

**Oral History Interview of  
John Kenneth “Ken” Lattimore**

**Interviewed by: David Marshall  
November 10, 2011  
Lubbock, Texas**

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## Transcript Overview:

This interview features Kenneth “Ken” Lattimore. Lattimore discusses his time with the group the Sons of the Pioneers, a western acoustic singing group now based in Branson, Missouri. Lattimore also discusses the long history of the group dating back to the thirties and forties, along with the ever-changing group membership.

**Length of Interview:** 01:14:43.9

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### Keywords

Western music, country, acoustic, singing

**David Marshall (DM):**

The date is November 10, 2011, and this is David Marshall interviewing Ken Lattimore—

**Ken Lattimore (KL):**

Lattimore.

DM:

Lattimore. I've always called you Lattimore. (laughter) At Texas Tech, in Lubbock, Texas. So let's just begin then with your full name, pronounced correctly.

KL:

(laughs) Well I have to do that since we've known each other for thirty years. It's John Kenneth Lattimore.

DM:

Okay. L-a-t-t-i-m-o-r-e.

KL:

That is correct. Comes from the old word, *Latiner*, back in the Middle Ages. They were readers of Latin.

DM:

Really?

KL:

Scholars, I would think.

DM:

How interesting. Give me your date and place of birth, if you don't mind.

KL:

I was born in North Wilkesboro, North Carolina, November 14, 1960.

DM:

And your parents' and siblings' names?

KL:

Okay, my daddy's name is Marion Everett Lattimore. My mother, Doris Ann Godby Lattimore, and after Daddy passed away she remarried, her last name is now Kleysteuber. My stepfather's name is Paul Raymond Kleysteuber.

DM:

You'll have to spell that for us.

KL:

Okay, it's K-l-e-y-s-t-e-u-b-e-r. A little bit German there. My stepsister, who passed away several years ago, [her] name is Sharon. My other sister is Melissa Ann Lattimore. My oldest brother is Guy Michael Lattimore, and his wife Catherine Lattimore, who taught here at Tech for a little while. My nephew, Gene Arnio, and my niece, Alexandria Christine Lattimore. My brother, Joe Godby Lattimore, and that's my siblings.

DM:

Okay. Pretty early on, you moved to Texas.

KL:

When I was five.

DM:

Okay.

KL:

Daddy's job took us from North Carolina to Utah, to Georgia, and then to Texas.

DM:

What kind of job was that?

KL:

He worked for Thiokol. He was a chemical engineer, process engineering. My stepfather, Paul Kleysteuber also worked there, and all the family seemed to move together, some of them did. They helped make rocket engines to send the Apollo to the moon and they made army ammunition and the like. Daddy's job took us to Texas, where he worked at the Longhorn division in Karnack, Texas, and we lived in Marshall. The house we bought in 1966—I bought later on—I live in now when my parents moved up to the northern part of town in Marshall.

DM:

Okay. On Bridle Path in Marshall?

KL:

That's right.

DM:

So tell me a little bit about your childhood, about maybe any education you might have received before public schools. Were you taught to read early?

KL:

Yeah, actually, I did know how to read some when I went in to first grade, which is where you usually learned at that time. I was asking questions about words and stuff, and my sister, Melissa, had a lot to do with helping me to learn that. I was looking at Joe's old *Tip and Mitten* books and I'd ask, What's this word and what's this word? So I was reading some when I got in the first grade at David Crockett School in Marshall.

DM:

I seem to recall that your father was a reader of the classics—classic literature?

KL:

Well, he was a big reader of history. Now, he loved books like *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn* and *Ivanhoe*. Dad was a voracious reader and could read a rather thick book in a couple of nights. He was a very fast reader. Like I said, he was a chemical engineer. Mother is a retired teacher, and she loves reading history. I mean, my house and their house is just full of books. I go to old library sales and buy stuff that looks interesting. I like to read about history and I like to read about the old space program in the sixties, anything I can find. I noticed you had something by one of the astronauts yesterday.

DM:

Alan Bean.

KL:

Alan Bean, yes. A really fine artist.

DM:

And still living in the Houston area, last I heard.

KL:

Yes, yes. I just got to glance through the book. I couldn't see the quote that Conrad had when he stepped on the moon: "Maybe a small step for Neil, but it was a big one for me." (both laugh) And I enjoy reading books by old football players. I like to read about football. I'm a football fanatic. You don't want to be around me when Tech loses a game. I'm very, very much a Red Raiders fan and have been since Melissa entered Tech in '72.

DM:

Oh really, okay.

KL:

Well, she graduated from Tech and Guy graduated from Tech, and I believe Sharon went to Tech for a while. I'm not sure where she graduated. She may have graduated from Tech, I'm not sure. I've been a big fan of Tech ever since. Now, I was actually accepted at UT Austin and A&M as well, and chose to go to Tech.

DM:

Because of the family tradition?

KL:

Well, I almost didn't go because of family tradition, because everybody was saying, "You're going to keep the family tradition and go to Tech, aren't you?" I'm like, If I go there, it's not going to be because they went, you know. But I'm glad I went to Tech, very, very much.

DM:

Why did you choose Tech then?

KL:

Well, it's a great school, you know. It's a great school. I thought about going to maybe one of the other schools, and Dad said, "Well, why don't you go to Tech, see how it goes and if you want to switch out, you can." But I liked Tech, so I stayed. Now I'm very, very happy that I did. Number one, because I like the atmosphere of Tech. It's different from the other schools in a very positive way. I'm not putting down the other schools, but I just like the atmosphere and I like the Tech attitude. Plus, considering what I do for a living, graduating from Texas Tech matches being a cowboy singer.

DM:

The western flavor?

KL:

Yes. Yes, Absolutely. We sang at the—I believe it was the Lubbock symposium.

DM:

Cowboy Symposium?

KL:

Yeah. Back in 2002, I think it was. I roamed around the Tech campus and saw that many things have changed—the buildings and stuff—but a lot of things have not changed, one of those things being some of the most beautiful co-eds in the world.

