

Robert C. Byrd Legacy Project

Oral History Interview

James Nobles

February 21, 2012



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Preface

by Keith D. Alexander

Much has already been written about Senator Robert C. Byrd, and far more information about the senator can be found in the archival collection housed at the Robert C. Byrd Center for Legislative Studies. Nearly all of that material, however, addresses the professional rather than the personal side of the man.

One of the great advantages of oral history is its ability to access the personal, to put a more human face on historical figures. Few people have been better positioned to reveal Senator Byrd's personal side than James Nobles, one of the senator's closest friends for twenty-eight years.

Born February 13, 1933, in Wetumpka, Alabama, Nobles moved to the Washington, DC area in 1960. He and his new wife Joan settled in McLean, Virginia, where he worked for the Safeway grocery store corporation for twenty years. He first became acquainted with Senator Byrd through Nobles's wife, who taught several of the Byrds' grand-children. The friendship between Nobles and Byrd really began as a result of tragedy, however. After Byrd's grandson Michael died in a car crash shortly before he was to graduate from high school, Nobles offered to share home movies he had of Michael as a child playing with his own sons. Nobles also began helping Senator Byrd and his wife, taking the senator grocery shopping, bringing the Byrds home-grown produce, and helping with yard work. Nobles and the senator also held many long conversations while sitting on the porch of the senator's McLean home.

While Nobles expresses great affection for Senator Byrd in this interview, the esteem clearly was mutual. Senator Byrd's admiration for Mr. Nobles led the senator to devote a speech on the Senate floor to his friend and neighbor. It can be found in the Congressional Record of July 28, 2005.

A note regarding the transcript: After the interview was transcribed, the interviewee reviewed the transcript and made edits and additions. Material enclosed in brackets was added during the editing process. Bracketed text in regular typeface consists of editorial clarifications. Bracketed text in italics was added by the interviewee and is generally not in the archived recording.

About the interviewer: Keith D. Alexander is Director of Archives and head of the Oral History Project at the Robert C. Byrd Center for Legislative Studies in Shepherdstown, West Virginia. He received his MA and PhD in history from the University of Maryland, College Park.

Interview #1
Tuesday, February 21, 2012

Alexander: Today is Tuesday, and it is [February] 21, 2012. I'm Keith Alexander, and I'm here with Jim Nobles at the Robert C. Byrd Center for Legislative Studies.

Jim, what's going to happen today is we're going to talk a little bit about your relationship with Senator Byrd. As you know, it's being recorded. You're okay with your voice being recorded for today's purposes?

Nobles: Sure.

Alexander: Very good. Can you, first of all, tell me a little bit about yourself, about your background?

Nobles: Well, I'm originally from Alabama, and I've been up in the McLean, Virginia, area for fifty or fifty-five years. In those years, I got to know Senator Byrd for about twenty-eight years. I worked for a company called Safeway, Incorporated, at their main branch there in the Washington [DC] area for about twenty years, and then I retired.

Alexander: What was the name of the company again?

Nobles: Safeway.

Alexander: Safeway. The grocery store, Safeway?

Nobles: Yes, the grocery store. I didn't work in the stores. I worked in the—

Alexander: You worked for the corporation.

Nobles: A very good outfit to work for.

Alexander: Can you tell me actually your date of birth and your place of birth?

Nobles: February 13, 1933, in Wetumpka, Alabama. That's kind of an unusual name.

Alexander: Could you spell that for us, please?

Nobles: I sure can. W-e-t-u-m-p-k-a, Alabama. It's in Elmore County, probably was the largest county in Alabama at the time. I was born way out in the country. I came from a family of eight children, seven boys and one girl.

My father was in the First World War, and actually he got injured over in France. The way I understand it, I was about six years old when he passed away, so I never got to know him very well. I think that's one thing that Senator Byrd and I really understood,

being that he was an adopted child and didn't know his biological father until he was about sixteen years old, and we understood each other in that realm of thinking, you know, about our fathers.

I moved from Alabama up to the Washington, DC area and married a nice lady, Joan. Her name was Joan Hatch, and she was born and raised in Arlington County. We got married in 1960. We have two boys, two grown boys, and four grandchildren, three boys and one girl. The youngest boy works for the National Geological Survey there in Reston, Virginia, so he's close to us. The oldest boy, Jimmy, stayed in Arlington County the great portion of his life until the company transferred him to Florida, so we don't get to see him as much as we do the youngest boy.

Alexander: So you moved to the area, to your wife's neck of the woods then?

Nobles: Neck of the woods. She's the one who brought me up here. I met her and then I went back to Alabama, and then I decided that she was the lady for me, so I came back.

Alexander: Where did you live when you got to know Senator Byrd?

Nobles: I lived about three miles from Senator Byrd in McLean. He lived in the Evermay section close to the CIA, off of Dolly Madison Boulevard, and I lived about three miles off of Georgetown Pike. So we didn't live very far apart.

But, Keith, the way I got to know Senator Byrd, what really got me started with him, was my wife was a schoolteacher in Vienna, Virginia, and she taught his three grandchildren. His youngest daughter was Margie Moore [phonetic], Jon and Margie Moore, and they were very active in the school. Joan and Margie got to be real friends in teaching her children. They had Mona, Mary Anne, and Michael. Michael was actually the oldest one.

Margie would invite my wife and my two boys out to her home in Vienna because they had a swimming pool, and the children would play in the swimming pool. On one of the visits to Margie's home, my boys took a little 8-millimeter camera and they just took pictures of how they were playing in the pool and jumping off the diving board, and quite a bit of it was taken of Michael.

Later on, they left Vienna and moved to Leesburg, and Michael was about a week away from graduating from high school. He was a big boy, and Senator Byrd was really fond of him, as he was fond of all of his grandchildren. Michael was coming home one night from visiting with a friend or something, and they say he fell asleep. He was in a pickup truck, fell asleep and ran into a tree, and the truck burst into flames. It was just a tragic, tragic accident, and, naturally, he died. Senator Byrd really had a hard time with that. That was one of his hard times in life, trying to accept the death of his grandchild,

and I have heard that was the main reason that Senator Byrd stopped playing the fiddle and started writing the four volumes on the Senate, which took him twelve years to write, but he never played the fiddle anymore.

I had a few little—not a few little things. Jon Moore, Michael’s father, took me to the site where the wreck had occurred, and I picked up an ashtray from the truck. Everything was burned up and everything was gone. I said, “Senator.” This was after I got to know him. I said, “I have this ashtray.” I understood that he went into Michael’s bedroom shortly after he had passed away, and there were three or four pennies on Michael’s bed, and he picked them up and had them put into a chain or on his watch or something like that, in remembrance of Michael. I told him I had this little old ashtray. I said, “You’re welcome to it.”

He said, “Oh, I would appreciate it.” He had one of Michael’s shoes. He wore about a fourteen or a fifteen. He was a big, big shoe.

But that was prior. What really got me started with him, we went to his funeral in Leesburg, and that was the first time I shook hands with Senator Byrd in person, and Ms. Byrd and the family. I remembered that I had this 8-millimeter film that was showing Michael quite a bit, and I had heard of how much Senator Byrd had suffered over this sudden death. So in the back of mind I wanted to, but I was a little bit leery of doing it, and I would ask my wife. I knew where Senator Byrd lived, and I would tell her, “You know, I’m going to go down one day to Senator Byrd’s house and ask him if he wants to see this film.”

She said, “Oh, don’t do that. He’s a busy man. I wouldn’t go by there and do that.”

But one day I was passing his house, and he had just parked his car in his garage, and he was coming out of the garage, and I was on the opposite side of the street, and I said, “I’m going to do it.” I stopped the car, walked across the street into his driveway and introduced myself and told him briefly about my wife teaching his grandchildren. So he was interested in that. Just a friendly man, just so down-to-earth and friendly.

I didn’t know how to accept him, because I knew how powerful he was on Capitol Hill. I’ve been there many times with him, and he had a tremendous respect down there by all that worked there. He never did say that he was going to the Capitol. He always referred to it, “I’m going to the Hill.”

But in our conversation in the driveway, I said, “Senator, I have this little bitty 8-millimeter film that my boys took in the early seventies, and it shows Michael quite a bit. Would you like to see it?”

He said, “Would you show it to me?”

I said, “Sure. I’ll go home and get it.” I had a little projector that would show this film.

He said, “Now, I’m going to go on in the house, but you tell Erma [Byrd] when you come to the door. I’ll tell her to be expecting you. I might be taking a nap, but she’ll wake me up. I want to see this film.”

So I went to the house and got it and brought it back, and we went into the living room, and we were going to show it on the wall, wall of his living room. He and Ms. Byrd, for some reason, they got down on their knees to see it close, because you had to watch it close because back in those days the film was a little bit on the fast side, I guess you’d say. So I showed it to him, and then after he saw it the first time he said, “Jim, would you show that again to us?”

I said, “Sure. I’ll show it to you as many times as you want to.” So I showed it to him the second time, and as he and Ms. Byrd were watching it, he said, “Erma, those were the good old days in Vienna.” He liked those days. He would go out there on the weekends, and he would take his fiddle and he would play for Michael and Mary Anne and Mona. They sometimes would in the next school day or something, next week in school, they would tell my wife that—they called him Papaw—came out and played his fiddle. They were proud of it.

So after we got through showing the film, I said, “Senator, I have another production of this same film. I sent it to a film place so I could see it on television.”

He said, “Oh, they can transcribe it or whatever over onto a film, then you can see it on TV?”

I said, “Yes, and it’s a much better picture. You can have this one.”

He said, “All right. I’ll take it down to the Hill and I’ll have my people do that.” I don’t know if he ever got that done. I asked him later on in life about it, and he said he really didn’t know where that film was, but he thoroughly enjoyed seeing it. Michael was probably just a young boy at that time, maybe ten, eleven years old, something like that. He was just so grateful to see him moving again, you know. So that’s what got me started with Senator Byrd.

After that, I was down there one time for some reason or the other, and they had a large row of azalea bushes and things. I thought I was pretty good at trimming bushes, and these bushes really needed trimming pretty bad, and some other work around the house there. I said, “Ms. Byrd, I’ll trim these bushes if you’d like me to.”

She said, “Oh, that would be wonderful.” They always would say, “How much would you charge me?”

I said, “Oh, I’m not going to charge you anything. It’s just an honor to come down and do this for you.”

I was getting to know them more and more and more. So that’s how our friendship really developed, and it went from there. He started inviting me to events that he had. The first event we went to was [organized by] Jim Huggins. I was just talking to Ray about this. [Jim Huggins] was the main one that set this event up, and President [William J.] Clinton was there, was a speaker at that event too. President Clinton had just taken office. This is in the nineties. He turned around to Senator Byrd and he said, “You know, it took me about eight months in office to get the nerve to call you.” [laughter]

Alexander: Isn’t that something, a president saying that.

Nobles: Senator Byrd would just smile, you know. [President Clinton] said, “I understand you want the Capitol moved somewhere in West Virginia.”

[Senator Byrd] said, “Bring it on.” [laughter]

Alexander: That’s great.

