

**Kentucky Folklife Program  
Interview Transcription**

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**Interviewee:** Jerry Bransford

**Interviewer/Recordist:** Brent Björkman

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**Others Present:**

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**Context:**

**Technical Considerations:**

**Transcription prepared by:** Eleanor Hasken; edited by Hannah Davis

**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 June 30th, 2014. This is Brent Björkman, the director of the Kentucky Folklife Program. We're continuing on our interview series, um, having to do with our Ranger Lore project, the Working Lives of Park Rangers. We are here in Glendale, Kentucky, and we are talking to a special guest today. Could you tell me your name and your current position with the Park Service?

**Jerry Bransford:** Jerry Bransford, and I'm a seasonal tour guide for Mammoth Cave National Park.

**BB:** Well, Mr. Bransford, um, I know that you have a deep connection to the park in a number of ways, and I've been asking people about how they got connected to the park, and uh, could we start off by you maybe sharing a little bit of that with me?

**JB:** Well, my connection to the park goes back in the 1830s, Thomas Bransford of Nashville. Uh, I didn't know the entire story, but I knew, um, three generations of Bransford -- even as a young, young kid, my daddy, uncles, aunts, and kinfolk, but after been introduced to Joy Lyons, uh, some years ago, I found out there was actually a generation-and-a-half more of Bransfords than I actually, than I really knew about.

**BB:** Wow. And, did you -- so your connections to Joy, you were -- your connection to the, to the park itself, as a guide, um, that wasn't an early part of your life? Or was it an early part of your life? Did you start guiding after you were in the public --

**JB:** Yes.

**BB:** Public sector for a while.

**JB:** I had 30 years with the Magi Corporation in Elizabethtown, Kentucky, and I retired June 22, 2012. Excuse me.

**BB:** That's alright.

**JB:** Uh, June of 2002, and uh, and I, I had talked to Joy Lyons a while ago and thought over the years we had communicated and exchanged documentation and stories and things she was showing me through my father. And after retiring, she asked me if I was, if I was interested in becoming a tour guide and uh, had a lot of reservations about it that I'd already been into the bigger arena for 30 years and I just didn't know if I wanted to go another place at 57 years old and having to learn everything. But after thinking about and giving it thought, I felt that I owed myself and my ancestors, uh, my assignment at Mammoth Cave as tour guide. I wanted to bring the Bransfords back.

**BB:** What year was that, that you, you mulled this over an-and-and you started the orientation and started going into the cave as a guide?

**JB:** Well, actually started tour guiding 2004, but I had several interviews and I had already been invited to Mammoth Cave National Park for History Month, that I would do

a presentation there in the auditorium for Joy Lyons. And that really developed my interested and, and so being fascinated with my family story, I realized that there's even *more* uh, than I knew about it. And I was really motivated to tell everybody, kinda, what I know and some things that happen to my ancestors. Some of the things were happy and than that -- as time went on I realized some things were quite sad disasters, but it's all the American story and I wanted to make sure that I did the best job that I, that I could to let the world know what happened down there. Beginning in 1838 until 1941.

**BB:** Oh. What were -- did you grow up with? It sounds like you knew some, and then you learned, you did some of your own research but also through your colleague Joy Lyons, uh, learned some. 'Cause she was working on, I think she was also -- an interest of hers I think was also the African American story, was that true?

**JB:** That's true. Joy Lyons would see these, uh, photos in the Curtorial, and they all said Stephen Bishop, and they couldn't have all been Stephen Bishop. Some of these, Stephen Bishop had been gone 120 years, so it's just several different things that came together coincidentally. And, um, my dad told me a lot of stories about Nick Ransford, who's been buying his way from slavery in Mammoth Cave. My dad told me about old ancestors losing children to slave buyers before the Civil War, and uh, but he didn't see to know much about Matt, the first Matt. He knew about Henry, my great-grandfather and third generation, third generation guys, but he didn't seem to know about Matt and Joy Lyons is the person that introduced me to Matt, first generation, who was actually filed up by Thomas Bransford of Nashville and leased to Franklin Noin along with Nick Ransford.

**BB:** Hmm.

**JB:** So there was actually more back there, than I, than I really knew about. It was quite a fascinating story. I was fascinated that I knew about Henry, my great-grandfather, but they were -- but it was quite powerful and amusing about Matt, first Matt.

**BB:** Mhmm.

**JB:** He and Parthena how they lost those children and the interview of James Rushing Fowler, the Union soldier and abolitionist, you know?

[00:05:11]

**BB:** Mhmm.

**JB:** So all that really sparked, uh, interest for me. And, particularly considering how my ancestors left. They left under duress. Uh, they didn't really want to go, uh -- I felt there was a lot of injustice in that. I felt that as time went on, I owed it to the family and to the public to bring the Bransfords back. That I had such a great opportunity to do, to do things that some men never had the opportunity to do.

**BB:** Mhmm. And tell that story.

**JB:** Tell that story and I, and I -- they were never grandfather to the National Park uniform, none of the men of color were. And, uh, I understand that a lot of the Caucasian guys would give them the choice, but none of my ancestors wore it. And uh, I feel that I owed them that tribute to work there for a while.

**BB:** Mhmm. How do you bring that story in? What tours do you guide? Do you guide the wide range of all of the tours?

**JB:** Uh, we got a wide range of tours. Historic tours, probably, and the uh, the discovery tour is probably is the greatest opportunity to talk about the slave ancestors and the saltpeter bats and the black men and their contribution to the cave. We all do all the tours, but the historic tours actually allows me to walk in the foot steps of ancestors that were there over a 100 and 1 years before I ever -- before I came there.

