

# “Working—and playing” An Oral History

By Philmore Kelley  
(interviewed by Margo Blevin Denton)

I was born October 19, 1928. My whole name is Silas Philmore Kelley, after both my granddads. My dad was a carpenter, and my mother worked a little when she could find work. At one time, we lived in Barbour County. Dad had a farm there; when he had work here in Elkins, he’d come do it, and then he’d go back to Barbour County. We finally moved to Elkins when I was about seven. So I’ve spent most of my life in Elkins, but I spent summers with my grandmother down in Barbour County. I learned a whole lot from all the old farmers there. I’d go out in the hayfields and work for 10 cents an hour. I’ve always had pretty good health. We grew up playing softball in Bluegrass Park after the soldiers all left. So we just grew up working—and playing.

My granddad was from North Carolina, and his mother was a full-blooded Cherokee Indian. So I’m part Cherokee. But I didn’t know much about being part Indian growing up. Granddad left North Carolina at 13 or 14 years old; he ran away from home. He worked his way through Virginia and into West Virginia in the wood-hick days. He met my grandmother, and she said, “I’m not going to marry you until you get in touch with your mother; let her know where you’re at.” Well, he wrote her, and he got to see her twice in North Carolina before she died. My mother was 8 years old when Granddad went to see his mother for the last time. I was only 10 years old the first time they took me to North Carolina to meet my relatives. That was something, seeing all that tobacco and cotton growing down there. That just put traveling in my blood. I love to go and see the country.



Philmore Kelley of Elkins. Photo by our author.

From the time I was a little kid, I could draw stuff. I could take a knife and whittle. Granddad’s knife—I wasn’t supposed to have it—there are scars on my hand from that still today. I could carve a gun so it looked like a real one. We used to make rubber-band guns, and I was a crack shot with one. There was a



Philmore's railroad crew in Elkins—Philmore is at the far right. All photos courtesy of our author.

bank by the river where you could dig clay. I'd roll it into balls and lay 'em in the sun to dry, and they would shoot straight as a marble!

I worked in the gardens in the summers and put up hay and stuff when I got big enough. My dad's boss said, "If you want to come work for me, just climb on the truck." And that's how I got started with the cement-block company where Dad worked. I was 14½ or 15, but I was big for my age, and strong. The war was going on, and manpower was scarce. My granddad was a big part of my working capabilities because he loved people who'd work. In his later years, he was the foreman in the CCC camp in Raleigh County. Just think how smart he was: with maybe a third-grade education, he made foreman. And he had worked for the railroad before that. One day, he ran into someone he knew who said, "Why don't you go over to the railroad and ask for a job?" And he said, "I'm too old." And they said, "They need men so bad they won't even ask you how old you are. Just go

over there, and they'll put you to work." And sure enough, they did. His hands were so swelled up with arthritis he couldn't hardly work. But the foreman over there said, "Do you know anybody else that needs a job?" and Granddaddy said, "I've got a grandson that likes to have a job," so he said, "You tell him to come over."

So I went over, and they give me some papers to fill out. He was so desperate for men he didn't even wait for those papers to come back from the doctor. The boss was sitting there, and he said, "11:00 tonight, boy." I said, "What?!" And he said, "You're in the locomotives department now." So that's how it started with me and the railroad.

It was December 1947 when I went to work for the Western Maryland Railroad. First job I ever done was operating the roundhouse turntable. I said to the fella that was training me, "Which way do I turn it, right or left?" He said, "Don't make any difference, it'll run just as fast one way as it does the other."

We worked pretty hard in the steam-engine days. You didn't sit down much, and when there was something to do, you did it. But I loved to switch engines on the turntable! They told you which trains were going out, and we would get them ready to go. We got 10 steam engines (800s) ready to go east every day. In 1950, they brought engines from Thomas here. So that made 10 800s going out of here *every* morning—100-car trains. There was 28 men on each train going out of here. But then in 1953, they switched over from steam engines to diesel, and they only needed seven men on each one. So the jobs just kept droppin' down, droppin' down. I'll tell you something about the steam engines: a steam engine was just the same as something alive because you had to feed it and keep pouring water in it to keep it goin'. If it was a diesel engine, you just turned it on or shut it off.

