

Interview Log: Jerry Burns
Location: the Interviewee's home in Blowing Rock
Date: October 17, 2003
Interview by: Philip (Ted) Coyle
Transcriber: Jamie Patterson

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Jerry Burns Interview

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Checked by: Philip Coyle

PC: My name is Philip Coyle. I'm called Ted Coyle, and it is October 17th and I'm in the house of Jerry Burns here on Maple Street in Blowing Rock, North Carolina. Would you spell your name for me?

JB: It's Burns, B-U-R-N-S. Jerry Burns. J-E-R-R-Y B-U-R-N-S.

PC: And when and where were you born?

JB: I was born in Blowing Rock. I'm one of the few natives left. Born here, moved away for a few years but came back, and I've been editor to the newspaper here in Blowing Rock for about 35-36 years.

(007) PC: And we were talking briefly, and you were saying that you thought that Blowing Rock had a special and unique relation to the Parkway.

JB: Oh, absolutely. I think Blowing Rock's economy is not partially tourism. It is 100% tourism. Whereas most of the state highways that lead into the community are considered veins, the Parkway is the main artery. I think without the Parkway, our economy would not be what it is. It's been that way ever since the Parkway's been a part of our community. Yeah, I think the relationship between the Parkway and the town of Blowing Rock, it's hard to find a separation. They're very close. The people of Blowing Rock feel very protective of the Parkway. They not only know it's here as a resource for our visitors but for themselves also. I think those that live here year-round take as much advantage of enjoying the resources that are available that the visitors do, or the people we call tourists.

(019) PC: Well, you were saying that people in Blowing Rock, maybe to make a generalization, but many people in Blowing Rock would like to see the Blue Ridge Parkway develop in a particular direction.

JB: Well, I think what they would rather see is preservation of the existing resources that they've got. I think, like everybody else along its route, they're concerned about encroachment by private development, although most of the people that have lived here any length of time wouldn't even think of impacting the Parkway in a negative way by developing a tract of land that would be too close or it might be an eyesore from the Parkway. There are a few that move in that buy some land and the first thing they want to do is put a commercial development on it and open it up so it's visible from the Parkway. I think that those of us that live here or have lived here any length of time, all know that that's really not in the best interest of a business or the community as a whole. I think that

the town of Blowing Rock more shares the same mission as the leaders of the Parkway itself, that preservation and protection is what made it America's biggest and most popular Park to begin with. The town is literally bordered by the Parkway. It's like a protective ribbon around the town. It controls our growth. Thank goodness, or we would be expanding far quicker than we are. A lot of the land is owned by the government and thank God it is, because it's a buffer for us that we deeply appreciate and recognize. The town actually can grow only to the south because of the city limits. All the other directions are bordered by park land. But the people of Blowing Rock grew up with the Parkway. They realize what it means to the economy of the area, and they're not about to jeopardize that.

(044) PC: Well, I think you were saying that the town of Blowing Rock has changed as a result of the Parkway as well. I mean, Blowing Rock was here before the Parkway came through. You were saying it celebrated its 100th anniversary now fifteen years ago in 1989, you said. You were born here, and so how has the Parkway changed the town of Blowing Rock?

JB: Well, like I said, it's the lifeblood of the community. It's set the quality of life in this community. People that travel the Parkway appreciate the land and the views and all the resources the Parkway has to offer them. They're not looking for a golf course, or they're not looking for a beach or a souvenir stand. They're looking to enjoy what was there before the Parkway was. And the Parkway came through and really disturbed very little of the natural lay of the land, and that's what the people come here for, and that's what we recognize we've got to protect as a resort community. So we share that in common and I think the Parkway just, when it came, revitalized the community to an appreciation of why we're here to begin with and why we're a resort town to begin with. It would be awful easy to kill the goose that laid the golden egg by overdevelopment or commercialization because of the impact the Parkway has had on Blowing Rock...it's become hard to do, but, more importantly, people wouldn't want to do it even if they could. They share that vision of quality and protection of the mountains with the Park Service. It's a great partnership.

(066) PC: Walking down the street from the town hall, I was struck by how the Southern Bell building is rock faced and your beautiful house here is rock. And looking out over here at the Stage Company's ticket office, it's all rock. Was it like that when you were growing up?

JB: It really was. There was more rock then, if anything. We haven't lost many structures, but a few have fallen by the wayside, some stone structures. Most of that was Grandfather stone that was taken from Grandfather Mountain and then used in building homes. There's, I guess, 25 or 30 homes in Blowing Rock that have this particular...but it's a beautiful light-colored stone. Our town hall, the community library, some of the town buildings and the homes still use that. But there again, it shows the appreciation the people have for the Parkway or either the Parkway had for the village of Blowing Rock, because you can see that same rock style and masonry work along the Parkway in its bridges and rock walls and stuff all along the Parkway. But it's a resource that is gone

now. There's no more of that particular rock. They're using synthetic and some different color stone that's being imported from other places. Most of that particular stone is very rare and it's hard to find now, sort of like a chestnut. We don't have the chestnut trees we had.

