



Notes from a Conversation with David Byrd and Jody Isaacson (2012)

Jody Isaacson: Where were you born?

David Byrd: Springfield, Illinois, February 25, 1926

Jl: What birth order were you, David?

DB: Carlyle, Mary Louise, William Patterson, David Leonard, Weldon Wilson, Sadie (6 kids)

Jl: What happened to your dad?

DB: He was from Biloxi, Mississippi. He worked. Ten years older than my mother. Born in 1890. He was a contractor. He built houses like those in the painting, Houses on Delaware St. (P152). He hired help. Then the depression arrived. After 10 years of good living, bad living started. Funny, my grandparents (mother's side) were separated. He was well off, lawyer, but ran off. Grandmother left barely surviving. My grandmother got the house, and he was a world traveler. England, Denver... He could not help mother when dad disappeared to the mental hospital, where he died in Quincy. He drowned in the Mississippi River.

Jl: Why did your mom give up her kids?

DB: She thought she could support the family that way. It was a bad idea, not a good idea, but the only idea she had. She wasn't taking care of us. She didn't feed us and give us medical attention. I needed that. She seemed to be mentally ill even at that time. Movies were her main diversion.

Jl: Why did she pull them back together in 1942?

DB: She thought that would be best. Carlyle had gotten into trouble with the law. He assumed the father role. He was on the lam. He went to a farm but got run off. He assumed the role of head of the family when mother left.

Jl: When and how did your mom die?

DB: She died of old age at 87, 88 years old. She died in Cleveland with Mary, Mary's husband, and four kids.

Jl: What happened during the three foster homes?

DB: It was not good. Taffy had crippled legs and canes. She abused my sister after she opened a package from our grandfather. I was a runaway from Cantrall. I had a change of life, and the last foster home was a good one.

Foster Homes:

Foster home #1: Taffy 1 to 2 years. She had canes to walk with and abused David and his sibling. (See painting # P217, *Time Keeps on Running*.) Taffy with cane reading, grandfather behind mother always moaning about daughter's lot in life. David flirting with the girl on left. Sister following grandfather. Beggars coming to the door. Girl in front bottom in the park and then hitchhiking. Man reading newspaper. Cat is sympathetic to crying sister. Father has hat on and can't find a job. Christian Science man (they were) at end of aisle, top right. More beggars from the Depression. The two girls close to the center were taken from a tapestry David's mother always had hanging. Running legs cropped throughout painting. Also depicted in painting P209, *Between Services*. David and his brother are outside waiting, fooling around. Christian Science services.

Foster home #2: The Cantralls, painting # P200, *Foster Family*. Setting is Springfield. Bottom of the Depression. David wrestles with brother Weldon. A daughter married to WPA. A good guy, but drink took him. He was a great baseball player. Second daughter going to the bathroom. Foster mother is neurotic. Husband taught school. He's holding a paint can because he had a summer job painting. The mother sold newspapers (depicted in the painting) on behalf of her son, who is playing the trombone in the painting. Another son in the Navy. The house was in a well-off neighborhood, but their home was mediocre. David sold magazines to get out of the house. Painting number 202, *Hell of an Evening*, relates. David's comment on this: "The violence of the family is constant."

Foster family #3: Billinger. Stayed two years and was the best. She had a goiter in her neck and two sons.

Jl: What happened to your siblings in life and death?

DB: **Carlyle** was drafted during the war, then a taxi driver in Springfield. He was a good draftsman, married, had two kids, and his wife was Irish Catholic. He wasn't always with her. He died by suicide in an automobile.

(On a different occasion, David related about Carlyle...)

He was institutionalized. He was involved in a gun incident, which bothered him. At 14, he was playing with guns, romancing the Matt Dillon thing, and something happened. The sheriff came to the house. He was a good worker, a hard worker who worked his way to the top. But he took to drink and finally shot himself. His wife would play on him with his past. After he died, he left \$10,000 to our mom, who blew it in no time at all. Bought a Cadillac. Continued neglecting family.

Mary was married to a terrible-looking person but a good worker and had four kids. Died of old age.

William died of a heart attack from smoking. He received a big operation from it. (David: Smoking almost killed me, but I stopped.) William got married but had no idea what marriage was. His wife thought she was a Lady Giovanni. She wasn't. She was normal and wanted kids. He thought it was just sex. I did not get along with my siblings. We were competitive in order to survive. My younger brother

Weldon crashed his car on the bridge and died. He was neglected... No one was able to teach you to do the right thing. My father was dead. My mother was crazy. I finally ended up at the VA.

