

Nicole Musgrave: So, we are recording. This is Nicole Musgrave. I am with Cordelia Collins Schaber. It is February 17, 2023. We are at my office space in downtown Whitesburg, Kentucky. This is for the Carr Creek Oral History Project. So, I guess just to get started, can you say your name and tell me a little bit about who you are?

Cordelia Collins Schaber: I'm Cordelia Collins-Schaber. I'm originally from Letcher County. I live in Cold Spring, Kentucky in northern Kentucky. I left Letcher County in 1977 – actually, January [19]78, after I graduated from Morehead, I came back here to work at the Jenkins Clinic Hospital. I had worked there between my junior and senior year. When I came back here, the hospital was a hundred bed hospital and they had one patient, because UMWA had gone out on strike and nobody had insurance at the time. So, I saw the writing on the wall and moved to Cincinnati where my sister lived because that's as far as mother would let us go. It was a day drive way back in the day. So, I've lived up there, and I'm an accountant. I got my accounting degree from Morehead State University. I worked mainly in nonprofits and hospitals, healthcare. I retired on the day I turned sixty-two because my mother had passed away at the age of sixty-two, and I wanted to have some kind of life after sixty-two, after working for forty years. So, I have a cat named Penny. I married (Dale Schaber?) from Northern Kentucky. He and I love to travel. My best friend, (Kim Combs?), lives here in Letcher County, her and her husband, (Michael Burrell?), that I graduated high school with. So, we are rabid UK fans. So, we travel to UK games all the time. I've been here in Letcher County since August helping with the flood.

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

CCS: Okay. So, my father was Ray Collins. He was an Old Regular Baptist preacher. My mother is Estelle Collins, and she was a Collins before she married my father. They were both raised over on Little Colly. So, I love the mountains. When I get to Stanton on my way home and I start seeing the mountains, I know that I'm coming home. So, no matter how long I stay away, this is my home. I have five sisters. Four are still living. Three of us live in Northern Kentucky within a mile of each other. So, I have family still here. I have first cousins on Little Colly, and my father's brother, Uncle Russell?, has three children living on Colly. My uncle, Ron, has a son living on Colly. My Aunt (Mabel?) has a daughter, (Freda?), who lives next door to the old home place where my mother was born. My great-great-grandfather, when he came to Kentucky, built the home. My mother and my cousin (Freda's?) mother were both born in that home. (Freda?) was born in that home. There is a sixth generation baby that was born in May that is living in that home. So, this is my home.

NM: Wow. That is incredible. Can you tell me a little bit about life growing up over at Little Colly?

CCS: I actually was blessed. Daddy owned the RC plant with Brad Bentley in Irvine. So, we had a home next to there. My sister that's three years older than me, Becky, and I were born in that house. When I was six months old, my parents moved to Madison Street in Whitesburg. So, I grew up in town, but I went and stayed at my cousin's a lot in the country. I went to kindergarten at the Old First Baptist Church under (Miss Boatwright?), and then I went to Whitesburg Elementary, Whitesburg Grade School, and graduated from Whitesburg High

School. My father was an Old Regular Baptist preacher, and Old Regular Baptist preachers don't make money. So, Daddy was a businessman. He had gone to Morehead and gotten his teaching certificate. He taught in a one-room school on Little Colly and in Colson. Then he went away to World War II. When he came back, he went to work as a secretary at the Coke plant. Then he saved enough money and went into business with Brad Bentley, and they bought the RC plant. Daddy had several RC plants, one in Jackson, one in Bedford, Indiana. He had a bottling plant warehouse over in Wise, Virginia. So, growing up, I grew up on RCs. I don't like MoonPies. So, it was very interesting growing up. We had an Old Regular Baptist church. You go to a different church every Sunday. Daddy was moderator of three churches. On the first Sunday, we went to Hot Spot. The second Sunday, he didn't have a church, a home church, so we would travel, go to Little Dove, Little Ruby. On the third Sunday, we went to Thornton Union at MayKing. On the fourth Sunday, that was Daddy and Mother's home church on Little Colly. So, growing up, we were very involved in the church. That was our life. When I was in high school, when I was in sixth and seventh grade, Daddy had sold the RC plant and bought a Coke plant in Hazard. So, we had to switch drinks. My sister and I would get to go to Hazard on Saturdays because Mother would go down there to help Daddy work. Then when I was probably a freshman in high school, Daddy bought the old Kraft Funeral Home, and he changed the name to Ray Collins Funeral Home. Because Daddy was a real people person and my mother and my father loved people, and when someone dies, that's a very hard time for people. They were very special people at the funeral home. So, we grew up at the funeral home. I got married in 1972 the first time. My husband and I moved into the funeral home while we were finishing high school. So, that was a unique experience to live in a funeral home and have your friends come visit you. We liked to have Saturday night. We would go downstairs and watch *Chiller*. There could be a body in the other room. So, that made for a lot of fun. But we were still pretty reverent around people who had passed. But I have a love of people, and I get that from my parents. So, I went to Morehead after I graduated high school at Whitesburg, and then I moved to Cincinnati after not being able to find a job here in Letcher County. I've been in Northern Kentucky ever since.

