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Jeanne Gurnee oral history interview with Beth Fratesi and Todd Chavez, July 23, 2007

Jeanne Gurnee (Interviewee)

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Todd Chavez: Test, test, test—Jeanne, would you say, test, test, test?

Jeanne Gurnee: Yes. All good men go to the aid of caving.

TC: There you go. All right, that's good. We're ready.

Beth Fratesi: Okay, thank you. My name is Beth Fratesi, and today I have—we have with us Jeanne Gurnee, who is a highly respected speleologist, explorer, [and] conservationist. Right now we are at Marengo, Indiana, at the 2007 convention of the National Speleological Society of America. And Jeanne has very kindly agreed to talk to us about her experiences in the caving community and her other life experiences. So, thank you.

I would like to start with some basics. What's your full name?

JG: Jeanne Marie Gurnee.

BF: Okay. Where were you born?

JG: I was born in Englewood, New Jersey.

BF: Oh, wow, New Jersey.

JG: Mm-hm.

BF: What year?

JG: Do you really want to know? (all laugh)

BF: You don't— (all laugh) you don't have to answer that.

JG: Yeah, how does one find out?

BF: So, did you grow up in New Jersey?

JG: Yes, I lived—but really up until the time of my husband's death in 1995—in New Jersey from the time I was born.

BF: Wow.

JG: So, I'm really an easterner.

BF: Yes—

JG: And my daughter, one of my daughters lived in Tennessee. And I can go briefly into this. Every time I would visit her after becoming a widow, ah, she would say, "Let's take a drive." And I'd say, "Well, fine." We'd go up into the karst hills and so on. And she said, "There's a very nice house over there." And I said, "Yeah, very nice." And every subsequent trip she kept saying, "You know, maybe we ought to take a look at that house over there." And it finally reached me that the family was trying to get me to move out to Tennessee. But I was very firmly entrenched in New Jersey. You can imagine, forty some odd years of marriage....

BF: Do you have a lot of family there?

JG: No, but I knew everybody in town; everybody in town knew me. So, I was going to an area of different cultural mix and not knowing anybody except my immediate family.

BF: Yes, yes. So, where did you go to school in—?

JG: I went to school locally in New Jersey and later in New York City. And New Brunswick, New Jersey, Rutgers—

BF: What in New Jersey—ah, I'm trying to think of how you would have started caving? (JG laughs) Tell me about that.

JG: That's a very valid question. Everybody knows that New Jersey caves have a measurement of a *you*. And a *you* is the length of a body. And you'd say, "The cave is four *you*'s long."

BF: Yes.

JG: So, we didn't have much in the way of caves in New Jersey. But it just so happened that I was giving a lecture one time and on the same platform was a man from the Academy of Science in Philadelphia. And he mentioned that there was a society—National Speleological Society. And on our wedding trip we had stopped in and looked at some caves going to Mexico. When I got home I said, "Russ, you know there's a society of people and all they do is go cave exploring?" And he said, "Where do they meet?" (interviewee answers question) They met at the Museum of Natural History in New York City. So we went there to a meeting and were welcomed very nicely. And [soon] we went caving, and that was it. We were really very interested, both of us.

BF: What year was that?

JG: Nineteen fifty. And I joined in 1951.

BF: So, you and Russell were caving together for the whole time you guys—

JG: Yes.

BF: You're known very well as a professional pair, so. That must be exciting. How did you meet him to begin with?

JG: I met him in church in the young adult group. He was the president of the group, a nice six-foot-five man who had [an] absolutely beautiful baritone voice. And I'm very interested in music. And so, it sort of progressed from there.

BF: When did you get married?

JG: Nineteen fifty-one.

BF: Can you tell me what he's like?

JG: Marvelous person and wonderful partner. We complemented each other because he was an engineer so that when we developed caves or when we did work, he would do the engineering and was a definite leader in every way. I would follow through with the reporting, the publishing, the written material, logistics, and things of that sort. So, we worked very well together. We had areas that we liked best and that we worked together well on.

BF: So, what areas of the country did you cave in at first? I mean, you know, to begin with.

JG: Well, very early on, we were all over the country because in 1962, I believe it was, we wrote the first book, *Visiting American Caves*.

BF: Yes.

JG: So we went to all of the caves that were open to the public in the United States. We took several trips across the United States and personally saw all of those caves. So today when I'm writing the book and I get a letter from Crystal Cave in Wisconsin, my mind immediately goes underground. I know exactly what that cave looks like.

BF: Oh, that's neat.

JG: So we did a lot of wild caving in cave country—Tennessee, Virginia, you know, Missouri. All of the big cave states and—

BF: Do you have any favorites?

JG: You mean a cave favorite in the world or—? I think my favorite cave is Sonora Caverns in Texas. It is a very beautiful cave. I was, I guess, the sixth person in there exploring. And it was like walking in a china shop because there were even formations coming up from the ground and we were trying to stay on the little narrow trail, so as not to damage anything. But you still heard this little clinking sound, you know, but it just is like a geode inside, the crystals everywhere. Have you been to Sonora?

BF: Yes, yes. It's beautiful.

JG: It's very beautiful.

BF: So, when you—did you have a particular group? You know, I see—I come to [the] convention and I see groups of cavers who are like family 'cause they've been caving together for so long. Did you and Russell have a group like that?

JG: Um, not really, because we had groups everywhere that we went. I would—just judging from last night, you know, as I saw the food line—I would look at the different people and say, “Oh, I remember we worked together on honorary membership, or we worked together on the Board.” So that all of those people I have an affection for in a different context.

BF: So you've been involved with the National Speleological Society for a long time.

JG: From, I guess, the onset of our membership.

BF: In many different ways, correct?

JG: Yes.

BF: You were president from 1992-1994—

JG: Yes.

BF: And before then, what?

JG: Oh, my goodness.

BF: What did you—?

JG: I guess I had every job.

BF: What stands out? What stands out the most?

