

Nicole Musgrave: So, we are recording. I will go ahead and introduce us. So, this is Nicole Musgrave. I am speaking with Kevin Combs. It is June 1st, 2023. This is for the Carr Creek Oral History Project. We are recording via Zoom. I am calling from Whitesburg, Kentucky. Kevin, where are you calling in from?

KC: I'm calling in from Louisville, Kentucky.

NM: So, I guess just to get started, will you say your name and tell me a little bit about who you are?

KC: My name's Kevin Combs. I'm a retired educator. Born and raised in Louisville, but spent a lot of time in Eastern Kentucky, specifically in Knott County growing up. That's where my grandparents resided. That's where aunts and uncles and cousins lived. Like I said, it holds a special place in my heart for numerous reasons. I've been retired about, oh, now well, I guess going on about eight years come this fall. But I've kept busy doing various coaching stints at two or three schools here in the Louisville area. Just recently I've been involved with running an afterschool program for one of the high schools in my neighborhood. So, I keep busy but I also like being semi-retired, if you want to call it that.

NM: Well, Kevin, tell me a little bit more about your people and where you are from.

KC: My parents were born and raised in Knott County. Mom was born in 1919. The last residence was on Breeding Creek. That area was taken by the lake development. My father was born and raised in Sassafras-Vicco area. He was born in 1913. They've both been deceased. Dad's been deceased twenty-two years. Mom's been deceased nineteen years.

NM: What were their names?

KC: Virginia Back, B-A-C-K, and then Watson Combs. I want to say back then but I guess as times have progressed, they were married. They came to Louisville for work, which a lot of families went to Louisville, went to Cincinnati, went to Detroit. My mom also worked in Detroit for a while. She also worked at the Scuddy Coal Company. I guess that was probably down in Perry County, if I keep my boundaries correct. Dad, like I said, Sassafras-Vicco. He was in a blended family. There were sixteen kids in that blended family. He was in the first group. He worked in the coal mines for sixteen years. Also served in World War II. Then when he came to Louisville, he worked for American Standard which was like a plumbing company, made plumbing fixtures. He worked there until he retired. But typical of that generation, he didn't just sit down and take it easy when he retired. He went back to work. Worked for a couple of businesses here in Louisville. I'll tell you this story. His last job, he worked as a parking lot attendant at one of the doctor's office buildings here in Louisville. The biggest kick he got was when somebody came through from up home. He would talk to them and catch up, see if they knew somebody. Dad always thought that if they didn't know somebody directly, they knew somebody who knew somebody. He'd always tell stories about meeting folks who had come through, come in town for a doctor's appointment from up home. In fact, it's still in the family, and unfortunately, I can't recall the specific name of the branch or the hollow where it's located, there's still a family farm that is in the Combs family. I can tell you how to get there, off Big

Branch. Or if you come through from the Hindman's side – golly, I can point out the road, but I couldn't tell you the community. But it was a 100-acre farm. His sisters who lived up there all their lives, I remember when I was young, they were still going up and gardening on the farm property. Because every once in a while, me and a cousin who were probably pre-teen, we would go up there and play and run around while the adults tended to the garden. Unfortunately, I did not get the green thumb that my father had. He could grow a garden anywhere. Mom, like I said, she worked in Detroit for a while. We had a lot of family on my dad's side who went to the Cincinnati area and the Detroit area. But mom, when they settled here in Louisville, she worked for the Indiana Army Ammunition Plant over in Southern Indiana. She worked there until she retired. She also was an Avon lady, so mom never met a stranger. Her biggest pride, and I may get choked up talking about them, but she loved that she was a graduate of Carr Creek High School. When she was healthy enough to drive, her and some cousins would go up for the Carr Creek reunion that they had every year on Memorial Day weekend, which was going on this past weekend. Unfortunately, that's what I was going to be up in the area for. But anyway, they would go up for that. She always took a lot of pride in Carr Creek. She never went to college, but she always donated to Alice Lloyd College, always did. That was one of her big things. They both were very prideful of where they grew up and of their humble beginnings. Dad didn't finish high school. But he was pretty much a self-taught man. I remember in the evenings after turning off the news or TV back when everybody had a set of encyclopedias, he would take an encyclopedia off the shelf and he'd read from front to back. Would he read everything? No, but he'd read things that were of interest to him. I'll just tell you this, playing him in the game of Jeopardy was always a challenge because he knew the facts. Both of them were big encouragers and pushing me towards education as far as going on to college and things like that. They always had a big value for education. There are a lot of educators in the Combs' side, a lot of my cousins and even aunts and uncles who were educators. So, they came to Louisville probably in the early [19]50s. Again, I don't know the exact time, I know they lived with some other family members down in – back then Louisville wasn't quite as spread out as it is now. They lived and shared a residence until both of them ended up moving and having their own place. They worked here in Louisville up until they retired. Mom retired probably late [19]90s. Dad retired I guess at age 85, [19]99, because it was the summer that I moved to Richmond. Me and my family, we moved to Richmond at the time and I was there for eleven years. So, Louisville was where I was raised. My sister, who's seven years older than me, raised here also. She still lives in the Louisville area. But one of the things as I was thinking back about my trips up home and my connection, most funny thing, my dad never drove. He could drive, but he never. He always told this story. He went to get his license when he was back up home and they said, "Well, where do you live?" He said, "Louisville." They said, "Well, you need to get your license in Louisville." Well, he never did. So, mom drove us everywhere. Well, during the summer, we would do some family trips up home. But a lot of times we would either ride with maybe an uncle who was going up to Eastern Kentucky for a while, and we'd go up and stay for a little bit. I always went up and stayed three, four, five weeks. Most I would spend at least a month up home during the summer, which I thought was like heaven because I got to see cousins. I got to play, run through the creeks, go places, do things that you didn't do growing up in the city. But as I was thinking about this, I remember probably a good handful of times that we would be taking a trip. To get up home, we would go to take a Greyhound bus. Well, a Greyhound bus trip from Louisville to Hazard, it hit a lot of little commute. So, that trip which by car took about three and a half, four hours, on a Greyhound bus, took a good part of the day. One of my uncles