One thing I am very proud of: when they still had the steam engines, I worked the inspection. They'd pull that engine into the pit; the crew would be there, and Lloyd Simpson was the machinist. It only took him about five minutes, and then he'd say, "OK, Kelley, you can have that engine." So I would drop that engine down to the next place. They changed those 200-class engines every day. Years later, I got to thinking that I got to run every one of those engines just because of working that job there! Every morning at the same time, that Baltimore train left Elkins heading east. When they got to Cumberland, the crew got off and got on the next train coming back west. That's what they done all day—just switched trains. It put those engineers back in their home terminal every evening, see? They'd bring the last train back to Elkins at 7:00 that evening, and the other crew would be at their home terminal in Baltimore. So that's how it worked.

Every so often, they'd bring a private train in here with maybe three or four coaches on it. Private cars were for the big shots: the owners of the railroad. I don't know who else, maybe the train foremen and master

mechanics? They had a lodge up on Cheat Mountain, and they would go up to that. I was there just once, years later when I was playing music. We went up and played music for them. But that's the only time I was ever up there.

And later, in 1985, I was working as a temporary car man. This system was set up to build at least 3½ cars a day, but we turned out 5 perfect cars, every day! I know. I saw it done. And they kept on shipping the materials in here and building them cars here. Because then, men really worked! That's the reason they kept that railroad here. It went from Elkins to Cumberland to Baltimore. I don't know how many miles they had, but they had beautiful engines. Beautiful. They took care of them. C&O [Chesapeake & Ohio] was a prosperous railroad, and B&O [Baltimore & Ohio] linked 13 states in the nation; then C&O and B&O merged. They owned the Western Maryland too. They shipped all that coal overseas—a full car every minute—turned it over in Baltimore, brought it back, filled it, and turned it out again. That's the reason why people from West Virginia could go to Ohio and get hired on just like that. Because West Virginia people are good workers. But in 1985, when that big flood happened all over West Virginia, it was a disaster for the railroad.

I worked most of my life for the railroad. You weren't guaranteed five days when they called you to work. They might work you two days and then send you home. I had 427 service months when I retired.

I had learned to cook back when I was working in Cumberland. I had a homemade camper that I made down there. I stayed in it and did my own cooking. We kept saving money, and finally I had enough to buy a ½-ton truck. I made a homemade camper to set on it. I built it myself, and I was very proud of it. The first big trip my wife and I took was to Montreal, Canada, to Expo '67. I ran into a guy there who had a ¾-ton truck, and he said, "I don't want to scare



Philmore scrubs down a Western Maryland railroad car.

you, but those wheels that you have are not made for that load that you're hauling. They can just explode. If I was you, I'd get me a bigger truck." So we traded it in for a bigger truck, and we had it for years and years. I had Wednesday and Thursday off through the summer, and we'd load up and hit whatever campgrounds we could reach. And when vacation time came, we'd head to the beaches and all over. I've been to Yellowstone twice. Then we bought a used 1975 motorhome and put 7,000 miles on it. We were going to make another trip, but then my wife got sick and we didn't go.

My wife was a smart woman, I'll tell you. She never missed a day. From first grade until she finished high school, she had perfect attendance. She loved school. It was the other way around with me! So I didn't stay in school. But my wife got to teach, and she didn't even have a teacher's certificate. She was a brain at spelling, and she taught

in the [West Virginia] Children's Home for 20 years, and she worked in a bank for years too. There was some important test that they would give all the kids in the state. She learned how to run it, and they said, "We want you to come to Charleston for three days." Well, she didn't tell them that she wasn't a teacher. And here's all these teachers, and they said, "Mrs. Kelley, will you explain this?" I understand they called the board of education here and said, "That's a smart teacher that you sent down here!"

