

Marshall University

Marshall Digital Scholar

0064: Marshall University Oral History
Collection

Digitized Manuscript Collections

1973

Oral History Interview: Riley L. Kelbaugh

Riley L. Kelbaugh

Follow this and additional works at: https://mds.marshall.edu/oral_history

Recommended Citation

Marshall University Special Collections, OH64-71, Huntington, WV.

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Digitized Manuscript Collections at Marshall Digital Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in 0064: Marshall University Oral History Collection by an authorized administrator of Marshall Digital Scholar. For more information, please contact zhangj@marshall.edu.



MARSHALL UNIVERSITY

JAMES E. MORROW LIBRARY

HUNTINGTON, WEST VIRGINIA 25701

ASSOCIATES

ORAL HISTORY

GIFT AND RELEASE AGREEMENT

I, Riley K. Kelbaugh, the undersigned, of
Dumfries, County of Harrison State
of W. Va., grant, convey, and transfer to the James E.
Morrow Library Associates, a division of the Marshall University Foundation, Inc.,
an educational and eleemosynary institution, all my right, title, interest, and
literary property rights in and to my testimony recorded on Oct. 21, 1973,
to be used for scholarly purposes, including study rights to Reproduction.

R.K.K. Open and usable after my review
initial

_____ Closed for a period of _____ years.
initial

_____ Closed for my lifetime.
initial

_____ Closed for my lifetime unless special permission.
initial

Date Oct. 21, 1973

R. K. Kelbaugh
(Signature - Interviewee)

1341 G-50 SSWP Area
Address

Date Oct. 21, 1973

Dumfries, W. Va.
Guarman Leone
(Signature - Witness)



Reverend R. L. Kelbaugh

JL: I'm speaking with Reverend R.L. Kelbaugh who is ninety two years old. I'm going to ask him to share his memories as a circuit rider, Reverend Kelbaugh, where were you born?

RLK: I was born in Jackson County, West Virginia near Lockhart, West Virginia.

JL: Did you have alot of religious training in your home?

RLK: Yes, my parents were Christians and we had bible reading, family prayer in our home everyday.

JL: When did you decide to go into the ministry and why?

RLK: I decided to enter the ministry in 1912 because I felt as though it was a position the Lord wanted me to take up and yet I had a little hesitancy to undertake it because my education wasn't sufficient to make a good minister. I hadn't finished the eighth grade in school before I went to work.

JL: That's then next question I wanted to ask you, what kind of training did you have to have as a minister back in these days?

RLK: Well in those days we were supposed to have a college education but if one didn't have that but felt the call, they had what they called a quarterly conference minister that would just do substitute work and assisting of other pastors and helping along the line of holding revival meetings. I had a little experience in singing and thought that I could put the two together so I helped other ministers and that was in 1912 and not until 1915 did I accept a regular pastor and did study work along the ministerial line leading up to that time.

JL: When you were a circuit rider what denomination were the churches where you preached?

RLK: The United Brethern in Christ.

JL: How big was the area you covered as a circuit rider?

RLK: My first circuit had an area about 20 miles long and

possibly eight or ten miles wide, seven churches and one schoolhouse to preach in.

JL: Oh, you did preach in schools then?

RLK: Schools, they had church in schoolhouse.

JL: How often did you get to visit each church?

RLK: I was supposed to preach once each month on Sunday, each month at each of the churches but when in a revival meeting, if they'd last over, well sometimes I'd have to miss one appointment in the other churches while I was holding revival meeting.

JL: How did the revivals then compare with the ones we have today? Were they the same or how were they different?

RLK: No, no they were quite different. The revivals there if you would announce at the one appointment that when it came to the next appointment that you was going to start the revival why it seemed to be great expectancy in the minds of everyone. Now we'll have a good revival and get our church going good again and now when you announce a revival it's taken with a question mark.

JL: How long did the revivals last usually?