NM: Where was the funeral home located?

CCS: It was on the corner on Main Street. It's the average funeral home now. So, there was an apartment upstairs that we lived in. Vernon Moore, who was mayor of Whitesburg, was the embalmer. There was a man who was dead, (Herschel?), and he was a gravedigger. A funny story is that when we lived upstairs, my husband and I, in the funeral home, because (Herschel?) couldn't hear, when he wanted to come visit, he would start hollering from the time he was at the bottom of the stairs until he got up, so that we would know he's coming up. He can't hear us say, "No, don't come," whatever. So, that's a funny memory of (Herschel?) and how he would come to visit us. So, the funeral home was on a corner of two streets. When we had the funeral home, people would call and ask, "Do you have any corpses up there?" So, we got several calls with people who – I think the mountains are a special place in relation to dead. People come to funerals, and they may not even know the person. So, Daddy had the idea to put a board up and put the names of the people who we had there at the funeral home. So, those boards are still there. His competitor, (Estelle Blair?), Blair Funeral Home, he put one up too. So, both of those boards are still there. But it's just a way for the people to know when they came into town who had passed and who was at the funeral home.

NM: That is so interesting. I love that little bit of local history. The project focuses on Carr Creek Lake. So, I guess I am curious. Growing up, I want to know, did you spend a lot of time in Knott County?

CCS: We went to Knott County because we went to Vicco to Martin's Department Store. So, that was – in Whitesburg, we went to Dawahares, or we went to Nancy's Style Shop, or we went to Hoover's to buy our clothes. We sometimes went over into Virginia to the His and Her Shop. Daddy had six girls, and Mother loved to shop. So, we would go around shopping. That was part of growing up. We would go to Knott County to Martin's in Vicco. I can remember several outfits still that I purchased down there. Also, Little Dove Church was in Knott County. So, when they had the old road, you had to go a certain way and we would pass Carr Creek High School. When my dad was growing up, he loved basketball. He played basketball. So, he would tell us a story of he would – they rode mules over to play. He went to high school at Carcassonne, and they went over to play Carr Creek. He said by the time they got there after riding those mules, they couldn't even walk, let alone play a ball game. So, that's just a funny memory of Daddy. As I said, Daddy had six girls. I was the fifth. So, he decided that he needed – he kept wanting to have a boy to have a basketball player. Mother gave him six girls. So, when I was nine, he gave me a basketball goal and wanted me to learn how to play basketball. I can't walk and chew gum. So, that was kind of a dud there for me. But my father gave me the love of UK basketball. So, my memories of him are us listening to UK games and watching UK games later on when they started coming on TV. So, that's a special memory for me, and that's a special bond I have with my husband, is we're both UK fans.

NM: Nice. You said Little Dove Church. Where in Knott County was that?

CCS: It is, if you go towards Vicco, after you head down the hill when you've passed the lake, if you turn right, you go up through there. It's still there, I'm pretty sure. But it's kind of Sassafras. It's before you get to Sassafras, you take a right and go up there.

NM: Got it. So, what are your memories of what that area was like before the lake was there?

