



TV news pioneer Bill Kelley. Photo by Steve Brightwell.

# Bill Kelley

## Historian behind the Camera

By Aaron Parsons

The Broadway hit *Hamilton* musically asks the question, “Who tells your story?” Unlike in old films and plays, it’s not always the horned-rimmed bespectacled academic sitting behind a desk. This stereotypical and outdated image (Ok, maybe a few of us still fit that bill) forgets about a different type of historian: those who literally record our history in real-time. Every day, reporters and photographers are out in the field to make events known to the public, documenting history

in the making and gaining knowledge that often fails to make our history books.

One such person is Bill Kelley, who was born on July 26, 1934, to William Marshall “Buck” Kelley Sr. and Reba May Runyon. His father worked in eastern Kanawha County’s coal mines, starting as just a child; however, after nearly getting killed, Buck moved to Charleston to work for Standard Oil and later got a job at South Charleston’s Naval Ordnance Plant. Reba was from Charleston’s West Side.



Her mother passed away when she was only three years old, and she was raised by her grandmother.

Horace Marshall Kelley, Bill's grandfather, was a painter at Union Carbide in South Charleston. Horace was also a musician, an artist, and an acrobat. "The guy could do about anything," Bill recalls. "Every Saturday night, everybody would get together. My dad played violin and guitar; my grandfather played violin and guitar. An accordion would show up, a trumpet would show up, and a bass fella would show up, and everybody would play music, fry fish to eat, and drink beer. I really enjoyed that when I was a little kid. . . . [Horace] was kind of the leader of the group, but when he got killed, that was the end of that." Horace died in an explosion at Union Carbide in 1941.

Bill clearly recalls the day Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, only a month after his grandfather's death. "I remember we had left my grandfather's house—we lived on the West Side at the time—and as we went across the Patrick Street Bridge, the newsboy from one of the papers ran out with an *Extra*, holding it up saying, 'Japanese attack Pearl Harbor!'"

Bill's family had moved to the West Side from South Hills, generally a wealthier section of town. Bill notes, "It was sort of a culture shock, but it didn't last long because I had all these great kids to play with."

Bill recounts playing football with friends and competing in the soapbox derby. One time, he had to go to the police station to retrieve his football after his buddies, who'd borrowed it from him, got caught playing in the street while he was home doing chores. A police officer had the ball sitting on his desk and lectured Bill about the danger of playing football in the streets.

Bill was a Boy Scout. "I never rose to a high rank, but I had a lot of fun

and learned a lot," Bill says. He was the bugler for his troop and played the scouts' calls at many ceremonies. He even took part in a bugling competition, and his troop put a lot of pressure on him to win. Luckily, he was asked to play "Taps."

"When I got my paper and saw the call I had to play, I tossed it down and just started playing. I had 'Taps' down pat. . . . Once I finished, everyone in the troop was screaming and jumping up and down."

Bill attended Lincoln Junior High, located about where the Kroger on Delaware Avenue is today, and later went to Stonewall Jackson High. While in school, Bill worked at The Diamond Department Store's cafeteria and for the phone company. In the latter job, Bill traveled quite a bit locally and learned a lot about the area, which would later prove invaluable.

As a teenager, Bill was fascinated with film and the news. He would read the newspaper and listen to the radio. He used an 8-millimeter camera and tape recorder to document his family, friends, and school events, such as a pep rally prior to a game against Stonewall's rival, Charleston High. He later used audio from the pep rally in his film *Memories of Stonewall Jackson High School*. Bill says that after showing the film to old classmates at reunions, "people would stand up and applaud, and the girls would cry."

After high school, Bill considered going to college, but one day, he saw something that changed his course. "I remember going down Capitol Street with my dad, and we turned onto Washington Street, and there was a WSAZ camera at the front of the Daniel Boone Hotel, and they were doing *a man on the street*, and I was like, 'That's what I want to do.'" Luckily for Bill, WCHS-TV had recently gone on the air, and the station was looking for help.





