

Nicole Musgrave: All right. So, we are recording here. I will introduce us. So, this is Nicole Musgrave. It is June 22nd, 2023. I am speaking with Roni Gilpin, who often goes by sister. This is for the Carr Creek Oral History Project. I am calling in from my office in Whitesburg, Kentucky. Roni, where are you calling in from?

Roni Gilpin: I live in Casey County.

NM: Okay, great. Well, I guess to get started, can you say your name and tell me a little bit about who you are?

RG: My name is Roni Gilpin. I'm from Knott County originally but left a little bit after I graduated from college and haven't lived there since then but go back occasionally. I'm a retired teacher. That's about it. [laughter]

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

RG: I'm from the lower end of the county, which is Sassafras specifically. I grew up at the mouth of Red Oak. That's kind of on the Knott-Perry Line. My Eastern Kentucky relatives are Combses. They're from Knott County. On my grandmother's side, I have Hamptons and Cornetts. They were from Letcher County. We grew up at the mouth of Red Oak, which was across the point in the road where 15 goes up to the dam now, and where the new road went up the hill at Red Oak Mountain, so to speak.

NM: Okay. Tell me a little bit about your family growing up.

RG: Well, my family was just my mother and my brother. For a time, we lived on Yellow Creek, which is down from the elementary school, with my grandmother. But then we moved to Red Oak. We had cousins in Red Oak. Actually, at that time, Red Oak was populated with lots of kids, all branching in age from probably, I don't know, five to sixteen, seventeen. We just kind of ran wild and [laughter] in that little part of the community. So, went to Yellow Creek Elementary School. When high school started, we went to Carr Creek. Way before high school started, they had started, I guess, construction on the road. I don't remember the exact dates. But the road construction was really big there because it went right up the mountain on one side of the holler. That whole hillside had to be blasted off to build the road.

NM: How did your mother spend her time?

RG: My mother was a teacher. She taught at Dilce Combs High School. That was in Jeff. Of course, that school is not a school anymore, of course neither is Carr Creek nor Yellow Creek.

NM: How old were you when you all moved from Yellow Creek to Red Oak?

RG: Probably about fourth grade, I'm thinking. I can't remember exactly. It was just like a mile. [laughter] It wasn't like a big move. [laughter]

NM: Can you describe to me what your house was like at Red Oak, and your neighbors?

RG: It was across the creek. In hindsight, it was kind of in the creek. But that's how a lot of houses were. It wasn't many feet above the creek. But it was a little two-bedroom wood frame house. We had a car bridge. Later, we had a wood footbridge. The car bridge, while we lived there, was washed out twice with cars washing down the creek during floods. The neighbors were right across the road. It was a small, unassuming community, not really anything fancy. But I think everybody all kept their houses neat, and their yards mowed. Despite all the kids playing, you just played everywhere, in everybody else's yard.

NM: Did you have family nearby?

RG: Yes, we had cousins. We had cousins that lived in a couple of houses up from us. You knew all your neighbors really well. So, so you hung out with them. Not a whole lot to do, but just play outside and play in the creek and play on the hillside. [laughter]

NM: Yes, a lot of time outdoors. [laughter] I know that other folks have talked about having memories of gardening. Did you all keep a garden at your house?

RG: We did not keep a garden because we lived right up next to the hillside. It was too shady. Now, that didn't keep my mother from trying, because we went up the hill to what you might call a flat, but there was not anything flat about it, and grubbed up a place and planted some tomatoes. Nothing ever really did anything because there wasn't enough sun. All through our lives, my aunt and uncle that lived up the road from us, and my mother would rent a garden somewhere and grow a garden. We always had a garden. We rented a garden at the mouth of Rowdy, which was just across the road from the mouth of Red Oak, at creek bottom. We gardened there. We gardened up in Sassafras holler, which is now the road that's below the dam, the holler that's right below the dam. We gardened up there a couple times with them. I don't think my mother had a car, at least that one you had to drive to the garden. We were always made to work in the garden. I can remember my brother rapping about it. I just tried to get by with the least work I could and keep my mouth shut. [laughter]. I hated it then. But now, actually, last year and this year are the first years that I have not been able to have a garden my entire life. So, yes, it's a big change. I feel the need to get the hoe out and work in the dirt, no matter what. I guess my mother felt that too.

NM: So, she gardened outside of her teaching job? She would make the time for that?

RG: Oh, yes. Oh yes. Of course, that was part of – teaching didn't pay very well. I guess part of our family was putting up canning and making jam and jelly, and canned beans. All that was stuff that you just did as a matter of course. So, that kind of sticks with you, what you're supposed to do. [laughter]

NM: Did you help out with the canning also?

