



One of the Actors in

Murder on the Last Train to Clarksville

Meet Dennis with an i. In 3rd grade his teacher said she had a son named Dennis and it was spelled with an e, not an i. So, all through school, Dennis King's name was misspelled the way that teacher wanted it, with an e. When Dennis went into the air force, and they looked at his birth certificate, he was reborn the way his momma wanted it – Dennis with an i. Double Nickel member Dennis King was one of 6 children and being the 2nd oldest, he and his older sister took the brunt of the field work. They worked in tobacco and cotton, and behind the plow tilling the fields of cucumber and watermelon. In his high school years, he also worked on other farms. His rock growing up was his mother. "She had a rough time. And it was hard [for the kids], but she was fair and there was no sugarcoating stuff. She said 'you live your life, and if you're happy, I'm happy.'" This self-described "country boy" left home and signed up for the Air Force and never once thought about getting out. "I was probably one of the most adventurous, outgoing [of the 6 kids], if anyone's going to get in trouble or break something, it's going to be

Dennis. So it just seems natural that I went off. He spent 30 years in Air Transportation Logistics for the Air Force, earning the highest enlisted rank you can obtain in the Air Force: E9, Chief Master Sergeant - a feat achieved by only 1% of the enlisted force. His work entailed moving people and cargo for both humanitarian support as well military resources into war/conflict zones, often having to move things within a 48-72-hour window.

"My role in air transportation was supporting that airplane. Getting it ready for the number of passengers, the type of cargo - the latrine service, meals and blankets, water and coffee. I loaded that onto the airplane, processed the passengers and baggage - cargo on and off the airplane - stuff that supports the warfighting services." His first assignment in 1974 was in CA receiving and taking passengers and cargo off planes coming out of Vietnam. He landed in Guam 18 months later, followed by the Philippines where he was stationed for 5.5 years and where his first son and daughter were born. From there he supported a 300% increase in the airlift of personnel and supplies to destinations in the Indian Ocean to support the Iran hostages, moved to Dover Air Force Base where his work intersected history with the US invasion of Grenada and later our military efforts to oust Manuel Noreiga, then dictator of Panama (1989). As vehicles, ammunitions and supplies were placed in cargo holds, Dennis had to keep cargo safe. "I was out inspecting and making sure there were no leaks and not too much fuel in the vehicles because pressurizing going up is a major problem. Different explosives are incompatible so you try to keep them apart - some can go on the same airplane but some have to be kept at a certain distance. You've got batteries, corrosive stuff, Claymore mines – things you wouldn't think of being on an airplane and with the atmosphere's pressure that can be a problem."

While his career took him to Saudi Arabia, Spain, the Philippines, South Korea, AK, CA and our nation's capital, his heart never left La Crosse, VA where he was born and raised. And in 2019, his children grown and college completed, and he and their mother divorced, he resettled in the area with his new wife Cynthia Mabrey-King, a former high school friend. He joined the Double Nickel Players and appreciates the flexibility offered by working on the group's 2 yearly events while enjoying retirement. He's able to travel (recently returned from Italy), play golf with his brother who lives a couple of hours away, and perform on stage. In *Murder On The Last Train To Clarksville*, he plays the conductor who finds the victim on the train. An all-business character, he's faced with keeping his train on schedule while having the dilemma of unloading a body that's part of a crime scene! ~ Written by Holly Stadtler



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Lyn Kessie Smith was constantly in motion as a child, so her other directed that energy into dance lessons. Lyn eagerly embraced dance, and got her start in theater at age 15 dancing for the Playboy Club (fully clothed, of course). At 17 she was awarded a scholarship to the prestigious Juilliard School in NY. Her mother felt she was too young to go to NY, so she was deprived of this opportunity.

Married at eighteen, Lyn had two daughters before becoming active in the local theater in Antioch, Illinois. She participated in that theatre for nine years doing over fifty shows. She not only acted, but got started again in choreography. She enjoyed choreographing musicals, with her favorites being *Fiddler On The Roof* and *Man Of La Mancha*, in which she also danced. She learned how creative she could be with lighting, and was soon asked to direct. Her favorite acting role was as Annie Sullivan for which she won several awards. She described this role as her most physically challenging, and her role as the Ghost in *Gramercy Ghost* as the most fun. Lyn would have loved being on Broadway, especially as a June Taylor dancer.

She moved to Clarksville in 2016, and lost her husband later that year. She chose Clarksville because it was close to her daughters. In 2018, she visited the Clarksville Community Players (CCP) theatre. She knew the minute she walked in that she wanted to become a part of this inviting theater community. She immediately felt at home.