**BB:** Mhmm.

**JB:** I see their names and dates along the route, probably at least five along the historical route, and just the other day a young person came and told me that they found Clifton's name down Audubon Avenue. A signature and date I had never seen before.

**BB:** So you're always learning as well.

**JB:** Always learning and I'm quite fascinated how deep into the cave some, some of my ancestor's names are found. Deep, dreadful places. Their's actually a Bransford Avenue in the cave, name for Will Bransford, my second cousin. He was part of the exploring team that found Cathedral Dome in 1906.

**BB:** Hmm.

**JB:** He's also the Bransford that escorted, gypsum, natural gypsum formations and a little slave -- a little Indian, Native American girl's remains, named Little Alice to the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago.

**BB:** Hmm.

**JB:** Well, so, that's fascinating to know what he did and, uh, that he was actually up in Chicago for several months. That he, that he was a representative for Mammoth Cave to the Columbia Exhibit in Chicago.

**BB:** Mmm. What are some of the things that you try to impart to people, not that I necessarily give me a part --

**JB:** Mm.

**BB:** Part of your, your speech to the public, um. *Or*, maybe give me a little bit of that. I think it's just an interesting thing that you have this legacy that you're getting across and

the feedback must be pretty amazing for people when-when they have a tour from you, to learn these things from your family.

**JB:** Uh, uh, I think that the things I would really want to do, is to, let everybody know Mammoth Cave is a wonderful cave system. Internationally renowned. Not only a Bransford, but I want to let people know that people, men and women of color have a vital role in it's success in the earlier days. For many years, none of these stories were told. So I feel that I am glad and have responsibility to let everybody know, uh, their roles and the things they experience in the cave. I'm not trying to give them more than they deserve, but certainly I don't want to come away feeling that like the first 63 years that it became a national park that they really weren't given what they did deserve.

**BB:** Mm, mm, yeah. How was your introduction. You came into this later and thought about helping to fulfill this idea by telling the story of your family. How did you -- what's the, what's the training like? You know, we're talking about working culture and, and working with different people. Um, you know. Do you start out by guiding a tour? Some of, some people have talked about you start out by trailing a tour and listening to someone else. Um. Because, you had talked to Joy Lyons about this, this importance of telling the African American story, was your training -- was it different or anything that you know of? Or --

**JB:** My training wasn't different. I, um -- I wanted to be careful when I came that -- uh, that I wasn't sure, being 57 years old, taking a brand new job after being somewhere 30 years, it's just a whole lot of things came to mind, but after getting down there, I realized that folks treated me better than any place I'd ever been. They treated me quite well. I had reservations about going because, uh, there are stories, there are stories inside me, that I remember, being a very young kind going to Mammoth Cave as a young person in the 50s and 60s and you know, we, we couldn't go inside the restaurants. You know? Those people weren't necessarily unkind in telling me that you, that coloreds can't come into the restaurant, but uh, but uh -- all these things have to do with the mixed feelings I had wanting to become a tour guide. I knew that there would obviously be training and some things that are required, every job I've ever had there's certain things that's required. But I just -- I didn't know what my fit would be and I found that my fit's quite great. I'm glad to be a part of the team. Um, I can't imagine people treating me kinder and nicer than what I receive at Mammoth Cave, but I didn't want the story and the legacy that Bransfords told to overpower what I was there for in the first place. And it seems to date that that hasn't happened.

[00:10:56]

**BB:** Mmm.

**JB:** Did that get close to your question?

**BB:** Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

**JB:** Okay.

**BB:** No, I'm just trying to figure out -- because it is such a unique situation. And uh, I guess some stories about your family -- I would like to hear some of those, because it is unique. I know you've, you may have shared those with other people. We've talked a little bit, you have been interviewed more than one time, but I think for the Library of Congress it would be great to share, maybe a chronology, a little bit of the things you share on your trip about the particular persons that are connected to the cave, uh, from the Bransford line. You know.

**JB:** Well, it all began with Thomas Bransford of Nashville. Thomas Bransford of Nashville. As a matter of fact, there's a Bransford Avenue in Nashville, Tennessee, today.

**BB:** Wow.

**JB:** And [indistinguishable] that's named from a one Thomas Bransford, who was business partner and associates with Franklin Gorin, who owned the cave in 1838. That history says that Franklin Gorin owns Stephen Bishop, he pays \$5,000 for the cave, but the idea of tourism, but it appeared a short times goes by and he realizes that Stephen Bishop is not able to accomplish all the things that's required of him. So, he speaks to Thomas Bransford of Nashville who was also a slave owner. Thomas Bransford of England were quite well-to-do. Bransford Avenue in Nashville is again named for him. So, he sends up Matt Bransford, my great-great-grandfather, and Matt was 16 years of age. And Nick Bransford, who was *really* -- we found that more recent years that he and Nick were not really brothers. They only shared their owner's last name. But we have proper documentation in Thomas Bransford's record book, who is owned by Pat Bransford-Davis of Dallas-Fort Worth, Texas, area, actually Morgan Mill, Texas, that she has the record books and it makes it very clear that Thomas Bransford knows that he knows that he was Matt Bransford's father. So he leases Matt to Franklin Gorin and Nick for 100,000 years slave guides and explorers.

**BB:** And that would have been -- the years?

**JB:** 1838. And then in 1849, when old Thomas Bransford passes away, Matt's brother -- Matt's half-brother inherits him. And he continues to lease him to Franklin Gorin.