JG: I did Internal Organizations for a while ... [and] I was interested in chartering new Grottos. And I established the Internal Organization Newsletter that I wrote and printed on a temperamental machine. [I] sent [a copy] to every Grotto to try and keep a sense of unity among the chapters so that they felt that they were a part of something. That there was some connection to the central—

BF: That's very important, yes.

JG: Ah, and I think that's where we probably can do a little bit more currently. And so, I chartered— I don't know how many—I think fifty or more Grottos during the time that I was chairman and I did advertising for the *NSS News*. You name the department [and] I probably worked in it at one time or another. I was just very interested in a lot of aspects of the NSS. And certainly did not expect to end up having the job I ended with. I shouldn't say "end with" because I'm still working.

You know, that was one of the terminology [used], I think. It said something about retired people. I think anybody who has had an active life—and this is probably going to happen to all of you—if you'd say, well, "In your retirement, what are you doing?" as if you

might go on a beach somewhere, and just atrophy. An active person is always just as active as long as their health holds up and their mind is acute. So, there really is no retirement for those people. I would say maybe Bill Halliday is one of those, too. You'll see a number of them at this convention. And I've just seen [many] working for NSS or working in various areas just as actively as they did, although they're not being paid for it as an employee. They're doing more volunteer work.

BF: Well, speaking of being active, you know, I was reading about some of the exploration that you guys did. And I came across—let's see—Harrison's Cave in Barbados and the Fountain Cave in British West—

JG: Anguilla.

BF: Yes, Kartchner Caverns. And of course, the Rio Camuy in Puerto Rico is probably, I would think, the most famous. Tell me about the exploration. What was it like?

JG: Rio Camuy?

BF: Yes.

JG: This is now back in 1958, in the Dark Ages. (all laugh) Ah, we were coming up a circuitous route through the karst area, which is—have you seen the karst in Puerto Rico? With these *mogotes*, which are very distinct and sinkholes everywhere. And we thought we had died and gone to heaven when we drove up that road.

And we saw a river going along [the road], and the river disappeared into a hole. Russell said, "Stop the car." (all laugh) We got out and there were some machete cutters alongside, cutting the [brush beside the] road, and so, Jose Limeras, who was a friend from Puerto Rico, a caver, went over and he said, "*¿Hay una cueva cerca?*" ["Is there a cave nearby?"]. And so they said, "*Sí Señor.*" They dropped the machetes and started off into the jungle and so we followed.... [It led to a] jungle ravine that led to a hole in the ground. And so, we said, "Are there any other openings?" And they took us to another one which is—have you been to the Camuy?"

BF: No.

JG: Oh, there's a big sinkhole that's—let's see—it's about 600 feet across, 300 feet deep, and across the bottom is the river with an opening at either end going into nobody knew where. And at that time in Puerto Rico, the availability of rubber boats or anything like that didn't exist. So, we thought we'd reached Valhalla. And Russ said, "We've got to get an expedition down here." So, he opened it up originally to I think the NSS, saying, "Here are the qualifications: you must be able to swim—" You know, there were a whole bunch of ... [requirements], so we got a really good team together.

And then *LIFE* magazine got kind of interested in it. And they said, Fine; they wanted to send a photographer down. And so, we launched into the unknown. We brought our rubber boots down and found this monstrous cave and came back several times. Geographic, [that is] National Geographic sponsored one, [as well as] The Explorers Club. We started to map the system. And Russ said, "I think we ought to buy this land." There was a little, like a, tarpaper shack, and there were no windows. It just opened out on to this—you look out the window and there [were] the *mogotes*. Talk about picture window! So, Jose's father said, "I am a lawyer; you know I will arrange for you to buy this land." So he went to all of the farmers in the area. If I'm being too lengthy, stop me.

BF: No, no. This is what we want to know. (laughs)

JG: [He] went to all the farmers ... and [we] bought up the various parcels [of land].... And Russ said, "You know, I would really love to develop this cave." And I said, "Russ ... [you are] just starting ... [a] business, engineering, heating and cooling and clean[ing] rooms and all sorts of things. And I ... [have] small children ... I don't think that we can just take up." Where the Camuy was at that time, there was no telephone service, no water. We had to bring all water in. It was really quite primitive. And I said, "I don't think that we can do this," and so he said, "Well, this has got to be preserved," and I said, "I agree. Let's walk the land and see what should be preserved." So Russ made a map.

(to interviewer) Did I bring the [map book]? I didn't bring the Camuy book. Well, there's a book, *Discovery at the Rio Camuy* [that we wrote], and it's in Spanish and in English. So we outlined an area that we thought should be preserved. [We] went to the government and they said, "Oh, this is very fine. By all means—for the honor of Puerto Rico," and so on, "we should preserve this area."

But no action was ever taken so this—we went to subsequent governments over a twenty-year period. (laughs) And one day we got a phone call saying, "We're ready to develop the cave. Fly down in the morning, sign your land over to us, and—then we will think about developing the cave." They had read the book. The head of the Land Administration had read the book and so we realized that he was going to do something.

So Russ flew down in the morning, signed over our land for exactly what we paid for it, and came back at night. We felt a little sad about leaving that. (laughs)

BF: I can imagine.

JG: And so let's see, where are we? So then they said, "Well, all right now—will you develop the cave?" (laughs) Well somehow or other we thought maybe—I don't know what we thought ... [about] who was going to develop it. So we went down and talked about all of the ramifications of our moving to Puerto Rico because it would be a year[']s period that we would live there. We assumed it would take about a year to develop the cave.

And it would be the upper level, [called] Cueva Clara, which is much easier. The lower level has a surging river through it that floods and several lives have been lost there. So, the upper level was the logical choice and also for expense. The government really didn't have the wherewithal to do an extremely ambitious development. So—they contracted with us to make an investigation.

