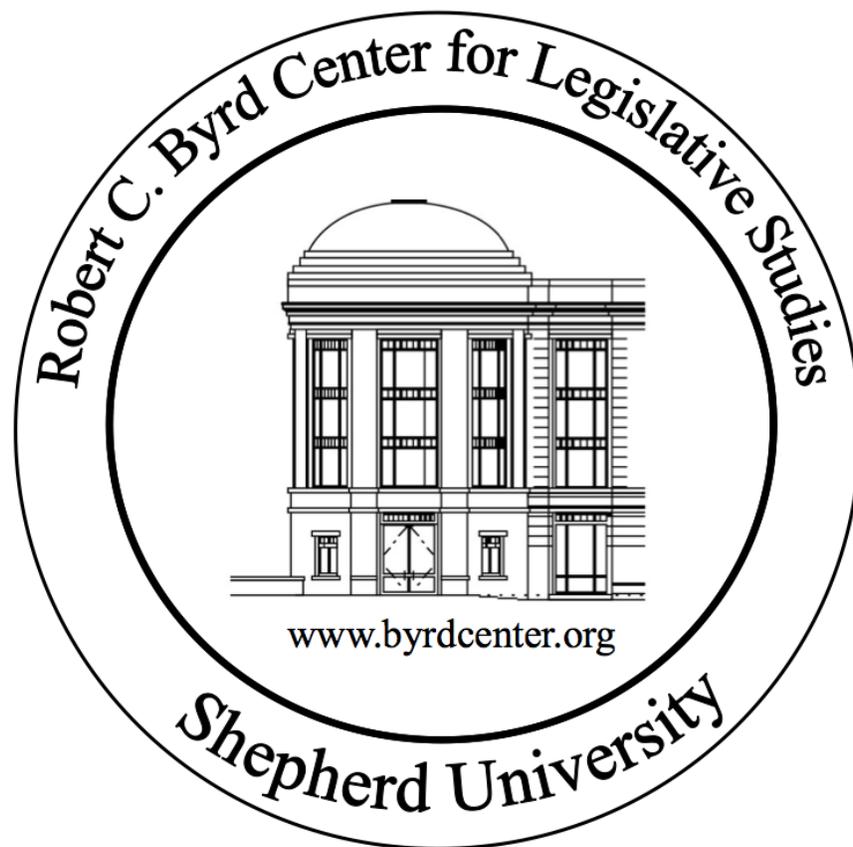


Robert C. Byrd Legacy Project

Oral History Interview

Bobby Taylor

June 21, 2013



Preface

By James J. Wyatt

Robert “Bobby” Taylor is a fourth generation West Virginia fiddler with more than forty years performing experience. He trained under famed fiddlers Clark Kessinger and Mike Humphreys and first gained recognition for his playing in 1977, when he was named West Virginia state fiddle champion. In 2003, the Friends of Old-Time Music and Dance awarded Taylor the Footbridge Award for his contribution to old-time music. He has served as a judge at numerous prestigious fiddling competitions, including the Grand Masters Fiddle Championship in Nashville, TN, and coordinated several others, including the West Virginia Vandalia Gathering contest, the Appalachian Open Contest, and the Appalachian String Band Music Festival Contest. Taylor has played with numerous acts and entities, most recently with the old-time band, *Kanawha Tradition*, at a variety of venues, most notably the Kennedy Center in Washington D.C.

In this oral history, Taylor focuses primarily on one of the less publicized aspects of Senator Byrd’s life, his fiddle playing. A close personal friend, Taylor performed in support of the senator on numerous occasions as a part of *Chestnut Ridge*, a group he describes informally “as Senator Byrd’s band.” He details Senator Byrd’s life-long passion for playing the fiddle, the musicians who most influenced the senator’s playing, and the seriousness with which he approached the instrument. Taylor characterizes Senator Byrd as a “very good fiddler” whose playing had “a lot of soul” and a unique “haunting tonal effect.” He also explains how playing the fiddle at rallies and stump speeches helped the then future senator gain notoriety and develop a following during his early political career.

Branching away from music, Taylor discusses his friendship with Senator Byrd. He expresses his affinity for the senator through the retelling of numerous personal stories and anecdotes, including one in which the senator called his father to make sure that he safely returned home from a performance. In doing so, Taylor presents Senator Byrd as “an honest” and “genuine” humanitarian and as a “maverick public servant” who “transcended” parties and politics while serving the state of West Virginia.

About the interviewer: Alan Sturm is a retired educator, former teacher, principal, and assistant superintendent of Upshur County Schools. He also served for two terms on the Jefferson County Board of Education. He has a BA in history from West Virginia Wesleyan and an MA in Public School Administration from West Virginia University. He has made the study of West Virginia political history his lifelong hobby, and he has been working to collect interviews for the Robert C. Byrd Oral History Project since July 2012. He lives with his wife, Libby, in Shepherdstown, West Virginia.

Interview #1
Friday, June 21, 2013

STURM: Today is Friday, February 21, 2013. I'm Alan Sturm. I'm working with the Robert C. Byrd Center for Legislative Studies on the oral history segment of the Robert C. Byrd Legacy Project. Today it is my pleasure to be speaking with Mr. Bobby Taylor. Mr. Taylor is a fourth-generation West Virginia fiddler. He is a former West Virginia State Open Fiddle Champion. In 2003, he received the Footbridge Award from the Friends of Old Time Music and Dance. In 2010, he won the Vandalia Award. In July of 2012, he was inducted into the Mountain State Arts & Craft Hall of Fame in Ripley, West Virginia. He has judged national fiddle competitions and has played at a variety of venues, including the Library of Congress and the Kennedy Center in Washington. He is currently the library manager of the West Virginia Archives and Historical Library section of the West Virginia State Archives. We are conducting this interview in his office in the West Virginia Cultural Center.

Mr. Taylor, I want to thank you for taking time to do this interview for the Byrd Center.

TAYLOR: It's a pleasure to be here.

STURM: Now, as you know, this session is being recorded. Is that all right with you?

TAYLOR: That is fine.

STURM: I will ask you a few questions today, but for the most part, I want you just to feel free to talk about Senator Byrd as you knew him and your relationship with him over the years. I'd like for you to share stories, personal observations, and anything that you feel comfortable in discussing with me about Senator Byrd. We may touch on politics as it plays a role in his life, but what we want to talk about is Robert C. Byrd the fiddler—.

TAYLOR: That sounds great.

STURM: —as you knew him. Let's begin by having you tell us a little bit more about your background and your family and how you got to where you are today.

TAYLOR: Senator Byrd was a household name in my family as early as I can remember. My mother knew Senator Byrd, because she met his mother, the mother that raised him here in West Virginia.

My mother, when I was born, was in a sanitarium for tuberculosis in Beckley. She was getting ready to get on a bus to come home, and Senator Byrd's mother was there. They had a lovely conversation, and my mother said that Senator Byrd's mother was one of the nicest people she had ever met. So that was the first introduction, I guess, to Senator Byrd.

STURM: About when was that?

TAYLOR: That would have been maybe about the time I was born, about 1952, through that era of time. So, mother knew of the Byrd family way back then.

STURM: I don't think I've talked to anybody who actually has said that they've ever met his mother.

TAYLOR: But she had.

STURM: That's fantastic.

TAYLOR: So say that we go back a long ways with that, Senator Byrd has been a household name my whole life.

In 1976, I played with the Sweeney Brothers Band. That was when Senator Byrd played on the *Grand Ole Opry*, about that time period. He always was famous for wearing his red vest, and he appeared in his red vest at the Huntington Civic Center. We played a show, the Sweeney Brothers, and he went on with The Country Gentlemen, and we had a wonderful evening that evening. He played his fiddle, I played my fiddle, and it was just a great evening.

STURM: Is that actually the first time you'd ever met him?