**BB:** Hmm.

**JB:** Well, of course, by now, let me make a correction, Franklin Gorin only keeps the cave one year and sells it to Dr. Croghan of Louisville. But, Nick and Matt are continued to be leased by their owner, their half-brother, Thomas Bransford of Nashville. Thomas Bransford, Jr.

**BB:** Hmm.

**JB:** I find it fascinating that, um, that -- that a person can be inherited by their half-brother or sister.

**BB:** Yes, absolutely.

**JB:** 'Cause that's like you, um, course at that time, the way that we were doing things, he was just property, a slave.

**BB:** Mhmm.

**JB:** But I find it difficult to comprehend that, that your half-brother inherits you.

**BB:** Mhmm. And they're guiding, do we know from the public record what their work was like? Guiding and --

**JB:** Well, uh, public record says that they were quite the well-renowned celebrities. Seemed that Nick, Matt, and Stephen Bishop had gotten along pretty well because I think that they were very important young boys and they realized that they had a unique situation, like, uh, I'm sure that, uh, there were probably other slave, so to speak, in the neighborhood that realized that these fellas are entertaining national crowds. I mean, they're not in the barn lots and the hay fields. They're working in the cave and directing and taking care of free people. *Free people*. People of royalty. Educated people. Depend on slaves to take them on all-day walks and take good care of them. So it seems that, Franklin Gorin and Dr. Croghan, uh, have told their guests to follow the slaves' direction to the letter, although, we also have material that suggests that some free people had difficulty, maybe have slightly raised their voice at them, but the slaves were interested in keeping their job and the safety of their old boss' guest.

**BB:** Mhmm.

[00:15:21]

**JB:** So, if he had a good job, you did whatever you could to keep -- to hold on to it and maintain it, you know?

**BB:** Right.

**JB:** And that's what they did. Kings and queens. Free people. Depended on them. Grateful to have them.

**BB:** Yeah. And things changed, maybe. After -- from the surface, when you get down there with your guides.

**JB:** Absolutely. Absolutely. As a matter of fact, we have material that, that supports that perhaps Franklin Gorin had heard about the slaves having lunch with people from England, even though they, um, depended on the slaves to take care of them on long,

dangerous hikes in the cave. They were reprimanded. You're not supposed to eat with free people. So, I take that, uh, Matt and Nick are stealing, but cordially declining an invitation to have lunch with free people and they would, they say, go to the other side of the cave trail and have lunch with themselves.

**BB:** Mhmm.

**JB:** But it seems that the folks from England didn't have the issue. And I don't know that all American whites did. But it seems that we know the most about people from foreign countries that were so grateful for their careship of them, that they would often, "Come to the grand table and eat with us. We want you over here." And maybe perhaps they did that and they were told not to do that anymore.

**BB:** Yeah, I was, I was wondering about the -- I've heard things about the education of the -- Matt and Nick and Stephen.

**JB:** Mhmm.

**BB:** Meeting these people and, um, they're speaking different languages at some times. They've probably learned little bits of other languages and, did that, do you know if that propelled them to do some studying on their own? And about the world and, you know, made them much more worldly any other African American counterparts.

**JB:** I think it did make them more worldly. I think that the information and the exposure that they received from free people really enlightened them about the outside world. Stephen suggested that those slaves-those slave guides might have known more about the outside world than free whites, because I take if you're in a cave with a dentist or a geologist or scientist, um, you are probably fascinated that they ask *you* to direct them, but also you would bend an ear to absorb all the information that you could. So they did know a little of geology and science and some said that they could speak Greek and words of German, and those kinds of things.

**BB:** Hmm.

**JB:** And there's places in the cave that I'm satisfied that the handwriting and so forth is so neat. For example, a signature for Nick Bransford in the Snowball Room is such a neat signature that I'm satisfied that a educated free white wrote that tribute to Nick on the cave wall in the Snowball Room. Don't think Nick could write that, that perfectly.

**BB:** Mhmm. How long after this -- after, uh, 1865 and the rest of your family legacy did it -- is it a continuous legacy? Uh, with the Bransfords? And uh, in the cave and guiding for the most part?

**JB:** It's, it's continuous. They -- um, the Bransfords there and, of course, Matt was still there. Henry was still there. Matt's son, uhm, by, by now, Matt, the first Matt -- first generation, had lost three children. He'd lost three girls and a boy to slave buyers. But,



uh, fortunate enough Henry was kept on. And so, um, it seemed that Matt didn't know much about the outside world and he taught his son Henry the tricks to the trade and the guiding skills that he chose to stay on. Old folks in my family that Matt said, "I don't know so much about the outside world and I feel good here at Mammoth Cave, so old boss said he'll pay me now to stay on, so I think I'll stay here. This is a good enough job for me." That's what my Daddy said old folks told him.

**BB:** Hmm.

**JB:** And we did stay. That's how we became residents of Mammoth Cave, which eventually became a national park.

**BB:** Mhmm. So your -- Bransfords were displaced when the park was created.

**JB:** Oh absolutely. Yes.

**BB:** Hmm.

**JB:** As a matter of fact, Matt Bransford, third generation, my great-uncle, had a hotel-resort, up down Flint Ridge and down Great Arch Road. I know where the foundation of it is today.

**BB:** Hmm.

[00:19:50]

**JB:** And it's only two places in America that was rated for people of color to stay in the '20s by people of color to stay by AAA Travel Club and Matt Bransford of Mammoth Cave was the number two listing of places recommended. If you were traveling and you needed a recommended place to stay, Matt Bransford's hotel was on the AAA list. And it was quite something to see too.

**BB:** Wow.

**JB:** Quite a hotel. Quite a resort. I have 20 post cards in my basement, down in my file, that we found in the old house that are just invaluable to our family.