RG: You know what? I did not help out a whole lot with the canning, but at least enough of it stuck that I still do it. During that time, I guess especially as I was older in high school, there was a cannery in Vicco. I don't know if anybody had mentioned that.

NM: No, tell me about it.

RG: Pardon?

NM: I said I have not heard about that. Tell me about it.

RG: There was a little cannery. A lady that lived up in Red Oak was the person who ran it, Ms. Pittman. You would can your vegetables in tin cans just like you would buy in the store. I think they would have certain days for certain things. It's been a long time, so I don't really remember. You would take all your beans. Everybody that was canning that day worked together. They would get all the beans ready. Of course, all your beans had to be broken and ready to go. They would put them in the machines. Then they would come out canned in tin cans that you would bring home instead of jars, like traditional home, canned green beans are. You were able to can in the cans. I think there was a small price that you paid per can. But it wasn't cost-prohibitive. That was something that was like an FDA project, I guess, for –that was considered a depressed area. But it was there and operating for several years.

NM: So, is that what your family would do? They would take their things to the cannery?

RG: The green beans, that was about it. Everything else they would do at home. But they took green beans to the cannery. Yes.

NM: What was the advantage of the tin cans over the glass jars?

RG: I don't know. I think probably the biggest advantage was you canned a whole lot at one time. Everybody worked together who had canned that day. Everybody stayed until the job was done. Then you brought your cans home. You were finished. I don't know. Evidently there was an advantage. You didn't have the jars to contend with that. It takes a lot of room to store the jars from year to year, I guess. I don't know. I really don't.

NM: So, for instance, if you were taking your beans there, you would actually stay and do the canning alongside everyone else that brought their beans that day. Is that right?

RG: Yes Everybody worked together to finish the project. Everybody had a different job, like assembly line, on the line.

NM: Did you ever work at the cannery yourself?

RG: I did not. For some reason, I never had to go. I stayed home and did whatever needed to be done at home that day.

NM: Did the cannery have a name?

RG: The cannery. [laughter]

NM: Right. That is what it was called.

RG: Yes. It was at Vicco. That's all I know. It was a little trailer.

NM: Interesting. Very cool. I am glad to hear about that. That is something I did not know about before. I guess I am curious if you could tell me a little bit about the schools you went to. What was the first school that you went to?

RG: The first school that I went to was Yellow Creek. It was Sassafras Elementary, but it was on Yellow Creek. It had originally been called the Yellow Creek School. It was eight grades for at least that time period. It was a real nice school. It still stands there. I think it's an old regular Baptist association meeting house or something. It's big yellow sandstone. It had oiled floors like most of the buildings did at the time. It was three stories, the basement,, and then four grades on each floor. It had a lunchroom and a library. So, as schools went in that time, I think it was probably a very nice school.

NM: You went there up until third grade? Fourth grade?

RG: No. Eighth Grade.

NM: Oh, you did. Okay.

RG: Eighth grade, because when we moved, that was still the school that you went to.

NM: I see. Okay. Got it. Where did you go for high school?

RG: At Carr Creek. Everybody that was affected by that dam went to Carr Creek, I would say.

NM: What was it like for you at Carr Creek High School?

RG: Carr Creek was the same kind of school, I guess. Started out, it was up on the hill from the road. I guess by the time we graduated, I can't remember, but I don't think the dam had filled in then. I think it was still – I graduated in [19]73. I don't know. I can't remember exactly how the road construction and the dam construction were at that time of graduation. I just don't remember if the new road was going on. Yes, I guess it was. I just can't remember that. It's funny because you think you would, but not there.

NM: How did you like to spend your time as a young person? As you got older, like in high school, how did you like to spend your time?

RG: I guess running around, going to the drive-in, spend the night with friends. I can't really think of anything that I did specifically. Sounds pretty boring. [laughter]

NM: No, no, not at all. One question that came to mind too, when you were mentioning that your mother was a teacher when you were younger, what was it like when she – well, I guess I should ask, did she have her summers off?

RG: Oh, yes, she had her summers off.

NM: What was that like when she had her summers off?

RG: Well, we just kind of did just what you have to do in the summer, keep the grass mowed, and work in the flowers. She was a single parent. So, whatever needed to be done, she would have to do it. Then we would have to help her, whether it was digging out the septic tank or – we still had contact with my grandmother. So, we would go down and help her a lot. Of course, tried to keep a garden going, did that. But I don't remember the summers being very eventful. We never went on vacation. We just kind of did what we did day to day.