PC: I've never actually even heard...I've heard about the chestnuts of course, but the lack of native stone I haven't actually heard of, although it's interesting. (086) One thing I'm struck about of Blowing Rock is the town square, I guess you wouldn't call it that, but the town park and how that kind of tumbling down of that back hill goes into that park down below. What was that like when you were young?

JB: Well, at the turn of the century and through the '20's and '30's, the Memorial Park that is the center of our village was occupied by large hotels. Matter of fact, there was a Watauga Inn and there were two Watauga hotels that occupied the spot that the park is now on. All three burned to the ground, and the last time it burned was the last time anything has been named Watauga in this town at all. In the early 1940's, a minister by the name of Walter Keyes, a Presbyterian minister, had such a love for children that he wanted them to have a safe place to play in the village. He didn't do it for the visitors, or tourists; it was for the local residents. So he led an effort to secure that land and developed it as a park, and it just spread from there. I think it's a unique thing that Blowing Rock, half of the town is a park on one side, and the other half has got the stores and shops on it basically. It makes it kind of unique, and also it makes it a quaint place to sit and watch the town do its business from the benches in the park. You're looking down right on to Main Street. But, if you go on back behind the park, there's another park, and then you go beyond that park, and there's another park. So, Blowing Rock really is a community of parks, there again sharing the same mission as the Park Service in preservation of our natural environment.

PC: As a tourist here myself, there was a sense of discovery when you go back there. You see this one park and you go, "Wow, look at this! There's even more back here." And you start realizing, "Wow, this town is better than I thought it was!" It's sort of like the Blue Ridge Parkway itself. You drive along and you think it's great, but then you stop at one of these places like the Cone Mansion, and you realize it's all that much deeper.

JB: It really is. To people passing by on the bypass, it's a shame they don't get to see all of Blowing Rock. You really need to be here and talk and visit with the people to understand that we're proud of what we've got here and we don't think we're doing anything to damage it. (118) And I think that going back to the Parkway again, it's their philosophy; it's our philosophy. It's a shared philosophy. We've learned from them. The relationship the town has with the Park Service since 1939, the very first rock that was cleared, has been a spirit of cooperation. To this day, if the Park Service needs one of our fire trucks that has a tower on it to reach something they can't reach with some of their equipment—a few years ago they were dropping some pre-constructed bridges to the places on trail, we took the tower truck from the fire department and lowered those into place on a trail from a vantage point on a highway above the trail. If there's an emergency, if the Park Service has flooding, the town's always the first one there. So,

we're here to help. By the same token, the town has had the same, whether it be in law enforcement, on any emergency the park rangers, resources of the Parkway are here. It really is a close partnership, and we call each other all the time. It's just each are a branch of the other.

(134) PC: I'm struck by, as an outsider, how active the Garden Club seems to be here. And also the town library is staffed by volunteers.

JB: Well, Blowing Rock is a community of volunteers. The makeup of the town is those of us who live here year-round, those that live here seasonally, and then the people we call day trippers or tourists that are here for the weekend to go to Tweetsie or some of the attractions and then they're off to the next stop on their tour. So, you've got three segments there. But, most important of all and recognized again as one of our main resources is our retired people. It's funny, when I was growing up, the reputation the town had which was not particularly pleasantly accepted by the people, was the "Town of the newlyweds and half-deads." But it was literally true. You had the people that either came here on a honeymoon or they retired here. Well, it's still that way. The chamber of commerce would cringe if they heard it described like that, but I think Blowing Rock years and years ago recognized the value it has in its retired people.

As far as a volunteer base, they've got the time, they've got the skill, they want to remain active, they have pride in their community, they live here the year round. Those that live here seasonally, while they may not physically get out and dig in the flowers or build rock walls or whatever, they provide the financial resources for the others to do that. But it's a community rich in retired people. For that reason, we have a population or a volunteer base that is second to none, I would say. That's a big thing for a town this size to have that as a resource and to recognize it as such. I don't think you could move into this town and live a week here without somebody coming to ask you if you didn't want to be on a Garden Club or the Appearance Advisory Commission or the theater board or some community service agency. And there are a lot of them here. They all have their missions. A lot of times they work on them together, but all of them are community-oriented.

(165) PC: Scott Hildebran, the town manager, was saying that Houck Medford and the Parkway had been working to try to put together some kind of a connection between that lower park down there, the town park and Bass Lake and thus the Blue Ridge Parkway. Do you think that's a good idea, and what needs to be done if it's going to happen?

