

Phil Noblitt interview log
Location: Park Service Headquarters
Date: 3/19/2003
Interview by: Philip (Ted) Coyle
Logged by: Jamie Patterson
Checked by: Philip Coyle

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Interview with Philip Noblitt, Management Assistant

Location: Park Service Headquarters

Date: May 19, 2003

Interview by: Philip Ted Coyle

Transcript by: Jamie Patterson

Checked by: Philip Coyle

(001) My name is Philip Ted Coyle and it is May 19, 2003. I'm in the office of Phil Noblitt in Asheville, North Carolina in the [Blue Ridge Parkway] Park Service Headquarters. I'm here to interview Mr. Noblitt about his experiences working with the park. Do I have your permission to archive this tape in the Park Service archives, the Blue Ridge Parkway archives?

Phil Noblitt: Yes. That's no problem, Ted.

Philip Coyle: And I also give my permission for that. Well, as we said I'm going to start with your background, with your personal background.

PN: Well, just, of course it's Philip Noblitt, by the way.

PC: Oh, yeah, could you spell your name? Excuse me.

PN: Well, it's just Philip with one L and Noblitt, N-O-B-L-I-T-T.

PC: Thank You.

(010) PN: And currently my job position is management assistant. But, in any case, I don't know how much background you really would be interested in. I started in the Park Service as a seasonal historian in Chickamauga and Chattanooga National Military Park in 1970 and then got on there as a permanent employee, then styled a park technician. I was later selected as an intake trainee and moved to Cape Hatteras National Seashore where I was a district interpreter for the Wright Brothers Fort Raleigh in the north end of the seashore. Then, I went to Fort Frederica National Monument on Saint Simons Island in Georgia as a chief ranger--chief of interpretation and resource management. A few years later after that went to Ocmogee National Monument in Fort Macon where I was the same thing.

And finally in 1987-- in fact this is May, I guess it was May when I came here--so it's been 16 years exactly that I've been on the Blue Ridge Parkway. I first was a District Ranger working what was then called the Bluffs district, which is mostly the section of the Parkway in Ashe County and Alleghany Counties of North Carolina, mostly in that section. And then I came to headquarters just a few years later in 1990 as the park's interpretative specialist, and, gosh, I have to think, 2001 was that, and then I came over to be a management assistant.

PC: Where are you from originally?

PN: I was born in Kingsport, Tennessee. I grew up essentially in North Georgia, in Rossville and Fort Oglethorpe, which are very near Chattanooga, so that was essentially where I was raised. I did live a short period in Hampton, Virginia, when my dad was working there for civilian services as a firefighter at Langley Air Force base. But most of my life was basically East Tennessee, North Georgia. I went to UT-Chattanooga for my undergraduate degree and while on the Parkway got my masters in history at Appalachian State, so I think that covers my background.

PC: How did you first get hired by the Park service? What brought you to the Park service?

PN: Well, let me see how to make this story short. I had asked the placement office at UT-Chattanooga if they knew anyone who wanted a historian and she laughed and said, "Are you kidding? For a summer job? No, I've never heard of such." She called me two weeks later and said I was the only person she could think of, that she had been called by the chief historian at Chickamauga Battlefield who was looking for somebody majoring in history --and had at least 15 semester hours of history-- and she said, "You were the only one who came to mind." I said, "Thank you, Jesus!"

And I went and interviewed, and I was then working at a textile mill, and you may be sure that I was happy --I was deliriously happy-- to be hired. And I put on that park service uniform. Yeah. And the pay was better. But, it was one of those things. I got to talk about the civil war. I thought it infinitely fascinating. I'm not sure all the visitors that I spoke to were as fascinated as I. But in any case, that's how I got into the Park Service. Of course, like a lot of people, I had aspirations to one day be a sainted superintendent, so I was quick to accept any promotion and to move around, which I did. In any case, that's how I got into it and--knock on wood, so far so good--it's been a great career.

(046) PC: Well, earlier I was asking you about your suggestions for this research project. This research project combines oral history and ethnography. And you were mentioning that you thought some of the most important people to talk to would be, well who?

PN: I think a lot of times when you do oral history there is a tendency to talk to people on the inside, well people like me, and people who are with the park and our various partner groups, and certainly they're all important. I also--maybe this is my advice toward the past and toward the cultures--that I just recommend thinking--I'm not sure how you hook up with all these people, Ted--but people who are perhaps affected by the parkway, live on corridor, but who are not necessarily powerful people, people who may be lower class or who represent the new demographics of the region.

(055) I mean there has been a tremendous amount of Hispanic population growth in the last decade plus. And how much do we deal with sort of the whole thing of ethnicity in a changing world, not the stereotyped ethnicity. And of course gender and class and try to get every one who --I hate to keep saying it-- the margins, but not necessarily the empowered or the people who are within, for lack of a better term, the system. But those people who are on those margins and who may indeed be very much affected by the parkway and who may indeed have great feelings about it or even if they don't, if they have no feelings about it or the parkway seems irrelevant to them, maybe that's a

question worth exploring because of that value. It wouldn't be like that would be a meaningless undertaking either.

(065) PC: Yeah, I know that I spent some time in Sparta recently and, uh, huge Mexican population there in Sparta, so-

PN: Well, Sparta was the place that I, you know, it's the county seat for Allegany county. And in 1987, I you know there were certainly at various times of the year, I think more so when it was harvest, Hispanic population, that's exactly right. But on a recurring basis, there were very few. This is nothing statistical that I can allude to, but I would have guessed that there would have been very little Hispanic population and especially on a year-round basis in that county, and I'm just talking from 1987 to, what, 2003.

