

Debra J. Black

Debra J Black was born in Honolulu Hawaii on March 19, 1947 to her mother Aviza Johnson Black and her father Richard Blackburn Black, a retired Navy Officer whose accomplishments include building a base for Amelia Earhart and exploring Antarctica. Debra moved to Rippon Lodge when she was five and spent the remainder of her childhood in the historic house. She attended the Madeira School for high school, before continuing her education at Briarcliff College, and later the University of Madrid. After graduation she worked as a fashion journalist in Spain before returning to DC to continue her work as an assistant editor for “The Town Tattler”.

Debra sold Rippon Lodge to Prince William County in 2000, and Rippon Lodge was opened to the public as a historic site in 2007.

Transcript of Oral History Interview with Debra Black

Interviewee: Debra Black (DB)

Interviewer: Jessica Maria Alicea (JA) and Lauren Maloy (LM), Prince William County Office of Historic Preservation

Date: Friday, November 8, 2024

Interview Location: Rippon Lodge in the “Best Room”

Please keep in mind that this document is a verbatim transcription of the spoken word rather than a written document.

JA: My name is Jessica Maria Alicea. I am the Site Manager for Rippon Lodge Historic Site, which is operated by the Prince William County Office of Historic Preservation. Today I’m interviewing Debra Black at Rippon Lodge in the “Best Room.” And it is Friday, November 8, 2024. Could you please state your name and spell it for the recording?

DB: Debra Jane Black, D-E-B-R-A J-A-N-E B-L-A-C-K.

JA: We're gonna start with some simple biographical information, and then I'll ask a little more detail in a bit. First, when and where were you born?

DB: I was born in Honolulu, Hawaii, 1947 March 19.

JA: What are the names of your parents?

DB: My mother is Aviza Johnson Black. My father is Richard Blackburn Black.

JA: What educational background do you have, and what did you do as a career?

DB: I went to the Madeira School¹ for high school, and I went to the University of Madrid. And I'm a journalist.

JA: Wonderful. Foreign, domestic, what kind of journalism did you—

DB: No. Magazines—

JA: Magazines?

DB: One in Spain and one in Washington—a little what's going on in the city kind of thing called "The Town Tattler."

JA: Okay.

DB: And I was Assistant Editor of that one.

¹ The Madeira School is a private girl's school located outside of Washington DC, established in 1906.
<https://www.madeira.org/about-madeira/mission-vision-history>

JA: Wonderful. Did you always live in the same place growing up? And then how much time did you spend here at Rippon Lodge?

DB: I grew up here at Rippon Lodge after we came from Hawaii. I didn't visit it. I grew up here from age 5. So, this was my home.

JA: Cause you mentioned this the last time I saw you—what memories do you have of Dessie Ellis?

DB: Do we know who Dessie Ellis was?²

JA: Yes.

DB: Okay.

JA: (Laughs)

DB: Well, just briefly, she sold Rippon Lodge to my parents. And she canceled someone else who wanted to buy it because she knew that my father had such a strong feeling about it, since he was descended from Richard Blackburn. She was a character. She was about 90, and she always wore lots of jewelry. And she was a—but she was funny. She had a wonderful sense of humor, and I was only 5. But what I remember is sitting out on the lawn with my mother and Dessie, and she always came with her friend Luella Chase. And just talking and I would be running around and stuff. And one day she gave me a gold ring with a diamond in it—with like about a two-carat diamond. And she said it was a child's ring. But anyway, I loved it, and I lost it somewhere along the line. But she was a lot of fun, and she adored my father.

JA: Well, you just described it. Do you remember was it a simple band on the ring or—

DB: Yes. It was a simple gold band and the diamond. Yeah.

JA: What were your impressions of the house when you first saw it as a child?

DB: Wow. You know. It was huge to me. I'd had a lot of buildup from my father, so I knew it was historic. I knew it was something to do with our family, and I loved it. I loved it. I loved growing up here.

JA: Is there anything else interesting that you could tell us about Dessie? Any specific memory you can recall of the multiple times that she may have visited here?

² “By 1842, the Atkinson Family called Rippon Lodge home. They owned the house for about 90 years before the property was sold to the Marron Brothers in 1911. However, by 1923, Wade H. Ellis and his wife Dessie, purchased the home, along with 500 acres of land, and began extensive renovations to the building, turning it into the Colonial Revival residence visitors see today. Mr. Ellis, a prominent lawyer from Washington D.C., is regarded as being responsible for preserving much of the architectural history of Rippon Lodge.” From “Rippon Lodge History,” <https://www.pwcva.gov/departments/historic-preservation/rippon-lodge/>.

DB: She did visit a lot. Well, I think I said—she had promised someone else, and she canceled that. What else? Well, she was very proud of her husband, Judge Wade Ellis, who was no longer with us. She was just a character. She was lots of fun. She wasn't stuffy at all.

JA: Oh, that's good. Okay. So where was your bedroom in the house?

DB: It was at the top of the stairs to the right—first room to the right.

JA: Okay. How did you decorate your room? (Laughs)

DB: It was pale pink. I had a canopy bed, and I had lots of dolls. Lots of dolls—especially a Snow White doll and most of them would go to bed with me at night. And in the morning, I would put them back on the bed. So- And I had my own bathroom.

JA: Where did you go to elementary school?

DB: Occoquan Elementary School.

JA: Okay. And then later on when you got into like high school, what were the electives that you took? Or did you play any sports?

DB: I played hockey—field hockey.

JA: Nice.

DB: At Madeira you didn't really have electives. We had four main subjects each year.

JA: Okay.

DB: So.

JA: And when did you graduate?

DB: 1965.

JA: Any good memories about any of your school education that you experienced that you'd like to share?

DB: Well at Occoquan one of the teachers—my first-grade teacher—Miss Moss became friends with me and my parents. And she used to come here and babysit me. And the principal of the school was Mr. Shirley. I remember that. And by way of that in those days there was no Woodbridge. It was open fields—farmland. And we went to Occoquan for our groceries—Lynn

General Store³, and there was a movie theater there. But it was all open farmland where Marumsco Plaza is now—open farmland.

JA: Do you remember the cook and the cook's grandchildren that used to live in the cabin behind the house?

DB: Very well. She was not our cook. She was our housekeeper.

JA: Okay.

DB: She did cook, and she had two children. And her name was Estelle Golden Fortune. She was half American Indian, half Black, and her husband was in jail. And my father was very good to her, and both children grew up here and went to school here.

JA: How long was she employed?

DB: Oh—

JA: Rough estimate?