JB: I think if it's well-thought out with the right kind of plan, I don't want to see -- there again you're getting a community that is a resort community, you want it to be separate from the Parkway to the point of commercialization -- but as far as opening it up for better access through walking, through bikes, I think yeah, that's a good...and it has happened. They've got a bike lane now out on 221 that you can come from the Parkway into town without an automobile. Trails to connect the parks would be a great idea. And that is an attitude the town has expanded on the past few years of building sidewalks and trails mainly to help with the congestion downtown during the middle of the summer when traffic and trying to find a parking place in this town is impossible. So, they realize

that the more people that are on foot, the better the traffic congestion is going to be handled. That and the horse...I think the other areas and the horse trail, a lot of people ride horses and it's right in town here. Out on 221, right at the edge of the Parkway there is still city limits, and they're riding horses from what we call the horseshow grounds, the show grounds where we have the horse show, through the village and around into the parks. And the Park's got an extensive trail system for both walking and horseback riding. So, yeah, I think in developing the walking, the bikes, and the horses is an area that yeah, I think there are some ways that they can enhance both the Parkway and Blowing Rock by developing those. But as far as motorized traffic, I think it's good. I think we've got it about the way we want it right now.

PC: Yeah, I'm thinking about...Scott was saying that currently they might be thinking about some sort of a greenway type of thing to connect the city park and the National Park essentially.

JB: Right. I know that's part of their mission statement. They ran a study here a few years ago, and that was one of the things that...people said they wanted easier access to the Parkway from the village. They wanted easier access from the village to Shops on the Parkway, which is an outlet mall built actually between the Parkway and Blowing Rock. They have done that with a new sidewalk system that reaches that far. I think now their move is to go in the other direction, out toward the Parkway the other way. So, yeah, I think we'll see more of that.

(211) PC: Now, if you were me and you were doing an oral history interviews with people in Blowing Rock, what would be the main themes that you would think should be covered?

JB: As a tourist or as a—

PC: What kind of constituencies or different people do you think that I should talk to?

JB: Well, I don't think there's a few people, I don't know of anybody you could talk to that's not going to share the same philosophy. I think the biggest example is ongoing now, the state of North Carolina and the Department of Transportation is trying to build a four-lane highway through Blowing Rock. And I don't think anywhere in the state has there been more resistance than they've found in Blowing Rock. And that resistance comes because people do not want the quaintness of the town disturbed. They like it the way it is, and they want to keep it the way it is. The quickest way you could make an enemy in Blowing Rock is to be passing through here and stop because you love it and buy a piece of property and build a house on it, move into it, and then start an effort to change it to the way it was where you came from. People don't like to hear that. And that has happened. You know, there are people: "This is a perfect place I've always dreamed of. Now, let's change it the way it was where I came from because we don't do it this way."

PC: If it only had curbside recycling.

JB: Right. So, I think, I'm trying to think if there is a segment of the population. Indirectly or directly, everybody in this town makes their living from tourism. The Parkway is a tourism-oriented facility. Nobody is going to want to endanger that or anything else that's tied to tourism. When the town council got permission to raise an extra penny sales tax, when they established an occupancy tax for seasonal residents in apartments or rental units, it only passed because they promised to earmark that money to improve facilities, the community, for tourists or for the local people to enjoy, it had to be recreation-oriented improvements. Not streets, not the sewer plant, not the water plant, or added police officers. They wanted something like more trails, more sidewalks, and more parks. And I don't know that you could find a segment that disagrees with that. I really don't. Even your largest developers or construction people won't disagree with that.

(254) PC: Well, speaking of which, you were saying that there was some conflict between a developer here and Bass Lake. You might talk about that.

JB: The Chetola resort is the highest quality. If there was a five star resort, it would be Chetola. It's former ownership included development of land that bordered the Parkway, specifically at the edge of Bass Lake and the dam that holds that water back. Although he was listening to the people who were trying to beg him not to do that, including the Park Service -- as a matter of fact the Park Service sought the town's support in trying to head that off and got it without any hesitation at all -- they convinced them to hold up on it, and in the meantime, the property sold and the new owner was more receptive to that. Kent Tarburton of Chetola has been far more...He comes from a tourism background, and he understood, or understands, well what an asset that is to have at his back door rather than develop right up on top of it. So, the first thing he did was yield to the Parkway and the town and made adjustments to where the units that he did build, while they're visible from a distance, are not bordering the Park Service. There's a good strong buffer that is there. I think, just talking about Bass Lake, a few years ago, the town did get into a little squabble with the Park Service. And there again, it was...the Park Service wanted to build a road down to Bass Lake so that the hikers would have an easier access and that handicapped people could use the walk around the one-mile loop around the lake. But the town didn't want it. They felt it just, "We don't need a road down there. We don't want too many people down there. It's just going to send too much traffic in that area." So they fought it. I think it took the rangers several meetings with church groups and with the community clubs and others to get the support that finally got it across to the people that the Park Service must provide for the handicapped. This would in the long run be a lot better than cars parking on the highway and walking through the woods down to the lake. But there, they recognized the benefit of being able to communicate with the people, and they did establish meetings where they answered the questions and all. The road is down there now, and people do say it's better than it was. But it shows you how protective the people are of the Parkway and the land around Blowing Rock.