DM:

By the way, here you sit talking about western flavor at Texas Tech and we're in the Southwest Collection, which is one of the ranching archives of the country. I don't know if you knew, but we have an interview with Ken Curtis.

KL:

Oh, you do? Oh my goodness.

DM:

We've been conducting interviews here since 1956.

KL:

He was our lead singer.

DM:

Right.

KL:

And my first boss took his position when he left in 1952. Dale Warren was a member of the group for almost fifty-six years and he was the boss for thirty-one of those. He was the man who hired me. I'll always be grateful for that. His wife is still living. Her name is Margie Warren and she was known as Fiddlin' Kate, and played fiddle for Johnny Bond. Very, very fine fiddle player, by the way, one of the best. When she was in college, I think she was the concert mistress of her orchestra there. A very talented lady.

DM:

Let's back up a little bit. I want to get some more on your early influence. You mentioned something about your father and then your mother being a teacher. Tell me where she taught. And did you say history?

KL:

Well, mother taught second grade.

DM:

Okay.

KL:

She taught first at what was known as Austin Carver, is now George Washington Carver School of Marshall. It's a magnet school now, I think. Then, she taught at, most of the time, at William B. Travis Elementary School there. But mother played Pioneer albums a lot when I was a kid. So I was influenced early; I probably heard my first boss's voice when I wasn't [more than] a week old.

DM:

You're talking specifically about Sons of the Pioneers?

KL:

Yes, Sons of the Pioneers. We just call them Pioneers—

DM:

You abbreviate it to Pioneers.

KL:

Yeah. Now of course, S.O.P.S., I wouldn't want to call them "sops," that would not work. Although we had a softball team based on our group for a season one time in Branson. Kind of the Branson Musician's League. The bass player we had at the time said it stood for "Sorry, our players stink," or something like that. Something close to that.

DM:

But you had this influence early on at the house then. You had the old Pioneers albums going—

KL:

Yeah, then I went to Tech and got my music degree and I hadn't heard the albums in a while. I was thinking of a specific song that I remember, it was one of my favorites, called "The Lilies Grow High," one of Stan Jones's songs. I wanted to get the words to it, and I had just graduated from Tech, and came home. And I was looking for jobs and opportunities in opera. I joined the chorus in Houston and then in Dallas. I wanted to get out of the traffic in Houston, so I went to Dallas. Anyway, I played the album and got the words to the song, and ended up listening to the album, then the next album, then the next. It wasn't long before I was thinking, you know, This is what I'd like to do. I'd like to sing with the Sons of the Pioneers, sing western music. After being in Dallas, I taught orchestra in Marshall for thirteen years for the school system. Finally I got to where I was ready to do something else other than teach. I thought, well, the Pioneers—all they can say is no.

DM:

By the way, what were the biggest challenges of that?

KL:

Of teaching?

DM:

I know that was a challenging period.

KL:

Well, I enjoyed working with kids, but unfortunately, education has changed a lot. I don't think teachers are as highly held in esteem as they used to be—or should be. They should be held in higher esteem, but they're not. There's too much politics in school systems. You're going to base this on someone's theories, and we're going to do it this way even if it doesn't work, and if we throw out this deal, we're not going to keep anything in it, even the good stuff about it—

DM:

A new theory comes along every year?

KL:

Yeah. What will drive you crazy is not the kids, it's the adults. I had a lot of good parents. Orchestra teachers a lot of times do. But I still had people saying, I'm not going to push Johnny to practice, or that kind of thing. And I'm thinking, Well, are you going to push me when I flunk him? But it got very frustrating in that regard. But like I said, there's a big reward to teaching in that you don't realize when you first start—I was only twenty-four—that these little squirming sixth graders were going to grow up to be good friends of mine. I keep up with a lot of them. These folks have grown up to be all kinds of different great careers. One's a marine biologist, another's a songwriter in Nashville who has co-written several Top 40 hits. Two or three of them are orchestra directors. The list could go on and on. One has—well, two have served in Iraq. One was severely wounded. I mean, they've served their country in fantastic ways. So you know, you really—it's getting to where I've become a great admirer of theirs, so you know how that is.

DM:

In these years when you were the orchestra teacher, were you also involved at times in opera or symphony orchestra?

KL:

Yes, oh yes.

DM:

Have you always been?

KL:

Yeah. I joined Marshall Symphony back home when I was twelve. My first teacher was a lady who's still living named Nell Armstrong. And she was my first teacher, and my next private teacher was Leonard Kacenjar, a Juilliard grad. And then I took from Dr. James Barber here at Tech, who is an Eastman [School of Music] grad, bachelor's, master's, and doctorate.

DM:

Now, this is all violin you're talking about?

KL:

Yes. My voice teacher—well, my first choir professor in high school was Mike Brock. I was under several band directors, including Melvin Reddick and Dr. Jerry Payne, because I had been in choir and orchestra in high school. One of my band directors was later on my orchestra director in high school, Tommy Mayfield, who is a 1960 grad of Texas Tech. I'll be seeing him in Hobbs tomorrow.

DM:

Oh, good.

KL:

Or tonight, actually. He was a big influence. All these folks were.

DM:

But twelve years old in the Marshall Symphony Orchestra? Were you performing?

KL:

Yeah, yeah, in the orchestra. I'm still in the Marshall Symphony. I also play in the Longview Symphony sometimes, and sometimes play in the Texarkana Symphony when I'm home. Sometimes South Arkansas Symphony will call me over to come in and replace someone who can't play that concert.

DM:

Well, how often do you see a twelve-year-old playing in a symphony orchestra?

KL:

I guarantee you, there are some twelve-year-olds that can play rings around me, today.

DM:

Yeah, but do you see them performing in symphony orchestras, typically?

KL:

Not typically, but every once in a while you do. Leonard Kacenjar is very enthusiastic about young people, and he has a project called String Power that I was in in Shreveport in the seventies and now he's got one very similar in Carthage, Texas. And he has people in that orchestra from the age of seven to seventy.

