

Randy Wilson Interview
with Abby Huggins
June 29, 2017
Hindman Settlement School

00:00 Randy Wilson: Eat breakfast afterwards, breakfast was so good. They always had vegetables, something green on the plate, looked pretty good. So, I started doing that. That was a good group of people, we met people from all over the world and got pretty close and worked together [laughs]. It was the dairy. The dairy was going down, they kept, they kept referring to us as Hebrew word [leti lerefit, refit]. They called us the future of the refit, of the dairy. It was just [laughs]. It's tough business. We had this cow called Humula and we couldn't get her into that milking parlor, we had to beat her, push her. So they decided to give her to the butcher. The day the butcher came, she jumped the fence [laughs]. I mean, he just showed up, she was over the fence. I mean, they're a lot smarter than you give them credit for, animals are. Anyway, that was good. A good experience. It was a good rhythm of life. We studied in the morning and we worked in our hands, we worked in the morning and did hands in the morning in the fields or at the dairy and then we studied in the afternoon, studied Hebrew. It was really good. Good rhythm of life, doing something with your hands and doing something with your mind part of the day. It was a good idea. And nobody got along until we learned the language and then we didn't hear no more problems after that. There were French, Russian people. And everybody spoke English and they resented it because they would speak English to us, of course they didn't know Russian or French. There were so many misunderstandings but when we all got Hebrew, you know, it all passed away.

02:29 Abby Huggins: Well, you want to start the interview? [laughs]

02:32 RW: Let's talk some more about Israel [laughs]

2:36 AH: I'd love to hear, well, we can start there, but -

02:39 RW: Well, you said, let's just have a conversation, that's what I was doing.

02:44 AH: That's true. Would you care to back track a little, but I'd love to hear more about Israel at some point. Well, can you introduce yourself.

02:57 RW: [laughs] Yeah. I'm Randy Wilson. I'm the Folk Arts Director, here at the Hindman Settlement School in eastern Kentucky.

03:08 AH: Can you - I always like hearing people to say, to talk about where they were raised and who their people are.

03:17 RW: Yeah. Well, you know, I was born in Redbird Mission. My mother was a missionary teacher. She came down from Wisconsin to teach in the schools they had at Beech Fork. The Beech Fork of the Kentucky [River]. The Beech Fork goes into the Middle Fork, you've got the three forks: South Fork, North Fork of Kentucky. This was the Beech Fork. This was Beech Fork Elementary School. She came after the war to teach. And it was, Evangelical United Brethren. She was raised in a big church in Wisconsin, downtown church. She kind of raised her siblings. She had three siblings and her mother was disabled at an early age and my mom took care of the kids.

And she saw a way for her to have an adventure after she had done all, been the mother and parent for these children. She took off and came down the mountains and she met my dad there at the school. He was in from World War II. It was interesting to me. We built a house, or my dad built a house it was surrounded by all the relatives. Grandma, grandpa were a stone's throw down the road and all the other relatives were really close by. He built that house, he was in the Sigma Corps in World War II. And he built that house through his savings in poker games [laughs] on the ships. He must have been pretty good. So, the war was good to him. The Sigma Corps, my dad said that they, if Japanese picked off a Sigma Corps, they would bring the whole thing to a standstill. So, it could be dangerous. So, communication, you know. But, yeah, that's where I was born in that community. Everybody was close by. You just really had to know how to operate in your community - you knew people, you knew their limits. You had to know their limits and what they would do. My dad said, "you don't indict anybody," he said, "because they're your neighbors," [laughs]. So he said, "catching a thief is enough. You don't have to indict people." So, that's the kind of lifestyle. There were thieves in the neighborhood. You know, he would catch them and they wouldn't bother anymore. So, that's a pretty good lesson. I think it was a good lesson for these communities that are policed by people who don't know the actors in the communities. They don't know who's dangerous, they don't know what the tipping points of people are. And, so, it's better that way, to really know the community. So, there were people. I mean we had people Lawrence, he was the mailman and his wife and him, they were in knock-down-drag-outs all the time. [laughs] And shouting. She called him Black Lawrence. And the kids were rough too. They were big people. And, they were in fights. One of them, they got mining caps and threw them in the fireplace, blew the back of the fireplace and threw them against the wall. He always said, "that was my early combat training." [laughs]. Explosives in the house. So, it was rough, some people were really rough, but I never knew it. They let me go with Lawrence on his mail route. He took me up through the mountains on his mail route. So, they knew it was ok. When he got around his wife, he wasn't ok. Those kids, man. So this was going on. I must have felt something about it. And, my brother, he was always off. They tried to fence him in with barbed wire and he was crawling under the fences. He'd be out there somewhere and they'd have to go find him. So, it was a sight. But we moved to Corbin. My dad followed the railroad to Corbin. So, there was a little something missing about that life. So, when I got to college, I went to Center College in Kentucky. We were just in the dorm room and I heard the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band do "Will the Circle Be Unbroken." And I heard that banjo. And I had heard bluegrass, but this was something different. I said, well, that's not bluegrass. They were playing "Soldier's Joy," one of the most popular tunes. I said, "where did that come from?" And, you know, it's those things, those little asides, you just turn and your life is changed that way. So, I started looking up these old timers in college, I started making these pilgrimages to eastern Kentucky and looking up these people.

09:17 So, I just, an article in the paper, and Joe Begley's store, they had an article on that in Blackey and I went there and I made several trips to his store. He was such an influential person - real brass, and courageous, and a good storyteller. So, he introduced me to the Carcassonne dance, that's the first time I went up there to that. And they had a banjo player. I was trying to think of his name, Austin Miller, and he would play on the porch, and his feet would thump as he played. He'd just go up there and play. He had two finger thing going there, of his own.

