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Interview with Mark Gilmore

Michael Davis

Mark Gilmore

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Researcher's Name: Michael Davis

Event: Interview with Mark Gilmore

Place: Kokosing Valley Camp & Canoe, 25860 Coshocton Road, Howard, Ohio 43028

MD: Well, it's January 5th, 2000, my name is Michael Davis and I'm here with the Rural Life Center at Kenyon College. I'm at the Kokosing Valley Camp & Canoe—is that right? I'm talking to Mark Gilmore who runs the place and I'm just going to ask him a few questions.

inaudible question

MG: Started 1967, as far as the canoe livery, 33 years. As far as being raised in the county about three miles...

MD: inaudible question

MG: No, we had the canoe livery up by Howard. We bought the campground in, like, '88, so put everything together we actually operate under Kokosing—we used to be Howard Canoe Livery before we put everything together.

MD: inaudible question

MG: On this property here, just since we've moved down here. (Radio messages in background, Mr. Gilmore goes to turn it off).

MD: So there's been a canoe livery on this ground since...?

MG: Ever since we bought the campground and moved the canoe livery here.

MD: inaudible question

MG: It was up the river about an hour, canoe-wise, in the village of Howard—it where our number one stop is now.

MD: How does that work?

MG: We're backwards from most canoe liveries. Most canoe liveries stick you in a canoe, send you down river, and pick you up. We take you up river to whatever desired trip you want and then you end up back here at the campgrounds, which is nice—your car is here, there's no wait when you get back.

MD: inaudible question

MG: Ah, anything from a one hour to a seven hour, but our two hour is our most popular trip. It starts at the intersection of Sapp and Stall Road, southwest of Howard and it comes back here—it's about five and a half, six mile long

MD: inaudible question

MG: We stay relatively small, we keep around three dozen canoes, we've got a dozen or fifteen kayakis, and roughly three to four dozen tubes—we also have a tube trip. We try to get two runs out of each canoe on a weekend or a holiday.

MD: inaudible question

MG: Everybody—families, individuals, church groups, a lot of school groups, a lot of people just to fish the river—the Kokosing's a great smallmouth river.

MD: inaudible question

MG: A lot.

Phone rings, tape pauses, then resumes.

MD: So tell me about the campground here.

MG: We have 102 acres, 170 sites, 140 of them have water and electric, 30 primitive. This is a rec hall and in the summertime it's got video games and stuff like that in there. We have a heated pool, and putt putt, horseshoes, basketball, and the canoeing. As far as who camps here, we have roughly ninety people, families, who just leave their campers here, just stay here year round... We stress family camping. If people indicate that they want to party all night, why, we tell them where there's campgrounds where they can do that. We like it, we enjoy it. We have two or three part time help, but it's mostly just family.

MD: inaudible question

MG: All over. We've got our permanents that camp here, we've got anywhere—some that live in Wheeling, West Virginia, they drive up here every weekend. We've got some from Toledo, Youngstown, Cleveland, Columbus, Dayton, Canton—very few local people. I think that out of ninety seasonals or permits, maybe half a dozen of them are from the Knox county area. Columbus is our big draw, the Columbus area.

MD: inaudible question

MG: Yeah, we've had two or three families from just the past two or three years. One was from Plain City... There's a lot of the others just looking for property.

MD: inaudible question

MG: Apple Valley's not really their main—Apple Valley's almost too much like the city, you know, they want to be out by themselves.

MD: inaudible question

MG: My wife and I live right straight across the river, my son lives on the grounds

MD: inaudible question

MG: He helps out.

MD: inaudible question

MG: As far as our permanent residents, April 1st through October 15th, but we usually open sometime in mid-April and then go until October. The cat's puking (laughs). I didn't feed her yesterday so she's kind of overeating.

MD: What happens when you're off season [around the grounds]?

MG: We're open during the month of December, the first week of December—we are a deer check station. We do have some campers that come back. The water, of course, is shut off at the sites, but the shower houses are open. Besides that, there's always something—we have two or three projects going as we speak.

MD: inaudible question

MG: I'm redoing some odds and ends in the shower house. We're just getting ready to upgrade one area of our electric. When this campground was built there was no such thing as air conditioners and microwaves, so the underground electric line is not heavy enough for that. And today's campers are not really campers anymore, they have to have the home away from home. So we are upgrading all of our electric to thirty amp service so people can use their air conditioners, and microwaves and stuff, which is fairly expensive.

MD: something about deer check station...

MG: When you shoot a deer, you—are you familiar? Have you ever hunted before?

MD: No, but I just talked to Mike Miller...