DM:

Wow.

KL:

Yeah. So musical influences were big.

DM:

Well, you seem to have grown up in a household where education was important.

KL:

Oh, yeah.

DM:

History was important.

KL:

A C on a course was considered a disaster with my folks. They would not put up with me making a C.

DM:

Was there any thought at all other than you going to college? Did you ever have any decision to make there, or did you grow up knowing that you would go on beyond high school?

KL:

Well, there was never a conflict about it. My folks encouraged us, Well of course you're going to go to college. And we never thought any different.

DM:

Took it for granted.

KL:

Yeah, it was just taken for granted we would go. We wanted to go. We actually looked forward to it, so—

DM:

You really got an early start in music. When you went to Texas Tech, did you know you were going to go into music? Is that what your first major was?

KL:

Actually, I was an engineering major the first semester. But I found out very quickly, you better want to be an engineer very badly if you're going to go into it. It's a tough road to hoe. And I remember Dr.—it may have been Dr. [Russell] Seacat or maybe one of the others who said, "Look to your right and left, and more than likely, they won't be graduating from the Texas Tech School of Engineering." But I wanted to be a musician, so I switched over after the first semester.

DM:

The engineering program has created a lot of successes in the field of the liberal arts, because people have gone into engineering and then gone into the liberal arts.

KL:

Well, and gone into lots of things, really. Melissa has a degree in the Latin and Classical languages here. Guy's degrees—he has two of them from Tech. He has a history degree and a geology degree. And he teaches earth science. He's one of the most enthusiastic people about rocks and volcanoes and everything else you'd ever meet. Every time we do a gig in February in Tucson, he just comes alive and he's telling me, "Well, you are going to go to the Tucson Gem and Fossil Show and pick these things up for me." He's got probably the biggest fossil and rock collection of anybody I have ever seen. A lot of those are items I picked up through the years.

DM:

That's neat. Well, yeah, it just sounds like a real fertile environment at home.

KL:

Education was big and we talked about everything in our house. We talked about politics, we talked about history, we talked about everything you can imagine. And I'm very interested as well in free grace theology. I study a lot on that. I have a friend in Branson who teaches me Biblical Greek and Hebrew. His name is Merle Steely, and he was a missionary in Nigeria for about twenty years. He graduated from Wheaton. I've had a lot of good teachers in a lot of fields. And of course, our head pastor teacher and our pastors back home at Cypress Valley Bible Church have taught me a lot. So education is a big thing. I grew up in a family—we were taught to love the Lord. That was important to my parents.

DM:

Well, let's talk a little bit about your experiences in the music department here at Texas Tech. Name some of the faculty that might have helped to develop you as a musician or some of the pluses and minuses, the positives and negatives of the experience here at Tech.

KL:

Well really, I can't think of negatives, really. I mean, the faculty at the music department when I was there was very pro-student. Certainly Dr. Barber and Mr. Shinn taught me a lot. My only regret is that I didn't practice harder and try more to implement what they taught me. Now, when I became a teacher, I implemented what I was taught, and I became a better player because when you teach kids and they see you do it the opposite of what you just taught them, they will point it out. And I took choir from Gene Kenney and then Donald Bailey, and orchestra from Phil Lehrman. They were all big influences in a very positive way. I could never leave out Dr. Paul Cutter, who was my music lit. teacher. I don't think anybody could ever teach music lit. better than he did—wonderful teacher. I had Dr. [Judson] Maynard for music theory—excellent teacher. I had so many. I just couldn't name them all. I'd be here for half the day if I named all my influences. But there were—you know, Susan Schoenfeld and so many others. They're just—just great people. And it was fun. We'd have a master class with Dr. Barber and then we'd all go down and have pizza. Sit and talk, you know. (laughs)

DM:

(laughs) A bit casual, huh?

KL:

Oh yeah. And the music department at Tech is a great place. And I was very pleased when a friend of mine—Alwyn Robinson went here a few years ago and he just graduated and he's now T.A-ing [Teaching Assistant] over at University of Colorado. He was told when he was going to go to North Texas, Well, you know, you've got to be an upperclassman before we really give you the good stuff in percussion. Well this guy was playing high school type drumming when he was two years old. And so his dad, Anthony Robinson, called Alan Shinn and he said, "Will you let him do the stuff early?" And he said, "Oh yeah, we'll take him and put him on scholarship." And Tech ended up getting a great player and a great student and UNT lost out.

DM:

When you left Texas Tech, did you feel prepared to step into the area of professional performance?

KL:

Oh yeah.

DM:

Because I know you did fairly quickly. You were with some opera companies, it seems like, fairly early on—?

KL:

Yeah, I was in the opera chorus in Houston, and then the opera chorus in Dallas. I did the lead tenor in eight productions of Gilbert and Sullivan in Shreveport. So I had plenty to do. And then I really wanted to get into western or country, although they are different genres. People say country-western. Western is not country, really. But I wanted to sing western, and this fellow named Al Petty was running a contest, and Paul said, "Well, why don't you look into this?" I said, "Well, next weekend I'll go over—" And he said, "No, go today." So I went. I won the contest, and that gave me the chance to record a couple of songs. That grew into three albums that I did with Al. And so when I came up to Branson, I had a package to give to Dale.

DM:

This included your three albums—?

KL:

That I made.

DM:

And a demo in addition, or was that your—?

KL:

Those were the demos.

DM:

That was the demo.

KL:

With my biography and all. Mother and Paul were doing the real hard work when it came to that at the time. My mother was doing the paperwork and contacting people. And that was when I when I went to Vienna for the festival up there. So—

DM:

By the way, tell us who—for the record here—tell us who Dale is and his full name.

KL:

Okay, Dale Henry Warren was the member of the Pioneers from '52 to 2008.

DM:

The one that replaced Ken Curtis.

