

Nicole Musgrave: So, we are recording. This is Nicole Musgrave and I am here with Roy Crawford. It is April 5th, 2023. Thank you for correcting me. We are here in my office space in Downtown Whitesburg, Kentucky and 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?

Roy Crawford: I'm Roy Crawford. I've lived here since I was five years old except for when I went to college. I'm a retired forensic engineer and I'm also licensed in coal mining engineering. These days I'm just playing a lot of music and reading.

NM: Nice. Not too shabby [laughter]. Well, can you tell me a little bit about your people and where you are from?

RC: My people? Oh, goodness. Well, my mother her father was a Methodist minister and they were transferred all around the central part of the state. My grandfather was a civil engineer here who designed most of the bridges in town, including the Stonebridge at the upper bottom. Both my father and grandfather had the same name. I come from a family of seven kids, none of whom live here anymore except for me. What else?

NM: Where did you grow up? Here in Letcher County?

RC: In Whitesburg, yes.

NM: In Whitesburg, okay, great. So, we are talking about the Carr Creek area over in Knott County. So, can you tell me about your family's connection to that area Knott County?

RC: Well, my family owns about 7,000 acres of mineral, and most of those are in Knott County. Back when the coal industry was flourishing, there were lots of small miners that we leased properties too to mine. That all went away six or eight years ago, which is a good thing for the environment.

NM: So, was your family involved in the operations of coal mining or you were just leasing the rights?

RC: We did have a few coal mines in the later years. But most of it was just leasing, and those were properties that were bought by my grandfather.

NM: Whereabouts were some of those properties?

RC: Oh, they're scattered all around Knott County. It looks like a puzzle with most of the pieces gone.

NM: Were some around the lake area?

RC: No, I don't think we had any around the lake area. But there were some way up Carr Creek, I guess they were in the watershed, but they weren't close to the lake.

NM: Whereabouts in the watershed?

RC: Steel House Branch. I've forgotten most of the names now, but I guess all the way up to the head of Carr Creek.

NM: Do you recall the names of any of the operations that your family helped operate?

RC: There was a Tango coal company that my brother owned half of and a PNC coal company that we owned part of. Those are the only two names I remember. It's been a long time.

NM: Do you recall at all whereabouts the workers were from?

RC: They were from mostly around Knott County. They were usually what I would call mom and pop operations. There were no big coal companies. Those people usually hired friends and family. So, they were probably mostly from Knott County, I would guess, or at least surrounding counties.

NM: I guess I am curious as a young person growing up around here, did you spend much time in Knott County or around the lake area?

RC: Not when I was young, no. It wasn't until I came back here to work after college that I would visit some of the mines sometimes.

NM: What do you remember about visiting the mines and what sorts of things would you be doing then?

RC: Well, our office was here in Whitesburg and I was kind of a liaison between the office and the mines that were scattered around. So, I would just make trips that ask them something, tell them something or see how things were doing.

NM: What sort of mining was it at that point in time?

RC: Underground and surface mining, both.

NM: So, at that point when you were being the liaison that was when your family was involved in the operations.

RC: That's right.

NM: So, what year about was that?

RC: When I came back here to work, that was in 1975, but I think most of the properties were bought in the [19]40s and [19]50s.

NM: The properties being the...

RC: That my grandfather bought.

RC: So, 1975, what was going on in that lake area in around then. Do you remember?

RC: The only thing I can help put a date on is I remember driving through the construction area while it was being built, and that was when I was on the baseball team. So, that narrows it down to about [19]63 to [19]65 around then there. So, that's when it was built. That's the first I remember of it.

NM: What did you think about that seeing it?

RC: I didn't really know what to think. I don't think I knew at the time whether were making it. It was just something new and interesting.

NM: Were there any stories that you heard about during construction time? What were people saying? Do you remember?

RC: No. Since it wasn't that close to Whitesburg, I don't remember people talking about it. But I just remember one time as we were driving down there, the baseball team on the school bus, we heard that a tree had fallen where they were building the new highway up the side of the mountain where it had originally been in the bottom of the valley and would be covered up by the lake that a construction worker was killed by a falling tree.