TAYLOR: I think that probably was the first time I'd ever met him, and throughout the years I had seen him in different places. But the 1990s is when, at the death of his grandson, John Michael Moore, he had made his recording of some beautiful fiddle tunes and singing, but after that, he no longer played the fiddle very much.

At that point, I become his fiddler, in the 1990s especially, and played a lot of events where he would be speaking at and he would get up and sing. And that's when we became friends. It wasn't just politics. Some of the events were political and some were where they were dedicating buildings and highways and everything else in his honor, which he truly deserved, because he was a maverick public servant, beyond anything I've ever seen. I've never seen anybody that could make things happen like he could, and he was so genuine about it and honest about it.

But we became friends, and it was so neat that I could call his office and talk to Martha Anne McIntosh or Anne Barth.

STURM: Martha Anne's my neighbor. She lives about two miles from where we live in Shepherdstown.

TAYLOR: That's so neat. I'd call his office, and they would just put him on the phone. I'd be sitting out in the library and all of a sudden some of the patrons would look around and I would say, "Oh, it's a pleasure to talk to you today, Senator Byrd." And, they would all look around. "You're talking to Senator Byrd?"

STURM: Did he actually call you and ask you to make appearances with him, or how was that arranged?

TAYLOR: I'd talked to him on the phone different times, and I think he would call either me or, in most cases, I think, probably Tracey Rohrbaugh, who we'll talk more about, with Chestnut Ridge. Chestnut Ridge was the band that we formed kind of as Senator Byrd's band. We even had a business card. Dr. Ken Landreth played the banjo in this band, and he had a business card with Senator Byrd's name on it.

STURM: I never heard of that. Would you have a copy of that card?

TAYLOR: Ken Landreth has some and he can get you—

STURM: That would be fantastic. I'll contact him. I'm sure they'd like to have a copy at the Byrd Center.

TAYLOR: Ken has the business card, and Senator Byrd, he showed it to him, kind of thinking that, oh, this would kind of be beneath Senator Byrd, you know. But Ken just kind of showed it to him jokingly, and Senator Byrd said, "I want some of those." He wanted them to pass out.

So, like I said, he was such a humanitarian, and I think that's why Senator Byrd could get elected on all levels, because he could talk. That's why I consider him of the highest of high class. I always considered a person high class that was at home on any level of humanity and made everybody feel at home on any level of humanity. I think everybody knew that he was on their side, and I don't think you can feel more comfort than that. It showed.

STURM: Now, your relationship to him obviously was different than a lot of the people I've talked with who had just a political relationship with him. Yours was more personal. Did you have occasion to sit down and talk with him about how he started playing the fiddle, about the early days? Do you have any information about that?

TAYLOR: Yes, I do. He knew Clark Kessinger, three times world champion. He even played in contests when Clark was there. He loved fiddling, and he also played the violin, as you probably know, when he was in school, in the orchestra even, and he knew a lot about fiddling.

STURM: Let's interject something right here for the people who are going to be reading this who may not know. Talk a little bit about the difference between playing the violin and fiddling. That's something that I've heard a lot of people—I used to be a school principal and we had kids sign up for the—we had a string program. They wanted to learn to fiddle, and they got in there and they were learning to play the violin. So talk a little bit about the difference.

TAYLOR: Violin is a wonderful thing to get your children started into. It's structured. It's very structured. You have it written down, and it is to be played exactly and precisely the way it's written. It's a standard of excellence that you strive to do and to do accurately. But it's structured, and it's to be done exactly right. That's why you have all the way from your start to

very simple, to very complex, all the way from your little students that start out at the very beginning stages that goes all the way to Itzhak Perlman, violin virtuoso who can memorize it, play it without the sheet music, who plays it exactly, though. You have people that can sight-read many lines, even below where the music is, and that is just talent that is unbelievable.

Okay. Fiddling, a lot of great fiddlers start, though, from being a violinist.

STURM: And Senator Byrd did.

TAYLOR: Senator Byrd did that.

STURM: Did you?

TAYLOR: I did not. I'm not a violinist. But, I will state what the difference is. There are people, though, that play the violin that cannot play the fiddle. They cannot make the change. Senator Byrd, when he plays the fiddle, shows almost no sign of violin training. A great fiddler usually shows a whole lot of improvisational skills. Violinists that can't make the transformation usually will sound a little stiff, a little regimented, won't have that flow of the fiddler. A great transformation between violin and fiddle has that ability to add a lot of your personal feeling, soul, and improvisation to the fiddling. What can make them both operate well together is all the knowledge in chords and structure, and real clean, clear accurate noting that the violinists do that a lot of fiddlers may not have learned.

STURM: Well, that might explain—I had a professor in college who was a trained violinist, a music teacher. I'm from Buckhannon. He said he used to go around to square dances and all those sorts of things and watch fiddlers, and he said he could not make his violin do what those fiddlers made their fiddles do.

TAYLOR: Yes, and some cannot. If you've got the best of both worlds, that's one great thing. One of the greatest fiddlers that ever lived was not a violinist, and that was Clark Kessinger, and he is marveled at to this day for his technique. And, Senator Byrd always thought the world of Clark Kessinger. His execution with the bow was just unbelievable. I've had a broken tendon in my middle finger. I said today is perhaps not the greatest day for me to demonstrate three of Senator Byrd's favorite tunes because I am pretty stiff there in that middle finger. I'm hoping to execute some of his favorite tunes today when they unveil the exhibit.

STURM: I look forward to that. [On June 21, 2013, the West Virginia Department of Education and the Arts and the Robert C. Byrd Center for Legislative Studies unveiled a new permanent exhibit on the Senator in the West Virginia State Museum in Charleston. Bobby Taylor played his fiddle at the opening ceremony.]

TAYLOR: But I'm not as good as I was, by any shakes of the imagination, after ripping that tendon loose from the bone, on the noting hand, of all things.

But the thing is, I never liked to downplay those who have had classical training because there are some that win national championships after having classic training, and there's some

that don't. The ones that have classical training, though, that aren't able to forget enough of it to become fluid at the other, that show classical training, that can't get past that bridge. Does that kind of answer—

STURM: It does. Now, did Senator Byrd, after he learned to play the violin, was he pretty much self-taught on the fiddle?

TAYLOR: Very much so, in my opinion. His fiddling showed—he would play even cross-key tunes and they sound so mountain—

STURM: What's a cross-key tune?

TAYLOR: Where you tune the violin or fiddle in different tunings, the old mountain style. Rather than *E-A-D-G*, you might tune it *E-A-E-A*, and you get the drone strings and the old mountain, haunting tonal effect.

STURM: Those sounds that my professor said he couldn't make his violin do.

TAYLOR: Yes. And the fact is, Senator Byrd had a lot of soul in his playing. It was just incredible what he could do. He definitely had that mountain flavor to his playing, which showed no hint, at that point, of violin training. But now, where you've seen a hint of his playing, when he played "More Pretty Girls Than One," where he'd go up the neck and pull some very neat chords and stuff, that showed some pretty good technique. You could see that he knew more than some of the old mountain fiddlers there.

STURM: And, if he was with his fiddle like he was with everything else, when he saw something and learned it, it stayed with him.

TAYLOR: Yes, you could see that. So Senator Byrd, even though people would at times poke fun at his fiddling and stuff like that, the bottom line is, Senator Byrd was a very good fiddler when he went out to play. He could fiddle. If you listen to the recording, it's quite good. But if you'd listen to the cassette tape that got lost, that "Dusty Miller" was the best I had ever heard it.

STURM: And that would say about 1995?

TAYLOR: Ninety-five that I got to hear it.

STURM: Let's follow up on something else. You said that after his grandson was killed—and other people have said this—he pretty much for a while at least—

TAYLOR: He never did really pick the fiddle back up.

STURM: But this was just a private thing when you were in his office?