**BB:** Of the hotel property?

**JB:** Yes, absolutely. Uncirculated postcards.

**BB:** Wow. I'd love to see that.

**JB:** It's on the internet.

**BB:** Okay.

**JB:** Yeah.

**BB:** Mhmm.

**JB:** He was going to board a train, he and his wife Zimmie. He and Zimmie were quite, quite respected in the neighborhood. Blacks and whites respected Zimmie and Matt. Now, why they had no children that -- Louis and John Henry, my grandfather, and Charles Wesley, my dad's grandfather's brother -- they had large families. But for some reason, Matt and Zimmie didn't seem to be able to have children.

**BB:** Mmm.

**JB:** So they would have nieces and nephews over to their house and work around the garden and work in the hotel for them. But the hotel was quite something to see.

**BB:** How long did that -- so that -- when the -- when the park was taken over, is that when that --

**JB:** Demolished. Demolished. There's quite a stressful letter that can be read in Mammoth Cave Library that Matt goes to -- I'm going to assume that it was Judge Jennings. Judge Jennings was in charge of the Mammoth Cave estate. And this Matt is third generation and the letter sort of worded, in my own words, is that he hears about the take over coming into place -- coming into existence and he's worried about losing his hotel, he's worried about losing his job. I don't know if he was as worried about losing his job as a tour guide as he was losing his property and the hotel. He simply says, "Judge, I was born here. My daddy was born here and his daddy before him. Is there a chance that we could be spared?" He says, "I'm having sleepless nights thinking about this." But eventually all the men of color were called in at a specific time. My daddy said that we were to document it, I think, that none of the men of color were going to be kept on as tour guides. So, they were alerted that perhaps a year-and-a-half in advance that this National Park thing is coming, so you need to think about what you're going to be doing for employment because probably there will be no men of color in a uniform. So, my ancestors actually told me a little bit about that.

**BB:** Hmm.

**JB:** That the Bransfords were actually required to train their successors. And they did it with dignity.

**BB:** Hmm.

**JB:** But also, my grandfather's brother, Matt, third generation, never came back to Mammoth Cave or anything. He said he wanted to remember it like it was. I just imagine there was a certain amount of emotional hurt there.

**BB:** What did, what did your ancestors that were guiding, what did they do following their training these people.

**JB:** Clifton Bransford worked on the colored work team. Clifton Bransford's name can be found Camp 510, down River Room, up the steps. He was part of the colored work team, Clifton. Sometimes I walk up there while I'm trailing a tour and I walk up in that cove where Clifton left his name and I know where his 1924, uh, this why Clifton was still acting, working as a guide, but even working in the cave all your life, being a tour guide - - fourth generation. In order for you to stay in the area, you become a pick and shovel guy. Now, I'm not saying there's anything wrong with being a pick and shovel guy, *but* I find myself -- it almost brings tears to my eyes. I wonder, how would it be, that you're working for a old boss in a place where you were literally born up and raised. You're nobody but a pick and shovel guy working on tour routes that you've toured all your life. And then when those -- and his brother Elsey, Elsey was a real renowned tour guide. Elsey moved to Glasgow, I knew -- we called it Maca-Elsey, he was actually my second-cousin. So much older than me. We called him Elsey, Uncle Elsey. But Clifton moved to Indianapolis, Indiana. And Joy Lyons and delegation from Mammoth Cave National Park found Clifton by my Daddy and then went to Indianapolis and interviewed him. I have a VHS movie, that same movie is in the library at Mammoth Cave. And you know, Those tour routes that I walk on today didn't mean as much until I'd seen the VHS movie, per Joy Lyons and the Delegation at Mammoth Cave, but he would talk about Little Bat Avenue and he would talk about the Bottomless Pit and the Corkscrew and after coming to work there some years later, all that real had a true meaning, that Clifton had been there *way* before I'd gotten there. He was gracious fella, but we called him Doc.

**BB:** Hmm.

[00:25:05]

**JB:** And he was the king of the guides around [indistinguishable] were respected, but I wonder how he felt when he asked for his last day. He moved to Indianapolis, Indiana and became a janitor for Indiana Power and Light, but can you imagine the information and the skill and the knowledge he took with him? But I credit Joy Lyons, that she had an interest and that she found him. And they had a really nice interview. You can see that interview, too.

**BB:** Mhmm. Is that something that-that the Mammoth Cave and this work that you do, do they, they give you time to do your own research? Or do they -- do they -- is that something they want you to do? Try to look up things on your own? Increase your own knowledge of your story that you can share.

**JB:** Well, absolutely. They encourage us to do all our own research. I feel blessed. I think I know what happened in my family. Even from England to Nashville. I feel sad that there were generations ahead of me that knew some of the story, they didn't really know - - my dad died in 2002, but he didn't know the whole story. And I have cousins and nieces and grandchildren that I'm sharing the information I have because I think I know what

happened. They pass away not knowing what happened, but you know, I think I know the story. I know what happened that they came to Nashville. I think I know what from Nashville to Mammoth Cave and I have a good idea of the whole thing. So, I'm making sure that my children and grandchildren, that Mammoth Cave is kind enough for us to have a family reunion. And they allow me to take family members on guided tours. It's a private tour, and I make sure that I share with them the information that I've absorbed over the last 30 years.