CCS: I mean, there's no difference when you leave Letcher County and head into Knott County. It all looks the same. It was in a valley. I can remember the high school on the right and – or a school – I assume that was Carr Creek High School – and just that going through Redfox. I had some family members that lived in Redfox. So, really back then the only time you would go to Knott County is if you were going to Lexington, or to Vicco to shop, or to church. So, really, there was no difference in territory. I did have an Aunt (Tishy?) who lived over there. Her and Uncle (Mally?) lived in Knott County. So, we would go over there to visit them. But Letcher County, Knott County, it's all pretty much the same terrain.

NM: I have heard a lot of people talk about the old road. I guess I am curious. Obviously, the new road is up high because there is the lake there. So, was the old road down lower?

CCS: Right. So, when you get to Redfox and you're – I think there's kind of a monument there. I don't know if it's a miner's monument now.

NM: Oh, the anvil, the black...

CCS: Yes. Yes. So, the road just kept going that way. So, you just kept going straight there, and yes, the road was down under the water. So, that was pretty much – I don't remember it being a road that rose. I think it was all just a flat road all the way to Vicco.

NM: Then the road that would pass by the old Carr Creek High School, I mean, even now on the new road, the high school, right, is up high because it is on a hill. But was that road lower to and it was up even higher?

CCS: The road was low, and the school was there even with it. So, the school was there on the right. If you kept going straight, it was maybe, in my memory as a child, it was maybe three miles from that anvil, where that anvil is. You just kept going, and then it was on the right.

NM: Was that maybe the grade school then?

CCS: Maybe. Maybe. Maybe. I don't remember Whitesburg play in Carr Creek or going to a game over there. I don't even know if Carr Creek had a football team. So, maybe that was a grade school there. I just knew it was a school.

NM: Did you have any familiarity with the communities that were there at the time before the lake was built?

CCS: No, not really, because there was no reason to. It was out in the country. So, the community was, once we got to Sassafras, we knew people there – the Combs, (Brax Combs?) and his daughter, (Etta Sally?) and (Lovell?). They lived there. So, we would go visit them. But by that point, you're past where Carr Fork Lake is.

NM: So, attending church at Little Dove, did you know people there then that live in that lake area?

CCS: Yes. Yes, yes. So, specifically, I don't know of anybody who lost their home in that. But then as a child, it was like you just knew people and went to dinner after church. So, not really paying attention to the geography.

NM: About how old were you when they started to create the lake? Do you remember?

CCS: I think, if memory serves, that it was around [19]72, [19]73 when they decided to put the lake in. My understanding is they did it to stop Hazard from flooding. So, they wanted to put one there. I can remember they also wanted to put one where Natural Bridge around in there. I can remember barns having signs that said, "Stop the dam." "Stop the dam." They didn't want something like the Carr Fork Lake down in that area. I guess, they would just assume flood, so –

NM: When you say Natural Bridge, do you mean up toward the Red River Gorge?

CCS: Yes, yes. So, around in that area, they wanted to have another reservoir to keep from flooding. So, it's funny because I can remember Daddy saying just about every year that had a seven in it, it would flood. There was a [19]77 flood, a [19]37 flood, the [19]57 flood that everybody talks about. I think at [19]67, they may have had a flood, but I think that was all the thinking behind we need to do something to keep Hazard from flooding.

NM: I am so interested hearing about those signs. Do you have a memory of what they looked like? Were they painted?

CCS: Yeah, they were on people's barns. So, as you go towards Stanton now, and you see there was specifically a barn on the right, and it said, "Stop the dam." So, I could remember those signs down there. Because I don't know how it would have affected those people. I just know that that was a sign we saw, and we already had planned and were building the Carr Fork Lake to stop flooding.

NM: What other memories do you have of before the lake was there? I mean, as far as like, do you remember other kinds of talk that people were saying about the lake being built? Do you remember what the sentiment was of folks?

CCS: Well, not really. I know there were people who did not want the lake to be built because that was their home place. They lived there for hundreds of years. Especially if you've never been flooded, you didn't want your home to be taken away from you. So, I'm sure there were people who were really against it.

NM: Obviously, you talked about the signs up near Natural Bridge. Do you remember any signs or any resistance that you saw around Knott County?