(Left-right) WCHS-TV cameramen Dick Johnson and Bill Kelley. All photos courtesy of Bill Kelley unless noted otherwise.

Bill started at WCHS in 1954. He aspired to become a production assistant and, to his surprise, was given the position right off the bat. However, his excitement was quelled when he was handed a broom and told to sweep the floors.

"I did, as almost everyone else, a little bit of everything. I ran the cameras, did photography, production work, and swept the floors," Bill told Ron Hutchinson of the *Charleston Daily Mail* in 1994.

Bill got close with WCHS's chief photographer, Nilo Olin, who became his mentor. "He had tremendous camera

techniques," Bill says of Olin. "He'd gone through the [U.S.] Signal Corps Motion Picture School and had shot film in North Africa, Sicily, Italy, southern France, and in Germany during the Second World War. So, he knew his stuff, and he was the best in this area by far."

Bill covered a variety of news, such as President Dwight Eisenhower golfing with Sam Snead at The Greenbrier, the opening of the West Virginia Turnpike, Cecil Underwood's campaign for governor in 1956, and WVU home football games.

"The first time people in this area got to watch WVU play football, it





Bill Kelley films the dedication of the new bridge at Montgomery (Fayette County), 1956. In 2001, the bridge was named in honor of former House of Delegates Majority Leader Earl M. Vickers.

was 1954," Bill explains. He, Olin, and broadcasting great Ernie Saunders [see Summer 1990] had to shoot from the top of Old Mountaineer Field's original press box in the pouring rain and sleet during the 1954 WVU-Pitt game—a 13-10 upset of No. 7-ranked WVU. "We covered most the games for the next two years, so that was a chance for people in this part of the state to see WVU football."

Bill often covered Underwood campaign events. Some have credited Underwood with being our first governor to use TV effectively. One time, Bill was even mistaken for the young governor. "When

they broke ground for [the] Green Bank [Telescope], Cecil was supposed to break ground for it, but he got sick. . . . So, he tells a trooper to drive us up there so we can cover it. We get up there, and I've got a camera case, you know. So, I jump out, and this guy walks up and shakes my hand and says, "Hello, governor! How are ya?"

In 1956, Bill married Alice Anderson and was drafted by the military. "When I came off my honeymoon, my pre-induction notice was waiting on me," Bill explains. However, he didn't meet the physical requirements. He did, however, aid the





(Left-right) Bill gets an autograph from singer Pat Boone at Kanawha (now Yeager) Airport, late 1950s.

military by shooting footage. He once rode in a helicopter with the Army National Guard to help find a missing child on Campbell's Creek and even parachuted from an Air National Guard plane to a boat to film the plane landing on water.

Bill's career path changed in 1957 after an explosion at the Monsanto Chemical plant in Nitro. He and his crew recorded footage of the blast's aftermath. "I went down to where the explosion was, and it was mayhem. They were bringing guys out and so forth. I got film of some of that, and this guy comes up to me and he says, 'I need your film. You can't shoot film in here.' Something happened that turned his attention, and I handed [the film] to Dave Riley and said, 'Get it back to the station right away.'" Because he captured that footage and got it on the air, Bill was offered and accepted a job at WSAZ.

Shortly afterward, Bill covered a story that put him and other reporters in great danger: the integration of schools in Matoaka (Mercer County). In October 1957, there was a multi-day anti-integration demonstration at Matoaka High School. During the protest, Bill and his team filmed Black students being attacked by some of the demonstrators. Seeing the cameras rolling, protestors threw eggs at and shouted threats of violence toward the news crew. "I remember a lady, one of the teachers up on the second floor, yelling at the crowd, saying, 'Get that photographer!'" Thankfully, Bill and his team weren't harmed, and startling images from their footage spread nationwide.