RLK: They usually lasted two weeks and if there were many folks being saved, you just kept on until the revival kind of wore off. The longest revival I had during my ministry was six weeks.

JL: How many services did you have during the revival each day?

RLK: Two services each day, a meeting of the class folks for song and praise and testimony service in the morning at 10:00 and then the service at night for each preaching service and invitation to come to Christ and become Christians.

JL: How many people usually attended a church service?

RLK: Well it depended on the area of population but the church building was also built along the same ratio and when you come to revival meeting, you could expect a full church every night whether it would hold ones in the community where they expect 150 as another place where there might be 300.

JL: Did they always have a church that you preached in or did they sometimes meet in homes? You mentioned a school.

RLK: Yes, they would usually have a prayer meeting in the homes the week before the public service began at the church.

JL: Normally when there wasn't a revival, how long did you stay at one church? Just one Sunday or did you stay more than one day?

RLK: When I would be preaching in the regular service during the summer period and winter period, I would sometimes preach at one church before noon and immediately go to another church for that night and then the following Sunday, would go to another church once or twice. Then occasionally preached three times, three different churches on Sunday one before noon and one in the afternoon and one at night.

JL: Where did you stay when you traveled around, did you stay with families?

RLK: That is when I'd be so far away from the parsonage that I couldn't get back and forth to these services, why I would stay with the families in the area where the revival was in. Whether it was in close enough so I could go back and forth to these services from my home I'd usually go home.

JL: Did you travel year round or just certain months our of the year?

RLK: Year round. Of course the revivals would usually

last for a period of about four months from the time I'd start my first one until I'd get through with the last one and then each Sunday I'd go to just one or two or three churches.

JL: Did you ever get a vacation or any time off that you would spend with your family at home?

RLK: Not while on a circuit. I preached on three different circuits. One in Tyler County and Pleasants County combines and the second one during WWI was in Jackson County and the third circuit was in Mason County.

JL: How long did a church service usually last on your circuit on a Sunday morning. When did they start and how long did they usually run?

RLK: Well they usually run about an hour and one half for the worship service and the Sunday School would be an hour and the worship service would follow the Sunday School.

JL: Were the church proceedings the same as they are in today's church, like call to worship and maybe an opening hymn and the sermon or was it less ritualistic back then?

RLK: Well it was more ad lib. Just the preacher would have someone lead song service, then he would read the scripture lesson and occasionally he would have a testimony meeting for a short period and then preach and have the benediction. At other times, it would just be singing at the beginning and the scripture and prayer and another song, preaching and the closing verse of some song and the benediction.

JL: Did the sermons differ back then than today like the subject matter of the sermon or is it pretty much the way it is today?

RLK: Well somewhat similar. It was usually a topic and the scripture text that the minister would take was usually have contained in it a topic that would aim to cover a certain section of the Christian

faith and worship service usually had more of an emphatic tone in the ministers sermon that we have today that has somewhat of a question mark whether we think this might be it.

JL: Did you perform many weddings and baptisms, was that a big part of your ministry?

RLK: Oh yes, that was one of the things that the minister was supposed to do back in the beginning the same as at the closing if any couple would come and want a wedding performed, they would perform a wedding ceremony. Then after every revival why there'd be arrangements for baptismal service. The weddings were not as formal then as now, they usually just the bride and groom would come to the parsonage and the wedding would be performed in the parsonage and they would sometimes bring one or two parties along as a witness and a minister's wife would act as a witness if they didn't bring more than one person with them and not until my later ministry did we start having weddings in churches and as formal as they do now.

JL: Were the baptisms always by immersion at this time?

RLK: No, in our church the applicant for baptism could have his choice of being sprinkled or immersed.

JL: If he did choose to be immersed was it usually in a river?

RLK: Well we usually went to a creek in the community where I preached, a few times I was close enough to a river that we could baptise in the river but usually in some creek.

JL: How did the people hold church when there wasn't a minister available?