TAYLOR: When I was in his office that day—I will fill you in on another little story there that’s very important. This is a memory from there that he shared with us, Chestnut Ridge, close personal friends.

STURM: You all were there, the whole band?

TAYLOR: Yes. He sat in his office, very sad, and talked about the death of his grandson, John Michael Moore, who was his daughter Marjorie’s son. He said, “Perhaps I need to retire and spend more time with my family, but I’ve got so much I need to get done for the nation.” And he then talked about—he said, “I hope West Virginia knows how much I care for them, that every night I get down on my knees and I pray for West Virginia.” He was as sincere and honest about that as I’d ever seen about it. That was 1995, because we had played the—I think it was West Virginia Society of Washington at this *big* hotel. [President Bill] Clinton was in attendance, and I’ll get to that in a moment. But he had invited us to stay that night and the next day to have lunch in the Senate Appropriations chamber.

STURM: [laughs] Not many people get that invitation.

TAYLOR: We then scrambled to cancel everything on our calendars. I canceled—I’ll tell you this. I had one of the biggest cancelations of my life the next day. I canceled a meeting with John Hartford at Lawrence Haley’s house. Lawrence and Pat Haley, their son Steve was going to be there. Now, that may not mean anything to you until I tell you, Lawrence Haley was Ed Haley’s son. Clark Kessinger, who was Robert Byrd’s, one of his favorite fiddlers of all time, but Ed Haley was Clark Kessinger’s teacher, and John Hartford being the big country star that wrote “Gentle On My Mind” was there.

STURM: I heard that name, but I couldn’t place it.

TAYLOR: That meeting was set up. I now have Ed Haley’s fiddle as custodian of it, and I showcase it all over the—it even has been on exhibit here. I showcase it playing Ed Haley and Clark Kessinger’s tunes.

But, I canceled that meeting. I had to call John Hartford, being the celebrity he is, and tell him he had been upstaged. And he said, “This has been set up for months. What’s the problem?”

I said, “Believe it or not, I’m in Washington, D.C., and Senator Byrd has invited us for a special lunch in the Senate Appropriations chamber tomorrow.” And I said, “Can we postpone this to Tuesday?” [laughter]

He said, “Well, in that case, I guess we should.”

Meanwhile, Dr. Landreth had to cancel class, and Senator Byrd, as we remember, canceled a Senate meeting.

STURM: He did? [laughter]

TAYLOR: So, if that isn't a good story, I don't know what is.

STURM: That answers at least part of a question that I've asked a lot of other people. And I'll just sort of put it to you now, see if this doesn't fit in, because a lot of people have felt that Senator Byrd was really a very private, withdrawn man. I've asked several people what he did for relaxation and pleasure, and apparently, the fiddle, and folks like you who played the fiddle, were part of his relaxation and pleasure. Is that a fair statement to make?

TAYLOR: That was the fairest statement you can make, because that'll bring me to this little part of my presentation. The fiddle was the part of his relaxation, because he would get the fiddle out each evening, I think. Part of our conversation on one of our gatherings, in the evening, after one of the most stressful days maybe trying to iron out some of the nation's greatest troubles, for him to unwind—people go home and sit and watch television—he'd go home and pull the fiddle out.

STURM: I was going to ask you, did he play just by himself at home?

TAYLOR: Yes, he did, and he had several fiddles at the house. And, one thing I really regret never come to pass because of distance, his schedule and my schedule, and all that, he had invited me to his house, which I thought was the biggest honor you could get, and wanted me to go through his fiddles; we'd go through and look at them.

STURM: You're the first person that I've talked with who said that they've ever been invited to his house.

TAYLOR: I was invited to come and look.

STURM: Did you go?

TAYLOR: I didn't get to.

STURM: Oh, that's a shame. Do you have any idea how many fiddles he had?

TAYLOR: I thought he said about a dozen.

STURM: Because Ray [Smock] told me at one point they had two or three at the Byrd Center, but he wasn't—

TAYLOR: I think he said about a dozen. I think that's my memory. But that was back in the nineties, and he wanted me to come and look through them and tell him what he had, because I've done quite a bit of study on violins or fiddles, as we call them.

I will get back to the hotel show, because President Clinton was president at the time. He was elected in 1992, I think, for the first time. This was 1995, and it was a big thing honoring Senator Byrd then. Clinton was there, and I got to shake hands with President Clinton.

STURM: That's fantastic.

TAYLOR: Which was great, and I got to shake hands with Clinton two or three times back then during my Senator Byrd tours. But, I remember Clinton's speech, and Ken Landreth last night got to fill me in on part of the stuff that I'd forgotten, and I remembered part of the stuff that he had forgotten, and Tracey filled me in on other stuff.

But, I remember his speeches; because Senator Byrd, in my opinion, was the best public speaker I'd ever seen. Earlier on, he spoke faster and said a lot. Later his speeches were a little slower, and he said maybe even more, but slower and more heartfelt. But, I never could decipher which was better, earlier or later. I like later better because every word seemed like a pecan pie; it was just so rich and so meaningful, what he said.

But, I remember President Clinton when he got up to speak, honoring Senator Byrd. He said, "You know, when I came to Washington, D.C. as being elected President of the United States, there was one person that I was afraid—," or "apprehensive," whatever words he used. Recollecting almost twenty years now, I won't get the quote right.

STURM: That's all right.

TAYLOR: But I'm going to try to get the meaning right.

STURM: Paraphrasing is fine.

TAYLOR: He said, "One person I was afraid or apprehensive to meet was Senator Robert C. Byrd. I knew there was no one in the big city that knew more about the workings of government than this gentleman. When I finally got to meet him, I met a very humble, down-to-earth gentleman. Not much was said during this first meeting, but he did come out and hand me a history of the Senate."

STURM: Which he had written.

TAYLOR: Which he had written. "I decided I'd better read that, and I did, because I figured later I would be quizzed on it." Then Ken Landreth remembered this, he said, "I also figured that Senator Byrd might want the Capitol moved to West Virginia." Those two statements were remembered by Chestnut Ridge.

STURM: That's fantastic. That is great. Because I had read a little bit in Woodward's book several years ago about Clinton's initial feelings about Senator Byrd when he came to Washington, so that adds a lot to that.

TAYLOR: We do remember—now, Ken will have a listing of a lot of our shows. When you email him, Ken Landreth, he does remember that, in 1995, we played the Canaan National Wildlife Refuge show, where Senator Byrd made an address there, and we had a wonderful show where he sang and played, sang with us while we played. He didn't play at this time at all. Then

Corridor H, 2000, that groundbreaking. The Poultry Farm was one of our earliest shows that we ever played with him.

STURM: Where would that have been?

TAYLOR: That's at Wardensville, West Virginia, in 1994. At the Corridor H thing, he gave us a little glass paperweight each, all of us that played that show. We played his eightieth birthday party at Williamson. I think that's where that was.

Going back, which I hate to go back, but to the D.C. trip, we do remember that in 1995 he did take my fiddle in hand and on "More Pretty Girls Than One," he was playing his parts up the neck a little bit.

STURM: Publically?

TAYLOR: No.

STURM: That was just privately?

TAYLOR: Privately, with Chestnut Ridge at that lunch, which was neat to have the fiddle in his hand again. If you look at the picture there, that's Senator Byrd holding my fiddle, and hopefully we can get you copies of some of these that you will—

STURM: I was going to say, do you have an extra copy of this one?

TAYLOR: I don't have it today, but that's a pretty priceless picture there with Chestnut Ridge.

STURM: That's a fantastic picture. It is a great picture. Which one's the doctor?

TAYLOR: Dr. Landreth is not in this picture. That is one of the shows that he couldn't make. But Tracey is here, and, of course, I am here within the picture, a lot younger there.