who lived in Sassafras would come down and pick us up. So, going up home was always something we looked forward to. Occasionally, I would go not too much during the winter, but spring break, definitely summer. Then when I got to where I was driving and working here in Louisville and then I left and went to college, I would go quite often. I went to school in the eastern part of the state. I went school at Morehead State, so I could get down home probably in less than two hours. So, I could go down on a Friday, stay at an aunt and uncle's house, visit with cousins, go back to school on a Sunday. That was for the most part our vacations. We didn't do a family vacation to Florida or someplace. Our vacations were going up home.

NM: Kevin, you said that your mother was really proud of being a graduate of Carr Creek High School. What was it about going to Carr Creek High School that instilled her with that sense of pride?

KC: There were only two in her family, her and a younger sister. You had Hindman High School over in Hindman and then you had Carr Creek High School. I think there may be have been a high school down in the Sassafras-Vicco area. It wasn't around that I can recall as I got older. Of course, now you have – what's the one right down in Perry County? Dilce Combs, which I had an aunt teach at. That was between Sassafras and Hazard set over on the hillside, right off Kentucky 15. But Carr Creek High School, it had family, it had friends, it had cousins. Everybody who went there. Mom had a cousin who taught elementary school at Carr Creek Elementary up until she retired, Ruth Smith. You may run across that name at some point, because she was a wonderful storyteller. She was just an amazing lady. But I just think Carr Creek had so many – first off, it wasn't a real big high school, if you've ever been up to the high school. It's pretty much still in its original, I guess, shape now. It needs some work. They're working to develop it into a community center. I think they added on maybe a kitchen right off the gymnasium. I've taken some other coaches that I've worked with. We've gone up and visited the gymnasium. We've gone over to Wayland over in Floyd County to the Mountain Sports Hall of Fame. Mom loved her sports. My mother knew everything there was to know about Carr Creek basketball. Because most schools up there for the longest time, they didn't play football. Basketball in Kentucky is king, especially the legend at Carr Creek High School. There was a gentleman who was back this weekend for the reunion who played at Carr Creek High School. I think he graduated [19]64, but he was on the [19]63 team. He went on and played at Virginia Tech. Then he played in what was known as the ABA, American Basketball Association, which was separate of the NBA. Well, Louisville had a team here. He first played for Dallas and then he played, I think, for Utah. Ended up in Virginia, maybe Memphis. If we missed a game, it was very, very few. But whatever team he was on, when they came to Louisville to play, we as a family, maybe not my sister, but my – usually, aunts and uncles and myself, we were going to the ballgame and we would always visit with them afterwards. His dad was the head coach at Carr Creek. They lived up above the high school. When me and dad would go up, we would go and visit them. So, mom just had a lot of pride for where she went to school, the family, and friends. Because even though a lot of folks left the region for work, if you've ever listened to Dwight Yoakam song called "Reading, Righting, and Route 23", that's what it's about. They all go home on weekends. She always had Carr Creek High School alumni t-shirts. I think I've got a hat that she had bought at one of the reunions but I've got it saved in storage. She took a lot of pride from being up home, as most people do. The region gets a bad rap, but you won't find better people. You won't find better people than up home.

NM: What was the name of the basketball player you were talking about?

KC: Oh, I'm sorry. It was Glen Combs. Now, you may say, "Were you related?" Well, the saying is Combses, up in Eastern Kentucky and I've always heard this, Combses were as thick as ragweed. Combses are everywhere. So, were we directly related? Maybe down the line. He wasn't an immediate first cousin or anything. Did I claim him? Oh, yes, I claimed him because I was a basketballer too growing up. But his dad was Morton Combs. I see his mother's face, but I can't remember her name. Dale? Maybe it was Dale. D-A-L-E, I think. But we would go and visit him. For me, that was like visiting royalty because he was a legend. He coached at Carr Creek. Morton Combs was the head coach. I think Glen graduated in [19]64. There is a video that they took Friday of last week of that [19]63 team. It's on a site, Mountain Sports Hall of Fame that's located over in Floyd County. They posted it. I'm still pretty excited about this interview, but I was telling somebody and I couldn't remember and I didn't have my phone. So, I said, "I got to go back and check." I had forgotten about the Berea College connection. I was like, "Let me do it." So, I went into your page and then that's where I realized that we have four mutual friends. But Corbett posted it on his page and talked about it a little bit. But the Mountain Sports Hall of Fame folks posted it. I'm supposed to take another couple guys who one is a former player and one is a guy I coach with. We're going to go up sometime this summer to visit Eastern Kentucky, go to visit the gyms, and then go to that hall of fame again. But they interviewed four guys off of that [19]64 team, because my mom would tell you that Carr Creek won the state title [19]56. But you can go all the way back to 1928, which my mom was nine years old at the time, where Carr Creek didn't win the state tournament but the history about that team, they rode the games on horseback. Other folks outside of the area made donations so they could have uniforms. Back then it was a National High School Invitational tournament. So, after high school basketball ended in the state, there was a big tournament up at the University of Chicago. Well, Ashland Paul Blazer, or Ashland High School, had won the state tournament. They beat Carr Creek. I think the score was in the teens, because that was back in 1948. But everybody thought so highly and loved the story of Carr Creek High School. Carr Creek High School got invited to that tournament as well. My mom would tell me stories about that, would tell me family members who probably passed on before I was even born who may have been on a team at Carr Creek. So, I grew up and I still tell people, my introduction to basketball was Carr Creek High School, then the Kentucky Colonels, which was our ABA team. Mainly, we would go. One, it was close by. I grew up in town. It was maybe two miles away from my house where they played. So, we'd go watch them play. Then my next introduction to basketball was UK and U of L basketball, which that's usually the first two introductions to basketball for people in the state. Mine was Carr Creek High School. That's it. It was a big deal, just the history. Can't think of the gentleman's name, but he was from Eastern Kentucky, Happy Chandler. He was a former governor. He would sing "My Old Kentucky Home" of UK games. Usually, there wasn't a dry eye in the place. He was good friends with my grandfather. I didn't know my grandfather very well. He was killed in a car accident when I was 3 years old. In fact, I've got a baseball card here of Happy Chandler, because he was commissioner of baseball, that he actually signed. I've got that card here with me at the house, which is a pride and joy thing. So, there's just a lot of history that I don't think they pushed it on me. You just know family you get that connection. I was lucky. Quick story, I told you my mom she had another sister who was a younger. Now, my grandfather who we lost when I was 3, he used to

