

Rock Voices: The Oral History Project of Slippery Rock University
Donald Kelly Interview
March 20, 2009
Bailey Library, Slippery Rock University, Slippery Rock, Pennsylvania
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TD: Today is March 20, 2009, and I am Teresa DeBacco for the Rock Voices Oral History Program. I'm here today with Dr. Donald Kelly. How are you today?

DK: Just fine . . . cold. I was looking forward to spring; it hasn't proven true today.

TD: We're going to get started with some biographical information. I need you to tell me a little bit about yourself: your full name, your date of birth, where you're from . . . just some basics.

DK: Donald Shields Kelly. Birth: June 17, 1930. I have lived around Slippery Rock for most of my life, but never in the borough. And place of birth: New Castle, Pennsylvania.

TD: Fantastic. Can you tell me a little bit about your education?

DK: One-room country schools, with no complaints. Good teachers. Slippery Rock graduates who I had, and each teacher that I had I remember for something. For my introduction to music, George Keefer; my introduction to literature, Arthur Taggart; my introduction to the finer things of nature, Gene McCracken.

TD: Can you tell me a little bit about your affiliation with Slippery Rock University? I know you were here as a student and a professor both; can you talk a little bit about that?

DK: Well I arrived here as a ninth grader, at what was then Slippery Rock High School, which was a laboratory school for the college. So I was introduced to the college quite young, at the age of fourteen in fact. And all of—not all but most all of my high school teachers were also college professors. So I had an introduction to good teaching and dynamic personalities very young.

I did not go immediately into the college. I spent years—strip mines, pottery, truck driving—but my closest high school friend was a man by the name of Stanley Duncan. His father was then dean of instruction here, which functioned really as a vice president. That's the way he functioned but his title was Dean of Instruction. I knew the family and spent time with the family and never considered myself college material. Although I had, I'd say through elementary school

'til high school, I had good grades. In high school I had fun; the grades suffered tremendously. But Dr. Duncan, Stan's father, wrote me a letter one summer, really pleading—he was very complimentary of what he knew about me and was pleading me to enroll. So I did. But in the meantime [I'd been to] North Korea, been to South Korea. The Korean War broke out. I had already served one year in the United States Navy, and rather than being drafted again, I volunteered to return as a Naval Reservist. So I went back in during the Korean War for two years. At the end of that, then I came back to school here.

TD: Let's talk a little bit about what Slippery Rock eras you were here [for]. I know you graduated in 1956 from the college—it still would've been a teachers college at that time, correct?

DK: [Yes].

TD: When you came back as a professor would it have been in the state college or the university era?

DK: It was a state college. It did not become a university until—I'm not sure of the date. Not when I returned, it wasn't a university yet.

TD: Were you here for the transition from teachers college?

DK: Yes.

TD: Can you talk a little bit about that transition?

DK: Well they changed the sign on the building [laughs]. I don't want to be a smart alec but

TD: Were you here as a student during the transition, or a professor?

DK: No, I was a professor.

TD: No changes in your—departmental changes?

DK: No, no, no

TD: Oh, that's interesting.

DK: An easy transition as far as I'm concerned; a very easy transition.

TD: [Pause] Can we talk about the department you were hired into and the changes that you saw while you were here?

DK: Well [pause] I considered my lifelong ambition to be a history professor, once I was here and was introduced to good teaching and dynamic professors. So to come back to the department that I graduated from was the height of achievement for me. And to work with the people that I had admired like Joe Frazier, Bob Duncan, Charles Halt; I shared offices with all of them. That was, as I say, beyond my fondest ambitions really, to achieve that, and I did so at the age of thirty which I thought was . . . pretty good [chuckles].

TD: What buildings did you work in on campus?

DK: Old Main [laughs]. Top floor of Old Main [laughs] and [I] had to clean off my desk every morning, not from work but from the mortar from the bricks that fell from the ceiling every night [laughs].