PC: Yet the road was built. Now that's a general access road down here?

JB: Yes. It just leads down to a parking area, nothing more. But now handicapped people can access that trail. And it's good. I was one of the ones that were opposed to that, because I just thought, "Well, here's a beautiful park area that they're going to build a road into. All that's going to do is make so many people go down there." But it hasn't. It's worked out well.

(311) PC: Understanding how supportive this town has been to the Park Service and your paper too -- Scott was saying that practically every issue you have something about the Parkway in it -- there's always room for improvement. You were mentioning some of the changes that have occurred over the last some amount of time. Maybe you could talk about that.

JB: You mean on the Parkway itself?

PC: Mmm-hmm.

JB: Yeah, I'm concerned a little bit about the pride sometimes that I see the rangers...It's not out of hand, but I don't think it's the same as it was twenty years ago. I've been in situations to see a ranger literally, the method he uses to let somebody know that that's not permitted on the Parkway. Whereas a few years ago they would have reasoned with them, they come a little more strongly. I know that's probably unique to the ranger himself and all, but litter on the Parkway, I've seen litter left there for three or four days that in past times, if a ranger passed by, you'd see the patrol car pulled over picking that up. Seeing rangers on trails and out of their offices and out of their vehicles literally into the parks visiting the campers or whatever the people are doing. I haven't seen that to the extent that I once did. I realize there's a lot more people and a lot fewer rangers, so probably that's probably the biggest problem. And I know too how frustrated the rangers get when they see things that they know is wrong day after day after day. So, I know they get a little short maybe sometimes with the people, but when I was growing up, the ranger, you really weren't afraid of him. They were law enforcement; you knew that. They had a blue light or red light on their vehicles, but he was more of a friend, a man that could tell you about the woods and the great outdoors, and you didn't look at him as law enforcement. Of course, times have changed. It's a different era we live in now. And the Parkway is impacted by negatives as well as positives. I think with the shortage of rangers and that, it's probably changed the personalities of the rangers somewhat.

(357) PC: Given that this cassette here is going to be transcribed and it's going to go into the archives, what are some other issues that you feel should be given voice to?

JB: Well, I think if we are going to maintain the Park Service, the parks as we know them, the Parkway and all National Parks, we're going to have to come up with a better way for people to get involved both financially and physically. Whether it's a cleanup campaign or financial support, there's going to have to be more partnerships. I think the Blue Ridge Parkway Foundation, the Friends of the Parkway, there's going to have to be more agencies like that or these agencies are going to have to be expanded to handle more. I think they're going to have to look at fee structures that maybe need to be

evaluated and possibly changed. I just don't think the federal government can afford to fund the Park Service of any park to the extent that it should. There's just not that much money available. So, I think we're going to have to look for other sources. If you love the Parkway, if you enjoy the Parkway, I think you ought to be able to put something back into it whether it's out of your pocketbook or off the sweat of your brow, one or the other. You're going to have to share some of yourself with the Parkway. And that goes for us as individuals or firms, foundations, whatever, agencies...I think we might see in the future commercialization, not so much concern by bringing some large companies in to subsidize some of the programs and facility needs of the Park Service. I've heard suggestion that they ought to ask Sherwin Williams to come in and do a commercial on the Cone Manor House using their paint to one of America's great historic buildings. But that would be met with resistance now as too commercial for the...But I think we're going to have to look in those areas. It's the same with the needs of the Cone Estate and looking toward the manufacturers of denim products to assist. Moses Cone was the denim king, and they should be proud of that as we are. They should be a partner in preservation of what has been their livelihood. And I've got to look in those areas and maybe be a little more receptive to some commercialization, within limits, I think. I don't think we have much choice. I think that's the right...the way we're going to have to go.

PC: Well, thank you very much. You understand that this is going to be transcribed and put in the archives. Do we have your permission?

JB: Absolutely.

PC: And I'll send you a release to that effect.

JB: That'll be fine.

PC: Thank you very much.

JB: Glad to do it.

(422) End of interview