STURM: Well, you would have been. [laughs]

TAYLOR: George Ward is mentioned in my notes here as being one of the guitar players that played. He played several of the Senator Byrd shows. Mark Rankin will be mentioned. He played bass.

STURM: Who's the banjo guy on the end?

TAYLOR: That's Jim Gabehart, played a couple of the shows. He played the Welch show when we were down there, and I've mentioned him in my notes. Paul Delaney [phonetic] played the Kennedy Center with us when Senator Byrd recommended us for West Virginia Days for that. We played two campaign trails.

STURM: Which ones were those?

TAYLOR: We'll have to get back to you. Ken'll have to get the dates there on those.

STURM: That's fine. That's not a problem.

TAYLOR: Ken's notes are wonderful too. I don't know that Bob Wise—when he had a very hard race to run. We played in Beckley.

STURM: Was that when he ran against Governor Underwood?

TAYLOR: Yes.

STURM: For governor?

TAYLOR: I think so, yes.

STURM: Would have been 2000.

TAYLOR: 2000, maybe. We played down there. I remember when we played in a lot of different places: Welch, Hamlin. I remember in Hamlin when we played. It was so funny when we played in Hamlin. They had all the fried chicken you could ever see, and Senator Byrd said, "Did you ever see so much fried chicken in all your life?"

And I remember when he went on stage that night, he went out there and he said, "You know, back in the big city, they're accusing me of pork."

STURM: The "King of Pork."

TAYLOR: The King of Pork. He said, "But you know what? Those people back there in Washington, D.C., they like pork too." He had a way with words, now, I tell you. He had a way with words, and his delivery, like I said, was very to the point. And don't ever leave Erma out of these conversations.

STURM: Talk about his relationship with her and what you know about her, if you would, for a little bit.

TAYLOR: Erma was the quiet soul. We even have an award here. I'm losing the first name of her father.

STURM: I can't help you there. I don't know it.

TAYLOR: James Award. I have to—

STURM: We can check that. That's not a problem. [Erma Byrd's father, Fred James, was a coal miner.]

TAYLOR: I don't know if I've got that in my notes, but I know that it's— Fred James? No, I can't remember. But we named an award after her father here.

STURM: At the Cultural Center?

TAYLOR: Yes.

STURM: Did she come to these shows that y'all did?

TAYLOR: Yes, she was at some of these shows. She definitely was. But she was very instrumental behind his speeches, and I think she read them all and kind of proofed them.

And another thing, I heard that she—which might need to be substantiated by somebody other than me, but my memory isn't what it used to be. I understand that she subscribed to many or a lot of West Virginia newspapers, and she would scan all of them each day to make sure the senator knew what was going on in West Virginia and would keep him informed.

STURM: Well, I can't verify that she actually subscribed to them, but I know that the Byrd Center has, I would say, literally thousands of newspaper clippings from West Virginia newspapers about Senator Byrd.

TAYLOR: I heard that she was unbelievable at keeping him informed on what was going on in West Virginia.

STURM: And that's something we can verify maybe with the daughters.

TAYLOR: That would be something I would like to see verified, because, as I recall, that she basically went through West Virginia newspapers, a huge amount of them. I won't say all of them, but I understand that she basically kept him informed on what was going on in West Virginia, and it would be very hard to get something by Senator Byrd that he was not informed of. That's why I think he knew what was going on all the time in West Virginia. That's why no matter how small it was or how big it was—and not to lead your interview in a direction you don't want it to go, but I do know a story firsthand that was—

STURM: I want this interview to go wherever you want to tell us.

TAYLOR: I do know a personal friend of mine, and I probably won't name her because she may not want to be named, but her son was in the army, and she was distressed to no end because she normally heard from him. She's the friend that was here yesterday that waved to me while I was playing for the 150th birthday party. She's a very close friend of mine and does Civil War reenactments. But, her son was in the army in the Gulf War, and she didn't know if he was dead or alive because she hadn't heard as normal. So, she didn't know what else to do. She called Senator Byrd's office. She ended up getting to talk to Senator Byrd.

Senator Byrd gets off the phone, and he calls to find him. So, apparently, the hierarchy started from this very powerful gentleman, Byrd being the humble soul, but extremely powerful. Naturally, people listened. If he wants something, they listen. If you or I call, no one listens.

STURM: Right.

TAYLOR: If Senator Byrd calls, people listen. If a mother calls, no one may listen because there may be thousands of mothers calling.

STURM: I'm sure there are.

TAYLOR: But my dear friend, someone listened. It was a matter of a very short period of time as the hierarchy, as it hit the top, [demonstrates], just like slots going down, all of a sudden, a son calls his mother.

STURM: That's great.

TAYLOR: And then he says, "Mother, please do not do that again. Heads rolled all the way down to me. I know you love me and you care, but please do not do that again."

She said, "Why?"

He said, "I don't want to explain, but please don't do that again." [laughter]

STURM: Now, you alluded a little bit to how his grandson's death affected him. How did you observe Mrs. Byrd's death affecting him? How did he react to that? What did that do to him?

TAYLOR: I know that Mrs. Byrd was sick for a good little while before she passed. I think Senator Byrd, during her sickness and death, took a great toll. He was already very old, and I think that greatly weakened him. He loved her so dearly that they were a team. She was a great part of his life, and I would just say that it took a good bit of any strength he had left.

STURM: Did you play for her funeral?

TAYLOR: I did not get to play for her funeral, no.

STURM: You did mention to me, though, that you played for all three of the senator's—

TAYLOR: I did. How that come about, I heard of Senator Byrd's death.

STURM: That's a good story in and of itself. You might want to elaborate on that, how you found that out.

TAYLOR: Yes, let me see here. I need to look over my notes.

STURM: You go right ahead.

TAYLOR: I hate to keep your tape recorder running there, but I wrote some stuff down there, somewhere. Well, Senator Byrd—I had his death date written down there somewhere.

STURM: I believe you mentioned to me you were at Cedar Lakes, I think.

TAYLOR: Senator Byrd, I think, had died on—let's see. I was at Cedar Lakes. It was a Thursday and I think it was—Thursday was July 1st, I think. I'd have to look at a calendar.

STURM: We can check those dates. [Senator Byrd died on June 28, 2010]

TAYLOR: Yes, but it was, I think, on a Thursday, and I was playing at Cedar Lakes, and I'd have done heard of his death. I think it may have been on a Monday, which was June 28th, I think it was. And, I think this was, like, July 1st. When I was playing, a golf cart come with a couple policemen on it, and right in the middle of my set they come and told me that I needed to make a call real quick.

STURM: This would have been during the Arts & Crafts Festival at Cedar Lakes?

TAYLOR: At Cedar Lakes. So I called the Governor's Office, or here, and they said that they wanted me to play that night in the Capitol as the horse-drawn carriage would be bringing Senator Byrd.

STURM: This is in Washington?

TAYLOR: No, no, here. That was right here.

STURM: In Charleston.

TAYLOR: Yes. And they asked me if I could. I said, "Of course. I'll be there."

I got back from Cedar Lakes that evening and got re-dressed up and all that to come and play. Then, when they brought the horse-drawn hearse and all that in, all the funeral procession in, I was playing inside the Rotunda there as all the senators and all of the people, family and everybody came in. I played "Amazing Grace" and several hymns and stuff as they brought the coffin in.

It was very sad for me because he was just very close. The whole passing of him was just devastating for the whole state, and especially for the loved ones and people who dearly loved him. I just felt like it was the end for me, because, the thing is, not only was he a very close friend, but he was a close fiddling friend. I felt like such a pillar of strength went with him. I felt like somebody I could count on went with him. I felt like a mentor went with him. I felt like so much of the state's power went with him. How do you replace that?

STURM: You don't.

TAYLOR: How do you replace politically, compassionately, loyalty, knowledge? How do you replace somebody that cared that much with all those qualities? How do you replace that? How many people does it take to replace that man?

