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Kevin M. McCarthy Memoir

M131. McCarthy, Kevin M. b. 1956

Interview and memoir

1 tape, 90 mins., 9 pp.

HISTORIC SITES IN CENTRAL ILLINOIS

Kevin M. McCarthy, National Park Service Ranger at Lincoln Home in Springfield, discusses his work as a ranger and park interpreter: school programs, Joshua Speed program, and other National Park Service sites.

Interview by Mrs. Mary Louise Connelly McCarthy, 1980

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PREFACE

This manuscript is the product of audio tape-recorded interviews conducted by Mrs. Mary Louise Connelly McCarthy, while pursuing her Masters Degree at Sangamon State University in Springfield, Illinois, for the Oral History Office during the Fall Semester of 1980. Mrs. Gay Ruble Piatchek transcribed the tapes and Mrs. McCarthy edited the transcripts.

Kevin Michael McCarthy is a National Park Service Ranger at Lincoln Home in Springfield, Illinois. He was born in Saint Augustine, Florida, on May 25, 1956. His father is Matthew James and his mother is Mary Louise McCarthy. Kevin has been educated in Florida and in Glen Ellyn, Illinois. He attended the University of Miami, Coral Gables, Florida. He has taken courses at Cape Cod Community College in Barnstable, Massachusetts and in December of 1980 is graduating from Sangamon State University in Springfield, Illinois, with a Bachelors Degree in Communication. Kevin is well informed on the topic of Abraham Lincoln and his career and family. Kevin's duties as an interpreter are varied and myriad. He has written and produced several productions for the site. Some of these have concerned the courtship and marriage of Abraham and Mary Lincoln. In addition, his work in Communication has enabled him to film and tape video productions. Some of these have included the Walk into the Past presentation at the site. He is one of the Rangers who present the school programs for the Springfield community. He is a friendly and well traveled young man who is very personable and who enjoys his work with people.

Readers of the oral history memoir should bear in mind that it is a transcript of the spoken word, and that the interviewer, narrator, and editor sought to preserve the informal conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources. Sangamon State University is not responsible for the factual accuracy of the memoir, nor the views expressed therein; these are for the reader to judge.

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Kevin M. McCarthy, December 12, 1980, Springfield, Illinois.

Mary Lou McCarthy, Interviewer.

Q. Kevin, I understand you are one of the younger rangers at Lincoln's Home.

A. That's right, there are a number of us who are in our early twenties and it's our first or second year with the Park Service.

Q. Would you tell us a little bit about yourself? Where were you born?

A. I was born in St. Augustine, Florida. That's about forty miles south of the Georgia border on the Atlantic ocean.

Q. And it's known for something very special. Would you tell us about that?

A. Right, it is the oldest continuous settlement in North America, and in 1565 they established under the colony of Spain as St. Augustine, settled by Ponce de Leon, and it's one of the oldest cities in America.

Q. And did you grow up there?

A. Yes, until I was about eight years old and then our family moved north up to Illinois on the south side of Chicago.

Q. What schools did you attend in St. Augustine?

A. There was Cathedral Parish School. That's the oldest Cathedral and the oldest parish in America. It's a Catholic school, and Cathedral parish was the school that I went to for first and second grade, and as I said, when I was eight, we moved.

Q. And, then the schools here in Illinois?

A. Third grade was at Abraham Lincoln School which seemed kind of an appropriate one when we moved to Illinois, and then I transferred to a parish, and no one can pronounce the name, but it was St. Petronille's in Glen Ellyn, Illinois, and I went there and graduated from eighth grade, so it was about five years there.

Q. And then high school in Glen Ellyn, also?

A. Right. Two schools, I started at Catholic ones so I certainly moved back and forth between the two systems. It was St. Francis High School in Wheaton, Illinois. That would have been run by the Christian Brothers and then eventually over to Glenbard South, which

was a brand new school built in 1972, so I got right in on the ground floor, and graduated from there in 1974.

Q. Oh, well then you've certainly had a variety of public and parochial schools. How about colleges?

A. Well, now, we're getting into quite a few. Again, like high school, it started out with a series of different schools, the first one is an old historic school in Northern Illinois. They used to be known as St. Procopius, and eventually they decided to come into the modern twentieth century, and call themselves Illinois Benedictine College, run by the Benedictine Brothers of Minnesota. Eventually, from there I went there for my freshman year, and transferred to the University of Miami in Coral Gables, Florida, and went there for a semester in 1975.

Q. And then you left Miami, where did you go after that?

A. My family was moving to Cape Cod, Massachusetts, so we certainly get around the country and there is a fine community college called Four Seas, Cape Cod Community College in Barnstable, Massachusetts, and I went there and took some studies so that I wouldn't lose a full year of college, and eventually we moved to Springfield, Illinois where I'm going to Sangamon State, hopefully graduating this semester.