PC: So you can see that change in just a few years, because I'm sure some of these were seasonal people as well, but there's also people that are moving in and staying, so you make a good point.

(075) One of the things that I wanted to talk with you about is this idea that, as a former interpretive specialist and someone who still has their hand deeply involved in interpretation of the parkway, is how to interpret different sections of the parkway.

PN: Well, in candor Ted, I'm not so much involved in...well, I do do some work for the NCTA, but that's more of an administrative function, trying to work with them on getting our agreement done. But I certainly have had some past, and worked for what ten or eleven years as park interpretive specialist. Specifically your question again Ted, let me focus...

PC: My specific question is that you were saying that instead of interpreting the parkway as a whole, as one unit, it might be better to focus on different sections of the parkway and focus more specifically on the challenges for interpretations in each one of those sections.

PN: Well, yeah. You know, the parkway, and it's one of the great dilemmas we have always had, is so long and traverses...So, we often say, you know, we've got this kind of elevation change and species change in natural history. Well, in the same way the cultural history of the region varies from place to place. It doesn't have necessarily to do with elevation. but it has to do with the history of that particular area.

I would say, you know, look at Roanoke, Virginia or Big Lick, as it was early on. Until the railroad came, it was one community. After the railroad came it certainly became another. Asheville, for many years, was sort of a health resort even before the civil war. The Cherokee culture at the south end of the parkway is a culture not specific to other parts of the parkway. Certainly, there was Native American influence all up and down the whole region. But I'm just saying, you know, you have the whole Qualla Boundary down there. So how do you talk about the Blue Ridge Parkway in terms of Asheville, Roanoke, Cherokee, and Boone, Blowing Rock?

I mean Blowing Rock was a bit of a resort town itself prior to the civil war. But now, Spruce Pine was fairly early on and for years, in fact, Native Americans mined some of

the mineral resources in that region and fairly early on was an industrial place. So you got all these places and none to my mind have an exact same history. So, when we stand up and start generalizing about the Appalachian past, we're talking about mountaineers, whoever they were. It's like, gosh, this is a slippery slope we're on now.

And I know it gets tedious. One of the great powers of history is to be able to generalize. And when you can't generalize, it makes it tough. But I think it's being able to look with some specificity and say, "Be careful," and tell our visitors this story that, traveling the parkway, the culture history is too rich to overlay it with a single stereotypical story. We have scores, hundreds of stories, to tell, and, so, let's not assume that we have one Appalachian past to deal with here. That's I guess, you know, kind of a convoluted way to say that, Ted, but...

(113) PC: Well, let's get to some of those different sections and maybe we'll just go from north to south and get some of your thoughts on these different sections. So let's start with Humpback Rocks. What do you see as some of the challenges with interpretation? Now you had something to do with Humpback Rocks. Might you talk about that first, the interpretation there?

PN: Well, just a few years ago, we did get some exhibit funds to, you know, we got a very small visitors center there, which sort of serves as the entry point, and of course nearby is the, what we have always called, the Mountain Farm, I think somewhat a misnomer, because, as everyone on the Parkway would be the first to say it, the arrangement of those buildings, it's really an outdoor museum. It's a collection of buildings that were brought to that site, not as a working farm, but simply to represent types of buildings that were often associated with generally middle or lower class farms in Appalachia. So, when we did our exhibits in Humpback Rocks, we tried to tell a little broader story than just this notion of isolated mountaineers.

When we got to thinking about it, the Howardsville turnpike, a major mountain crossing, being literally almost right--didn't cut quite through the farm--but came very very close, within a stone's throw. And then, just up the ways, right about where I-64 crosses now near as you go up to the north. Humpback Rocks is 5.8 milepost. There's already up in antebellum era a railroad train. So you were probably within earshot of that train. So how could you tell some isolated story?

So, when we did those exhibits, we tried to talk about class and industrialization and the fact that, yeah, sometimes people did make homemade goods but sometimes they bought them out of catalogs, and that not everybody was isolated. So we tried to put that story in some perspective.

Now the problem is the Mountain Farm itself is the big attraction. And it is so hard. In exhibits, you can try succinctly to raise the point that this region may have been more complicated.

Now, I think, we even mentioned for example, slavery. You know in one of the 1850's or 1860, Nelson County to east had a slave population of 45% as I recall. Augusta County in Shenandoah Valley, on the east boundary of the parkway, slave population of 20%, obviously, a biracial society. But, you know, so we tried to introduce those notions to help people think about, to get a somewhat more complex and I think richer picture of the region and to include people. I think if you talk about race and class, you immediately

make the past accessible to people who may sometimes feel in the margins, who may be minority, or who may say, "Whose story is this anyway?" So we tried to make that a broader story, but in any case you still got that mountain farm.

And the mountain farm, or the outdoor museum, as I would still call it, for a lot of people it's like, "Ah, but this is really how it was!" So we face and will always face, Ted, I think, the conflict between the created landscape that the landscape architects did for us, the edited landscape, and the richer past. I mean, once you've edited that landscape, it is very hard, I mean you can put up exhibits, you can say, "Truth be told, there were really clapboard houses here, and, the truth be told, there were trains and mines, and there was slavery and there were people who migrated in and they just didn't all live here forever and at different times there was different levels of industrialization and sometimes people actually traded their farm products in regional markets and were very much connected with the regional economy and some were hard scrabble and sometimes farm prices went up and sometimes farm prices went down. Sometimes these people migrated to factories when there were opportunities. They were not out standing outside of American culture."