KL:

Yes. If you've heard the classic album, the *Cool Water* album released in 1959, that is Dale singing lead, and Lloyd Perryman, who was known as "Mr. Pioneer," and he was singing tenor at the time, and Tommy Doss, who just passed away last month, singing the baritone. The *Cool Water* album was the first album that had Tommy Doss and Dale Warren, and then they did albums up to 1969 with RCA. The RCA had been with the Pioneers for a long time. They started on the Bluebird Label back in 1934. Two of the first songs that they recorded was, "Way Out There," which had the yodeling and harmony (Ken yodels tune) but an octave up. (both laugh)

DM:

You don't want to try the octave up today?

KL:

Not right now. It might break your recorder. And our theme song, "Tumbling Tumbleweed." Both of those were written by one of the original Pioneers, by the name of Bob Nolan. Bob Nolan wrote so many of the classic hits. Also another original, Tim Spencer wrote "Room Full of Roses," which was a crossover hit. When you hear the Pioneer version of that song from the forties, that lead singer is Ken Curtis. Ken had a wonderful voice. A lot of people don't realize that from seeing Festus, but he did. But the original Pioneer trio was Bob Nolan, Tim Spencer, and Leonard Slye. Then they needed a fiddle player, so there was a fiddle player out there in California who was from Ranger, Texas, by the name of Hugh Farr. And they asked him if he would join them, and he said, "Well, I haven't heard you yet." So they auditioned for him, and he quickly joined, and then brought along his brother, Karl. And Karl was our lead guitar player. So then, about '36 or so, Leonard Slye went into the movies and became Roy Rogers. That was when—I think Pat Brady came in around that time, and in '36 or '37, that's when Lloyd Perryman came in. Lloyd was a very, very important member of the group. He did a lot of the arrangements of the Pioneer hits that we know so well. The thing about Pioneer harmony is that the lead singer doesn't sing just the tune all the way through. The tune gets passed from man to man.

DM:

Right.

KL:

A classic example is "Tumbling Tumbleweed." Because the tenors, (Ken sings) "See them tumbling down, pledging their love to the ground," then the lead takes it, "lonely, but free I'll be found." And then the baritone takes it, "drifting along with the tumbling tumbleweeds."

DM:

Great effect.

KL:

Yeah. So if you—when you're passing it around like that, you don't have the tenor screeching—(intercom) you don't have the tenor screeching and you don't have the bass grumbling. But now the fiddle player, Hugh Farr, did have a lot of the bass parts. They called him Foghorn. And for a while, they also had a base player and comedian named Shug Fisher. Shug later on went into the movies and TV and he became known as Shorty Kellems from the Beverly Hillbillies, and he was a funny man. And so was Pat Brady.

DM:

So they had a comedian that would—what would he do? Would he break up between the—would he have a couple of one-liners between the songs in a live performance?

KL:

Yeah. In between, or they'd do a comic song. Now, Mark Abbott does that now. He'll do the "Preacher and the Bear." That always tears the house down. The audience loves that song. And they love the way he does it. But Mark, he's an extraordinary man. He's toured with Ray Price and just, Charley Pride, people like that. And he's done albums with the Sons of San Joaquin before he joined the Pioneers, and with Don Edwards and Rex Allen. I met Rex Allen a couple of times. If I could sound like anybody, I would like to sound like Rex Allen. Now, he had not only a great speaking voice, but a great singing voice. He was the last of the silver screen cowboys. His son wrote a song about that. In fact, Rex Allen Jr. and Roy Rogers Jr., also known as Dusty, are good friends—grew up together.

DM:

How nice.

KL:

Yeah. But meeting Rex Allen was a big thrill.

DM:

So you decided to try to audition for this group, or try to get an audition for this group. So you approached Dale—

KL:

Yes. I said, "If I give you a promotion package, would you listen to it?" And he said yes. And so the next day, I went to some theaters around Branson and then I called my folks and I said, I'm

coming home tomorrow,” and they said, “Well don’t come home yet, the Sons of the Pioneers called and want you to call them back.” Wow, you know.

DM:

He listened to it right away?

KL:

Yeah. Yes. I hit the ground and thanked the Lord. I called and they—the fellow that answered said, “Yes, Dale really likes your voice and he’d like to talk to you tomorrow.” So I came to the show, and after the show, we sat and talked. He said, “I’m going to give you six tapes with about sixteen albums on them, and I want you to learn the songs as well as you can and then you’ll come back later on.” So I spent the summer putting a booklet together, wrote down every word to every song, wrote down all tenor harmonies, practiced and practiced. Every time I got in a truck, I was listening to those tapes and I was singing along. And then in November—see, that was in June. And then in November, they called and said, “Come up for a couple of days.” So I come out and I do a solo or two for the audience. And then backstage, we’d be doing harmonies. And Dale would say, “Do you know—”

DM:

Who’s we? You would be singing with—

KL:

With the Pioneers.

DM:

The Pioneers.

KL:

And Dale would turn around, “Do you know this song?” And I’d sing it back at them. “Do you know this song?” I’d keep singing back to them, and he’d grin. And he’d say, “Well, we’ll call you.” So he called me in January of ’98, perhaps a couple of months later, and said, “Let the school year finish up, and then come on and we’ll see how it goes.” And then they actually wanted me a little early, so I got permission from the school to leave about two weeks early. I said, Well, I did promise I’d take my kids on a fieldtrip, and I’ve got to do that first. And so I did that, and the next day headed for Branson and did my first show with the Pioneers as the high tenor on May 16, 1998. And I was voted in as a full-fledged member I believe in early July.

DM:

They vote? The Sons actually vote?

KL:

Well, that's how I got in. Now, usually it's not a matter of a guy coming up and saying I want to be a member. That's rare. Usually a fellow leaves the group, retires, or in some cases passes away. Our first member to pass away as a member of the group was Karl Farr in '61. But he actually passed away on stage. It was very sad. And what a great guitar player. But anyway, usually when we need to replace somebody, we start looking around for someone who's really good. So you know, that's how we got Randy Rudd, who is the best lead singer you would find anywhere.