We did the preliminary map and proposal of how the trails would go and what we were going to do, and everything was very fine. We found some people in Puerto Rico who would rent us out the lower floor of their house. A man who was the first to [raise] tropical plants in Puerto Rico or any tropical area and bring them to the United States. It's common now to see a tropical plant in an office, [but] he was the frontiersman of that whole situation. He raised orchids as well. [They were] an American couple who lived in Puerto Rico, though, for many, many years. So it was a pleasure that we were able to live with them.

And so we went down in January of—1984, I'm guessing. And [the couple] said, "Have you signed the contract?" And we said, "No, not yet. You know, we're going in ... [to San Juan today for the signing]." So we all sat around this table and they said, "Well, we're ready to sign the contract." And an attorney came in with a book this big and threw it on the table and said, "These are all the requirements of government and ... without this, no contract can be consummated." And so everybody looked at Russell and me and said, "What do we do now?" Russell stood up and he said, "We go home." And so I stood up with him and we headed for the door.

And I had goose pimples. I thought, here we had made arrangements to live with these people [and had] contracted with them for a year [and] made a lot of [arrangements]—changing bank accounts—a lot of things! We put a second mortgage on our house because we couldn't be bonded in Puerto Rico.... So we had made a lot of preparations

on the assurance that they wanted to do this. We got just about to the door and the head of the Land Administration said, “One moment. I will speak to the head of the Department of Justice.”

BF: (laughs)

JG: And so we stood by the door and he disappeared into another office. [When he came out] he said, “Sign the contract. We will sign the contract.” (laughs) So in a year, we developed the cave and we hired thirty men in that area—which again, was [a little difficult because] some of those men had families but had never worked before, and certainly not on a construction job of any kind. So it was a matter of training them, the work ethic, and how to safely work a lot of the machines that were needed. Russ was really on the surface most of the time, engineering and working with the foreman. And I was underground doing the circuitous route from one work group to another, so that ... [the men] always felt that there was someone that they could say, “Well, something didn’t work,” or, “This machine broke down,” or whatever.

And there’s a beautiful tropical ravine, which is a collapsed cave, that leads to Cueva Clara. We were starting to bring all of our equipment through this ravine, but we just felt that we were going to destroy it. We wanted to keep it as natural as possible, so Russ said, “I think we’re going to have to go down [a different way].” There’s a pit—a 400 foot deep pit at the other end of the cave. It’s open at one end [and] open at the other with a pit. He said, “We’re going to have to put a hoisting tower down there. We’ll take an elevator. We’ll bring everything in that way. Then when we take the hoisting tower out, nothing will be disturbed.” I said, “Where are we going to find a hoisting tower in Puerto Rico?”

So, we went to [San Juan and located a company] that had one hoisting tower. It was an interesting installation but we got it in. You go down this open elevator, and you see the sides of this pit. It’s really a nice descent. That’s the way we got everything in. Then as we got near the culmination of the job, we decided we wanted to bring the people in down this ravine so that they would get to see the old collapsed area leading to the entrance. So I set out with two men and Jack Burch, who is very good on trails, very experienced. With machetes we started cutting trails down the ravine to see how we could make it fit among all of these boulders and things that had collapsed from the side. And finally we made a very nice trail down to the entrance.

There’s a huge entrance that was used probably by the Indians and also later by fishermen who went down to the water source. And I said, “I don’t like the idea that people come down that. We should keep that view from the inside.” So Russ started crawling along the

side and found—he said, “There’s a little hole over here.” We started to dig it out, [and] it led to another room.

So we brought the people in through the room and down, and then in the afternoon you look up at this uninterrupted hole with the crepuscular rays [of] the sun coming down. It’s spectacular! With rainbows in it, you know? So that was a breakthrough. Many, many challenges on that development. We made a cantilevered trail out over where the water was below so that you’d hear the rushing water and [guides] can explain a little bit about the formation of the cave and so on. So in a year’s time, we completed the job and so it was. (laughs)

BF: Were you there when it opened?

JG: Yes. We were there at the opening and [the] Governor flew overhead in a helicopter, and all of the *alcaldes* [chief town administrators] of the surrounding towns were there making speeches. And the band played what sounded something like “The Star-Spangled Banner.” It was very pleasant, very nice. All of our caving friends in Puerto Rico were there.

BF: Oh. It was probably a very important event for the island itself. I mean, you’ve been involved in the development of several show caves on the [Caribbean] islands. At least one other, huh?

JG: Uh-huh.

BF: The islands have limited natural resources and the caves are—

JG: Yes. I don’t know about the cave in Puerto Rico, but Harrison’s Cave in Barbados is the largest money-earner on the island. The project is, when we got ready to leave, to try and have someone who can carry on because I explain very simply, “A cave is like a garden, it’s always growing. You have to maintain it. It never is static. It’s not that you develop the cave, you go home and people just keep going through it. You must always be alert to what the cave is doing.” And so we did leave a very fine fellow in Barbados who carried on after we had left. I still talk [with] and visit him. Very nice family.

BF: So the entire Rio Camuy thing—it sounds like it covered several decades of your life!

JG: It did. It did! We started, as I say, over a twenty-year period.

BF: How much of that was exploration itself?

JG: A lot. Because we brought subsequent groups down and tried to push it. But still, to this day, they haven't pushed the [entire cave]. What happened was I think that the government decided they didn't want any exploration in there because there were a couple of deaths that occurred. I guess the liabilities and so on. But it discouraged further exploration, and [at that time] the Puerto Rican group did not continue either. So there's still a lot of cave there. (laughs)

BF: So what about after the cave opened—were you sort of left at loose ends? Or did you have new projects to start?

JG: Oh, no, my goodness! No! (laughs) Because Anguilla came and Barbados was before, I believe.

BF: How did that happen? How did Harrison's Cave—?

JG: We were there on vacation, as I recall. And for some reason this young Danish fellow looked us up, at the hotel. I don't know how he knew. [He] discovered what we did, and he said, "Oh, I'm developing a cave on Barbados, on the island." And we said, "This is wonderful. Are you a cave developer?" "Well, no, I haven't developed a cave before but I've convinced [the] government that I should do it." So he said, "But I think it would be good maybe if you ... explored with me, in this cave." And we said, "That would be fine."