TD: Wow. What were your first impressions of the college when you arrived here? What was it like when you first arrived? What changes did you witness while you were here?

DK: This is a cop out, but almost too numerous to mention. [Pause] The change of personnel, the change of student body—when I came here World War II vets were here. And when I came here campus work crews were German prisoners: prisoners of war, who came down here from Camp Reynolds, which was a prisoner of war camp. They came here and worked on campus. I can only say I *almost* became a believer in Hitler's master race theory, because those Germans war prisoners all came out of Rommel's Afrika Korps and they were the crack troops of the Nazi army and they were handsome men, very handsome men. And happy to be here and be out of combat, believe me.

TD: Can you talk a little bit about your campus activities? I see that you've been involved in a lot of different things on campus, both as a student and a professor.

DK: Not as much as a student, because I was married and commuting. However I was lured into theatre work by a woman by the name of Jan Burns. Jan was a magnificent lady. Now this, you can do what you want with this, she was not a handsome lady. She looked like Eleanor Roosevelt. I swear to God we used to—behind her back we'd call her Eleanor [laughs]. But a beautiful person, who thought I was enough of a ham that I could be good on stage, and so I was in a production every semester on campus and because of Jan, I always had the lead role. I'm proud of that. I'll be very uninhibited and say yeah, I'm proud of that.

TD: How about as a professor?

DK: I think I was respected. And I think if I was respected it was because I always respected my students. And that was not phony, I did indeed.

Sometimes I was attracted to the renegades because I was a renegade myself, I guess. And I managed to develop some of them into good scholars and good citizens.

TD: [Pause] I want to talk a little bit about the beginning of the master's degree program that I know you were very instrumental in, which would've been like the early 1970s. What can you tell me about that?

DK: There was some dispute as to what the requirements would be. Not a dispute, but kicking it around and trying to decide: can you get a master's degree without a thesis? Some schools you could get a master's degree with an additional amount of work and no thesis or just a thesis for so many—worth so many hours.

We finally went both ways, you could do either—and I'm not sure how it is now—but you could either get the master's with the additional work or you could do the thesis. And that's the way it ended up at that time.

TD: I also read that you helped initiate the archives project. That's why we have our archives here today at Bailey Library. Can you talk about starting that project?

DK: Well [pause] a graduate assistant who later became my wife, briefly [laughs] . . . that's not true, we were married thirteen years. That's not brief is it?

TD: No.

DK: Well, okay. We sort of got tied up with the University of Pittsburgh archives; their study was ethnic archives. So she and I began to collect ethnic materials [pause] and that's easy in western Pennsylvania. With your background—I'll tell you because of your Italian heritage. New Castle of course is extremely Italian. And they once invited me to go over there to speak. Well my dissertation is on the pioneer settlements of six counties of western Pennsylvania; that's my dissertation. I had studied the census returns. So I am speaking to this group, the Lawrence County Historical Society and I told them, "You may be surprised to find out that in the census of 1860, there were only two people of Italian descent in all of western Pennsylvania." And you should've heard the gasp in that crowd [laughs]! "[Gasps] No!" I says, "Yes. One was a priest at the Saint Alphonsus parish." You know where Saint Alphonsus is?

TD: That's where I go.

DK: Oh really? Okay. He was a priest there. The other one was listed as a chef at a restaurant in Clarion. They were the only two people of Italian heritage in 1860. The great Italian immigration started about the turn of the century, not that early. They wanted more credit in 1860, but I couldn't give it to them, there were only two of them [laughs].

TD: I also saw that you wrote two books, *A Profile of Early Alumni of the Pennsylvania State Normal School at Slippery Rock: The First Twenty-Five Years* and *Selected Oral History of Slippery Rock University Alumni*. Can you talk to me a little bit about what led you to that process and maybe a little bit about that process?