Q. Oh, marvelous. Well, travel, then has been part of your life, as a little fellow. Is that one of the things that led you toward the Park Service as a Park Ranger?

A. That, and also the fact that I'm studying a field called Communication, which is all sorts of different things, speech, broadcasting for television and radio, film, dramatic arts, theater and sometimes, too, it's part of the political process.

Q. How did you find out about the Park site here in Springfield?

A. Well, I was walking by the job board at Sangamon State University and they have openings for local employers and national employers interested in college students, and there was a card that said "National Park Service," so I thought, "Oh, good, that sounds like a good idea, I'll look at it," and it said that there was an opening at Lincoln Home for college students. There were two grade levels available in government service. In GS-4, there was an opening for a student with two years of college, and GS-3 for a student with one year of college, so I applied, and eventually was selected.

Q. Oh, marvelous. Now, I understand your position is one of a seasonal ranger, could you explain that to us?

A. Right, the Park Service is a little bit under 10,000 permanent employees so it's one of the smallest of all the government bureaus.

It's administered out of Washington by a man, in our case, the Department of the Interior's Secretary. Right now is Cecil Andress, and he is directly responsible to President Carter. In the future, it will be President Reagan, and the Park Service is structured so that the permanents cannot possibly handle all of the folks who come to visit during the summer. Some of the big parks like Yellowstone, have seven and one-half million visitors a year. Almost all of them come in a five month period, so they supplement their work force with college students, high school students and young ones who are learning forestry that are often part of the Y.A.C.C., which is the Young American Conservation Corps, which is the old WPA of the 1930's. The seasonals come on for different appointments, usually ninety days is a minimum season in the Park Service, and that's ninety working days or extensions for parks which go into different seasons, not only the summertime, but sometimes they need help in the winter. That would be 180 day seasonals. They can be hired anytime in the calendar year. So they supplement the permanent work force.

Q. Oh, that's terrific. How many seasonals work in the United States? Do you have any idea?

A. Well, last summer, there were 57,000 applications to the Park Service for seasonal positions during the summer, and there ended up being about 9,000 selected. So it's a pretty stiff competition, and the different parks have different amounts of applications. Yellowstone and the Grand Tetons and some of the bigger parks, probably more applications than others.

Q. I see. Well, how about Lincoln Park now, has started what they call school programs, and you're greatly involved in them. Can you tell us about those?

A. Quite a bit. They developed in all different directions. When they first started in 1974, two years after the park had been taken over by the National Park Service, it started out with a first grade program, and they found that the children were just learning their ABC's and how to write and they weren't too sure that they were really clicking into Mr. Lincoln. So they decided to try a fourth grade program that they had for three years, and that was an outstanding success. District 186, in Springfield, decided that they wanted to make it mandatory for all of their children in fourth grade to come, and so they got things started, and then in 1979, they played with the idea of having two different types of age groups, so they just went up a year on the original first and fourth grade, and we had the second grade program which talks about the Lincoln family, and a fifth grade program.

Q. Oh, fantastic, and exhausting. How long a time is each grade given when you have a school program, how long do you give the youngsters?

A. Well, we've got a set format, it's just easier for our employees

to know how much time it will take. District 186 agreed that they would have enough time to be able to send two school groups or classes per day, so it goes from nine-thirty in the morning until eleven o'clock, at which time they go back, and of course have lunch. Then there's an afternoon group that comes at twelve-thirty, and then they leave our park at two o'clock, so it's an hour and a half per program.

Q. And do you have the regular school-size groups, for instance twenty-four to fifty children in a group?

A. That's probably pretty close. Sometimes, we do have groups that are special, or the fact that the school can't afford to rent a bus for an extra amount of time, so we have had as many as sixty-five coming at once. We try not to have that many, because it's very hard to make sure that the children are getting anything about Lincoln and it's hard for the Park rangers to make sure that they can control the children, too.

Q. And now they have a tour of the home, and then they have a tour of the neighborhood, do they, and then talking?

A. Very much. There are all different ways of doing it. I was lucky last year as a seasonal coming in, I worked through the fall, and I helped to write the second grade program. That was kind of fun trying to figure out what the little people wanted to know about Abraham Lincoln and his family, and there's this very simple program. About twenty minutes of it is a tour of Lincoln's home, and a lot of them have been there before. They're from Springfield, and hopefully they'll come back again, and we don't want to just show them the house that they can come and see anytime. The program is, like I said, about an hour and ten minutes long. It is a puppet show, that we have Mr. Lincoln's horse, Old Bob, that was his horse for many years, and some of the menageries of animals that would have lived in Springfield relate to children the story of Abraham and Mary and all of the boys in this home. Then what we do, is read some special stories to the children. Ones that were written about Abe Lincoln in Kentucky, so I think they enjoy it very much and they do learn, by the time they are leaving, they can tell us things about the Lincoln family.