DB: At least 10 years—maybe more.

JA: Do you remember what year your dad expanded the cabin so that they'd have more space?

DB: It was after both children were in school. So, it—I would say fairly soon after they moved in cause it was tiny—maybe two or three years after.

JA: All right. So good question. What can you tell us about your dad? What was he like as a dad—attentive, supportive, more strict being a military man? I'm a military brat so I kind of—I get that. We know a lot of these great stories that he would tell, but I also would like to know any of the stories that stick out in your mind that he told you? So first of all, what was he like as a dad?

DB: He was an honorable man. He had great integrity. He was very patriotic. He was an adventurer. He was funny. He had a wonderful sense of humor. He was an historian, and he was very handsome. And he was a very nice dad.

JA: Good. What stories do you recall that really stick into—what he told you? Whether it was from his childhood or some of his adventures? Some of the stories?

DB: Okay. Well, his childhood was in Grand Forks, North Dakota, and he told about walking to school on snowshoes. They didn't close school there for snow. Well, he had a very interesting

³ The store was purchased by Andy Lynn in 1974 as the 5th generation Lynn to own the store, before being turned into a sports goods store.
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/1982/02/11/a-town-too-tough-to-die/e3f7b4a3-abf1-4c3c-b6b5-1330e4a074f3/>

life. He built the airport for Amelia Earhart. He was—he and my mother were at Pearl Harbor when it was bombed. Stories? He read *Treasure Island* to me. He would tell stories about Rippon Lodge and Richard Blackburn⁴, and there was a duel in this room. And I forgot who won that. He was very, very attached to Rippon Lodge. He had heard of it all his life because his fifth great-grandfather, Richard Blackburn, from Ripon, England was his fifth great-grandfather—a direct descendant. And he'd always dreamed of living here, and he was lucky enough to be able to do that.

JA: Let's see. Can you tell us anything specifically about his wartime experiences? Did he share any of that information with you?

DB: Yes. The morning of December 7, 1941, my parents lived on the water near Honolulu. He heard planes going over, and he went out on their front lawn. And he looked up, and he saw the bomber with the rising sun on it. And he said that the pilot leered at him—the Japanese pilot, and that he was flying low cause he went right into Pearl Harbor and bombed it. So, my father went up—he was stationed then at Pearl Harbor, and he went to work. And my mother and my half-brother, who was my father's son by his first marriage—Douglas, we drove up into the hills behind where we lived. And we stayed with—or, I wasn't there. I wasn't born yet. My mother and Douglas stayed with complete strangers who welcomed them because they were very close to Pearl Harbor—to the harbor. So, it was a very exciting time, I guess. And my brother, my half-brother, was yelling, "Oh look at that! Look at that!" With all the bombs going off. And my mother was scared to death he—you know, she said, "Get back in the car."

JA: Yeah.

DB: So—

JA: What about his actual experience in the Pacific theater? Any—

DB: Yes.

JA: He told you?

DB: He led the amphibious invasion of Kwajalein which was one of the Line Islands.⁵ And before the war he was with the Department of Interior. And he helped colonize the Line Islands, and that's when Amelia Earhart came in.

JA: Yeah. Do you remember what ship he might have been attached to during the war? Did he mention the actual ship's name?

DB: No.

JA: Okay.

⁴ Richard Blackburn was the first owner of Rippon Lodge, and the house was built for him.

<https://www.pwcva.gov/departments/historic-preservation/rippon-lodge>

⁵ Kwajalein is located in the Marshall Islands. <https://www.history.com/articles/battle-of-kwajalein>

DB: And I don't think he was on a ship much during the war. I think he was pretty on land.

JA: On land station?

DB: Pretty much.

JA: Okay.

DB: Yeah.

JA: And you mentioned it, but what about his time working on Jarvis, Howland, and Baker before the war? Did he ever speak to you about that besides Amelia Earhart? What were some of his experiences there?

DB: Yeah. He had Hawaiian beach boys help him. I don't know if he colonized all three islands. He colonized Howland, and he built the airport for Amelia Earhart. And of course, she never arrived, but I think he was the last person to speak to her. And she said, "I know I'm over you, but I can't see you." And then he was on the ship, *Itasca*, that went looking for her, and they never found her. So, and he was a friend of hers.

JA: Really?

DB: Yeah.

JA: I didn't know that part.

DB: Yeah. And her co-pilot, Fred Noonan.⁶

JA: How long had he known her?

DB: I don't know. I guess in Honolulu? I don't know, but he knew her. You know. He was part of that whole story.

JA: Yeah.

DB: Yeah.

JA: All right. So, we know that the house meant a great deal to your dad. What are some of your memories of him here at the lodge?

⁶ Richard Black was a field representative for the Department of Interior and worked to coordinate logistics at Howland Island for Amelia Earhart's final flight. Francis X. Holbrook, "Amelia Earhart's Final Flight," *Proceedings*, February 1971. <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/1971/february/amelia-earharts-final-flight>.

DB: Well in the winter he woke up and lit all seven fireplaces—before we had heating installed. He loved it here. He built a split rail fence around the apple orchard, and he built that well house which still stands. Well, he loved the history of it. My parents did a lot of entertaining. Every year the Virginia homes and gardens—we were on that tour, and we all wore a colonial costume. He was just very proud that his ancestor had built Rippon Lodge. By the way, Richard Blackburn was an architect. Some people say he was a builder. Well, he was a builder, but he was also an architect. And he built the Falls Church which now the city is named after, and the church still stands. It's a brick church. I don't know if it's in use or not—Falls Church.⁷ But Richard Blackburn built that church. He just loved the history of it. He loved—this room in particular I think is the prettiest room in the house, and Williamsburg wanted this red pine paneling. And my father wouldn't sell it. He just loved living here. He loved the history of it. He was very proud of it.

JA: That's leading into my second part of this question. What other things did he share about the genealogy of the family? What other things did he discover when he was really learning about the family itself and where his origins were?

DB: Yeah. I don't really know the answer to that question. He and my mother went to Ripon, England several times, and that's where Richard Blackburn came from. That was on his mother's side—the Blackburn—not his father's. That's about all I know.

JA: That's good. So, let's talk about a little bit about your mother. We always talk about the gentlemen of this house.

DB: Yeah.

JA: I like to learn about the ladies of the house.

DB: Good.

JA: So how did your parents meet first?

DB: They met in Honolulu. My father was there with the Department of Interior, and this would be—this was 1937—the same year as Amelia Earhart. And my mother was an artist, and she was doing the fashion drawings for the *Honolulu Star Bulletin*. And I still have some of those. And before that she worked for a big department store in San Francisco called the "City of Paris." I don't think it's there anymore. It was in Union Square.