RLK: They would usually meet on a regular time for Sunday School and then following Sunday School they would have what they would call prayer and testimony meetings. The Christian folks would all be suppose

to give a testimony at that testimony service.

JL: Were you paid as a circuit rider? If you were, who paid you and how much did you get paid for this?

RLK: Well each church on the circuit was assigned so much at the beginning of the year. They would come together and decide the total salary that the church circuit would pay and they would divide up that amount among the different churches according to their ability. My first circuit, the first year paid \$350.00 a year and the most any one church paid was \$50.00.

JL: Did your family ever go with you at anytime while you were traveling?

RLK: Not on a regular circuit unless it was some special church, some special service like possibly having a special meeting of some kind where a number of churches would join together for that special service like quarterly meetings and then sometimes the family would go along but usually they attended the one church near the home. I rode horseback to the church that I was going to preach.

JL: How long were you a circuit rider? How many years?

RLK: I served my first circuit two years, my second circuit two years and my third circuit five years making nine years altogether before I took a stationed pastor.

JL: Why did you change circuits, did a group of people decide when you would go to a different group of churches or did you decide yourself that you wanted to try a different one?

RLK: The arrangements was that the conference superintendent who visited the circuit four times each year would find out while he was making those quarterly meetings about how the people felt whether there should be a change in pastors or the same one return. Then when the superintendent would make up his mind as how it

should be, he would talk it over with the pastor and by the time they were ready to attend conference, why they knew pretty well whether the pastor would return or move to another charge. My first ministry usually two or three years was as long as any pastor would serve and some of them would go over one year until they'd be moved. Then as the years went on, why they seemed to extend the time until pastors served longer. My beginning was two years the first and second and the next three appointments were five years and the last one was ten.

JL: Do you remember the year they stopped having circuit riders and started just having a permanent minister at each town?

RLK: They still have circuits.

JL: Still have them?

RLK: Yes.

JL: Well I didn't know that. How do you think churches compare today with the churches back then?

RLK: Well I hardly know how to suggest it. I think back in the beginning of my ministry the folks who were professed Christians was more interested in getting other folks to unite with the church and become Christians than the average churchman is today.

JL: Do you think then that the religion isn't as important in families today as it used to be?

RLK: No, I think not. I think there was far more folks whose family would have family worship and the children were taught in the home to be Christians far more than we have today.

JL: Do you have any experiences you'd like to tell about that happened, funny or otherwise while you were a circuit rider? Do you have any favorite stories?

RLK: Well I don't think of anything special just now. Of course there were quite a few experiences that was rather interesting at the time but they don't seem to come to my mind.

JL: When I was talking to Mrs. Kessell yesterday, she said that you went to a singing school once. What was this? It's kind of interesting.

RLK: That was when I was just a boy about fifteen years old. My father was asked to hold a Sunday School in the schoolhouse where I attended school because we were about three miles from the nearest church and many children five, six and eight years old couldn't walk that far and go to church when their parents didn't go to church and so they wanted their children to go to Sunday School whether they did or not and they asked my father to hold a Sunday School. He couldn't sing, no one who came to Sunday School could sing. A friend of my father's was starting a singing school in the church where we belonged and my father asked him about sending me to that singing school to learn to sing so that I could lead the singing at the Sunday School. My father told him that I couldn't sing, that if I would be trying to sing along with folks who were singing a tune, I'd be singing off key. He said, yes I can teach anybody to sing that can speak English, but my English wasn't very good and he said we think we can teach him to sing. They were starting a singing school in the church where we belonged and the singing school master was to get ten dollars for ten lessons. The number of pupils would decide how much each one would pay and if we got just ten pupils, it would be a dollar a piece. If they got twenty, it would be fifty cents, but they got twenty five pupils, that made my tuition forty cents and the book was fifty cents and the tuition was forty cents, making ninety cents total. Our first five lessons was just singing the notes from a chart he had and on the sixth lesson we got our songbook and the first lesson in singing was on our sixth lesson and that song that we sung and learned that night was "Life's Railway to Heaven." The next

Sunday morning I sang that for the opening service and sang it for the closing service.