say, "The good Lord blessed me and gave me two daughters." He said, "Well, the devil owed me so he paid me back with Combses for sons-in-law." So, my mom married a Combs, and my aunt married a Combs from another family. Growing up, you just think, "Well, everybody's a Combs." You don't really think about that. But then you hear these stories and they go to school together, they grew up together. I, fortunately, inherited a ton of pictures of when they were growing up and I guess in their teens and early twenties and things like that. I've got a cousin who grew up down around Sassafras. She lives in Casey County and I'm going to go down probably once I get through my basketball responsibilities. I told her, I said, "I'm going to bring that tub of pictures and I'm going to see who you know," because she grew up there. She went to Carr Creek. I think she was in the last graduating class at Carr Creek High School, which was [19]73, I do believe. So, whether you were directly related or not, everybody knows everybody. It's not just a neat place. Especially as I've gotten older, I still refer to it as up home.

NM: What is the name of your cousin? The cousin you were talking about, I know you have got several. [laughter]

KC: There's a bunch. Growing up, we always called her sister. That was her nickname, sister. But her name is Ronnie Marie Toby. Her mom was Rebecca Toby who taught at M.C. Napier High School. She taught history and social studies. She was just sharp as a tack. But yes, she grew up in Red Oak, which is a holler there if you're coming from Sassafras towards Whitesburg on Kentucky 15. It's right where you start to go up the hill on what is no longer the new road. But it was a new road when they started building that lake. Red Oak Holler was off to the right. I had multiple cousins who lived back in that holler. That's where I spent my summer, would be in Red Oak. Of course, we would ride bikes or walk down to Sassafras to get a pop. Then my grandmother, she was the one who lost her house to the lake. She moved from Breeding Creek over to live with a sister and brother-in-law in Hindman. You've probably heard of this name, Jethro Amburgey. That was my grandmother's brother-in-law. So, she lived with them on the top floor of their house. It's a big stone house. I think that's 550 coming out of Hindman that sets up on the right. I can find it. But they've developed so much around it, if you don't know exactly when to look for it, you'll miss it. Bessie Back lived with Aunt Leonor and Uncle Jethro in Hindman. Then when they eventually passed, she moved over to – they're like apartments. But it was like a housing development just coming outside of Hindman, which to me was weird because you don't think of your grandmother living in an apartment. But then she lived there until my aunt and uncle moved her to Louisville when her health started failing. Just to give you a little historical point of view, I was starting high school in 1975 when busing started in Louisville. There was a lot of debate because it was so new. There was already some historical reference to busing. It used to be called forced busing, where they moved kids all around the city to achieve desegregation. But there were some problems in Boston. So, it had a lot of negative actions surrounding it. So, when this was going to start in Louisville, I know I had a cousin who lived in Louisville, and his family moved to Bullit County. In fact, they grew up in Eastern Kentucky also until this family came here to work. His dad came here to work for GE and then worked for Ford. But my mom and dad asked me, they said, "Would you want to go live with your grandmother and go to Knott Central High School?" Knott Central opened in [19]74, [19]75, because they came to the state tournament, again basketball reference, and played here in Louisville. We went and watched them. So, the next year was when I was going to high school as a sophomore because back then Louisville had junior highs, not just middle schools. But my

