

Tony Guinn  
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Blanchard Springs Caverns  
Ozark National Forest, Arkansas

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Interviewer: Connie Lee

Tony Guinn (TG): My name is Tony Guinn and I'm the visitor information specialist here on the Sylamore Ranger District here on the Ozark St. Francis National Forest. And what that means is basically anything that has to do with visitors, information, public affairs, etc., kind of falls under the heading of what it is that I do. And one of the things I do is give tours and information about Blanchard Springs caverns. I've been here since about 1986, and I'm not from Arkansas originally, I grew up in Cleveland, Ohio. But I came to Arkansas on vacation. The guide said, oh you need to go down to see the caverns and the folk center. So we did, and we decided we liked it well enough that if we were ever to move this might not be a bad place to live. Consequently we bought a place in 1982, the year of the great flood here, and moved here in 1985, and I got the job with the Forest Service in 1986 and I've been here ever since. I've spend all my time at the cavern doing tours and visitor information later on. I didn't have to kill anybody to get my job [Laughs]; I got it through recommendations. But I enjoy talking to people and keeping the history and doing exhibits, visiting with kids, and setting up special projects like this one. One of things we're working on is some of the history involved here at the caverns and in the forest. We are going to have a new exhibit hall, and that involved getting together a lot of local history, talking with the original explorers, getting more hands-on stuff with the kids, incorporating some of the local history from some of the earliest folks that lived around here into our ongoing exhibit hall. And so we have a lot of that information on hand: original stuff that the explorers used. We'll have an original fiddle from some of the local families that lived around here, and we'll put all together in the exhibit. We're also getting a lot of [Cane?] history. For example, we had what we believe was a bluff dweller Indian who visited our caverns and somehow had the [name unclear] accent down there. He died in the cave and his bones were found in the 1950s. And we're going to incorporate that history into what we have going on too. We talk a lot about or Indian... While we're on tour we get a lot of questions about what was this guy doing and how'd he get in here and was there anybody else with him, and a lot of this is all... We don't know what was going on with him. We don't know how he got in. We don't know if he came here with a bunch of other people; were they unkind enough to leave him when he fell, or how that shook out. We do know that he meant to be in the cave because we found pieces of torches scattered throughout the cave. We did find his bones, and he had broken several bones and fractured his skull, which is one reason he never left the cave. Anyway he got quite a few people interested in visiting our cavern system. So from 1955 to 1963 was the bulk of the cave exploration. And in 1963 was when our upper level was found. And that was the big find. Everybody knew there was the caverns there; there was the natural interest. But not too many people wanted to make a hundred foot drop into the cave. But when the upper level, this gorgeous upper level was found, it was decided that this would be really good to get people to come to Stone County. Prior to that Stone county was very poor; one of the poorest counties in the nation. Not a lot was going on

here. In fact a lot of the folks had left and gone out West to find jobs. A lot of them had sold their land to the Forest Service or whatever. So the Folk Center, Ozark Fol Center State Park, and Blanchard State Caverns were thought of and actually opened in the same year. So we do share the same visitors, although folks who come to the Folk Center are looking for a little bit more local history, how things used to be done. People who come to the caverns are pretty much looking for a, I guess I'll say natural history, and something that's absolutely not man-made, outside of the trails and lights and things like that. We see somewhere in the neighborhood of about nine thousand visitors a year. Most of those visitors will take our short tour, Bridgestone Trail, which is the easiest one, and see lots of gorgeous formations. We see lots of kids coming in the summer time, of course when they're out of school. We also see a lot of school groups in April and May. This is the end of the year field trip. And we also see college students, who are here because in the cave you can actually see the layers of rock. If they're studying geology or something like that, they can actually see the layers of rock and see what's happening below ground. Outside of that, then, we also have the Discovery Trail, which is the middle trail, a little more strenuous; a little more history involved in that because you see where the natural entrance is, where everybody had to drop in originally. And also you see where these explorers camped out. It gives you a better sense of what the explorers had to do to find that upper level. And the third tour is our wild cave tour, which is for I guess the more adventurous person; somebody who's willing to do some climbing and crawling, sliding over rock and red clay, because you're going to do all of that on our wild cave tour. It is the most strenuous of our tours and the longest. It's not for the faint of heart. It does take some doing to get up and down some of that clay. But it is a fun tour, and it gives people a huge sense of accomplishment. And I think also ties them into our early explorers. We've had kids come out and say, wow, you know. I want to be a cave explorer. I want to find a cave. Things like that. Which is really pretty neat. We've managed to reach them and make them see something outside of their regular world.