MG: When you buy your deer tag—you buy your hunting license and then if you want to hunt you have to buy a deer tag—they issue you a tag which has to be put on the deer as soon as it is, well, shot. And then you've got twenty-four hours or something like that to take the deer to a deer check station. And they bring it in here, and we just determine

whether it was a buck or a doe, how long the antlers was, and odds and ends, where the deer was shot and stuff like that. And we put a metal tag on the deer.

MD: inaudible question

MG: They stop every day. Picks up the tags and marks it down...Strictly volunteer, well, they give me a calendar.

MD: So do you have a lot of the same people...?

MG: Yeah, this year was down. The rules and hunting regulations were changed here in Knox County. You could only get a buck—you could get a buck the whole season but you could only get a doe the first two or three days. Next year it will be either sex, so it will be back up again.

MD: inaudible question

MG: We're relatively new—[phone rings]

MD: inaudible question

MG: There are several check stations in the county, this is actually only the second year that we've done it. There was a place close to here that decided not to do it anymore, so the game protector asked if I'd help him out. But we checked in 115 or so last year, 50 to 60 this year—it was down considerably.

MD: inaudible question

MG: I do it for gun season only. In fact, there was a gentleman here last Sunday who wanted me to check one in for bow season, but we're not in the office that much in the winter. For one week it's OK. For gun season they want you to be here from 8:00 in the morning to 8:00 at night. [Rabbit noises in background from cage, coughing.]

MD: So what else happens here during the summer? You have canoeing, you have fishing, what else?

MG: The tubing is very popular, especially during the hot weather. We run the tubes on the one hour canoe trip—it takes about two, two and a half hours. That's very popular.

MD: inaudible question

MG: The baseball diamond is used by the campers on the weekend, but I don't know if you're familiar with the Village of Howard up here, East Knox high school? They built a new auditorium, gymnasium about five years ago and it took away their Little League fields, so we let Little League play their games here. So they start the 1st April. Yeah,

there's either one or two games, or one or two practices here every night, through July 4th.

MD: inaudible question

MG: Yeah, we sell a lot of East Knox shirts and stuff. Yeah, I've been a—I've been following football quite a bit. I filmed the football games for well, this was the 26th year. I'm good friends with the coach. The coach, our coach has been here for thirty years. It's a small knit community.

MD: inaudible question

MG: Yeah, especially holiday weekends. Holiday weekends for this season and next season is with the same people. For all three major holiday weekends, get the same people back each time. Which is good for us—you don't have to second guess whether they're—you know, you're going to be with them three or four days. No new faces on weekends.

MD: inaudible question

MG: Pretty much they place themselves on the holidays, people like certain areas. If they call and that area is booked, and we move them someplace else, they may say, "Hey we like this area better than we did." Most of the sites have a, all of the sites a tree on them somewhere. A lot of them really shady, some not as shady as others. Everybody wants something different.

MD: inaudible question – something about how people are placed.

MG: Not the weekenders, our permanents we do. We've got one area that's got a lot of retired people in it. So we try, without the new people knowing it, we just don't show them that area. If they've got children then...

MD: fishing...inaudible question

MG: Lot of the campers fish, lot of the permanents fish. As far as canoeing, our weekday business is mostly fishermen.

MD: something about the rec hall...

MG: Yeah, it's been used for everything from a wedding reception to a dinner after a death. Local 4H clubs use it a lot for meetings. We're also a voting precinct for Howard Township—I've got about three weeks to get it cleared up again because the primary is on March 7th. ...Just about everything, a lot of square dance groups use it. There's a lot of camping clubs, like Good Sam's and stuff like that, or clubs, we don't let them, we don't rent it out in the summertime, because if it rains, the campers don't have anywhere to go. But in the fall and stuff like that.

MD: question about wedding reception?

MG: They were residents of the area.

MD: What kind of future plans do you have?

MG: We're putting in—I don't know whether you noticed it or not coming down the driveway—we're putting in a lake out front. It's going to be thirty-two acres, pretty good size. We're talking a few years to get it done. We're thinking about maybe, next couple years, going strictly seasonal or by reservation. But we're getting older. People don't realize how many hours—I mean, the store is open from 8:00 in the morning until 11:00 at night. So we'll cut back on the store's hours. Someday—our daughter is in college and this is her last semester of college, so we'll have that expense out of the way. [too faint, mumbling]

MD: So what's going to happen on that lake?

MG: We haven't decided yet. A lot of it depends on insurance, we've got it surveyed out so it may not even be part of the campgrounds [phone rings].
[pause for phone conversation]

MD: So tell me a little bit about what you think of the river.

MG: Pretty, clean. It's definitely one of the cleanest rivers in the state. The Department of Natural Resources does a lot of their studies on this river. They tell us how clean it is. There was this career center—or someone—did a study on it just a few weeks ago, this last year sometime—I forget how many different species of fish there are. It is very clean water. It was nominated state scenic river last year. Well, they started a program probably fifteen, twenty years ago, but there was a change in governors. It kind of stopped and then they did it again. I don't whether that's going to help us or hurt us.