parents said, "If you want to go and live with your grandmother in Knott County and go to Knott Central High School, we can make that happen." As I think back now, you wonder what ifs. But I know the only reason I did not go was because a lot of the schools in Eastern Kentucky didn't have a football team. Well, I was playing football and basketball. So, I said, "No, I'm good with staying here because I wanted to play high school football." So, if Knott County would've had a football team, then who knows? I may have been growing up in Hindman while I was in my high school days. You learn about that and in the time, you don't think much about how they got to Louisville or how they did this or how they did that. But then you start hearing stories and connecting. I remember the first time I heard that Dwight Yoakam song, "Reading, Righting, Route 23." I was sitting there thinking, "Well, my Uncle Isaiah, they took their family and they grew up just outside of Cincinnati, up around Hamilton, Ohio." I had an aunt and an uncle that they ended up living in the Detroit area. You just wonder the connections. I had some go down far Western Kentucky, Madisonville. I think when I was still in junior high, I told you my dad worked for American Standard, which was a factory here in Louisville. Well, they were opening up a factory in Paintsville over in Johnson County. I remember dad coming home and saying there may be a situation where he gets transferred or he may look to accept a transfer because it's close to up home. That never panned out. We didn't move. We didn't leave Louisville. But now that I'm a little seasoned, not as young as I used to be, you think about the what ifs. We could have ended up living in Paintsville. I've got great friends that I know who live in Paintsville now. I could have been growing up in Knott County with family. I have no regrets on what I did here in Louisville, but how neat would it have been around family? Then you hear stories about it never fails. I can't go too far without somebody saying, "Combs, you got any family in Eastern Kentucky?" I said, "Oh, more than you can imagine." So, it's just the stories and everything. So, I thought about the Greyhound. I had probably forgotten about the Greyhound bus trips going to Eastern Kentucky. But that was an adventure.

NM: You started to talk about your grandmother. So, I am curious, what sorts of things did you hear about as far as the construction of the dam and the creation of the lake? What kinds of things did you hear about with that?

KC: When I was young, I think I remember probably being mad that my grandmother's losing her house. Like I said, I could have been definitely elementary school or preteen, but that all happened. I don't know if I just didn't understand it or maybe I just was mad because I thought that the house was going to be underwater. Well, actually, that part was really the backwater. When they first opened the lake and all the roads went up onto Kentucky 15, up above all the communities, I could still see the brick pillars that set out by the road which I guess was old Kentucky 15 because that old road would take you to Whitesburg. You could see the pillars that sat out at the end of the sidewalk. It was a very modest little house. They didn't have an indoor bathroom. Going to an outhouse, I never thought anything about it. [laughter] I do remember that cousin who I told you, who lived here and then he moved to Bullit County when busing started, they lived across the road and up the hill a little bit. I never even thought much about this because I guess I thought everybody were cousins, but he was a cousin on my mom's side. So, really, he is a second cousin because his mom and my mom were cousins. When I was in elementary school, going up home and going to see mainly my grandmother because, like I said, I was 3 years old when my grandfather was killed. We would walk across the road and up a little dirt path up to my cousin's big, old house because they lived with his grandparents at the time.

Of course, everybody up home had a garden, so you remember the garden. But when it came around time that, the word was that the lake development was going to take their houses, I think I remember being mad because I just didn't understand it. I didn't understand why does my grandmother – because my grandmother was born in 1900. They had the house the second bridge that you cross over to – you know where the marina is? The road that's under the water there, if you came under that bridge, you could take a left and head down. That was Breeding Creek. I think part of it that bothered me, as I think about this, is that the house sold and the house was moved over onto the road that takes you to Hindman. So, for years, and especially when I started driving, I would drive by what was my grandmother's old house. Now, the house, it's dilapidated, I think. People lived there and the people who lived there they kept it up. But the last time, I guess last August, when I was up home after the floods it was hard to find because lot of growth and things that happened. But it was a black. I've got a picture here somewhere of that house when it sat on Breeding Creek. It was a beautiful house. Just beautiful house. So, it sat over there on the highway as you're going over towards Alice Lloyd or over towards Hindman. I could always find it. I could always find it. Like I said, unfortunately, it's fallen into disrepair. I'm sure it's beyond repair, to be honest with you, from the last time I saw it. I don't know if I'd ever been over to the house in Hindman where she went to live with her sister and brother-in-law. But they took me in when I would go and stay. Basically, I don't know if I was pawned off on purpose or what, but I'd stay four or five, six days over in Sassafras, Red Oak area, close to the lake. Then I'd go over to Hindman. Somebody would take me one place; somebody would pick me up. So, I would go back and forth during that month-long stay that I was up home. But things that I remember, that house sat up on the hillside. Of course, Jethro Amburgey handmade dulcimers. My sister has the one that we have had in our family. She still has it, I do believe. I remember being in his wood shop in the basement of his house and just watching him make dulcimers. Now, did I study it? Did I even understand how rich that was? No, never did. I can't tell you exactly when he passed, but I was still fairly young. But that was just a new place to be. I remember getting to be friends with the family that lived next door and up on the hillside. The grandparents lived next door, the kids lived up above them, and they had grandkids who were close to my age. So, when I got to go over there, that's who I played with, hanged out with. Cody Hardware down in Hindman, that was an aunt and uncle who ran that business. So, every summer, and when I got to go to Cody Hardware, I always had extra money to get to buy something, usually a toy or something from Cody Hardware. They actually lived as you were going back out of Hindman back towards Sassafras. They lived on a big hillside house up above the old Hindman High School. I remember going there and playing on a trampoline, never realizing every time I went to their house, I literally could reach out the window of the car and touch the gymnasium from Hindman High School and the history to Hindman. Now, one of my cousins, well Cody Tom, that's where him and his siblings went to school. I think all of them were out of high school by the time Knott Central opened up. So, they went to Hindman. I had cousins at Carr Creek High School. I do remember, I won't say angry, I guess I was just mad probably because I didn't fully understand it. I didn't even understand what the concept of a big lake development was going to be. Then once Jethro Amburgey and his wife passed – and I don't know exactly at what point, but that's when my grandmother moved to those apartments. I probably didn't think anything about it. I just didn't think it was right that my grandmother – because it seemed to me like most everybody else living in that apartment – and it's not a real big apartment complex there because it sits right on the road in this bend. It's got a terrible blind spot if you're pulling in or out of it. But most of it was young people and young kids but there