10:17 So, that was there at his place. We stayed over and we went to the dance and, really it was the introduction to the culture that I'd sort of leave in the creek at five, I kind of missed out on. So, I came back to recover that. I never. It was a gap, it was something I needed to do as a little

blank in the picture of who I was, so I went back, I kept coming back to that. But, they had these, I never heard of Old Regulars before. So, I was on his porch, you know where the store is there and across the river is an Old Regular Baptist. So, I was sitting on his porch and I heard this sound, I thought it came out of earth [laughs]. I didn't say music, to Joe, I said, "Joe, what's that sound?" He said, "That's the Old Regulars." I said, God, man, that stuff, it was real earthy, it just kind of, it moved like the river. It's very slow and just comes, just wells up and descends. And that scene there at the store and that train would come around and just rumple through and that river goes by and then, I was just really captivated by that. Of course, you talk to Mike Dixon, he's not captivated, he's lived next door to it for twenty-five years [laughs], he's sick of it.

12:03 So, I kept going back and I went to, I'd go the dances. At that time, they had the whole community was there. There was no, it was just people who lived there that was there at those dances. The place was packed, and especially in the winter as I recall. They went in the winter and snowing outside. I said, "Joe, I don't know if anybody will be there." "Oh," he said, "Yeah, when it's snowing, more people show up." So, they helped each other push cars over hills. The whole experience of being together was good. So, we pushed cars, each other over the hills and danced. And unlike, again, unlike, dances weren't, to do a hoedown, it wasn't like they learned it from somebody. It was just their own, just like banjo playing. It was their own step. Everybody had their own thing. Joe had his and others had theirs and it was fun to watch, just the hoedown section where everybody danced, not with a partner. So, it was interesting to me that it wasn't this choreographed thing, it was everybody doing their thing. Interesting in that there were young and old, they just, everybody danced and kids and it was a form of dance, it was so simple that people could watch others do it and then it would come around to them. You know how they danced, everybody in a circle, then you have one couple do a figure with another one and then that one did that figure with the next. And you watched and by the time it got to you if you were sort of positioned at the other end of the circle, then you knew how. So, they didn't have any instruction about ok, this is how you do this dance. They just went in dancing and you watched. And, then it came to you and you knew how to do it. So, I thought that was really interesting that they called, called, and danced the same time. And, that just added a heightened sense of intensity to it. That they were hollering and dancing. I was impressed with the way they were doing that. But, and, they had many of them who knew the dances, of course, already though. So, they knew the figures and he'd just call them out and he knew them already. But, as I recall, that time, the caller didn't have a mike and so that made it somebody shouting and dancing and the music. It was pretty exhilarating. But, I saw one of the callers, recently, who did it like that for years and I said, "Hello, I remember you calling a dance." He said, [mimicking scratchy voice] "yeah, I used to call up there at Carcassonne." [laughs] His voice was shot. So, there's drawbacks to doing it that way. He might have been, he might have been an Old Regular preacher. No, he wouldn't, he couldn't have been, they don't allow that dancing. So, he got it all from calling dances, I guess. So, I was pretty hooked at that point, kept making pilgrimages.

15:50 Lee, you know, he was the banjo player. So, I'd go over to Lee's and learn from him about playing. He'd complain. He taught me "Whoa Mule, Whoa" I think. He said, "Would you please mention me when you play this tune?" He said, "there's some boys come down here, Cohen boys came down here from New York and they recorded everything I did. And then I went in a shop one day and there were all my tunes on some record and they didn't even give any credit to me." So, I try to remember that. There's Lois [referencing person walking by]

16:49 So, you know, Joe and Gay Nell, they didn't think much of Lee [laughs]. They thought he was a bigot, you know. Joe and Gay Nell they were, they knew folks in black movement pretty well. I don't know what their experience had been with Lee, what he might have said. Because you never know what he's going to say. But, they knew Jesse Jackson, who would come there. They were real involved with Highlander Center. People would come and be around Joe, just really was, he was a character. Something else. But, it reminded me of my dad. He just, brash and storyteller and he would - I remember a guy that came there, old money, and he wasn't paying up and they got in a scuffle. Joe went out to get the guy's gun, his rifle out of the car, out of the man's car, that's pretty incendiary. And the guy came out and he was pissed off and they were starting to fight over that rifle, wrestling. I was looking for a place to get to and Joe said, "You'll get this back when you pay up." And the guy saw Joe meant business and wasn't going to - and it's going to be dangerous. So, he let go. It was tough.

18:39 And then, he told the time they had trouble, there's somebody wildcat mining up there and they were messing up people's property. Joe was a sheriff and he pulled the trucker over for a crack in his tail light [laughs]. So, I don't know how, so he was going through Blackey had a cracked taillight. And, Joe wanted to stop him and so he pulled the guy over. Well, the guy had a gun and Joe said, "Well, you know, you got a gun, I got a gun. If you want something to happen, it can happen now." [laughs] I can't imagine me doing that, you know? But he was like that, man. He was really. He was up in people's faces. And, my dad was like that too. So, it was kind of familiar to me, that attitude. But, he had a store there and he was against some of these strip miners, so it was tough. You got clientele who are miners, but people understood who he was and he had his people that kept the store going. If you've got a business and you make those stands. I always wanted him to come to Center College. They was going to have some kind of meeting with Roger Mud, he used to be an anchor for CBS or something. I was in some kind of thing, thinking about people to invite to convene a session of discussion, I forget what about then. But, I mentioned to bring Joe, just a person that wasn't afraid of saying things and pretty insightful. And, Joe had been to the White House several times under different administrations. Johnson, and then Carter. And he said Lady Bird Johnson was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen, he was looking [laughs]. And then he said Carter said to him, Jimmy Carter, he was at some luncheon there at the White House and Carter was with him and Jimmy Carter said, he said, "Joe, some of my people said you can be a pretty bad son of a bitch." And, Joe said, "Mr. President, I've heard the same thing about you." [laughs] Somebody that quick would be good to have on a panel. So, I made many journeys, and different banjo players, I would learn tunes from them. Many different pilgrimages to different players here and yon. Through the store, really, through Joe Begley's store.