So we explored the cave, and it was not a very large cave, and it had a stream passage that you were belly-crawling through water all of the time. There was a walking area that would have been quite nice. So his name was Ole Sorenson, so [Russ] said, "Ole, you know, it might be a nice little walking tour but nothing more than that." So he said, "Well, we'll see." So we didn't hear for quite a long time and then all of a sudden we got a call from Barbados saying, "The roof of the cave has fallen in and we have fired Ole Sorenson and we would like you to come down."

And we said, “We’ll bring a group with us of cave developers and financial planners.” [These are] all of the things that people don’t think of in cave development but [they are] very necessary if you want to make a success. If you have a financial failure, you’re dooming the cave. So we brought environmentalists [and other specialists] down and did a study. They housed us in a very nice place. We had our own little villas around a swimming pool.

We were sitting around the swimming pool at night saying, “Well, you know, it’s a tragedy what Ole Sorenson had done.” He had used heavy equipment and cut passages into the cave so that there were formations piled up like cordwood—where he had to go through to make this big passage because he was envisioning a riding trip through there. But in doing it he had desiccated a lot of the cave and water was now in pipes overhead and dripping out. I said, “I think—it breaks my heart but I don’t think—what can we do from here?”

[During our visit,] the Prime Minister invited us to a beautiful party where they had the steel band playing Chopin.

BF: (laughs)

JG: It was really gorgeous. It was striking. I got the record because it was so beautiful, like thirty men all (sings). So, the Prime Minister said that he’d like to take a tour through. We took him through and he said, “I think that you should develop this cave.”

So, we went back and sat around the swimming pool and said, “Who’s going to do this?” “Not I!” said Roy Davis. “Not I!” said Jack Burch. (laughs) Russell and I are looking at each other and we said, “Well, how about if we are the constant [agree to develop the cave], and we will call you down as your particular aptitude is needed?” Jack, to determine what we were going to do about the trails; those [others] who specialize in water, hydraulics, and hydrology and all of this—because water was a terrible problem. It was just running free every place [in the cave].

The first six months, I had boots like this (refers to rubber knee boots), just slogging through mud. We had to put a conduit along, underneath, to carry off the water and then build the trail over it. So everything now looks like no problem. (laughs) Plus, directing the water so it could be interesting at certain places [including] a waterfall.... But that’s the way we did it (referring to the development’s completion). Different people came down at different times. [Meantime], we had the hard job of living on the beach and looking out at the ocean. (laughs)

BF: Poor thing. (laughs)

JG: Yes, we suffered. (laughs) But we were underground all day so it was really just weekends that we were on the surface. So that was Barbados.

Anguilla is another interesting place because someone sent us a postcard saying, “[As the president of The Explorers Club], I understand that there is a cave on Anguilla.” So about three months later we were on Anguilla to find out what the cave was. (laughs) And it’s fascinating because it is a cave that had been known for a long time. [In early times,] ships would come in order to get fresh water because the cave is near the beach. They would go in the cave, [and climb] down a tree into the sinkhole where there was fresh water to take to the ships.

So we climbed down the tree to see what was there and we went down to the little pool of water. Russell happened to look up and here’s a beautiful petroglyph—a face with sort of like a crown on it. He said, “This is kind of fascinating,” so we talked on the Radio [Anguilla] and found all the people who knew anything about caves. One man had said, “Men don’t go in those caves. They are reach-less.” But actually we continued; and then the government there said that they would like to develop the cave. When we did more exploration we found a whole wall with the most beautiful petroglyphs of all kinds. (looking at a photograph) [This was] Fountain Cave. But there are all kinds of petroglyphs, like this. So we had an artist do all of that, and then at the end [of the cliff-face] is a stalagmite that is carved with a helmet on top. So it was a significant archaeological cave.

[In 1995,] Russell passed away. I went down [to Anguilla] with another fellow, Bob Burnett, who worked on [the development of] Kartchner [Caverns]. That’s how I knew him. But the government really couldn’t get it to the point where they were ready to develop. I got on to other things, and Bob also. He was doing some work at Natural Bridge Caverns. So that has not come to any conclusion yet.

Those fellows [in Anguilla] write to me from [time to time]. When 9/11 occurred, one of the fellows who works for Scotiabank wrote, “I just want to let you know: we sent a donation to the United States, for the families of the firemen.” Which was nice.

So where else are we going?

BF: Well. Let me see. Can we take a break for a second?

JG: Okay.

Part 1 ends; part 2 begins

BF: Okay. We've covered a lot of the chronological history. What I'd like to ask about now is some of the international work that you've done. Can you tell me about the kind of things you've been involved with?

JG: We very early on decided that we wanted to see the caves of prehistory, which have always been a fascination to me, and to Russell as well.

So in 1958, we were probably one of the first American cavers [who] went over to Europe. We went to an international congress. There's an organization, the International Union of Speleology. And we became quite active in that. [On] our first trip, in fifty-eight [1958], all of the gentlemen wore high button suits and were very erudite, and looked at us as sort of something from the colonies.

BF: (laughs)

JG: What could we possibly know in a nation only 200 years old?

BF: Mm-hm.

JG: And whose speleological history began with NSS, really, in 1941. So what could we possibly know about caves? And we did actually learn a lot, that was true. We didn't know a lot about caves. And learned so much from being in Europe and exploring the caves there. We had the joy of exploring Lascaux Cave, which is now not open to the public. But at that time, we went through with one of the original discoverers, which was great. And he explained each thing—of course in French—but when you see those running horses or the legs, there would be a major leg and then another to indicate that the animal was running. Where the wall was irregular, like flowstone, over it you would see drawings of deer, swimming.

BF: Ah! (laughs)

JG: So just their heads are above this irregular flowstone.

BF: The water!