DK: I've always had a fascination but no experience with exactly the thing that's happening here, with your interview. So, there were some old-timers around that I knew that I could reach easily—lived locally. One, a great aunt of mine, whose father had once been in charge of the [pause] kitchen here on campus, and she had gone here, and an old football player from the great days of Thompson football and so forth. So I got together with George Force, if you know Professor Force, and he and I . . . we compiled this. And I don't know what has become of it, but it should be around. It was sponsored by and financed by the development department.

TD: Can you talk a little bit about your involvement with *The Stone House Review* and the Old Stone House?

DK: Not *The Stone House Review*; that came, in fact, after I had retired. But the Old Stone House: I managed it. I don't know what else to say. I enlisted student help for guides, or docents they're called, and arranged all visitations for school groups or anybody on weekends.

You can cut this out if you want, but you say (referring to questions) “interesting or embarrassing moments.” I had a school group and I was doing the guiding myself that day; the students couldn't make it or something. [In] the upper room there was a bed with a nice quilt on it; beneath the bed there was this little white pot. You're sophisticated; you know what it was for. So I said to the group, I said, “Now,” I picked it up, “Do you know what this is for?” Well one little kid in the back of the room raised her hand up immediately. And mama says, “No, no! No! No!” And you know when mama says “No,” I'm going to call [on] that kid. “Well what is it?” She says, “That's my popcorn bowl!” [Laughs] And the mother says, “Oh my God, I have to explain it.” She says, “We do have one and we do use it for that, we make popcorn in it.” [Laughs] so, an embarrassing moment—for the mama, not for me.

TD: You talked a lot about—before we turned the camera on—the Native American studies that you brought to campus. Can you talk a little bit about that?

DK: I've always had that—interest of Native Americans, has been with me forever. As I was growing up playing cowboys and Indians, I was never a cowboy. I was always an Indian. I don't know why, I don't know where it came from, out of the clear blue sky. Something else I don't know where it came from—I even had a name, “Red in the Face.” I was “Chief Red in the Face.” Only as an adult did I [find] out that there was, among the Dakota Sioux, a Chief Red in the

Face. Where I got this, where this came out of the blue to me as a child, I don't know. But that's all I can say: the interest was always there and I have no Indian blood.

I have a proud ex-student who is a Native American, Tom Pecore. He attended here. His father was a Potawatomi Indian in Oklahoma, but he was a career Army man, so he was stationed at Carlisle Barracks in Pennsylvania. So Tom was here in Pennsylvania. Well, he came to Slippery Rock. [We] got acquainted in my class, and although he was Native American he didn't have a lot of knowledge [about his heritage]. After he had been in class for a few days he came to me and he said, "I must be." He said, "I'm dreaming Native American." He says, "because of this class I'm dreaming of being a Native American; I'm dreaming of my past." And we became great friends, and he invited me to the All Nations Powwow in Shawnee, Oklahoma, which is the headquarters of the Potawatomi Nation. That's strange: the name is Shawnee but they were Potawatomis. Well that's—Indians were confusing.

I went. I had the privilege of being invited into the circle. A non-Indian; I was invited into the circle. And a man that you may have seen on film, Will Sampson—did a lot of movies. [He] did *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Remember the big Indian making the dunks? That was Will Sampson. Will Sampson gave me a Jim Thorpe memorial belt.

Jim Thorpe, of course, was the famous Olympian. And I met Jim Thorpe's two daughters and one son. I'll never forget, they were having little hot dog stands and stuff at the powwow. So I walked up and this guy walks up to me and says, "How ya doing?" and I said, "I'm good." "Good," he says, "What's your name?" I said, "Don Kelly." "Where are you from?" [he asked]. "Pennsylvania," [I said], "Who are you?" He says, "I'm Richard Thorpe." My God, he looked just like his dad, he really did. And I had a long talk with Richard, and I found out why. He was a typical politician, at that point he was in the House of Representatives for the state of Oklahoma, so he was ready to cultivate me, but when I wasn't—I couldn't vote for him, why he just became a friend.