Nobles: Senator Byrd had a great sense of humor, he really did, but when he put on his suit and got ready to go to the Capitol, he was business. But when he got back home, he was so down-to-earth and relaxed and he didn’t particularly care about talking about politics, this, that, and the other when he had other things that he would, I guess, prefer to talk to.

I have heard this—and this is not to be critical, but just to show you how businesslike Senator Byrd was—he never invited a senator to his home. He wanted to keep it on a business level. I think he figured if he’d get senators to his home, he may have to, in turn, do something. This was when he was head of the Appropriations Committee and somebody would butter up to him, like that, and he stayed away from that.

He had some good friends in the Senate. He worked very well with them. He and Senator [Edward M.] Kennedy, I know Senator Kennedy used to send him—I know on his eightieth birthday, Senator Kennedy sent him eighty roses, and he continued doing that up to up to Senator Byrd was about ninety-two. I would say, “Your dear friend Senator Kennedy did so-and-so.”

He says, “Jim, I wouldn’t say that we were dear friends. We were friends on a working level. We didn’t go out and party together. We didn’t go out and drink together or any of those things. It was strictly business, and we were friends.” He said back when he won the Whip nomination, that he and Senator Kennedy were real, real enemies, and

they didn't care for each other at all, "And neither one of us cared who knew it." But later on they became very, very good friends, and they worked very well together.

Alexander: But it seems like it's more of a professional friendship rather than a social friendship?

Nobles: Everything was on a professional [level]. He didn't party with people, especially other senators. Ms. Byrd, now, would go. She always enjoyed going to—they used to have a senators' wives luncheon. Now, she enjoyed going to that, but she wouldn't brag about it or anything. I heard the story of one lady heard that one time she went to this luncheon and she sat by Elizabeth Taylor, and the lady said, "Oh, Ms. Byrd, what did Elizabeth Taylor have on that day?"

She said, "Oh, I don't know. I didn't notice what she had on." [laughs] But that was just the way she was. She was just so down-to-earth. It was so enjoyable talking to her, and I can see why Senator Byrd loved that lady. They were married almost sixty-nine years.

When they got married—and other people have heard this, too, but the second day they were married, they were walking down the railroad tracks somewhere in West Virginia. Senator Byrd had saved up \$400, which was a lot of money. He took the \$400 out of his pocket, and he said, "Erma, here's all I got, is \$400. Now, I would like for you to take care of the financial end of everything, and I'll take care of working." And that's what she did. She took care of the finances and she took care of the home and things like that.

She wouldn't throw anything away. They came from hard times. And they knew a lot of people. Well, not a lot of people. She had a niece, I believe, or some kin to come there, and the lady told me, she says, "When I came here, I thought Senator Byrd and them would have a maid and somebody to clean their house and stuff like that, but they didn't have that. They're just like everybody else." Senator Byrd, on Saturdays, he would clean the house.

Ms. Byrd, she and Mona and Margie, her two daughters, would go up to Tysons Corner, a big mall up there. She didn't call it Tysons Corner. I said, "Ms. Byrd, where you going tomorrow?" It would be Saturday. She says, "We're going uptown." But they'd go up there and they would shop and they'd have lunch together.

Senator Byrd would stay home and clean the house. He would vacuum the house, he would wax, Windex, and mop the bathroom floors and the kitchen floor. For years, I got in the time at 11:20 on Saturday mornings, I always called him, and he would just pick up the phone and say, "Jim, how ya doin'?" He knew who it was going to be. He was working cleaning the house. There are a lot of people didn't know that. He thought

maybe they had a maid or something to do that, but it's none of that. They lived just like everybody else, just like they were brought up. They did for themselves.

He was so good. The thing that I remember about Senator Byrd mostly, and I don't know why I would be surprised, was his humility. He was so humble, and nothing fictitious about that man. He was just the real thing. As you know, he came from hard times. We reminisced a lot about his early upbringing.

I know I'm all over the page with this. I'm just saying things as they come to my mind.

Alexander: That's okay. It's fantastic.

Nobles: He was actually born in North Wilkesboro, North Carolina, to—he was a Sale.

Just a second, Keith. [Consults notes.] His biological father, he met his biological father when he was sixteen years old. And I said, "Senator, did you have any emotional feelings about when you met your real father?"

He said, "No. He just looked like another man to me."

Pap and Mom, Mom and Pap, was his stepfather and stepmother. But, anyway, Senator Byrd was about ten months old when his mother died in 1918 from the influenza epidemic, which killed millions of people, and before she passed away, she asked her sister, who had married a Byrd—and I have these names. Let me see. I want to make sure I get their names in there. Senator Byrd's father was named Cornelius Calvin Sale Jr. [*sic*], and his biological mother was Ada Kirby Sale. She had died on Armistice eve, November 10, 1918 from the influenza epidemic, which killed millions. Before her death, she asked her husband Cornelius to give the baby, which was Calvin, or Senator Byrd, to Vlurma. Let me spell this. V-l-u-r-m-a. That was the sister, Sale Byrd. Her husband's name was Titus Dalton Byrd.

Senator Byrd was not quite one year old at the time, and he had three older brothers. One was named Clyde, William, and Reuben, and he had one sister named Jettie. He had a half sister. His biological father married again when his mother passed away. In fact, he married twice, but he always told Senator Byrd that his love was his mother. That's who he really, really loved.

Senator Byrd, when we would call Quelle [pronounced 'QL'], she lived in Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania. Now, her father, which was Senator Byrd's father, never wanted them to call each other half sisters, half brothers. It's your brother and this is your sister. So that's how they referred to each other. We would call Quelle quite often in Beaver Falls, and she was a nice lady. She was up in age too. He would always ask her, says,

“Quelle, how about telling me something about my father, my real father.” So she would try to do the best she could in telling him, because she was about eighteen years old, I believe, when his real father passed away. So she would tell him stories.

I remember one story that he really enjoyed. He said she said that his father had the same great memory, the love of poetry, was a spiritual man, and had a lot of talent in woodworking, in making musical instruments. He had a garden and he’d work out in the garden and be reciting poetry just by memory. And Senator Byrd could do that. He enjoyed reciting poetry.

She said one time his father made a really nice fiddle, and he could play fiddle too. He said that they had a close relative who was always after him, that he wanted him to sell him that fiddle, and Senator Byrd’s father said, “No, I’m not going to sell it to you because you can’t play it well enough. You keep practicing, and one day I might let you have it.”

He said one day Mr. Sale was sitting out on the porch playing this fiddle, and a black man came walking by and stopped and was listening to him play, and after he got through, the black man said, “Oh, my lord, that fiddle has such great tones to it, good-sounding music to it. I sure wished I had one like that, but I don’t have a nickel to my name.”

And said Mr. Sale says, “You don’t need a nickel. I’m going to give it to you.” And said that was one happy man. He took the fiddle and going on down the road playing the fiddle. So Senator Byrd liked that.

He would ask Quelle, every time he talked to her, to tell him something new, but that was probably one of the best stories that she told him. He really liked that.

Alexander: Did he talk much about his relationship to his foster parents?

Nobles: Oh, did he ever. Senator Byrd, he called them Mom and Pap, and he didn’t know until he was sixteen years old that he was an adopted child, but he said after he got up, ten, eleven, twelve years old, some of the children that he played with, went to school with and all, he said would say unkind things like, “Robert, they’re not your real parents.” But Senator Byrd wouldn’t pay any attention to them.

So when he got to be sixteen years old, then Mr. Byrd told him, and that’s when he took him on a Trailway bus, took him down to Greensboro in North Carolina and met his biological father.

Senator Byrd said he’d traveled all the way around the world, traveled everywhere that you could conceivably think of, and met kings, queens, emperors, whatever, but he had never met a man he admired more than Pap. He just was so fond of that man. That man took him in and did the best he could.

Senator Byrd said [his adoptive father] was a coal miner, he worked in the coal mines, and said in the evenings when he got off and was coming home, he walked down the railroad tracks and said, "I met him every day when he was coming down the railroad tracks, because I knew he had saved me his dessert." [laughs] He liked that.

Now, his mother, his adopted mother, he said they didn't have very much education, but they knew how to live right. They were righteous people. They were religious people. And said when he would go to bed at night in this old house that they lived in, that had cracks that they had to put paper or stuff with something to keep the wind out of, he said in the next room he could hear his dear mother praying and she would sing. She had a good singing voice. They had an old broke-down piano that needed tuning real bad, and she'd be playing tunes on that piano and singing. We read that from this book that he wrote, *Child of the Appalachian Coalfields*, and in Chapter 27 is a chapter there of his return to Wolf Creek Hollow. He liked that chapter. I bet you we sat on his back porch and read that chapter twenty or more times. He just loved that chapter.

Alexander: Did you read it out loud to him, or did he read it out loud to you?

Nobles: No, I read it out loud to him, read it out loud to him. This is when he had gotten into kind of poor health. We would come to a paragraph like I just said, without repeating it, he would say about his mother being in the room and all, and he'd say, "Jim, would you read that again? Read that over again for me." So I'd read the same paragraph again, and I could see every time that we read that book, the same thing would happen. I could see his eyes would start watering, and about the time that I got through the paragraph, he was downright crying. He was just crying.

He would say, "Wait a minute. Wait a minute, Jim. Let me absorb this," or whatever, and then we'd go on reading it. It was sad. It almost made me cry, myself, because in him telling that story, you could just see how sincere he was and how much he loved that part of his life growing up at Wolf Creek Hollow. We made plans to go back to Wolf Creek Hollow many, many times, but he had gotten to where it was a little hard to get around.

He and Ms. Byrd went back to Wolf Creek Hollow one time, I think in the early nineties, and he visited the old place. It didn't look anything like when they lived there. He tried to find the old spring that they kept the perishable goods with, cooled. And the old barn was gone. He had a pony. They had a vegetable garden. He told about these bugs, insects would get under the beans, I believe, under the leaves, and that's what they would do, they would pick them. They didn't have pesticides and things, I don't believe, so they would pick the bugs from beneath the leaves and put them in a bucket and burn them. He told about his working around there.

I don't know if this happened when he was at Wolf Creek Hollow, but at one stage of his life he had a couple of buckets that he would walk the neighborhood—you know, it was a long ways from one house to another house because it wasn't thickly populated—gathering up what we'd call, and he did, too, slop, food left over from neighbors, that they were not going to use or throw away. He would bring this slop back and feed the pigs and the hogs, and he did that for years.

I think, Keith, I don't know if I can describe this right, but this is where Senator Byrd formed all the humbleness and the gratefulness that happened to him later in life. It had never left him.

Alexander: He experienced these really hard times early on.

Nobles: It never left him and he never forgot it.

Alexander: Did the Byrds have a garden at all at their house where you knew them?

Nobles: No, but I had a garden, and this is another thing that kept me in good faith with them. But it turned out to be, you know, some people say, “You're just doing this because they're well-known people.” That was not it. Senator Byrd and I were friends. I know it sounds like I'm bragging. I'm not bragging. I'm more honored in saying this. Senator Byrd told me over and over and over, he said, “Jim, I've known a lot of people in my life, but you're my best friend.”