But to tell that story when you drive down the Parkway and see bucolic Mabry Mill and you see these split rail fences and you see pastures and in some cases, because the National Forest lands especially, the depopulated areas. It's like, "Gosh, I'm glad this place is here and what would it have been like to have lived up here all by yourself?" And it is so hard, and it will be perpetually a difficult challenge, or a challenge for park service interpreters, to try to wrestle with.

(167) PC: Well, speaking of forest lands along the parkway it makes me think of Peaks of Otter in that area, and, uh, it reminds me of a story you told me a little while ago off tape. I don't know if you want to tell it again, but when I was at the Peaks of Otter Lodge recently, a lady came in and she just was looking around and she says, "I just want to make sure it's the same as I remember it!"

So, clearly she was projecting that timeless past, even on the lodge, which is a contemporary building. So, it's really struck me that people go to the Blue Ridge Parkway to find a timeless past that exists and always will exist. Will you tell that story about the visitor you overheard at Peaks of Otter?

PN: Oh, I was just, yeah, just making a casual site visit and was actually out of uniform, but listening to a ranger at Polly Wood's Ordinary talking to a visitor and it was pretty much one-on-one conversation. And the visitor, a middle-aged woman, was talking about the smells and how it reminded her of her grandmother's house and waxed somewhat nostalgic about how simple times past must have been, or were, not must have been, and was really sort of enraptured of the whole setting and being in that cabin.

And at length, I asked her, not to be adversarial, or I hope not, but I did say, "Does that say more about the past or does that say more about how you feel about the present?"

And my whole point was, I think, a lot of what we do on the parkway, the other issue is not only have we created landscapes, but they continue to appeal and resonate with folks. I believe, and it's just my opinion, I certainly have no basis in fact, but it seems to me fairly obvious, it is so easy to look back and idealize the past and say "well it was a simpler time" and to forget all those difficulties about women dying in childbirth and very poor medical care and no antibiotics and people dying of pneumonia and infants

dying very young. So, one has to be very careful in idealizing the past, but, again, I think the most provocative thing about all that is that what does it say about how we feel about the present?

(199) PC: Well, let me ask you that question, because you've been hanging that question out here over the last hours, or the last hour that we've been talking. What do you think it does say about people in the present that they need that idealized past so strongly?

PN: That's a very difficult question. I'm not sure I've done enough research to give you an informed study. That's a question, Ted, that, gosh, could be answered at length and I'm sure in different ways by lots of folks. I mean I sort of have the notion sometimes that because of our degree of specialization and complexity and urbanization in modern society and, yeah, to some extent pace, or we perceive it to be a rapid pace. I personally think, we just go, perhaps we're just bent on some direction that we'll just go faster and faster 'til we just explode or implode. It's always getting more done, and more efficiency and achieving more in the least amount of time.

Or maybe, with our computers, now it is that we can individualized production and consumption units. We can both work and buy online and thereby be the most efficient consumer in the whole world as individual production and consumption units. Now, that's a very dark thought, but I'm not in sure entirely without some merit.

But, in any case, I just think that for whatever reason. I just think people are enamored of the past because it gives them a release from the present. And whatever it is. Whatever stress they have in their life. It could be international terrorism, that's an issue right now, international politics.

As population trends change, I mean we're talking about growth of Hispanics. I sometimes worry that if you look historically, America is not above having some great nativist sentiment and great resentment of people, and so, will historically the dominant population revert to some nativist sort of sentiments. And will that manifest itself in some ways that I personally would regret very much? But again I think specialization, urbanization, all those things are a natural reason that people would want to say, "Ah, but wasn't there a better time than this?"

(229) PC: Moving south along the parkway, you told me an excellent story about Mabry Mill and I wonder if you would recount that one.

PN: Well, I was doing some exhibits. For years, our theme at Mabry Mill was "mountain industry." And we have there, of course, almost the compulsory moonshine still and we have a grist mill, which has been gussied up as it were. We put in a reflecting pond and made it look much better than if you look historically at the mill.

The Mabry Mill never looked better than before the National Park service took it over. We made it one nice looking thing. In fact, one of the exhibits there now has postcards, which I found from a local collector who has all pictures of Mabry Mill. He had a whole poster board of them. I don't know. Maybe he had two poster boards. I know one of them was completely covered. They were different postcards and they would variously say - now, it was the same image of Mabry Mill- "Greetings from Connecticut!" "Greetings from Iowa!" And, so, I think we said on the exhibit that this image is so appealing that it

has been exported and appropriated by other states apparently. But, it is obviously the same picture, and I love that.

But the other story is that we told about mountain industry in sort of this "land of make do or do without" and people like Ed Mabry had these multiple skills and was such a valuable resource to his neighbors. And, he was no doubt that. But, in trying to do some background research for those exhibits, I went to Stewart, Virginia and just perused some microfilm records of the same time period, roughly 1905, 1910. And in the Stewart newspaper they would have sections sometimes about Meadows of Dan, and which is just, of course, over the hill from Mabry Mill, literally over a knoll almost. And they would talk about, one of the things I saw was that someone I think was visiting from Richmond, or maybe it was Charleston, but some downeast place visiting friends there for the summer in Meadows of Dan. And I think there was some reference to the score between a couple of baseball nines, baseball teams that were playing. And I'm thinking, "Well, this is all interesting to me." Not that Meadows of Dan, do not misunderstand me, Ted, there was no implication that Meadows of Dan was the cultural hotspot. This was not White Sulphur Springs; this was not Asheville. It was very much rural. But people obviously came to visit in the summer. And people had social connections. And there was enough society and enough surplus that they could afford to play baseball. And there was a road that went down the mountain So, I began to think, "It's too bad that Ed Mabry and his friends didn't occasionally walk over this knoll, because they would have found the world right at their doorstep, literally." I don't want to exaggerate that, but I just use that as an example to say, to begin to think that people could, by Ed Mabry's time, buy mail order catalog supplies.