JA: Yeah.

DB: And she went to the California School of Fine Arts. That was her education in art. She was a painter.

JA: Yes.

⁷ The Falls Church is still active as an Episcopalian Church today. <https://www.thefallschurch.org/history>

DB: A painter.

JA: You actually answered a lot of these questions.

DB: Ah, okay.

JA: What university did she go to again?

DB: She did not go to a university.

JA: Oh.

DB: She went to the California School of Fine Arts—

JA: Fine Arts—

DB: —in San Francisco.

JA: Okay. And then so her occupation—was it a designer? An illustrator? What exactly would she have titled her occupation as?

DB: Artist.

JA: Artist, okay.

DB: Painter.

JA: Are there other places that you can remember your mom working at?

DB: Well, she had some one-woman shows in Washington—one at the old Sheraton Park Hotel that I remember. She studied here with a man named Ralph de Burgos, and she continued painting the rest of her life.

JA: That's good.

DB: Yeah.

JA: What was her favorite place to work—where she worked?

DB: She worked at the top of the stairs was kind of an open—big open room. I think it's still there.

JA: Yeah.

DB: Yeah. And she didn't like to be disturbed when she was working.

JA: Okay. And how did she feel about the house itself? Her opinion of the house and living here? And did she spend a lot of time here?

DB: Yes. We all spent a lot of time here. She loved it. She loved it. And she—in my opinion she decorated it very elegantly. The windows had damask curtains and things like that. Lots of silver and crystal and but she stayed within the colonial period. Both my parents loved it here.

JA: All right. So, we're gonna show you some pictures that we've had in the collection, but they haven't been identified as far as who's in them. So, and what should be included in the transcript. And I would like you if you can talk about them. If you don't know anybody in there or don't know when they were taken it's okay.

DB: Okay.

JA: We're just a little curious as far as who might be in these pictures. So, if you need your glasses go ahead.

DB: Yes. I need my glasses.

JA: All right. So, this is Picture Number 1, and your dad is in here. And I believe that's your mom, but we don't know who the other couple is or where that was taken.



Picture 1: Debra's mother Aviza Johnson Black and father Richard Blackburn Black with an unknown couple in Honolulu.

DB: Yes. That is my father and my mother. That's Honolulu. I do not recognize the other couple, but my father is in uniform—so is the other gentleman. It was probably the Officer's Club or something.

JA: All right. This is Picture Number 2 with an automobile, and I think those are you parents. Is that also in Hawaii or is that California maybe?



Picture 2: Debra's parents Richard Blackburn Black & Aviza Johnson Black.

DB: That is my parents. The foliage doesn't look like Hawaii. I don't know. Honestly, I don't know. It could have been California. I don't see any palm trees or anything. I'm not sure.

JA: Okay. Not a problem. Sorry the printer ink kind of went out in some of these. All right. So, this is your dad. I don't know the other gentleman cause he's got his head down—can't really see him.



Picture 3: Debra's father with her half-brother Douglas and an unknown gentleman.

DB: Yeah. Yes. That's my father, and that's my half-brother, Douglas. And I started to say this is here, but I don't know that. And I don't know who that gentleman is.

JA: Okay. Not a problem. All right. Picture Number 4.



Picture 4: Debra and her father Richard Blackburn Black in an apple orchard.

DB: Oh, yeah. That's my father and me, and that was the apple orchard. And he built this thing to make apple butter with.

JA: Oh, wow. Okay. I was wondering what that was that you're sitting on. (Laughs)

DB: Yeah, yeah. And my mother knew how to make apple butter, and, you know, you grind the apples in there. We had a lot of apple butter. Yeah.

JA: So, this was on that side.

DB: Right there.

JA: Okay.

DB: Yeah.

JA: I'm pointing to the apple orchard.

DB: Yes.

JA: For the audio. (Laughs) People are like, "What?" All right. I know this is possibly here—maybe not. But maybe you know?



Picture 5: Debra's father Richard Blackburn Black and a friend.

DB: Yes. That is New Zealand and that man was a very good friend of my father's. I can't remember his name, but he was Scottish. And my father was Scottish—part Scottish, and he was obviously dressed in a kilt. I will try to remember that man's name. I can't offhand. He was a good friend.

JA: All right. Now this is also from Rippon Lodge. This is Picture 6, and I just don't know if you maybe know who the two little boys are?



Picture 6: Tenant's Children.

DB: Well, that's the barn. I think the barn is still there. Yeah. I think they were tenants.

JA: Okay.

DB: You know the "Caretaker's Cottage." We always had someone living there. I think they must have been children from there.

JA: All right. And there's only a couple more. This is Picture Number 7. This is of your dad in front of the house. Perhaps you remember this gentleman with him?



Picture 7: Debra's father, Richard Blackburn Black, with a friend.

DB: Well, he looks very familiar, but I don't—his name doesn't come to me. But he looks very familiar.

JA: All right.

DB: Yeah. And that's my father.

JA: Yeah. Now this last Picture Number 8—I actually got from someone who was a child that was a tenant during your time here. And I'm wondering if you remember her?



Picture 8: The child of a former tenant.

DB: Oh yes, I do. O'Connor. I think her name was Marion O'Connor, and the O'Connors had two girls. And someone took this picture which is cute obviously. She's sitting on the well, and there's a little bird. Yeah. They lived here five or six years—two daughters. Yeah.

JA: She actually remembers you, and she remembers you liked the Beatles. (Laughs)

DB: I did. Yeah. Do you know her first name?

JA: I can't recall it at the moment.

DB: I think it was Marion or something. I can't remember. But yeah. She was cute.

JA: All right. So let me find out more on that. All right. Do you have any other memories of the lodge—your memories—and was it always a place that you looked forward to coming to even after, you know, going to college and, you know, being married and everything? What are your memories of this place?

DB: Absolutely. Well, an early memory—Halloween memory—is we had a—I was about 7, 7 or 8. And we had a Halloween party for some of the kids at Occoquan School that I went to school with. And my father (laughs) wore a sheet and hid in back of Richard Blackburn's grave. And we all went down and everybody was scared. Very scared. And he wrote a poem for the invitation, and I'll see if I can remember it. It was, "Come o come to the Pirate's Den. Come at 6 and stay till 10. Come all dressed in pirate's clothes, and wear a mask upon your nose. All Hallow's Eve we'll celebrate. The 27th is the date. Come and seek and ye shall find treasures here of every kind."