I think, Keith, because of that, especially when he was down and out or needed something, he always called me. If I was coming down to visit him, he might say, “Jim, stop by the store and pick up me some bananas.” Sometimes, “I'm out of toothpicks. How about picking me up some toothpicks, and I'll pay you when you get here.” He always wanted to make sure of that.

But let me regress here just a little bit. When he would talk to Quelle or other friends that we would call in West Virginia that he knew by name, knew the children, knew if something had been wrong with the child, he would ask them—and this was years ago. He just had a tremendous memory. But he'd always ask, “Is there anything I can do for you? Quelle, is it anything I can do for you? Do you need any money? Now, if you need it, I want you to come see me. I'll send you the money. You can catch a bus down here to get down here. If there's anything you need, let me know.”

And the same thing with other people that were just not kin to him, just that he knew real well. That's how generous that man was. He always wanted to help in any way that he could help you, and he did help. He sent a Chinese young lady, I think he sent her through college, four years of college, and she was no relationship to him. And he did

other things. Keith, I don't have to tell you what he has done for this state of West Virginia.

Alexander: That's for sure.

Nobles: He dedicated his life for the people of West Virginia right up to the end, and Ms. Byrd, she was also that way. They were so proud when they saw that a new highway was coming through or a new business was coming into this. He said the only way to get business into West Virginia was to make highways, roads into these places.

I remember he was in a meeting one time at the governor's mansion, I think, when they were going to dedicate this big statue of him in Charleston. The governor said that, "Senator Byrd sent us the money and we built the roads." [laughs] He said when he first came to Congress that there were three miles of two-lane roads. I'm pretty sure I'm right about that. That was in the mid fifties, somewhere along in there. And you can see what they have today. That was his life's work.

Alexander: Some people have criticized him and sort of called him the King of Pork. Did you two ever talk about that reputation, and did he have anything to say about that or response to that?

Nobles: Yes. He was known for King of Pork, but he said the man that was really King of Pork was Ted Stevens from Alaska. We were talking about the millions and millions of dollars, billions of dollars, all that he'd sent to West Virginia and all. I don't know exactly what he meant by it, but he says, "Oh, it's more than that. Those figures are a little bit low." [laughs]

Alexander: When he talked about the state of West Virginia—first of all, you keep describing these conversations. I'm curious. Where were you when you had these talks? Were you driving around? Were you walking? Where did you usually interact with him?

Nobles: Most of these conversations, now, there were some in driving, but the great majority of them were on his back porch. We would sit on his back porch, and we got into a little time there, I wasn't a smoker, but Senator Byrd smoked at one time. At one time, he smoked cigars pretty regular when he was a younger man, but then he stopped for a long period of time. Then he and I got to smoking these cigars, and we would sit on the back porch. He really didn't smoke them. He chewed them more than anything else. I would have to light those cigars, I know five or six times each. He'd say, "Jim, need a light," and then I'd light it and he'd chew on it a little bit more. Then it'd go out. But that's where mostly he told these stories of a lot of things that happened to him and around Wolf Creek Hollow.

I'm going to tell you, if you will, Keith, and this would be appropriate to tell this story, I think. He told it many times, and a lot of people have heard it in speeches. But he tells this story about witnessing this execution of a man. I think it happened, occurred somewhere around Beckley, West Virginia. I'm not sure. But anyway, a young man at the time killed a cab driver. He got into the cab and they went on the outskirts of a town, and this man shot the cab driver. He was caught and sentenced to death.

Well, Senator Byrd was in the state legislature back then, in Charleston. So he visited this man in prison. This man swore up and down that he was an atheist. He didn't believe in God in any kind of way, and there wasn't no convincing him otherwise. Senator Byrd visited him in the cell because he had been condemned to the electric chair.

Senator Byrd had organized a large Sunday School class along in those days, and it was a priest was there, too, in the room when Senator Byrd would be there. He said on one occasion he left and asked this prisoner, said, "I teach Sunday School. Is there anything you could say to these Sunday School students?"

He said the man just kind of hung his head and thought a little bit and said, "Yeah. Tell them don't drink that stuff."

And Senator Byrd said, "All right," and he was just about to go out the door and the man said, again, said, "Sir, tell them to don't drink that stuff."

So it came time for the electrocution, and Senator Byrd and another friend were a witness of this, and the priest was a witness of this, and some other people too. He said the man swore up and down that he was an atheist and wasn't going to be persuaded any other way. So he said the man walked into the chamber and said it looked like that he wasn't afraid, just walked in and was handcuffed and shackled, and they sat him in the chair and strapped him down. He said he looked pretty calm to him.

So they got this black hood that they put over their heads, and said that when they started putting this black hood over, the man said, "Oh, my God." Said it got down about halfway down his face, and he said it again, he said, "Oh, my God." And that was the last thing he said.

Senator Byrd said thirty-five years later, he was giving a speech someplace in West Virginia and he told this story to the crowd, and he said after he had told the story, this elderly man came up to him and said, "Senator, you told that story exactly the way it happened, because I was the priest. I was the priest in the cell with you."

I've heard Senator Byrd tell this story many a times, and it seems like that he wanted to witness this for some reason, but I believe he regretted witnessing it because it stayed on his mind. That would be a horrible sight. That's just my opinion. I don't know,

but I think Senator Byrd kind of maybe wished that he had not done that, but he did, and that's one reason I believe he told the story quite a bit.

Alexander: Did he discuss the issue of capital punishment with you or his stance on it at all, or is that one of those things that just didn't come up?

Nobles: No.

Alexander: Did you tend not to speak about politics or big political issues like that, or was there more of a separation, again, maintaining the separation between his job and his more social side, his recollections of his life?

Nobles: Keith, that's one thing, and I told my wife before coming up here, and I told other people, they might want to ask me what does Senator Byrd think about this or that thing. Well, we didn't talk about that. The only one thing that I know distinctly that he said, in voting, he said, "You should vote your conscience." We talked a little bit about politics, but not much. He didn't bring it up and I didn't bring it up either. But I personally enjoyed him more just telling stories.

Alexander: Just the human side rather than the politician?

Nobles: Yes, after getting away from the Hill and just kind of relaxing, and he would reminisce. As everybody knows, it's just fabulous, he had just a fabulous memory right up to the end. He just really, really could remember things in detail.

He wrote one book, and I ought to be able to get that name of that book, if you will just bear with me a second. He wrote a book entitled *The Senate of the Roman Republic*, which I'm sure everybody's aware of this, he gave thirteen speeches, I believe, in that book without a single note. That whole thing's from memory. If anybody wants to really understand what kind of memory that man's got, read that book, because it's unbelievable. I always told my [unclear], I said, "This is unbelievable, how anybody can remember these dates and all these names," when they were born, when they died and when they were in power and all this stuff. That just blows my mind.

I asked him what he attributed, I guess, to his memory. I said, "You must have gotten some genes from your father, because your father had a great memory too."

He said, "Yeah, probably so." But he said, "Just from studying, from reading and studying and remembering what you read. I just trained myself to remember."

I said, "Well, you did a good job." [laughter]

Alexander: That's for sure.

Nobles: Let's see. Let me tell you one little quick thing. I'm jumping around.

Alexander: No, you're doing great.

Nobles: When Ms. Byrd—well, I'm just going to tell what she really was. Ms. Byrd was tight. She was tight with money. [laughs] But that was all right with Senator Byrd. Senator Byrd was kind of opposite. She just believed in saving and stuff like that and then not throwing money away trivially.

But we were sitting on the front porch one day, and Senator Byrd liked me to tell this story. She had an old housecoat that she had worn for years and years, and it just about was worn out. Margie and Mona, her two daughters, kept saying, "Mother, you should throw that housecoat away and get a new housecoat. You've worn that one out."

She said, "Yeah, I know it is, but it's so comfortable. I want to continue to wear it."

So on her birthday, I think, Mona and Margie bought her a new housecoat, and she said it was a pretty housecoat and said that, "They took the old housecoat off of me and took it out back and put it in the trashcan and said, 'Now, don't use that housecoat anymore. Wear this pretty new one.'"

She said, "All right." She said it did feel pretty comfortable, but it wasn't as comfortable as the old one. She said they got ready to go, and she said, "Jim, they didn't no more get to their car and I went out back to the trash can and got that housecoat out, put it on and wore it for several more years. I just couldn't take that housecoat off."

Alexander: Did she continue to maintain the finances up until late in her life?

Nobles: Yes, I'm sure she did. They had a place at one time up at—this place up in West Virginia up above Hedgesville up there. Can't think of it right off my head, but they had a—I think senators had to—he lived in Virginia, but I think technically he had to have a residence in West Virginia. Now he's got one here in Shepherdstown out here, and we came up to visit this house one time. He had been there one time.

Quick little story about that. I said, "Senator, you want to go up to see your house in Shepherdstown?" We did that for a long time.

He said one Sunday, said, "Yeah, we'll ride up there."

I said, "You think you know where it is?"

He said, "Oh, yeah, I know right where it is." So we left and came up and got on the main road that would lead to this house, but you had to take a left off of one of those roads. There's a lot of little roads off to the left. We were riding along and he said, "Jim, take this next left up here. I think it's down this road." So we go down there, and, no, it wouldn't be down there. He said, "Turn. All right, let's go down."

So we did that about three times, and I think on the fourth time we went down the road, it was getting a little funny, and he was making fun of it himself. He liked to joke about it because he couldn't remember exactly where it was.

So we went down this road, and it came to an end, end of the road, and this man was cutting his grass on a John Deere tractor. We pulled up there and stopped. Senator Byrd was a passenger, so the man walked up. He'd recognized Senator Byrd right away. Senator Byrd was trying to explain to him where this house was, and he knew the area. This man really knew the area, and Senator Byrd was giving him some help in trying to get him to figure out where about where this place was. Finally, this man says, "Whose house are you looking for?"

And Senator Byrd says, "I'm looking for *my* house." [laughter]

Alexander: That's wonderful.

Nobles: And the man got a big laugh out of that.

Alexander: Is that typical of the Senator's humor?

Nobles: Yes. See, he would make fun of himself. When I say that, you know, I don't know how far a degree he would want to go, but if he did something like that, he wouldn't mind saying it. He thought it was funny.

A lot of Saturdays I'd be down there with him, and the phone would ring and he'd pick up the phone and say, "St. Elizabeth's Hospital." Well, St. Elizabeth's Hospital was a big institution in Washington. But that's how he would answer the phone. It would usually be some of his relatives that called him. Sometimes he'd say, "Lorton Prison. Who you want to speak to?" [laughter] The Lorton Prison was a big prison down a little ways down in Virginia.

But that's just the type humor he had. I wished I could remember and recall some things that—so many little things that we did together. And nothing—everything was just down-to-earth-type stuff.