DM:

So when you—

KL:

What a smooth voice.

DM:

I want to come back to him. So when you joined then, it wasn't filling a vacancy?

KL:

Well, there were five members at the time, and there's usually six.

DM:

Well, that was good timing then.

KL:

It was great timing. I think the Lord had a hand in it.

DM:

Well, let's talk about some of those members. If you can give me a brief sketch.

KL:

Well, our Trail Boss [group leader] today is Luther Nallie. Luther joined the group in 1969. And when he was a young man growing up in Beaumont, Texas—four out of the six of us are from Texas—he actually performed with a young George Jones. He is not only a fine singer, but he's also a fine guitar player. Very, very good, and he knows all the right chords. He loves all kinds of music. He's a big Four Freshman fan, both he and Gary. And he's doing a fine job as Trail Boss of the group. Gary LeMaster is our lead guitar player. And he was in on the early days of rock and roll and was actually a member of The Hollywood Argyles for a little while. When Gary Paxton decided he didn't want to tour anymore, he took Gary Paxton's place. So they're the guys that sing "Alley Oop." You know, it's fun to talk to Gary about the early days of rock and

roll, because he lived it. He can tell you about it. He was entertainment director I believe at Sam's in Las Vegas before he joined the Pioneers. A wonderful guitar player and extraordinary in the fact that he was cutting up wood one day with a buzz saw, and he accidentally got his hand caught in it and he cut his fingers up badly to where he couldn't even use one of his fingers, and he retrained himself to where he could play the guitar, and plays beautifully with just those three fingers. And now I think he's beginning to get that other finger back now. But boy, you hear him play and you would think, Wow, you would never think that it ever happened. He joined about 1985 or so. He replaced Roy Lanham.

And Roy Lanham was a guitar player for the Pioneers from '63 up to around the mid-eighties when he got cancer. He had been with The Whippoorwills—wonderful player. And Randy Rudd is our lead singer and has a beautiful, smooth voice—a very good MC. And he has a very quick mind when it comes to ad-libbing. He can pull a joke out of thin air. And he was with Moe Bandy when we were able to get him. Our fiddle player is Rickie Boen. Oh, by the way, Gary is from Ashland, Kentucky, and Randy is from Blue Springs, Missouri, and very proud of being from that area, I might add—big fan of the Royals and the Chiefs.

And Rickie Boen is from Odessa. He is a Texas state champion fiddle player. He's the newest Missouri state champion, and he is a world champion, I think from 1983. He knows all the great fiddle players just about everywhere. In fact, he had not even met Johnny Gimble when Johnny Gimble was talking to another fellow and saw him coming towards him and said, "Look, there's that Rickie Boen fellow." I mean, Rickie was just elated that Johnny Gimble knew who he was. He's a big Johnny Gimble fan. And like I said, he's a world champion and he played some with Asleep at the Wheel. [He] has his own group called Rickie Boen & Texas Mud, which is a very fine western swing band—well, group. His western swing is—he's absolutely great at. And he can play western style fiddle. And what amazes me about Rickie is how he can just play fast passages right off the top of his head. I said, "How do you do that right off the top of your head like that?" He said, "Well, it's not from here—" He points to his head and he points to his heart and says, "It comes from there." I'm like, well, what does that mean? (intercom)

I learn a lot from watching Rickie play. Not only is he a good fiddle player, but he's a good violinist. He was concert master of his high school orchestra. Also, you can learn a lot about fiddle playing from watching Mark Abbott, our bass player. Mark's a brilliant man, can talk on any subject. He is from Weatherford, Texas, and was born in Nacogdoches. He is an excellent bass player and very much in demand all over Branson. When people say, Well, I need a bass player. You need to try Mark Abbott if you can get him. And heck, he was doing—he can do lights and sound if someone needs a light man or a sound man. I love his big old truck that he's got. He's got this diamond steel welded on the back and he's got this huge cowcatcher on the front. If anything happens to that truck, he is in the repair shop just like that (snaps fingers). I mean, he keeps that kind of stuff up. And you want to know something about how to keep your vehicle up, you ask Mark. I needed to have my truck taken to Shreveport from Branson for repair, and he knew the people to call. (both laugh)

DM:

Just along the road, he knows.

KL:

Yeah. And he's done albums with famous people and toured with famous people. It's like you'll mention somebody and he knows about them. And I mentioned an obscure Broadway play from back in the late fifties, early sixties, and he knew what I was talking about. And of course, we've had a lot of great members through the years. Of course, I mentioned Ken Curtis. We had Ken Carson, who had a wonderful high tenor voice. Deuce Spriggs was a great bass player. Let's see—Rusty Richards, who not only is a fine tenor but is a real cowboy, and has written some wonderful songs like, "Call of the Wild" and "Cherokee—Cherokee Woman" I think it's called. So we've had a lot of great players.

Now, one I definitely don't want to forget to mention is Sunny Spencer. I really miss him. He passed away in 2005. Sunny was a member from about '84 on. Sunny was one of the few people I ever met that could say good morning and make you laugh. He could play a bunch of instruments and he had what we called his nest. He'd have all these instruments put together in just the right place, and he would do a version of "Mama Don't Allow," and he'd play each instrument all through the song. He'd grab one instrument and play. He played clarinet for, I believe it was the Dorsey Band. He also played for Gene Austin. He took jazz clarinet from Pete Fountain, toured with Bob Hope, had late-night suppers with a not-yet-known young fellow named Elvis Presley. He had an MC when he was in New Orleans by name of Andy Griffith. I mean, he was going to write his memoirs when he passed away, but I wish he had been able to do so because he had a very adventurous life. As a baby he was actually in Vaudeville. I mean—

DM:

How did that come about?

