

**W.I. “Bill” Hairston**

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## **W.I. “Bill” Hairston**

W.I. “Bill” Hairston, 71, is a storyteller, old-time musician, and pastor (Westminster Presbyterian Church) living in Charleston, West Virginia. He was born in Phenix City, Alabama, and his family moved to Saint Albans, West Virginia in 1960 when he was 11. Through his storytelling, Hairston, as he says in the interview, “combines the Appalachian culture that he was exposed to on the Coal River, to the African-American culture that he is a part of.” For 35 years, he served as music coordinator at the Stonewall Jackson Jubilee, and is currently the coordinator of the Vandalia Gathering’s West Virginia Liar’s Contest. Hairston is an active member of the West Virginia Storytelling Guild, the Kentucky Storytelling Association, and the Ohio Storytelling Network, the National Association of Black Storytellers, and serves as the West Virginia liaison to the National Storytelling Network. He has performed in concerts, festivals, libraries, corporate meetings, conventions and schools throughout the region and the country.

This interview is a follow-up to Emily Hilliard’s September 10, 2019 interview with Hairston. In this interview, Hairston discusses his participation in the last segregated Black 4-H Camp at Camp Washington-Carver, and the first integrated 4-H Camp at Jackson’s Mill. He also speaks about his summer job with the Department of Natural Resources and his involvement in the United Methodist Youth Fellowship when he was young.

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BH: Bill Hairston

EH: Emily Hilliard

00:00

BH: Actually, you know I'm being very careful, and there's a climate of pandemic and virus etc. So I'm not really seeing a lot of people. I'd gotten to a point where I just had to get out of the house.

EH: Mmhm, yeah.

BH: I just needed to go somewhere and do something.

EH: Right.

BH: You know, I've got First Presbyterian, but that's normally one morning a week and then I do some stuff for them virtually so I'm still in the house.

EH: I see.

BH: So I got on the road yesterday, well I knew I was gonna get on the...my eventual point will be Nashville, TN...

EH: Oh cool!

BH: ...where I have an older sister, who's not really well. But I'm gonna go into town. I'm not actually going into the house, for her. But we'll figure out a way to get together at least twice, and then I'll continue my--[In] Abingdon is an old friend of mine from way back so...

EH: Nice.

BH: I needed to come here yesterday and do a few things and so I did. And then from here I should go on to Nashville, but I have a feeling I'm gonna stop in Chattanooga. I came this way on purpose, so I may not get to Nashville. I'm just--I have no schedule, no anything, I'm just out here. By myself. I've got my microband 24 and my wipes and my gloves and I'm stopping only at major truck stops like Pilot and places like that that are taking care of things and...

EH: Yeah.

BH: And eating out of drive-ins. Drive-thrus I should say. And I'm having a good time! So...

EH: Good! That sounds good. Yeah, so Stan asked me to expand the article for you and he had mentioned maybe one point being attending the first integrated 4-H camp after attending the Black 4-H camp at Washington Carver.

BH: And the reason, I just thought it was complicated, so I needed to try to explain. In 19, and I'm pretty sure it was '62, but I probably should just say the early 60s, so I'm safe (laughs) on that. In West Virginia, there were actually 2 separate land grant colleges. There was West Virginia State College--it had a land grant that basically was for the Black folks and West Virginia University had land grant status for white folks. Now, that was true all over. I mean not just West Virginia but all over the South and the Midwest,