was my grandmother. But I could probably guarantee you that the concept of her coming to Louisville wasn't going to happen until her health started to fail. She wasn't going to leave up home because she had sisters up there and family and that was home for her. Yes, she'd come to Louisville for visits. But she passed away in December of [19]85. She was brought to Louisville to live with an aunt and uncle probably in the spring of [19]85 when her health had started to falter a little bit. But at that time, she was 85 years old, because like I said, she was born in 1900. I guess if I wanted to be maybe angry about it, now I could. But there were a lot of people displaced when Carr Fork Lake came in. But it came in, well, like most lakes or dams, one, to help with flood control and also just to create additional opportunities. I still think Knott County and that area, if they ever were to fully grasp the tourism industry because I don't think they could hang onto the coal industry forever. But the tourism industry could be a big boom for that area because a lot of other places in Kentucky have welcomed the tourism industry. Eastern Kentucky, not so much right now. I think it's getting there. I'm not sure what the park is over on 80 going from Hindman to Floyd County. But I think over there they do horse trail rides. My cousin trains motorcycle riders. I've got a cousin who works over there. Do you know a Karen Jones who works at the *Troublesome Creek Times*? That's a cousin of mine.

NM: I interviewed her.

KC: Well, now she's a pistol. She and I are really close. We both graduated from high school at the same time. If I wasn't staying in Hindman, if I wasn't staying over in the Sassafras area, I was staying over around with Karen and them. That's where my Aunt Ruth lived. They all lived next door to each other. So, you can go up that. I think it's called Mallie. You can go up through there. I got relatives over there too. So, Karen's a pistol. A lot of times I'll just drive up and get with her and Tim. My wife and I will go up and take a visit for the day, maybe go to the cemeteries and then go meet up with them to have dinner somewhere. There's no need to be angry about it. I still don't say this would never happen, but I could find myself relocating. I don't know if I'll go all the way to Southeastern Kentucky. I could be Morehead where I went to college. My daughter is a teacher in Bath County, Owingsville area. Her and her husband both teach up there. Because in Louisville, I can run here, run there, Kroger's, Walmart, you name it. But in Eastern Kentucky, most of the time we walked down to one of the little country groceries in Sassafras to get a sandwich or to get a bottle of pop. It's developed more. Forever, I remember having to go through Hazard to get on 15 coming home to Louisville. Well, now, I don't even know how old the bypass is. I'm sure the bypass around Hazard has to be 40 to 45 years old. But I remember forever you drove through Hazard by Jerry's. You wound around. I remember going to a high school ball game up in old Hazard gym. It's set up on the hill. It was probably 1980 or [19]81. Knott Central in Hazard High School playing, hottest gym I've ever been in, in my life and I've been in a lot of gyms. So, there's just a lot of the stories. To me, they're just so neat, unique, and special because I got the family tied to them. Well, I didn't even mention this, I didn't go straight to Morehead out of high school. I went to Louisville, worked here in town for a little bit. Then I realized, "Oh, you know what? I probably need to get out of the city. I need to get away. I need a fresh start, I guess." So, I decided I was going to go to Morehead. I made that decision based on two reasons. Number one, a guy that grew up in Red Oak Holler who we consider them family because I hung out with him every summer. he was going to school at Morehead. I had aunts and uncles and cousins who lived in Red Oak Holler. Then my cousin who moved to Bullit County had just gone up as a freshman. So, when I



decided, I was going to go to school, I'd go up and see the guys every now and then. I decided I was going to Morehead. My first roommate in Morehead was that guy from Red Oak Holler there in Knott County. Now, he got married that summer, but we roomed together my first year at Morehead. That's when I learned everybody in the state of Kentucky pretty much when they ask where you're from, they say what county. Well, growing up from Louisville, I always said I'm from Louisville, never said I was from Jefferson County. Going to school at Morehead, and I'm a history buff anyway, but I learned about all these county names. You never said you were from Hindman or Hazard or Jackson. You said, I was from Breathitt County, Perry County, Knott County, Johnson County, Floyd County, Pike County and all those. Just the connection that, I guess as I'm into my sixties now, I cherish it probably even more so now than I did. Because, of course, I guarantee you every summer I was looking forward to it. Every summer I would always come back, because I'd always get hurt. I'd have a bike wreck or I'd fall off a bridge or I'd fall in the creek or get nicked up. [laughter] Mom was probably a little overprotective and she probably thought they were abusing me. But no, I'd fall through my aunt's bridge. We would walk or ride bikes everywhere, Sassafras, Vicco. Because Yellow Creek, that's where my step-grandmother lived up Yellow Creek coming out of Sassafras-Vicco. So, we would ride bikes from Red Oak Holler down to Sassafras where I had cousins, up Yellow Creek. That was my summer vacation not going to the beach or going to Florida or anything.

NM: You talked about your grandmother losing the home and moving in with her sister. I am curious, did she or your parents or anyone else in your family ever express feelings or opinions about that, about her losing the home or about the lake?