22:02 AH: Who were some of those people?

22:05 RW: Let's see if I can think about it, besides Lee. Well, Austin Miller was there. I probably started two finger kind of emulate what he was doing. There was a blind guy over in Whitesburg, George Gibson could think of his name, but it escapes me now. Oh in my, on the creek there, Howard, his last name is Howard. I'm terrible with names, Marcus, Marcus Howard. He played banjo. He really showed me some things about frailing on the banjo. That lick. And he talked about at that point, he said, well you drop your thumb in there and get some notes, then you'll have it. I remember him saying that to me. But, he played two finger, he said, "I just got tired of that old way of playing." He had his own style of two finger thing going on. So, he taught me some tunes, he did, Marcus Howard. He lived up the creek on the same creek there. And, he

was another interesting guy. I don't know. You just have to hear him talk. He just had a slow, rolling way of talking. It was entertaining to be around him. Little things he'd do. He hated the cats being in the house. I could see him. He was pretty tall. He'd have a cat by the head and he'd be walking through the house, swinging that cat [laughs]. He'd just, swing it out the screen door. And he was just so nonchalant. He wasn't really made, just part of the day, swing the cat out. And he had chickens, and livestock. It was all kind of interesting to me, to be around him. And, he would go, he would go out in the summer. It's just one of the things he did. He would go out in the summer up in the holler there and dig up all the marijuana plants his children had put out [laughs]. Just as a matter of course, he'd have his hoe, swinging through the holler there to get them out before they were found. And I did the same on property. People planted on your property and you could get blamed for it. But, his girls planted it there. He delivered children there. He did a lot there. They said, you know, when he died, they said of him, it's like a library burning up because of things he knew and been through. From then on, I tried to go and record people and get stories, family stories, whatever stories. But he taught me some things, Marcus. But, the thing, I never had one of those experiences that was like from the other world kind of thing except through him at his funeral. He had his people, Howards come in from Dayton, everybody moved up there. And, when he died, and I was trying to think of something appropriate to him. And I thought of the Carter Family tune, "Sixty Miles of Elbow Room." It's a hymn about going to heaven and being a lot of elbow room, and I thought that's Marcus, he needed a lot of space. So, he wouldn't much into cities, you know. That appealed to me that that should be the thing. But I couldn't find the words to it, I just could not piece it together. It was a time, there was no internet and I didn't know how to find the words to it. So, I had another tune in mind, kind of crestfallen. So, the day of the funeral, there's another Howard, come from Dayton, young guy. Gosh, you know, I'm just awful with names. But, it was his family. This guy, he sang opera in Dayton. He was a real vocalist there, did a lot of concert ties. So, he was there and he played banjo too. So, he was there and I went down. He had his guitar there. I went down, I said, "Gosh, I can't think of the words to 'Sixty Miles of Elbow Room.'" He opened his case and there it was in his guitar case. Greg, Greg Howard. He said, "Yeah, it's a funny thing. There was an aria, I wanted to sing and I didn't know the words. I came in at the wake and there it was on the piano, there right there." Interesting the way that turned out. So, we got the right songs [laughs] for that funeral anyway. So, Greg Howard, yeah. He does a lot of the shape note singing, but that was kind of a remarkable day to have one of those things happen to you. Why it was for him on that day. I don't know. I'll always remember that. So that's how I found my way back to the culture and the music and the dance.

28:35 AH: I'm curious for you to talk a little more about the people that would gather at Joe's, especially organizers or activists and what that was like.

28:46 RW: Well, I don't know. I just remember Joe. When you're around, Joe was the one you remembered. I remember people coming through from Highlander and from the Southern Law Center, Southern something Law Center.

29:07 AH: Poverty?

29:07 RW: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I just remember them coming through and Joe introduced Jesse Jackson in Hazard to speak. Pretty good. It wasn't somebody from the black community, it was Joe. So, it was a recognition of his contributions to all people. Joe used to say, he's a sheriff and everything, he said, regarding these issues, he said, "Everybody ought to go to jail." [laughs] He

said, "It's a good thing for everybody to go to jail once." So, he was a good organizer there in that community. And, you know, things, he just was very insightful. I've told you this, he quit school at the Little Big Horn. I've told you this story, haven't I?

30:22 AH: Keep telling it.

30:25 RW: I mean, just kind of latch on to Joe. He was in eighth grade, he quick eighth grade. They were studying about Little Bighorn and Custard. They called it a massacre and Joe had some Cherokee blood in him and he asked a question, he said, "What's a difference between a soldier's victory and Indian massacre? Because all in history books, if the soldiers won, it was a victory. If the Indians won, it was a massacre." It stumped the teacher and Joe left the classroom, he never went back, he quit in eighth grade. Those kind of things. That wasn't in the 70s or 60s, that was in the 30s, somebody saying that. So, he was way ahead of his time. It wasn't fashionable then. So, he quit and he got a job showing these land speculators around. And they were buying up people's land on the cheap. And he came home and said, he's just a teenager, and he just came home to his grandma, he said, "They're stealing people's land." So, he saw what was going on very early. So, people came to see Joe. And they came to Blackey. So, that's what I remember, Joe.

32:07 It's a wonder what to do with that place, that store. It's got so many artifacts in it, he collected so many things. The place is falling apart. Mike, I don't know, talked about, Mike Dixon talked about, everybody left but Mike. Mike's wife died of cancer and Joe's people, boys, they left. One of them, I met at, he was on a panel, he was part of MSHA, Mine - I don't know what the title is, but they were listening to a public hearing and he was one of the people listening to the people on the panel. So, his life was still around those issues of coal. I think he was in Knoxville. JT is his name. But, Joe and Gay Nell. Gay Nell got so she couldn't talk. I would just go over and tell her stories. That pleased her because she couldn't formulate words. And she couldn't write, she said writing was worse. But, she could listen and I think Mike was the one who took care of her in her dying years. And, I don't know about the place. I don't know what we're going to do with it, kind of historical place, but not sure what to do about it. And, people wondered for a while what to do with it. They lived at the store, just make shift rooms in the back around that store. And pretty happy people, I thought. One thing I always wanted to look for and never found, I asked Mike. Joe had collections of just sayings, just turns of phrase. I always wanted to find that, but never have been able to. What else?