[I used to take Senator Byrd up to shop at Giant Food every Saturday, or quite a few Saturdays, and we'd be walking along in the aisles, he'd pick up things, then he would say, "Jim, do you think we'll ever amount to anything?" And we'd laugh and talk about it, then later on he might say the same thing: "Do you think we'll ever amount to anything?" That was his sense of humor- that's the way he was.]

We went to a lot of events. I drove him up to Hedgesville. They were celebrating the little chapel up there, 150th anniversary of this chapel. It was just pouring down rain, and I said, "Senator, I don't believe they're going to—they may not have this thing, as hard as it's raining."

He said, “I don’t know.”

So I don’t think the church held but forty or fifty people, but they had a big outdoor place covered and all, and they had a reception after the thing. I didn’t go in the church, but then after that, he came back and they had a nice selection of food and all, and he ate. Everybody crowds around him everywhere he goes, you know, but he never rushed.

I noticed a lot of people. We were up in Charleston, West Virginia, again, and the place was just packed. People would walk up to him. This is when they had this film coming out, *The Soul of the Senate*, and he was known as the Dean of the Senate. You know all the positions that he held; held more committee positions than anybody else. When Senator Byrd passed away, he was president pro tem of the Senate, which was third in line to be president if something happened to the president.

He was, I guess—Keith, I’m guessing at this a little bit. I got to know a lot of those Capitol policemen. They parked almost in front of his house in Evermay and stayed there round-the-clock shifts to watch him, and that was one of the amenities, I guess you would call, of being president pro tem. He was watched. They had this van that they would take him in to the Hill. This was when he got into the wheelchair. He started out with one walking stick. Then it graduated to two, then a walker, and then the wheelchair.

I hope I’m not going out of my boundaries here, but to show you how this man worked and dedicated his life for the people of West Virginia, in his latter years, especially when he was in the wheelchair, you know, he was fed by a tube inserted in his stomach, I know for at least two, maybe three years. It was just like an IV, this thing dripping. You could just screw it on just like something, and then when he went in to vote or in to the Capitol, they could take it off and they’d dress him and off they’d go. The Capitol police would take him in. But you just have to imagine. Now, sometimes we don’t feel very well, if you have a headache or complaining or something like that. Now, that man had to be in pain a lot, but it was his duty. He worked for the people of—he was a hired hand, he said, for West Virginia.

Alexander: He used that term, “hired hand”?

Nobles: He said, “I’m a hired hand. They sent me to do the work for the people of West Virginia.”

I said, “Senator, you have done that.”

His wife was proud of that too. A lot of times later on in life, he would say, “Jim, if Erma was here today, what do you think she’d say about me?”

At first, I didn't know what to say and didn't know if I was going to—I said, “Senator, what I think she would say and be so proud of is that you're continuing to do the work for the people of West Virginia, and that she would admire you trying to hold up yourself in these circumstances without her being there,” because he just was devastated when she passed away.

He would go out to the cemetery. He's at the Columbia Memorial Gardens in Arlington Cemetery. They got a nice plot there. And, Keith, I'm going to say this, this will rub some people probably wrong, but I go out there three or four times a week. I just like to go there and sit down, because I took him out there so many times. He had to struggle to get out of the car. They had a bench in front of her grave, and he would make it to that bench. He would sit down and he would talk about Erma and how he missed her. Then he would get up, very feeble, get up—this was before he got in a wheelchair—and rest his hands on the grave. He would pray, tell her how much he loved her, and he would cry. Most of the times he would cry.

We would get back in the car. He'd say, “Erma.” He'd wave and say, “Erma, I'll see you tomorrow if the good Lord's willing.” He missed her immensely, and it affected his health. I think things like that can affect your health. He tried to keep flowers on the grave, and it just got so tough of him going by, that Father [Thomas] Acker would come down and see him sometimes.

Alexander: Who was that?

Nobles: Father Acker, A-k-e-r [*sic*. Reverend Thomas Acker was president of Wheeling Jesuit University from 1982-2000.] He was president of some religious institution or college of some sort. He was a pretty well-known man. Acker. I knew him pretty well. He dressed as a priest. He was very fond of Senator Byrd. He told Senator one time, he said, “Senator, it's nice of you to go out every day to Erma's grave, but it's not necessary. It's really not that necessary. I know it's a strain on you to go out there,” and this, that, and the other. “You can pay your respects right here from your house. Go out there occasionally, but you don't have to go out there every day.” He'd been doing that for a year or so, yes, and he'd always take a live flower.

On the way in to work or either on the way back from work, he would stop by this grave, and then on the weekends I would take him out there, and it just got to be too much for him. My, my, my, he really missed her, but he fought right up to the end.

I was with him. He had gone into Fairfax Hospital three or four times prior to his passing, and I always went out there to visit him and he was always grateful that I came out. Now, you would think a lot of senators and all that kind of stuff would come out there. They may have wanted to, but he didn't want it that way, I don't believe. Senator [Harry] Reid, I believe, came out one time. He thought if they were coming out there, they wanted something. That's my opinion.

He enjoyed my visits out there, but I was with him—if you had gone into that hospital to the reception desk and said, “What room is Senator Byrd in?” she would pretend she’s going through all these names and all. She says, “Senator Byrd’s not here. He’s not in this hospital.” He went by the name of Mr. Fairfax. If you wanted to see Senator Byrd, you better ask for Mr. Fairfax.

Alexander: Interesting. How did he choose that?

Nobles: Keith, it was to keep away the people that wanted to come in and make a story, I think that was one thing, take pictures, and always bothering him and stuff like that. So they didn’t know where he was.

Alexander: So was that a longstanding code name for him, Mr. Fairfax?

Nobles: Long. Every time he went in, he was Mr. Fairfax. I don’t believe—I shouldn’t have done this one time, but I asked a little young nurse as she came out when we were walking down the hall, I said, “Do you know who you’re attending to?”

She said, “No, I don’t know who it is.”

I said, “That’s Senator Byrd.”

She said, “That’s Senator Byrd?”

I said, “Yeah.” Well, I may not have said that, but she didn’t go around spreading the word, because they didn’t want the media to get to it. That’s how they kept it.

And the police guarded him there around the clock. You couldn’t get into that room unless you got past them. They were nice, and they thought the world of Senator Byrd and they enjoyed working for him.

So I was out there. I stayed until eight-thirty that Sunday night. Not being a physician and not witnessing death, when I left I said, “Senator, I’ll see you tomorrow morning.” Well, he had a tube inserted in his mouth, and he was really breathing hard, and I had never seen him that way. I just thought, you know, he’s having a hard time. I didn’t think he was going to die, but he just looked like he was suffering. I don’t know if he was suffering or not. He may not have known. I know he didn’t know what was going on. So that was Sunday night, and at around three o’clock the next morning, which was Monday, he passed away.

Alexander: You may have been one of his last visitors, his last visitor.

Nobles: May have been. What they tried to do, Keith—when I say “they,” his son-in-law, Jon Moore, and Mohammad [Fatemi], and I don’t know how to pronounce Mohammad’s last name, but they were talking to this doctor who was really an extremely

specialized doctor that was watching over Senator Byrd. I can't recall his name right offhand, but he came to the funeral. They were trying to see—this was on Sunday evening—trying to see if they could get him moved Monday morning home, because they wanted him, if he was going to pass away, to pass away at home. But this doctor just really wouldn't give them any encouragement, because I think he knew without telling them. He said, "Well, we're going to do the best we can," and then they would try and get him to say, "Yeah, it's going to be all right now." He said, "I'll put it this way. He stands about a 10 to 20 percent chance of getting home."

Here again, I shouldn't give my opinion on it, but I think the doctor himself knew that it was very, very little hope that he was going to make it through the night, and he didn't. So he passed away in Fairfax Hospital, and I believe it was Room 312 or 212, something like that. Sad day. Sad day. But he had a presidential funeral.

Alexander: Did you attend his funeral?

Nobles: I did. Keith, he always—again I want to emphasize I'm not bragging. I was just proud. He always said I was family, because we were that close. So they had a memorial service for him, just for the family at the funeral home, so I went to that and saw him.

Then they had the funeral on the Senate floor at the Capitol, and that was the first time they had had a funeral on that Senate floor for fifty years. They had had a funeral for another senator there about fifty years ago. No pictures are allowed in the Senate, but in this particular case, they let them take a picture. You may have seen it in the paper, you know, because it's the casket.

Alexander: Right.

Nobles: The name of it, I'm going to use it as a stand, like this table here where they put the coffin on, well, that's the same stand that was made for Abraham Lincoln and other high dignitaries that they use, and it's kept in the Visitors Center at the Capitol. So they used this. That's how well thought of this man was.

And all the—not all the senators, but a great majority of the senators came through and paid their respects to Senator Byrd and the family, and then they flew his body to Charleston. Now, I didn't go to the Charleston, but that was a big, big deal.

Alexander: Right. I watched that on television.

Nobles: Yes, that was a big deal.

Alexander: Can you tell me a little more about Erma and your interactions with her and what she was like when she was a little younger?

Nobles: Ms. Byrd didn't talk a whole lot about her family. Her father died at a real early age, in his early forties. He had really prostate cancer, and Senator Byrd said he just died a horrible death. They didn't have any way to treat it. He said that that man really, really suffered. She was a James. Her maiden name was James, Erma Ora James. And as we pulled in up here, you see this. [Points out the window to the Erma Ora Byrd Nursing Building on the campus of Shepherd University.]

Alexander: Yes, indeed. His presence and her presence are hard to miss around here.

Nobles: Yes. When I saw that, it just feels like she comes out of that building into the car.

She didn't particularly like the name Ora, O-r-a. She wouldn't hardly ever sign her name Ora. I've got several of her autographs with our pictures together. She told me, "I never did like that name." [laughs]

She had a sister that lived in Rockville, Maryland. Here again, I'm voicing my opinion. They may not have been real close. They were close, but not as close as some sisters may be. She had a first cousin that she liked to talk about all the time. Her name was Laila [phonetic], lived in the area of Roanoke, Virginia, and she said Laila was just like a sister to her. They grew up together and they had a lot in common, and she just thought the world of Laila. She was an independent lady, she lived up to be, I believe, in her nineties and without much assistance, and she didn't want any assistance. She wanted to make it on her own.

Alexander: Were they about the same age, Erma and Laila?

Nobles: I think Laila may have been slightly older than Ms. Byrd. Ms. Byrd passed away in 2006, I believe. I have it here somewhere. You mind if I just—

Alexander: Sure.

Nobles: Not to skip by Ms. Byrd. We would sit on the front porch and I would bring her string beans and tomatoes and cucumbers. I had just a little small garden in the back of my house. My house backs up to St. Luke's Catholic Church, which was twenty-seven acres, so it was kind of like you felt like you was out in the country, but you weren't out in the country. But I had this garden for years, and I named it Ms. Byrd's Bean Patch. [laughter]

They had that picture at her funeral, where they show pictures of when she was young and this and that and the other thing, and there's a lot of pictures of that bean patch. But I would take—and I thought of those beans. I didn't want to eat them myself. I just thought that they belonged to her. I would get bags, two couple of bags. I think one

time she weighed them. It was twelve pounds or something like that. I would take them down and give them to her. She said, “Well, you’re going to keep me busy for the rest of the week, snapping and stringing these beans,” and she would can them. She liked that. We had a lot of fun talking about the garden, and she appreciated it. And Senator Byrd, they liked beans.