**BB:** You hold a Bransford reunion at the park?

**JB:** We do and uh --

**BB:** Is it a yearly thing? Can you tell me about it?

**JB:** Well, about every two years. We're not going to have it -- we had it last year. Kathy Proffitt, day-to-day operations person, is kind enough to allow me to take my family and she's been very gracious about doing that. And Mammoth Cave National Park. Period. And even Joy Lions did. So, I get to tell them some of the things that I've learned. I tell them some things that they already know. But I share with them many of the things that I'm sure that they don't know. I want to make sure that when I'm gone from Mammoth Cave National Park, that the story doesn't go away again. It went a way for a while, when Clifton and Elsey and Louis Turner Keyes in '39. They were the last three. So there were 60 plus years there wasn't much said. But I feel that I have opportunity to kind of bring them back, the Bransfords back. Hopefully telling the true document in a tasteful way. The whole story. The story of slavery. The story of Matt losing children. The story of them having happy days, escorting kings and queens through the cave. Free people depended on them. Matt Bransford been able to go to, Louisville, Kentucky during the Civil War and have his photo made. Free. He was in Louisville, Kentucky for several during the Civil War, they were such a celebrity that they invited him up and took him around Louisville and showed a slave around. That they were honored to have him, to come up and be their guest.

[Phone ringing]

**BB:** Hmm. You've been sharing these stories -- prideful stories of your family with your family. Do you have anybody in your family that's -- you think might take over the sharing of these stories for future generations?

**JB:** I sure hope so. My daughters' a healthcare professional. She has a lot of interest in the story. She's uh, a busy young wife with young children and college kids and grade school kids. My son knows what happened and, um, I hope it doesn't end here again.

**BB:** Mhmm.

**JB:** At 67, I worry that, um, you know, I'm grateful to be there, I can do the job quite well I think, but at 67, I couldn't possibly think about being there 20 more years 'cause -- so I'm hoping that someone wants to come and that someone will come.

**BB:** Yeah. Well it's such a vibrant story and I think that you're trajectory, you know, having this legacy, being born in this family, working outside of the context of the cave for many years, but you came back to it.

**JB:** I did, being a little kid, growing up in Glasgow, mom and dad, daddy had this *huge*, big, black album. Had all these pictures in it. I used to, as a little kid, "Who is that, Dad?" "That's Will Bransford." "How am I kil-kin to Will?" He says, "Will is father's sister's son." I said, "What did Will do?" "Well, Will's a guide." "Well Daddy, what kind of guide?" "Well he's a guide at the cave. He took things to the World's Fair in Chicago. As a matter of fact, I'm going to tell you a story he told us when we were little kids." I said, "What's the story, Daddy?" He says, "Well, Will could pass for white. Will's daddy -- there's a lot of white on both sides of the family. Will's father was a white man in Cave City. So Will was a very popular tour guide at Mammoth Cave, so the proprietor wanted Will to go down Specimen Avenue and take gypsum flowers and take this little mummified Native American girl's remains to Chicago. Now, we think, this is what my dad said, "We think that Will was very well liked, but Will could pass the lines of color quite easily. Hazel eyed, straight hair, very bright." You'd have to see a picture to know what I mean. So Will told my father, and the other kids, on the cabin porch, that he'd gotten aboard the train to Louisville, Kentucky, to go to Chicago. He says, "I wonder what it would be like to ride up front in the all-white car." So he says, "When the train got past Louisville, I just decided to ride up front." He said, "The conductor who was taking tickets never knew I was a man of color. And I never told him." Goes up to Chicago, he says, "I didn't really want to go to Chicago, because I hadn't been any further than Louisville or Nashville." But after getting to Chicago, I think he was really glad that he did. He says, "After we had been to Chicago for a few months, coming back, I rode in the all-white car, just because I could. But when I got near Louisville, Kentucky, I realized that I was getting close to the boundaries and I took my proper seat in the all-colored car." And dad told me that story at least twice.

[00:31:45]

**BB:** Huh.

**JB:** If you see a picture of Will, you can understand how Will -- very gracious, smart guide. Witty, quiet. You can find his name right before you go across Bottomless Pit. 1893. It's a very nice one, too.

**BB:** Mhmm.

**JB:** J.F. Stephenson. Willy Bransford.

**BB:** Hmm. It's just amazing to be able to point out the markings and the names of your --

**JB:** Joy Lyons showed me that. Hadn't been for Joy Lyons, none of this would be where it is, I think. I just feel that what's come together was meant to be. And then, about 30 years ago again, Pat Davis, who was heir to Thomas Bransford in Nashville, comes to the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville, Tennessee, knowing that she's heir to Bransfords of Mammoth Cave, because she has the slave record business books of Thomas Bransford. So she says, "I'm in Nashville, Tennessee, let's go to Glasgow to see if we can find any of the Bransfords." She looks in the phone book and she sees David C. Bransford, my father. So she says, "Mr. Bransford, I'm Pat Davis, heir to Thomas Bransford, who we are satisfied that once owned your relatives." And she says, "I've got some history I think you'd be interested in. If you would like to know." But Dad said, "Just coincidentally, I have a cousin, uh, had a son in Glendale, his name is Jerry, and boy has he been pumping me for the last few years about the Bransford history. Maybe you'd like to meet him." Well, we met by phone, about 32 years ago. We've never met in person. But the information that she has in the record book is invaluable. It speaks of Nick and Matt, how much the owner received to have them at Mammoth Cave. Uh, that they were one of the Mammoth Cave and that Matt brings his mother some rocks from Mammoth Cave and a little slave girl said, "My boy, Matt, brought me some rocks from Mammoth Cave and nobody better never bother my rocks." And I think Matt had just found some pretty things in Mammoth Cave that he brought his mother. So it seems like that story, that Pat Davis has the record book, my interest in Joy Lyons, and then the Kellers of New Orleans, Louisiana, has this huge sketch of Matt Bransford. That they inherited, Mrs. Kellers's great-great grandfather was the artist who sketched Matt's picture in 1857. So this picture lay in their possession for years and they didn't know who Matt Bransford of Mammoth Cave was, so they come to Mammoth Cave with this huge sketch and Joy Lyons makes me aware of it and it's a very nice sketch of Matt. So these three things, uh, I truly feel were not just coincidental. I don't feel my appointment there at Mammoth Cave is just by chance. I really believe that I was meant to be here for a while. And I'm doing my best to be the best tour guide I can for a number of reasons. I feel like I have a great responsibility. Responsibility to the National Park Service that they took a chance on me becoming a tour guide, and also a responsibility to my family, that I want to make sure I tell people what happened and give them the best information that I can.