NM: Gosh, I had a question and it flew out of my head. Well, I guess I am curious, when you came back in the [19]70s and were working here, at that point, the lake was built and filled then by [19]75 right?

RC: Let's see.

NM: Trying to, I am like...

RC: See, if I was sixteen, that would've been in about [19]67. I wouldn't guess it was filled up by the end of the [19]60s but that's just a guess. I don't know how long it takes to fill up a lake like that.

NM: So, I guess, did the lake at all affect coal mining around that area that you are aware of?

RC: Only in that the Corps of Engineers condemned all the property in the watershed immediately around the lake to protect the water quality. So, they had to condemn those properties which is a governmental action to buy people's properties, whether they wanted to sell it or not. I worked on one case I guess as a forensic mining engineer where the people, I guess there was a dispute over what the property was worth, which is common. A lot of people want too much and the government is required to pay him what's considered fair, although people don't agree on what's fair. They would get appraisals and so forth and make an offer. If they didn't agree, sometimes they would've to go to court. So, I evaluated the coal on one seam that was owned by a Hamburger family and testified in court how much coal there was. But I don't

know how the case came out as far as money or anything. But I know the Corps of Engineers, they always wind up getting the property because they have to.

NM: It is interesting. I have not talked with anyone yet that had any courtroom experience with this, but I know that that did happen. So, where did it take place?

RC: The trial?

NM: The trial, yes.

RC: The trial was impactful and it's the first time I had ever testified in court. It was interesting because the mining engineer testifying for the government was a man named Noah Howard. He was about eighty years old. I was in my early twenties. If you're going to be called an expert it's looks a lot better if you're older. I remember when a certain coal seam we were testifying about, he said, "This coal seam is too thin to be mine, so it's not worth anything, basically." When they asked him how he determined that, he said he waved his arms and said, "Oh, I've been a mining engineer in this region for sixty years, and I know all the seams, I know all the qualities and all the mining methods and all that." Then when they came to me and asked me how I knew how thick the coal seam was, I said, "Well, I took a tape measure and put it up against the coal like this." That's the more the way I do things.

NM: It is funny. So, what was your argument that there was value in that seam?

RC: Well, there were several seams and yes, several of them did have value. So, presumably at some point the family who owned the property would've wanted to mine it and receive the royalties from that. So, I keep saying state but I guess it's federal government since it's the Corps of Engineers. They had to pay the people what they would've made had they mined the coal.

NM: The court that it was an in Pike full, was that just a state court or was it federal?

RC: It's federal court. It must be the nearest federal court to where the property was, I assume.

NM: Why did they choose you to be the expert?

RC: Well, I don't know how many other mining engineers there were around who are even willing to do it. That's a good question [laughter] I don't know. Maybe they had five others turn them down, but who knows.

NM: Did you have much interaction with the family during that time?

RC: No. Not that I remember.

NM: So, when I asked about how it may be affected mining, and you said that they condemned some of the property around the lake to help with water quality. So, what did that mean for operations around the lake that were on land that had to be condemned?

RC: I don't know if there were any mining operations in the area. I don't remember hearing a vetting. I only worked on that one piece of property. But the way it affected things in general is that that meant there was a whole large area that would never be mined. It was just not available for coal miners to develop.

NM: Was there quite a bit of opportunity lost with that then?

RC: That all depends on how you define a lot. It would be a fair amount. But there was a lot more coal in eastern Kentucky, so I don't remember it being a big issue.

NM: What is your understanding of why the lake was built and how it came to be built?

RC: To help reduce flooding downstream. My understanding is they have had a number of really terrible floods in Hazard. What they do with this lake is they let the water level go down in the winter, and then in the spring when they expect a lot of rain, they let it fill back up instead of going down the river and flooding the towns down below.

NM: I know that there was a proposal to also build a dam in Letcher County, I think in kingdom Come area. Was that anything that you were ever aware of growing up that talks of that?