NM: The grandmother that you mentioned, was that your mother's mom?

RG: Yes. She lived on Yellow Creek. I mowed for her. Then after I was in high school, I mowed a couple yards for neighbors just to help them out. Of course, they paid me. One summer, I babysat. That was the first job I ever had, like a real job. With no transportation, there weren't any really jobs close. So, just played on the hillside and did what we did growing up. Stay out of trouble. [laughter]

NM: Were both of your parents from Knott County?

RG: No. My father was not in the picture. My mother met him in Detroit during the war, I think. She had worked in a bakery in Detroit. Almost everybody from that area lived in Detroit, or Detroit as they would say, some part of their lives.

NM: Got it. I am curious, when did you start knowing that there was this plan to build the dam?

RG: Pardon?

NM: When did you learn that there was the plan to build the dam?

RG: Since I talked to you, I've kind of thought about that. I don't really know. I do think it's really important to know what people our age think of that because we lived through the building of it. But I think what a missed opportunity that we don't have interviews with people my parents age or even older. The older people at the time who were affected, so affected by that, I wonder what they felt about the building of the dam. At the time, I do remember, or maybe a little bit later, there was the fight against building the Red River Gorge Dam when they wanted to build that. They fought and stopped that construction. I remember thinking if that would've been a possibility to stop the construction because it felt, from the beginning, like a done deal. It was such a good idea. It was happening. At the same time, you felt like it was already planned out and done. I think things happened that made me think that it wasn't planned out that well. The plans changed throughout. Does that make sense?

NM: Yes. Well, can you tell me a little bit more about what you mean as far as the plans changing throughout?

RG: People living in one house that had to move, and they move into another house. Then turns out they have to move out of that house too. Did they not know they'd have to move out of that house? Or did they just not tell them that? Did they know that that was going to be affected too?

NM: Gosh, I have not heard of anybody that had happened to. Are there folks that you know that that happened to them?

RG: Well, I do know one family who lived in a house that was exactly where the dam is. Then they moved down closer to Red Oak, the holler. Then that house was taken too. So, they had to move out of that one. They may have known that when they moved into that house. I don't know. I just don't know.

NM: Do you remember, before things really got set into motion, before construction happened, at the early times, what were people saying about this project? Do you remember what folks were saying?

RG: I tried to think of that. I don't remember a whole lot. I don't remember a whole lot of pushback from it, which is what surprises me. I know, of course, when people got word that they would have to move, nobody was satisfied with the price that they were offered for their house. I don't know if they eventually got a price that they were happy about. But that's the only pushback that I remember, not really pushback on whether or not this should happen. I don't remember a lot of that. That doesn't mean it didn't happen, it just means that I didn't hear it, or I don't remember hearing it. I wonder about the pushback. I wonder now about, was it worth it, and what the real purpose of it was. I just wonder that.

NM: What do you mean by was it worth it?

RG: Well, all that upheaval in people's lives, for what? It's a nice dam. It's a nice water. I mean, it's pretty. But [laughter] I wonder if the other people that you have talked to felt like it was a worthy cause, I suppose.

NM: What were you told that the reason for the dam was?

RG: Flood control. Flood control is what we always assumed it was. At the time, I remember people saying, "Flood control to keep Hazard from flooding." If it was really for flood control, and people said this at this time, then the dam should have been on the Kentucky River and not on Carr Fork. Because the amount of water in the Kentucky River, like at Jeff's, would've impacted Carr Fork water and the North Fork Kentucky River. So, I don't know.

NM: Do you know why it happened to be at Carr Creek then, rather than Jeff or somewhere else?

RG: No, I sure don't. I do not. Do you? [laughter]

NM: No, I do not know definitively. I have heard different people's thoughts on it, but I am not sure definitively. I am curious, did anyone in your family have to move because of the road or the lake?

RG: Well, yes. I had an uncle that had to move because of the road. The road, when it came up through Sassafras, which is north of the lake, there were several houses across the creek behind Sassafras. All that was taken off. So, those houses had to be torn down and moved. We had an

uncle that my mother's brother lived there. So, he had to move. I'm guessing. That is the only one that I remember. Sorry, that was my alarm. [laughter]

NM: That is okay. Aside from family, is there anyone else, those close to you, where they had to move? I know you had mentioned a few names to me when we were on the phone earlier.

RG: Oh, yes. I had lots of friends, people that I hung out with, that had to move.

NM: What did they have to say about that?