But the thing is, I've got to be careful and fair to the Mabry's, and the other thing is that people like him were very useful and people who were jack of all trades and he did provide useful services, obviously no denying that. But you just have to be careful of context and how you look at that. And don't assume, again, and maybe it was one of our signs said it was "land of make do or do without," but it was mountain industry and all that had nothing to do with railroads or turnpikes or you know further south with mining minerals resources or further west mining coal. All that wasn't really mountain industry. Mountain industry meant doing blacksmithing [speaking sarcastically].

PC: Well, reading oral histories of Ed Mabry, everybody talks about him and just being a great guy, a hard working man, and, notable for being a hard working man and being skilled at a number of different jobs. He didn't farm as much as some of his neighbors did because he depended more on blacksmithing and did other things as well as that. But, just over the hill, in Rock Castle Gorge, reading the oral histories of that place, there was a five hundred acre apple orchard there and these apples were being sold down in the Piedmont. Quite clearly they were a cash crop, so these were not isolated, maybe on a daily basis they didn't have that many visitors or something from down below, but they were connected to the rest of the world, surely.

PN: Well, they obviously had to have been. I think that whole notion, and it's a play on words, and gosh, not to get into semantics, but what's the difference between "isolated" and "rural"? A lot of these people were definitely living in the country, as I would have called it and still call it sometimes. And some of these people were most assuredly

country folks, people in many cases of modest education. But, in many cases, there were public schools, and people, in particular by the late 1800's, and many people read and again there were different classes. So, yeah, these folks were much more connected than a lot of people think. But on a day-to-day basis, did they live in subdivisions? Well, no they didn't for the most part.

(315) But were there communities, now, and I digress, or maybe we just move on south to the Music Center site, because there was a historic research study done, and I can't remember the office. It's out of our regional office. But I remember looking at it thinking, "This is amazing."

There were a few houses when we bought the site, and we set about to tear most of those down, because they were residences there that we didn't need. Although I do remember making the point to a former superintendent that did we really want to tear down...if we were trying to interpret culture, because, within almost view shot of the visitors centers area, there was what looked to me like a 1910 or 20's bungalow. And I could be off base on that, but it was definitely a bungalow-style house. It was called the Judge Mathews house. It sat kind of on the curve in 612. There was what looked to me a post-WWII, maybe early 1950's, again it's just a guess, Ted, brick rancher sitting right on the parkway almost. There was a retirement home a little further up, and I know there was a more modest house a little further down, and there was a spring house nearby, which was associated with one of those properties. And I think what we decided to keep was the springhouse. And my point was that, well I understand that all these structures cost, and I must tell you candidly, were I the superintendent, would I have kept all those houses? Probably not, because it's an upkeep hassle, and who's going to live in them? And everybody knows our constraints about budget and the different demands that are put on us. But, at the same time, it was a wonderful cross-section of 20th century vernacular architecture in Appalachia, and what we did was systematically take out everything but the spring house. So, I would argue why the springhouse pray tell? Are we still trying to promote the notion of the hoary past, antiquity, and the timeless past. It's not exactly when, but you could have interpreted...I kind liked looking at the Matthews house and that brick rancher and those different ones.

(351) But I digress from the main story, which was that, apparently at the turn of the century before, I think it was called the Goodson community, and I've had to look again at that report to be sure. But I think she had found somebody, an elderly person, maybe in their 80's, but who remembered from childhood living there and who drew her a mental map, so to speak, just penciled in where residents were. And I don't know if there were 50 or 60 structures, or maybe I exaggerate. But there was definitely a community, seems to me, a country store or two, maybe a church, a school, and a number of houses all across that Music Center site, I mean a whole community. And it was just amazing to me that it had been so depopulated.

Now the parkway corridor didn't take up that much room through there. And I thought, well, maybe these people moved to the furniture factories up in Galax and maybe they moved to Moses Cones' textile mills in Greensboro and Winston Salem, because there's always the push and pull of migration. If times are hard for agriculture and you had an opportunity, you got to get out of Dodge, so to speak. So they did. But, again, it's just trying to picture that. I think most of our visitors think that, you know,

we're always accustomed to linear past and progress and more people. There are whole sections of the parkway where communities were there and are no longer there.

(377) PC: And I suppose those houses would have also been an opportunity to point out that the music that you all are going to present or are presenting at the Music Center comes into the present. It's not a living relic of the past. Clearly, these people are still alive and playing music and valuing music and teaching string instruments in high school and such. Maybe, you can begin to talk a little bit about what you see as some of the possibilities for the Blue Ridge Music Center.

PN: Well, actually, probably Ted, not to be unresponsive on that, that's broad enough I think the current interpretive specialist, Patty Lockamy and Dan Brown, of course the superintendent, other folks may have more in terms of long term direction with the Music Center. I certainly have interest and strong feeling about some of that, but on the other hand that's probably outside of what I now do. Although I must tell that I was involved with some the planning for that, because it's been 15-20 years in the works. So, from 1990-2001, I was involved a lot with of the initial development of the interpretive plan.