Q. Oh, good. Your rank is called, you're a Grade 4 interpreter, what in the world does that mean?

A. Well, there are different sorts of park rangers. It's a term now that is confused because there's a sports team in hockey, the New York Rangers, and the Texas Rangers known for their law enforcement, but what it really means is it goes back to the early days of the army, when special volunteers scouts were called rangers, and it developed from the natural parks, that they were the men going out to search for hikers who had been lost in canyons, or go up and save people from snow avalanches. So, what it goes back to is, as I said, the army, and then the ranger interpreter is the new thing that developed out

of what they call the Mission 66 program. Interpretation was written by a gentleman who is kind of the father of this whole field, there were a number. Horace Albright was one, and some of the other gentlemen, now are gone. Steven T. Mather was one of the first Park Service directors, and they mean not that you can translate French or Italian or Russian, they mean that you're interpreting the language, or the special significance of the park to the visitors, and the GS, or grade level means government service level. It's like being in management positions in private companies.

Q. Oh, I see. That's good.

A. It's a job title, in a way.

Q. And it's a job title, but I think it confused some people and they expected you to immediately go into Italian or French.

A. Bonjour.

Q. Bonjour. Now you recently gave a lovely Sunday afternoon program in which you played the part of Joshua Speed. Will you tell us something about Joshua and the program?

A. He's an unusual character. Abraham Lincoln, there's the image of Abraham, and then there's the real man that lived in Springfield for twenty-four and one-half years, and if he had a best friend who was close to him, and told all his innermost thoughts, and he told him all the things that were important, it was Joshua Speed. In fact the one story that lives on, everyone knows it's kind of a legend, but it's considered "historically accurate," which is a phrase they like to use, but Carl Sandburg wrote about Joshua, and said that Abraham Lincoln had ridden into town on a borrowed horse, because he owned none from New Salem. He had to borrow it from a friend of his, Bill Clary, he rode into town, and Speed's store happened to be the nearest one on the outskirts of town, and he stopped in, and inquired as to how much bedclothes would cost. Speed added it all up on the counter out in the sawdust, and said "Seventeen dollars, that is what it'll cost you." and Lincoln apologized, and said, "Oh, I'm sure that's a very reasonable amount, as such, but I don't have the money to pay you, however, I'm coming to Springfield to be a lawyer, so if you'll let me borrow them for a while, I can pay you by Christmas. Of course, if I'm not a good lawyer, and I don't do well, why, I won't ever pay you at all." And Speed kind of laughed at him, and stood back and noticed the sincerity in his face and said, "Well, I've got a room upstairs if you're that desperate for one," and they said Abraham stomped up the stairs and yelled down, "Speed, I moved."

Q. That's marvelous. Do you rangers work with any of the other park sites, New Salem, for example?

A. No, we work with all of them. We have a visitor's center on Seventh

Street in Springfield. A lot of people don't even notice that it's there. They built it to blend in with the scene, and I'm afraid they did too good a job, but it was built in 1976, but what we do is work in a cooperative effort. The Springfield Board of Tourism and Convention Services are now headed up by a Mr. Pulia from the city of Springfield, and we try and direct people through them and through us answering questions. And on busy days we need every person we can get. Lincoln's home is just one of the pieces of Springfield in the story about Lincoln. You asked about New Salem specifically, that's of course just a super place to go to. It recognizes America's preeminent outside historically accurate village. It was built in the 1930's by the CCC, the old Civilian Conservation Corps and the Work Program. W.P.A. Work Programs Association*and it was built by the Rockefeller Foundation. John Rockefeller had heard about New Salem and wondered when did Lincoln live there? Why? and thought that something should be done about it, so they constructed it. And we try to send people there, Lincoln's tomb in Oak Ridge Cemetery, the Old State Capitol in Springfield, the Governor's mansion, which is outstanding architectural building that's being completely renovated. Governor Thompson is quite an artifact buff, he purchased ten pieces last week. And, the main state house where of course people can see government in action talk to their legislator, or even if they're not from Illinois, take a tour through the building. And then there's some other sites like the Lincoln Depot and Mr. Lincoln's law offices. There's quite a few-- New Salem's just an excellent one that can tell about Lincoln before he got to Springfield.

END OF TAPE

*WPA - Works Progress Administration