RC: I had totally forgotten about that. It just seems like, I remember hearing that some people or a lot of people maybe were opposed to it, but I don't remember anything else about it. Do you remember what year that was?

NM: I think it must have been in the [19]60s just because I think that is when a lot of the action was happening around Carr Creek. So, that is my understanding that it was around that timeframe.

RC: Well, I only graduated high school in [19]69, so I probably wasn't paying a whole lot of attention to other things going on.

NM: Yes, understandable.

RC: In Carr Creek especially at that time it seemed pretty remote to Whitesburg considering the highways and everything.

NM: Do you remember traveling on the old highways?

RC: Oh, yes. That mean, that's all there was when I was a kid. IT took like, I don't know, it seemed like four hours to get to Lexington and it was awful.

NM: Well, I know that you had mentioned on the phone that I cannot remember who it was you were speaking with, but there were some. I think it was when they were initially planning for the lake. They were estimating about how many people would use the lake on a daily basis. Can you tell me about what you were telling me?

RC: Sure. I've read this report that was done, and I think it's how they developed what they call a cost benefit ratio. If the benefits of having the lake justified the cost of building it. Of course, the main thing was flood control. But once they did it, of course, then there was also this side benefit of being a recreational area for people who wanted to fish and swim and water skiing all those things camp out. So, I read this report and I just remember that, if my memory is right and it's the big gifts sometimes, that they estimated that an average of seven hundred people a day would use it. I just thought that was wildly optimistic, let us say. I mean, I think that might be true on the best day of the year especially since during the pandemic. That's the first time I've spent a lot of time at the lake. I would go down there several times a week because I was alternating between bicycling, swimming, kayaking, and what else? I was running something else I've forgotten. But whenever I was swimming or kayaking, I'd go down to the lake. Because it was a way to get outside, which I like and get some exercise, which I needed to do. But I was still staying away from other people because of the pandemic. Even before the pandemic I was going down to the beach to swim, but that was closed down during the pandemic. So, I'd swam in open water after that. I don't know if I answered your question very well. But before that, there was just a few times when my children were small that we would go down there and rent a boat and ride around. We did that maybe once or twice. I had forgotten this, but one time we were sitting in a boat. We were sitting still, and I think I was reading a book while the kids were fishing, and I saw a little movement out of the corner of my eye. I looked over and I thought it was just some foam. But as I watched it, it was pulsing like this. I thought that was really strange. So, took a cup or something and picked it up and looked at it, and it was a little tiny jellyfish. It was about the size of a dime. It was white and translucent and it was going like that. It was kind of like a cloudy contact lens as the way it looked. So, I actually brought it home and I called a friend of mine who I thought knew a lot more about biology than I did. He said, "Yes, that's a freshwater jellyfish." He sent me a copy of a page out of a biology book explaining it. They have a really weird lifecycle. I always wondered how something like that would even get into a man-made lake. It wasn't always there like the ocean but that's one of the weirdest things I can say. The other weird thing is when I was kayaking a couple years ago, I went up the hollow just right near the big boat dock. When you leave the dock, if you go up to the right, I saw a little cloudy spot in the water. I went over to see what it was, and it was just a little thin stream of oil coming up. So, I don't know if whether there's oil in the ground that's leaking out or if there's a pipe that runs under there. I keep meaning the column and ask him about that. So, anyway, I know those are pretty far off digressions, but...

NM: No, those are great.

RC: Now that you've got me thinking about it there are things pop back into my head.

NM: Those are both really interesting stories. I am so surprised about the jellyfish. I would love to learn more about that.

RC: That's the last thing I expected. Sometimes I wonder if they're still there.

NM: Did you ask your friend that that knew a little more? Are there other places around East Kentucky where do you find these freshwater jellyfish?

RC: I didn't think to ask. No, but that's a good question. I would assume they are at least any lake that has basically the same temperatures ought to have them.