RG: Well, I don't remember. I really don't remember them ever voicing that, if it was bad or if it was hard. I wonder what they felt about it. I don't remember. There were so many changes so quickly. For us, we lived on one side of the holler. But that construction was just going on endlessly with blasting and trucks and dirt and all being moved all around us all the time. [laughter] It was kind of chaotic. I don't remember talking with anybody about it. It's just like, it is what it is.

NM: Being right there with all that construction, what was that like for you?

RG: It was kind of crazy. They're blasting all the time. You didn't really know where. They would just have a big siren. Then there would be a certain amount of time. Then the blasts would go off. Then another siren saying that it was all clear. You just got used to it. In the evenings, when they'd quit work, we would walk up and just walk around and see what they'd done for the day. [laughter] So, lots of time spent, if you were on the road, spent in roadblocks through construction.

NM: Do you remember walking up on the hill after they blasted?

RG: Oh, yes. Yes. We would do that probably every evening and pick up the blasting wire. It was all colors of wire. For years that's what we fixed everything with, was the blasting wire. [laughter]

NM: Oh, really?

RG: Yes. We'd rewire that together. [laughter]

NM: Interesting.

RG: Actually I still have some. [laughter]

NM: Oh, wow. That is wild. What did you think, seeing the landscape change with all this blasting and stuff?

RG: Well, I think it's kind of sad. I think, at the time, it was very novel. You just were in awe of the changes and how big they were in such a little time. I guess now, it kind of makes me a little bit wistful. It's kind of sad, especially since I don't live there anymore. I would rather go back to the eastern Kentucky of my childhood rather than with the dam and the lake and all that.

That's probably just part of getting older too, more than a social commentary on that. That's why, when I said earlier about what was it good for, I wonder how many people enjoy the lake, and participate in the lake, and like it being there as opposed to what their ancestors would've preferred without it. Does that make sense?

NM: Yes, definitely. Yes. You have talked about the blasting. I am curious, what other sorts of changes or processes did you observe with this whole project?

RG: I'm not sure I know exactly what you mean.

NM: Sure. One thing that some people have shared are some memories of buildings being moved. I don't know if that is another part of the process that is something you observed and have memories of at all.

RG: Oh, yes. Still, when you go down there, you see a house. Then you think, oh, I remember when that used to be wherever it used to be. I know at the time, there were lots of people who went to the little Smithsboro Church. Of course, when it was being moved, it came apart. So, they had to completely rebuild that. I'm guessing that was tragic for a lot of people for whom that church was special. I don't know if the blasting from the road probably did it, or mind blasting, because both of those were going on at the same time. We had a well at our house. The blasting destroyed the well. You shouldn't have used the water at all. We certainly didn't drink the water. We carried water from my grandmother's house for years to a drink, but then my mother ended up getting hepatitis and almost dying, which I feel certain was from the water, even though she didn't drink it. So, that was a big byproduct for us. But then the city water came through there. So, nobody had the little wells. They were little, tiny wells that were probably almost in the creek anyway.

NM: Were there any other ways that this project affected your life that you can recall?

RG: Well not really, I think, because – of course, I was going to college for four years. Then I came back and taught for three years and then left again. It hasn't impacted my adult life, mostly because, I wasn't there. The cemetery where my family is buried – I'm the only one that's alive now in my family – it was at Cornett Hill. It was not moved. There were lots of other old cemeteries that we used to go to with my grandmother. Of course, they're all smudged together up there in that one cemetery where they put all the graves when they moved the cemeteries.

NM: Is it the Car Creek Memorial?

RG: Yes.

NM: I think it is called, maybe.

RG: Yes. When I go now, the only place I go to is to the cemetery because my mother doesn't live there anymore. The house is sold. So, there's not really much reason for me to go back. I usually go back on Memorial Day or Memorial weekend.

NM: I know that you mentioned – oh, gosh, it just flew out of my head what I was going to ask



you. It came and then it went. You just brought up the cemeteries. That is another thing that a lot of folks have talked about was the fact that they had to move a lot of graves. I was just wondering if you had any memories of that happening.

RG: Yes, I do have memories. We had a friend who was in high school at the time, but he worked on that crew to move the graves. Of course, my mother was big in the remembering of the ancestors. So, we went around to several different cemeteries and tidied up the graves and things. I remember that early in my childhood. Then to think of all those cemeteries that were so simple and small and close, and then they're all up in that big new cemetery on a hillside, which I think is so ugly. [laughter] I hate that cemetery. I don't know. There's something that feels a little like blasphemy to me that, that they've done that to those bodies that had no choice. One part of the lake, there was a cemetery that I remember going to, because it had those huge, big mallow plants that have the big pink blooms. I remember those in the cemetery. Then when you go up past part of the lake, they're still growing there from where they were originally. I think that's, I don't know, a last stand of some sort. [laughter]

NM: Whereabouts around the lake are those flowers, did you say?