etc., Kansas, those places. And I'm explaining it because it gets complicated when you get to West Virginia. What happened in West Virginia was that way back in I think it was 1954, they integrated schools. When they integrated schools--in Kanawha County, I should say. Not all over the state but in Kanawha County and in some other counties. And I'm not an expert on that so I don't know which counties, but a lot of counties integrated very early in the 50s. But overall the counties hadn't integrated and so we still had the Black program in the state and we had the quote white program, well the program that was there for the sort of, there. Then, West Virginia State and again I'm not sure of the year, but in the early 60s gave up their status. And the reason I call it land grant, you have to understand that all extension programs came out of land grant colleges. One of the extension programs was the 4-H or youth development programs and so that's why that's important. That means that the staffs were paid by these different institutions, they worked for these institutions, etc. So I, my agent, my Black agent here in Kanawha County was a woman named Julia Lowery who was, and I don't know--she had to work because they were different from the white agent. They had multiple counties because of obviously population. So she had, if my memory served me right, Kanawha, Putnam, and Cabell counties. And to my knowledge, Kanawha, when I joined the 4-H program, I joined in Kanawha County of course, and that, Miss Lowery was my agent. I went to 4-H camp in an integrated setting which meant that the Boone Maxwell was also my agent. You know, the white guy, because they worked together and again I don't know the arrangement. All I knew was Miss Lowery worked Cabell County, which was not integrated. And she worked Kanawha County which was integrated. So that meant that as I joined 4-H, and this would have been like '62 a couple years after I was in the state, I was going to camp in an integrated camp, Camp Virgil Tate, in Kanawha County. At the same time, I was at an age, 13, where I was being, I could be used as a junior leader. And so Miss Lowery would take her junior leaders from Kanawha County into the segregated Cabell County camp. Okay?

EH: Okay.

06:59

BH: (laughs) So I would go to camp that was integrated. I never ever went to the segregated Kanawha County camp. That never happened. It was integrated when I got there. But I went to the segregated Cabell County camp as a junior leader. Then there was 2 other camps--there was still the Black camp, state camp at Washington Carver, which again I don't have all of it, but it took care, it was the camp for the kids still in the segregated program that hadn't integrated yet. And of course, Cabell County was one of those counties that was segregated. And I went to that camp one time and one time only. The state 4-H camp for Black children. I went there not representing Kanawha or--Miss Lowery was there, she took kids with her and I was one of those kids that she took with her. So that's how I ended up at the Black state camp at Carver.

EH: Mmhm.

BH: That was also the year that they decided to integrate the state camps. And so I was chosen from Kanawha County to go to Jackson's Mill as a camper in the very first integrated camp. Up until that point, they just sort of kept it separate, but all of a sudden, WVU was wanting to integrate, or the WVU staff was integrating the camps. So I ended up going to the state Black 4-H camp for the reasons I just told you and then from Kanawha County, I showed up at Jackson's Mill for the very first time at the very first integrated camp. At that camp there was--and I'm still trying to figure this one out--there was a kid from Mercer County, his name was Ed Cabell, he was, Dr. Cabell became very famous here in West Virginia but Ed Cabell is the one that I really remember by name but there were kids from Jefferson and Berkeley Counties, Kanawha County, and I'm almost sure Wood County was the other county. And so we made up the first Black kids to integrate the camp, so that's how that happened. And I should tell you that part of what was going on there also was Jane George. Jane George was a neighborhood leader and in the same

neighborhood there in Saint Albans that I was a part of, and she was a leader at Kanawha County 4-H camp. So her husband literally drove up the Kanawha County kids, me being one of 'em. So that's how that happened. I was in the midst of the integration of camps and I should tell you that some of those counties did not integrate until the late 60s. (laughs) I can, and counties like Raleigh and McDowell, and I don't know what others because again I didn't follow--but ironically Mercer obviously had integrated or even though I knew and had met the Black 4-H agent in Mercer County, I think they, when they were doing these integration things they just put the agents together, you know just had 'em all work together. So that's how, and it's complicated, I think it's complicated only because I was a Black 4-Her and I loved Washington Carver and everything that happened there, etc. as a Black camper, but I was also exposed for the first time that same year to Jackson's Mill. And as a result of my entrance into Jackson's Mill at that time, I really have been active in 4-H all of these years, you know through the years, all of these years, whatever, almost 50 years. And I've been active in a lot of different ways because I was one of the first. I guess you call me a...I don't know what you call me (laughs) but I was a kid that really--the program was something I enjoyed. I worked, you know not only from there started going to camp, state camps every year, but I worked 4-H camps in the summer while I was in college, I worked in the extension service for a very brief time, I've been a volunteer leader, I'm what they call an All-Star, West Virginia 4-H All Star, which is a specific honorary organization that you're chosen for, I'm part of the West Virginia 4-H Hall of Fame, I mean I'm a 4-Her in West Virginia!