Speaking of something outside of our regular world, we got involved in an IMAX movie, back in, I believe it was '95. And the folks from Macgillivray Freeman Films called up and said, they wished to come filming at our cavern, preparatory to making a caving movie. So we filmed with them for a week—a solid week, seven days—and one of my jobs was to help set that up, be chief cook and bottle washer for that; and so basically my job was to facilitate the camera groups coming in and setting up, everything like that. So we filmed in both the Dripstone and Discovery Trails for a week. And our part initially was supposed to be the introduction for the film: show what could be done so that they could take this and say okay, we can do this in a cave, and take it in a whole other direction. We didn't expect to be in the final film. Well as it turned out, when the movie finally came out, they decided to incorporate the footage they had shot into the cave movie. So something that was just supposed to be a pilot turned out being a major part of the *Journey Into Amazing Caves* movie. The movie itself shows cave extremes; I mean, they go into some very high caves, that involve rope work. And of course when you see it on IMAX screens it just absolutely makes your heart drop because it's just so intense. And then they also do the extreme part of going into ice caves, five hundred feet down, where you can hear the ice groaning and carrying on. I can't even imagine going into something like that. [Laughs] And then of course they show the pretty stuff from our cave tour. And also they go into cave diving, which is something totally different, that absolutely takes a specialized knowledge. Cave diving can be very, very dangerous. And one of the people in the IMAX film, Hazel Barton, has said she was excited about learning how to do it, but on the other hand you got this feeling of anxiety

because cave diving's dangerous. But they managed to get the movie made, and we actually made the cut in the movie, which we were just delighted about. So we were really pleased to be part of that, and we're glad we made that particular cut. But it does show some of the extremes people can go to in going caving.

Compared to some of that ice caving stuff, going into Blanchard is very tame, in that on two of our tours you're on paved walkways. Nice lights, you know? Hand rails and things. It's very safe, you know? Very awesome and very pretty, but very safe. The wild cave tour does involve places where, if you don't listen, yes, you could fall down over a hundred feet, which can't be very pleasant. I can't say I've done it personally, but this can't be a very good thing. So in that case you do need to listen to your guide and realize when he says lean close to this wall, he's not just kidding. But in addition to that, we hope to have other wild cave tours here on the district. We have over two hundred caves here in our district. We've been in most of them. Some of them have endangered species in them, which means we don't go in the cave very often. Some of them have petroglyphs and things like that, which means they're closed to casual visitation. Some of them are open for folks to go into. Some of them are novice caves where anybody can go in; and others are experienced, or experienced vertical, or experienced water, which means at certain times of year you're going to be in water up to say, up to here or something like that. [Indicates her neck] Which actually isn't all that bad, but the water's cold. It's fifty-eight degrees in our cave, and in several of the other caves around here. So if you're standing in fifty-eight degree water up to your shoulders, yeah, it'll take your breath away. [Laughs] But our caves systems run fifty-eight, sixty degrees thereabout. It's actually fairly comfortable. Going underground unless you're going to be down for a huge amount of time, I just go ahead in shirtsleeves, like this. If I'm going to be down for a long period of time, yes, I'll take a jacket or whatever. But our caves tend to be fairly comfortable. Fifty-eight is the average temperature for this part of the country, so if your go to caves in Texas, it'll be a lot warmer. Caves in upper state New York, it's going to be a lot colder. That doesn't always hold true, but as a general sort of idea, that's pretty much how the caves run.

Connie Lee (CL): How do the visitors get into the cave? Do they have to jump on the end of a rope, or what?

TG: [Laughs] Some of them probably would. I've asked people, if we had to get on a rope, would you come in here? And some of them, oh yeah, sure. Most of them, no. So we actually bring our visitors in on an elevator. We drop down into, either of our cave tours, the Driftstone or the Discovery, on an elevator, you drop in two hundred and sixteen feet. And from there you walk into the rest of the cave. The elevator allows us to bring in just about anybody on the tour. We bring in folks with wheelchairs; baby strollers. We had a lady here just yesterday and she had a walking cast. So we see almost everybody. Almost anybody can take either the Driftstone or the Discovery. On the Wild Cave Tour we drive you down to the entrance, actually it's the exit of the Discovery. We take you down to the one the bus and you walk through the cave. When you come back out they call for the bus again. So you actually get two bus rides on the Wild Cave Tour.

CL: Are there any real tough places that you guide? Not on the Wild Cave Tour, but the one through Blanchard Caverns or...?