STURM: Well, you played also then for the family.

TAYLOR: Well, I played the next day on July the 2nd, which was a Friday, which was on the steps of the Capitol, with thousands of people out there. President Obama was in attendance there. President Clinton spoke. And, I played several of his favorite fiddle tunes that day.

Then, I got a call from Margie Byrd Moore's husband, Jon Moore. He called and asked me if I would play for the family's service in Arlington, and I played there. My guitar player, Andrew Dunlap, and I went and played. We played "Amazing Grace," and the family said they wanted it just the way he wanted it, with no hint of a violin sound. They wanted the old mountain sound.

STURM: The old mountain fiddle.

TAYLOR: And the key, they said they wanted it in a minor key. Well, "Amazing Grace" isn't in a minor key, but I knew what they wanted.

STURM: They want that drone.

TAYLOR: They wanted it in *E*, which is very hard to play. It had all the drones in it.

STURM: Yes, that's what I was thinking. I wouldn't have known the key, but I knew what you were talking about.

TAYLOR: I'm playing today for the [exhibit] opening. I probably won't play "Amazing Grace" today because it's more of an uplifting—we don't want it be. I'll probably play three of his fast fiddle tunes rather than "Amazing Grace" today.

STURM: What were some of his favorite tunes?

TAYLOR: Getting to his favorite tunes, we'll get to another point in our interview.

STURM: We were getting a little sad here, so I think—

TAYLOR: So let's go to—I keep going back and forth in the interview, and I'm sorry about that.

STURM: This is fine. This is great.

TAYLOR: I hate not going in a beautiful sequence, but it's hard to do that for me. Let's go, then, to a happier moment, to him getting the Perry F. Harris Award, maybe.

STURM: That's fine. Sure.

TAYLOR: In 2008, the Grand Master Fiddler Championship awarded Senator Byrd the prestigious Perry F. Harris Award. I called him to let him know on his ninetieth birthday. I got to talk to him in person. I said, "I've got a birthday present for you, Senator Byrd, if you will accept it. The Grand Master Fiddler Championship in Nashville, Tennessee, wants to honor you. They want to give you the Perry F. Harris Award. The Grand Master Fiddler Championship, as you probably know, is perhaps one of, if not *the* most prestigious fiddle contest in the world."

The Grand National is in Weiser, Idaho, and it is as well. It's the national championship, but the Grand Master is right on par with it. It is like the ultimate icing on the cake. That contest, you've got to be the best in the world to win that. It is very possible that the national champion will usually make the top three there, but may not win it, may not win it. It is just so prestigious. The national champion is the national champion. But, the Grand Master champion is like you've got to play at the national eighteen tunes and play them real, real well, and you've got to be, like, the greatest at really all-around fiddling to win the national. But to win the Grand Masters in Nashville, you've got to have six tunes that *are* perfect, *are*.

STURM: Perfect.

TAYLOR: Yes. So, that one there is just beyond belief. I mean, they've got to be just dead-on. Mark O'Connor's won it twice or three times, the Grand Masters in Nashville. But in either case, Perry Harris wanted to set that standard of excellence and raise that bar to the ultimate level.

But they wanted to honor Senator Byrd with the Perry F. Harris Award. Perry Harris is now dead, but they wanted to honor Senator Byrd as the ultimate honor by giving him the Perry Harris award for taking fiddling his whole life through America. What a great award.

STURM: Because he introduced it to people who would not have known about fiddling otherwise.

TAYLOR: Yes, and this is so wonderful, because I've judged it six times, and we decided to give it to Senator Byrd. The Grand Masters folks thought it was a great idea.

STURM: That would be sort of like with the Academy Awards, the Lifetime Achievement Award that they give to some star.

TAYLOR: Yes, it was. They were prouder than they've ever been to give that to him. I called him, and I said, "The bottom line is, would you accept it?"

He said, "Sure I would."

So, in D.C. they were having all this trouble with votes and everything, Senate votes, and about a week before the contest, I called Senator Byrd's office and I said, "Is he coming?"

So they went to ask him. He didn't talk to me on the phone that day; Martha Anne McIntosh did. He said, "You tell Bobby, if he'll play 'Redbird' for me, I'll come and get the award."

STURM: Is this in Nashville?

TAYLOR: Yes. "Redbird," that's one of his favorites. So, therefore, I played a second one of his favorites, "Durang's." So, those two will be played today.

STURM: Now I know "Redbird," but I don't think I know "Durang's." I'll probably recognize it when I hear it.

TAYLOR: It's on his recording. And another tune he liked to sing a lot was "Sally Goodin'."

STURM: I know "Sally Goodin'."

TAYLOR: I'm going to play those three today, if I can get through them, and they're three hard ones for me to play with my broken tendon. It's grown back, but it's still pretty stiff.

I called Ed Carnes and Howard Harris in Nashville and I said, "Be careful what you pray for. He's coming, and his whole office crew is coming to cheer him on. They'll be calling you with what it takes to bring Senator Byrd, all the Secret Service and the whole nine yards." Boy, did they have their work cut out for them. They didn't regret a moment of it, but they worked themselves to death to get everything in place to roll out the red carpet. And I said, "You will roll out the red carpet, because he is worth it."

STURM: Let me ask you this, personally, about Senator Byrd. He was on *Hee Haw* and he was on the *Grand Ole Opry*, as we talked about earlier, and he won this—

TAYLOR: And he's on it again here.

STURM: He won this award at the *Grand Ole Opry*. Why was it important to him, with all of the achievements and power and fame that he had, to be accepted by the country music world?

TAYLOR: I'll tell you why. Early in his life, if you read—and you have read and you do know—what did he say was his briefcase in his early life? Trivia question. What was Senator Byrd's briefcase in his early life?

STURM: Must have been his fiddle case.

TAYLOR: You got the question right. So, why did he want to be accepted in the fiddle world?

STURM: That was his beginning, I guess.

TAYLOR: Yes. That was who he was.

STURM: That was who he was, absolutely. I've never thought about it in exactly those terms.

TAYLOR: Senator Byrd was a United States senator. He did great things for our nation. He was a family man that loved his family. He was a national politician. He was a national treasure. But, he was a fiddler.

STURM: How did he use the fiddle in politics?

TAYLOR: He was an entertainer. He was an entertainer, whether he was speaking or fiddling. He used to say this, he said, "I noticed that my speaking at some point, people would turn their deaf ear. But you know what I figured out? If I got my fiddle out, they had to listen." He used whatever he needed and the talents he had to get people's attention. He even stated in his earlier career that he would use whatever he needed to get his points across, and fiddling was one of them. He pulled the fiddle out. If he wasn't getting your attention, he would get his fiddle out.

STURM: That's amazing.

TAYLOR: And somewhere I have read or heard him say that in some of the worst heated discussions, where the discussion was going nowhere, and it was getting about as tense as it could get, he'd get his fiddle out.

STURM: Did he ever play the fiddle in the Capitol in Washington?

TAYLOR: Oh, yes. There's a little cartoon when he was running for office that I just had to have. It was making light of him, but I thought it was too cute for me not to have. It showed Senator Byrd with his fiddle out when he was running for president. He was wondering how the acoustics would be in the Oval Office. [laughter]

STURM: Was that in the *Gazette*?

TAYLOR: It was somewhere. It was a James Dent, but I had to have that, and I've got it here somewhere.

STURM: We probably have a copy of it in the Center too.

TAYLOR: It was making light of him, but I thought, “That is the cutest thing I’ve ever seen. ‘Wonder how the acoustics would be in the Oval Office?’” I thought that’s the coolest thing I’ve ever seen.

STURM: Do you think he was serious about that run for the presidency in ’76? Did he ever talk with you about that?

TAYLOR: He never did mention that to me. I don’t know what his motives were for that. Being as wise a person as he was, it could have been serious, or it could have been to make a point. I assure you that whatever his intentions were there, they were to make a point, because he did not do anything that wasn’t for a good reason.