EH: (laughs)

BH: But that's how that happened. It was a combination of that agent...if I had just gone to Kanawha County I would have never seen, or if Boone Maxwell who was the agent in Kanawha County and I just went to the Kanawha County camp for the first time, I would have never been at Washington Carver, because one of the Black agent was Julia Lowery, who took an interest in a couple, maybe 3 or 4 of us, and she involved us then in the Cabell County Program, and the Cabell County Program was still going to the Black camp, and it just, and I'm glad that happened by the way, 'cause I, that experience at Washington Carver, even though it was only one time, was one of the, how do I put it? It was a great experience for me. Keep in mind I had, if you knew my story...

EH: Right.

BH: ...I had left (laughs) Alabama in a segregated situation and I had been put into this integrated situation being one of very few Black children and then boom! There I was with all the Black kids all over the state. I mean I loved it! And I wished it continued, but I think that might have been the last year because little by little the camps, even though they didn't integrate school systems, I think extension decided that it was time to move on and that...and also the other thing that happened that made Camp Washington-Carver close was that West Virginia State College gave up its status as a land grant college, so they were no longer doing 4-H programs so that all went to West Virginia University. So you see how complicated that is?

EH: Right, right. And was there a specific focus content-wise on African American traditions at the Black 4-H camp?

15:58

BH: That is a great question! Um, yes actually! I never thought about it that way. There was a lot of art and poetry--Black poets, Black artists, Black history--all of those factors were a part--Black music, you know all a part of Washington Carver that certainly were not a part of any of the other 4-H camps, county-wide or state-wide. I mean I just never thought! You just brought that to mind! They--one of the things that would happen in a 4-H camp was every evening, whether it was--there would be what they

called a council circle, based on Native American traditions etc. In the Black camp, a lot of sharing of Black poets, just different music etc. would have been shared. That was the last thing you did in the evening was go to council circle. And a lot of that happened. In the white camps, it was more other music, other stories. I remember one of the things that I did in the white camp was James Weldon Johnson because I was--I picked that up in the Black camp. I never thought about that before! (laughs) That's one of the reasons I would do...but I also did some white traditions. I was known for a song called "Dem Bones" which was--had been taught to me by one of the older white guys that was working in the camp, and I just, you know, but yeah, that difference was definitely--the Black camps focused on Black art. The white camps did not.

EH: Mmhm. Yeah. Well I bet that was a loss in some ways.

BH: It was. For somebody like me it wasn't because I continued to even throughout high school etc., I would still, whenever given an assignment I was you know, I was picking Black poets and Black--but I think that's where that came from (laughs).

EH: Yeah!

BH: And so I was still doing that but the general 4-Her who was an African American or Black, would not have picked that up in a summer camp. You know?

EH: Mmhm.

BH: It wouldn't have been there, you know?

19:09

EH: Yeah. And then was there any issue with integration the following year?

BH: I know of none and I say that honestly because...West Virginia and I don't know--I mean I know what happened in Kanawha County only because my mother-in-law later on in life and a lot of folks in my church etc. were teachers and so I know how they inte--I think it was '54, the Fall of '54 when they decided to alternate the grades. In other words, 1st grade 2nd grade--no. 1st grade, 3rd grade, 5th grade etc. They integrated those grades, alternate, all the way through, which meant that by the next year, everybody was integrated. And I know they--people like my mother-in-law, they moved her to downtown Charleston to Fruth Elementary from her all-Black school in Institute. And so for the first year in her life, there she was teaching an integrated group of kids. But that's what they did. They literally took the teachers, and unfortunately the principals and coaches, and made them teachers. None of them, none of them were coaches or principals in the integrated system. Some of them made it later. But not only that, they didn't really utilize any of the Black school buildings. They literally closed them. So you know, it was one of those things where the Black education system in Kanawha County was just sort of overwhelmed. That's why, and this is just aside, when the whole issue came up about Stonewall Jackson Middle School and changing the name, people were so outraged and upset. All they had to do was go back to the days of integration when the Black schools in Kanawha County were named after Black people!