KL:

Well, his parents, I guess. He was a fascinating man to talk to. He was always the first in the theatre and always the last to leave. He loved performing. It was very interesting how he could say something that no one else—if anyone else said it, no one would laugh. But Sunny would say it, and people would just die laughing. I mean, one day a speaker starts humming and Dale's saying, "Soundman can you take care of the speaker?" And he'd say, "Dale?" "Yes Sunny?" "You know why it's humming." "Why?" "Because it don't know the words." (both laugh) On his tombstone is one of his favorite sayings, "Wherever you go, there you are." He was a delightful man. Delightful man. A lot of fun to be around. Dale's parents were interesting people. His father was on the radio in Chicago. I don't know whether it was the Frolics or the Barn Dance, but he was the man known as Uncle Henry.

DM:

This would've been when?

KL:

The thirties. So Dale got his start early singing with his mother and father and traveling around from town to town. Dale actually told me that he remembered visiting the Carter family. And he and the other Carter children, of which there were a few, they were sleeping on the floor, and they would hear their parents talking in the next room. And this is including June Carter Cash and all these folks. He knew Mother Maybelle and all the Carter family. He had his own group called the Jimmy Dales for a while. He had an extraordinary voice even when he was in his eighties. But you know you can be a Pioneer as long as you want to be one. Dale was eighty-three when he passed. Sunny was seventy-five. That's young, really. Luther is seventy-eight. Gary's sixty-nine, I'm fifty-one next week. So it's not like being in Nashville, where if you don't get there by the time you're thirty, you're over the hill. In western music, they don't care how old or young you are. They just care how you sound when you open your mouth.

DM:

That's good.

KL:

Or when you play that instrument. That's pretty cool.

DM:

That is nice. Now, when you joined, if you don't mind, tell the story of one of your first responsibilities or events with the Sons of the Pioneers—singing at Roy Rogers...

KL:

Well, since I was going to be coming in in May, I had to go over and rehearse on weekends because I was still teaching, and so Paul and I would go up there, stay in the hotel, and we'd rehearse the tenor parts and rehearse with the group in the theater. We were at the Braschlers' Theatre at the time. We're now at Shepherd of the Hills Pavilion that Gary Snaden built for us. We do the show there six days a week from the beginning of May until the end of October. Now, Shepherds has been very good to us. Of course, these other theaters were, too. The Braschlers are wonderful folks. What a great voice they all have. Cliff sings "The King Is Coming" so well. But anyway. The first show we had was actually at Silver Dollar City. We had a two-week gig there. So my first show was there. We'd sing there—we'd sing at the show in the afternoon and then go up there in the evening, but since it was the weekend, my first show was there. So yeah, I was a little nervous when I first got up on stage, but the nervousness didn't last too long. I mean—

DM:

You had been on stage before, though.

KL:

Yeah, I'd been on stage before.

DM:

Acting, in fact.

KL:

Sure, sure. But you know, it was a big thrill to join, and it's still a big thrill. I mean, sometimes I still have to kind of pinch myself and say, I'm with the Sons of the Pioneers. This is cool, singing your favorite songs for a living, how can you beat that?

DM:

Well, what I was talking about was your performing at—your singing at Roy Rogers' funeral.

KL:

Oh, oh, oh. Well you know, people ask me, they say, Wasn't that exciting? And I say, Well, it was sad. I mean, it was a funeral. I was sad that Roy had passed way. And it was a big honor, but I would have much rather sang at his birthday party.

DM:

Exactly. Of course, of course.

KL:

But I sang—well, we sang, the Pioneers sang at his public service and then later in the afternoon we sang at his private service. I did get the privilege of doing a solo at both of those. That meant a lot to me. I've met—I met Dale Evans a couple of times before she passed away. She was a wonderful lady. I remember when—my folks were there the second time I met her. We were doing a western festival and she'd come over to Branson and my autistic brother [Joe], we brought him over to meet her. Introduced her, and she said, "Well, you tell him Jesus loves him." She wrote a book called *Angel Unaware* concerning their Downs Syndrome child and that changed the view of Downs Syndrome to a point where people were keeping their children instead of institutionalizing them. So that was a very important book. But that was the first time I'd ever been to California and that was an experience.

California is a beautiful place, and I enjoy going there, but I didn't know what to think when we went through that brown cloud to land and I got off there—my first breathing of smog and I thought for a minute I was going to stop breathing, because I don't take too well to car exhaust. It wasn't easy. We went to Beverly Hills to the Beverly Hilton where we received a Golden Boot

award back in 2003. I remember that because I was breaking up with one of my girlfriends. I remember the year because of that. Another time I went to California, Randy—we were doing Tucson. Randy and I wanted to see the ocean there, so we went to San Diego and saw the ocean. And we went to the Air Museum there. It was pretty cool.

Randy and I roomed together in Tucson. It's always good getting to know somebody like that because boy, this is a guy who absolutely loves his wife and his kids and that was always cool—he'd call and talk to his kids or his wife while he was gone. And they love him. Boy, howdy, they love him. It's a cool thing to see. That was fun, and I loved the traveling. I liked to go different places. We've been to Idaho. I've been through states I hadn't ever been through because of the Pioneers.

DM:

Right, right. So performing in a new town is kind of a thrill?

KL:

Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. I love to go. And sometimes, I take Joe with me. Joe's fun to take along. But yeah, going up to Post Falls, Idaho, I thought, Well, heck, I'll go to Seattle and see sis.

DM:

Do you all typically travel together in a bus or separately and meet there?

KL:

We usually go separately. Several of the guys will go together. They'll rent a car together and go. I like to go myself because I like to stop at historic places or visit friends, like you. Drop by Lubbock. In fact, the last time I was in Lubbock, I ran into Gerald Myers.

DM:

Oh, really?

KL:

Yes. He showed me the athletic director's suite and took me to the athletic department, introduced me to some of the players. It was like being twelve years old again, I loved it. Loved it.

DM:

How are the relations between the Sons of the Pioneers? You work together a lot. Are they fairly cordial?

KL:

Yeah. Oh, yeah.

DM:

Do you get along?