JA: Oh, wow. (Laughs)

DB: He was a poet, and he wrote a wonderful poem which was published in *National Geographic* called the "The Barkentine Bear," which was a ship he was on in the Antarctic. And I tried to find a copy of it⁸. I will still try to find it, but he had a very lyrical side.

JA: That's good. Let's see. Can you give us some more details—cause I've only seen really what is in our files and what the newspapers had put in the newspaper for the sale of the house and some of the process and some things that you had to go through—

DB: Yeah.

JA: —when you sold it to Prince William County in 2000?

DB: Yeah. Well, I lived here—I mean I owned it as long as I could. And my parents really the last few years of their life lived in a townhouse in Georgetown, but they would still visit. But I couldn't really keep it up anymore. It was 600 acres, and so I knew I had to sell it. And I did have some offers from other people for more money than actually Prince William paid, but I wanted the county to have it. So that's what I made happen, and I'm glad I did. Yeah.

JA: Were you afraid that if you sold it to someone else that they would not take care of it—

DB: Yes.

JA: —or tear it down?

DB: Yes, yes. And that it would not remain for history. So, I wanted Prince William County to have it. Yeah. And Hilda Barg⁹—she was active in all of that.

JA: Yeah. Recognize the name—

DB: I don't suppose she's around anymore.

⁸ A copy of this poem, along with other items of Richard Blackburn Black is lodged in the University of North Dakota Department of Special Collections.

<https://apps.library.und.edu/archon/index.php?p=collections/controlcard&id=45>

⁹ Hilda Barg is a former member of the Prince William Board of County Supervisors and community activist.
<https://www.hmdb.org/m.asp?m=247369>

JA: —like she is, but I do recognize the name.

DB: Yeah.

JA: Is there anything else that at least in this first session of our discussion that I may have missed or is there anything else that you want to add that isn't recording right now?

DB: Well, it was a real privilege to grow up here cause I grew up with a real sense of history, and my father and mother made sure that I knew that. After I was older—after college—I had a wedding here. I married Bradford Ross, and we had it in the garden. It was beautiful. There was great entertaining done here the whole time my parents had it. They loved to entertain, and they loved the community. Hilda Barg is the only name that comes to mind, but my father was friends with people on the Prince William County Board—whatever. And he was always active in anything that they needed him for. Just a wonderful place to grow up. I mean the vast lawns as far as we could see in those days was Rippon Lodge. I couldn't see any houses or anything—and the river. And it was wonderful to grow up here. Just run across the lawns, and you had the woods. And my father taught me how to ride a bicycle by starting here at the porch—at the veranda and pushed me down to the well house. (Laughter) And it took a few times. It was just a great privilege. It's a beautiful old place, and I just want it to be preserved for history. It was wonderful to grow up here.

JA: Good. All right. So, we're gonna actually walk you through the house now and room by room and have you talk about the space itself. And what you may or may not remember, or how it might have been decorated. And so, we're gonna have to stop here and then continue on once we can set it up and go room to room, if you have time. Great.

DB: Yeah

The following section of the transcript is walking through the house at Rippon Lodge. Pictures are included for many of the rooms mentioned but not all. If you would like a more in-depth tour, please visit our website to check times for a tour, or stop by Rippon Lodge!

<https://www.pwcva.gov/departments/historic-preservation/rippon-lodge/>

JA: So, this is what we have as an orientation room for our visitors, but I've seen some—only one photograph. This was the kitchen, yes?

DB: Yes. This was the kitchen.



Picture 9: Former kitchen in Rippon Lodge

JA: What do you remember about the kitchen? Anything fun? Food smells? (Laughs)

DB: My mother was a very good cook. I'm trying to think where the stove was—the stove was over there. The refrigerator was in the vestibule here.

JA: Oh?

DB: What do I remember? That's about it. It was just—it was in use a lot. Yeah. This was the kitchen. This was the "Breakfast Room."

JA: The "Best Room" I meant—

DB: I can tell you more about that.

JA: The "Black Room Parlor" is what we call it today—



Picture 10: "The breakfast room"/"The Black Room Parlor" at Rippon Lodge

DB: Oh, okay.

JA: —but it was off what was the original kitchen for you.

DB: Yes.

JA: What do you recall about this room?

DB: I think this was the original kitchen. I think the Ellises added this. We called it the "Breakfast Room," and I would as a child have breakfast here before I went to school. And at Christmas time this is where I'd put the letter to Santa Clause. And in the morning there would be a paper, and the edges would be burned. And it would be from—a letter from Santa Clause written in red and green ink from my father.

JA: Oh, nice.

DB: Yeah.

JA: Yeah.

DB: And I had left cookies and stuff, but I loved this room always. It was very warm, and a lot went on in this room. Yeah.

JA: Good. All right. So, we're- now we're gonna into what was the original entryway.



Picture 11: entry way Rippon Lodge

DB: Yes.

JA: But it wasn't when you lived here because—

DB: No.

JA: —what was through the what is the entry door? What was on that side of there?

DB: The dining room.

JA: Okay.

DB: I don't know if the Ellises built that. I think they did or—

JA: They built the porch, and then you guys enclosed it with one of those?

DB: I guess we did. Yeah. It was nice. It was a big dining room—very light and airy. I forget what we called this room. But this pine paneling—ruby pine paneling in the drawing room—I think I mentioned in the recording—Mount Vernon wanted to buy it, and my father refused. So, it's really beautiful, and he made sure that it was oiled or whatever always—

JA: Sure.

DB: —to keep it cause it's—and this was just a cupboard. Yeah. Oh, yeah. I remember—I remember this little chair. It used to be in the "Breakfast Room." (Laughs)

JA: Was it something that your father bought? Or was it something that Dessie left here?

DB: I think that was one of the Ellises' things. Yeah. [Inaudible 0:02:42.6] that's the way the house looked when Richard Blackburn built it. It was really a lot smaller—

JA: Right small. (Laughs)

DB: Yeah.

JA: All right. So, we call this the "Best Room," but you called it the—



Picture 12: the "Best Room"/the "Drawing Room" Rippon Lodge

DB: We called it the "Drawing Room"—

JA: The "Drawing Room."