Alexander: I had always heard that she was a little bit on the shy side. Is that—

Nobles: That’s correct, yes. She didn’t want to be in the limelight at all. Like I said earlier, about the only thing she would enjoy doing, she would go to a lot of the events when Senator Byrd would speak or it was a special thing like the unveiling of the statue in Charleston. She enjoyed going to the senators’ wives things. She met all the presidents and all kind of well-known government people and foreign people and this, but she never spoke about it. You would never know it.

It’s just like the little thing I told you about Elizabeth Taylor. She didn’t pay any attention to Elizabeth Taylor. I guess she knew who she was, but that didn’t mean anything to her, how many movies you made or how many husbands you had. She was just down-to-earth, plain, plain, plain. She didn’t wear elaborate clothes. They didn’t go to elaborate events. Senator Byrd really didn’t like to go to events in a bow-tie, events like that. He tried to stay away from them, and in his latter years, he just didn’t attend them. He shied away from that, and she did too.

They would go out to eat. In fact, I’ve eaten with them several times in McLean. They liked Chinese food. She was a vegetarian.

Alexander: Is that right?

Nobles: Yes. She was a vegetarian, and she was a slim lady. She was pretty tall. Senator Byrd said when he used to play music at these events, that she was really a good dancer, and that before they got married, she had another boyfriend, and [Senator Byrd] said, “When they would come to the dance, I kept an eye on them. If he looked like he was dancing a little bit close to her, I didn’t like that.”

But she said that this boy that she was dating had an automobile. But he said every time that he would pick Ms. Byrd up—well, she was Erma James at the time—that when she got in the car, she says, “Let’s go down to the market and see Robert.” [laughter] Oh, lordy.

I said, “Senator, she knew who she was after.” They were married, like I say, almost sixty-nine years, and he treasured that lady. He just really treasured her.

Keith, I think now I’ve talked about how dedicated he was to working and how dedicated he was to make the lives of people in West Virginia better, and that’s what he

did, but I think this was true to most anyone as they get older in life, then they start realizing that they'd missed a little something by not spending more time with their family. Well, as you know, his job required campaigning, speaking, so he was gone a lot.

Alexander: Tremendous amount of travel, time [unclear], almost around the clock, absolutely.

Nobles: Tremendous amount of time. So I think he regretted, in his tone, the way he talked, that maybe he wasn't the best father for the children. But he was just so wrapped up in his work and so dedicated in what he was doing and wanted to get things done, and he couldn't get things done overnight. Some of the things that he was working on might take twelve years to come to fruition. So I think he had a few little regrets about that. But he was one dedicated man to the people of West Virginia.

Alexander: Do you have a sense of how often he saw his children?

Nobles: You know, I don't think he saw them as much as a working father would that would go to work and come back home that same day.

Alexander: A nine-to-five type of job.

Nobles: Nine-to-five and come back like that. Because he would be gone periods of time, like his trip around the world and trips to other events that were big events. And late nights. He stayed up. He was the last one. Senator [John D.] Rockefeller [IV], he said that he knew where Senator Byrd parked, and he said, "One night I'm going to stay here until that car is gone. I'm going to stay here longer than he does. I know I got him tonight, and I think it was after twelve o'clock." [laughter] He said, "I went down to get in the car, and there was Senator Byrd's car still sitting there. I give up."

Alexander: I wonder if Senator Byrd was saying the same thing, "I'm not going home before Rockefeller does." [laughter]

Nobles: It could be. He tells a cute little thing about—he called him Jay Rockefeller, you know, the Jay. Those senators call each other that, but they on the floor speaking, they do their respect. He said he and Jay were over traveling through West Virginia one time, and it was around lunchtime, and he said, "Jay, are you getting hungry?"

He said, "Yeah, I'm pretty hungry."

He said, "Have you ever eaten at McDonald's?"

He said Jay said, "Oh, no, I've never eaten at McDonald's."

He said, "Well, you are today." [laughter]

Alexander: That's great.

Nobles: And Ted Kennedy tells a story. They get up just in fun at events, like whatever the event might be. Ted Kennedy said one time that he and some of his staff members were traveling through West Virginia, "And of all things, our car broke down." He said, "I called the operator, and I told her the story that we were broke down."

She said, "Whereabouts are you broke down?"

He said, "We're on the Robert C. Byrd Highway."

And she said, "Which one?" [laughs]

Alexander: That doesn't narrow it down much around here. That's great.

But when he talked about his home state, did you get a sense of the source of this love that he had? What terms did he use to describe it? Did he have any maybe favorite places in the state? What did he associate with West Virginia? What do you think accounts for that love of his home state?

Nobles: You know, Keith, speaking about—I heard him speak several times that if he—I asked Ms. Byrd one time, I said, "Do you think Senator Byrd will ever retire?"

She said, "Oh, no, I don't think so, because he doesn't have many hobbies. Only thing he likes to do is read and write."

But I understood at one time they were considering if he did retire, that he wanted to come to Shepherdstown, yes, this is Shepherdstown, and teach at this Shepherd College. But I don't know how serious he was at that, but I heard that there were conversations about that. He spoke very highly of this town. He liked Shepherdstown, and he's got his home here in Shepherdstown.

What I think what Senator Byrd—oh, I think it always goes back to Wolf Creek Hollow. That's where that man learned everything that made him what he is. He said he studied by coal lamps, I believe. Back in my day, we had kerosene lamps, but I believe he used the term coal lamps. He said, "I just read and read and read and studied, and I would look at the sky and see the clouds, and I would imagine what the formations, what they might be just in my mind."

I think his favorite place probably was Wolf Creek Hollow, but he loved all of West Virginia. I forget what he said at the funeral, something about they wished he had a map on his chest of West Virginia when he passes away. There was nothing phony about him. He just gave his life, devoted his life to making the lives of people in West Virginia. I used to tell him, I said, "Senator, that must be a great feeling to have brought companies into West Virginia and made the life better, and what I was thinking, than you had at Wolf

Creek Hollow and things like that. I think that's what energized him to work so hard, that he didn't want to see people grow up like he did.

Alexander: It's interesting, because he had such fond memories and such a close attachment to Wolf Creek Hollow and yet it was such a place of a lot of suffering for him. It was a tough, tough place.

Nobles: A lot of suffering. A lot of suffering. And not only—he saw it in other people too. No one, hardly no one back in these coal camps—they were just surviving. They just survived off the company store. The company store owned these people. They were paid by the company store, and they had to deal with the company store to get food and credit and stuff, so actually they were just working for the company store and doing the best they could to make it.

You may want to cut this, but I'll tell you one little story about when he was in the coal camps. He said that a man came by and he was a peeping tom, was peeping in their house. You know, people back in those days, they didn't take very kindly to that type stuff, and they probably don't today. But he said he saw this man peeping in the house, and so he came out on the front porch, and he said the man was standing out on the railroad track. Senator Byrd said something to him about what he had done, and he said the man raised his hands up in the air and shook his hands like he was the king of kings. He said, "Well, what are you going to do about it?"

Senator Byrd said he turned around and went back in the house and got his pistol. He said, "I'll show you what I'm going to do about it." He said he came back out. I don't know how many shots this pistol had. I believe he said six, but I'm not sure. He said he started firing at this man. When the man heard the first shot, he started taking railroad ties about not one at a time, he said he started jumping about two at a time, three at a time, and he said, "I was right behind him shooting. The more I shot, the more cross-ties he was not touching. I think at the end when my gun gave out, I don't even believe his feet were on the ground." [laughter]

But then when he'd get through telling it, he said, "Jim, you know, I often wonder about this. What if I had hit and killed that man? My life would've been entirely different."

I said, "Did you mean to hit him?"

He said, "I meant to kill him dead, dead, dead." He would do it three times. But he said, "I'm so glad that I didn't hit him. That would have changed my entire life." But that's just how people were. You didn't come around meddling around places where you weren't supposed to be.

Alexander: Absolutely.

Nobles: Senator Byrd was a man. I mean, physically, when he was coming along on up through the years, he was a strong man. He was strong. We'd work out in the backyard and he'd pick up fertilizer bags and topsoil just like—I said, "Senator, I'll get that."

He said, "No, you don't have to get it. I can pick this up." He didn't shy away from work.

So, yeah, I'm glad he didn't hit this man either. He said the man went on across, got under some railroad cars and went on up the hills. He said he could hear cans falling down the hills that the man took. He said, "I don't know who he was and I never did see him again."

Alexander: The Senator actually gave a speech on the floor of the Senate, in which you played a pretty prominent role. It's called "The Good Neighbor." It was all about you and how you helped the Senator, so you must have been some neighbor.

Nobles: Keith, again, I have a tape of that, of him giving the speech. But, you know, as I would do little things for him, and I was conscious that I hoped people, especially his family—I said, "I hope these people don't think I'm trying to do these things to be put in the will or this." That was totally out of the realm. I wanted *nothing*. I was just doing it because we were friends. That's how we grew up in Alabama. You helped, you know.

So he kept saying, "Jim, I'm going to give a speech about you on the Senate floor, and that's going to put you in the *Congressional Record*." I didn't think much about it, and that went on for a long time, and he'd say it over and over, "I'm going to give a speech about you. I'm writing it now," or something like that. So he did.

Betsy, one of his staff members, she would always call me when he was going to give a speech on the floor about anything. At that time, I was retired, too, so I was always wanted to see him. She called me one time, she says, "This is the day. He's going to give the speech about you."

I said, "All right." I went in and turned the television on, and you know how proud you are that he would take time to do that. I have the speech on film, and he gave me a picture of it, framed. It's beautiful, just how the speech was given.

Alexander: Yes, you're in there. You're in the *Congressional Record*. I've seen it myself.

Nobles: I'm in there. But, yes, if you tell—I have friends left in Alabama, and you kind of want to tell them, but if you do that type stuff, you get the idea that or they may

get the idea, “Who are you?” You’re bragging or something like that, but that’s not what I’m—it’s just an honor of the man taking time to do that.

And our friendship is—I go now and go and talk to Senator Byrd at the gravesite and let him know how I appreciate what he did for me. That man did a lot for me. He gave us tickets to go to President Clinton’s—what was that called when they had the—

Alexander: The impeachment trial.

Nobles: Yes, the impeachment trial. We stayed there a whole day. William Rehnquist was the Chief Justice, [U.S.] Supreme Court.

Speaking of Mr. Rehnquist, Senator Byrd, one of his things that he thought very highly of, that he won, was the line-item veto. He was really proud of doing that. He took that to the Supreme Court, and, again, Chief Justice Rehnquist was the Chief Justice at the time, and they were friends, passing friends. But he was really proud of that.

To show you I’m not much of a politician, I think what it was preventing was that if he hadn’t won that, the president could do pretty much anything he wanted to, but this kept him from doing that. He wanted things to come through the Senate like it was supposed to, and be discussed, voted on, and then sent to the president for his signature.