KC: My mom could be fiery at times. I don't know, did the lake come in, in the name of progress? To me, I never heard them vocalize frustration and anger. I still think this, and again my grandmother passed in [19]85, I could almost hear her saying she wasn't having it coming to Louisville to live even though my aunt and uncle had plenty of room at their house. There were my parents, my aunt and uncle, and then another family. Of course, I'm sure there were other folks from Knott County living in the Louisville area. But immediate family, there were just three families in this area. So, I'm sure my grandmother had no desire to live in Louisville whatsoever. My aunt and uncle, my aunt who married a Combs, before they moved to Louisville, they lived down in Middlesboro and Pineville area down in farther Southeast Kentucky. Then they came to Louisville, I think, mainly to work for my uncle because he worked for Brandeis Corporation who sold heavy machinery for some of the mining and other construction type stuff. But they came to Louisville and I think Brandeis had their headquarters here. So, I'm guessing that's what probably brought them to Louisville, even though mom and dad, I think were here first. So, no, I never heard any anger or frustration, maybe regret. My dad probably always wanted to still be up home. But he knew that for work unless you wanted to work all your life in the mines, you needed to leave Eastern Kentucky. I do remember speaking of him working in the mines. He told me this story numerous times, but especially there towards the end. He was diagnosed in January with cancer and was given six months and he lived six weeks. Now, he was 87 at the time. Big storyteller. If he was hurting a lot, he never let on. But a couple times he had some brief stays in intensive care. But the day before he passed, he was as bright, as sharp, and as with it as any day that I remember him. But he always told me, "Carl Perkins tried to get my –" My dad did sixteen years in the coal mines. Whatever application or route you had to go to get black lung benefits, dad was always turned down. He even had Carl

Perkins who was a big-time politician in Eastern Kentucky, friend of the family. He tried to intervene for dad, but dad never got it until the day he died. Dad would periodically tell me the story of that he knew people who worked for mining companies and never set one foot inside of a mine and got black lung benefits and dad never did. My dad wasn't a bitter man, but that was probably one of the sticking points for him. Like I said, they were already in Louisville before my sister and I were born. So, it wasn't like they moved to Louisville for opportunities for us. My sister was born in [19]54. I think they came in the early [19]50s. I know dad worked for a couple places before he worked for American Standard. Mom, I think worked for the ammunition plant over in Southern Indiana on two occasions. I think she worked there before I was born, and then she went back to work after I was born. But no, they never spoke negatively about the lake development. I think it was a source of pride. Of course, I'm sure you've run across this, that lake forced cemeteries to be moved. Every grave site didn't have a marker. There's a cemetery on the road going over right from Carr Creek High School to Hindman. It sets up on a hill at an angle. I remember when I was young, I think some family members' remains were moved there. But I just remember going to funerals because that's one of the things families do, you go to funerals and you go to weddings. But that was the hardest. There are some rough cemeteries to get to in Eastern Kentucky. But that one was built on an angle, not from front to back, but going up on the side. Most of my family on my mom's side, they're buried down at Resthaven down in Perry County which sets up above the old Dilce Combs High School. You see it off Kentucky 15. Now, most of my Combs family, they're buried up behind Little Dove Church. Up there, you could probably throw a stone from the cemetery to the dam. We always went up home. If I wasn't going up home for vacation, especially as I got older and it got that time where people were passing away, or cousins were getting married, you went up home for funerals or weddings, which it was not the best way to see family. Me and my cousins we always joke about having a just-a-cousins-get-together, but we haven't done it. Now, we'll see each other, there may be a small group of us who happen to be somewhere. But to actually have something planned, we have not done that. I don't think anything negative came out. How old is Carr Creek Carr Fork Lake? They started building on it in what, the late [19]60s. Has it accomplished the goals that they sold it with? I don't know. That's why I would be interested to see what some of your research and things like that. How do people feel about it? Because a lot of people were displaced. A lot of families were impacted one way or the other. But then it's a beautiful lake. There are people up there who have built beautiful homes and I guess they've accepted the new. As you left Sassafras headed towards Whitesburg, and you got there where you cut left to go to the dam, cut right to go up that Red Oak Holler. I remember when they were building that road and it was nothing but dirt and gravel. We would go up there and play on the equipment. We'd go up there and climb on the equipment. I also remember being up home, and when they would make the announcement, you'd hear the big siren go off that they were getting ready to blast. So, you had to be alert because they were getting ready to blast part of the mountainside down so they could build that road. As I think about it now, back then I was just, well, they're building a road. But, if I knew then what I know now, I probably would have paid more attention, maybe taken a lot of pictures. But it was what was happening. I remember friends who lived in Red Oak Holler who some of their houses, it wouldn't be major damage. But they'd have some minor damage from when they were setting off explosives to clear the roadway. So, I think I loved going up there. Carr Creek High School probably closed for numerous reasons. One, it small. Two, it was not easily accessible. Three, it was a very old building when they closed the doors in [19]73. But that wasn't the only place that was going

with what was known as consolidated high schools. That happened a lot of places in Eastern Kentucky, probably also a lot of places in Kentucky, more so the western part of the state, I think a little bit later. But did it change the history of the area? Oh, yes, it did. But you still go back to the goodness and the tradition and just the soul of the area, it comes from the people. It doesn't come from a landmark. I think there are certain landmarks that are important. But you got to be careful. Nowadays, you got to be cautious about losing history. Carr Creek Lake probably opened maybe in the mid-[19]70s. I'm guessing official opening. As they finished certain parts of it, I'm sure they'd have an opening. But I guess the whole area had a grand opening at some point. Funny thing is, we talked about it, I don't think I've ever, ever gone and swam in the lake on the beach area, which I was up there all the time in the [19]70s. I'll be honest with you; I think most of the time we were satisfied with playing in the middle of the creek as opposed to going to the lake.

NM: Well, this has just been so lovely to hear all these stories and memories, Kevin. I am still hoping to record a couple more interviews for my project. Is there anyone else you would recommend that you think would be open to being interviewed?