So that's another thing; maybe I depended on her too much. She took care of the checking account and everything, and I just worked, or went and helped this fellow or that fellow. Didn't hardly take time to sit down and read the newspaper. But after she died, I said, "Maybe I should have done more of that stuff." But finally, some of it came to me. You just had to fool with it.

My mother, she was a good singer; everywhere we went, I'd always get her to sing. And she could chord an organ or a piano. I think that's why I wanted to play music. Well, I got a few dollars ahead and got me a Sears, Roebuck guitar. It wouldn't stay in tune, but I kept fooling with the thing, and finally I got it in tune. From that time on, I was chording and singing and playing. My brother teased me about being Gene Autry, but I kept on playing. Then I taught myself how to play the mandolin by watching the guitar players. I stood on the righthand side of the musician so I could read his fingers. So he's playing a D chord, and I found one, then he went to A, so I found an A chord. There's all kinds of A's on there, you know! So I would jump around, hit one chord, and then hit another. That's how I learned to play mandolin.

Back in 1960, I had helped form the Korn Kobbers band. There was our banjo player, Carl Tallman, and my brother-in-law Dale Carr played guitar and washtub bass, and our fiddler, Ron Moyer, and me. We got



The Korn Kobbbers, with Philmore on guitar (second from right).

hooked up with George Brown from Pepsi-Cola—they made their own Pepsi here in Elkins—and he would have us go play for things for them. We played two times at Weston State Hospital. Then Ron left the band, and we got Gus McGee—Woody Simmons' brother-in-law—and he was our fiddle player after that. We played three times in Pennsylvania and at [Pittsburgh's] Kennywood Park twice. We played at Pepsi-Cola Days and got tickets for all the rides and stuff, and you never saw the likes of the food there. We played for weddings. One night, we were supposed to play up at Davis & Elkins College. Well, Carl sprained his hand, and Gus had ran a knife through his finger and couldn't play the fiddle, so he called Woody Simmons. I was playing

mandolin by then, and I hadn't been playing much guitar anymore. I said, "Woody, you just play straight songs, and I'll know what to do." So I played the guitar for Woody. There was a lot of playing for this and that, and I really enjoyed every bit of it.

Then the Korn Kobbbers got hired for the Mountain State Forest Festival, and for the next 15 years, we played the public square dances for the Forest Festival. That's the largest crowd I ever played for; I'd say there was 30,000 people out there by the stage where they crown the queen, but it didn't pay on account of the weather. They moved the public square dances to all different buildings. Finally, I talked them into cleaning up the floor in the Forest Festival building, where they stored all their stuff, and we

started having the square dances there. It had a rough concrete floor, so they brought a machine in and polished the floor to where they could dance on it.

But then, my wife got sick. Betty got this esophagus cancer, and I spent all my time sitting down next to her bed the whole time she was sick. And then she was in the hospital, dripping chemo 24 hours a day, and she was in radiation every day. She would sleep a lot, and I would sit there next to her and read. I had just got this book on how to build a mandolin. I'm a slow reader, and it takes a while for something to sink in. And I would write out a little outline so I'd remember the main things. I just set quietly there with her and read those paragraphs over and over 'til it got in my brain.

I had repaired an old mandolin of mine; I rebuilt it twice. But I'd never built one from beginning to end. I started to think I could do it. I love to fix anything that needs to be fixed. I can do carpenter work, electric work, plumbing; I built three houses from the ground up. But a mandolin is a really hard instrument to build. When I cut that thing out, I never used a saw. I took a Dremel tool, and I went around it and got that thing cut out. It was all done by hand. There was a man who liked to come hear us play, and he brought me a big piece of maple, and I made a case for that mandolin. You can stand on that case, and it wouldn't collapse. Some guy said to me, "You worked for two years on that mandolin. What would you have done if it didn't sound good?" I said, "I'd have put an electric clock in it and hung it on the wall." I finished it in 1994.