EH: Yeah.

BH: And they were all just--the few [Black] schools that were used, they changed the name.

EH: Yeah, yeah.

BH: Like downtown there there was a high school, oh--my mind's not coming to me. The Black high school in downtown Charleston, now that should come automatically to me, but anyway, they decided to use that building but change the name to a white president, I think John Adams, and then that, in fact I know they did, and then that school ended up in South Hills. But yeah, they, and like I said, the principals of the Black schools ended up as teachers and my father-in-law was a principal of one of the Black schools. He ended up teaching and never did make it back to principal. Some of the coaches later on through the years, through the later 60s became coaches but for the most part, in those years, integration was just sticking the Black folks in the white system and forgetting it. You know?

EH: Yeah, right.

BH: Sorry to give such a long answer.

EH: Oh no, that's okay. Let's see, oh yeah, one thing I didn't ask last time. Your job with the West Virginia DNR--what was that? What were you doing in that job?

23:32

BH: For them I worked for Water Resources. Now I had a lot of different, I had different state jobs but for DNR, I worked for Water Resources, which was, and that's the one that took me around the state.

EH: Right, and you had the state car.

BH: Right, exactly. That was the division of Water Resources. I guess they still have that division (laughs)

EH: And were you doing water testing or what were you doing?

BH: Well okay, let me go back. The first part of the job, when I first got there, and I guess really when I was doing a lot of the initial travel, I was working directly out of the director's office. I was, I guess I was an aid or assistant to the director of the Division, I mean the Department of Natural Resources. I was there in the state house, down on the statehouse campus in his office. At some point, they moved me over to Water Resources. So I guess when I talk about the times when I was the Black kid being called in you know, by people seeing me out on the road in my state car, that really was when I was part of the director, um excuse me, the director's office and that job was more of let me see if I can...I always have to give history to put things in perspective (laughs).

EH: Right (laughs)

25:31

BH: Arch Moore was governor. That winter Arch Moore had I mean what was called the State Road Commission, which later became the Dept. of Highways, the State Road Commission, the employees decided to strike for better wages, for better wages. But they did it during a major, major snow storm. That's when they thought when would be most effective.

EH: Oh wow. Uh-huh.

BH: In Arch Moore's opinion, publicly I guess, he saw that as an insult and something that should never happen in the state, that people working for the state of West Virginia should be more responsible to the

state of West Virginia and the leap to stop working during a major snowstorm was just outrageous! So he fired everybody in the State Road Commission. He literally wiped them out (laughs).

EH: Wow!

BH: So, okay. Now that explains now where Bill Hairston comes in.

EH: Uh-huh.

BH: Summertime comes and there is a program, a federal program that's called Neighborhood Youth....oh Lord have...Well, anyway, a program that was funded by the federal government, part of the you know, War on Poverty I guess. That Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty and something like that. But at any rate, this program gave kids a job in the summertime.

EH: I see.

BH: And the job then was they had put it in State Road Commission because that way kids could cut grass on the side of the roads and pick up litter and do all these other things. When he fired everybody, their structure could no longer handle that program. And so the program was moved to the Dept. of Natural Resources. And they needed people in the summertime to do that program. And so boom! Bill Hairston showed up that June to literally be all over pretty much all over the state out of the director's office doing that program. Not just me--there were, there was a coach from DuPont High School and one, a guy from Marmet--there was about 5 of us that they hired, but I was a young kid. The rest of 'em were all seasoned people. And they sent us around coordinating that program. And so that's how I ended up out there in the state car doing all these things. And then by fall, I didn't go back to Glenville. I stayed in the system and ended up at Water Resources. So that's...so now that I knew what you were asking. It's because of that program and that's why I was there and that's why I was running all over the state, in the Neighborhood Youth...isn't that horrible that I don't remember the...That's been a million years ago, but essentially it was a federal program funded into the state to give low-income children, well yeah, I don't know if that's even what they called it--kids employment in the summertime which then put more money into those families which was part of the War on Poverty, so.