Lyn has been very active with the Double Nickel Players (DNP), both directing and acting. She directed *Calender Girls* for CCP in 2021 and is currently directing *Hallelujah Girls* which will run November 16 – 19, 2023 at the Fine Arts Center. She also is a board member of CCP.

Her life in Clarksville has been full - with her animals, farm and the theatre. Earlier this year, she married Jeff Smith whom we all delightfully welcome. Who knows, the theater may get into his blood also! In *Murder On The Last Train To Clarksville*, Lyn plays an excited lady waiting to see her best friend from High School arrive on the train. ~ Written by Anne Smyre



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I am sure that John Wayne Johnson has been asked a thousand times if he was named after the “Duke.” And answered a thousand times no. One parent wanted to name him Jesse Willard after a grandfather, the other said “no” — so, they kept the initials JW and the result was John Wayne. He said there were times in his life when people at work did dub him with The Duke moniker but it wasn’t often, and once

with Enos after the deputy in *Dukes of Hazard*—maybe that was during the twenty years on the fire department in Scottsville during the 1960s and 1970s. He says he did fall off a roof a couple times and recalls dragging hoses across downed power lines and setting off sparks.

John Wayne was born and raised in Buckingham County on Hill Hancock near Scottsville, Virginia. You can hear the charming accent that lingers from growing up there. “My Daddy worked a farm up there and the big white colonial house we grew up in is still there.” In those early days, there was not running water, no bathroom. “My grandparents, parents, and us four kids [two boys, two girls] made for a big family in that house. I have no regrets. I learned a lot about family—how important family is—folks depended on one another.” John Wayne’s eyes light up when he talks about his children, his 21 grandchildren, and six, soon to be eight, great grandchildren. He says his daughter is good about keeping all the birthdays and names straight so he doesn’t mess up and miss someone.

John Wayne worked in the offices of a telephone communications company in Charlottesville from 1972 to 1987 and then transferred to Farmville where the company created and maintained telephone systems for large corporations and colleges. Besides his time volunteering with the fire department in Scottsville, he spent twenty years, two days a week, on the Buckingham rescue squad. He says it was very rewarding work.

When he retired, he had made up his mind he wanted to live on the lake. In 2015, he and his late wife moved to Clarksville, he bought a boat, did some fishing, and has had time to pursue his love of playing guitar and singing country music and bluegrass. His uncle taught him to play when he was about fifteen years old, and John Wayne brings that love of guitar playing to many through local venues and volunteer work. “I play each Friday night at the Oasis Club at the VFW, church on Sunday, and I play local nursing/retirement homes each week here in Clarksville and in South Boston.” He especially likes to see peoples’ faces light up when he plays in the Serenity wing for those with memory loss. “Some of them cannot even talk and I start to play and you see them trying to mouth the words of the song you are singing—their faces light up.”

Fellow Double Nickel Players member, Karon Runyon, approached John Wayne after hearing him play in church and encouraged him to come to a DNP’s meeting. She thought his talent would be a great addition to an upcoming show. John Wayne had never done any acting since high school and does not find memorizing lines an enjoyable part of performing. “I really have to buckle down to learn the script, but I enjoy getting dressed up to look different, to portray a character.” You will get a sample of John Wayne’s country sound during *Murder on the Last Train to Clarksville* where he appears as the wandering minstrel Billy Nelson. We are glad he wandered into that first Double Nickel meeting and stuck around. ~ Written by Patricia Jutz



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Dyan Willis is a founding member of the Double Nickel Players (DNP). In the twelve years since its inception, she has appeared in nearly every production. In the current dinner theater murder mystery, *Murder On The Last Train To Clarksville*, Dyan plays Ethel, the chairperson for the 40th class reunion of the Clarksville High School graduating class of 1925. Forever the organizer and list maker, who better to play the character responsible for greeting fellow classmates as they arrive at the train station and making sure the reunion at the Grace Hotel goes off without a hitch.

Dyan was not sure she was going to participate in another murder mystery, at least not in the same capacity she had in the past, but then she heard that retiring DNP member, Irene Chapman, who had put together and directed several of the murder mysteries, had come up with a title for this years show—*The Last Train To Clarksville*. “I thought that was the perfect show for me to go out on,” perhaps hinting at her own retirement? “And I love playing Ethel and love the script. Everything Ethel says in the script is something that I would actually say. And, I get to hold a clipboard as I’m at the station checking off the names of people getting off the train—I can have my lines right there in front of me on the clipboard and not have to worry about missing a cue.”