One of the things, I'm not sure we even put it in the plan, and Ted, you might consider this a total digression. I've always thought that the Parkway to some extent has, and Anne Mitchell now, in her dissertation, talks about how the Parkway was disappointing to many people who live on the corridor, these poor mountaineers who wanted to open a lemonade stand, so to speak, and found out they wouldn't qualify as concessionaires. So they thought, "well, at least we got a good farm-to-market road" and it's like well we don't really want commercial vehicles here. And sometimes, their land was bought by the respective states. And I think sometimes, in a less than sensitive way, posted the Parkway route on the courthouse wall. So sometimes people found out about it when they found the surveyors out there saying, "Oh by the way." And I think the Music Center is a thing...and don't misunderstand me; I'm not saying the Parkway was in any way unduly harsh, I think we've always wanted to be sensitive to our neighbors to a degree. It's just that sometimes I think people perceive us as being the big bad federal government. We exist. People come off...

(431) End of Tape1: Side 1

Side 2

(B001) PC: This is the beginning of Side 2 Tape 1. You were just saying that the Blue Ridge Music Center might be a powerful statement.

PN: Yeah, I was going to say I think it's a powerful statement to the people in that community. I mean I've been around a few of those musicians during the planning and so forth. I remember a musician, Greg Hooven, he's kind of the lead man for the New Ballard Branch Bog Trotters, I believe, and he's enthusiastic about this music and this culture. And I think, one of the great things when I see all this enthusiasm is that this is the Park Service in a sense--I mean we've got the partner, of course, in the National Council for the Traditional Arts--but we are saying to the community, "There are things

about you that we very much value and your culture is important to us." I don't know if they need our validation, but I think it is sort of nice from our standpoint to say to local community, as we have through crafts. I mean historically we value crafts and all that sort of thing. But this is our first venture in the sense, Ted, into really serious sort of nonmaterial culture. I mean music has its material manifestations, with instruments and all that sort of thing, but essentially it's nonmaterial expression. And we have in the past limited ourselves to sort of vernacular architecture, cabins and all that sort of thing, and with crafts, but this is the first attempt to try to get nonmaterial culture. So, yeah, I'm pleased with that. I'm pleased for the statement that I hope it makes to the local community about the way the Park Service values who our neighbors are or who many of them are.

(B018) PC: Could you talk a little bit about the history of the Blue Ridge Music Center and how that all got going from your perspective since you were involved at that time?

PN: Well, gosh, you know the story often told was a meeting with Joe Wilson, who heads up the National Council of Traditional Arts, former superintendent Gary Everhardt, and maybe a former management assistant Jim Ryan were sitting maybe in a hotel room, and who knows, maybe sipping a gin and tonic, but who knows, but reminisced about things, and I think in fact the early plans if I'm not mistaken for the Parkway, may have called -- Master Plans--for some sort of development at Fisher's Peak. And I don't know how that conversation got started. And I don't want to be too much into myth-making since I wasn't there, but apparently the notion was that, "Gosh, what would really be great of course is to have this center," and so on and so forth.

And there was some feasibility studies done, what in the early-mid 80's, I think. And it's had tremendous Congressional support, local congressman Rick Boucher, and a lot of community support. And Galax gave us land that was maybe for their watershed, I'm not sure what they had all that land for exactly, but close to a thousand fifty acres. We added some land to that which we bought to fill out the site. But they gave us all that, and I think there was a notion that this would be a great thing to do, and don't discount the importance of tourism.

I think a lot of music is to some extent a commodity, and I think anybody involved in the project, especially in the community, would be the first to say we hope it brings more visitors, because a lot of these regions, the furniture factories are not doing as much as they once did, so they very much need that traveling tourism boost. And I hope it gives them that.

But, in any case, it's been a long time. Gosh, there are records that would show the whole history. In early 1994 or so 1995, we got significant funds to begin construction. And I think there was some mid-term election changes, or leadership in the house and Senate changed. That money was rescinded. Then, we got it restored. So we've been going through this very slow process. I know it's been frustrating. I know some people in the community are very frustrated that it has taken so long.

On the other hand, we can only do what we can only do. The plans that had been originally done had to be looked at again. The building codes changed. Our interests changed to some extent. The technology on the equipment had to be specified, because we knew back years ago we might as well wait to do all that. Electronics change. Long

way to say we've worked a long time on that. It's a slow go, but hey we're getting there and I really do think it's going to be something that our visitors and the community will very much appreciate it.

(B049) PC: So what are your thoughts on getting the name artists in there? Are you in favor of that? What's your feeling on that, the Ricky Scaggs and the Ralph Stanleys, and, heaven forbid, the Bob Dylans of the world?

PN: Well, you know, I, being a huge fan of Bob Dylan, would be an advocate of the latter, but I'm afraid that would be a very tough sales, truth be known, Ted. Although in my own mind, I could rationalize it. But, in any case, your essential question is, I am torn. On the one hand, I think from the get go, this facility, at least when I was involved with it, the idea was not that it was going to be some Fillene Center or Kennedy Center for performances. This was not going to be the musical elite. There were going to be elites in a sense. There was not going to be a center for the musically-challenged, for the a-rhythmic and a-toned. No, this was not what this facility was about. But it was to celebrate and to feature and showcase those people who were most steeped in those local traditions. It doesn't mean they can't be bluegrass. It just means they come out of this community or this region and who've lived along the Parkway corridor and who play and have continued, even with modification, and various riffs and licks. Don't get caught up on that old thing. But how music has evolved in this region and what it's contributed elsewhere. And that often has been porch music, it's been the informal social setting music, and it's not been elite.