JG: So there's a great deal of artistic sophistication in those drawings. And he explained all of those things. That was very interesting.

Subsequently, we did see the constructed Lascaux, which is very nice and I'm glad that they have closed the original. We did go in again. They only allow five people a day and they have to be recommended by ... [a special government department]. Also, the last discoverer we went in with who was still living—and subsequently, very soon after, passed away.

But those caves of prehistory, I think, give us an entirely different view. When you see declivities in the cave soil with a rock which is where the cave bear hibernated. And prehistoric man went like this (uses hands to indicate rock used to kill hibernating bear) ... [and] killed the bear for food while it was hibernating and all of these marvelous things. Somehow we attribute and we depict prehistoric man as being Neanderthal in the connotation of not very bright and gorilla-like, when actually I'm sure they had all of the sensitivities and just not the resources. (laughs) I'm very grateful that they have left some magnificent things. Altamira in Spain is another. [There are] just a great number of caves in Southern France, each one slightly different.

So that was an education to us as well as the International Congresses. We went to them every four years for thirty years or so. And there will be another now, as you know, probably in the United States in Kerrville, Texas, in 2009.

TC: Tell me a little bit about your experience in European caves, because you hear of Altamira and Lascaux. What other caves have you had an opportunity to visit with prehistoric components?

JG: Oh, there are many. Niaux—I can't even begin to name them all. I'm just thinking of where I can give you a record of them, but I don't think I have it in the CV ... Les Combarelles is one—and I would say we've seen maybe twenty, at least, and they're all grouped mostly in the Dordogne Valley.

TC: What do you think drew people in—I mean, every anthropologist has a theory. What is your theory about why do people go—why do they go in to do the painting?

JG: Oh. Of course I think they did use [the caves] for shelter, but I think that there was more than that in the deep caves because they had to use torches and so on, and they actually, as you probably know, have found the pigments and tools, which is so marvelous!

But when you see it, it's so—I hate to say sophisticated, because that's not exactly—it's knowledgeable. They had an intimate knowledge of the animals, and depicted them in such a wonderful way, sensitively. Some of those caves [showed] ... marks on the animal; they believe that maybe [during] some ritual they speared them in a symbolic way before going on the hunt—something of that sort. They had something below [the animals] that looked like traps [and] maybe these are all symbolic. Again ... maybe [they were] preparing to capture or kill their food.

Let's see, Europe? So much in Europe. I wouldn't know where to begin.

BF: (laughs)

JG: (laughs) Of course our interest is especially in show caves. So naturally we went to many of the show caves in Europe, and they are—what's the word?— so much more used, because show caves in the U.S. really came into their own [much later]. While show caves were open in the 1800s [here], it really wasn't until later we had what we might call a show cave industry. But in Europe they have trod those trails for many, many centuries, and in many cases ... (laughs) the caves are tired.

BF: Not many of the prominent cavers that I've met are as interested in show caves as you are. Is there anything in particular that—?

JG: Well, I believe that the show caves are probably the most beautiful caves in the United States, and if you want people on the surface—the traveling public—to understand the underground world, you want to be able to present [the caves well] and preserve them in the best way you can.

I was an environmental commissioner, and I took planning and environmental action and environmental law and all of those things. [Then] I realized that all of those subjects

applied to show cave development. I [had] joined the National Caves Association back in the sixties [1960s], I guess.

And I realized that a lot of the owners didn't understand the nature of caves. They were exhibiting a cave as a commodity. And to me, there was so much more to it. We have the precipitation of mineral-laden waters that come through and so on, where in some cases there were asphalt parking lots, for instance, over the caves [that prevented the penetration of water in the cave]. They said, "All of a sudden, our cave died." And I said, "Well, it died because it's not getting any food." (laughs) I started a series of talks every year to the National Caves Association on the environmental side of caves [emphasizing] that being a good custodian to the environment is good business.

BF: Mm-hm.

JG: Because it keeps your cave in peak condition and will attract customers—or as we call them, visitors—in the show cave industry. (laughs) It just developed then, that there was no book of all the caves that are open to the public. And Russell said, "That sounds like fun, traveling around the United States and seeing all these caves." I don't have the metamorphosis of all the books, but we started out in the sixties [1960s] with *Visiting American Caves* and then *Gurnee Guide to American Caves*, and now I'm calling this one *Gurnee Guide to American Show Caves*.

They used to call them commercial caves—and in Europe they objected to that very strongly, particularly back in the communist days. They said, "We are not operating this cave for commercial gain!"

BF: (laughs)

JG: "We will not call it a commercial cave." So we tried to settle on a name that would be translated well in many languages, and so they said, "You could call it show caves." And so—vote after vote [was taken until] they finally came to that. When we came back to the United States, we said that "show caves" had been adopted. Then the U.S. cave owners [agreed] except for a couple of holdouts who still said, "I have a commercial cave!"—but most have used the term "show caves." And that's even federal, state, and county caves. They still are exhibition caves—whether or not they're operated for gain.

BF: (laughs)

TC: How were you received when you first began your talks to try to spread the word about the ecological aspects of show caves?

JG: Well—(laughs) I don't know. We had so many friends in the National Caves Association. It wasn't that we were saying, "Look! You're not doing things right." and I would never do that with anyone, anyway. But [instead we would say], "Here's a way we can enlarge our effectiveness in the industry—how we can make it better." It was just really a lack of consciousness of it. I know we did a study in Curacao. Russ said, "Maybe if we just sprayed water up above [the cave] we could reactivate the cave."

BF: (laughs)

JG: (laughs) And I'd never thought of that! We never did it, but we were always thinking of ways ... to preserve, augment, and help the underground architecture.

It was received well until—today it goes without saying. All of these things are what they operate under. In fact, I'm working on their committee for revising the bylaws. And conservation of caves is one of the important parts of the mission, while that, I think, a number of years back, would not have been included. So they realize the importance now of conserving the underground.