KC: Well, it's funny, I talked to my cousin, the one who lived across the road. He was born in Eastern Kentucky, and then they moved here. I asked him if he would be interested and he was like, "Oh, yes, sure." He's pretty laid back, so nothing gets him too excited. He and I were talking. I guess we're like a couple old women, we used to talk almost daily. Him and his wife are both retired educators, so they go camping at Rough River. It's really not camping. They're not roughing it I can promise you that. They moved to Louisville, his immediate family because his dad got a job at General Electric, and then he eventually moved to Ford Motor Company. But then his grandmother, who was my great-aunt, the sister of my grandfather who passed away in [19]63, she passed away. I think maybe they came to Louisville when their health – and they lived together. They moved to Louisville probably – well, like I said, I was born and raised in Louisville. Bill was not. His name is Bill Niece, N-I-E-C-E. They live in Bullit County. He would probably be someone. The one cousin in Casey County, Ronnie Marie Gilpen is her name now, she may be one. I talked to her last week and I was telling her I was coming up and I told her about getting to sit down and interview with you. I didn't ask her if she would be interviewed, but I could always reach out to her and see if she was interested. She's a retired educator. They moved away. After graduating from Carr Creek High School, I think she did one or two years at Hazard Community College before she moved to Lexington to finish up at UK. Now, her mom lived in Red Oak Holler until she passed away. That was my Aunt Becky. She was a teacher at M.C. Napier. See, dad passed in March of 2021. Aunt Becky passed in December of 2020. Another sister, Aunt Nola, passed in November of 2020. Of that family of sixteen, they were the last three. Aunt Nola was in the first family. Aunt Becky was in the second bunch. My dad, I think because he was an older brother. I'm not saying he was a big provider, but he watched out for his younger siblings. I think he was always well respected by his younger siblings. I'm not saying it's good, bad, or indifferent because I really can't remember a lot. But I know they always enjoyed whenever my dad would come up home. It was a big deal when my dad would come back to visit. My dad was the last one of the sixteen. He passed in 2001. So, he was the last one of the sixteen kids. So, Ronnie Marie may be someone you would like to talk to. I can reach out to her. Then Bill Niece. I think they all ended up moving because the lake was going to take their house. From where my grandmother's house was, their house

was across the road and just up the hill. It wasn't half a mile down the road, it was just up the hill on the old road going to Whitesburg. So, that's two that I think about. Now, I have another cousin who grew up in Red Oak. She is a year younger than me. She lives down in Tennessee. She graduated from Knott Central in [19]79. Those are probably the three that I think I could reach out to and ask them if they'd be interested. Me and Ronnie Marie were talking. Like I said, we always call her sister. I remember because her and her brother, Hubbert Earl Toby, who we always called him Toby, he was my hero cousin. Because usually, when I went up home, I stayed with Aunt Becky. So, that meant I stayed with Toby and sister and then of course, Angela. If you could visualize this, on one side of the creek of the road, there was my Aunt Becky's house. Just down a little bit was my Aunt Martha and Uncle Marvin's house where I had four other cousins. [laughter] So, we had a walkway of rocks that we had a shortcut instead of walking to our left across the foot bridge or the drive bridge and then walking back up the holler, we'd go up through my Aunt Becky's backyard, drop down through a little pathway we developed and had laid flat rocks in the creek that the creek was never very high. So, we could walk across the creek hitting these flat rocks and come up a little incline and be in the road and be at my Aunt Martha's house. So, that's what we did. Then I think there was a flood that wiped all that out, and they ended up putting a foot bridge in that was up high. But then another flood eventually got it. That's where I spent my summer in Red Oak Holler in Sassafras. That's how I reference it because that's what I did. So, I could reach out to all of those folks and see if they'd be available. Like I said, one lives in Tennessee, Ronnie Marie lives in Casey County, and Bill is in Bullit County.

NM: Well, maybe I will follow up with you about that on Facebook after this. Well, Kevin, maybe just wrapping up, is there anything else that is still on your mind that I have not asked you about?

KC: No. I know you mentioned you're over at Whitesburg. One of the things though, we never did go to the lake to swim. There used to be a city pool over in Whitesburg. We'd go over there occasionally and go swimming. We went to Whitesburg and I had friends from Whitesburg. Of course, they're friends that I went to college with. I'm sitting there trying to think. Things that came back to me were taking that trip on a Greyhound bus. Then I remember when mom and dad asked me if I wanted to go to school in Knott Central. I was thinking and learning about all the interviews that you've probably done, I was like, you've had to have interviewed Karen. Those were the big deals to me, going and seeing cousins. I would explain to people who aren't from Louisville that this will help you no matter if you've been to Louisville once or a thousand times. If you took campus at U of L and Churchill Downs, I'm in between. So, I grew up in town, so getting a chance to go to Eastern Kentucky – and I laugh about I remember taking my dad up. My daughter was probably 4 or 5. Dad wanted to go up to the old home place, which was at farm. It was up off Big Branch. I can't think of the name, that area that they give it. But I had a four-wheel-drive Jeep. We had gone up home. Of course, my dad he was probably early [19]80s. Then I had my 4- or 5-year-old daughter. It was a four-door Jeep, four-wheel-drive. So, I was like, "Dad, we'd probably get up there in this Jeep," not realizing that the last time my dad had been up on that farm was probably when I was in my teens. I remember he and I walked up there. We walked up to on top of that mountain hillside area. We came up from the road that leads over to Hindman. It used to be behind an old general store. I'm telling you it was an old, rough, auger road. We get up on that mountain. Mind you, I had a cousin who was a state