STURM: Had a purpose behind everything he did?

TAYLOR: Yes, he did. I’m sure there was a purpose there, because everything that he did had an honorable purpose. And I will say this, there are things in Senator Byrd’s life, like everybody’s life, that he would love to take back, as we all have. There’s things that every day of my life that I question how I’ve stated it, that I’d like to restate it, and people have asked me, “What did you mean by that?” I’ve had close friends even say, “I think I take offense by that. What did you mean by that?” And you know what I’ve told a friend that works for the *Gazette*, who will be nameless, when he said, “What did you mean by that?”

I said, “Listen. You got to understand one thing. I love you dearly. Anything that I state to you or about you is meant with the most honorable light possible. If you take it any other way, I’m going to be very upset with you.”

STURM: He was that way too?

TAYLOR: Yes. Senator Byrd was that way. He did not appreciate things being taken in the improper perspective.

STURM: Over the years that you knew him, obviously you were quite close to him. Without violating any confidences or anything, what kind of things did you talk about when you were with him?

TAYLOR: The main things that I talked about with him, a lot of it was fiddling. He loved fiddling. He loved comparing fiddling, and we would talk about Clark Kessinger and his style of fiddling. We would talk about different tunes, and we also talked about life in general. We talked about his family, his intentions for West Virginia. We basically talked about character a lot and his concern about what people thought of him. That bothered him. He really wanted people to like him. A lot of people did not realize that the real Senator Byrd’s feelings, I thought, were hurt very easily, if he thought he was being mistaken. I really believed, in his office that day with him feeling very, very in touch with people when he said, “I don’t know if the people know that I get down on my knees every night and pray for West Virginia.”

STURM: Now, when you say he wanted people—did he get upset by newspaper articles? Did he get nasty letters that upset him?

TAYLOR: He did get letters that upset him, and I will tell you this. I would say that in later life I don't know if he'd seen a lot of the letters that come in. I don't think he could have possibly seen them all, but I know that he'd seen a lot of letters in his career and I know that he personally probably answered more than most politicians. He was very heartfelt when he answered letters, and he tried to—just like how he handled the mother and her lost son in the army, I think he handled everything with that type of conscience.

STURM: Did he talk about his relationship with other West Virginia politicians, with the governors he worked with, with the other senators that he served with?

TAYLOR: He was always on board with them and very much was supportive of them, very much so. He would go to no end, no matter how bad he seemed to feel, to try to help them.

STURM: Did you ever get the impression from him that he was trying to, I guess for want of a better word, meddle in the internal workings of West Virginia politics? Or was he looking at it as someone who could be of assistance and help the people who were in other offices?

TAYLOR: I would say this. I wouldn't want to speak for him, but my opinion—

STURM: You observed him, though, and have had conversations—

TAYLOR: I observed him. In my opinion, with that Constitution because of Senator Byrd—it's not here, but it's setting right there.

STURM: And we'll note here for the record that Mr. Taylor has a copy of the Constitution in his hand.

TAYLOR: Right there it is. Because of Senator Byrd, it's setting right there. I will say this about Senator Byrd. I would say that Senator Byrd guarded ethics. He guarded what was good and would never shy away from any politician in his party or otherwise, to gently correct you if he thought you were going down a wrong path, and we've seen him do that.

STURM: Absolutely.

TAYLOR: We've also seen him harshly come down on his party and other parties when they were defiantly going down the wrong path. As far as meddling in trivial stuff, I don't think he had time for that. But where it made a difference, I think he would try to provide a guiding hand, and that's just who he was. I don't think he could not leave something that he thought he could assist with.

STURM: That's a fair answer, absolutely.

TAYLOR: That is as fair as I think I can be there. I think that, as a servant of the people, his conscience would let him do no other. Knowing his conscience, that is what I observe.

STURM: You talked a little bit just a couple minutes ago about the fact that he had regrets. Did he talk to you about regrets that he had? What kinds of things in his life did he regret that if he had to do over he would have done over?

TAYLOR: Well, we all know the one major—

STURM: The Klan.

TAYLOR: We all know that—

STURM: Did he ever talk with you about that?

TAYLOR: He never did talk with me about that. I never allowed the conversation to go to that, because we were there on pleasant and happy times. That, I thought, had done been gone over too many times, and I think that he made his statements far too many times on his regrets there. I think that his endorsement of Barack Obama showed his last tribute to being totally above-board on total change as far as being total equality there.

STURM: You observed him for a long time. Did you see him change over the period of time that you knew him or the time that you studied him? He was first elected to the Senate in 1958. So did he, as a man, change, or did his views change?

TAYLOR: His views, I think that no one can help but change to varying degrees. I've seen him over the years. What I'd seen change was, he was always a brilliant man. He always knew how to move and shake and make things happen. I'd seen his changes over the years get more and more refined. I think I'd seen, like people that get older, his refinement and his compassion and everything. And his look toward immortality as far as that, in hoping to get the nation on really firm grounds, was, I think, his main focus. I think that's why he lasted as long as he did, because he kept seeing things that he thought he could do to help. That's why I don't think he could quit, because the nation kept needing more and more and more, and he kept seeing things that he hoped he could do. I think the change was supply and demand. The demand kept getting higher. [laughter] But what do you mean by change? In character or in—

STURM: Well, in character and political outlook, because we touched on the Klan briefly, but one thing that he was criticized roundly for was voting against the Civil Rights Act in 1964.

TAYLOR: He was, and as we know, his take on that changed.

STURM: And he was a hawk on Vietnam, but he was the leader of the Antiwar Movement when the Iraqi incursion begins. So that's why I say, how did you observe him change? Do you think the core man changed, or did he adjust his views to the changing society?

TAYLOR: We'd seen some adjustments, didn't we?

STURM: We did. But do you think his core beliefs changed or did his views of the world and the place of our country in the world; did they change because the whole society was changing?

TAYLOR: I think there was some change, don't you?

STURM: Yes, I think so.

TAYLOR: I think there was some change there. I think there was some change there a little there where he tried to at least—I think he gave in a good way.

STURM: Would “growth” be a better word than “change”? Did he grow as an individual, in your view?

TAYLOR: I don't like “change.” I like “grow.”

STURM: Let's look at it from that perspective. Did he grow as an individual, in your opinion, over the years?

TAYLOR: Yes, I think he grew as an individual to the changing society because society did change. As far as his old-fashioned and moral values and constitutional values—

STURM: Those didn't change, in your view.

TAYLOR: Those didn't.

STURM: The basic core of his beliefs didn't change, but he adjusted. He grew and adjusted.

TAYLOR: He grew and adjusted somewhat to try to meet modern—

STURM: That's where I wanted to go with this to begin with. I asked the question poorly when we started.

TAYLOR: I did not want to try to change a person that would be nearly 100 years old.

STURM: I understand, yes.

TAYLOR: So I did not want to put something in the Byrd Library that would reflect—

STURM: No, and that wasn't my intention.

TAYLOR: —in the right light.

STURM: That wasn't an "I gotcha" question. That was—

TAYLOR: You notice how guarded I was. I was doing a "Senator Byrd" on you there. I was guarding each word to make sure it was presented in the right light.

STURM: Well, I didn't ask the question very well to begin with.

TAYLOR: I tried to say, yeah, he grew, but in the right way, in the parameters of his beliefs.

STURM: Is that what you think enabled him to get elected to the Senate nine times?

TAYLOR: I think it was exactly what enabled him to get elected nine times, with such a huge percentage of the vote, because he was a humanitarian that was in touch with all walks of West Virginia citizens. He was at home with everyone.

STURM: Obviously he had to have Republican support with the margins he had.

TAYLOR: He transcended all parties.

STURM: That's a good word.