BF: You mentioned, before we started the interview, that in the course of some of the things you did for—what is it?—the Society of Women Geographers? You interviewed Margaret Mead in 2001.

JG: I also interviewed—I've forgotten her first name—[Helen] Damrosch.

BF: Mm-hm.

JG: I don't know; it's probably before your time.

BF: Yeah. (laughs)

JG: But [Frank] Damrosch was a very, very famous conductor in New York City. And he had an only daughter, who was this woman. And so he wanted her to be a musician as well—possibly a conductor to follow in his footsteps. So when I interviewed her, I said,

“And what happened?” And she said, “Well, I was always fascinated with biology and undersea life.” And she used to even visit morgues to examine cadavers to see the anatomical details.

BF: Wow.

JG: So she had no interest at all in history. And he even gave her own [metal] music stand to try and encourage her, and I said, “What was the outcome of all of this? Because I did what you’re doing right now.” And she said, “Well, I put on a diving helmet,” because back in those days they had the big helmet that you see in pictures, you know, like *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, “and they put me down on these things and I brought my music stand down with me in the water.” This is before the time of color photography. We’re again talking Dark Ages. “So I had my [oil] paints there and I would put my canvas on the music stand, and I would paint the fish.” (laughs) “And then they’d pull me up again.” This was the only time she had with music.

BF: (laughs)

JG: But every one of these women were pioneers and made [a] great difference. And when you say one person can make a difference, I believe that.

BF: Is there anything that any of them or all of them has said that really resonated with your own experiences being—?

JG: Yes. There’s a question that I always asked in oral history because we give scholarships—pay all of [the] doctoral expenses: lodging, textbooks, everything—at Columbia University, for their Ph.D. And so when I was chairman in New York, and I was vice president one time, I would invite all of these young girls from Columbia, who had geography as their major, to come to meetings. Because this is what we had to do in the NSS, too, is to bring up this new generation of people who have the enthusiasm and the drive to do this, and who are going on in their education....

TC: Something resonated with your experience.

JG: Oh, yes! The question that I asked in oral history is: What advice would you give to a young woman who is beginning in her career in the geographical field? We use that in its broadest sense because there are anthropologists and oceanographers and everything else. We have women astronauts. Amelia Earhart was a member, and Eleanor Roosevelt.

So they said that their advice—and every one of them, because I asked them separately and not one had knowledge of what the other had said—they said for you to choose something in life that really turns you on, and then work in it. Don't worry about how much money you're going to gain, or how you can push ahead. Focus on it, and just give it everything. And [all of] these women were top successes.

BF: Mm-hm.

JG: So that's what we did.

BF: Is that what you did?

JG: Yes. I just got fascinated with stuff and [when] Russ and I ... [got interested in] the Puerto Rican [development] ... I said, "Should we take this on?" because it's a major park and a lot of problems. You imagine there was no running a construction job without a telephone. (laughs) We talked it over one night and we said, "We [have] got to do it. We [have] got to do it." (laughs)

BF: I have found the NSS and the caving community in general to be very friendly to women in general.

JG: Yes.

BF: Is that what it was like when you started?

JG: Yes, it's always been a very congenial group. I think people who like to mountain climb and camp are sort-of "live and let live" kind of people. They're not judgmental. Some of them are unusual.

BF: (laughs)

JG: And that's okay. (laughs)

BF: Yes.

JG: They're very forgiving. Many of my friends are in the caving community.

BF: On top of that particular society, you are also in The Explorers Club?

JG: Yes. Uh-huh. Of course, that was very interesting. I had done an article for the *Explorers Journal* under a very scholarly editor, quite elderly. I did really thorough research on the people who carried the flag, which is a great honor. He had ... [previously covered] several of our expeditions [in the magazine]. I had gotten old photographs of these people who had carried the flags in history and everything and it ended up being a major article in the magazine. I went into the Club one day and the president said to me, "Jeanne, how would you like to be editor of the Journal?" I said, "You have an editor for the Journal, Henry Evans." And he said, "Well, tell him that you're going to be editor now."

BF: (laughs)

JG: I said, "I'm not going to tell him." I said, "John, you tell him if you want to make any changes...."

So he told Henry, and Henry called me and he said, "Look, I'm going to move out west [soon]." He lived in New Jersey. He said, "I'd like you to be," I don't know, "assistant editor for a year. We'll work together. And then I'll turn it over to you."

So it was very calm and very nice, but (laughs) that's how I got to be editor; and it was a great education to me to interview these world-class explorers and all [of] the original astronauts. It was really nice. I enjoyed that work a lot. Then they asked me to be on the Board, which I did. We had Sylvia Earle, [and] a lot of people you probably wouldn't recognize on that Board. The man who found Lucy in wherever it was—Nigeria?

TC: [Donald] Johanson?

JG: Johanson.

TC: Mm-hm.

JG: And I don't know. All of them were stellar individuals and very interesting in their way. Then we had Explorers Club meetings in London because there's a chapter—there are chapters all over the world. We went to London and visited the research labs ... and Cambridge University, and we ... had [a] marvelous reception everywhere.

So it was a very nice experience. Russell became president of The Explorers Club, and so we did a lot of traveling in connection with that to all the chapters. It was a very nice—and he also chairmanned the dinners at the Waldorf Astoria for about eight years. So we built a dirigible in our house and flew it around the Waldorf [Ballroom]. There are many tiers to the ballrooms.... We have a picture of Lowell Thomas standing up looking at this thing (referring to the dirigible).

BF: (laughs)

JG: We called it *The Explorer*. At one time we had Bill Stone rappel out of the roof of the ballroom in a tuxedo. Russ had a lot of good ideas. “What are you going to do this year?” [There was] Tristan Jones, who sailed on a very small vessel around the world—fascinating character. And a fellow who held a record for the length [of time] that he could hold his breath underwater. We had a huge tank of water and Russ had a big clock up above. We put this guy down in the water, and I was lying on the floor, beyond the curtains. He says, “I'm going to have my hands [clasped] like this. Now if I go like this (shows hands going limp), pull me out.” (laughs)

BF: (laughs)

JG: So I'm lying on the floor and watching this guy, and the clock is ticking away and everybody's going (imitates audience holding breath). But he held the world's record for holding his breath—whether that's an auspicious or important thing, I don't know.