While at WSAZ, Bill covered other historical events, such as the 1960 Holden mine disaster, the 1960 presidential campaign of John F. Kennedy, the deadly





An African-American student is attacked as he tries to enter Matoaka High School (Mercer County), October 1957. This is a screen capture from film shot by Bill Kelley. Courtesy of the West Virginia State Archives, WSAZ-TV News Film Collection.

1961 Charleston flash flood, and Point Pleasant's Silver Bridge tragedy in 1967. While covering the 1961 flood, Bill found out from his colleagues that his wife and children had been forced by the deluge to abandon their home. "I went in the newsroom, and they said, 'Your wife had to leave your house. You have water in your home on Maryland Avenue.'" Bill's wife had to carry their two children out of the home in chest-high water.

Bill also covered the trials of former Governor Wally Barron and several of his associates who were indicted in 1968 on bribery charges. Though most were found guilty, Barron was not, but he went to prison in 1971 for bribing the jury foreman during the original trial. Bill was there to see it all.

"They all went to prison. I covered all those situations. One of the toughest

things was, one of the leaders, I knew his daughter. He brought his daughter with him to court, and she was watching me as I was filming them. It was tough. . . . And Wally, before he came in for the trial the first day, he came over and shook hands with me."

In 1969, West Virginia launched our first public TV station. Hearing this, Bill knew it was once again time for a change. After 13 years with WSAZ, he left to work for West Virginia Public Broadcasting (WVPB). "We couldn't find a studio in Charleston, but we found a school in Nitro that we could convert into a TV studio. . . . I was there to help put the system on the air," Bill explains.

At WVPB, Bill worked with teachers to develop education programs and create documentaries. He was executive producer of *Legislature Today*, which





Bill Kelley pretends to give a speeding ticket to Huntington native Soupy Sales (at the wheel of a swanky Ford Deluxe convertible) as part of a “Drive 55” personal service announcement for West Virginia, 1982.

aired daily when the legislature was in action. He also shot several public service announcements—some featuring A. James Manchin and Soupy Sales—and later became manager of WVPB’s Charleston facility. Bill worked for Public Broadcasting for 26 years, retiring in 1996.