TG: Not really. Most of the cave, in fact, is great big and open. In fact the first room that you'll see on either the Driftstone or the Discovery is our largest room, it's the cathedral room. And it's sixty-five feet tall and a hundred and eight feet across, and eleven hundred and fifty feet long. So we're not talking any tight, closed space. We usually tell people that the smallest space you'll be in is the elevator. And if you can make it through the elevator ride the rest of the cave is a piece of cake. So several other people, several friends of mine who have claustrophobia, they agree with that assessment. So we're not talking any constrictive passages or anything like that. On the Wild Cave tour now, that's a whole other story. There's a place called the corkscrew, which should give you an idea of what you have to do to get up into it. It's not all that tight or anything, but it is, you do have to crawl in, then stand up, climb up on the rock, climb up over, go across on your knees, and then you're sitting down up here. So yes, that's a little bit different. But for the most part it's a really easy walk through the cave. Also on our Discovery Trail, you are having to deal with nearly seven hundred stairs. So obviously somebody that's got some kind of walking difficulty or whatever, heart problem, they probably don't want to do all the Discovery Trail. It's maybe a little too strenuous for something like that; but almost anybody can take the Dripstone Trail.

And let's see, other than that? There's other things that go on here on the district.

CL: The cabin?

TG: Oh. The cabin?

CL: The house? In the cave? Wasn't there...?

TG: Oh, not in our cave no. In Mamouth Cave, yes there was. But in our cave, no there's not.

CL: Okay. I'm sorry.

TG: On our district, again, we've got several other caves. We do what we call the cave crawl. We offer summer programs, and we actually do take people into a small, undeveloped cave, and let them see what it's like. They bring flashlights, so they don't have to have hard hats and things like that. But we take them into Lower Shelter and let them climb and crawl around, and such like that. And also in Lower Shelter they can see what vandalism does to a cave. Lower Shelter's got a huge [pattern fuse?]. A lot of folks can go into it. It's an open cave. And so consequently there's names carved in the wall. There's graffiti. There's nearly always trash. We have found everything from bread crumbs to survey tape to string. Not that it's that hard to get into; it's a pretty straightforward cave. But people take the stuff in there, and so it lets people see what mis-use can do to a cave. At Blanchard Springs Caverns we do have a series of rules that you agree to before you go on the tour, and obviously one of those is not touching any natural part of the cave. In Lower Shelter, though, although you still shouldn't do it, you can see that folks that don't obey the rules, how it will destroy a cave. It's a very graphic and very immediate message, because as you're doing private crawl you see names back here on the wall, and people say, who is so-and-so, who is Robert? Well, Robert's some fellow who thought he might leave his name in the cave. And then they realize, this doesn't look very good, does it? So it's a very

immediate message about what not to do, why you shouldn't do it. And so we do that, that particular program a couple times a summer; we do other different programs. We range from cave type stuff, bats, musicians, Arkansas history, Ozarks history, forest history. Anything we can think of to fit into those very broad parameters, we'll have a program on. So we get everybody and their mom to come in and do a program with us, for us, whatever. And we offer those in the summer.

CL: Can you tell us about some of the life forms in the cave.? Is there stuff in the water?

TG: We've got stuff all over the cave.

CL: Do you have to dodging the bats?

TG: [Laughs] Not usually. Sometimes, let's say it's raining outside. The bats that are outside tend to come into the cave, and on that case, you'll see them flying in and you say something like, it must be raining outside. Folks look at you a little funny, and then they realize you've been here and you know that. That has happened before. We've got over eighty different species that use Blanchard. It's been highly studied. And we've got a few of the endangered species. The grey bats; we have the Ozark Blind Salamanders, the grotto salamanders; several other different types of spiders and such. Most of our animal life tends to be little tiny things. And it's not like we've got bears hanging out waiting to greet you as you come through on tour or something like that .But we do have all together I believe it's about eighty-one different species that use Blanchard. Even though we've been here doing tours since 1973, our grey bat population numbers have gone up steadily over the years. Our animal life hasn't declined because we've been here. We do make an effort to watch our water; closing down portions of the cave if we're not going to have a visitation; turning out the lights. Things like this is going to preserve both the cave and the animal life. But most of our animals, little tiny things. Every now and again we'll get something that doesn't necessarily belong in the cave. Such as one time we had a cat fall in the natural entrance; that's pretty exciting. We had raccoons in the cave before; we had mink, mice, snakes, frogs. Well I guess the only thing we're missing, we didn't have a bear, you know. Bears do go into some caves around here. But most of these animals that aren't supposed to be in there, we will call Arkansas Game and Fish, they will bring us a trap over, whatever. And we'll usually trap the animal out, if it's a large one, like a mink. We will catch the snakes, and take them outside. The problem with the snakes, since it's cool, it is fifty-eight degrees in the cave The snakes will get very sluggish, and they'll either sleep to death or starve to death, one or the other. So we have to catch the animal that don't belong in the cave and take them back outside. And let them take their chances outside. If they don't belong in the cave the chances are very good that they're just going to die, and become food for some of the other little creatures that live down there.