TAYLOR: He transcended all parties because he transcended politics. He basically was a person that was in touch with people. And, the fact that he loved West Virginia, it's hard to not vote for somebody that loves you and loves West Virginia.

STURM: Let's go back to fiddle-playing a little bit. We're getting kind of heavy here. [laughs] You described to me, when we first started talking, one of his fiddles that you had the privilege of playing.

TAYLOR: It's the one that is inlaid, that the West Virginia Hall of Fame has.

STURM: I had talked with Dr. Smock, who's the director of the Byrd Center, and he hadn't seen this fiddle, so can you describe it for us?

TAYLOR: It is a beautiful fiddle. Right here, the label reads "F. Breton," B-r-e-t-o-n, Breve Mme Laduchesse de," and it's got "S.A.R." and then it's got a "D'angoulne, 1887." It's a full-sized violin. But, this one here is very special and quite valuable because it is inlaid, and the upper bow is floral oval border in scrimshawed mother of pearl with "U.S. Senate Majority Leader" in pearl block letters on the back lacquer background. Inlaid in lower bow is in scrimshawed mother of pearl, an example of the eagle found on the back of the U.S. currency one-dollar bill, with circle of thirteen stars on black lacquer, background above. Overall condition excellent. And I've got—and I don't know why I've got it—I've got the John Blizzard appraisal of the violin in blue ink signature. I don't know why, an exact—

STURM: Where did he get this particular instrument?

TAYLOR: Now, where he got this we never did know. Somebody obviously gave him a lot of things down through the years, maybe, or somebody has presented him that, possibly. I don't know where he got it.

STURM: Where is it now?

TAYLOR: Senator Byrd donated it to right here. It's in Charleston. It's at the West Virginia Hall of Fame.

STURM: Now, where is that in Charleston?

TAYLOR: It's right downtown here, and it is a beautiful work. It's in the video that we may be able to give you today, if Debra has it ready when we finish our thing. We'll see what she has ready. But I'm playing it on stage at the Grand Masters when he's on stage with me. I'm playing that instrument.

STURM: You'd mentioned you were, yes.

TAYLOR: And he's got it in his hand before I played it, shows it to the audience and everything.

STURM: Sounds like it's beautiful.

TAYLOR: It is unbelievable. But in either case, they have that.

STURM: I'm sure he donated some things like that.

TAYLOR: It says "U.S. Majority Leader" on it. It's got his name on it and everything.

STURM: That would have been from the seventies or eighties, because he was the Majority Leader from the time Carter came in until he decided to step down and chair the Appropriations Committee.

TAYLOR: Yes. But it's incredible. But when got the award there—see, they presented the award twice that day. It was presented at the Convention Center there at the IBMA at the Grand Masters Fiddle Contest, where I played his fiddle and they presented him the award. The official presentation was that night, though, on the *Grand Ole Opry*, and he was onstage there with the whole Byrd staff.

STURM: This was when he received the award when he was ninety?

TAYLOR: Yes. The Perry F. Harris Award. We were onstage there, and it was so funny that Tristan Clarridge was the Grand Masters winner. It was just hilarious. We went out

there, and they started talking to Senator Byrd, and Ed Carnes asked Senator Byrd, said, “What would you like for Tristan to play for you? He’s the Grand Masters winner.”

And Senator Byrd said, “There’s More Pretty Girls Than One.” That’s not a good fiddle tune. It’s a good singing tune; it’s not a good fiddle tune.

And Tristan said, “I don’t know that.” And there he is in front of the whole *Grand Ole Opry*.

STURM: This was being televised too?

TAYLOR: Yes. Senator Byrd, oh, what a hoot he was. And Ed was there squirming, and there I am with Senator Byrd, and there he is holding his fiddle, you know, for the audience to see, and Tristan’s over there at the mic. And he said, “Do you have another one, Senator Byrd? He doesn’t know that one.”

And Senator Byrd said, “I’m a Roving Gambler.” Of course, he doesn’t know that. [laughter] “I’m a Roving Gambler?”

I said, “Senator Byrd, he doesn’t know that, but let’s cut him a break. How about we ask for ‘Sally Goodin’.”

Senator Byrd said, “Okay. I like that one too.”

I said, “Tristan, ‘Sally Goodin’.”

He said, “Okay.”

STURM: He knew that one. [laughs]

TAYLOR: So, I saved him. I saved him, because I knew the senator was just doing that. He was just making him squirm.

STURM: Did he really have a sense of humor?

TAYLOR: Oh, yes. Oh, yes, we knew exactly what he was doing. Because you know what he said after he didn’t know, ‘Roving Gambler’? Senator Byrd said, “You mean he’s the champion and he doesn’t even know ‘Roving Gambler’?” And, oh my gosh, Ed Carnes turned about four shades of purple, I’m sure. But, I knew exactly what he was doing.

And Ed was looking at me like, “Save the day.”

STURM: What fiddle players did he admire? Who did he like?

TAYLOR: He loved the fiddle player that worked in his mailroom who played with Jim & Jesse on the *Grand Ole Opry*.

STURM: Who was that?

TAYLOR: Joe Meadows.

STURM: I've heard that name.

TAYLOR: Joe Meadows worked with Senator Byrd, I mean in the—and he was one of the greatest fiddlers there was. He was a professional fiddle player, and he played there with Senator Byrd as well. Great, great fiddle player. He is now deceased as well. Joe Meadows, he was also known as Ralph Meadows. But, Joe Meadows played with Senator Byrd some too.

He liked a lot of the fiddle players. He knew a lot about the fiddle players because that was a big part of his life, so he kept up with the music. And, the band that recorded with him was The Country Gentlemen on his fiddle album.

STURM: Yes, I know who they are. This is interesting to me, because I think a lot of people felt that the fiddle-playing was just a gimmick for him, that it was something, as you said, you know, he pulled out the fiddle when people weren't listening to him, just sort of to get attention. But, I don't think most people realize what an important part of his life the fiddle and fiddle-playing and this type of music was. So I think it's absolutely fascinating to see this aspect of Byrd, because this is something that not everyone has.

TAYLOR: But there's an article you might not have seen.

STURM: Yes, I have that magazine. Yes, I've subscribed to it for thirty years.

TAYLOR: I figured you had seen my article on Byrd there. [*Goldenseal* (Fall 2010)
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STURM: Well, I didn't begin to put this together till you and I talked, though, because as I said, this was a side of his life that he had—I, like other people, knew that he played the fiddle, but I thought it was just more an avocation than anything.

What else would you like to add? We've covered a wide range of topics here, but is there anything that we haven't covered that you think is important?

TAYLOR: Any questions you have for me?

STURM: No, I think you've answered pretty much everything that I had. Do you have a favorite story about him?

TAYLOR: I've went over several favorite stories there.

STURM: You told me something on the phone about him, and maybe you can expand on that, about how he used to call your father to see if you'd gotten home.

TAYLOR: That was such an interesting—we had played—I think it was maybe when we played in D.C., or maybe it was Wardensville. It was one of the long-distance trips we'd played, and Ken and I was trying to figure out which ones it was because he called maybe more than once to make sure that each member of the band—he had our personal phone numbers. And, he got my father on the phone, because I hadn't quite made it home yet. Of course, my father had the highest respect for Senator Byrd. And my father was waiting home at two o'clock in the morning because he was so revved up that he had had a conversation with Senator Byrd. [laughter]

I said, "What are you still doing up, Dad?"

He's sitting there in his recliner. He said, "I had the most wonderful conversation with Senator Byrd. He'd called to see if you'd gotten home okay. We had the nicest conversation." I guess they had discussed fiddling and whatever, because they were both fiddlers. My dad was a fiddler too.

STURM: That's one thing—we sort of jumped right into Senator Byrd. Before we wrap this up, go into your background just a little bit more. I hit a few high points on it there, but tell us about Bobby Taylor.