TC: It is if you're in water.

JG: (laughs) Well, he's a Navy diver by profession. But very interesting people. [The next morning, Lowell] Thomas gave a critique to Russ afterwards and we met for breakfast. He was an interesting person. So The Explorers Club connection was an important one in our lives. When Russ was president, I would handle a lot of his correspondence. It's very heavy correspondence, and a lot of activities connected with [it] were very pleasant. (laughs)

TC: There's something—comes from talking with you, and also yesterday with Bill Halliday. How do you all find the time to accomplish all you've accomplished, have children and have careers? How do you do it? How do you look at that problem?

JG: It doesn't happen all at once.... [Your life gradually evolves.] You don't know what's ahead—

TC: You can't imagine this—

JG: —but you start taking on things, and when you get to be my age you look back and say, “How did I ever do all of that?” (laughs) I was very, very fortunate as far as my children are concerned. Wendy is here [at the convention], and my older daughter lives in North Carolina.

... [A tremendous help was Russ's mother.] Russ built a house when he got out of the Navy. He built a house for his mom and dad, and so when we got married, I said, “Russ, let's just leave your mom and dad there happily.” We got a small apartment over a Ford dealership with a neon sign [that shone] in the bedroom window. They lived in the house, which was fine with us.

But when his dad passed away, his mother said, “Won't you come up and live with me?” I had a not-too-good experience that my grandmother and my father did not get along very well [when] she lived with us. I didn't ever want to have anything that wasn't pleasant, so I said, “If we do move up there, Russ, let's build a wing for her.” She has her own bedroom, her own living room, kitchen, and [a] place for a car, so that she feels she can come and go, eat what she wants, do what she wants. She loved the idea.

[During] our whole married life she lived down in her wing, which was just a beautiful place. And then, when we'd go on expeditions, she'd move upstairs with the little children. She was probably a little better with them than I was, because when I'd get home they'd be making their beds and doing all kinds of things that they never did when I was around. (laughs)

BF: (laughs)

JG: So she was just a wonderful person. I am very blessed that she was there during those years when we were away quite a bit on expeditions.

TC: Are your daughters interested in caving?

JG: Well, of course they learned caving like you'd learn bicycling. It never seemed to be anything unusual. The "Gurnee girls" used to always be [with us in the] campground. A lot of cavers [still] come around and say, "That's Wendy!? We remember when you were just a teenager!" She now has a son graduating from university, and so—it is kind of interesting. But they really never followed [caving] with the interest that Russ and I had.

TC: You talked a couple of times about interactions with scientists and bringing scientific ideas into a community. I hear a lot about this relationship between professional scientists—karst scientists and cavers. How do you see that relationship? What's your perspective?

JG: I think it depends on the scientist and it depends on the caver. Always on expeditions we brought scientists, because we believe that it's important that we have a complete spectrum to cover a cave. You just can't cover it physically on the surface. We brought biologists; we brought an environmentalist, Tom Aley. We brought all kinds of specialists, depending on the cave. [In] Fountain Cave, we'd bring an archaeologist. The interplay between the scientists and the speleologist—what we call the caver—can be extremely beneficial.

When we did the expedition to ... Guatemala, we brought an ornithologist because we were going up in [an] area ... [where] the Quetzal bird [was known to inhabit].... We brought all of the scientists with us on that. And then when the following report comes out [on all of these], we would have a ... [part one if] it was to be a cave development [with the scientific reports, and] part two would be the cave development.... They go hand in hand. They can't be separated from each other. I think anybody who's doing a valid study should do it that way. Or it would be best to do it that way. (laughs)

But of course some cavers are just cavers. A lot of them just [enjoy climbing.] ... They love going up and down ropes, and other people love mud caves—love to crawl. And those people probably will not work with scientists, because they're sport cavers. So fortunately, in the NSS we have the panoply of interests and by selecting those people that you know are going to follow through with reporting. [A] great explorer said that, "It's not the expedition, but it's the time doing the reporting following the expedition that takes the time and effort."

And making the conclusions. After you've gathered all of this body of material, then [it is] put it in a form—for instance, if you're making a presentation to a government—putting it in a form that is understandable. In other words, you cannot make a heavy scientific treatise and hand it to government and say, "Here's how you develop the cave." Because they ... [may not] understand ... the terminology.

Every science has its own terminology.... Fountain Cave is a good example. In part two, I made all of the written material so that a layman could read it and understand it.

Portion of transcript deleted at interviewee's request

[In some cases,] I had to counter some of the scientists that really were not cave-knowledgeable, particularly, but just were interested in their specific species or study or whatever. Sometimes you do have to be a diplomat in that area, as in anything in life. (laughs)

TC: My background is in library science, library information science, and I'm really new to this caving, karst community. One thing that has struck me in being in this meeting is that there's an awful lot of important work going on in these caves, and I'm not sure if the rest of the community—of either scientists or general community—knows it. However—

JG: Have you seen our Journal?

TC: I have. Oh, yeah.

JG: The scientific journal. But of course it probably doesn't get the distribution that—

TC: Yeah.

JG: My mother was a librarian—director of a library. I developed a love of books very early in my life because she was always supplying me with books, depending on my development in reading and in interest. And libraries are very important in my life; I use them all the time. But, of course, I like the book itself; I haven't still gotten into the whole computer thing. I don't want to read a book on a computer. I think that with libraries, we may not have done the best job that we could in disseminating information about the science [of speleology]. I'd like to see it.

And there is that decision that a [speleologist] has to make, and that is, should I publish in the *Journal of Speleology* or should I go to some other [journal] where I'll get more exposure? ... Fortunately ... [many] will report in our Journal. We have a backlog, actually, of authors.