34:30 AH: Can you talk a little more about Lee Boy and Opal?

34:34 RW: Oh. Well, they've lived in that place ever since I've known them at the dead end road in a trailer and down from it is the house where I guess he grew up, kind of ramshackle place, and garden, it's on the Line Fork. I don't know, I mean, I've had so many, I've got so many stories of his and I don't know if we want to repeat all of them here. But, he was the go to first person to go to. I mean, he's so well documented, everybody's been at his place. I remember, we took him to, we did a cultural exchange called, what was it, something from home, stories from home, that Appalshop put on. We went out San Antonio, we went to Alaska and there was one in the Bronx. I didn't go to the one in San Francisco, but I went to the Bronx, I went to Alaska, went to San Antonio. And they took a chance bringing Lee to the Bronx, to Puerto Rican community. They never knew what he'd do. [laughs] But he was great. The Puerto Ricans, they were on the edge of their seats because they didn't know what he was going to say next either. He would tell things and they would just love it, they just ate it up. [laughs] What was that thing he would tell? One of

his stock jokes. Somebody came to his house and he would mimic how northerners would talk, it would be funny. They'd fall out laughing because they identified with it, Puerto Ricans and people, gringos how they talked, it was like that to them. And, he said, "Well, there's the old woman come down from Ohio, she looked at my dog, she said, 'Mr. Sexton, that is an interesting dog. Why is it doing that, Mr. Sexton?'" What it was doing, Lee said, "What it was doing, it was rubbing its butt across the grass." [laughs] "So I said to that woman, 'It's a dog that can count.' And she said, 'Can count, Mr. Sexton?' He said, 'Yeah, it can add,' he said, 'Yes.' 'What's it doing there?' He said, 'Well, it's added up some figures and is trying to erase it.'" [laughs] And you could imagine some proper woman being in his yard and him saying that. And people would come in and he would, they would have something like squirrel to eat and these filmmakers would come in and Opal would lay out, it was probably chicken and dumplings, something like that. They'd never seen it and they'd say, "Mr. Sexton, what is this we're eating?" And Lee would say, "That's muskrat." And they wouldn't eat it. [laughs] There's so many tales. He had a tough time with liquor. He wouldn't, as mercy of God that he's off of it, because he wouldn't be around. Because he was drinking and playing these juke joints and playing dangerous places, knives pulled out and people running for their lives. He drank and they'd throw him in jail and he'd get out and look for more liquor. And of course the tales of him doing that swinging bridge after a night of drinking and playing and the heaviness of that banjo and him on the swinging bridge, not too steady, he'd fall over, he said, several times. Over he'd go, he'd say, "I go plum to the bottom." Come back up and empty out his case, set his banjo out to dry the next week. These kind of things would happen to him. But, it's just a rough life. People romanticize about liquor a little bit, way too much, it's dangerous. But he woke up one morning, he looked at it, he just got sick, he saw the remains of the bottle, he knew if he took another drink, it just turned him sour. So, he said he had the same bottle there. But there was plenty of it around and he was lucky. I don't know, there's so many things, places, the way he met his fiddling friend, I can't think of his name now, I'm terrible with names. Marion Sumner. He met him over in Norton, Marion played everywhere he could play anything, he could play the hell out of, Western Swing, I thought he was much better at that on the guitar. He was just crisp and on fire. He played that long bow. He did shuffle, but he liked that long bow, he could make it cry. He was a really great musician, but he drank too much and his family suffered for it. But, he met Marion, young man over in Norton doing a gig. And Marion, I don't know they didn't have enough room, Marion was in bed with him. And he woke up, they put Marion in, Marion woke up, said, "What is this trash that you've put in bed with me?" [laughs], that was his first encounter with Marion Sumner. But, they played so many years. There's tales, probably apocryphal, but Rich Kirby said that he saw them trade dentures one time [laughs], things like that. They played everywhere, poor up places too. And, Lee is just a prankster. He's another person, just a lot of brass, would do anything. He was doing a paint job, he painted a guy's cat, just out of a whim [laughs]. They found a boat in the Line Fork, they said, well let's take it to Hazard. They took the boat to Hazard, stole the boat. Just things, you know, they'd just do things. And, Marion he was over here with Marion playing. He loves to tell this tale. Marion snuck off to smoke or just be, just to get away. To be irresponsible. And Mike [Mullins] wondered where he was and Lee said, Lee knew where he was, but Lee said, "I don't know where he is." And Mike said, "I know where he is." He roused him out, it embarrassed Marion. He blamed it on Lee, he said, "You told him, didn't you?" And he said, "No, I didn't tell him." He slammed the car door, he was pissed off. And Lee called him. It was like my dad too. They don't care about people being mad, they just, so Lee called him. I'd be mortified. But, Lee called him that night, said [in high pitched voice] "Is this Marion Sumner?" He said, "Yes ma'am, it is." Said, "Mr. Sumner, I'm interested in playing the banjo and I wonder what you, is Lee Sexton a good banjo player?" Marion said, "Well I have to tell you ma'am, he ain't much." [laughs] So, they got in

the car to go back over and Lee says, "Mr. Sumner" in that voice. Marion said, "Aw, you old thing you." That kind of thing when people were, my dad's that way too, he liked people to get riled up. He would be, that'd be great fun to him [laughs]. I don't know why. My grandma used to live with us, she was a poor thing. I didn't know at the time, just young. She was living with us and away from home and had to, didn't have any other option. She was pretty bitter. She would watch TV and she'd, my mother said she would have to escort her from the table at times, just too negative. And take her by the arm and escort her back to her room. And she didn't like dad, she didn't like us that much either, boys. She always found something wrong with us. But, that didn't bother dad. He come home from a fishing trip and he had about a three day old beard on, she was over there eyeing him, like that. He got in front of the mirror, he rubbed his face, he said, "Gomer Wilson, you must be one of the most handsome men on earth." She said, "Don't you believe it." [laughs] He just, he'd have fun with that kind of thing.