Alexander: Did the Senator talk much about what he thought of other presidents? I know you didn’t talk much about politics so much, but maybe personal relationships with some of the presidents or anything like that?

Nobles: Now, his favorite—yes, he did say that. His favorite president was Truman, Harry S. Truman. One time—I don’t know why I thought of it. We was sitting out on the back porch, just knocking around. He liked to watch the planes come into Reagan National Airport. We were puffing on cigars. I said, “Senator, do you know what the S stands for in Harry S. Truman? You know, I don’t believe it stands for anything. It’s not a name.”

He said—oh, that’s one time he was wrong, I caught him wrong. He said, “Oh, yeah, it had to be. It’s got to be a name.”

I said, “Oh, I don’t think it is.”

He said, “Get Betsy on the phone,” one of his staff members down at—I got it and I told Betsy the story, and she looked it up on the computer, and, sure enough, it doesn’t mean anything. It’s just an S. He said, “I didn’t know that.”

He tells the story that President Truman was up here in West Virginia campaigning for him years ago when he first got started. He said President Truman was so down-to-earth, too, just a no-nonsense president. He asked the president before he

gave his speech, he said, “Mr. President, I have two daughters. Would you give them your autograph after you get through speaking?”

He said, “Sure, I’d be glad to.”

So the speech was over and said President Truman must have slipped his mind a little bit, but he was on his way out and he told him, he said, “Wait a minute,” turned around, came back and he said, “I forgot about your two daughters.” So he signed that. He autographed something for his two daughters.

But he liked Lyndon [B.] Johnson. He said it this way, “I was a Lyndon Johnson man.” He campaigned for him out in California and places, and some people wanted him to change his—wanted him to do something that would not help Lyndon Johnson, and he said, “Nope, I’m on the bandwagon. I don’t flip-flop. I’m a Lyndon Johnson man, and that’s the way it’s going to be.”

I don’t recall him saying too much about President [Franklin D.] Roosevelt. I think he may have liked President [Dwight D.] Eisenhower. He didn’t dislike, I don’t think, any. At least he didn’t express that.

There were some senators—and I wouldn’t call names—that he didn’t particularly care for. They had severe differences in what was going on in a lot of them. He said about the only time they would have much conversation to him was when they wanted something done, they’d come by and try to butter-up to him and stuff like that, and he said, “That didn’t work with me.”

He and Ted Stevens, now, were good friends. They were good friends. When Ted Stevens got in trouble there at the latter end of his life, they were on the floor and he said that Ted Stevens had given a speech about it, he came over and he said, “Ted, tell me it ain’t so, that this has happened.”

And he said Ted Stevens said, “It ain’t so.” But he lost his office and lost his senator’s spot.

Well, I tell you, being it just come to my mind, Senator Byrd says, “I’ll go to my grave and people are going to remember the Ku Klux Klan. I have apologized hundreds and hundreds of times about that. When I first got started, I organized a group of men in about two weeks,” and I want to say he got about 250 men. It was just an astronomical amount of men that he got in such a short time to organize in the KKK. So one of the leaders in Arlington, Virginia, who was high ranking in the Klan, heard about this, so he wanted to meet him. He said, “This man must have something on the ball.”

So he came up to one of their meetings in West Virginia and met Senator Byrd, and he told Senator Byrd, he said, “You know, you are a good organizer. People like what you do, and, to me, you ought to think about getting into politics.”

And Senator Byrd said, “The light went on.”

Alexander: Interesting.

Nobles: “And that’s what started, really, my career in politics, was this man making that statement. I never considered politics, but when the man said that, the light went on.” And the rest is history.

Alexander: Did he ever talk about other aspects of his Klan membership, other than the fact that he apologized for it?

Nobles: He wrote a letter, and I’m sorry I don’t remember some of this stuff in detail. It’s just brief stuff. He wrote a letter that made a lot of publicity. He admitted that he did it. He would say what he had done. But he never got down to details as to what they did, and I didn’t want to ask him. I said, “Senator, when I was a little boy growing up in Alabama, I was helping a carpenter, and the man told me that he belonged to the Ku Klux Klan.” I said, “Even being from Alabama, that didn’t mean much to me. I didn’t know much about that.” I said, “But I understand they didn’t go around whipping people and beating people and tying them to posts and all that kind of stuff that you hear that might have happened. I always thought if a neighbor was mistreating his wife or mistreating his children and not taking care of his family, something like that, they might step in and try to straighten him out.” But he never would comment too much about what they actually did.

He said, “Now, in my time, we didn’t wear the hood. We didn’t wear hoods,” and he would talk about getting to where they did wear the outfits that they wore, very cheap back. Things weren’t very costly. But he expressed himself as being it was a mistake.

But, you know, in looking back at other side, that was just what was going on back in that period. There’s a man told me way prior to what I’m telling you now, is we went to some event up there in Charleston, and this man knew him way back when he was in the Klan and this and that and the other, and had photographs, had an album of all of this. That’s when he told me, he said, “This is really what got Senator Byrd into politics,” and then years, years later the story that I just told you, I heard it again. But this man said it, and it didn’t make an impression on me at the time. But, like I say, he apologized many, many times over it.

Alexander: How are you holding up? We’ve been talking for almost two hours here.

Nobles: Really?

Alexander: Yes, an hour and fifty minutes. So do you feel like we're at a good stopping point, or is there anything else you'd like to contribute to the record? This has been tremendous, tremendous stuff.

Nobles: Well, Keith, as I said before, I'm not a public speaker and—

Alexander: Oh, I think you're a natural, Jim, to be honest. [laughs]

Nobles: Oh, I don't know. My vocabulary, my wife is a schoolteacher, and she's still trying to teach me something about English. [laughter] But I've never tried to change. I went to a small college in Alabama, just a state Teachers College at the time, played basketball and baseball, and now it's a big university, Troy University. They're big time now, but it wasn't when I went there. It was just a small school.

Alexander: On the subject of the university, you mentioned that there was some consideration of the Senator coming out here to possibly teach, maybe. Do you have any idea what subject matter he would have wanted to teach?

Nobles: I think something pertaining to politics, you know. He knew it from start to end. He wouldn't have needed a textbook.

Alexander: I'm sure that's right.

Nobles: I always marveled at him. I always think, you know, I'm trying to compare myself to him, I said I don't even hold a light to that man. He was a gifted man. I told him, I said, "Senator, I think if you'd lived back when Jesus was on Earth, you would have been one of the twelve disciples," and he would smile. But he was extraordinary. He had a gift of getting things done, and it was by hard work. He knew the Constitution from the beginning to end, and he knew more about England's history than the people over there.

Ted Stevens tells a story about that, but I don't know exactly how it went. They were at a big round table meeting, I think at Greenbrier. Speaking of Greenbrier, he used to take Ms. Byrd up there on their anniversary, and they'd ride the carriage. He always wanted to take her up there.

That reminds me. One time we were—Keith, I wished I knew these—we were in West Virginia. Somewhere around where Stonewall Jackson, the Civil War hero, was born, they have, I think, a Stonewall Jackson Hotel there, big huge place. Senator Byrd the next day was going to dedicate a prison in this town not far away. I went to most all these things when I knew about them. Well, I knew about them, sometimes I just couldn't go, but I went every chance I could.

Alexander: Did you go with him or did you just go separately?

Nobles: No, I went separately. Yes, we went separately. He had Ms. Byrd, and this was when Ms. Byrd's health was failing, and he was so concerned about her and so protective of her. I think at their ninetieth—I better not tell this one, because I don't know the dates and all, but I think at his ninetieth birthday. We've had many meals, several meals, over here at the Bavarian Inn with Ms. Byrd. One time Senator Byrd, I got him and Ms. Byrd—I said, "One Sunday, Senator, when you're not busy, let's ride up to the Bavarian Inn," because he had dedicated this wildlife preserve back in here at one time. And then after that, we came to the Bavarian Inn and had a meal. He always liked those knockwurst.

Alexander: They're good over there.

Nobles: They are, and he really liked them. I've lost my train of thought here.

Alexander: You were talking about how you were going down to a dedication near Stonewall Jackson's birthplace.

Nobles: Oh, yes. Terry Sauvain was there and Anne Barth. I didn't know Anne Barth at the time. We were in the hotel lobby and I was sitting twenty feet or so from them, and I noticed her. She's a nice-looking lady. But I didn't know her at the time. She ran his office in Charleston, wonderful lady, and she ran for Congress.

But, anyway, the next day, like I say, he had Ms. Byrd there, and she was having these kind of dizzy spells or something, and they had thought it's best that she not drive, and that was a hard thing for her to accept that she couldn't drive anymore, because she went to the store and bought the groceries and that sort of stuff. Senator Byrd and I, after that, I would take him up there and we'd grocery shop at Giant Food. A lot of people would stop him while we were shopping, and I don't think he'd mind, but he was shopping. I think that was his main thing. He was shopping.

But Ms. Byrd said prior to [unclear], this is after Ms. Byrd had passed away, but Ms. Byrd said when she was shopping for groceries, she didn't want Robert to go with her, because, "He wouldn't look at the prices and he'd pick up too many things and fill the basket up and he always ran up my grocery bill. So I asked him, I said, 'Robert, I'd really prefer you did not shop with me.'" [laughter]

Keith, they were big on feeding the birds, the wildlife. They had bird feeders and she'd have flowers, hanging flowers and stuff, and sometimes the birds would build a nest in it. When she'd go to the store, Senator Byrd would always tell her the day before, "Now, Erma, be sure to get the bird feed."

She said, “You know, he didn’t realize how expensive that bird feed was.” [laughs]

Alexander: Were they birdwatchers? Did they know the different kinds of birds?

Nobles: No, I don’t think so. Yes, well, they watched out of their dining room area. They had big windows to look out in the back. Around his house was all—not like it was secluded. It was all bricked in, but it wasn’t like a fortress. It was just the way houses were made then.

So after Senator Byrd passed away, I knew how—he said the birds knew where to come to get a good meal. So I knew how they enjoyed feeding the birds, so I’ve kept up that, that routine. Now, I don’t buy the feeds. His son-in-law and his oldest daughter buy the feed and they put it in a big five-gallon bucket, and I go down there every morning and feed the birds. So I know he’s happy about that. He knows that they’re still being fed.

Alexander: Wonderful.

Nobles: It’s just something that you remember him by. The bird feeders are right there where we sat so many hours on this back porch. I mean, in the winter he would still want to sit out. I’d get every blanket that they had, and he’d say, “Jim, I’m still cold.” Well, I don’t know how many blankets I had on him already, and he’d have on this Russian-looking hat pulled down over his head, smoking a cigar, but chewing a cigar, more or less.

Then every time I’d go down there, every morning, I can just—it brings back so many memories of us sitting there. He would sit in one, and I’d make sure sometimes I’d move him over where he could watch. He liked to watch these airplanes come in, and he’d get all excited about an airplane coming in. Then he would talk about when he was a young boy, they didn’t have anything, no airplanes or that type stuff. They would take off, and he liked to watch them.