TAYLOR: Well, I'm a fourth-generation fiddler, and, incidentally, I hit another wonderful gold mine in my family by going to my family reunion this past Saturday. There was no known pictures of my grandpa that played the fiddle. We found a young picture of him with a fiddle in his hand, with my Great-Uncle William Louis Taylor holding a banjo in a big group of people, and showed them both holding a fiddle and a banjo.

STURM: I do genealogy, so I know how much that means.

TAYLOR: I wouldn't take nothing for that in this whole wide world.

STURM: I know how much something like that means to you.

TAYLOR: But I'm a fourth-generation fiddler, as you probably read from my notes there, and you probably copied stuff offline there. I played since I was, like, thirteen years old when my grandfather that was holding the fiddle in the picture passed away. He gave my dad the family heirloom fiddle on his deathbed. I got to carry it across the hill at thirteen years old, because it was like a mile to the car. You couldn't get a car into Grandma's house, she lived so far—

STURM: Where was this?

TAYLOR: Roane County. When we got the fiddle home, I started to learn to play then.

STURM: Were you self-taught, or did your dad teach you?

TAYLOR: Dad showed me starting off, and so I started playing then. He kind of tricked me into playing. My brother started first, actually, and dad showed him a little bit, and he's three years younger. His name is Michael Clinton Taylor. His middle name was named after my grandpa, John Clinton Taylor. But the family heirloom fiddle, I still have, and I played—

STURM: How old is it?

TAYLOR: It's a real old fiddle. It's probably mid-1800s. It's an old Stainer fiddle and it's been passed down to me now. Dad passed away in 1995 at ninety-four-and-a-half years old. But, fiddling is a very special thing, I think, in a family, and it's revered very highly. I guess you can see that with Senator Byrd when you asked me why it was so important to him.

STURM: Absolutely.

TAYLOR: He took it all the way to his grave, so it had to be important, even though he was so monumental in so many other ways. Why did the fiddle go the whole way and stay on such a high pedestal in his life?

STURM: He was a multitalented man. Did you know he was also an artist?

TAYLOR: Yes, I did know that, and we think we found another original painting just a while back.

STURM: Here at the archives?

TAYLOR: No, somebody brought it to the Allegheny Echoes Workshops, in Marlinton, WV, and I brought a photograph of it in for authentication. We think it's an original.

STURM: That's fantastic. I know we have some copies at the Byrd Center of some of his paintings, but I haven't seen any originals. There may be some. We have one entire room yet that's—

TAYLOR: We have one here in our collection.

STURM: In your collection? I mean at the Byrd Center is where I—

TAYLOR: Yes.

STURM: There's one entire room yet of boxes that still need to be unpacked and catalogued and that sort of thing, because it was a monumental task to collect all his material and try to get it organized.

What kinds of things have you played for?

TAYLOR: I have played a lot of places, and I don't know which biography you have of me.

But, I didn't answer your full question there. The fourth generation's Elijah Jefferson Taylor that played the fiddle, and I may even be fifth. We're not sure about John Oscar Taylor, but Elijah Jefferson, we're quite sure he played some. And John Clinton definitely played, because now I've got a fiddle in his hand, and my father and me. But, fiddling has been really big in the Taylor family. All of Dad's uncles played music. It's big in West Virginia, in the rural areas, and Vandalia keeps that alive, as you know.

STURM: I've never been to that, but I've always wanted to come. That's on my bucket list. [laughs]

TAYLOR: I think it's the Fred James Award that was named after Erma Byrd's father. I think its Fred James. Sometimes things don't come back to me real fast.

STURM: I understand. Did you start playing like at square dances, or how did you actually begin your career?

TAYLOR: Well, I started playing just by myself at home, and we got some records of Clark Kessinger playing. Sam Jarvis was one of the greatest fiddlers that ever lived, if not the greatest that I ever heard, and he was a distant family member. And, Mike Humphreys was another great fiddler, distant family member and direct descendent to John Oscar Taylor, my lineage. It's just been something that has been kept alive, brought over from Scotland, Ireland, and England to our country by the early pioneers. I think that's why Senator Byrd, you know, kept stuff alive. That's why he researched even the murals in the Capitol on who painted all these wonderful paintings and stuff. He researched them to no end.

I do have a story, and I cannot remember if it's 100 percent accurate or if I dreamed it, but it's a good story and I don't think I'll put it on the tape.

STURM: I wish you would.

TAYLOR: Well, I don't know how true it is.

STURM: Well, you can put it on the tape, and if you discover that it's not, you can take it off with the edit.

TAYLOR: You know, it seems like something I may have heard or dreamed or what, but it sounds too profound not to be true.

STURM: As I said, go ahead, and you'll have the option to edit it when you get the transcript.

TAYLOR: Chestnut Ridge doesn't remember being there when this happened, but I was in his office several times. I think I do remember this happening. It's so profound that I

wouldn't want it to be—but, I think this happened. At one point when I was in D.C., I was in the senator's office there in D.C., and I can't remember the date on it, but the press come barging into the office, and they were questioning Senator Byrd. He kind of wasn't in the mood at that time, or wasn't going to take the time to answer their questions, as I recall. And I'm quite sure that this happened at one of my visits, but it happened so fast, and I didn't give it much thought. But they didn't get a meeting with him, is my memory. He started talking about the murals on the wall, you know, and the paintings, and they didn't want to talk about that. Because they were kind of rude, as I remember, and I remember him speaking to them, talking about the murals and they kind of interrupted him.

And he said, "You've interrupted me." He said, "Do you know where you're at?"

And they said, "Yeah, we're in the Senate Appropriations chamber."

He said, "Well, until which time you can respect the dignity and honor of the office you have entered, you may now leave."

Does that sound too profound—?

STURM: That sounds profound, and I can almost hear the words coming out of his mouth when you said that.

TAYLOR: I'm quite sure that happened, but what bothers me about it is Chestnut Ridge didn't remember that happening. But I am quite positive that happened, because it's too profound for me to have forgotten it.

STURM: And I don't think probably you dreamed that.

TAYLOR: I don't think I could have dreamed that up. It's a good dream.

STURM: But the wording, that sounds like something he would say. I can hear him saying that.

TAYLOR: I am quite sure that happened. I'm 98 percent sure that happened, because his wordage is not mine. Because, I can still hear the history behind those murals, him talking about them.

STURM: That is a great story, and I can see him doing it.

TAYLOR: He threw the press out.

STURM: Mr. Taylor, thank you so much for your time. This has been fascinating.

TAYLOR: I feel I needed to kind of share that, with a little bit of retraction.

I will state one more thing, and I don't know how to state this. When we were in Welch, that was one of the most interesting things of all the trips.

STURM: Go ahead.

TAYLOR: When we were in Welch, that was a colorful experience.

STURM: I can imagine being in Welch would be. I haven't been there for years.

TAYLOR: Welch was colorful because it was a political event and it was on a Sunday. There were different politicians talking, and it was a day that was, shall we say, interesting.

STURM: Okay. [laughs]

TAYLOR: I'll tell you that we were scheduled to play, and Senator Byrd got up to sing with us, Different politicians were doing their platforms, and different people were doing their speeches. There was an embarrassing thing that happened. One of the politicians got up to speak, and one of them was still speaking and had kind of interrupted one of the very nice presentations that somebody was doing, and basically had embarrassed the presenter just slightly. One of the people from the back told me, they said, "Bobby." They said, "Bobby, play now."

So, rudely, I played over top of two people talking at the same time to save face for Senator Byrd and the band and everyone. So they said, "Play now." So, I started into "Old Joe Clark," and Senator Byrd started singing, and that's how that ended. So, we kind of saved the day there a little bit from a little bit of a situation, but that was interesting.

STURM: It's no wonder you were a good friend of his. Thank you so much.

[End of interview]