45:15 So, that was like Joe and like Lee. They'd have fun with people [inaudible]. Different things, of course Lee was very brass, took his banjo to the mines. When he went in the mines and the foreman said, you can't take a banjo in the mines. He said, "I got thirty minutes for lunch, don't I?" He said, "Yeah." "So, well, that's my thirty-minutes." He took the banjo down with him. And, when they got to jail, somebody got shot in the strike and they all got jailed and he got jailed in Hyden. And they, the union was good to them, you know. They made sure they had a shower. They made sure they had clean clothes, they fixed the place up, they made sure they had good meals. That's good, you know. And, then people showed up, brought him his banjo, then there's another guy, they come in with a guitar, local, and they played and the crowds would go to the jail and they would be playing and giving him money and cigarettes. And, then, the Sheriff came and said, "Lee, Lee Boy, would you like a jar of shine?" And he said, "Yeah, I would." And so the county sheriff comes in and he has a big overcoat and he opens it up, says, "Just reach and get it." He can't be seen giving it to him, so he had to do that little farce. And he had liquor and he had cigarettes and money. And he left, of course, he said, "I came in with \$10 and left with \$250 and six cartons of cigarettes." So he did well in the jailhouse. So, things that way.

47:20 They talked about them coming into his house and pulling a gun on him in bed, the deputy sheriffs and said, "You'll be coming with us." So, he right now, he's just, I think he's a better storyteller than a banjo player, really. I mean, he's helped so many people, but he's really a cracker jack storyteller. He's kind of the real McCoy, he farmed and raised a garden, like my dad too. He's out there trying to do a garden and can't hardly walk. My dad, same thing, dad was leaning to one side a lot, balance problems. But, he tied, he got a rope tied to a tree so he could hold onto that rope and lay out the garden. It was a site, it looked like he was on a big sailing vessel, holding onto the sheets in the wind out in that garden. But, he gardened, we got him a little signal thing if he fell down he could press a button and all that, so. He was out there. Of course, he just grew up with it. We didn't look forward to a garden much because it wasn't our garden. His garden. It's tough work and he'd get us out of the garden just like they got him out in the garden, I guess. I'd go out, lay out corn with him. I'd say, "Dad, how do you do this?" He'd say, "Just lay it down." [laughs] "How far?" "Just lay it down." "Well, how many in a -" "Just lay it down, son." [laughs] So that was my gardening training, he just had no patience at all. He'd done it all his life I guess he thought that through genetics I should be able to know how to plant corn. Same way with the woods. I'd go out with him. I'd say, "What's that tree dad?" "It's an oak." [laughs] Like, idiot, you don't know what that is? So, I didn't ask him questions. So, when I got older, I got curious, I just kind of learned from other people. Mostly, we were competing at everything - baseball, basketball, football, running, croquet, cutthroat croquet. My poor mom. We'd beat the shit out of

her at croquet. [laughs] She'd just take it. That's some of the people that influenced me. They're a lot alike, Joe and Lee and my dad. They're really a lot alike in so many ways.

50:37 AH: Can you tell me about what you did after you left Center?

50:44 RW: Well, let's see, I went back to work, it was a big movement in mental health, comprehensive care, and I got a job there. Well, I just worked there. I wasn't really fit for the program. Drug Education. I didn't know anything about it. I took drugs, just to figure out what was going on with them, you know. But, did some counseling with alcoholics again and I just didn't have, it was work and I didn't know really. I did training and all, but something like AA was a lot better, people who identified with that. So, I went out West with some friends, Jim Sanders. He was at Cowan Creek Community. He's a doctor, he was a doctor in Barbourville at the time. I went out with him to the West Coast. He had connections and there was a folk festival out there. We traveled over Christmas out there. And, there was good dancing at that.

52:01 AH: Where was that?

52:03 RW: That was in Marin County, across the bay from San Francisco. So, the folk music scene, very vibrant. Sea shanties, and old time music and dance, just had a gay old time. Got a romantic connection through that dance. And, she's Jewish and she lived there in San Francisco. Her people got away from Czechoslovakia during the second World War. Went to Mexico then San Francisco. Dinah Hills, they were Himmelfarp was their name, real name. It was a nice name, sky color. That's a nice last name, isn't it? Himmelfarp. But, they had to change it to Hills. So, she played fiddle and we did dances and I ended up going out there with her. And, we did a lot of the folk music scene. Faith Petric there had jam sessions. And we started doing gigs and we'd go out to the Yosemite and do gigs there and hike and had friends there. And I was, she was very good at Spanish, she spoke fluent Spanish. So she was teaching in the Mission District there in San Francisco. She knew some German and some Russian, but she knew Spanish. And, so, I got on there early 20s doing music in the Mission District. LeConte Elementary School. I'd be doing Groundhog [laughs]. I'd walk down the halls and look out the windows and see that city and I'd say, "What am I doing 'Groundhog' here for?" [laughs] And so, I learned some little Spanish tunes. But I always - Dinah, I never had anybody kvetch before. That's a Yiddish term. She kvetched about me coming out there a lot. She just wined and wined and wined until I agreed, I wasn't used to that. So, I went out there with her. A wonderful person. We had a wonderful time there, but I always felt like I just, I felt like I had another mission. I wanted to get back to my roots still. So, I did seminary there and I worked my way through seminary. They had work study at one of the elementary schools. And they wanted teacher's aide. And I said, "What if I come in and just play music with the kids and dance?" So that's really where I worked my chops up for music and calling dance. I would practice playing and calling. I never did like a record because it would stop in the middle of a dance. I'd try to play tunes and call and I'd seen it done before. Really, when I was in seminary, I was really studying for this vocation, every day I was at the school, working with the kids. So, they liked it. And that was probably a kind of hands on education right there, calling dances, working, doing things with classrooms. I finished up this seminary, I came back this way. And worked on Redbird. We called dances there, at the Redbird Mission. And worked with the school until I saw this artist in residence grant in Leslie County. Got a really nice leadership from the school board, she was Joyce Fortney and she wrote the grant. And, I've been doing it ever since. Usually, you do one of those residencies and then you do another one somewhere else. But, I didn't want to, I didn't want to travel all over. So, I talked them into