CCS: No, I wouldn't even have paid any attention to it, probably, because it didn't affect me. They weren't taking my home. I had seen the destruction that floods did. So, it's like if they can stop somebody from flooding, what's the big deal? When you're young, you don't have that sense of home place yet.

NM: So, you thought that the dam sounded like a good idea?

CCS: I don't think I really thought much about how it would affect me at all. So, I'm getting ready to go to college. My house is fine. Fortunately, when we lived in Whitesburg, it never flooded. One of the reasons we moved from Irvine by the RC plant was it flooded. That house flooded. The plant flooded. In our home movies, Daddy had several filming of the [19]57 flood. So, we knew what a flood looked like in this area. So, probably in my child mind, I was like, "Well, why would people be against something that's going to keep people's homes from getting flooded?" Not thinking about the people who lost their homes.

NM: Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. So, what memories do you have of when they started to build the lake?

CCS: Probably, the biggest memory would be the fact that Daddy owned a funeral home, and

there were cemeteries that were going to be covered with water in that area. So, I don't know if there was a bidding process on who moved graves or if it was just something that they took on. But Daddy, when he had the funeral home, they went down to Knott County to move graves. I don't know if people ask them, like, "My loved ones here, can you move them from this place to this place?" I don't know all the ins and outs because I was doing my teenage things. Probably the biggest memory I have is that my brother-in-law and my husband at the time were some of the grave movers. So, I asked my sisters if they remember anything about that time, and my baby sister, Cecilia, said that she can remember Daddy telling stories of when they unearthed the graves. In some of them, the lids would fall off, and they would see scratches. That's very scary for a little girl to think about people have been buried alive because how else would those scratches have gotten on those? My brother-in-law, I can remember him telling the story of unearthing a Civil War veteran. As soon as the air hit his coffin, it disintegrated. So, a lot of times, they were just getting ashes out of the dirt and putting back in a box to go be buried somewhere else. I know it was probably very emotional on them. My sister remembers that that's when Daddy bought a camper. So, I'm thinking that maybe he bought that camper because of the emotional toll it would take on you. Maybe he went in there and prayed for the people that they were being moved. I know that as a preacher, Daddy knew where those people were. They're not in that grave anymore. But I imagine it was still hard, not only for the fact that they had to move these graves, but families who their ancestors were had been buried in that same place for hundreds of years, and now they're having to be moved. I also don't know if there were people who just said, "Leave them there, and the water covered them." So, it's a sad thought when you think about that things like that have to happen, especially I think about people now who have graveyards in their yard that's their ancestors and they're trying to sell a home. I have a friend now who has a cemetery making of her family. She sold the home, but she has a cemetery, and she still has someone maintain it. She says, "I don't know" – "I don't want to give that burden to my son. He doesn't know those people." So, cemeteries can be very interesting, very familiar, very sentimental or whatever, very emotional to visit for people who know the people. But once it's hundreds of years have passed, just that's a piece of dirt to some people. So, going back to when they moved the graves at Carr Fork, that had to be emotional for people who were continuously spending their days. I don't know exactly how long it took for them to move the graves that they were given to move.

NM: I am thinking like you mentioned the one story about opening the one coffin and there being scratches. I guess I am curious, like, as they were digging up the graves, did they have to open them?

CCS: Some of them are so, "Oh, they just fell apart." So, I'm sure that he had to think about, "Oh man," because in the olden days, we read stories every day of people that they think have passed, then they get ready to embalm them. I mean, it's not a lot of stories. But in this day and age, you pretty much, when you die, there's a doctor there to declare you a dead. There's all kinds of machines that know a person is not alive anymore. But maybe somebody went in a coma. They didn't have a way to tell, are they really not dead? So, it kind of makes you think, were people actually buried alive if there were scratches on the inside of a grave or a casket?

NM: What was the name of your ex-husband and brother-in-law that helped out?

CCS: Ivan Collins was my brother-in-law, and Glenn Palumbo was my ex-husband.

NM: Do you remember them talking about what it was like for them?