So, to give you a very direct question, I fear that because NCTA, our partner, it does not have funds to operate that special appropriation for that facility itself. They're going to be scrambling for money. And I fear the economic pressure over time will turn this into an elite music center where you have to get the Ralph Stanleys and the Ricky Scaggs and Alison Krauss's and those future big-time stars in order to draw enough crowd for paid ticketed concerts. I think, to their credit, they're trying to resist that right now. I mean their flip of that is that some big-time names aren't cheap. So there is a risk in bringing those errors.

(B074) And I look, and I don't mean this critically, but the Folk Art Center is a juried... They sell juried crafts. And it is to my eye some of the best folk art, whatever that term embodies. It sometimes to me seems a little high dollar, but, hey, I can't question the marketing, because I know that it takes tremendous artistic ability and skill to do what some of these people do. Do I ever have any regret that it is juried and that it's so fine? I guess personally, and I shouldn't say this, yes, I'm speaking very candidly, simply because it's sort of like the vernacular architecture thing. Do we want just the very finest? Do we want something that's actually maybe more representational in some cases?

So, I just hope, very long way to answer your question, that the music center never becomes driven by sheer economy that says we only can feature elite performers here because we've got to pay for this place. I worry about that, but I think so far, NCTA has struck a balance. And I just hope that that will continue over the years.

(B088) PC: Talking with them myself, they seem like they are basically folklorists and interested in traditional music themselves. And I think that they would be trying to resist that as well. Although, there is kind of an advantage to having maybe more big-name persons salted through the year. It kinds of gets people. I mean it worked for me. If it was just people I never heard of, I might think "this place, I'm not really sure about it." But if I see, oh Ricky Scaggs, maybe I'll have to go up here that one weekend. And then, you start getting into the habit of going, and you go another time to see the New Ballard's Branch Bog Trotters who you might never have heard about. Then, once you actually hear them, you realize how great they are. Then you go to the Galax Fiddlers' Festival, and you just follow that line back into the source, which Galax certainly is.

PN: Well, one of the greatest things about that, and you make a point, and also I don't worry about this much. I don't think, you know some people, maybe somebody, and it wasn't Joe Wilson, somebody on the NCTA staff made the point that it sort of adds the uh, you know having some of these nationally known performers lends a certain aura of credibility to a place that you've had these big-name acts. And perhaps that's the case, (B103) but some of these other folks, and you know I'm a guitar strummer of sorts, a dabbler in many genres and certainly a master of none of all, and that's no modesty, but enough so that when I go and I listen to Greg Hooven's band, and I've heard them before. And I think, you know, "hey, these ole boys here, they are good." Trust me on this. I do a little bit of instrument and one of the great things is that it makes me appreciate people who are good. And it's just amazing to me and the other things is it's accessible.

I mean, you can go to, and gosh, I'm digressing with you, Ted, but you can go to any number of pubs that have open mike night around here. There are informal jams in people's homes that exist. And, if you were really into this, and a friend of mine is, he can go just about every --in fact I think he can--every night of the week there's some place he can go and jam. And some of these folks are good folks. Do not underestimate. On the one hand, I rail against stereotypes, but sometimes I listen to them and think, I don't know what it is, but we sure do seem to have a preponderance of folks who can play. Now, sometimes if you talk to them you find out that they moved here from Vermont. Like that boy from Alison Krauss's band, Dan Teminsky, I don't believe he's a native son, but, certainly got a lot of play for "Oh, Brother, where art thou!" But, the Music Center, I hope, will inspire people to say this is some great music here. I'm going to seek this stuff out. And I'm gonna go out here to these different places. And again it's just accessibility.

(B123) PC: Joe Wilson made a point to me. I'm sure you've heard it as well. He said that the greatest luthiers, you know, fretted-instrument makers that have ever lived and made instruments in the history of the world are making instruments now in the southeast.

PN: If that's Joe's statement, I certainly can't confirm or challenge it. Joe typically knows what he's talking about. I certainly know Wayne Henderson, and he is obviously a master craftsman, and there are others who are very good. And if Joe says they're the best in the world, they may very well be that. That is an associated skill. Of course you always have to be careful, because if you go to most of these jams, most of them aren't playing Wayne Henderson guitars, not that they wouldn't if they could. But, they're not playing poor boy

guitars either. You typically see Martins, which, as you may know, Ted, is not an inexpensive instrument. And sometimes you see Gibson instruments, so yeah, those boys have invested some in this. But, yeah, luthering is a great thing.

But I want to make this other point in connection with regional music. This is not an original idea with me, so I'm not sure how valuable it'd be. But a lot of the local community wants people to go to these different venues partly for the travel and tourism purpose to be perfectly blunt. And it's more stays, more boost to the economy, more tax revenues, and I understand all that. But the other thing is accessibility and not only can you interact with musicians sometimes, but in some cases there are jams.

(B144) I was talking, it may have been with Jene Haskell, well at that time Jean Spear, who's done a number of historical studies for us, which you may have seen in our archives when she was at Virginia Tech and later at East Tennessee State. But I was talking about genres and how it's so difficult to pin music down to my ear and bluegrass is essentially a modern phenomena, you know, the Flatt and Scruggs, Bill Monroe, and their whole sort of style that's really not that traditional, but how do you, you don't want to say it's the dead past and try to wall up music which you can't, it's too squirrely to try to wall up anyway. And she helped me greatly by saying that some of this has to do with social context.