Alexander: We’ve got an airplane up in our reading room that’s named after him.

Nobles: Really? I’ll be darned.

So let me see if I can see something here that might kind of spur me on here to think of something. [Rifles through notes.] Oh, yes, I want to tell that.

Alexander: We’ve covered, I think, pretty much all the things that you had sent me, but if you’ve got something you want to add...

Nobles: Some of this, if people read his book and stuff, they’re going to know anyway. But instead of sending him a card when he became the longest-serving member in Congress—you know, he was elected nine terms, never been done before. Nine times

he was senator from West Virginia, never lost an election. But on this particular date, November 18, 2009, Senator Byrd became the longest-serving member in Congress, breaking the old record set by Senator Carl Hayden of Arizona. On this particular date, Senator Byrd had served the people of West Virginia 20,774 days, and he went on to serve a lot more.

Alexander: Did he talk to you about his feelings regarding these accomplishments, his longevity?

Nobles: He was proud of it, yes. He could express his way in a term that you knew he wasn't bragging, but he was certainly proud of them. This book here, the sum of a lot of his accomplishments in here, we used to read this and I'd say, "Senator, I think a person that read this book and they didn't know you, they would think this book was fiction because of everything that you've done." And he liked that. He knew that he'd done quite a bit of—but it was all for the people. See, he had made lives better. That was his main thing.

He cast more votes than any other senator in history, I think over 18,000, and I think somebody can look these up, because I'll be off a little bit. The closest one to him at one time was Senator Kennedy at 15,000. Well, as you know, Senator Kennedy's not around anymore either. But he was proud of that and he was proud of being there. I think he had a voting attendance record of like 98.7 of being there. He went on when he was down and out, when he wasn't feeling well. He went in to vote.

Alexander: Was there a particular vote that he was especially proud of that he talked about with you, or a particular issue that was especially near and dear to him that he might have discussed?

Nobles: I think so, Keith, but offhand I don't. What brings to my mind, he was so proud of the line-item veto, of defeating that. That's when he would tell me that there was a Republican senator, I think Senator [Mark] Hatfield, really made a vote—he was a Republican—made a vote to swing this vote in favor of the Democrats, and it was a big deal in Washington about him doing this because he went against the Republicans. I asked Senator Byrd about that, and that's when he says, "Well, you just vote your conscience." That's what you do. He didn't elaborate about it. He just said, "You vote your conscience." There was one of two votes, and I can't remember which ones they were, that he said that he made a mistake on, if he had to do it over, he would not have voted that way, but at that time he did.

Just for records, Keith, he held more committee leadership positions than any other person in the history, and he was the president pro tem more than one time. Ted Stevens, I think, was, and Senator Byrd, I believe, was maybe twice, at least twice. He was the president pro tem of the Senate. He was the Majority Leader more than one time. He was Minority Leader, and he was the Whip when he first got started, when he

defeated Senator Kennedy. He was so well respected, you know, the Senator, they called him Dean of the Senate, Soul of the Senate, and they just had a tremendous amount of respect for him, not only because he knew the Constitution back and forth, there was no nonsense about him. He was there to work. That was his main purpose of being there, was coming there to work, no foolishness.

Alexander: These oral histories are going to be part of what we're calling the Robert C. Byrd Legacy Project. Did he ever talk about what kind of legacy he wanted to leave behind, how he wanted to be remembered?

Nobles: Keith, off the top of my mind, I can't think of anything. I don't know if I heard him say this, but knowing him as well as I knew him, I think he would want the people of West Virginia, that he gave everything he had to make their lives better. That was, I believe, his main purpose, and Ms. Byrd's main purpose too. She would talk about his accomplishments and how he had made life better for some people, especially, I think when they say this, better than what we had when we were coming along. That was very gratifying to them to know this. He did a good job at it. He just did it, he did it right up until his death.

I told you how he would go into the—a lot of people marveled at the fact. I don't think many people knew his situation, but maybe some. But they marveled at the fact that he would come in, especially on important votes, and vote, in the health that he was in. But that was just him. He didn't think it was a big deal. He was doing his job.

Alexander: We've been talking for, according to the clocks here, two hours and seven minutes, so we've got a really nice record here. What will happen next is we'll take at least a break and we're going to go have some lunch, and perhaps over lunch we can think about maybe there are some other things that we would like to cover while you're here or you'd like to come back. I think you've done a remarkably complete job here, getting a lot of this stuff on the record. I just want to thank you. We will have this transcribed and you would get a copy of the transcription for your review and approval. We'll send you a Deed of Gift and we'll keep everything nice and official. You send us your comments, any edits and so on, and we'll go from there.

Nobles: Well, Keith, I tell you, I'm honored to be up here. I never thought this would ever happen, and I just hope I done a fairly decent job.

Alexander: Oh, I think you have done more than that.

Nobles: My wife says I ramble, and I do. I know I ramble from one thing to another, but it's because I think of that and if I don't—I'm seventy-nine years old, and I don't recall things as well as I at one time did. That's just aging.

I would like to say one thing.

Alexander: Sure.

Nobles: One more story before, and it's not all that alarming, but Senator Byrd enjoyed telling this story about his mother, Mom. He said that he and his mother—he called her Mom, and his father Pap—they were sitting out in front of the house at Wolf Creek Hollow—he was a young boy—on a stump. And along came a—I hope this doesn't offend anybody—a black man. He said that was real common back in those days, some people who were down and out, they were looking for a meal. They would work for it if you had some jobs to do.

But he said this man came up to them, came up through the woods, up to where they were, and he seemed to be very nice, and he asked Mom, said if she had any work for him to do, that he hadn't eaten in a while and he would like to have a meal. And she said, "Well, I don't really have anything for you to do, but I'll fix you a meal."

He said, "Mom always wore an apron." There was no nonsense about her either. She come up the hard way too. Said she went in the house and fixed this man a really nice meal and came back out to where they were sitting at the stump, and said that the man ate the meal and thanked her very much for it, he appreciated it and thanked her for it. Then he walked away back down into the woods.

The Senator said, "Mom, weren't you a little bit scared of what this man may have done?"

She said, "Not really." Said she pulled up her apron. There was her pistol tucked in her clothing. Said, "No, I wasn't scared." But, you know, she wouldn't have used it unless she had to, but she'd been around and she didn't take chances, and she had enough wisdom to know that sometimes unexpected things happened. But he liked telling that because he was bragging about her, and he loved that woman and he loved his father too.

So, Senator Byrd, we're going to miss him. There'll never be another Robert C. Byrd, period.

Alexander: I think you're absolutely right. I think the state will really miss him especially.

Nobles: They just have to, unless—he worked himself into a position, like on the Appropriations Committee and stuff, where he could funnel money to different places, not illegally, but he'd get this money to places that needed it. He did a good job at that. He did a good job, and I know the people of West Virginia appreciate him, appreciate his work.

I've said this before, personally, when I go to his grave, and not that I don't appreciate going over there, I do, but I wish that his gravesite could be moved here

somewhere in West Virginia. I've heard Charleston, Beckley, Shepherdstown, where the people of West Virginia can come, know where he is. Where he is now is a little bit hard to find if you don't know your way around. That's around the Washington, D.C. area. Nice, nice place, nice site.

I've talked to the manager of those grounds on occasions when he'd catch me there. I haven't seen him lately, but he said in the earliest stages of when the senator was put there, that he would see a lot of West Virginia cars come in there and a lot of cameras flashing and taking pictures and things like that. But it would be much more accessible if he were here in his home state. That's me. Maybe one day. I'm not saying things that haven't been discussed within certain people. That has been talked about, but whether it materializes or not, I don't know.

Alexander: We have heard that from other interviewees as well, actually, about that.

Nobles: I hope it comes to pass. This is where he belongs. This is where he belongs, and the people can come and show their respects for a hardworking man.

Alexander: Well, very good, Jim. I'm going to turn the tape off now, and I sure appreciate all your time and coming out today. This has been a fantastic, fantastic interview, I think, so thanks again for your time.

Nobles: Keith, it's my pleasure, I'll tell you.

[Begin File 2]

Alexander: This will be the next track. So you were telling me about Byrd's other musical abilities?

Nobles: He's noted for fiddling, fiddle playing and singing. He made a record up at the Capitol, and I have that record. I think it's fifteen, sixteen songs on it, but he made that record when he was the Majority Leader. I wish I could think of the band that was there with him. I met that man, but I've forgotten who he was. But a lot of songs that—

Alexander: So you've heard him sing?

Nobles: Oh, yes. Like I say, he acted like he didn't sing all that well, but I think he was proud of his singing of "Amazing Grace." Everywhere he went, people wanted him to sing "Amazing Grace." The first time I heard him was at this event, I think, when this operation first got under way, but he had to sing it by a fiddle. He said he didn't particularly like—he'd prefer piano.

But to regress a little bit, when we went up to this dedication of this chapel in Hedgesville, I had heard him sing this song many, many times, and he'd bring the house down with it. People really liked his singing. While the people were eating, they had three or four ladies, they had the piano playing and these ladies were singing some songs. So when they got through with one song, I walked over to who I thought was the leader of the thing, and I said, "You know, if you'd go back and ask Senator Byrd to sing 'Amazing Grace,' I bet you he would."

She said, "Do you think he would?"

I said, "Oh, yeah. Go back and ask him."

So she went back in and asked him, and here he comes, and so he sang at that. They just brought the house down. He sang it with the piano.

On the way home, it was just he and I on the way home, he called Erma, just checking on Erma, and he told Erma, he said, "You know, somebody, I don't know who it was—." He knew who it was. He said, "Someone asked the lady down there to get me to sing 'Amazing Grace.'"

She said, "Well, they won't have any trouble doing that." [laughter]

He said, "Jim, you know who it was that asked that lady?"

I said, "I don't have any idea who it was." He was just laughing.

But Senator Byrd was well known in the musical world. At one of his—I think ninetieth birthday, Howard Baker, Senator Howard Baker came up from Tennessee to help celebrate. Senator Byrd and Howard Baker were well known for the Panama Canal when that was in the Senate. Senator Baker was a Republican senator, but they worked together really, really well, and they had a good friendship together. But, anyway, Senator Baker brought up a letter from Dolly Parton. She thought the world of Senator Byrd and his singing and playing. She sent a letter and said if she hadn't had another engagement, she would have been there, too, and he appreciated that.

Then later in his life, he went with staff members and all down to Nashville, Tennessee. He played on the Grand Ole Opry. He played on *Hee Haw*. They gave him a big reward down there for being instrumental in music, especially that type music, in Appalachian-type music. He learned from Ms. Byrd's father, who was a James, and he said he taught him a lot about it.

I said, "You play by ear?"

He said, "Oh, yeah, by ear. I don't read music."