NM: How strange. I will have to keep an eye out next time. Well, how many people do you think on average do use the lake? I am sure it fluctuates so much, but there was that seven hundred optimistic guess.

RC: Well, just to make of wild estimate, when I go down to the beach on a hot summer day, there's gosh, maybe between a hundred and two hundred people. Then as I'm kayaking or swimming, I'll see at most, maybe a dozen motorboats go by and they have a few people in each one so I don't know who else uses it. There are people who camp there. I don't know how many more that would be. Maybe another a hundred, but I don't think it gets anywhere near seven hundred especially on average. Because those people aren't going to be there in the middle of the wintertime.

NM: You said that you started swimming there mainly in the pandemic. Why was it during the pandemic?

RC: I was swimming there before the pandemic because like I said, I need the exercise and I enjoy it. It doesn't matter how hot it gets. That's a nice exercise for the really hot human days. It's a good exercise because you use almost every muscle, but you don't strain anything. But when the pandemic came, they closed down the beach and I called them and asked if it was okay to swim in other places. Because I've seen people as I kayak around people swimming in other places around the lake but I didn't know if that was legal or not. In fact, there are at least two places I know of where there are knotted ropes hanging from trees where the kids will swing out into the water. So, even if I don't see any people, I know from that that people do swim there and have swim there. So, during the pandemic I was afraid they'd say you can't swim anywhere. Because for example, if you're at the beach it's a roped off rectangular area and sometimes people will go across the rope and swim out toward the middle of the lake. I've seen rangers come by and tell them to get back inside the rope. So, I thought maybe it's not allowed anywhere else. But I called them up and they said you can swim anywhere except the beach. So, I started going down there and just swimming like I said, in open water. I don't go out in the middle partly because I don't want to get run over by a boat. But also want to be close to shore in case anything goes wrong with me because I'm old and I want to be able to get to the shore real quick.

NM: Yes, that is a good strategy.

RC: One guy came by on a paddleboard one day while I was swimming and said, "You're really brave [laughter]." That's the best compliment I've gotten down there.

NM: Nice. Well, I know you brought it up before we started talking and you also brought it up on the phone, but I know that you had said that you ran into a water quality concern. So, can you talk a little bit about that?

RC: Sure. A friend of mine told me that back in the mid-[19]80s, I think it was a college project for him. They were testing the water, especially for coliform. The worst place they found it was

coming out of, oh gosh, it seemed like he said that area just below Red Fox. I asked him about Carr Creek and he said that was bad up there too. But by the time it got down to the lower end of the lake, it was a lot better. So, I said, "Well, how come they even have a beach if that's a problem?" He said, "Well, they test it at the beach. They don't test anywhere else, the Corps of Engineers and if it gets too high, they close the beach." When he said that, I remembered that and by the way, a lot of times I would go right up to the area he was talking about— let's see, sometimes I've kayaked from the Red Fox area and sometimes up in Carr Creek. But since that's the upper end of the lake, once he told me that, I moved down to the dam and started swimming down there. But he said that if it got too high at the beach, they would close it down but they don't tell you that. There's been times I've driven all the way down there to the beach and it'll be closed in the middle of the summer day. I know one time they said it was closed because there was no emergency phone even though I've never seen an emergency phone there. I've never seen a lifeguard there even though half the people there have phones. [laughter] So, I don't really think they need to have an emergency phone. As you go to swimming pools, like at hotels when they don't have lifeguards anymore and they'll just say, swim at your own risk. I thought that's what everybody was doing there without an emergency phone. But it makes me wonder if really the problem was the water quality and they didn't want to say that. So, I'll just keep swimming down at the dam.

NM: What is it again that they were measuring for?

RC: Coliform. I think it's sewage because a lot of people in Eastern Kentucky have had straight pipes over the years.

NM: I see.

RC: If you're familiar with that term.

NM: Then you said you spoke with a friend yesterday. Was there more information that your friend shared with you?

RC: I think that's all he told me, but I'll be glad to put you in touch with him if you want to talk to him about it.