**BB:** Mmm.

[00:35:11]

[Phone rings]

**BB:** You shared a great lot, this is a great interview. Is there anything else that you wanted to say? I mean it's -- I think it's -- you got across that it's really a privilege. I think it's a privilege for me to be here, but also that you're being back in Kentucky, that you're here helping to tell this story from your own standpoint. Is there something you'd like to talk about, either future, or, uh, I mean, you've really articulated most of it, but is there anything you'd want to share, uh, more with me today?

**JB:** I want to say, I would like to say, although Clifton, George, Elsey, Arthur, Elsey, at the time that it became a national park, there were a lot of Bransfords there. And if they could hear me and that they could know what I'm trying to do, my daddy, I just would say to them, "I'm doing the best I can on your behalf. I only get to tell the story because of what your accomplishments were, so I hope that my appointment there and the way I tell the story would please you." If I -- wish I could say that to my daddy. My daddy never got to see me come to Mammoth Cave. He died a, uh, year before I got in there. So I'd say, "Fellas, all you Bransford guides, at one time there were nine of you on the roster, I want you to know I'm doing the best I can for you. Hope to pick up the torch for a little while." [laughs]

**BB:** Sh --

**JB:** There's an interview with a union soldier and abolitionist, he was at Mammoth Cave in 1863 and his name was James, uh, Fowler Rushing and he had heard about Matt and those children, and he had an interview with Matt. And he says to Matt, "Matt, it doesn't seem to bother you coloreds when you lose what you -- what we free whites call "children," uh, and you call "chattels," they say." And Matt said, "Oh no, captain, don't you believe that." He said, "Colored people have feelings just the same as white folks." He's, "Now I'm the man and I can take such things, although it went pretty hard for the old wife, her name was Pardina." He says, "When it comes to losing that last children, we'd seen so much of this thing that we turns up once and let her go and deal with it the best we can." He said, "Now that we get older, we get a good cabin and plenty of furniture, it seems that they work the Master Doyle now," they probably released out to the Doyle family. He says, "Master Doyle's not such a bad boss." He said, "We do good if we just had the children back." And sometimes, when I see his name, I wonder how he could have possibly endured. I have children and grandchildren, I can't imagine losing one. So, sometimes when I'm in the cave and I walk over there where his name is, and I try to place my feet where his foot might have been at the time, it's almost as though I can feel his agony and his happiness, too. I can't imagine.

[00:39:05]

**JB:** 1906. When I go to Cathedral Dome, I feel like I'm just dwarfed, it's magnificent. Named it, named Bransford Avenue. That's never going to go away, as long as that cave is there, Bransford Avenue should be down there as a tribute to Will.

**BB:** You did much caving until you came back? I mean?

**JB:** I hadn't done any caving. I was busy with my wife and then raising children and doing all the stuff my kids do. But I felt, I felt a burning inside of me. I knew that there was more to that story than my daddy knew, but I didn't know how I was going to find out. But Joy Lyons, bless her heart.

**BB:** She's --

**JB:** She made me think she was in love with the Bransfords. In love with our story. And we're good friends.

**BB:** Well she is! She is! She's a true, true shooter. She's a passionate --

**JB:** Yeah.

**BB:** Historian and folklorist. And park employee. Former park employee.

**JB:** And just recently, we have something sent to me that suggests that Matt Bransford was actually able to get one of those girls back after the Civil War and I think it was Will's mother. See, Will Bransford, the Bransford that escorted those things to the World's Fair, was born out of wedlock. He assumed his mother's maiden name. And Daddy always told me his father was a Caucasian guy from Cave City. So, they knew that. So we -- I feel that it was, uhm, probably it was Will's mother that Matt was able to recover. The other boys and girls, old folks only told me that the boy was last heard about in Memphis, Tennessee. The record book suggests that there was something wrong with him, that maybe he would never marry and perhaps he wasn't just a typical boy. Uh, Daddy said those girls were pretty girls. Said they were beautiful. That maybe the owner had forced himself on those girls, you know, which was not such an unusual thing.

**BB:** Hmm. Wow.

**JB:** So, sometimes I go to Memphis, Tennessee, I look in the phone book. There's Bransfords down there. I can't help but wonder if they're kin people.

**BB:** You ever call those numbers?

**JB:** Mhmm. I've called a gentlemen, he seemed very uninterested in talking about it. I've called other folks, "I just don't know, son, I've just don't know. It's a very low, it's a low-- it's a very low census last name. There's not a lot of Bransfords in the United States.

**BB:** Hmm.

**JB:** And we know for sure that Thomas Bransford came from England. John Bransford, his daddy, all these things in the record book that Pat Davis has in Texas, and they were actually heired to King Henry the VIII of England. From Honeyhill, Honeyhill England.