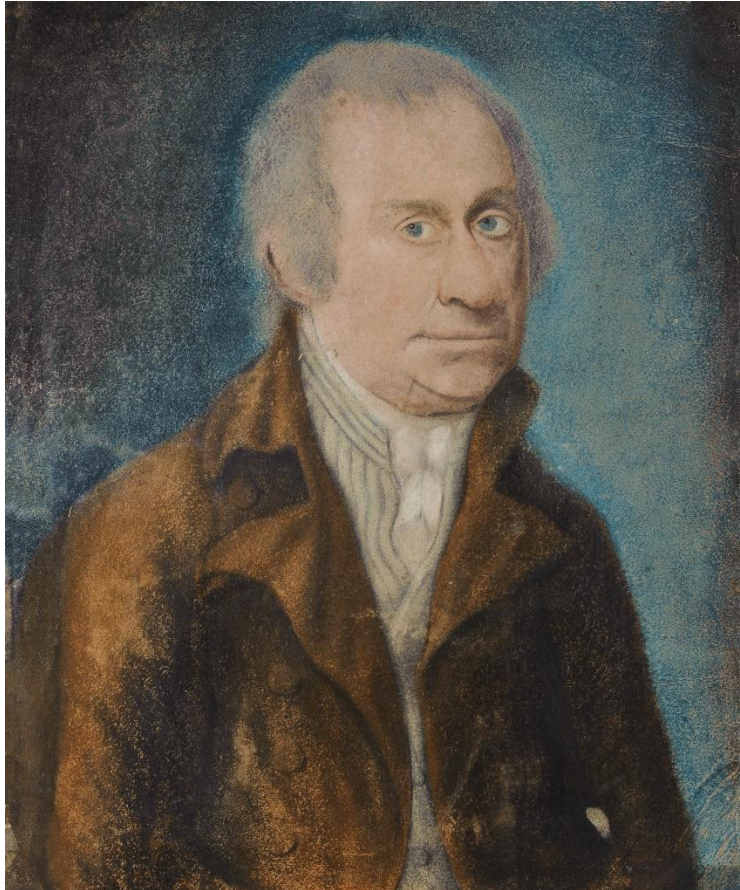
DB: —which comes from the term "with drawing room" where people would go after dinner to come and have cordials or smoke pipes or whatever. And if I may say—I'm being recorded—that I believe is a painting of Richard Blackburn. There was a beautiful painting of a Victorian lady that hung there—very beautiful. I don't know where it is. I don't know if it's still here somewhere. Unfortunately, Richard Blackburn was not a handsome man. And in this beautiful room if I were doing it, I would not have that picture.

JA: (Laughs) That actually is Thomas. That's his son. (Laughs)

DB: Oh that's Thomas? Okay.

JA: And unfortunately, yes, it was done around—want to say around 1800—and yeah—definitely much later in his life and not done by a very skilled artist like your mom. (Laughs)

DB: No, no, no. Yeah, okay. I would put it somewhere else if I—



Thomas Blackburn

JA: (Laughs)

DB: —cause this is a beautiful room. You know. And he almost looks deranged. (Laughter) He does. Okay. That's Thomas the son.

JA: All right.

DB: A good friend of Richard's—I mean of George Washington.

JA: Yes, correct.

DB: Yeah.

JA: All right. So, watch yourself on this cord as you walk through. Cause this is not usually on tour, but I've seen pictures of it—and watch your step here. This we call—

DB: The "River Room."



JA: The "River Room."

DB: You call it that too?

JA: Yes, we do.

DB: Yeah. That's what the Ellises called it. That's what we called it. Cause it has a beautiful view of the river. Yeah.

JA: What did you guys use it as though?

DB: Well, when they entertained, we used the whole house was always open. I used to come in here and do homework and stuff like that. Just used it for just the way any other room was used. But it was really nice in the summer, and then you'd just go out here. And we had lawn chairs out there, and I had a swing that my father built. So, we spent a lot of time out there. And in the evenings my parents would sit out there and look at the river and, you know, have conversations. And I would run around and get into trouble and catch fireflies.

JA: Did you—I know your mom got a I believe a pig, and I've seen a picture of her with a sheep. Were there black angus here as well?

DB: Oh, my goodness. Yes. Oh, my goodness. My father tried to be a farmer, and he wasn't. They had—we had a whole herd of black angus cattle, and those lasted the longest. But there was still a barn over near the "Caretaker's Cottage." We had pigs. We had chickens over there. I used to collect the eggs every day down in that ravine and sheep. We had a lamb called Frisky, and he grew to be a big sheep. And he used to butt you and knock you over.

JA: (Laughs)

DB: And they finally had to put him over where the barn area was. And two ducks that my mother named Abelard and Heloise, and they would come and nip at you. And they were big white ducks. So, we always had animals around, but my father was not a farmer.

JA: (Laughs) Any pet dogs or cats?

DB: Oh, yeah. He always had two golden retrievers.

JA: Ah, nice.

DB: One was Eric the Red Viking. The other one was named Jeffrey. And those are just the two I remember. He always had them. He'd get them as, you know—golden retrievers are darling little puppies, and he always had two. My mother loved cats, and any stray cat that came was welcome. So, there were always a lot of cats around.

JA: Oh, good. And we have some of your mom's paintings up.

DB: Oh, yeah.

JA: Any of them you recall her doing while here? Or is this later—earlier I mean?

DB: Yeah. I think these were probably later. This was her "hard-edge period." She evolved, but her period that I liked the best was more impressionistic—watercolors and things. But she—I guess she had a Picasso dream or something. She wanted to try something different.

JA: A little more abstract? (Laughs)

DB: Yeah. Quite abstract. Yeah. These are supposed to be La Tuna which are the young college people in Madrid who go around the old town in Madrid—old part of Madrid—and play music. Yeah. Yeah.

JA: All right.

DB: I wish you had some of her earlier work.

JA: We only have one watercolor which we have in storage right now cause I want to put it in your father's exhibit space. And it is a watercolor of the lodge.

DB: Oh, nice.

JA: So.

DB: Okay.

JA: We do have one of those. (Laughs)

DB: Okay. Well, this is [inaudible 0:07:58.6]. She didn't do that, but I lived in [inaudible 0:08:02.0] for a summer.

JA: Okay.

DB: And she—they went and visited me, and she bought that—

JA: Bought that painting.

DB: Yeah, yeah.

JA: Nice. All right. So, let's go into—

DB: The floors look great.

JA: Thank you. (Laughs) I'll walk through the "Best Room." We're gonna go into what we call the "Center Passage."

DB: What do you call it?

JA: The "Center Passage."

DB: Oh, okay.



Picture 13: the "Center Passage"/the "Entrance Hall" at Rippon Lodge.

JA: What do you recall about this big space?

DB: This was called the "Entrance Hall," and right here was a portrait of Daniel Boone. I hope it's still here somewhere.