JL: I don't know if you'd mind or not, would you mind singing a hymn? Or would you rather not? I think it'd be interesting to sing. Mrs. Kessell said that one of your first hymns that she always enjoyed was "Ninety and Nine." If you'd rather not, you know, you don't have to but I think it'd be interesting if you'd want to.

RLK: Since we were just thinking along that line, I might sing that "Life's Railway to Heaven." I'm not certain that I can get all the verses without a book. Could you shut it off while I see if I can find something (break in tape).

Must Jesus bear the cross alone
And all the world go free,
Now there's a cross for everyone
And there's a cross for me.

How happy heart the saints they brought
Who once went wandering here,
But now they take a mangled love,
And joy without a tear.

He comes, he craves that cross I'll bear
Till death shall set me free,
And then go home my crown to wear
For there's a crown for me.

Upon that crisp (inaudible).
(Inaudible)
With joy I'll trust my golden crown,
And his dear name repeat.

JL: That's very, very good. Is that the book you used when you were learning or is that just one of yours?

RLK: No, no the one that I used then is torn to shreds long ago.

JL: What kind of book was it? Just a book of hymns

in it, or a regular music book?

RLK: No, it was just a music book but it had some hymns in it, but usually it was just the type that they used in practice teaching and it's name was The Hours of Song.

JL: Well we have just a little bit of time left. Let's see, what else can we talk about. Did you just take ten lessons?

RLK: Yes, just ten lessons.

JL: Well you did really well. They teach you to sing and you were singing solos right at the beginning.

RLK: I think I got my ninety cents worth.

JL: Did everyone else learn to sing too?

RLK: Oh yes, yes. All of them. Most of them could sing much better than I to start with but all of them learned something.

JL: When did you retire as a minister?

RLK: I retired in 1949.

JL: And how many years were you a minister altogether?

RLK: From the time I started my circuit, it was thirty four years as a minister of churches and I was four years in preparation as a ministerial student and practiced preaching by helping other ministers when they needed to be away or they'd get sick or something and I'd go fill their appointment and then I'd often go and help ministers during their revival meeting by either leading the singing and occasionally preaching.

JL: I know in our church you still participate every once and a while. Do you participate at any other churches at any time? Do you still preach anytime on special occasions?

RLK: Yes, I'm supposed to preach here in this church
on the second Sunday in November.

JL: Well thank you very much, that's really interesting.
You're the first circuit rider I've ever talked to.
Thank you.

RLK: You're welcome.

Sunday morning I sang that for the opening service and sang it for the closing service.

JL: I don't know if you'd mind or not, would you mind singing a hymn? Or would you rather not? I think it'd be interesting to sing. Mrs. Kessell said that one of your first hymns that she always enjoyed was "Ninety and Nine." If you'd rather not, you know, you don't have to but I think it'd be interesting if you'd want to.

RLK: Since we were just thinking along that line, I might sing that "Life's Railway to Heaven." I'm not certain that I can get all the verses without a book. Could you shut it off while I see if I can find something (break in tape).

Must Jesus bear the cross alone
And all the world go free,
Now there's a cross for everyone
And there's a cross for me.

How happy heart the saints they brought
Who once went wandering here,
But now they take a mangled love,
And joy without a tear.

He comes, he craves that cross I'll bear
Till death shall set me free,
And then go home my crown to wear
For there's a crown for me.

Upon that crisp (inaudible).
(Inaudible)
With joy I'll trust my golden crown,
And his dear name repeat.

JL: That's very, very good. Is that the book you used when you were learning or is that just one of yours?

RLK: No, no the one that I used then is torn to shreds long ago.

JL: What kind of book was it? Just a book of hymns