CL: What about activities by people, like getting married in the cave, or having a birthday party, or whatever. What's allowed and what isn't, and kind of special activities do you have?

TG: Well for the most part, we don't do all that many special activities. We have had some requests for people to get married in the cave, but we run into logistics problems or things like

that. So generally we'll direct folks to get married at our shelter cave down in our day use area, or at the amphitheater, something like that.

As for special programs, now our current special program, we do something called caroling in caverns, which involves local musicians coming to the caverns, generally for the last tour of the day, and they sing. In this case it's Christmas carols. And they'll sing for an hour. It's a special program that we do in conjunction with Mountain View Chamber of commerce. In December, every weekend in December. We do a photo tour, which when we have requests to do photos on tour, most of the time on a regular tour we don't have time to set up a tripod or to get that particular shot or get everybody out of the way or whatever. So a year we set up a special program where photographers come to the cave for four hours, and we shoot in the Driftstone Trail. We have to shoot around the existing tours but there's never been a time period where we don't have that many people. And it's not instruction. It's just a chance to take, say a time exposure in the cave itself. And it's been very popular. We've done it now for, golly, I want to say about fifteen years. Longer than that. That is by reservation only. We are looking at possibly having one in the Discovery, but because the logistics of that tour are a little bit different, we'll have to operate that particular photo tour a little bit differently, so we're still in the planning process about that.

Other special things? That's really about it. Mainly we run into problems with having to schedule around the tours that are coming in. So we don't so that many things actually within the caves themselves.

Okay. The other things we have going on here, of course we've got various wilderness areas; hiking trails, shooting ranges, bike paths, things like this. We also have our namesake springs, Blanchard Springs, which has given water to the local community for ages. These days it's just kind of a visitor destination. Folks will come down to the springs even if they don't come on tour. We had divers dive the spring level, the third level of our caverns back in the early seventies; and while they found some gorgeous rooms down there, some very nice, great little formations... originally they had talked about having a boat tour. However that involved a little more dive light, because some of the passages were really low and thing like that, so that's not going to happen. But we have had the thing dived before, and the fellows took photographs for us. So we know what's down there, but chances are that's never going to be opened up for tours. The surrounding community. Gosh, folks have been coming to the springs; I mean, people around here have told us they used to cut school to come down here to the springs. And the first folk festival was held at the shelter cave in the forest, so we've got a big tie with the community. We do a lot of joint effort things, for example, us and the Chamber of Commerce, or us and the Folk Center, or the three of us working together. Just a whole bunch of different things. The idea is, since we have visitors coming in, we want to keep them here, of course, and make sure they see everything that the area has to offer. So folks can go into Mountain View, see the various things that are being done, the various crafts, music et cetera; Go up to the Folk Center and see how things used to be done; and come out and see what's going on in the forest, do some of those other activities we were talking about. So we've got a pretty good relationship with the whole community, pretty much of Stone County itself. And we kind of hope to keep that going along. And hopefully other activities will happen.

CL: Do you feel that having the caverns here, and having the Forest Service watching over the area above it, so that it protects the cave and everything, do you think that all of that is a draw for people; and are there people that come here and just fall in love and stay in the area?

TG: Definitely. I think it is a draw, particularly to get people here, particularly if you like caves or things like that. But a lot of people who come here, of course, if they go anywhere else in Stone County, into Mountain View, up to the Folk Center or whatever, they realize that it's a Small community,. We really don't have that many people here; About three thousand people in Mountain View itself and maybe ten or eleven thousand in the county. They get here, and there's a real sense of community. Even though I guess about half of us are from someplace else, from 'off' as they say around here, and half of folks who were born and raised here. We'll get people who will move back here after having lived somewhere else. We get a lot of people who want to retire here. Because it is a nice community. We've got a really good group of folks that are here. Well certainly from visitors, they're used to seeing visitors. We get some people here... There are a few factions, and there's some friction, but you're going to have that anywhere. So there's a lot of folks who come here and they say, this is really nice. Maybe they don't think there's a lot to do here, but if you like being outdoors, there's plenty of stuff to do.

CW: And how would you feel if someone dangled the carrot for you to go somewhere else? How do you feel about leaving this area, and how do you like your own job?

TG: I like my job very much. I like working with people, and it's never boring. I've got to say. There's always something going on. And it depends on where it was. If it was in Alaska, I might just have to say yes. And it would be nice to say okay, yeah, to go somewhere else. The challenge of going somewhere else would be fun, but I'd definitely miss the people that are here. I've got a lot of good friends here and I've met some nice folks, and it's perfectly gorgeous. So I might take the carrot, but you know, on the other hand, it'd be nice to stay here. I don't have any complaints about being here. It's a pretty cool place.

CW: Thank you, Tony. I appreciate your talking with us.

END OF INTERVIEW