CCS: I can remember Ivan with talking about the Civil War, people who they just disintegrated when they – but I'm thinking, too, because it was probably emotional, I don't know that they wanted to share. It's pretty morbid when you think about it that every day you're dealing with either a casket or bones that's all that's left. I know at the funeral home, we buried people in paper caskets. If they couldn't afford a wood casket, there were caskets that were actually made out of paper. So, I'm sure those caskets had just disintegrated, and all you'd be left with were bones. So, when my husband would come home, I don't really remember us sitting and talking about, "Well, today I had to deal with five bodies," I don't remember conversations like that. I think it was more the out of the ordinary, like opening a casket and seeing a scratch, or the air touching a casket and a bone just disintegrating. Those were more of the stories that they would have talked about.

NM: That makes a lot of sense. You said you are a little fuzzy on how long they were involved?

CCS: Yeah. I have a tub of Daddy's stuff, and I was like, "Should I go through that and try to find out?" because they would keep the mountain eagles. But there're so many mountain eagles in there where Daddy would advertise, or whatever, mother would keep all that. Then I tried to Google and see, is there anything written about that time when they were having to move homes? I can remember homes being moved. I can remember seeing homes, because it's interesting, especially back then to see a home on a trailer being moved that weren't trailers. So, I'm sure, somewhere in the back of my mind, I can remember different things like that. You go to church one Sunday. The next Sunday, or the next month, that home would be gone. I don't know the statistics on how many people actually moved their home and how many just let the state buy it, and then they moved somewhere else. Yeah.

NM: Can you describe what it was like seeing a home being moved, like, what that look like?

CCS: I guess it shows you how well constructed some of the homes were that they would put them on the back of a truck, what we would call a semi now that didn't have the boxcar on it, and the home would be on there. It would be wider than the road. So, you would have to pull off and wait for the home to go on down the road. So, I don't remember a lot of those, but I'm sure, it was a sight to behold to see homes going down the road and wondering, "Wow, I wonder where that home's going." So, it's not a clear memory of, "Oh, I remember a home with green shutters and red door," or whatever. But I just remember, because today you see wide loads, but they don't take the whole road up, where these homes took the whole road up when you had to pull over.

NM: Do you remember any of the construction when they started to build the dam or to build the bridge? Do you have memories of any of that?

CCS: No, because by that time I was at Morehead. So, I'm trying to think, when they were building the road, how we would get home from Morehead, because we would have to go

through that way. I guess they left the old road until they put the dammed up the water. So, I'm not really clear on the first time I took that road, the new road, so...

NM: Do you remember when they filled the lake, when the water started accumulating?

CCS: I know that we had family reunions there in the [19]80s at some of the picnic sites, but I have never been to that lake to swim that I know of or been on a boat on that lake. So, I don't actually remember the water going in. I remember there was a lot of talk about Fuzzy Zoeller putting a golf course on the top of the mountain there. The part that's cleared off, that was the talk that was Fuzzy Zoeller was going to put a golf course there. So, obviously, it never materialized.

NM: Was that something that folks were excited about?

CCS: I'm sure, because there are golfers in Eastern Kentucky in having a celebrity golfer have a course in Knott County. But I don't know why that never materialized. I do remember on that one stretch of road being stopped at roadblocks where they were checking for drunk drivers and stuff. So, I do have memories. I don't know if they still do that or not. But because that was a straight stretch and they could have a roadblock there, so people wouldn't come around a curve and hit people, but they used to have roadblocks on that stretch of road.

NM: Is that on 15 where the new bridge is?

CCS: Yes. Where you go down to the beach, that stretch, past the – Custer stands on that one side, and then you come this way toward Letcher County. Before you turn down left to go to the beach on that stretch of road, they would have roadblocks there. So, that was a good place, I guess, for them to have them, because people were coming from wet Knott County going into dry Letcher County.

NM: I see. That makes sense. So, I guess, are there any other memories bubbling up as far as like, maybe not your personal ones, but things you remember people saying about the time that the lake was built, like anything else coming up?

CCS: No. I think pretty much my memories are from them moving graves and seeing homes being moved. My only thing is this time when I came home after the flood, I thought, "Well, that dam helped Knott County as far as Vicco," because I don't believe Vicco got flooded that bad. So, the lake did do something for that area because they didn't get flooded as I know Hazard got flooded. I don't know what river caused their flood, but I do know that Vicco was pretty much spared.