NM: Yes. That is interesting. I know that I have had friends that have expressed concern about swimming there, just because you can see the strip mines surrounding the area and wondering if there is any runoff in that regard or if that affects it. What are your thoughts on that?

RC: I don't know if there's anything that's harmful especially considering how long it's been. Because even the pre-reclamation laws, the surface mines they have grown up. I think we would've heard about it if there were, it would be easy to find out. We could just ask the Corps of Engineers. Again, I don't think they would've the beach there if it was a problem or anything else. The boating or anything.

NM: Well, I guess I am curious as someone who sounds like uses the lake quite frequently these days, or at least in this coming season. I guess do you have any visions or hopes for the lake area



and what it could be? Or what would you like it to keep on being?

RC: Well, I really would not want to see it very commercialized any more than it already is which is not a whole lot. There's a boat dock that has a store and fuel, things like that. There are campgrounds, I would probably want to just leave it like it is.

NM: Suits you just fine.

RC: Pardon me?

NM: It suits you just fine.

RC: Yes, it does because I mean, I don't use the boat dock for anything. Sometimes I put my kayak in there and sometimes I'll just boat around and look at everybody's boats because that's kind of interesting. Some of them don't look like they been used in years. Some of them don't even look like they're safe to use anymore. Some of them are real expensive, some are shabby. I just think it's interesting and I'm getting exercise paneling around.

NM: There you go. Well, is there anything else I didn't ask you about that you think would be important for folks to know?

RC: Something I'm curious about is how much it actually help the city of Hazard since I don't live there, I haven't kept up with it. I mean, I hope it's completely eliminated really bad flooding but that would be interesting to find out. But let me see. I know that during the recent flooding here, a lot of people went down there and stayed in the campgrounds. A lot of state parks opened up for refugees, I call them to stay. In fact, now that it's getting warmer, I'd like just to get out of the house. I'd like to go down there and camp out or a night or two on some weekend. I've never done that. The nice thing about it is I wouldn't have to go far. So, pretty soon I'll probably call them and say, "Are they open now to everybody else?" So, I can go down there and do that.

NM: I have kept up to know if there's folks still staying there that were affected by the flood, but yes.

RC: Well, there's so many houses that haven't been replaced that those people got to be somewhere.

NM: Well, I think I want to collect about thirty seconds worth of the room tone so we can just kind of sit here quietly and listen to the birds chirping outside. I will just ask if there is just anything else on your mind, any other memories or anything that are bubbling up. But I will collect the room tone here. Well, is there anything else that's still on your mind about this?

RC: I probably have to go down the road for five minutes before I think of anything but I'm trying to think of the things we talked about yesterday or the other day. I can't think of anything but you're welcome to call me if you think of anything else.

NM: Okay, great.

RC: I've never heard of room tones and it seems to me like it's perfectly quiet.

NM: Well, it helps out for like if any of the recordings end up being made into a radio piece or film because every room does have some sort of sound to it. So, it helps mixing the audio so that it is kind of smoother transitions in and out of things. So...

RC: It's almost a good thing we're not outside. I know a lot of times recently as the weather's warmed up. I'll be walking by a bush and there'll be a bird that's so loud. It's incredible. I think how can that smaller thing make that much racket? If it is great, it's great. It's interesting.

NM: I think too coming off the wintertime, they just seem so loud because we have not heard them as much.

RC: But there was one in particular one type. I don't know what it is. Because sometimes I walk around looking for the bird and I can't find it and it sounds like it's twenty feet away and I keep walking around. Sometimes though they'll be on a tree trunk and as you walk around, they walk around. It's like the old cartoons because they think you're a predator, so they want to stay out of sight. So, you can walk around an old tree and not say, where's the bird? It's just been on the backside of the trunk the whole time.

NM: Yes, just playing a prank on you. Well, I will go ahead and sign us off here and then end the recording. So, this is Nicole Musgrave. I have been speaking with Roy Crawford on April 5th, 2023. We are in Downtown Whitesburg, Kentucky and this is for the Carr Creek Oral History Project.

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