MD: Why would it help? Why would it hurt?

MG: Business-wise, I don't want it to turn into like the Mohican with fifteen different canoe liveries, wall to wall canoes. There's some misunderstanding as far as rules and regulations, [unclear], we'd have no changes as far as farmers and stuff like that. Now they're saying they can't get so close to the river as far as chemicals and stuff like that. Just wait and see how it turns out.

MD: inaudible question

MG: The benefits is—we'll probably benefit out of it the most because we have a canoe livery, but we're not getting any bigger. We're staying with three dozen canoes. We get along good with everybody as far as property owners. I just don't want it any bigger, we're still busy.

MD: inaudible question

MG: Last year we had to close because of the drought, river just got too low to be enjoyable. We closed about the first or second weekend in August, which you know, income-wise it hurt, but you don't mess with Mother Nature.

MD: What about two years previous?

MG: Usually, by rule of thumb, you'll get flooded out at least one holiday of the three for the summer. We just kin of—don't spend your money til you get it. We're overly cautious, very overly cautious. The Kokosing is quite challenging in some parts. We've certainly got some landmarks—if the river's up to that height, we run. We've been called a few names for that, but money's not everything.

MD: Do you have pretty experienced canoers come out?

MG: All in all, no. People think they are, but no. They tell you how experienced they are, but then they get in a canoe and face each other, and they're just like beginners.

MD: inaudible question

MG: They don't use it too much. In today's society, percentage wise, not too many parents take their kids fishing. Ball games, Little League, stuff like that, takes up the whole summer. Fishermen—usually the same people year in and year out.

MD: inaudible question

MG: People swim in it. We have a pool here, so they don't swim in it. The campers take their lawn chairs out and sit in it the middle of the river and stuff like that. About all of them have a tube. They'll go from one end of the campground to the other, just back and forth all day. If you wear the kids out, keep the kids happy, Mom and Dad's happy.

MD: Going back to the major holiday weekends, do you have special activities planned?

MG: Oh we do have a disc jockey that comes in on the holiday weekends from 7:30 to 10:30. We used to have him back here in the rec hall, but he has such a good following, that we use the basketball court.

MD: What types of things do people do? Is there a lot of barbequing? What else?

MG: Yeah, a lot of barbequing. You have very few single people that camp, it's usually families. We eat good on holiday weekends, they always bring us the leftovers. And we sell eighteen flavors of hand-dipped ice cream and that's very popular—they tell us we give very generous servings. Each to his own, we're relatively close to Amish country.

The women, you know, you got to go to Wally Worth or Kmart, they like to do their shopping. You know, just relax.

MD: inaudible question – something about what it takes to run this sort of operation...

MG: You have to enjoy people. You have to be a jack of all trades—you have to be an electrician, a janitor, a plumber, peacemaker. When you're dealing with the public you never be surprised at what you find there. They're always driving a stake through the water lines or the electric lines, just part of life. But all in all they're good people, the biggest percentage of campers. You always get that certain percentage you're not going to satisfy.

MD: inaudible question – something to follow up power lines story.

MG: You know these twist things that you tie your dog to? They don't ever think that anything is underground, and they like to tie their dogs up. I had a permanent once, built himself a barbeque pit, put the anchor right through the electric line. I had a couple—wasn't a couple—it was a group using their parents camper and they tried to run an air conditioner on a twenty amp box, they blew the breaker. And on a trailer, when you blow the breaker, it automatically goes to battery. So the lights kept getting dimmer throughout the night. The lady came in the next morning and apologized to my wife for using all our electricity. [laughter] Had a group from, had a couple from Mount Vernon Nazarene College, they were from California and were going on the two hour trip. And my son took them up and put them in at 1:00 in the afternoon. It was 6:00 in the evening when they called from the same place we put them in. They had spent four hours going the wrong way on the river.

MG: There's a current there, but they went the wrong way. They got close to Gambier before they realized. It was pulling their canoe through a ripple. A tree branch caught the paddle and the paddle and when the paddle fell out and floated the other way they decided they must be going the wrong way. Hey it wasn't Kenyon students it was Nazarene.

MD: Did they come back?

MG: No, I've never seen them again. We get a lot of Kenyon kids. A couple programs, some kind of foreign students, I know.

MD: Do people fix up their campers?

MG: They do their own landscaping. If you're a seasonal, you mow your own grass. A lot of deck work, flowers. Yeah, very nice. Of course, if your neighbor does it, you got to do it, too.