funding a program. I forget how we did with grants and stuff. I just continued there in Leslie County. That's the ancestral home. Always wanted to go back to that and explore there and do music there. That's how, I thought everybody, talented people leave. That's the pattern if you have talent, you leave. So, if you want to make money, you leave, that kind of thing. So I wanted to turn the tables on that and just see, give back. Like Joe and Lee and my dad and all, my mom, I wanted to sort of give back to that legacy of people. So, I determined to stay and see what I could do. And, it just, year after year, we went grant by grant, seat of the pants for a long time. I worked over here at the Settlement School, between Leslie and here and then Mike, Mike Mullins really helped look for money. We looked this way and that and wrote grants and finally he found a benefactor - Marcia Lawrence and they endowed the position in perpetuity. Kind of like, the position that's here, it's kind of like my work is done. I've done this, I've got a position here and continued this tradition of my people in this region. That's it in a nutshell. It took a long while before we really found anybody, found this opportunity through Marcia. So, it was thanks to her. And her relationship with Mike, Mike Mullins.

58:57 AH: What's your favorite part of the work that you do?

58:59 RW: Well the kids, really. They just, they're just so creative and joyful, and make me feel younger, you know, to come in and, affectionate. That's the best part of the work. I think when we do things, when we have finished products, like a CD, I'm CD Wilson over the years, I've just found out that they enjoy hearing their voices. And they enjoyed having hands on something to take home and they keep it and they pass it around with their people and they give it to their younger sisters and brothers and they listen to it. Young guy, growing up, he said, "Oh yeah, I still have it, I put it in the CD in the car every now and then." So it's nice to hear. So, I just kept with that pattern to have something each semester hands on that they can take and hear themselves, with stories too if they hear their voices. I know there's a lot more I could have done, but, I'm in all the schools. It's hard, you have to kind of say, "What can I do in the limited time that I'm here?" I think it'd be a lot better, there needs to be somebody there every day. You could really do some amazing things, get closer to the kids and understand them. It would be a lot better. But that's how it's been. I think to know that there's something out there that they enjoy and some of them get introduced to music this way. It's such a diverse job. It's unusual. I just go in and find some fire somewhere in a classroom, something that's going on that there's some excitement about. So we've done dances and stories and there's just so many little projects that we've done I just can't name them all. We've done coloring books where they did their, it was kind of a mirror of their culture, their church, the school building, the garden where they could see themselves. In the printed word and in the pictures and color it. There's storybooks with their illustrations and their CD stories with their voices. It's just a great variety of things that we've done. We've done a lot of dance. My daughter's in ballet, so I knew some things. I'd do a little ballet with them. I'd do something from native culture. We'd do swing and we'd try to do different - and swing with jazz and we'd listen to, somehow I'd do a unit on jazz, different forms of music, "What do you hear? What instruments do you hear? What's the difference?" So, to introduce a lot of forms of dance, that's been a lot of fun. And play parties and things that they can participate in.

1:02:40 AH: Can you explain what play parties are?

1:02:42 RW: Well, there's millions of them. Like, latest one, a little play party was "Shoe Fly Don't Bother Me." It's in the kindergarten, first grade. They just line up on either side and they pick a person to skip back and forth and they all throw their hands in [singing] "Shoe Fly Don't Bother

Me." And they go back and forth and then they, "because I belong to somebody." They pick a person to do, just to swing, two hand swing with. And then that person's in the middle. Just very simple. And they sing "Shoe Fly" to them and take turns that way. It's just, a bunch of different things.

1:03:19 AH: How did you learn those?

1:03:21 RW: Well, you know here, I'm sure Taylor [Adams], you could look it up. A guy named Loren Kramer was here in the early 60s and that was the last of the one room schools here. And he recorded all the play parties in the schools and on the playground and wrote them down. I don't think they've been published, but I wrote them down. I've got them on my computer, I refer back to them. So, I've picked up a lot from him, and Jean Ritchie taught me some of them. But, I don't see anybody else doing them. Besides me. None of the teachers. Say, "Well, I don't want to do that in my class." Haven't seen it, so I don't know. It's there. But I don't know if anybody will take an interest in it. Yeah, Loren Kramer. He did it, he was a conscientious objector during the Vietnam era and they, for his service, they sent him here and he did this work here.

1:04:46 AH: What keeps you making music and calling dances?

1:04:56 RW: Well, I've found, like if they had this leadership conference here, example. And they'll say, "Well, could you call a dance?" So, I call a dance and it seems to solidify the notion that we are together here, that's the main thing. They enjoy each other's company. They're touching each other. It's not threatening. And they're being together and they're touching different people, hand to hand or swinging and that makes a community that I see. Of people, that's the main thing of it. And, as opposed to country western dances where you've got to know how to do it, you've got to dress a certain way, you're with certain people, same people show up. It's always different people and different backgrounds. Where I've been, different ages and become a community through the dance. I think that's the main lesson I learned about doing this kind of dance, square dancing. Was that the question?

