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Ann Hodgson: This is Dr. Ann Hodgson with the University of South Florida Library, Special Collections, and we're here this afternoon talking with Mary Ann Summeralls, the center associate, at the Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary, Blair Audubon. Mary Ann, it's great to see you this afternoon, thanks so much for being with us.

Mary Ann Summeralls: Thank you.

AH: So, I wanted to talk and kick off our conversation by having you tell us a little about your family history. I understand that on both sides of your family you were very early settlers here in South Florida.

MS: Yes, my family is from the Naples area. My dad was born down on the bay, and his parents lived here. I was born and raised here as well. My husband's family was actually settlers in Ft. Myers and Immokalee, and they were worked a lot in the cattle industry at that time, moving cattle around and things like that. So, we have quite a history from here. I guess seeing everything grow here up around us is probably the hardest part of seeing everything going around. Just the growth has been crazy, to say the least.

AH: So, your families were here, early 1900s or about when do you think?

MS: Probably. I'm not really good with dates, remembering dates. Curtis's, my husband's grandparents, so it was probably three generations back, that have lived in the area.

AH: Now the family that lived on the bay, what kind of work were they doing there?

MS: Before my grandfather, I'm not sure. My grandfather actually helped build [US Route] 41, so he worked a lot in the construction of that, that type of work.

AH: Okay. Now tell us a little bit about how you began working here at Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary.

MS: Sure. Well, my husband and his family owned a business, heavy equipment. They worked getting farm fields ready and things like that. And they sold their business out and so my husband went to fire school. And so in between I was looking for something. My children, my youngest was probably between four or five, and we needed a little extra income. And I didn't want to go very far. We've lived out in this area for thirty-five years, my husband and I. And then before that I lived out here as well, since I was about sixteen.

So, I was just looking around the area trying to find a part time job. And I just came to the sanctuary one day and talked to, at that time the manager was Kay Kune, and she said, "Sure, I could use somebody." And so, I started right away. I worked part time because I also teach. So, I just started working in admissions and getting people through. You definitely meet a lot of interesting people as they're coming through, people from all over the world. And the whole time I've lived here and worked here, probably I'd say twenty-three years I've worked here; I could probably count on one hand the number of people that had a bad experience out there on the walk. And everybody is usually just so amazed and relaxed and when they come back, they just really sing the praises of the swamp.

It's just a beautiful walk and a beautiful place. And like I said, the ones I can count on one hand, that didn't like it. It was mostly because they weren't really expecting to be in nature, I don't think. They were, some were afraid of bugs and everything, so it was like they just didn't like it. It wasn't their type of thing. But most everybody is so compassionate about the swamp, and what it stands for and how it's preserved and everything. So, I've always had a lot of good feedback from our guests about the swamp and the sanctuary. It's really amazing.

AH: So, you've been working in admissions and then, tell us a little bit about what that entails.

MS: Well, I've always worked at admissions. When we built—the admissions and everything was in a small building whenever I started, and the store and admissions were all together. And at that time, people could just come in, they paid their admission, they went out on the walk, and then pretty much left when they wanted to. There was not really a—they didn't have to check back in with us or anything like that at that time. Then as I helped move into the new building and I work in both places doing the admissions but also with our store and our nature store. And helping try to find things that would fit with our mission here, that goes along with what we're doing and how we're preserving and conserving around us. It's always admissions and sales so either way that goes. However I can be used.

AH: When someone arrives at the sanctuary, what's the orientation as you receive them and check them in?

MS: Well, let's say it's someone that's never been here before, because a lot of times we have repeat people, yearly. That's their yearly vacation spot. But if someone just came in and they got their tickets to go out on the walk, they want to know a little bit about it, what they're going to be seeing. And because it is a natural element, I think most people realize that you're not going to walk out there and see this animal sitting there and this animal sitting there. But just letting people know what has been seen out there and I always just remark about the forest. That it never leaves, and I always know it's going to be out there when they get out there.

And so, I mainly talk about that whenever people come in, that they'll be walking through one of the oldest bald cypress, old growth forests that there is. I think that it's only the third left in North America, so that's always just amazing to let them know that. Then they're always excited to know about what animals are being seen out there. But I think that just, you know, talking a little bit about the forest and how it's been protected from logging, and things like that, is probably my main point to get across to our customers. And usually, I tell them to go out there and relax and enjoy it, because that's what you want to do. Get away from everything, just get out there, and enjoy it.

AH: Then what is their experience like when they get out there? It's a walk.

MS: It's a walk. It's two and a quarter mile walk around through different ecosystems. The way that the boardwalk is set up, whoever thought it out at the beginning did a really good job because you go through about five different Florida ecosystems, habitat areas. So, they get to see different types of Florida ecosystems just walking that two and a quarter mile, so it's really set up very well, very well thought out, I think. And then just walking through each one and reading the signs that are around and then the forest, it's always amazing.

When people walk through there they come back and they're just like, "It's amazing." There's a lot of questions when they come back, sometimes about what did I see? How did they get the boardwalk through there? You know, how did all that happen? People just, I think when they come back, they're more passionate about the forest and what we do, the job. Because so many times people, I don't know how many times, probably ninety-nine percent of the time, people come back and say, "Thank you for doing this. Thank you for preserving this." Even though I didn't have a lot to do with it, they're very appreciative of it.

AH: You mention that you get visitors from all over. Every country? Different countries?

MS: From all over, I mean I've talked to people from pretty much any place you can think of. We get a lot of, in the summertime especially, we get a lot of people from Europe on holiday. And of course, people come in, hundreds and hundreds of people, but every now and then certain people stick out. I remember there was one lady from Russia. She was an older lady and she said, "I can't make it around the boardwalk." She said, "If you'll set me a chair right here, I'll help you sell these bags while my family is out there." And while she was there, it was a slow day, so she just told me all kinds of stories and I wish I could remember them all.