JA: Yes. It's in another room. (Laughs)

DB: Oh, okay. Good. Because he was my mother's direct sixth great-grandfather. I don't know who that gentleman is. And all these—this furniture was here. Oh, the Ellises left these [inaudible 0:08:52.5]. They used to be in the drawing room.

JA: Okay.

DB: All of this was here. Yeah. That was—

JA: That's your dad's sea chest, yes?

DB: Yes, yes.

JA: (Laughs) Do you remember where he got that, or did he mention it at all?

DB: I don't remember.

JA: Okay.

DB: But it used to be right over here.

JA: Yeah.

DB: Yeah. And that was here.

JA: Okay.

DB: And I don't know where this was. I don't know where that was, but this looks very much the same.

JA: Yeah. The pump organ is the Ellises—

DB: Oh?

JA: —cause it's in some of their photographs.

DB: Oh?

JA: I've got some here.

DB: Okay.

JA: It's right there.

DB: Who is this gentleman?

JA: That's the Marron—one of the Marron brothers. He actually owned the house before the Ellises.

DB: Yeah.

JA: And we don't have the picture of his brother unless—but much later in life. But this was the only young photograph we have of him.

DB: I see. Okay. Yeah. I remember about them. Yeah.

JA: Now the two candelabras that are in the "Best Room"—your father had those outside—right here by the fireplace. Those real big ones.

DB: Oh yes, he did. Yes.

JA: Anything you can tell me about those?

DB: I think there were candles in a glass globe way back, I think, he would light them if they had a party or something. But they stood there the whole time I was here—those two. Yeah.

JA: Okay.

DB: On either side of the front door.

JA: Do you remember anything about where they were made or where he may have purchased them?

DB: I don't know. They might have been the Ellises. I'm not sure.

JA: Okay.

DB: I don't know. This chair goes way back. I think. Yeah. This was in the “Breakfast Room.”

JA: All right. Let's go walk through. So, this stairwell—this space. (Laughs) How was it like going up and down these stairs? (Laughs)



Picture 14: Stairwell

DB: It was challenging. You had to be careful.

JA: Yes.

DB: Especially at night. Yeah, yeah. May I give a personal opinion?

JA: Sure.

DB: I know that we used colonial colors, but I don't care for this combination. It was Williamsburg blue when I grew up, but that's just my personal opinion.

JA: Yeah. Now we still have some remnants of the blue. So, and we saw that was like through all the entire house?

DB: Yes, it was. And this is Cyrano de Bergerac. You know that?

JA: Yes, I do. (Laughs)

DB: That was in the “Entrance Hall.”

JA: Yes. Actually, there's a picture of your dad sitting in this chair.

DB: Yeah.

JA: With a little baby as an older gentleman. Is that one of his grandchildren?

DB: It could be. It could be.

JA: I have to probably send it to you.

DB: One of my—it could be my daughter. I only had one child. I don't know. I don't know. You have the picture.

JA: I have the picture. I'll try to send too through the email and see if you—

DB: I would love to see it. Yeah.

JA: Yeah. (Laughs)

DB: This was the dumbwaiter.

JA: It was a dumbwaiter.

DB: Yes, it was.

JA: Okay. We get a lot of questions about that.

DB: I bet. And the Indian tunnel. I think there was an outside kitchen. And that was the passageway, but it became known as the Indian escape tunnel that—and I don't know if that's ever what it was but—

JA: No. Well historically from our research the native—indigenous population—that would have been here actually would leave the area even before Richard Blackburn—

DB: Oh, really?

JA: —came.

DB: Okay, yeah.

JA: So, yeah.

DB: Okay.

JA: But there are remnants still of—I think there are—been some artifacts that have been found.

DB: Really?

JA: Yes.

DB: Yeah. Okay. Good.

JA: But yeah. They were long gone. (Laughs)

DB: Okay.

JA: Bacon's Rebellion kind of did the mass evacuation of the general area that really kind of unfortunately put a lot of them in danger, so.

DB: Wow, yeah.

JA: Yeah.

DB: Yeah.

JA: All right. So, let's go into what we call Mr. Ellis's library, and there's pictures of Dessie and Mr. Ellis. There she is as an older lady up there on the bookshelf.



Picture 15

DB: Oh, yes.

JA: You can walk through.

DB: I remember both those pictures. Yeah, yeah. Yeah. Now you can see she has on a I guess a fur coat and a—she wore a lot of jewelry. Yeah.

JA: (Laughs)

DB: Oh, this I—yeah. This was in the “Entrance Hall.” Yeah. It looks—that painting was there.

JA: Yeah.

DB: Yeah.

JA: There is—where is it? I have a photograph. This is how it was though when your parents were here?

DB: I don't think so. I don't remember this painting at all. I can't say. I don't know. It might have been. I don't know, but I certainly don't remember—

JA: Remember the painting?

DB: No.

JA: Okay.

DB: Oh, yeah. Here were the garden tours and—

JA: Yeah.

DB: —house and garden tours. Yeah. Got some great photographs.

JA: He took—they had—people took a lot of different photos. Mr. Ellis took a lot of different photos of the property. So, it was really good for us to—

DB: Yeah.

JA: —for research purposes.

DB: I wish I had known him. I didn't. He was—

JA: Did Dessie ever talk about him?

DB: Oh, yeah. Yeah. They didn't have any children. Their townhouse is still standing on Dupont Circle—a big red brick building. It's used as—I use—I think it's used as law offices or something. But that was their townhome, and this was their country home, so.

JA: Okay. All right. So, then this will be your father's exhibit space. We moved the cannons in here, and there's the—



Picture 16: formerly a dance studio for Debra Black/guest room at Rippon Lodge.

DB: Oh.

JA: —there's the painting. (Laughs)

DB: There it is.

JA: So, it's still here. (Laughs) What was this space though when you were living here as a family? Was this like a guest room? Was this like an extra—

DB: It was my ballet studio.

JA: Really?

DB: Yes. And he had a bar and mirror. I studied ballet for many years, and later it was just a guest room. Yeah, yeah.

JA: Okay.

DB: Yeah. That's a beautiful painting. That was done from life, and that's his dog, Blue. And he's my mother's ancestor. Oh, I love that picture. I love that picture. That's a copy of one that I have the original that he wrote to his mother during World War II. And it says, "I can't tell you where I am."



Picture 17: the Huntsman painting at Rippon Lodge.

JA: I think I've seen that digitally, but I don't—

DB: Oh, yeah?

JA: —have a copy.

DB: Yeah.

JA: Were you able ever to meet your grandmother? On your dad's side?

DB: No.