EH: Got it. Well is there anything else that you think should be a part of this article? Anything else maybe we didn't cover this time or in our previous interview?

29:51

BH: Well let me think. (laughs)

EH: (laughs)

BH: Oh my goodness. Well, let's see. Well you know, I think part--the part that hadn't come out was involvement within the United Methodist Church, because that also, during those times, during my time, was a part of integration and so while all this other stuff was going on in high school etc., they were integrating the United Methodist Church. There was, I'm trying to think of how to start it. Essentially, and again I don't know all the details. All I know is what happened with me. I showed up, the first as a teenager, the same time by the way that these things were going on at the white 4-H camp at Camp Virgil Tate and the trips to Cabell County camp and the state Black camp and the white (laughs) that other camp, I was also involved in Methodist Youth Fellowship. My first Methodist Youth Fellowship meeting--again, you've got to keep in mind that Blacks were not a huge population, so therefore, geographically things were different. My very first youth meeting or week or whatever you want to call it was up in



Delaware, in that conference, or in the Pennsylvania, or excuse me, Pennsylvania-Delaware, that area. But it was in Delaware. The following year, I was down in Webster County at the Charleston District Methodist Youth Fellowship Camp. So you see I went from Delaware because again the numbers of people, and in an all-Black situation, to the following year, I was in Webster County. And the only reason it was Webster County was because that's the camp they rented. All the kids were from the Charleston area. But they rented the facility in Webster County. And so that again was part of I guess integration, and again I became a part of that system in the sense that after, even in college I was still involved in United Methodist--and in fact the reason I went to Glenville State College, even though I graduated from University of Charleston, that's because of, you know I left Glenville, but I was going up there because of United Methodist pastor and my pastor and other people making the decision that that would be a good place for me. And so I went up there only to be the in the second class of Black kids coming to Glenville. So you see they had an initial group who were all athletes that showed up one year and that following fall there were probably about 12 of 'em that showed up, just as students, you know. I certainly was not an athlete, but and I became Freshman Class President. Now that's interesting. How does a Black kid become freshman class president at Glenville State College his first year? It's simple. I was involved in state 4-H camps, I was involved in state United Methodist events, and the kids at Glenville were mostly 4-Hers and church kids. I came in there with name recognition! (laughs) I guess you would call it. Because I was a kid that a large percentage of the freshman class already knew.

EH: Mmhm, mmhm.

BH: And so I became president for that very reason. And it's because of those 2 factors, 4-H and Methodist youth and my activities there--because that was, and I spent my summer in 4-H camp and in Methodist youth events and went to camps and things. That's what a kid did. I didn't run the streets of Charleston. I was out being a good kid, I guess.

EH: Uh-huh (laughs) I see.

BH: But I mean that's the only thing that I could think was--because and ironically, well not ironically, it was just historically--all those things were in the process of integrating when I was a kid, you know 13, 14, 15. By the time I graduated high school, there was what they called complete integration, which had its problems too, but that's another day and another topic. (laughs)

EH: Right. Okay, great. Well unless you can think of anything else, I'll let you get on with your travels.

BH: Okay yeah, I'm gonna leave here and again just start toward Nashville. I am thinking like I said, I have no schedule. I'm thinking when I get to Chattanooga there's some things I want to do and I may not make it to Nashville 'til tomorrow. But who cares!

EH: Yeah right!

BH: The idea of this is not to worry about those things, so I may be in Chattanooga, I may be in Nashville, but I'll be in Tennessee.

36:55

EH: Nice, well that sounds really fun. Well thanks so much for taking the time this morning and I'll send you the updated article.

BH: Okay, that's great. And you know, I'm just so sad that this pandemic thing has happened because I'd loved to have invited you to all kinds of things I was involved in...

EH: Yeah! I know!