So one summer, this was even before Tom entered my life, I just had a summer workshop on Indians—an Indian workshop, and that started it. Then I got it passed through the Curriculum Committee, and it became a permanent part of the curriculum.

TD: Can you talk a little bit about the foreign studies program and Regional Council?

DK: The Regional Council was sponsored by [pause] a group of professors—a symposium, I guess you would call it—of professors of western Pennsylvania schools, and we studied foreign studies, many varieties. As I already told you, one of the benefits was not just the instructions

you got twice a month but the book supply that was given to the school of each participant. So we got nice books from the Regional Council.

TD: One last question about your campus involvement. You told me earlier you were involved with the Board of Trustees? Can you talk a little bit about that quickly?

DK: Very interesting. Interesting because—and I'll take pride in the fact that (but as I said, this ought to be checked out), but I believe I am the first ex-[faculty member]. Right now there is one, John Hicks, who is the second one. I was the first, I believe, ex-faculty member to go into the Board of Trustees. I was appointed by two representatives: Joe Steighner, who I had met through some political activities, and the state senator, who was my ex-high school student, Tim Shaffer. And through them I was appointed to the Board of Trustees. [I'm] quite proud of that role. I don't think that I contributed that much, but I learned a lot about how things function behind the scenes.

TD: Well we're gonna go in a totally different direction now. I want to talk a little bit about your best and worst teaching moments.

DK: Well I told you the one . . . [laughs], but that wasn't an embarrassment to me. But one that was: I had been teaching in Spotts. It was a miserable, sloppy March day. It had been raining, snowing. The halls were slimy and slick. And I noticed a young, black gentleman in a wheelchair sitting outside my room. He wasn't one of my [students] and he seemed very frustrated. So finally I said, "Can I help you?" He said, "Well I have a helper who's supposed to help me, manage my wheelchair for me, but he hasn't shown up, and I have to be at class someplace else." So he said, "Could you help me?" Well I had to take him down a set of steps. I got the biggest football player in the room, he will remain to this day unnamed [laughs]. I said, "Can you help me? We need to help this guy in his wheelchair down the steps so he can move on to Eisenberg," or someplace, I don't remember. So he got in front and I got behind. We hardly started down the steps—he [the football player] slipped and fell. I couldn't hold back because the kid in the wheelchair was pretty big and heavy. And we went down those steps fiddly-bang, fiddly-bang. Scared that poor chair-bound student to death! That was embarrassing, very embarrassing, because somebody else was being hurt by it. [It was] partly my stupidity and the stupidity of that football player.

What else? Well I taught Black History, believe it or not, for a couple of years before they hired Mike Matambanadzo. [Pause] An embarrassing incident one day: I had been preaching equality, justice and all of this which goes without saying, when all of a sudden one girl, nice girl, got very angry. And she started haranguing about n-i-g-g-e-r-s: the "N" word, and how lazy and so forth and I, I shut her up. But the fact that that ever happened was embarrassing, because there were a

lot of Black kids in the class. So I guess I'd have to count that as an embarrassing moment, yeah. But I was—I could out shout her, how's that? [Laughs] I had a big mouth.

TD: Any other students that really stick out in your mind?

DK: Sure, Dave Dixon.

TD: Want to talk a little bit about him?

DK: Dave was my pride. You know, he's passed away. Dave, I knew him from when he was in high school. He's a local. This was the reason for the pride: like me he's a local yokel. And I knew Dave was good. I had Dave as an undergraduate, I knew he was good. Well he was a structural steel worker; he fell. He was already partially handicapped, he was partially crippled, and after he fell it was even worse. So then he decided to go on to grad school at Kent State and get his Ph.D. And my introduction of Dave to Native American history—he fell right into it. His thesis was on a Native American scholar for the cavalry.