But I think that's something that should be explored ... particularly if there are significant discoveries that would be of interest to the general public. We used to have a lot of public relations in the NSS back when I was working. Newspaper interviews, radio, television interviews. During that time, I used to always mention that the Society and that its scope is not just exploration but exploration into those avenues that have never been known before—new species [and] all kinds of interesting things.

[I think] this is very dependent on the head of the Society. You need a person who is aware that our face to the world is important as well. It also is a way to alert people who may become, potentially, members; as our membership has not increased, really, since the time I left.

TC: That was something that came up during the Board of Governors' meeting during this convention, and another thing that came up was the amount of gray hair in the membership.

JG: (laughs) Yeah.

TC: It was remarked on several times.

JG: Look in the Members' Manual. I think it was the Members' Manual. They did a statistical study. First of all, the number of members by state; but also they did the age group, and I believe the median age is something like forty years old. When we saw that group last night, Wendy, my daughter, said to me, "Where are the children?" I said, "The children are your age, Wendy." She's in her mid-fifties. Some of them don't have interest in caves. There aren't too many that I know—offspring of cavers—who also cave. We have to branch out.

There are also members of Grottos that are not members of NSS. I always tried to encourage that—in fact, at one time it was mandatory in our constitution—that if one is a member of a Grotto, you also [had] to be a member of the NSS.

I think the glue of the NSS is the news, *The NSS News*. I think Dave Bunnell is doing a very fine job....

TC: As you think about karst terrains and caves as a natural resource, what do you think about its future—locally, nationally [and] globally? How are those terrains being affected by humans?

JG: Not good. (laughs) Of course you see road-cuts all the time. But, in Puerto Rico, as an example, when I was working on the cave there, I saw heavy equipment ... [used to take down] one of the *mogotes* for road surfaces.

Russ had worked with the highway department in putting in the new road. There's the old one that I mentioned that we followed. [And more recently,] they put a highway in, and we explained that it could not go through the park but could go along the edge of the park—through the *mogotes*. People [then] would have an introduction to karst before they got to the cave. It was all planned out.

Now, right beside the highway—because of the convenience of the highway—[contractors were] starting to take the *mogotes* down! So I immediately went to all the powers-that-be and said, “It's very important that we maintain this beautiful thing that you have that's quite remarkable in tropical areas,” because under the U.S. flag, there isn't anything that compares with that karst area. So they made a new ordinance [that] none of those could be disturbed. But you have to be on your toes all the time, because ... so much of those road cuts leave a tremendous amount of limestone, and it's beautifully stratified. It's gorgeous.

The entrance to my house is limestone, and I have a bridge that's limestone bridge—just because I love this stone. But defiling something [is destroying a feature] that really should be preserved. I think people have to be aware all the time and not hesitate to ... [speak with the people who] oversee ... [natural features].

TC: If we were to ask you to give us a couple of locations you'd want to go now, where would you want to go? What would be your top choice, top destination choice, at this point?

JG: (sighs) I've been thinking of that because my grandson is graduating from college and we do a lot of traveling as a family.... We usually plan something, and I've been to so many places in the world that I tend to want to take them to something I've seen—Paris or London or Wales or Ireland—we loved Ireland very much. (laughs)

Portion of transcript deleted at interviewee's request

I'd love to go to Maui. I've been to Hawaii and seen the fountaining volcanoes and walked out on the lava—where your foot crashes down [into] the lava and you look down holes and see this molten lava rushing underneath the earth. But I have not been on Maui. And so I said to the president of the National Caves Association, "I think the executive committee ought to go over there and help this fellow out, because they're (referring to the local government) trying to close him down." (laughs) So he said, "I think that's a wonderful idea!" (laughs) That's where I'd like to go next if it's just me, Maui.

But with a family, I would like to take them [to] some of the wonderful places that I've seen—Austria or—all over the world. It just—you can't compare one [experience] with another. It's like saying, "Which of your children do you like best?" ... I love them all.

TC: You mentioned music a number of times. [Did] you ever combine your two passions? The reason I ask this—I know it's off the cuff, but my son, who has never been in a cave before, is with me on this trip. We took him to Mammoth Cave. And we took him to Lost River Cave—'cause he's a music lover.

JG: Guitar?

TC: Guitar. The first thing out of his mouth was, "Dad, this would be great to come in and play the bass." And I thought—

JG: Yes. We had a quartet. Not I; it was a male quartet. It was beautiful. And also in Europe, I've heard men's—like in Yugoslavia or Czechoslovakia—the men's octets [that] are marvelous. They stand in a circle [facing inward]. And you don't know where they get the pitch from. And all of a sudden they begin [singing] ... and it resounds around the cave. But there was a quartet, and they were telling me that a cave has a key—like this is a B, or key of C cave, or key of G, that at that [particular key] sound, the cave resounds in a most complimentary way.

But it is wonderful, singing in caves, yes, by all means. (laughs) In fact, one of these guys was sitting around a campfire and I hear them singing. I didn't know this fellow and he's singing, (singing) "Go tell Jeanne Gurnee—tell her that I'll be there." And I thought, "What in heaven's name?" You can imagine—all these cavers. I said, "Where did you get that song from?" He says, "I don't know. I just like that name." I said, "Do you know

her?” He said, “No, I don’t know her.” (laughs) “I just like that name, so I made this song up.” And of course we have the Terminal Syphons, the musical group.

So music always plays a part. I’m a church organist and [I have been] a choir director for many years. I love church music, but I love every kind of music. Of course, in the New York area, we went to every conceivable kind of musical ... [performance]. Actually, my husband had a marvelous baritone voice. One of the reasons I was just so entranced with him [was] when I heard him sing. So music is very important. (laughs)

BF: That’s all for me.

JG: (laughs)

TC: Okay.

JG: *C’est ça*. [That’s it.]

I can’t think of anything else, only [the] Kartchner [Caverns Development]....

End of interview