A native of Mecklenburg County, Dyan grew up in Buffalo Junction and attended Clarksville Elementary in the very building that houses the Clarksville Fine Arts Center today. Dyan has insight and history with the Grace Hotel and the trains that frequented Clarksville during the 1960s. “Trains were very important to the life of rural Virginia and came through Clarksville all the time, and they were noisy—they could be very disruptive to us in the schoolroom since the train tracks ran right behind the school, and the train station sat just on the other side of Buffalo Road.” She recalls her first piano recital on the stage of the auditorium. A warm day, all the large windows open, and just as she began “Starlight Waltz” a train came into the station. Her music teacher called things to a halt, and she had to sit quietly at the piano until the train pulled away, then start all over again.

Before DNP, she was never involved in a theater production where you had to memorize lines. When she first heard about a meeting to talk about starting a reader’s theater group, she thought “I love people and love interacting with new people—I always greet newcomers to Clarksville with ‘Welcome Home’ so an activity where you are just reading things and meeting new people appealed to me. I truly do not enjoy a lot of memorization. And character roles aren’t for me. My accent is thick and permanent.” That first meeting evolved quickly into the Double Nickel Players.

Dyan and her husband Billy were in high school together at Bluestone, and they dated during senior year, then off and on through college. After graduating college in 1971, they both returned to Clarksville and married shortly thereafter. Ultimately, they decided that they would make their home and raise their family in Clarksville. Billy worked in the medical management field in South Boston. After giving teaching a go, Dyan decided while she loved teaching, all the things around it were not for her. She did substitute teaching for a number of years, and, after their second child left for college, went to work at the Clarksville Baptist preschool and stayed for 14 years. “I used to say I could write a book and call it *You Can Fix Anything With a Cheese Doodle*.” Thank you for helping form DNP all those years ago and for sticking with it! ~ Written by Patricia Jutz



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Sally Morgan has lived in Clarksville all her life, except for one year in Richmond after college. She has warm memories of going to school at the Fine Arts Center and seeing movies in town. In those days there were children all around, and they enjoyed playing hide and seek, kick the can etc. So, she was fortunate to raise her family here. Sally grew up on Fourth Street in the home now occupied by none other than our own Nancy Barden.

After college, Sally taught 3rd grade at Clarksville Elementary School, and then she was fortunate to be able to stay home and raise her three children here. In 2000, Sally went back to work part time at the Circuit Court in Boydton. Although her job was to scan all the deeds into the computer, she also enjoyed helping people get marriage licenses, passports, and researching their properties. So, she loved that work.

Throughout the years, Sally has met so many people in Clarksville that people think she knows everyone here, but she admits that these days there are new people moving to the area, which enriches our small town. Sally is always looking for opportunities to get together with others. "I don't like people, I love people; I love meeting new people."

Prior to stepping on stage, Sally was well known to patrons of the Fine Arts Center (FAC) as she managed the tickets at the box office and served on the steering committee to help raise funds and make the ongoing improvements to the FAC. She is hoping that ongoing fundraising will allow the work to be completed soon.

Sally has always loved the theater, and even has season tickets to DPAC in Durham, but it took her a while to step into the spotlight herself. She says she "always wanted to be in a play and be somebody other than myself." She first appeared in a play in 2006 when the Director, Amy Purvis, gave her a short part in the beginning of the show, *Dearly Beloved*. She played a fortune teller and enjoyed the experience of the theater. Since then, she has been in four plays - her favorite production was the *Dixie Swim Club*, and her role as a "pregnant nun!" In addition to performing in plays, she is also a founding member of the Double Nickel Players and enjoys working on the murder mysteries and the *Sunday Funnies* skits. (Most recently she played one of the three pigs in a skit for the Spring *Sunday Funnies*.)

To Sally, being on stage starts with a bit of nervousness, then the worry about forgetting lines. But she said once she is out there, it is a great feeling, especially when the theatre is full. "At the end of the show, if they really like it, and they give you a standing ovation, it is all worth it."

In the upcoming production of *Murder On The Last Train To Clarksville*, Sally plays Claudia who is so excited about meeting her old boyfriend from High School. She likes the character because she is just happy and an excitable person looking forward to her reunion. If you are unable to see this performance, stay tuned, as Sally has a lot more to give as an actress and patron of the Clarksville Fine Arts Center. ~ Written by Monica Walter



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Dave Greer and his wife Connie Greer moved to Clarksville shortly after his retirement. They liked the small, easygoing lake community. He never had an interest in the theatre until his wife Connie became involved with the Clarksville Community Players. Dave found the theater quickly after her performance in several shows where she was cast in situations of questionable modesty (*Calendar Girls*).

