FILE: T-BelcherDale-2017-03-23

INTERVIEWEE(S): Dale Belcher (DB)

DATE INTERVIEWED: Thursday, March 23, 2017

WHERE INTERVIEWED: Hotel Floyd, Floyd, Virginia

INTERVIEWER(S): Mayson Wahlberg (MW), Kathleen Ingoldsby (KI)

TRANSCRIBERS: Various Floyd County High School class students

DATA CHECKERS: Radford University mentors; Kathleen Ingoldsby

FILE/TRACKS: DB1013 - DB1028

AUDIO TOTAL LENGTH: 81:44

FILE/TRACK DB1013: 5:05 [selected excerpts from 30 page transcript]

MW: All right, my name is Mason Wahlberg. It is Thursday, March 23, 2017. I'm interviewing Dale Belcher at Hotel Floyd. We'll start with the basics: can you tell me your name?

DB: Dale Belcher.

MW: All right; what was your job occupation?

DB: I was a carpenter. I retired from the carpenter as a contractor, and now I'm an ordained minister.

MW: All right, thank you. How long have you lived in Floyd?

DB: All my life.

MW: All right, we're going to go into your childhood, if we may?

DB: Okay.

MW: So, how was it when you were growing up, and where exactly did you grow up and go to school at?

DB: I went to school in Floyd, you know all my life and graduated and I was raised, actually raised in a one-room schoolhouse. Then my dad built a new house when I was nine years old. So I've lived in those two houses, all my life, except when I was four months old

we moved to a one-room school house, and after the one-room school house we moved into this other house and I've been there ever since.

MW: All right, was there a specific name for your schoolhouse when you were growing up, like how we have the Check Elementary and Willis?

DB: This schoolhouse [holds up photo] it was the original Toncray School; Toncray was where the copper mine was, right below the house. Robert Toncray started the copper mine there. Believe he started up the copper mine right before the Civil War, and the schoolhouse was actually sitting there close to the copper mines. And I've got a picture of the copper mine right here. Here is a picture of one of the mineshafts at the copper mine sitting right below my house, and he moved the schoolhouse, back to where it's actually sitting now, it was named after Robert Toncray. And this is one of the mineshafts.

MW: That's pretty cool.

DB: And this mineshaft, [points at photo] I don't know how deep it really was, but when I took this picture, there was a rock maybe the size of a football. I picked it up and dropped it down the mines, and I never did hear it hit the bottom.

MW: Are you serious?

DB: So I don't know how deep it was, but then, since this picture was took they went in it and filled the hole up to keep different animals and stuff from falling in, but the hole is not there no more. It's done been completely covered up, but this was made maybe, probably, thirty years ago. But like I say, it's got a bottom, but I didn't hear the rock hit.

WB: On to when you started working, what was your earliest job?

DB: Earliest job when I got out of school was construction work. I started working as a carpenter's helper.

MW: -- so you were a carpenter, and a construction worker. From what you told us last week, you helped work on Chateau Morrisette?

DB: Yes I did, I remodeled Chateau Morrisette when they turned it into a winery. It was a dwelling house and they turned it into a winery, so they got me to convert it from a house into a winery.

MW: Do you know why they changed it?

DB: Well, the Morrisette family they wanted to start a winery, and they wanted to build one from scratch, and they found this farmhouse up there. And they said, well, this is close to the Blue Ridge Parkway; this would be a good place for a winery. So if we buy it, we can just convert it into a winery; so that's what they did.

MW: So what specifically did you work on, were you part of laying stone or ?

DB: I did all the stonework, all the construction, and the electrical, and the plumbing.

MW: Really! Did you do all that yourself?

DB: Yes, back then I was a licensed certified plumber, electrician, and contractor.

MW: How long did that take?

DB: I just had to take a test, after you get so much on the job training, and you can just take the state test you get your license.

MW: So it was easier?

DB: Well, it wasn't too easy, but I didn't have to take it but one time.

MW: You worked with Earl Palmer?