NM: So, you started to answer my next question, which is, how do you feel about the lake now?

CCS: Well, I know there's a lot of people who have lived here that love that lake, who go down there, who go fishing, the beach. It's also having the RV sites before this flood, having people come to this part of the state for recreation. I think it's been a good thing. But like I said, I wasn't affected personally. I didn't lose a home. But I do, I have cousins who go down there,



who go to the beach, a friend whose child's in-laws have the marina. So, it's been a good thing for tourists to come to, and the locals to enjoy, so that they don't have to drive all the way to Cumberland Lake.

NM: I guess I am curious. I know you do not live here anymore, but you still talk about Letcher County being home. I guess I am curious. Do you have any thoughts or feelings about what you would like to see with the lake and around the lake moving forward?

CCS: On this trip, I have been to Hindman. So, I've seen that there is a nice recreation area between 15 and going to Hindman. It would probably be nice if we could have, and maybe they do, cabins for people to come and rent. Not everybody has an RV that they want to bring to the lake, but maybe some more recreation reasons for people to come to the lake. Maybe that would be in the form of cabins like you see at other state parks that people go and rent, and then that's a reason to come to the lake to get you to come there. So, just maybe more recreational opportunities for people who maybe don't have a boat and don't fish, a reason for people like me to come and enjoy the lake.

NM: When was the last time you went to a family reunion there?

CCS: It would have been probably early [19]90s. Daddy passed in [19]94. He was kind of the patriarch of the family that would get people together down there.

NM: Why were the reunions at the lake there? Why were the reunions at the lake?

CCS: Probably because the kids could go to the beach. There were swings and facilities for people and picnic tables. It was just a good place for people to come to. I can tell you, I'm from here in Letcher County, and I can count on one hand the number of times I've been to Fish Pond. So, because you drive by Carr Fork, it's much more visible than you say, "Okay, let's stop here and do this." Where at Fish Pond, you don't even – if you miss the sign, you miss the lake. It's a beautiful lake up there. I've been up there like three times in the past six months. That is a beautiful lake. It's just not on the road as you go up past it.

NM: Yeah, that is an interesting point, yeah. Well, I guess, I am starting to wrap up. I am curious. Are there other folks that you think that would be good for me to talk with that would also remember the lake being built and before?

CCS: I did reach out to a friend, (David Steele?), who lived in Knott County, and he remembers that he was in grade school. So, I will give you his – he said it was okay to give you his contact information. So, I'll give him your contact information. Then I will see if my sister, who's younger than me, would have some information to add.

NM: Okay, that would be great. Your friend, David, you said?

CCS: (David Steele?).

NM: Does he still live in the area?

CCS: No, he lives in Northern Kentucky, too. I actually met him. We went to the same church. So, struck up a conversation, and it turned out he knew all about Whitesburg, and I knew all about Vicco. So, that was a good connection. We've been friends over ten years now. So, I reached out to him after you contacted me. So, he said, "Yeah, have her contact me." So, hopefully, he'll be a good resource for you.

NM: That is great. I appreciate that. Well, I want to get about thirty seconds of the sound of the room. So, we will just sit here silently for about thirty seconds, and then I will ask if there is just anything else that you want to add. Anything I did not ask you about that you think would be important for folks to know? So, I will go ahead and count off thirty seconds here. All right. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

CCS: No. It did come to mind, I'm getting ready to go meet with one of my cousins, who – I had mentioned Aunt (Tishy?) and Uncle (Mally?). It is their granddaughter. So, I am going to ask her if she remembers because they lived in Letcher County, if she remembers going to visit them while they were building the lake. Maybe she will have some input, too. So, I'll let her know.

NM: That would be great. Thank you. Well, great. Well, I will go ahead and sign us off in the recording. So, this is Nicole Musgrave. I have been speaking with Cordelia Collins Schaber. It is February 17th, 2023. We are in downtown Whitesburg, Kentucky at my office space, and this is for the Carr Creek Oral History Project.

[end of transcript]