MD: inaudible question

MG: Depends on the person. Some people will tinker all weekend—that's their way of doing wine, is to work with the flowers, and odds and ends. You know, you've got a few people you've got to remind to mow their lawns, but most of them...[too faint]

MD: inaudible question

MG: Oh, the county itself? Congestion on Coshocton Avenue, trying to get to Mount Vernon. I'd really have to stop and think if there was any big changes. The county, Knox County's definitely growing. Mount Vernon's getting closer to where we are—seems like the building's coming to the east rather than the west.

MD: inaudible question

MG: No. Well, maybe I suppose it has to help—ice cream and stuff like that. As far as campers, people do not camp local, they got to drive an hour, you got to get away from the family.

MD: inaudible question

MG: That won't happen, as far as the campground's concerned, if I can help it.

MD: What are some of your biggest concerns for the river?

MG: DelCo water company, you heard about them? I don't know whether they was pumping water last year when the river went dry, but if they're going to take their 4.2 million gallons out of here, it's got to affect, it's got to affect us somehow, you know. Pollution-wise, there's not that much industry left in Mount Vernon as far as pollution. I hope it stays the same. You know, I wouldn't mind—we are not big enough to meet the needs of the canoeing on the weekend. I wouldn't mind another canoe livery on the river. But I wouldn't like to see it turn into like the Mohican River, that's just too commercial for us.

MD: inaudible question

MG: We've been up to fifty canoes before. And then you need another van, or you need a school bus. Insurance is just—well, anytime you're hauling the public—it costs me more to haul the people than it does to put liability on the people inside the canoe. In fact, we sold our bus so we're just back to vans.

MD: inaudible question—maybe something about who will inherit the business?

MG: If they want it. My daughter's graduating with a degree in marine science and marine biology. She wants to work with dolphins. As of right now, she's had her second interview at the Mirage in Las Vegas at their dolphin habitat, as an animal trainer. So I kinda think that's where she's headed when she graduates. My son, I just talked to him

yesterday. He wants to end up with the campground someday. But things change, you know.

MD: inaudible question

MG: Yeah, it would be nice to keep it in the family, as far as coming over to help mow grass and stuff like that, but still I could go back home when I wanted to. But if the right guy would come along with the right amount of money, you know, we may not finish the interview. [tape pauses as he gets something to drink]

[end of tape]

MD: Let me ask you about the life a canoe. How long will a canoe last?

MG: OK, we started out with aluminum canoes. All the factories come out with new style canoes, and we tried about every one of them, but we always go back to them. We use an aluminum canoe, it's a rental canoe that's made by Michiba, which means made in Michigan. They're very heavy duty. Used to be we kept a canoe forever, but anymore, every two or three years we rotate.

MD: inaudible question

MG: A canoe for an individual will last a lifetime.

MD: inaudible question

MG: Rental business—there's one rock and they'll hit. Same as a rental car. They're rough on them. They're really not gentle. Cross braces and stuff like that. Probably don't have a canoe that doesn't have dents from paddles or something like that.

MD: Are they all the same size?

MG: We use a seventeen foot canoe. Five people. We do not send five in a canoe [phone rings].

MG: Five people. We very seldom do because our liability insurance—if you've got two adults and three kids, if the canoe would upset, there's one kid unaccounted for. So we try not to. But if it's late in the summer and they're going on a one hour trip and we know they can't get in trouble. First impression is valuable. As far as kayaks, what we rent is called a kayaki. It's an idiot-proof kayak. You sit on top of it, the seat's right there. It's another insurance reason. If we rented a regular kayak we'd have to show you a film which provides you safety. That's why they call these idiot proofs, because if it upsets you're automatically out, not strapped in there. Very popular with children.

MD: inaudible question

MG: It's got its challenging spots, it really does. People don't realize how swift it is. If you fill a canoe with water, face up, I don't know how many gallons it holds, how much weight it is, depends on the current, but I don't know, we've had swamped canoes before. You learn how to get them out. You learn how to cut the tree and let the river do the work. Always take them upstream.

MD: Anything else you want to add...?

MG: No.

MD: Any reason why you'd recommend the Kokosing over another river?

MG: The Kokosing because it's a very clean river. You see a lot of wildlife, a lot of blue herons, in the mornings you see a lot of deer, muskrats, beavers. The way we run our trips where you end up back here is very relaxing. When you go down river very seldom is you and the bus driver going to be there at the same time. One of you is going to have to wait. You might get there early or something. We have a lot of compliments on the river, a lot of compliments. The Kokosing Gap Trail gets a lot of compliments. [tape gets fainter, mumbling]

MD: inaudible question

MG: We're the only livery. Used to be a lot of old timers around that—the Kokosing in Indian is Owl Creek, but you knew that. There was a lot of old timers around that had a lot of stories. They're all deceased now. I'm getting old. I may be the only one left.

MD: question about Tecumseh on the river.

MG: I never heard that. I used to tell people and people would believe me, tell people that my granddad used to—
[tape cuts off as people walk into store, they did not want to be on tape]