



Bluegrass Express

In Memory Of Frank Nelson

By Mike Giddens

Frank Nelson, a founding member of the OBA and a pivotal figure in our community, passed away July 14th, 2016. Frank was 81. According to Glenn Linton, "Frank attended grade school from 1946 and in the 40s he was a regular attendee at local Bluegrass shows. In fact, he says, Frank asked for fiddle to start his playing and song. He was keeping a steady beat, making sure everybody was playing up to tempo from the beginning."

There is an interview by Mike Giddens, originally printed in The Bluegrass Express a few years ago, followed by photos of him with friends.

Bluegrass performers and fans have around Oregon and throughout the basin grown accustomed to a quiet, friendly man who enthusiastically of what we hear about the music. The director, Frank Nelson and his trademark smile have done much to quietly make the music forward, while giving all of us a connection to the grassies, more simple past. Like lots of folks living in the Northwest, Frank's story began far from here, in a place and time where playing and picking was a part of everyday life.

Frank was born on February 14, 1935 in Seattle, Oklahoma, to Frank and Lillian Nelson. He grew up around the family in Okmulgee, Oklahoma soon after, and Frank grew up there, a child of the Depression and the Great South. He recalled when he was about 10, he began going to an Assembly of God church with his family and friends, and that was where he learned to sing and to play the guitar. Much of the gospel music he heard there is played and sung today in our homes and churches, and Frank says that it is still his very favorite.

He moved to Springfield, Missouri in 1957 to live with his sister and brother-in-law and he soon got a job with

the Missouri Pacific Railroad, where he eventually became a locomotive builder. His job was to bring the steam locomotives to the maintenance and to clean and service



Frank and his sister in front in "Springer" 1967

them before their next run. But that took them back to the depot to be loaded on their train. As we talked, his hands reached out and moved over the buttons and brake levers of these long-ago engines. He

smiled and said, "It was our first." While in Springfield, Frank met and married Helen, and they began a family, eventually having two daughters, Kristina and Kristal, and a son (Chris). When 1970 Oregon, Frank and his family moved to Portland to find work with defense industry. Frank worked for Columbia Aircraft, making aircraft parts and then induction into the Navy. The year ended before Frank was sent overseas, and he and his family decided to settle in Portland. The Nelsons lived in "Gigapan", a small city off its own, which was built in North Portland near North Columbia and Williams Street to house defense and defense workers. Frank said that he began playing music with others living in "Gigapan" and they soon formed several bands that played country and swing music, the music they had all grown up with. Two of the bands he played with, "The Tumble Valley Boys" and "The Georgia Blue Grass" played shows in the area and traveled as far as the Oregon coast, playing once a week at the Siletz State Park (now in Lincoln City). He particularly remembered one of his band mates, Woody Hall and Mike Francisco. Hall was a fiddle player who Frank remembered as having a great voice and being a fine guitar and steel-guitar player.

continued on page 2