1:06:27 AH: Yeah, I wonder if you could talk more about the hopes you have for this community, or this region, with regard to the arts and culture as aspect of building community and bringing people together?

1:06:47 RW: Well, you know, I've been disappointed because I remember what it was on Carcassonne. There was the community gathering. It was very electrifying and as far as that, the square dance it's not, it's really declined as a thing to do in community. They do, thankful they do get together up at Line Fork, Campbell's Branch and they do music and they're together eating and they do a two-step together and that's good. I miss that feeling. The children and young and old and they're all dancing together and there's no audience. Everybody's participating it seemed to me. Whereas now, like Carcassonne, those people who dance, their audience is just too old to do it. They come out for the cake walk because that's what they can do. They'll be a crowd on the floor for the cakewalk. But, it's very hard to get people to dance. I remember what it was like, so I've been disappointed not seeing that. I like to see people together again. You know, that's sort of like going to church or being saved. You're saved in a certain event, like I was sort of saved through the dance, through that dance. And then you think you have to duplicate that experience to be in a community, but it's not necessarily so. Some people, they just go back to the story of how they were saved and if it doesn't align with that story or that church, then you know, it's not

exactly a right thing. So, I could be, I could just move on and look for other ways for community to be gathered. But, I just go back to that dance form. So, but, be open to other. It's like you have a certain religion, but you're open to other religions and how, what's important to them. So, you have to be open to the community and what's important to them. I'm encouraged lately because of you being hear, really. And your passion for it. It's important to me to see. So, and we've had pretty good groups there. If you get sixteen, that's a pretty good group to have two squares. You just remember the excitement of that community.

1:09:44 See, what the important thing is to be together. Whoever it is, to be together on the floor in whatever way. That's what the dance, the important thing. The dance was a vehicle to be together. And if it's a big crowd or a little crowd, what is, can we be together here? That's the thing. That's what you want to create. What was that question again?

1:10:23 AH: [laughs] I think you answered it. I mean, I'm just curious about the role of music and dance and culture in bringing people together and hopes that that can continue. But, also that it adapts. It's never going to be like it was.

1:10:44 RW: No, yeah. I'm more of a traditionalist, I guess. Yeah, I've got to be open. Just to try to keep something alive, but be open to what is, where people are and what they're doing together now and be part of that. Yeah, it's changed. And there's got to be some grieving. It's part of the process, you know. But, you got to move on. I mean, just as part of the culture. It's really, mountain top removal has changed it more than anything, I think. The culture around that. They have been very successful at making a culture around mountain top removal.

1:11:59 AH: What do you mean?

1:12:00 RW: Well, they get, everybody's riding a four wheeler and they're all up there riding a horse or a four wheeler and the mountains have been altered. To me, to think that you would blow up mountain after mountain so you could ride a four wheeler. [laughs] Humans will do any damn thing they can think of. Or ride a horse. But they're thousands up there riding now. I just think of, I'd rather be in the trees, I'd rather be looking for mushrooms or edibles, it's just more interesting to me. But, I can see you like to ride. So, there's some way to make your peace with how things have turned. I think of, like Jacob, he just go up to the rodeo, why not? [laughs] I'm kind of hard pressed to go up there, so pissed off. But, yeah, why not? Why not look at stars from up there? It's what we have. When I did that dance in Williamson, I met the mayor there. We'd seen him at the Appalachian Studies Conference. I said, I reckon I know this guy. And he was at that studies and we were talking to agriculture. So, he was just cleaning up trash after the whole event and I reckon I'd talk with him. And he said, "We can't do the left and the right anymore. We've got to figure out how we're going to survive here. We've got to talk with the coal people. We've got to sit at the same table. We've got to think through this. That whole mountain top removal, that's done. That whole movement around that theme. Now we've got to figure out how we're going to carry on here. We need to be together." So, that made a lot of sense to me.

1:14:31 AH: We need to be together.

1:14:32 RW: Yeah. And find ways to be together. If it's not the dance, some other way. What can you grow up there? That's why I looked at, interesting to me is the night sky. That's why I looked at that. Is there some way that we can be together up there and make an economic thing where

people come in to that kind of event. Because I'm not interested in four wheeling or riding horse too much. But again, he was in Williamson. He was talking about beef cattle and what that could draw up there. We need to think what's going to work now. But, to me, water, I mean, water may have been destroyed for a long time from leeching there. And, but, again, this county, I'm really thankful they've got a crew that at least cleaning the litter and I can be a part of that. These streams look a lot, hell of a lot better, than five years ago. They were just lined with trash. So, that look, you know, is a balm to me. Of course, I haven't tested the water lately. [laughs] May be fecal matter in it and whatever else it might be in it, so. It may be like a cat and lick itself clean after a certain time. But, some of those things, they just continue to leech out of there. And, it's sorrowful for me. Again, we grew up in the creek, you know. We were walking in the creek, slate bottom, cool. There was little pools you could fish out of. The attention, the center, was the creek. Being in the creek. You can't go in that creek now. It's filthy. Mike Mullins used to tell people at the folk music, Family Folk Music, "Don't let your children go in the creek, it's filthy." So, that's sad to me.

1:17:16 But we still have to find ways to be together anyway. That's why I think I'm kind of tired of protests, you know. I've been protesting mountain top removal and marching. We need, like that guy in Williamson said, we need to figure this out together now. And that made sense to me. There was opportunities missed, but you can't go back now. I mean, we fought for, Kentuckians for the Commonwealth used to be Kentucky Fair Tax Coalition to get un-mined mineral tax- we'd have posters about, some of our members they paid more for their car tax then corporate people paid for the minerals that they didn't assess the minerals that was in the ground. Well, you know, we fought for that long time. God we, last forty years. I don't know if we got a whole lot out of it. Very powerful. We wanted a trust fund for when this happened, when the coal would be gone. I remember these guys from Montana, that's the next place for coal. The guy came here. He said, "Well, we want to make a study because we don't want to be Appalachian-ized there." That's what he said. Said, "We want that region to have the best schools." I can't talk [pauses, upset]. Well, we can leave it at that.