JA: No?

DB: No, no. She died right before I was born, and I didn't meet my grandfather either. I only knew my mother's mother.

JA: Okay.

DB: So—this, yeah.

JA: Yeah. Those are old articles about the house, but even before the Ellises came here. The gentleman known as the "Rambler"—heard all these tales about everything, so.

DB: Oh, wow. And look at the original—yeah. Three chimneys but the original house. Yeah.

JA: And that's—

DB: Oh, what is this?

JA: That's one of the Ellis's guestbooks.

DB: Okay.

JA: Did your family continue the tradition of the guestbooks?

DB: They had a guestbook. Yes. I don't know where it is. I have no idea.

JA: And then we have photographs that we share with the visitors when we talk about your dad.

DB: Oh, okay.

JA: Do you remember this one? This is of course the ladies in front of the house dressed in costume. (Laughs)

DB: This was probably one of those home and garden tours.

JA: Is your mom in there? Oh, you probably don't have your glasses, so.

DB: Yeah. I could recog—I don't think so. I don't think so. Do you know when this was taken?

JA: I want to say it's in the 1970s.

DB: Oh, okay.

JA: Yeah.

DB: I don't see her in there.

JA: Okay.

DB: Oh. This was Honolulu. That was their Christmas card one year.

JA: Do you remember how old your mom is in this picture?

DB: She was early 30s. I think. I think this was before. She was in her 30s when she married my father, but I think she was married to him then. So, I'm not sure of her age. I think it was 30-something.

JA: Okay. I can pick these up for you.

DB: Oh, yeah. Yeah. That's the Christmas card. I have the original Christmas—

JA: Is that you?

DB: No, no.

JA: Okay. And then what about the kids in front of the snow?

DB: That's probably me. Yeah.

JA: Okay.

DB: Sledding—and did—you know we had a smaller sailing ship—

JA: A little [inaudible 0:18:02.1] yes.

DB: —and he had a dock there.

JA: Yes. (Laughs)

DB: And we used to—and in the winter we ice skated there on Neabsco Creek.

JA: Oh, wow. (Laughs)

DB: Yeah, yeah. He—oh, yeah. This is Frisky.

JA: That's Frisky. Okay. (Laughs) That's good to know.

DB: [Inaudible 0:18:16.6] She's giving him a bottle, and he grew to be like this. And he would butt you. He would knock you down. (Laughs) Yeah.

JA: (Laughs) Did you have like professional shares and everybody else come to take care of the animals?

DB: That's a good—

JA: Or did Dad try to do that? (Laughs)

DB: I don't know. I don't know. I don't know. He probably—that would be something that Virgil Waggy was—do you know about—

JA: Nuh-uh.

DB: —he was when we moved here first, he was the caretaker in his family. He would have done something like that. I don't know. My father probably did it and then his cannons. Yeah. He loved to shoot those off.

JA: Do you remember where he may have gotten them? Or did he mention that to you?

DB: He got them in Hawaii.

JA: Oh, in Hawaii?

DB: Yeah. I know he brought them from there.

JA: Okay.

DB: Okay. I don't recognize that chest but—

JA: Yeah. It might be someone else's.

DB: Yeah.

JA: All right. So why don't we go upstairs. (Laughs) All right. So, I'll let you use the handrail—go carefully upstairs. So, we're in the second floor in the main hallway. What do you recall about this space?



Picture 18: second floor main hallway Rippon Lodge.

DB: It was very much like this. At some point they put a wall there, and it was an extra bedroom. But it didn't really—it didn't fit. And so, they opened it back up the way it was originally.

JA: Okay.

DB: Yeah. I recognize all these things. Yeah.

JA: (Laughs) And so this was your room?

DB: This was my room.

JA: We call it the “Jane Charlotte Bedroom.”



Picture 19: "Jane Charlotte Bedroom" at Rippon Lodge.

DB: Oh, okay. Yeah. Oh, and this bed—yes. I tried to sleep on this once and it collapsed.

JA: Oh, no? (Laughs)

DB: I remember that. And my father had to repair it. Yeah. And that's the same bedspread. Yeah.

JA: Oh, okay.

DB: Oh. Yeah. All of these are—all this furniture is very familiar. Yeah. And in the winter, I would have a fire. And I had a big cannon [inaudible 0:20:42.10] went in here that way.

JA: Oh, okay.

DB: Yeah. And dolls everywhere.

JA: Now we've taken this apart, but you had two bathrooms?

DB: Yes.

JA: Where the "Architecture Room" is?



Picture 20: Second floor at Rippon Lodge.

DB: Yes.

JA: What do you recall about the bathrooms?

DB: Well, this one was mine.

JA: Okay.

DB: And this one was my parents'. And this is so interesting to see. Obviously, I never saw this cause you did this. So interesting to see that old brickwork. And I don't know what you call this?

JA: That's actually the plaster coming through the chicken wire.

DB: Oh, yeah.

JA: So, yeah. It's more a modern way to plaster walls.

DB: Wow.

JA: That's the more secure.

DB: Yeah.

JA: So, the entrance to the bathroom would have been roughly around the middle here—

DB: Right.

JA: —in the wall?

DB: Exactly.

JA: Okay.

DB: Yeah. And same here. It was middle in this—

JA: Okay.

DB: Yeah.

JA: What was it like here during the summer though? I mean did you have air conditioning or—

DB: No. No, we didn't.

JA: Oh.

DB: Every morning my mother would close all the draperies when it was still cool, and we had fans. Electric fans. But no. No air conditioning. No. Yeah.

JA: (Laughs) Pretty warm.

DB: Yeah.

JA: Okay So then we're now into the "Washington Bedroom." This was your parents' room?



Picture 21: the "Washington Bedroom" at Rippon Lodge.

DB: Mm-hmm.

JA: What do you recall about their room?

DB: Oh. I love it. What do I—well their—they had twin beds—they were here. And then the bathroom was there. I know the Ellises loved this room, and this was their bedroom also. Just that—yeah. The cradle—just to—I don't recall anything specific about this room. I love the beams. Yeah.

JA: Did you ever come in here as a little kid and wake them up? Bounce on the bed? (Laughs)

DB: Yes. I did all that stuff. And you see how the floors slant too.

JA: Yeah.

DB: All over the house. Yeah, yeah. Yeah, yeah. It really brings back memories. Oh, yeah. I remember all these.

JA: Yeah. The rocking chair.

DB: I'm so glad you're keeping the floors nice. It's—

JA: Yes.

DB: Yeah.

JA: And then were these the closets that they had constructed by the designer—

DB: Yeah.