DB: Earl Palmer.

MW: How did you come to meet him?

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DB: I met him at Ferrum College, at the Blue Ridge Folklife Festival, and he had a display down there, of my great grand dad, Newton Hylton. He had his life story and photography of doing everything. And I got a couple of pictures somewhere. He had everything; I had pictures of him making the original waterwheel at Mabry Mill. Then I got a picture here, I want to show you, I think Mrs. Pauley got it. He had what they call a shaving horse, where you use your feet to hold your wood like a wooden vise. And Earl Palmer had a picture of him making an ox yoke on that shaving horse. Well it so happens that I end up with that shaving horse after he passed away; fifty years later, Earl Palmer took the picture of me on the same shaving horse, doing the same thing that my great-granddad was doing.

MW: Do you know how your grandfather met Earl Palmer?

DB: Earl Palmer was the Blue Ridge roaming photographer, and he traveled all over Kentucky, Tennessee, West Virginia, and Virginia, taking pictures of mountain people. And he would just run out to them out in Meadows of Dan area, and he would photograph them doing everything from plowing with oxen, working in the blacksmith shop, making his own leather, he had his own vat where he tanned his own leather, and I got all those pictures.

I've got over one hundred pictures of him doing all these mountain things, making molasses, apple butter, gathering his own herbs to make his own medicine, and things like that. I know I got one picture of him where he was skinning the bark off the wild cherry tree, on the inside of it; he would use it to make cough syrup.

MW: Really? That's interesting.

DB: And I got pictures of him digging up sassafras roots to make sassafras tea.

MW: He was an outdoorsman.

DB: He did; everything that he had was homemade, or he did it himself. From making his own shoes—got a picture of him playing his banjo. [shows picture] And he made the banjo, he actually made the head of the banjo, where the strings are, out of a groundhog hide.

MW: That is, really something.

DB: And I got a picture of him playing that same banjo. And in the area where he lived, he was actually the dentist, anyone needed a tooth pulled, go over to his house and he would pull it for him. There was a story, this lady was telling me, she's dead and gone now, but her daddy had a toothache, it had hurt for about three or four days, and he didn't want anything to do with it. Every morning he would wake up and his wife would ask, "How's that tooth feeling this morning?" and he would say, "Oh, it's about to kill me." And so she asked him for about two or three days and one morning she asked and he said, "I don't know, I left it over at Uncle Newt's at 2:30 this morning." [laughter] So he got up at 2:30, and walked two miles to get his tooth pulled, at 2:30 in the morning. So it must have hurt pretty badly. My cousin, that lives right below me, actually has the tooth pullers that he made in his blacksmith shop.

MW: Really?

DB: So we went out to his blacksmith shop and made himself a spare pair just to pull teeth with. And believe it or not, this was back probably in the '30s, they were curved and shaped, and look a whole lot like the pullers that regular dentists use now; they really do.

MW: That's very interesting.

DB: So I don't know how, but he has a patent to do it. But anyway it's kind of crooked, and the clamp where it goes on you is kind of curved just like the regular tooth pullers are.

MW: So he was ahead of the curve?

DB: He was ahead of the crew.

MW: Back to Earl Palmer, how did you get involved working with him?

DB: When I met him down there, he had this old display of all my great granddad's pictures, probably thirty of them on the walls. And he was telling everybody who they are, and I said, I just popped up and said, "Yeah, I know a lot about some of these pictures, because this guy was my great granddad." so his eyes lit up. He met his great-grandson after forty-some years, and went by his house one to look at the display of them and he had them.

MW: Going to how you became to be the minister at your church. How long have you been going there or?

DB: I was in the church over next to Willis, for several years and I was the adult Sunday school teacher and filled in for the minister when they, when he was on vacation or sick or something, so I was a, I guess you call it, the assistant to him. And this couple approached me, ten years ago, and wanted to know if I'd be interested in trying to help get this church opened up. It had been closed for several years, it was founded in 1860, and it had been closed probably twenty years or more. And I said, "Well, sure." So, that was ten years ago.