police. He said, "You all don't go up there unless I'm with you because there are some people up there growing marijuana and stuff and you don't want to go up there." My dad's like, "Yes, let's go up there." So, I get up on top of this mountain hillside and there's a fork in the road. I've got an 82-year-old gentleman in my passenger seat and a 4- or 5-year-old daughter behind me. I said, "Dad, which way do we go here?" He said, "You know what? I can't remember." About that time, here comes some guy on a camouflaged four-wheeler. He's camouflaged and he's got a gun rack. I said, "Dad, I don't know if you want to talk –" Dad just rolls that window down, he said, "Hey, which way did the old Combs farm?" Well, this guy didn't know the Combs farm from the back of his hand. That property is still in the family. My daughter was going to be a freshman in high school. So, 2005, and a lot of our cousins met because this coal company wanted to haul coal across our property. Well, everybody went in. I never even thought about it. Well, we wanted per axle because that's where you make your money. The coal company, they weren't willing to pay. Basically, they probably just were going to wait us out. Because I don't know if any of the next generation, there's some who are still up there who may know something about it. But they wanted to haul coal off across our property and they weren't going to pay us what we thought was a fair price. So, here we are almost eighteen years later, and to my knowledge, nobody's hauling coal across our property. In a perfect world, could I go up there and live somewhere up there? Yes. I'm not saying that won't happen because I do know I'm ready to get out of Louisville. Eastern Kentucky is a place that I could go. It would be an adjustment, but that's okay. I've slowed down a whole lot. But no, I really can't think of any questions. Have you taken a lot of pictures?

NM: I have not taken very many photos, no. That has not been part of what I have been doing.

KC: I follow the Knott County Historical page on Facebook. There are people that probably knew my parents that are still alive that I've never had a chance to talk to. Most of the grandparents were born in the early 1900s. My dad's dad was born in 1880. [laughter] My grandfather was born in the 1800s. I think he died in the forties, fifteen to twenty years before I was born. So, I probably know about that much history of my family. If I was independently wealthy and could just dive into it and just go soak it up, probably the only way to do that with people passing on and getting older, is to just live closer to up home. Will that happen? I don't know. You never know. Can't say never. But there's just the history. I don't know if you've ran across this story in your research, they were wanting to build a big resort, Redfox Resort. Have you heard of that? I don't think they've ever put the first shovel in the ground. It was going to be a golf course and other things. But I think there's other tourism that could really help. Sometimes you hear the talk about making Knott County, Perry County, and maybe Whitesburg, that stretch through there. I don't think it'll ever be like a Gatlinburg, but maybe a Maggie Valley from down in North Carolina, which is a beautiful, little area. So, I don't know. I guess we'll have to just wait and see. But no, I can't think of anything else that comes to mind. I will reach out to those folks and just see or gauge their level of interest. Any updates or anything that comes about that you would be willing to share with anybody you've interviewed, I guarantee you I'd be interested in hearing about it. Again, I'm probably going to be up home here in the next two or three weeks, I do believe, at least for a day trip. So, we shall see. If I'm going to make it day trip to Eastern Kentucky, I got to leave pretty early because you don't want to spend all your day on the road when you can get up there and go visit and see and everything. Usually, if I get out of Eastern Kentucky by say 6:00 p.m., I can be home by 10:00 p.m. with a couple of

stops. Now, I tell you what, it was interesting, I was looking for a place maybe to stay over Memorial Day weekend. Just like every place else, they take advantage of that. That's a big weekend for people to come home. Man, those hotel rooms and everything, those prices went up a little bit. Back in the day, I used to always have a family member to stay with. But nowadays, it's just easier to stay at a hotel. So, now, I'm overdue for a trip up home. I can just tell you that much.

NM: Well, Kevin, I just want to thank you so much for taking the time. This has just been such a lovely conversation and I really appreciate it.

KC: Well, I hope I didn't ramble too much.

NM: No. It has been great.

KC: Hope I didn't ramble too much. You could probably tell I get a little emotional about it, but it's a special place.

NM: Well, yes, grateful to hear all of your sweet memories and perspective on it all. I will definitely follow up with you on Facebook afterwards and keep in touch about it.

KC: Sounds good. Listen, I sure do appreciate this chance to share my thoughts with you.

NM: Well, thank you, Kevin.

KC: It was a pleasure to meet you.

NM: You too.

KC: One last question. When I was on Facebook and I looked at our mutual friends, Debbie and Corbert Mullins, they're family. Aaron Grace was a former student of mine in Oldham County. But Kat or Catherine, she played ball as a student of mine when I was in Richmond. I just thought that was pretty neat too, two students. I spent eleven years in Richmond. I spent eighteen years with Oldham County schools because I came back here to finish up with Oldham County. We always called Catherine, Kat because she played basketball for us. I said, "She knows." Because Catherine's in UK, if I'm not mistaken still. Then Aaron's in Rockcastle County because Aaron's brother was one of our school resource officers when I was at Oldham County High School. Aaron's dad coached football for us at Oldham County when I was athletic director. So, just a lot of interesting connections there.

NM: Totally.

KC: Well, listen, it was a pleasure to talk with you and meet you.

NM: Same here, Kevin. I hope you have a good rest of the day and we will be in touch.

KC: Take care.

NM: Bye-Bye

KC: Bye-Bye.

NM: This is Nicole Musgrave. I was speaking with Kevin Combs on June 1st, 2023 for the Carr Creek Oral History Project. I have been calling in from Whitesburg, Kentucky. Kevin called in from Louisville. This was recorded via Zoom.

[end of transcript]