(B154) A lot of traditional music is participatory. It is playing for family and friends, and it is involvement. So, when you have jams, people stand around in the wings and you can talk and laugh and tell stories in between. That becomes a participatory exercise. That is not buying hundred dollar tickets to see the Rolling Stones, or even to see Ricky Scaggs. That is being enmeshed in what I think is a totally different social setting, and one that in and of itself helps to defines the music as much as the licks that these guys and gals are playing.

PC: That's one of the things I love about that area up there is it makes you want to learn to play an instrument. It's not about who you've seen, but what you can play in the parking lot, you know?

PN: Yes, exactly, Ted.

PC: And really, the show is as much in the parking-lot just jamming with other people as it is. So, you go, like somebody like me who doesn't play an instrument, and people just look at you like, well why not? Here's a guitar. Learn something. Make yourself useful. So, I think that's a neat thing about that whole area. It does completely change your perspective from a more consumerist to wanting to be actually involved in reproducing that music and attaching yourself to it somehow.

PN: I just, in fact, may have been telling a reporter the other day from Roanoke Times, and it may be a total digression, but a former father-in-law of mine was really big into 50's country music plays a pedal steel guitar and quite well as I always thought. And when he would have family reunions and by that I mean it would be 50 plus people would show up, well he had a little band. They weren't professionals. But, they would play 50's era country music, kind of Hank Williams. If I showed up, and I was mostly sort of Rockabilly/British Invasion/Folk Rock and sort of liked all these genres. But I'd

show up on my guitar and play along cause a lot of those songs were three chord patterns and even I could sort of fall in there. I remember once being there, and he was insisting that I plug up my guitar. And I said to him quite correctly, "but Jim, I don't think you need a sixth rhythm guitarist. I think five have it covered." And he said, "So, you're too good," and kind of got on me a little bit. So, of course I plugged up. And, in retrospect I thought about that, and I thought, here's this whole family setting, and I'm part of the family. And everybody who showed up with an instrument was going to play.

And to my mind, I thought, after listening and talking with Jean, I thought, yeah, maybe there is something regional about that, this whole notion that, "hey, you got an instrument, you know come on in here. You're going to be part of this team. You're being part of this larger group, whatever defines that group." So it's an experience that I found in retrospect very interesting.

(B193) PC: Well, we have about 15 minutes of tape here, so I think we should probably move on to the Cone estate. I bet you could talk for 15 minutes about the Cone Estate. What an interesting place! I guess maybe the segue might be the folk arts, because for a while it served incongruously perhaps as a center, well still to this day, as a place to sell folk crafts.

PN: Well, that was, Ted, I guess one the things that got me interested when I first came to Parkway as a district ranger, not then being a grad student at all, as I looked at that, and I didn't know anything about the estate. When I was, some years later, sort of fetching around for a graduate school topic, and talking to Chuck Watkins who in on faculty, he runs the center for the Appalachian Culture Museum at Appalachian State. So I wanted to do something to benefit the Parkway because I worked for the parkway. And he said, what about the Cone Estate? I was thinking along administrative history lines or something, that's probably too big of a topic.

And, as it turned out, the Cone Estate was a bigger project than I thought it was going to be. But I'm very glad I did it, because it solved some very personal questions for me exactly as you said. I mean, I walked in for the first time, and I thought, "Well, gosh, somebody had some money to build this. Who built this place, I wonder? I wonder what they did. Wonder how come here? And what were they trying to say with this, and how often did they live? I'm very curious about it, and what do these crafts have to do with what looks like kind of a country place," which, of course, it very much was! And it did seem incongruous. . .

PC: Country place, not in the sense of a log cabin. .

(B215) PN: No, no, no. I mean part of the country estate era in the way that Biltmore Estate was a country place and there were many country places throughout the country where folks built big retreats and often surrounded themselves with land and tenants and sort of replicated almost sort of the manor of medieval times.

PC: To the extent of, I don't know if the Cones did this, but certainly in the Vanderbilt Estate you sort of see this where they would actually go over and buy French chateaus, whole rooms, in order to replicate that lifestyle in an industrial age.

PN: Yeah, and the Cones did not do that. And, I do compare them a great deal. And I was in fact flattered, because it's sort of my theory at least that people in that era, the Victorian late nineteenth century, very much took their cues from their social superiors, sort of the survival of the fittest, sort of Darwinian socialism, not socialism, social theory rather. So, Vanderbilt's only social superiors were of course the aristocracy of Europe. I mean the Vanderbilt family was obviously moneyed and had been. So, George W. Vanderbilt took his cues, and he did in the sense export certainly by style and overall design the French chateau. Well, Cone looked, I think, to Vanderbilt. And, you know Vanderbilt had started work on his mansion before Cone began at Flattop Manor. And, so, and you know, Vanderbilt did scientific experiments in forestry, Cone and apples. And there was just so many parallels, in fact, I was gratified and found one or two newspaper articles, one facetiously comparing farmer Vanderbilt and farmer Cone. And, I thought, the connection I make was not the first one ever made. So, anyway, it was a country place in the precise sense of the word. It was less in scale but not intent than what Vanderbilt, Biltmore Estate was.

(B248) PC: Well, you pointed out earlier, that the Cone Estate and of course then the Vanderbilt Estate as well were both built earlier in time than Mabry Mill. And speaking of levels of incongruity, I thought you could talk about that a bit.

PN: Well, it's just, and I don't know why, I mean I knew the chronology of Mabry Mill. It was built very close to 1910, I'm not if our historic resource study gives an exact date, but the Cone house certainly was lived in. The Cones moved in 1901. And there was just something about Mabry Mill being sort of part of that "timeless" Appalachian, and I put timeless in quotes there. It's out of time. It's removed from time. Whereas the Cone Estate, it's like, "Gosh, here's this wonderful mansion." And to think that it was built prior to Mabry Mill, yeah, to me just was very interesting.