When he got his Ph.D. we had an opening in the department. I, of course, strongly supported Dave. There was another person, no Ph.D. but a very likable [pause] sort of sad person. He had gleaned, apparently, a lot of sympathy, so it came to a vote. Well I had hired most—at this time I had been chair—and I had hired most of the people in the department, not all, but most. And I expected a return. I'm a bit of a political scientist too. I expected a return on my benefits that I had brought to each one of those that I had hired. And only one, Dr. Settlemire, have you been involved with her yet?

TD: I think we've interviewed her. [Editor's note: we have not interviewed Dr. Settlemire]

DK: Okay, well she and I were the only two that voted for Dave. I raised hell, by phone, by eyeball to eyeball. Well, it worked [laughs] because the next year of course Dave was hired and he proved—and I think partly it was [that] they didn't want him as a local yokel. He out-published all of them! He's out-published everyone in that department to this day, with the best books. [He] was nationally recognized as a scholar in Native American and colonial history. But they didn't want him because he's local. Well . . . he showed them, by God. Thank you. Excuse me.

TD: Can we talk a little bit about the leaders on campus when you were here? The movers and the shakers: presidents, deans, people within your department?

DK: Well I have mentioned [pause] Joe Frazier and Chuck Halt and Bob Duncan; I've mentioned them. They were outstanding teachers even then, outstanding . . . sometimes more

outstanding than the Ph.D.s. They just had it: they had the technique. They had the empathy for the students.

Leonard Duncan, the dean of instruction. I've told you, he personally ushered me here into this whole business that became my life. Who else? [Pause] movers and shakers on campus . . .

TD: How about presidents while you were here?

DK: Well I was through many of them [laughs].

TD: Anybody that really sticks out?

DK: Not as outstanding, because the only one that's outstanding to me is the one that was a colleague of mine, and that's [pause] Bob [Aebersold]—now you know why I quit teaching [referring to his poor memory]. Yeah, it's happening to me at my age and I've turned, about ready to go eighty. So that'll probably be final: arteriosclerosis will have set in completely, Alzheimer's and everything else.

[Pause] Dale Houk, was when I was an undergraduate. Then following Dale Houk was [pause] you see I was not much impressed with the presidents here [laughs].

TD: Would Dr. Walwik have been in while you were here? Was he not a president for some time?

DK: Ted Walwik? No.

TD: No, I'm thinking of [Dr.] Watrel. That would've been later.

DK: Watrel, yes. Watrel . . . yeah, he was alright. But he got himself into some trouble. I don't know what it was all about, but he was . . . busted out, and lost his job. But there were some internal workings there by one of the deans. Roberts, [Jim] Roberts, who I liked, but I think Roberts was happy to get rid of Watrel. I don't know whether he was involved in that or not. I have no idea. I would never make that accusation, ever. But I know he was happy. How's that?

TD: I've heard that story a lot.

DK: Oh have you?

TD: From most of the interviewees that were here during that time period.

DK: [Laughs] Jim Roberts. You've heard that name huh?

TD: [Yes].

DK: Have you ever interviewed Jim?

TD: No.

DK: He's living locally. He's living in Harrisville.

TD: I'll add him to the list. Were there any other people who were influential while you were here? Anybody that really sticks out in your mind?

DK: Emma Guffey Miller will always stick out in everybody's mind [laughs]. And I don't know anything about her ghost, but I know she ran the show. I know, I wasn't in on this meeting but I know people who were, when [pause] I can't think of the president's name, before Watrel.

TD: Let's see what my book says . . . no, I don't have it in here.