David: I stayed single until 29 to 30 years old. I would flirt with everybody. That marriage didn't last because I kept on flirting. She paid for most of the expenses of getting the divorce. She was a nurse. It was a bitter ending. Shirley Silverman was a Jewish woman and also a painter.

Jl: When were you a merchant marine?

DB: I got rejected the first time because my blood pressure was too high and I was too young. Bill was accepted and I wasn't. Sent him to Saipan. I reapplied and was sent to Hoffman Island at the mouth of New York Harbor for a couple months of training. And then they sent us to ship out. The first ship was to Iran, Africa. We had invaded it a couple of months before, on the Mediterranean. I made five trips: Cherbourg, France, that face Dover, England. We got out of Marmots, England. Those were convoys, safe at the time. Before that, German submarines had attacked them. Boston. The only drawings were of the other men on the ship. I occupied my time drawing the shipmates from life and giving them to them. I drew a captain, chief mate, and fellow workers. They were free, and I just did it to kill the time.

JI: When did he study with Ozenfant?

DB: 1949-50, two years

JI: Was this the only study under the G.I. bill?

DB: Art school in Philadelphia for a couple months, but then went back to Brooklyn. I was sent to Ozenfant. The girl in the art career school advised me of that.

JI: What other odd jobs and employment between 42 and 58?

DB: I was a good for nothing after art school. Couldn't find any art jobs. Mother got rid of me by showing me how to get a job at the VA. Liquor store on Madison Avenue, delivery boy while attending art school, dry point factory, usher at the Metropolitan movie house.

JI: Any other jobs at Montrose aside from orderly?

DB: No

JI: Did you box or just watch it at the game?

DB: I watched it at Stillman's gym on Eighth Avenue, close to Madison Square Garden on 49th St.

JI: Where and when were all the places you lived?

DB: Brooklyn, lived at the VA for a couple years and then found a house next-door to the VA in Montrose, Washingtonville, when I got married (about an hour commute each way). I did not want kids and to have a family. I wanted to be a painter and no kids. I did not paint while I was married. My wife had three kids from a previous marriage. I did not see any good future getting married. I moved to Squire Village between Newburgh and Washingtonville, in a housing project for about 10 to 11 years, and then here. I saved wood for building a home.

JI: Did you move to Sidney Center in 1988? Started on his house then?

DB: About that time

JI: Did you design the house?

DB: Yes

JI: Is there architectural training there?

DB: No, just a liking for it. I drew all the plans.

JI: Describe the timeframe for the house?

DB: The foundation was about four years, and the house was about one year. The foundation is stone and could only be worked on in the summer. The hunter's cabin was a miserable place. The person selling me the land did not want me to at first because she did not think anyone could live in that shack. I made it into a good thing. After the house was done, I took the cabin down. I had saved all the wood from an 1850 old school house across from the VA and saved it and still have lots of it in one of my sheds. The floorboards in my house now are from that house. I also took apart another house in Newburgh.

Jl: Where did you store the paintings then?

DB: My mother held onto them. One of the rooms in Washingtonville was chalk full of paintings of mine. Mostly, I did sculpture in the shack.

Jl: How much is memory painting?

DB: It is all memory painting. It is all after I sat down and had a piece of paper in front of me. Some of it has developed from a sketch. I have not stood in front of the subject to make the sketch. The sketch is from sedentary actions that I ended up doing.

Jl: Did you work from nature or life?

DB: From life, but removed from life. Inspired by life, but not painted that way. Inspired by everything. The paintings are from observation where people did not know they were the subject. If people know they are the subject, they tense up. Photographers know this well because they take pictures with indirect cameras to try and capture a less tense look. As soon as you say, "Look," the subject changes.

Jl: What subject were the last five or 10 paintings?

DB: All my paintings then and now are from my life—person going home from the VA, angry man. It is too bad that most of my subjects are mental patients. I wish they were of normal people. The patient acts in a way that normal people also act but seldom reveal. Normal people are acting like mental patients, but seldom do they act that way in front of people. But mental patients act that way all the time.

Jl: What are you working on?

DB: Everything. Working on everything. All the stuff that I can't find time to do. OK. One of the things that I do is rework certain paintings. I also sketch in my books often. I also sketch new canvases and wonder all the time.

Jl: Can the stair be separated for travel and then put back together in the gallery?

DB: (Seattle show) Yes, it can