But I just remember, you know, I wish I could do that every day. Sit and just talk to people about their life, what their life was like. So, you meet people from all over the place. There are a lot of Europeans that come here and then there's a lot of people from our area that come here. Some of them don't even realize, or haven't ever realized, that we're here. Probably at least once or twice a week I'll have somebody say, "I've lived here for 40 years and I never knew this was here." And one reason is that we don't really advertise it that much. It's more word of mouth. And I think that's pretty amazing as well to see that that many people have heard about us through other people.

So, you know, whenever you have something like this, people talk about it. So, a lot of times people from, even our local hotels and motels will tell people when they're looking for something to do, "You've got to go check out Corkscrew." And then they'll tell them why, why it's a good place to come and visit. And I think the walk too. They can go to the Everglades and they can walk through some of the same type of ecosystems, but not as comfortably as walking on the boardwalk and seeing all the different habitats all together. That's always pretty amazing to me.

AH: Does what they see on the boardwalk vary seasonally?

MS: It does. It depends on what's out there, what animals are around. In our migratory season when we have the migratory birds down, a lot of people are here for those migratory birds. So, you have the birders and then you have the naturalists, you know there's all kinds of people that come. You have families that want to get their kids into nature, away from the video games and TVs and computers, and get out in nature. And that's why I like to see the families that are coming out, because that's going to be the future of keeping it up.

AH: When you work in the gift shop, is that the right word for it?

MS: Yes.

AH: You mentioned that you're involved in selecting the different items that are sold there. Tell us a little bit about how does a gift shop function? How do you pick out different items?

MS: Well fortunately, I don't have to do that. We have a great manager that does that, but she's always asking for our opinions. Because I think the main thing that we all always look for is one, that it will fit with our mission. So, we're always looking for things that, for instance, fair trade items or items that are made locally, more eco-friendly type things. Sometimes it's hard to find things like that, but you know we're learning and we're getting a little bit better at finding those types of things. And then I think even just when people come back in and having things that they want to remember their adventure on the walk, you know. Even if it's just a magnet, having something that they would be interested in.

Like for right now, how it has been for the last few months, it's been the ghost orchid that's been blooming. So even just having a little magnet with the ghost orchid picture on it just enhances the visitor's experience because they have that now and they can remember what they saw out there or something like that. So, sometimes, I think a lot of times people are thinking, Is the store even worth having? And I think it is because it does enhance the visitor's experience. They can come back and say, "I saw a Barred Owl out there today. Do you have something with a Barred Owl?" So, they may look for a t-shirt, or some kind of figurine, or something that has a Barred Owl because that's special to them now. They saw it out there. So, when they have it in their home or whatever, it reminds them of the sanctuary. And like I said, we have a lot of visitors that this is their yearly trek. So, they'll come each year because it's such a beautiful place. And they'll come each year, that's part of their list of things to do when they're here. So having something that they can remember their visit, I think is very important.

AH: You hear a lot of those conversations when you're in the gift shop. What are some of the most unique or the wildest conversations you've heard over the years?

MS: I don't really know. I don't really understand exactly what you're asking, I guess.

AH: Well, you know, you've been able to overhear a lot of conversations at admissions and in the gift shop.

MS: About the sanctuary itself?

AH: Yeah.

MS: I don't know. I think probably the ones that stand out were the ones I was talking about that where people didn't have a really good experience. The one I always think of is a lady came screaming back through there, "There's bugs out there!" And she just ran right out the door. She didn't even slow down. She came running. She goes, "There's bugs out there!" Just things like that I think keep us going because it was kind of hilarious. But I felt bad for her too because she really was scared of bugs. But she didn't realize that she was coming to a nature place and there's bugs here.

But just things like that. I mean I've heard stories about, you know, there's been people that have come and they came out here because a family member has died. And they came out here in the peacefulness just to reflect on memories or things like that. So, it's special in that it means a lot of things to a lot of different people. Some people, just like I say, come out here just to get away from the rat race. Some people come out here to see the nature, see what they can find. Birders come out to see if they can get a bird off their like list. But a lot of people have different reasons for coming out here and, you know, you never know what someone— sometimes they'll talk about their families. We've had a lot of people that have gotten engaged out here, we've had some weddings out here. So, you know, it's special in different ways to different people.

AH: Have you had an opportunity to spend much time walking on the boardwalk in between your other activities?

MS: Probably not as much as I would've liked to. But my whole family loves it out here, so we'll come out as often as we can to walk the boardwalk. We bring our grandkids out here. They love it. And I've brought my school kids out here a few times. But yeah, I haven't had time to get out there as I would've liked to. But it is something I try to do as often as I can.

AH: Mary Ann, it's been fascinating to hear you talk about, you know, the diversity of visitors that visits the sanctuary. What would be your message to people who haven't been here, you know? How should they be thinking about their visit? And what message would you leave them with?

MS: Well, I think if you haven't been here before, I would definitely say that you need to come at least one time. And I think if you come one time, you'll be wanting to come again. But it's just unique, the walk and just walking through the different habitats, walking through the old growth forest. It's just not something that you're going to see anywhere else or get the feel of anywhere

else. Even the smells and everything are just unique for the area. So definitely you have got to make it at least one thing on your bucket list to get here at least once, definitely.

AH: Well, thank you. We really enjoyed having a conversation with you this afternoon. It's just great to hear about all your experiences and thanks for being with us.

MS: All right. Thank you. You're welcome.