KL:

Well, you know, it's funny. We've got three cancer survivors in our group. One fellow had a very slight heart attack a few years ago and the doctor said, "You'll heal up if you'll take these instructions." But if somebody is in trouble, all the other guys are like, What can I do for you? What can I do? Now, you've got six men. And they—you know, and six men are not going to agree on everything all the time.

DM:

They're also musicians with their own peculiar interests and maybe interpretations of how this should be done.

KL:

Oh, yeah.

DM:

But there's compromise?

KL:

Yeah, we discuss things. We discuss things. But the Pioneers, the old Pioneers from 1932 on, they traveled together a lot. Their tendency in the old days was they'd get mad but the anger was gone as quick as it came. But they were rough and tumble men because they were young men during the Depression. Bob Nolan was a big, burly guy. You didn't want to tangle with Bob. He was a big man. And he was actually from Canada. His name was Bob Nobles, and he was from New Brunswick. And his father had been a gas victim in World War I, and they moved to Arizona for his father's health and he fell in love with the desert. That's how he wrote so many songs like "Cool Water" and "Tumbling Tumbleweed." Actually though, "Tumbling Tumbleweed" was "Tumbling Leaves" at the beginning.

But you know, when you've got, like I said, six men together, you don't agree on everything but you work things out. Of course, you've got Luther as a final say on certain things. He says, "Well, I've heard this view and I've heard this view and this is what we're going to do." But you know, each of us has certain responsibilities. Right now they have me writing arrangements for possibly, maybe doing some stuff with orchestras in the future, although we might hire someone else to do some of that too. I'm not too proud to do that, either, that's fine with me. Gary a lot of times will select songs and say, "Luther, why don't we do this one?" and Luther will say, "That's

a good one to do. So let's do this one." And we'll get together and rehearse it. Gary will put the parts on CDs, give each of us our parts on the CD and we'll listen.

Every once in a while, someone will say, Ken, will you write this down for me? And I'll write it down. But usually, you're just given a CD and you pick out your part and you do it. Now, I don't know how they did it in the old days with records. They must have been dropping needles all over the place. I learned on tapes, but CDs is the easiest way to learn, and now CDs are going out. So now probably I guess in the future, you'll download it. But how do you rewind it on the computer? I'm not real computer-literate. I keep a cell phone in the truck for emergencies, but I refuse to carry one on me. The guys say, We've got to get a hold of you! Well, I'm in the apartment most of the time in Branson. I mean, on the rare occasions that I go up to Springfield, I don't want to talk on the phone. And I'm usually there for a few hours anyway. I go to my favorite restaurant up there in Springfield, the Gem of India. I love Indian food. That's another thing I love about traveling, is when we go to like Arizona, California, New Mexico, enchilada mole, looking for places with the good Mexican food.

DM:

That's right, you mentioned your never ending search for the perfect mole.

KL:

Absolutely. Absolutely. Of course, the guys love to eat, too. Of course Mark knows all the best restaurants in Branson. If you ask him, he knows. And he's the one who introduced me to Chester's, which unfortunately doesn't exist anymore, but boy, they had the best corned beef. And that's another great thing about being on the road, man, you find all these great places to eat like GW Hunters in Post Falls. And I just like to go, I like to see the scenery and everything. But when we're in Branson—Branson is a neat place. A couple of weeks ago, it was turning fall out there, and all those maple trees and stuff—it's a beautiful place. Now, people ask me though, Well, you must go to all the shows out there. I say, Well, when I have company. (laughter) I mean, I'm used to there being shows and I can go whenever I want. And a lot of places there will comp you if you're a fellow entertainer. There's a lot of great shows to see.

DM:

You've mentioned some of these and also meeting some people backstage, I guess. Andy Williams, you said has a good show.

KL:

Andy Williams has a great show. He has a wonderful Christmas show, very much like the television Christmas show that he used to have. And he still has a wonderful voice. Another really good Christmas show is "Christmas on the Trail" that they do at Shepherd after we leave. It's a cowboy Christmas show. Of course, I will always recommend "The Presleys," and that show has a really great singer [Jay Wickizer] from Aledo, Texas. Just across the street from you.

DM:

Do you remember the name?

KL:

We'll look that up on the Internet. Boy, he's a wonderful bass singer. And a really very talented family. And the comedy is side-splitting. Cecil is a—he's a scream. So is his dad. And "Baldknobbers" is another good show, and they have three great comedians. One of them used to be with us, Hargus [Marcell]. Hargus is a blast, man. He is so funny. There's a lot of good shows to choose from in Branson. John Denver's show with James Garrett, and people like that. And you know, you meet these folks, and they're down-to-earth as anybody. We used to perform at Moe Bandy's theater. Moe's just a regular guy—old rodeo cowboy. But usually when I want to do something, I go to Springfield because it's a good sized town and I like to knock around the bookstores. Although there's a good used bookstore in Branson that I like to go to. Their price on their books is really good and the girl that runs it is pretty. Well, I'm a bachelor. I can still look.

DM:

So your schedule on the in-season is what, six nights?

KL:

Yes. Usually Monday through Saturday. Every once in a while, like when we had Memorial Day, we'll do it on Sunday and we'll take off on Monday, that sort of thing. And every once in a while, we'll fill in a Sunday and do all seven days. But it's just one show a day anyway.

DM:

And the daily schedule is like what? You show up for this at what time?

KL:

Usually between four and four-thirty.

DM:

For a sound check?

KL:

Well, sound check we don't do it every day. We do it at the beginning of the season. Chris knows how to set it all up. Chris is as good a sound man as you'll find anywhere. He's very, very good. Usually between four and four-thirty, preferably four or four-twenty, get in, get dressed. Five o'clock we're on stage and then at seven o'clock we're done.

DM:

Five o'clock you start performing?

KL:

Yes.

DM:

Do you have any warm-ups or anything like that on a daily basis?

KL:

Oh, warming up? No, we don't usually—we just sit back there and relax and talk before we start up. Or we might go over a piece of song that we want to be sure of or something like that. We got this little spot right, because Pioneer harmony is demanding. You've got to do it the correct way. I mean, every once in a while, we'll change a part up because somebody has got a cold or something like that. You know—

DM:

You have to make last-minute adjustments sometimes.