But, Keith, one time we were sitting in his living room—I mean in his dining room area, and he had a hymnal there, a hymnbook. He believed in the James version, the King James version of the Bible. He read the Bible through twice, and he and Ms. Byrd read it through once together. He could quote from the Bible. The preacher at his funeral made a remark about “Did you read chapter so-and-so, verse—,” he said he’d just start reciting it. He said, “He didn’t have a Bible. He’d just start reciting it.” It amazed this preacher.

I’m jumping around here a little bit, but for about a couple of summers or so, he and I went to a lot of different churches. He said he was looking for a church to go to, and he finally decided on this Columbia Memorial Baptist Church in Arlington [Virginia], which was a short distance from his—and that’s where his funeral was, that’s where Ms. Byrd’s—oh, boy, I forgot what I was saying.

Alexander: Something about a hymnal that [unclear].

Nobles: A hymnal, this book, and I would just open it up. I was a Baptist. I was brought up a Baptist, too, in Alabama, and a lot of those old hymns I liked, myself. I would turn to one and I would name the name of it. Well, he would just start out singing. At first I said, “Well, he’ll just sing the first verse. That’s all he knows.” Well, if it had four verses; he’d sing four verses.

Alexander: That’s incredible.

Nobles: It was. It’s unbelievable. It makes you just back up and say, “Is this man —,” I’m looking at the book and he’s not. He’s way over here, and he’s singing that thing word for word. So he’d say, “Yeah, I like this song.” I’d flip over to another one, very popular. As soon as I say it, and the tune might change, you know, right off the bat, the sound of that hymn, sing it top to bottom.

I said, “Senator, this is unbelievable. I don’t know how you do it.”

He would say, “Oh, well.” One time he said by reading and studying. I don’t think he just memorized these things, I don’t guess. I don’t know how he did it. But that’s just to give you an idea of the memory that he had.

It didn’t matter what you asked him. He knew the dates of just most anything that had happened. He liked to talk about Jack Dempsey, the boxer. You know, Jack Dempsey, I believe, was from West Virginia, the professional boxer. And the Gene Tunney bout that was supposed to be a long count, stuff like that. I think this was 1928, and that’s when he was coming along. He’d been about ten years old.

Then there was [Charles] Lindbergh’s flight, I believe, happened the same year. Babe Ruth, I believe, hit sixty home runs. And we talked about it. He liked baseball, but

he didn't even go to games, or football games. And he didn't go to many movies. I would tell him I liked when the Washington Redskins would play. I'd go down maybe after Sunday or something. He might say, "Well, Jim, what you been doing?"

I said, "I watched the Redskins this afternoon."

He said, "That's three hours lost."

Alexander: He didn't have much patience for that?

Nobles: No, no patience for it. No patience for football. He didn't go to those games and things like that. But in his younger days he played baseball. He was a catcher. I said, "Senator, did you throw them out?"

He said, "They didn't steal on me. If they tried to steal second base, I'd throw them out. But I'll tell you something, I took the worst whipping of my life was from another ballplayer." He was a batter. I don't know what Senator Byrd did. Senator Byrd was the catcher, and he said something to this guy that was batting, and he said that boy whipped him. [laughs] He said, "I never been whipped before, but he put a whipping on me." I don't know what age he was. But he didn't mind telling, you know.

Senator Byrd had knowledge about a little bit of everything, and he was much stronger in politics and things like that, history. He loved history. But he also enjoyed—I told him the story about Ty Cobb. Now, he wasn't really familiar much about Ty Cobb, who was a great baseball player too. He enjoyed this, and he would enjoy hearing that story. But he didn't spend much time with movies and sports, games and things like that. He thought it was kind of a waste of time.

Alexander: Did they have a television in their house?

Nobles: They had a television in their house. They had one, Keith, up in their bedroom, just ordinary, nothing out of the world. You know, you've got these wide-screens today. This was just an ordinary—one down in their dining area, set in front of a fireplace. That's what he watched.

He didn't watch the news all that much, at least while I was with him. But just ordinary small screen, nothing fancy. They were just plain folks. A lot of people, I think, have a misconception of—I don't know about other senators. I think some of them live the high life and glamorous life and stuff like that, but everything was just like ordinary to them. They weren't extravagant. He had a Chevrolet that Ms. Byrd drove, and she was a good driver. He had a Chrysler Le Baron, I believe, at one time. He sold that to some staff member. He was picked up and carried to his job, so they didn't need it. They didn't need the car too much. Ms. Byrd, about the only time she used her car was to go grocery shopping or things like that.

Jim Allen [phonetic], I want to mention him. Jim Allen had worked for Senator Byrd for thirty-some years, and he was like Jim Huggins, but maybe a little bit more so. He drove. He was Senator Byrd's chauffeur, if you want to say chauffeur. They were very close, and I'm saying this in all due respects, Jim Allen was a black man but he was a good man. He was very religious, and he would lead a lot of these events and services that maybe we went to. He would always ask Jim Allen to pray first, or, depending on what kind of event it was, they'd ask him to close the meeting in a prayer. Jim was very good. I really care for him. He's a nice, nice man. He retired just recently with the changeover when Senator Byrd passed away. He lives in Maryland.

Alexander: I think he's on our list of people to interview.

Nobles: He'd be a good one. Be a good one, Jim Allen. Be a good one. He can tell you more stories about him than probably I can.

Alexander: Let's see, make sure that we have him. Yes.

Nobles: Jim Allen.

Alexander: Yes, he's on our list.

Nobles: McIntosh. Martha Anne McIntosh.

Alexander: She is on here.

Nobles: Anne Barth?

Alexander: Yes, she's on here.

Nobles: Barbara. I can never tell Barbara's last name.

Alexander: Videnieks, yes, she's on here.

Nobles: Well, now, they're going to be able to tell you. They're going to be able to get into the politics with Senator Byrd. Barbara was his staff leader, and the other ones staff members. And Jim Allen, very familiar with him.

Alexander: But, you know, it's wonderful to talk about the more human side of the senator, because a lot of the political stuff, that's in the written record.

Nobles: You can find some of that in this book here.

Alexander: Exactly. But I think this conversation has done such a wonderful job of really humanizing the senator.

Nobles: Well, Keith, I'm glad you said that, because that's the purpose of me coming up here.

Alexander: Absolutely.

Nobles: It is to let people know that Senator Byrd was not above anybody. Just because he was a senator, he didn't think he was better than you. He never presented that at all. He would relax and kick his shoes off and talk about Wolf Creek Hollow and all of that stuff, just as the two of us are talking right here. Made it very comfortable.

I was at first a little bit afraid to talk to him. I didn't know exactly what to say to him. As we got to talking and talking, I said, "Well, we're just about on the same level here about this personal stuff," so we got along fine doing it that way, and we stayed away from politics.

Now, you can get people to talk day and night about his politics and his accomplishments and things like that, and he was proud of those things. Those things weren't given to him; he had to work for them. One took him—I don't know what it was, maybe Corridor H coming through West Virginia, it took him twelve years to ever get it finalized.

So I spoke to Ms. Byrd about that, and she said, "Yes, these things that he's getting done, it's not done overnight. He just doesn't send a check to West Virginia to get something done. It takes a while to accomplish these things. They have got to go through the right procedure."

I'm talking about another politician or senator, "Just because you may do something for me, you think I'm going to, in turn, do something for you," he didn't operate that way. Now, he did that with me, because I wouldn't accept any money from him. Sometimes when I'd put mulch or something around his house, he would just insist that I'd give him whatever the bill was. We had one bill that went on, and I got a lot of signed checks from him, but I didn't want to accept his money. I said, "Senator, now, I'm not in a hurry, really, for you to pay me. First of all, I don't want you to pay me. But I like the interest rate I'm charging you." [laughter] I said, "It's just building up. Take your time. You don't have to pay me right away."

So he sent me the check, and then where you make a notation, he says, "One cent interest." [laughter] I've got the check in my book.

The only time Senator Byrd ever got a little bent out of shape with me, a lot of times I'd bring him—he liked grapefruits, bananas, and stuff like that, and he would ask me if he'd run out—he had a nurse around the clock, you know, this Joan. She stayed with him Monday through Friday. Then another one would come in on the weekends and stayed with him and kept him fed and all that, dressed and stuff.

Now, what was I talking about?

Alexander: You were talking about the one time that he got bent out of shape...

Nobles: I had brought down just a few bananas. Jim Allen was there, picking him up, and they were getting ready to go up to the Capitol. He said, “Jim, how much I owe you?” He usually didn’t carry money with him, especially change or anything like that.

Let me reminisce a little bit back. When he gave the \$400 to Ms. Byrd when they first got married, he said, “Now, Erma, you take care of the financial end of it, but every now and then, if I come to you and ask you for a dollar, how about you just let me have a dollar?” [laughs] And said she did that.

So I had these bananas, and I wasn’t thinking anything about it. He said, “Where’s the receipt? How much I owe you?”

I said, “Senator, really, you don’t owe me anything. It’s all right. It’s just—” I didn’t know. I forgot how much they were and I didn’t have the receipt.

And he said, “Jim, I’m telling you, I want to pay you for what you paid for them. I pay for my grocery money and food,” and he kind of got on to me a little bit, meaning that, “You don’t have to give it to me. I’ll pay you.” But I would prefer him not to pay me, you know, not that I’m a rich man, but it just wasn’t much to it. But that’s how much he—

Alexander: Do you think it was a matter of pride for him?

Nobles: Pride. The first thing he would say, “You pick me up something and I’ll pay you when you get here.” And you better do what he said, because—Jim Allen and I looked at each other, and I was little bit stunned, a little bit. He didn’t get on me bad. I just never heard him say that. He said, “Well, you go back and find out how much they are. I want to pay you.” He said, “Jim Allen, how much you think they are?”

So we got to estimating how much it was. So some kind of way we settled it, and I realized right then, you better keep the receipt. He wanted to pay. He didn’t want it free. But that’s just the way he was.

On a bigger, on a larger scale, that’s the way he was with the senators. “If you do a little something for me,” I don’t know what it may have been, “don’t expect me to do something for you just because you did something for me.”

Alexander: Didn’t want to be in anybody’s debt.

Nobles: No, no way. He didn’t mix and mingle with them socially. He stayed his distance and kept his eye on the job, on his work. Late hours. Ms. Byrd stayed up with

him, stayed up till he got home, and asked him, “Robert, do you want anything to eat?” Sometimes he’d eat a sandwich or something like that, and go to bed, and maybe have to be up early the next morning. If you’re president pro tem, you’ve got to open up the Senate, but in his latter years, you can substitute somebody. But he used to go in, himself, usually about nine o’clock. Sometimes he wouldn’t necessarily be there; he’d be in earlier because he had work to do and he was going to get it done.

I think, Keith, if I recall right, he had something that he wanted to get done very badly, bad, and he made something close to three hundred phone calls to different representatives in the House in one day, telling them what he was trying to get passed in the Senate or in the House too. He said he was on the phone all day. But that’s just how determined he was.

Well, I can say it again—and I’m being repetitious—is West Virginia has been fortunate to have this man to serve them as long as he has, because he gave his life for them.

Alexander: Absolutely. All right. I’m really glad I kept the tape running. I’m going to stop now.

[End of interview]

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