**BB:** So you spoke to her on the phone, so she --

**JB:** Oh --

**BB:** -- called your dad.

**JB:** Yeah.



**BB:** Is that book been digitized? Have you seen it? Or?

**JB:** I've got a copy of it downstairs.

**BB:** Yeah.

**JB:** Interesting, big ledger. It says Mary Jane Eubanks, Thomas Bransford sister, was his secretary, and the skill and the penmanship is just awesome. Perfectly spaced letters. Talks about what slaves were worth.

**BB:** Woah.

**JB:** It's amazing. It's hard for me to believe that all of this is coincidental.

**BB:** Mm.

[recording paused] [00:43:04]

**JB:** He said, "You know, when I was a little boy, we used to come down here and take buckets of water?" Three Springs, I was up there last year and there was water come from the hillside. And Daddy would say, he would say, "You know, I used to plow this field when I was a kid." Now, my daddy was a real strict Christian Baptist. He'd say, "He thought if he drank any kind of liquor he was defouling his soul, but he was -- he would say my grandfather was a chef and his brother was a guide." So he would say, "Boy." He'd say, "Now boy, I'm going to be gone." They would stay in what was old slave quarters, the chefs would. Sometimes they'd be gone two weeks. Now his daddy said, his father would say, "Now, Son, when I get back..." He said, "I expect these two acres to be [BB coughs] plowed out here. Mules -- there's Jenny, you know Jenny." Then daddy said, "We're just eight years old." So he said, sometime -- he said, "Now when my daddy told me I had those two acres plowed, you best be working on it." And he said, "Sometimes when I was up there the work was so hard that sometimes it would be, I'd fall and the mule would be dragging me through the field and we would find Civil War artifacts." Now, I now that historians say there was no major battle. But he says, "When I was a kid we would find cannon balls. We would find pots and pans." Or maybe, Union soldiers camped up there. He said, "It only made my day harder." 'Cause he said, because it meant "I'd have to stop the mule and stack these things over by the fence and road and come back over and start plowing again." Daddy told me that.

**BB:** Hmm.

[00:45:01]

**JB:** There was also a cousin named Eddy. There's a ghost story about Eddy Bransford.

**BB:** Mmm.

**JB:** Eddy Bransford was my dad's first cousin, my second cousin. And Eddy's name can be found on the guide roster. And, uh, Eddy was a womanizer. He had married to an older woman named, uh, her name was, uh -- she was much older than Eddy. And it seemed like there was some jealousy about him being quite a handsome -- one of the well-looking Bransfords. And uh, so in the winter time, when the cave tours weren't very busy they would come to Elizabethtown, Kentucky, and they would like -- she was the, uh, cook in the hotel and he was the doorman. There's a pretty renowned hotel downtown Elizabethtown, used to be, pretty major stop. And, uh, so her name was Rhoda Woodson. And, uh, Eddy had taken the bus to Louisville, Kentucky, that she suspected he had gone to see a woman. Him being married, she's older, cautious about Eddy. So, he came in one morning, after being gone all night, she was in the kitchen cooking, she stabbed him with a huge knife and killed him. Killed him. She was very good friends with powerful people in Elizabethtown. It's on record. It's been found. She never served a day. So they brought Eddy's remains back to Mammoth Cave and buried him in the Bransfords' cemetery down Gray Launch Road. So the cabin that Rhoda and Eddy had was real nice. Daddy said it was nice, nicer than the one they had. So, his father John Henry decided they were going to move into this cabin, unoccupied. And they said something unusual and strange things happening in that house. He said the girls will sleep downstairs and the boys in the loft. He said night you could hear footsteps come down the hallway. Daddy told me this twice. And my aunt told me this just last year. He said, sometimes a cold air would come over you. Even in the summer, feel like it's going to freeze you to death. He said that cabin was haunted. Daddy said, "I'm not an advocate of ghosts, I'm just telling you what I experienced as a kid." He said -- but the thing that made them leave that cabin, he said, "My father came home one spring and saw someone in the orchard picking fruit that wasn't ripe yet. So, he asked my grandmother, Julianne Bransford, "Why you out there picking fruit. You know the apples aren't ready." She says, "I've not been out there." My grandfather been a Baptist Christian, didn't believe much in ghost stories, but they left that cabin. They moved out of there. Then another family says, "Ah, no such thing, we're going to move into that cabin. Who this next family was that move in that cabin, unusual, strange thing happen in that cabin and they moved out. And then family, the Civil Corps Civilians, when it was in a transition, they marked the cabin. Who was there? Some say maybe it was a ghost of Eddy Bransford, but what I'm telling you is what my daddy told me twice before he passed away and my 94-year-old aunt in Glasgow told me this same story, just two years ago. And my cousin lived there.

**BB:** Wow. Wow. Is that -- was that up by on Onyx Road?

**JB:** Yes, yes it was. Not too far from the Bransford Resort.

**BB:** Isn't Bransford Cemetery -- is it overgrown or is kept up?

**JB:** Not kept too good, but not kept too bad. That's what my grandfather, that's where my people buried. A lot of the graves up there are just footstone and headstone [indistinguishable] but Henry has a real good grave. Henry just 44 when he died. Said he was so pronounced working in caves that he would log all night and work in the cave all

day. Had a heart attack at age 43 walking to the cave one morning. But they saw that he had a real nice headstone. This huge headstone. He's buried next to his wife, Alice. And it simply says, "God, Henry Bransford, 1849-1893." Nice headstone.