KL:

Yeah, and sometimes if a fellow is sick or is not able to come to work that day, we'll call a former Pioneer who is Luther Nallie's brother, Tommy Nallie. Tommy was with the group in the eighties and he lives in Branson now. And Tommy will come in and fill in.

DM:

How nice.

KL:

And Tommy knows all the things he needs to know. Real nice, nice fellow. There have actually been four Nallie's in the group: Luther, Tommy, and Jack, three brothers, and Luther's son John.

DM:

Wow. So the show ends at seven o'clock. It's a two-hour show. Afterward, do you have backstage visitors or anything like that? Does it continue on, or are you finished?

KL:

No, as soon as the show's over, we're bugging out. We're ready to go to our respective places, particularly on a Saturday if Tech's game started at six o'clock, I'm in a hurry to get to the apartment, get that TV or radio on and find out what's going on.

DM:

Do you have any contact along the way with your audience? Is there an opportunity for them to meet you?

KL:

Yes, in the intermission. They come up and we sign autographs, shake hands, talk with people. I have met some fascinating people. Met a friend of Gus Grissom's one day. I've met Richard Bong's sister and brother-in-law, he was our leading ace in World War II. Of course, Gus Grissom was one of our original astronauts. You meet some fascinating people, and some very, very nice people who come by and say, "You know, I've been listening to you all my life, I love to hear you sing."

DM:

How nice.

KL:

Some of them would come up to Sunny and say, Have you played those instruments all your life? And he'd say, "Not yet." And you'll find me knocking around Branson, going over to the Cracker Barrel and getting something to eat and someone will say, You're one of the Sons of the Pioneers, aren't you? Well, yes. A lady came up to me one day, she said, "You're a Lattimore. Do you have any family from North Carolina?" I said, "Well, yes, I was born there." And she said, "I'm your mother's cousin." (both laugh) And she is! And we had breakfast the next morning. Friends will come up from Marshall or Shreveport, just walk into the show and I'm just awed, just floored. I see them, wow. I say, let's have breakfast tomorrow morning.

DM:

How nice.

KL:

It's a lot of fun to do that, but I also love meeting people on the road and I don't think there's any place that I've gone that I didn't like the people. You meet just cool people from all over, and you see some wonderful sights. I got to see the Little Bighorn battlefield and things like that.

DM:

You're going to take these detours to see the historical sites—

KL:

Absolutely.

DM:

Well, now you're in the off-season basically, right?

KL:

Yes.

DM:

But you're still—you're going to Hobbs today—

KL:

And Ruidoso, Clovis, Artesia, Albuquerque, and Iowa, Kansas.

DM:

It doesn't sound very off-season. So off-season means you're out of Branson.

KL:

Yes.

DM:

But you're still touring around?

KL:

Well, next month, in December, we won't be. I'll be doing various Christmas stuff. In fact, Longview Symphony is doing a concert with Michael Martin Murphey, so looking forward to doing that.

DM:

By the way, which is one of our contributors here. We have his collection. He comes up occasionally.

KL:

He's a neat guy, and a wonderful songwriter. And I'm a songwriting nut. I like really great written songs. And I study things like that. Because I want to be a songwriter myself and I've written a few, but only one or two that I think would really be commercial. I have to let other people judge that. I'm inspired to write songs either by the Gospel or by a breakup with a girlfriend. One girl's worth eight songs in two weeks.

DM:

Oh, that's good. So it's that emotional—

KL:

Yeah. So if I ever write a hit, I can thank these girls for—but anyway, of course, I'm free to travel, being single and everything. Of course, I like to take Joe when I can. Joe's a great traveling companion and you'll never leave anything in the hotel room because he'll make sure to find anything that you've left. That's a lot of fun.

DM:

Well, I know that we have kind of a tight schedule today, and I would like to continue this sometime, but before I turn the thing off, is there anything else that you would like to add today?

KL:

Well, just that the Sons of the Pioneers have been going for seventy-seven straight years. In February, it'll be seventy-eight. We're still singing the same harmony. Before Dale passed away, he decided to pretty well get rid of just about everything that was electric. We still use a little electric guitar, but other than that, everything is an acoustic instrument plugged in, and we play it the way we did it back in the forties. Now, one thing I would like to definitely add is People make a mistake—Luther will tell you this—coming up to us and saying, Well, you know, you're not the original Sons of the Pioneers, or, You must be the grandsons of the Pioneers. That's like waving a red flag in front of a bull with us, because—and Luther's analogy, albeit—I wish he'd try another team to do it with. He says, "Would you say that Jeter's not a New York Yankee just because Lou Gehrig and Babe Ruth were?" I would use the Rangers for my own deal, but I would say Josh Hamilton is a Ranger. You know, Nolan Ryan would not deny that just because he was one in the past. We're part of the same team. It's been a seamless transition. There has never been a stop in nearly seventy-eight years, and there's never been another group called the Sons of the Pioneers. You're not going to see other groups by that name, and if they do, they'll be hauled in court as quick as you can wink an eye.

As for the originals, people don't realize the original group stayed together for about two or three years and started changing when Leonard Slye left and became Roy Rogers. That was the beginning of that. And then in '49, that was when Tim Spencer and Bob Nolan left. And even though they recorded up to the late fifties, we had other members at that point. Ken Curtis wasn't an original member. Mr. Pioneer, Lloyd Perryman, came in several years in. So you're looking at guys who've come in at various times. And it's still the same group. And the old Pioneers, they're not going to deny that. They'll say, "Yeah, these guys are Pioneers, too." They've all been happy that the group is still going. So that's a very important thing for people to remember when they meet us. We keep up the tradition that's been going all this time, and we intend to keep it original. You know, if we do new songs, that's fine and we're open to that. But it has to be done in the Pioneer style.

DM:

Right. All right, I'm going to stop this.

*End of interview.*