I kept busy building things. I'm still wanting to build a guitar. Reice Brown builds them, and he gave me a pattern to make one. I've got pretty good hands, and I can do manual work. Then I started playing music on television with The Seneca Trail Band. That was the band that I was in with Eloise Mann and Ed Gardner from Pocahontas County—he played guitar and French harp,

and sang. Jerry Gibson ran the local TV channel, Channel 3, and sang with us, and he talked us into going on his television program. We were on there for nine years. We'd practice for two hours, and then we played two hours of live music there every week. Besides that, we went out on the road, and we made tapes to sell too. Then I started playing for Augusta Heritage at Pickin' in the Park, and I'm still hooked up with that. We went to play for the heart telethon up there in Beverly. I don't know what I would have done after my wife died if I hadn't had the music. It was something for me to do.

After I quit doing the television show, I started going over to Buckhannon to play. So I got in with a couple of different groups. I went over to the Amazing Grace band, and I played with them for about five years. We played in 27 different churches and at revivals. For 20 years, I played every Wednesday at Nella's Nursing Home. Then I got with the Bluegrass Gospel Mountaineers, and we were on live television in Buckhannon. And I was going to the Ellamore Fire Station playing. Now that's a lot of playing! It just seemed like I had something going all the time. It's all volunteer work, but I found out the more you do for other people, the better it makes you feel. You're giving your time, but it keeps you going. I think it pays off!

I'm almost 92 years old. These days, I play all over Randolph County, Barbour County, and Upshur County. I play the first Sunday of every month at Elkins Regional Convalescent Center, and on every third Sunday at the nursing home in Philippi. I play for the dulcimer classes at the Elkins Senior Center on the second Tuesday of each month. The third Tuesday of the month, I play at Colonial Place, and then we've got 30 minutes to get over to Nella's. Every Wednesday night, I lead the country music jams for Augusta at Pickin' in the Park in the summer and at Davis & Elkins College in the winter. We play all the old country songs and gospel. Sometimes, I go to Weston to play with the Wireless

Connection. Once in a while, we play at the Woodford Memorial Church in Elkins. I play at Holbrook Nursing Home in Buckhannon the second Saturday of every month and at the Senior Center in Buckhannon on the first and third Saturdays. They have another group comes in there sometimes, and if I go over there and they're already up there playin', I say, "No, I'll just listen." You know, sometimes it's just good to sit and listen.

I'll tell you what I believe now: this college here in Elkins is going to keep growing, which is really good. And they got these theaters here now, and this will be known as a music city! And they're running those scenic trains all around here, in the winter and summer. I rode the Cass train one time, and we went up and played music up there on top of the hill. I'd like to see this scenic railroad do more like that.

And I'd like to see more young people get into the music. I was going to make a round mandolin; you could build one really cheap that way. And if there was some kid that was interested in it, I was going to give it to them. From what I can see now, young people are just a-sittin', punching phones and things; they've got those games they're playing on all the time. Back in our day, we had Grandpa Jones—we saw him at the YMCA—and those Grand Ole Opry shows. We used to listen to them on the radio when we could get the signal. After I got to be a lineman on the train, I'd go down there and see the show on a Friday evening.

The kind of music we like to play, it's just the old country music. Some would say it's a little bit like bluegrass. But it's just plain country music. Now when it comes to music notes, I don't know one note from another one. I play it, but I don't read any notes. But I've been blessed. I just listen to the ups and downs of the music, and I know where to go next. Now, when we get together every week for Pickin' in the Park, or Pickin' at the College, I'll say to one of them, "You play two songs." Then somebody else plays two



Philmore Kelley, holding a mandolin made by Gus McGee. Photo by our author.

songs, and we keep going around. So one time, someone brings this instrument in there to the jam session, and it has one of those little power things on it. Well, he didn't increase the power, so I didn't say anything. But one night, someone turned the thing way up. And I told him, "Well, you've got to shut it off." That's a good rule, you know. The thing of it is, leadership is a technique of helping others to achieve a common goal. I learned that in the West Virginia National Guard; I was in there for seven years and made sergeant. And I found out, if there's any way that you can get somebody to do something without chewing them out, you're better off. Because you can win 'em over better that way! 🍁

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