**BB:** He died the same year as the World's Fair. 1893? Is that when he died?

**JB:** He was -- yes he did. He died the same year. 18 -- I guess Will would have been in Chicago, wouldn't he?

**BB:** Mhmm.

**JB:** Will would have been his grandson. Mhmm.

[interruption] [00:50:14]

**JB:** Maybe two things. When I was a kid, growing up in Glasgow, coming up to Mammoth Cave National Park on Memorial Day Weekend and Fourth of July was just standard. So, we'd load up in my dad's '49 Chevy and we'd go to Mammoth Cave. Well, we would ride up that dirt road, which was dirt then, up Flint Ridge. And we'd go to our great-aunt's gate and we would sit there in daddy's car, and I was a little kid and I didn't understand why we were up there on a hot day in that lane sitting in that car and Daddy wouldn't say a word. But my mother would say, "Boys, just sit there and be quiet. Your daddy has come home for a minute." See, what my daddy was doing, he was walking down memory lane. I didn't understand how, how important it was for him to go up there and just look and remember running up and down the lane barefoot. I'd been baptized and going to Mammoth Cave Baptist Church and then when we would go back over to the hotel after the -- we'd got to picnic area and have a picnic and then we'd go to the motel. And some of those people, those Caucasian folks, uh, who worked in the hotel kitchen, knew my daddy. But see, they were Mammoth Cave people. And, really, in 1957, the takeover hadn't been that long, you know. So, we go to the door to get a ice cream cone and I told Joy Lyons, this is in Joy's book, and she said, "Well how you doing, David?" A Caucasian lady. Well, he'd say, "Well Miss Milly, we're doing fine. I brought my wife and boys to Mammoth Cave for a picnic. We would like some ice cream cones and things like that." She'd say, "Why David, how many do you need?" He'd say, "Well, Miss Milly, I need four for the girls and I need a Coke for my wife and me." She said, "Well, you know you have to go to the back door." And you know. And I remember the pain in my daddy's face, but you know he never said a word. So, we'd go to the back door and they would bring out refreshments and we'd go back over to the picnic area. And dad said, "Oh." And my mom said, "This is a National Park, and we out to be able to go inside if we want to." And Daddy said, "Now, listen." He said, "That's just the way things are." Then after we would finish up our picnic, we would go down to the historic entrance, used to be a parking lot down where you could park your car and picnic table, all different now. So, we'd set there in front of the cave entrance and see these guides come up, you know, National Park Uniform. I remember being a little kid, I was about half a kid, badge and everything. And, uh, daddy would be telling us our story and they never knew who we were.

[00:53:09]

**JB:** Now, maybe one guide come through named Shorty Coates and dad say, "How you do, Shorty?" Because Shorty Coates was there when daddy was growing up over there. But most of the other guides were new people. People my dad didn't know. So, they never acknowledged our presence, but I remember thinking when I was a little kid thinking, "My kinfolk had to do with this cave, too." But they never knew who we were. And my daddy said, "I just want to make sure that you all know what I'm telling you. 'Cause, I wouldn't want it to go away." He says, "Because they told me that, uh, that Bransfords who was here were calling to the office and they were told that you need to be looking around for another job, because you're not going to be grandfathered." So my whole message, is I remember being a little kid, but I was offended. And it seemed like what my kin did, didn't really seem to matter. And no body seemed to be interested in who we were. But now, there's a rebirth. Now I get to tell you who we are. I get to tell you that. In their behalf. And that's what I want to tell you.

**BB:** That's great. See, you had that deep connection. I mean, where you are today started --

**JB:** Yeah.

**BB:** Those seeds were planted way back then. Just being at the cave with your dad and your mom.

**JB:** Yep.

**BB:** Knowing how much it meant to him.

**JB:** Well, I, Clifton Bransford, Elsey George, I have a cousin in Chicago, and she's Elsey's daughter and she's 88 years old. And she says she remembers when they had their last week in Mammoth Cave, being uprooted, realizing that they couldn't stay. And she came back to Mammoth Cave, um, about four years ago for a gathering and she hadn't been there since, because she remembers being a young teenager, how sad it felt. Uh, being uprooted from your house and having to leave and leave a familiar place going to a place that wasn't familiar. And also, my father told me that, um, growing up in Mammoth Cave, it wasn't such an unusual thing for the people who owned [indistinguishable] Store to carry your credit next spring, 'cause you made some who billed you couldn't pay until you sold your tobacco crop or your cattle. And he says, once they moved to Cave City, they found out that even though Cave City was real close to Mammoth Cave, the connection and the ties weren't the same. So my daddy and his father, and sisters, and brothers moved to Cave City. He says, but people there weren't as accommodating to his father as those folks in Mammoth Cave. So there was a pretty good correlation between blacks and whites even though it was segregation days. Because Dad said by clockwork in November, he said, the Ku Klux Klan would burn a cross on the hill not too far from Gray Ox Road, he said the flicker of the flame and the, and they would burn the cross in the fall time when the leaves off the trees to make sure you saw it. And he said there was

never a word said. So there was some clear, common things, about segregation and racism at Mammoth Cave, but overall, even in the '20s and the '30s and turn-of-the-century, people of color and whites did pretty good. Looking out for one another. 'Cause dad said his mother died in 1924 and he was just nine years old. He said the undertaker came from Glasgow to get his mother's body and made it and he brought her back the next morning. And he said the blacks and the whites from the whole ridge came over to their cabin. Got his daddy's crops and took care of his cattle and stuff. Wouldn't let John Henry do anything. They set up all night with the remains. That's the true meaning of a wake, you know? And then the next morning, all the black and whites went to the cemetery with his father and laid his mother to rest and then things resumed normal operation after that. So, the blacks and whites all supported each other. They're pretty darn good for the day.

**BB:** That's quite a community.

**JB:** I just want to tell you that.

**BB:** Alright.