He became curious while hanging around the theater, and was cast in his first role this spring as Cmd. Harbeson in the CCP production of *South Pacific*. Dave found he enjoyed the camaraderie and the creativity of the cast and crew. When asked what his favorite role to play is, he said "I'd enjoy being in the show *Harvey* as Elwood P. Dowd." Producing, writing or directing have also captured his interest. Both he and Connie joined the Double Nickel Players this spring, and it's great to have Dave with us in *Murder on the Last Train to Clarksville* as a local farmer circa 1965 who has come to the train station to pick up some 'little chicks' that is small chickens. ~ Written by Anne Smyre



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Introducing Connie Greer who joined the Double Nickel Players (DNP) this year. Connie is an employee of the Navy Federal Credit Union where she serves as a member service representative. She and her husband moved to Clarksville in 2020 after his retirement. They fell in love with the lovely small community on the lake, and Connie didn't waste any time getting involved. She found her way to the Clarksville

Community Players, where she appeared as Chris in *Calendar Girls* in September, 2021, and as Billie in *Unnecessary Farce* in the Spring of 2022.

This past spring, she also appeared in the Nurse ensemble of *South Pacific*. Her favorite role has been Chris in *Calendar Girls*, because she could easily identify with her personality. She loves watching a play take shape from the first read through to that first moment on stage. "There is nothing like the excitement of the performance! It's like a train ride. You can't get off until you get to the station, no matter what happens." In our *Murder On The Last Train To Clarksville*, she is appearing as a grandmother meeting her granddaughter from Richmond, VA.

Connie brings to the DNP, and our theater community, a contagious smile, and a vivacious enthusiasm. We are sure to see more of her in future productions. ~ Written by Anne Smyre



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Gary Walter spent 25 years in the Parks and Recreation Department for Philadelphia, spent 15 years as a respiratory therapist in various locales, and while retired now, owns a farm here in Clarksville. With the parks and rec dept, he managed theatre productions for inner city kids, built sets, and also worked in community theatre. But lately he's turned his talents to the Double Nickel Players production of *Murder On The Last Train To Clarksville*. In this murder mystery set in 1965, Gary portrays Mayor Elwood Truelove II – a man interested in commerce and the bettering of his town. But when a murder on the train happens, he worries about the ramifications it will have because a planned HS reunion has brought folks from all over, including an attorney/broker who has a client who wants to invest in the town. Gary says, "Elwood wants to keep a lid on the tragedy and control the events at least until the big reunion is over. And he becomes overwhelmed because he has no resources to investigate the murder." This is his first role in Clarksville as he and his wife Monica joined the players a few months ago. Since the play is written by DNP, no audience is familiar with the script, but Gary thinks it's terrific. "I think it's well written and well thought out, and I like that in some cases the writers have encouraged the actors to make it more cohesive. I like it a lot, and I find it fun."

Gary grew up in the Bronx and Yonkers in a poor family but watched his dad climb the social ladder as a businessman who provided for Gary and his two siblings. But when the cultural revolution of the 1960's came sweeping into the home, Gary and his father had a parting of the ways. As he describes it, "The generation gap was something that happened, and I was part of that. I kind of split off and just began to develop real estate. But that wasn't what I wanted to do." After trying his hand at buying houses and rehabbing them, Gary gravitated to the Parks and Rec job as a way to make more of a contribution to society. "It was kids, and it was doing something for society – to help this world and poor people in Philadelphia. I did that for 25 years, and there was just such an incredible desperate need. It was a wonderful job; I loved that job." But even after re-inventing himself as a Respiratory Therapist and moving from VT, to CA & eventually NC, his dream of owning a farm never left him. He explains from the barn as the rooster crows behind him: "It goes back to the 60s and getting back to the land and letting your soul be free. So much of the music and the movement was about self-sufficiency and getting away from corporate America - we're in patched jeans and growing our own food and kind of a communal existence. So those are compelling ideas." One of the things he and Monica have done at the farm is make music videos and even a couple of films Gary has acted and directed. A whimsical look at their take on the movie *Jurassic Park* can be found on YouTube *Jurassic Farm* <https://youtu.be/XxNxCuzd-nc?si=G0sBONf3heugTFee>. A harmonica player and singer, Gary enjoys joining local pickers and making music in his barn turned studio, surrounded by antiques, washboards, and instruments. Even in retirement, Gary relishes working on the farm – haying the fields, lifting sacks of feed for the goats, mending fences. It seems like a far cry from his home state of NY and Broadway and a chance to portray his favorite role - Don Quixote from *Man Of La Mancha* - but in the DNP Gary and Monica have found an outlet for their talents and interests in storytelling and theatre and feel like they're now connected with what's going on in Clarksville. "It's pastoral and all the work here is a labor of love, it's just fun. It's not working." ~ Written by Holly Stadler