RG: They're up on the upper end toward Hindman.

NM: Is it something you see from the road or if you were to walk a certain way?

RG: Yes, you can see it from the road. There's a little rest area there, or not a rest area, but a picnic and all that.

NM: On the left there from Whitesburg to Hindman?

RG: Yes, from Cody to Hindman.

NM: From Cody to Hindman. Yes. I will have to look for those next time around. You mentioned also the resistance for the proposed dam around the Red River Gorge area. Were you living around that area? Or how did you come to know about all of that going on?

RG: I went to UK. I believe that was still going on. Or maybe they had just stopped that when we got to UK. I don't know the dates on that, but I remember that somehow. I don't know, maybe reading about it in the paper. I don't really know how I knew about it except once you got to UK, it was still being talked about.

NM: Were UK students involved with some of the resistance to that?

RG: Yes. A whole lot of students were involved in that. Yes.

NM: Why were so many students involved? Do you know?

RG: Well, right now, Red River Gorge's probably the most visited place to go and hike and camp and go to. It's so accessible to Lexington. I'm sure that's part of it. It's easy to get to and not very far. I'm sure the UK students had a lot to do with the protest, and then, locals too.

NM: I am curious, you have sort of expressed this already, but how do you feel about the lake now?

RG: Like I said, I think it makes me a little sad. I think it's pretty. When I drive by, I think it's real pretty. I think, especially when you're young, maybe you don't get over this, but you think, "Oh, a lake, that would be so much fun and boating and zipping here and zipping there and fishing." Kids need something to do. So, that would be just perfect. It doesn't seem to me that it's used a whole lot. If you go by, even in the summer, there's not a lot of boat traffic on it that I see. Again, I'm up there once in a blue moon. So, I may have the total incorrect picture. I know there's a marina that's got lots of boats in it. So, I hope it is used for that.

NM: You said these days, you typically come back to Knott County just on Memorial Day. Is that right?

RG: Right. Yes. Right. Of course, things have changed with COVID. We stayed home a lot with COVID. Then two years ago, or not even two years ago, I had to have a heart transplant. So, that's kept me home. I'm just now returning to normal with that. So, I don't get around people very much. I don't visit people up there like I used to, because of those things. I don't have any immediate family, but I have cousins that live there.

NM: Well, Roni, is there anything else that I did not ask you about that is still on your mind or that you think would be important for folks to know?

RG: I can't think of anything. I don't feel like I've shed a whole lot of light on my experience. I wish I could remember more about it. But most of my memories are basically blasting that hill up the road that lasted for years. [laughter] Well, it felt like years.

NM: Is there anything else about that blasting that sticks out in your mind?

RG: No, except that it feels so ingrained in my soul that I've been in places where there have been mild earthquakes and never thought anything about it because I thought, well, somebody's blasting, [laughter] because being shaken around was just part of the status quo at the time.

NM: My gosh. Would you really feel the earth shake with the blasts?

RG: Oh yes. [laughter]

NM: Wow. Gosh. Did you ever get woken out of bed or anything?

RG: No. I guess we were already up by the time they would do that. Like I said, even after the road was gone, the mine blasting was still going on. So, you just never knew who was doing the blasting. It was still blasting.

NM: Coming at you one way or another. [laughter]

RG: I think it must be real common for at least people who grew up during the same time I did

because the mine blasting was quite prevalent before the road even came in. You might not even know where they were mining, really. Just you knew that they were mined somewhere because they were blasting.

NM: It has been really eye-opening for me to hear some of your perspectives and some of your memories on all of this. So, I just appreciate you so much for making the time to talk with me, Roni.

RG: Well, thank you for asking me. I wish I had some lofty words to tell you, but I don't.

NM: I think you have said some lofty words enough. That is for sure. Well, I will follow up with you on email, Roni, about the forms and such. Thank you so much. Feel free to reach out to me if you have got any questions or if you think of anything, if I do not hit up with you first. I will go ahead and sign us off here. So, this is Nicole Musgrave on June 22nd, 2023. I have been speaking with Roni Gilpin for the Carr Creek Oral History Project. We are recording this via Zoom. I am in Whitesburg, Kentucky. Roni is in Casey County, Kentucky.

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