But, it's also interesting, the more I researched the fact that you could, the Cones could leave the textile empire in Greensboro, catch the train to Lenoir, catch the commercial wagon hack-line service up the mountainside. They could leave in the morning and watch the sun go down from the porch of Flattop in the middle of the afternoon. They had a phone that I think went down to, wasn't Holstoer's, a little hardware, somehow they could call locally and, if I'm not mistaken be connected with sort of the rest of the world in a sense. I mean, they were not as isolated as folks would imagine.

In fact, I remember doing an interview with, I guess it was Omar Coffey, somebody told me, I think, Omar may be deceased now, as I would hope not, a great guy, great interview. And I just raised the question, I said, "Now, Omar when you lived here, did you all make all your furniture and stuff?" You know, I was leading him. And he looked at me with sort of, what's the word, perplexedly, as he was like, "No. Where'd you get my, what, over in Boone!" I mean it was like, Duh! And I'm thinking, I just wanted to confirm what I thought, but I did not want to lead him. And, so I just asked him specifically, I mean, in fact, I was trying to lead him in almost the other direction. So, the misnomer that the Cone Estate was in isolated areas is absolutely untrue. And, there's so

many things that were of course in my research very much interesting and one of them was that.

(B284) PC: When I looked through the archives, I saw that the Cone Estate, I mean the foundation, continues to correspond with the Blue Ridge Parkway and be involved to a certain extent. Do you know anything about that?

PN: Well, that was part of the indenture, I mean, the Cone hospital authority and so on? Yeah, see Moses died of course without a will, it was intestate so when the agreement done, which is all certainly in our files, we've got copies of, and so forth, so I won't laden you with that, but basically what was ultimately agreed to was that Bertha got the income of Cone company stock for as long as she lived, and then that, when she died would go to endow the hospital authority and part of that indenture allowed that ten thousand dollars a year, if I'm not mistaken, would go for the upkeep of the Estate, because it was to be a public pleasuring ground. So, that money was earmarked for the estate, so we had to keep to some extent, and also the Cone name, Cone family is, they're not involved in the mill anymore, but it's certainly Cones who live around, some who still have summer places around Blowing Rock and who live in the Greensboro area. Well, long way to say, we still get some money and have that reason, and also I think there's still some family interest. I wouldn't overstate that. I don't think the family is certainly not at our doorstep everyday pressuring us to interpret the house in one way or another.

PC: Well, concluding thoughts.

(B310) PN: Well, I'm just uh, I made a note, and we're talking informally. I think we've talked about most of the things I wanted to mention. I don't know when you go up and interview other people, you might stop by some of the entrepreneurs along the parkway. You know, the Tuggle's Gap restaurant there is always interesting to me. And I don't know who the owner is now, but it's right there, I guess-

PC: Neil Baker

PN: Huh?

PC: Neil Baker

PN: Oh, you've already interviewed this person?

PC: I know her. Yeah.

PN: Oh, is that right? Because I remember stopping in there several years ago. In fact, some of the district staff recommended it, because I love Mexican food. So I went in, and I don't know if it was burrito or some combo of things I had. Wonderful Mexican food, and I think, "Phil, is this bizarre or what!" Here you are, and I think in Floyd County, certainly 8 or 10 miles out of Floyd, I don't know the exact distance area from Tuggle's Gap over on Route 8, but basically in the heart of Appalachia, one of the more rural parts

of the parkway actually, and I'm ordering Mexican food, which is wonderful at Tuggle's Gap, and I'm thinking. So, yeah, that's the kind of folks who have certainly been influenced by the parkway and one of the audiences that you would have I think.

(B331) The only other point, which I belabored and maybe I made early on, I've rambled on so, Ted, but about the parkway. I would like to make the point, and I'm not sure a lot people recognize it, but the parkway did not have a mandate like Gettysburg or Chickamauga and Chattanooga National Military Park, so when I sometimes speak, somewhat critically of the way we have selectively edited this landscape, I also am keenly aware that we did not have any legislative purpose that I ever saw that said you are going to preserve Appalachian culture. We sort of extrapolated that, I think, from the National Park Service's broader mission to preserve natural and historic objects and the wildlife therein, so on and so forth, from our organic act. But there was no single issue or time and so the landscape architects created this very scenic roadway, and I think we shall ever try to deal with that because of the tension between a more complex past and the colorful past that the landscape architects I believe did a marvelous job on. In fact, they did such a marvelous job that, you know if I have any despairs that we will never counter-balance that story very effectively unless we edit that landscape anew. And I just don't think that's gonna happen, because I think the parkway is, in many people's eyes, a it's probably (couldn't understand) and for national landmark status, or is at least certainly it's national eligible register eligible property. And the design helps identify who we are. It's just that, just keep in mind that these landscape architects did not have a designated theme or specific time period to interpret as is typically so often an event with so many of our national park areas. And, so I just think that's gonna be something that, well, to the extent that we can overcome that, and maybe this harkens back to a point that I made earlier, it will probably have to do with how we feel about our future. Because as we succeed, as years pass and succeeding generations come along, they're obviously gonna reinterpret that past, so how appealing the myth of the pioneer will depend on how disconnected people feel with their future.

PC: Well that concludes our interview. Thank you very much, Phil. This is the end of Side 2 tape 1, and it is May 19, 2003. My name is Philip Ted Coyle and I'm here in Asheville at the Blue Ridge Parkway Headquarters.

End of interview