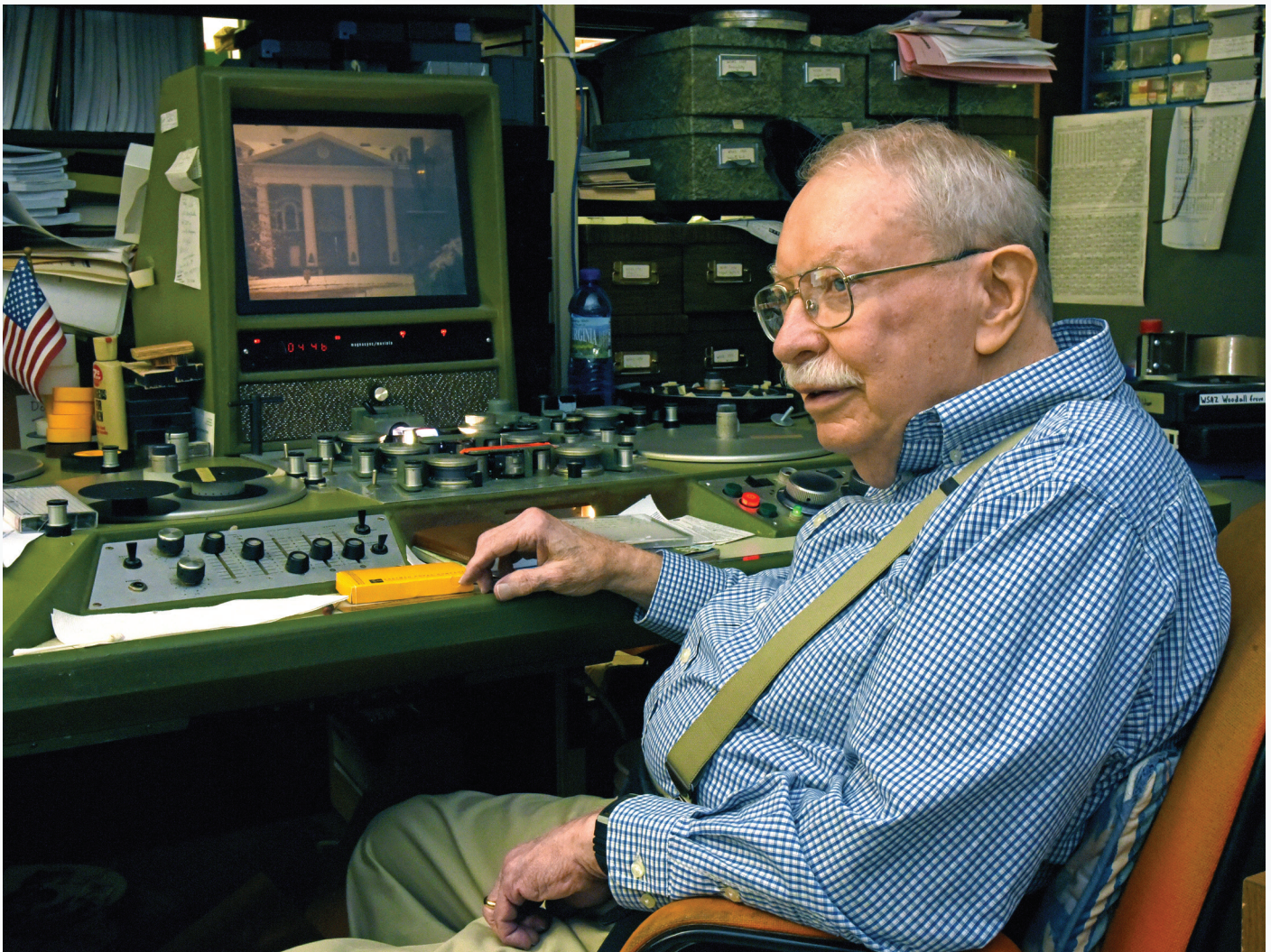
Bill began volunteering at West Virginia Archives & History, helping to identify people, locations, and anything else he could recognize in old news films. Some 25 years later, Bill still comes to the State Archives to search through film. And for more than 40 years, he’s produced a weekly broadcast for Charleston’s Calvary Baptist Church.

Bill still lives in Charleston with his wife, Alice. Their son, William (Billy)

Marshall Kelley III, is a photographer. He’s been a picture editor for the *North Pilot* newspaper and now digitizes photos for the state of California. Their daughter, Kari Smolder, lives in Charleston, and the Kelleys have three grandsons and two great-grandsons.

Bill’s received much recognition for his work. In 1975, a film he made on fire safety won the Ohio State Award for Television Excellence. He also won several AP Best News Film of the Year awards and was part of the first class inducted into the West Virginia Broadcasting Hall of Fame. He also served on the advisory board for West Virginia State College’s (now University) Department





At age 86, Bill Kelley volunteers regularly to help catalog historic films in the West Virginia State Archives collection. Photo by Steve Brightwell.

of Communications in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Bill was recognized as a West Virginia History Hero for his work in recording and preserving local history. Governor Cecil Underwood—Bill’s longtime friend who was serving his second term 40 years after his first one—was there to give him the award.

Reflecting on his career, Bill says, “I consider my work more as a cinematographer than a photographer.” His fond memories include shooting footage of traditional musicians like the Morris Brothers from Clay County, meeting Pat Boone at Yeager Airport, and being the first to shoot film of Jerry West playing basketball.

Bill has been a witness to and recorder of so many vital historical events. Because of people like him, we can see parts of our history come alive in front of our own eyes. So, when we think about historians, let’s not forget about those who literally document it. Some historians work behind a desk, while others do it behind a camera. 🍁

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