Started out with eight people, now we got between thirty or forty. And after two years there, some more, I had some more minister friends, we had a meeting, and they ordained me as a minister. So, I've been ordained eight years, 2009, I was ordained. So this May will be eight years; so I've been there for ten years. And we started out with eight, and now we've got between thirty and forty. And it started out, the building, where the church is in, it started out as a one-room school.

MW: Really?

DB: They moved it over to where it is now, and the spot where it's sitting on now, has been sitting there 101 years, they moved it across the parking lot in 1916. So it's 2017 now, so it's been sitting in the same spot for 101 years.

MW: That's incredible. Do you know how they moved it?

DB: With a steam engine, one of them big old steam engines that used to do farming stuff, a steam engine. But they didn't have to move it probably 300 feet, and then where it was set originally, they built a two-room schoolhouse, and the old schoolhouse is still sitting there—in the parking lot between the schoolhouse and the church.

MW: Do you still see the schoolhouse?

DB: Oh, yes, you can the schoolhouse real good. It's still sitting there, side of the parking lot.

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DB: Sometimes, kids, they're kind of shy, about kind of, to get the ball rolling. So, one time a boy asked a question about how religious I was, or something or other. I said, "I don't know if I would consider myself religious or not," and nobody would say anything for a few minutes. And the teacher popped up and says, "What've you got against Christianity?" And I says, "I don't have nothing against Christianity, I'm a Sunday school teacher." And the little boy who just asked me that question about religion says, "I thought you said you weren't religious?" I said, "Well, you have to remember there's a difference between being religious and being a Christian." Everybody has got some form of religion. So, I really had him going.

KI: And could you explain to the students about a twin lens reflex [camera], and the kind of film that it uses, and also what happened to the film after you took the picture?

DB: The twin lens Rolleiflex, it's a German camera. I don't know if you ever seen one or not they're probably four inches wide six inches tall.

KI: So how big was the negative?

DB: The negative was two and a quarter by two and a quarter [inches]. And I had a German Linhof. [large format camera] It was like a camera and I never did use it. Mr. Palmer gave it to me. His widow gave it to me after he retired. And it was one of those that you had to have it on tripod because it was so big. And I know y'all have seen movies where they would set them up with the bellows stretched way out, and then if you wanted to take a picture of, a real nice photo of somebody, they had a black hood where you raised over your head where you could focus it in total darkness. And those negatives were two and a quarter by two and three quarters. So you would use the whole format of that negative to make an eight by ten.

KI: And what would happen to the film after you took it out of the camera?

DB: You have to take it out, you have to learn to do this in total darkness. You take it out, you have to take it out of the camera, unroll it off the spool it's on, then reroll it in a little old container about this big and roll it, put it in a reel, and all this is done in total darkness. You stick it down in a stainless steel cup, put the lid on it, and fill it full of developer. And that will make the image on it. And it stays in it, seems like its nine minutes, and you shake it every thirty seconds to agitate it, to make sure it gets over all the negative. Then after nine minutes, still in total darkness, you pour that developer out of it, pour cold water back in it to rinse it off, pour that out again, and all this is done in darkness. It's not in total darkness now, because it's in a container, but anyway, you fill it full of what you call fixer, and that will kill all the developer. Then you take it out, and wash it and dry it, and then you are

ready to develop the pictures with it.

I have shot a picture, developed the negative, and cleaned it up and had a picture made in a little over thirty minutes; and now it's what, twenty seconds. If you work really hard, if it's some of an emergency, then thirty minutes is about as quick as you can make a picture. From the time you shoot the picture, take the film out, develop it, and put it in the enlarger and develop it, then you have to put it in developer then. It's not in darkness then. You have a darkroom light, which turns it on, it gives you a little bit of light but it's a red light. So it gives you enough light to where you can sort of see what you're doing.

MW: Thank you Mr. Belcher for everything; thanks for being interviewed today.

DB: You're welcome.

-end of interview-