1:19:36 RW: What other questions do you have? [laughs]

1:19:41 AH: Well, if you're about done, we can stop.

1:19:47 RW: Yeah. Is there any other topic?

1:19:48 AH: Well, one thing that's kind of changing the subject that I'm curious about your life is, you talked a lot about the draw to come home. But, you've also, I know you've also traveled and learned from other places. Traveled abroad. To Mali, to Israel.

1:20:07 RW: I didn't go to Africa. I went Mali through the Smithsonian. That we did that thing on the National Mall.

1:20:12 AH: Oh, that's how you - Oh.

1:20:14 RW: That's how I met the guy.

1:20:15 AH: I've heard you talk about the guy from Mali and just assumed you'd been there.

1:20:18 RW: Yeah, Dinda. We met there at the National Mall. They had that celebration. Yeah. What about that?

1:20:29 AH: Well, I just think, as rooted as you are in this place, I've observed you learning from other places. I don't know if you want to -

1:20:40 RW: Well, again, we got picked, I think Rich Kirby had a lot to do to get me on the grounds of the Smithsonian, Celebration of Cultures. They tried to show the threads of American music from Scotland, from Africa, from Mali that time, and from Appalachia. I don't think people got it. Some people were interested in Mali music, they went there. And Scottish people went there. But, I got it, so I was kind of mixing it up with the African people. And, like a story I often tell. Dinda, he's from Mali. I asked him how he learned to play and his elders would be around playing and he'd play like, he'd be playing on a broom handle and then they would say, "Ok, he's ready to learn to play." So, they would fashion him an instrument and he would watch his elders and then he would go off in the corner and try to emulate what they were doing. And I talked to Ray Slone here, I said, "How'd you learn?" He said, "Well, I was playing a broom handle and my dad said, now he's ready to learn." It's the same story. "So I went out, got him a groundhog hide," same thing, and I asked Ray, I said, "Did you take lessons?" "No, he never taught me anything." He'd watch then he'd go off and emulate what his dad was doing. That was the same story told in those - I thought it was really interesting around the banjo and banjo coming from Africa. And, the same threads of that story that remain from both cultures. And the story I read that in Africa, they would hoe out the peanut field and at the end of the row would be a palm wine and a what they called a banjo or ngoni or akonting and I asked Lee, I said, "What about the banjo?" He said, "Well, we'd hoe out the corn, at the end of the row would be a banjo and moonshine at the end of the row." It was the same story and the same story of it being here, being low class people, people who maybe hung out with black musicians. It wasn't, you know really, until Earl Scruggs, I think it was just, an iffy kind of thing to do. He really popularized banjo to me. He was everywhere playing. He was doing concerts in colleges. He gave it significance, cultural significance. So, yeah, I was interested in that history and how it - and you know, they had that Black Banjo Conference at App[alachian] State. I went to that. I thought it was so significant that they were doing that and all the presenters were black. That was insightful. That it wasn't white people telling about black instruments. They were all black people. And out of that, that Carolina Chocolate Drops. They were there, I think that's where they first met. I had my two kids there. And, I went to that. So, I got interested in that and then I got, Dinda gave me or bought, I forget, an ngoni. It was interesting that it's the same thing, it's not a factory made, it's made by the families. It's very privilege to have. That really. And then, George Gibson here. He had a history of it. It's fortunate he's in this county to pass on this. You know Tommy Bledsoe was probably instrumental in getting. Tommy's in Florida. He and Rich played a lot together. Rich Kirby and Tommy Bledsoe played many years together. Tommy moved to Florida, St. Augustine. Then he ran into George down there selling cars. And realized who he, what he knew and how he played. So, yeah. What other do you want to talk about?

1:25:31 AH: Yeah, I think you shared a lot, talked a while. Is there any more thoughts you have? We didn't get into wild plants or anything, that's a whole other passion of yours, but maybe for another day.

1:25:55 RW: Yeah, that'd be another thing to talk about. There was something I was thinking about. Talking about the African experience. The ends and outs of it was really interesting to me,

that guy Daniel Jatta coming here in the MBA program at the University of North Carolina. Watching these old time players and realizing they played just like his daddy back in Gambia. So neat, and he went back and sure enough it was the same exact, it wasn't a replica, a facsimile of it, it was the same stroke on the instrument. He was really the key, that was around 2000, so that's not been that long ago. 2002 or something. That he made contact in Oslo, Norway with this Norwegian guy named Olfi Ogforse[?] who was a banjo aficionado and made several trips to West Africa searching for the nearest relative to the banjo. And, had gone so far and then, I don't know, Daniel Jatta happened to be in the same town, just, not a few miles away, presenting about his knowledge. And they met in Norway and started this relationship. And now, like Cowan Creek Mountain Music School, Daniel Jatta goes back and they started a school, his father was one of the few people who played the instrument, so they started a school. I mean, as people, urbanization of people moving off. His father's one of the few that played it. So, they started a school there. But, it was interesting at the Black Conference, Black Banjo Conference, a guy, I guess he was from the University of North Carolina, professor, he would go to these AME churches, black churches, and talk about history and he said, "Well, get out basketry from our tradition, they'd go, 'Oh that's so lovely.' And I'd get out quilts from our tradition and they'd go, 'Well, that's really neat.' Then I'd get out a banjo, they'd say, 'No, no that's not us.'" The minstrel show just did a number on the banjo for them. Just turned them away from it. So, that conference, it was good to see, it's like giving the instrument back to them, that conference. I don't know any other stories I remember of that. That's all I can think of. There was some other little tangent, but I can't remember what it was. I can't think of it. Alright.

1:29:09 AH: Well, thank you for your time and stories and your friendship and mentorship.

1:29:15 RW: Yeah, you're welcome.

1:29:17 [End of Interview]