JA: —where this—

DB: And I'm glad you took them out. Yes.

JA: (Laughs)

DB: Yeah, yeah. They weren't colonial at all.

JA: Yes.

DB: They came out about this far.

JA: Wow.

DB: Yeah. On both sides. Yeah, yeah.

JA: (Laughs)

DB: The room looks lovely—just lovely.

JA: And your shoes are making the walls sparkle. (Laughs)

DB: Oh?

JA: Turn around. (Laughs)

DB: Oh, yeah. Okay. Yeah. Okay. (Laughs)

JA: So—

DB: Oh, this?

JA: Yes.

DB: You know about this?

JA: Yes. The stained glass. Yes.

DB: Ripon Cathedral. The Ellises got that.

JA: Yeah.

DB: Beautiful, isn't it?

JA: It is. One thing that we haven't told you—and I'm not sure if you get our newsletter or not—but this mirror was gifted to us by another descendant of Jane Charlotte.

DB: Oh, who married into the Washington family?

JA: Yes.

DB: Yeah.

JA: And it passed through the family, and it is something that Richard Blackburn actually made.

DB: Really?

JA: Yes.

DB: Oh, my goodness?

JA: It's a dressing mirror.

DB: Oh, my goodness? Yeah. Two Blackburn girls are buried at Mount Vernon. Yeah. Jane Charlotte and I forget the other ones now.

JA: Well they actually three.

DB: Oh?

JA: Anna Maria Thomasina—which was her sister—

DB: Oh?

JA: —and then Julia which was Thomas and Christian's eldest daughter who married Bushrod.

DB: Oh? That's wow.

JA: Yeah.

DB: Yeah. So, he made that?

JA: He made it.

DB: It's very delicate.

JA: It is.

DB: Yeah.

JA: So, we just need to get a label written. (Laughs)

DB: Yeah. That's wonderful.

JA: Yeah. But they had the genealogy and everything and the whole story.

DB: I didn't know he was also a carpenter.

JA: Yeah.

DB: Yeah.

JA: He was a master woodworker. So, he definitely knew how to do something very—

DB: Yeah. And knew how to build this house.

JA: Yes.

DB: Yeah.

JA: Any other thoughts on the second floor? I mean if there's no air conditioning—it must have been pretty brutal trying to fall asleep here. (Laughs)

DB: Yeah. It was. Well, we as I said we had electric fans. But yeah. It was hot in summer. And it was cold in winter until we got the heating. And there were two or three years I think we were here before we got the heating. But I would play dress up in this hall. I don't know why I remember that. Yeah. Well, it really brings back memories—a beautiful old house.

JA: Yeah.

DB: I'm glad you're keeping it up.

JA: All right. So, we'll go into the gift shop because that was another space.

DB: Yes.

JA: And so, watch your step going down.

DB: Okay. Am I being recorded?

JA: Yes.

DB: Okay.

JA: (Laughs)

DB: I was gonna tell you a story about—shall I tell you?

JA: Of course. It's fine. (Laughs) We can always edit it out. (Laughs)

DB: All right. Well, I had a boyfriend, and my father liked him very much. He went to the Naval Academy—the boyfriend did. My father did not. And so, he came. He was invited to stay overnight for some event or something. and my father was fond of him. But, you know, that was—he was sleeping down here. So, I snuck down these steps. It took me a half an hour being really quiet.

JA: (Laughs)

DB: And snuck in and kissed him or whatever.

JA: Aw. (Laughs)

DB: That was all. That was all. But they never knew. They never knew.

JA: (Laughs) That's pretty hard to do on these steps. (Laughs)

DB: Yeah. It was very hard to do—it took a long time. (Laughs)

JA: It's like which spot is gonna squeak? Let me see? (Laughs)

DB: Yeah. (Laughs)

JA: So, we know this was a bathroom—

DB: Yeah.

JA: —here in the gift shop entryway. And then what do you recall about how—well it's our gift shop now, but how is this—is a guest room, I guess?

DB: This was a guest room. There were two twin beds—headboard here facing that way. And my grandmother always stayed here—my mother's mother when she came to visit. Yeah. It was a lovely guest room. I guess the Ellises added this, didn't they?



Picture 22: Guest room/Gift shop at Rippon Lodge.

JA: Yes.

DB: Yeah.

JA: This was an addition.

DB: Yeah.

JA: Did your half-brother ever come stay here?

DB: Yes, he did occasionally. Yeah. And I guess he stayed here in this room. He was in Korea. You know all about that.

JA: Yeah.

DB: So, he was wounded, and he—while he was recovering, he stayed here. He was at Belvoir.

JA: Okay.

DB: Being—

JA: Tended to.

DB: —cause see his leg. Yeah. Oh.

JA: Yeah. We do weddings here. (Laughs)

DB: You certainly do. That's beautiful. Yeah.

JA: It's a great location, and we have tons of people wanting to get photographs—

DB: I bet.

JA: —taken here. So, yeah.

DB: Yeah, yeah.

JA: It's very picturesque.

DB: How often does that happen? I mean—

JA: Photos are—

DB: —more or less?

JA: —seasonal—right now with the fall colors and the way the sun sets and everything—we have a lot more people with school and graduation and prom pictures and that kind of stuff. So, we get an influx from the school kids that way. We also have families getting ready for the holidays. So, they come all dressed like the same.

DB: Oh?

JA: And have their, you know, their Christmas card picture taken here or something like that, so.

DB: Oh, that's great.

JA: The photography is definitely a lot more. Weddings are just—depends on the couples and stuff and who—I have at least two booked next year for here.

DB: Oh, really?

JA: Yeah.

DB: That's wonderful. That's wonderful. I'm so glad it's being used. That's wonderful, yeah.

JA: Then we have people who just come here to walk. They come here to go birding or look at all the different insects and take photographs and use the picnic area. So, it's really used and loved.

DB: It's really being used.

JA: Yes, it is.

DB: That's wonderful. My parents would be very happy to know that.

JA: Good.

DB: Yeah. Okay. I wanted to buy some of these. Can I do that?

JA: Mm-hmm. Absolutely

DB: Let me go get my purse.

JA: Well, we're gonna stop the recording. (Laughs)

DB: Yeah, okay. Sorry.

JA: No, it's okay.

DB: It's a very ad-lib recording.

LM: Those are the best ones, honestly, it's there. Yeah.

JA: No. It's actually one of the best ones. Absolutely.

DB: Really?

JA: Yes.

LM: Oh, for sure.

DB: That's what Carl told me.

END OF RECORDING