DK: Well anyway she was, Emma Guffey was, of course [pause] at least as much of a Democrat as Barack Obama, if not more—probably more. I mean, her brother was Senator Joe Guffey. She made the nomination speech for Franklin D. Roosevelt. Eleanor visited her here at Slippery Rock. Emma was something again. Well anyway, we had a local judge, Clyde Shoemaker, who was very active in the Republican Party. Well when this job opened up here, he brought in a candidate from Ohio. Emma Guffey was still on the Trustee Board at that time, she had not served out that term. So they had the interview and it is said by the people who witnessed it, she looked across the table and said, "If you're elected, don't unpack your bags, 'cause you won't be here long." It's true, he wasn't here real long. But it had nothing to do with her. But she, she ran the show, she really did, and sometimes not for the good of things.

TD: Let's talk a little bit about some major event or activities that happened while you were here. Any building projects, academic or cultural projects? Maybe large weather events?

DK: One time as an undergraduate [pause] we had a sudden storm, and the side of Old Main blew out, in the storm. You'll see the brick colors are different on that west end of Old Main; you'll see that. So that was kind of interesting to come to school and find out half the building's gone. So I suppose that was . . . [laughs]

TD: Now was your office still in there at that time?

DK: No, no I was—that was before—when I was an undergraduate.

TD: Okay. I was gonna ask if your desk was still there, but you're safe.

DK: [Laughs] No, I was an undergraduate then. What else? Oh, during the . . . you know, the march time when every student thought they had to have a protest. I wasn't faculty at this time,

but Slippery Rock isn't Slippery Rock—it can't be qualified as a college if we don't have a protest. I don't even remember what they protested, but they marched around Old Main screaming, waving things, and then they went away and everybody was happy. They had their protest [laughs]. But it was nothing. I have no idea what they were protesting. Just to protest, because everyone else was doing it.

TD: Any other memorable events or memories besides the really big things?

DK: Best years of my life. What else can I say? I enjoyed every minute of my time here. [Pause] I miss it. I didn't have to retire yet, but my style of teaching was suffering. I only gave essay exams. Classes got too big; I couldn't do it any longer. I couldn't teach the way I wanted to teach. Most of all, I couldn't test the way I wanted to test. And I couldn't do anything about it; it was out of my control. That's one of the features that caused me to decide to retire.

I'll tell you one story. The last summer I taught here, we would oftentimes get students from other schools. I got this young lady, she was a junior at Duquesne University and she was taking summer school here. I announced the exam, and I announced that it would be an essay. She met me after I made that announcement with tears in her eyes in the hall. I said, "Can I help you?" And she says, "Well, maybe." I said, "Come to my office." So I took her in my office and she was weeping by this time. She was scared to death. She said, "I never took an essay exam." And I said, "Where'd you go to school?" "Duquesne University." "What year are you?" "A junior." "And you never had an essay exam?" "No, I never had one." I said, "Well, who taught you?" She said, "Mostly graduate assistants." So we had a long discussion on how to approach and how to attack an essay exam. Well she got through it alright, but she was scared to death. I was, I was disappointed in Duquesne University, believe me.

TD: What do you miss most about Slippery Rock?

DK: Kids; students. Not even fellow faculty [laughs]. I didn't love them all. I loved all my students; I didn't love all the faculty. Sometimes I fought with fellow faculty. I'm Irish [laughs].

TD: One last question. What words of wisdom do you have for those in the current Rock community or future Rock community members?

DK: [Pause] Smell the roses. This too shall pass away. I don't have anything original to say, but I think those would be prudent philosophies for anybody. Believe in yourself and believe in your students. Believe in your school. I used to say this, this is a little crude but I'm going to say it anyway: don't you ever forget where you went to school. You wear green with pride because remember this: even a bird doesn't foul its own nest. Don't you do it. Take pride in this school and spread that pride far and wide. Okay, so.

TD: How would you like to be remembered?

DK: [Pause] As a lover of history . . . as a believer in education and a fun person.

TD: Anything else you'd like to add?

DK: No, that's all.

TD: Alright, I want to thank you for being with us today. We really appreciate your interview for Rock Voices. Thank you.

DK: You're very welcome, Teresa.