BH: ...but all of that got dumped. Not my life as a storyteller, really, just, it's coming back. I should tell you that that is--I'm doing last week I did a corporate thing that, they--it's a long story, but I worked for a corporation as a storyteller and I won't even get into the details of that. But I also did Mountain State Spotlight.

EH: Oh cool!

BH: Their virtual event.

37:49

EH: Nice.

BH: So I was out. So I'm starting to get back out there virtually. I didn't really care much for virtually 'cause you can't feel people, you can't see people.

EH: Right, yeah.

BH: But I've got to tell more stories, so I'm gonna do that and I've got some other things. I think I did one thing for West Virginia Storytelling Guild, back a couple of months ago. But I've decided that it's now time to--even if it is virtual--I'm gonna go out there and do it.

EH: Nice. And has there been any word from The Moth about when that might air?

38:29

BH: No, um. The Moth--this whole pandemic thing has affected them in a very, well negative way actually. I don't know if you're aware but I was part of what they call Mainstream. Moth Mainstream.

EH: Right. Mainstage? Yeah.

BH: Mainstage, mainstage. Okay. That literally died on the vine. And when it died on the vine, they are doing some stuff virtually now and I know that 'cause I've listened to and watched it, but I was even under the impression from the director and the producer that they wanted me to maybe do some of the other mainstages that were playing and they've had like 2 or 3 of those a week in different parts of the country. And I said I would consider that. Remember, I'm a West Virginian and West Virginians don't like to be running around. I was not gonna be one of those like, there was a few guys there that evening that do this about 3 times a month. And I couldn't do that. Number 1 I couldn't tell the same story over and over and over and over. And number 2 I wouldn't have been able to--they...it takes about 4 days out of your life when you do that. So if you do three of 'em that's 12 days a year, I mean 12 days a month and my life in West Virginia will not allow me to run around 12 days a month (laughs). Well it will now! I mean, but I meant back then. So I was sort of glad--I hadn't really realized that and I was sort of after everything died and they never, they really didn't contact me other than a couple of things, to even suggest or talk about anything further, and they wouldn't be doing that now for a while because once this is all over they've got to build up Mainstage again. And so...but and I would, I really loved that experience and I loved the people, I loved those other tellers--these were people I never dealt with before and I absolutely loved the guy, Larry, the director. And I just, I found all of that, and it's because of you by the way! I realize that. You gave me that experience. (laughs)

EH: Aw, nice. (laughs) I'm glad that worked out.

BH: It really did and I loved it. And it could have gone further but then--and it may. I'm not gonna say it won't, I'm just saying that at this point, now and so they, but to answer your question directly, there has been no conversations with me around when they will air that story. What I do know, and what they have told me is that that story will not be part of, along with the other stories that you heard that night. In other words, that story will be themed into a themed program and stand alone on its own. It's not a part of that concert and the other, and I thought oh well, because when I listened to The Moth, I realized things are themed. So eventually there will be some theme and that story will be a part of that theme and they'll let me and everybody else know according to whatever her name--I can't remember her name. She said you'll know at least 60 and probably more days prior to that because of the way we schedule things, you'll know when it's coming. So when I learned I'll go ahead and give you that date. It'll be that Saturday, the one that airs here on Saturday, from 1-2 it'll be a part of that programming. And then they do other things. I'm finding out that The Moth is really a rather expansive group. They'll use that story there, they'll use it in a lot of other places too. So it's--and they paid for it so I'm not gonna complain, you know. (laughs) Okay.

EH: Yeah, keep me posted about that. And yeah, you take care and have fun on your travels.

BH: And Emily, anything that I can do for you...I considered the program, the intern [apprenticeship] program, but at this point I'm not doing anything and I'm thinking that my schedule will build up very slowly. If this would have been this time last year, well actually it wouldn't have worked either, because I really don't do a lot in December, January, and February. But my life as a storyteller starts in March and goes all the way through November everywhere. Or it did! (laughs)

EH: Right.

BH: So we'll have to see how things shake out here in the future.

EH: Okay. Yeah, that sounds good.

BH: Okay my friend!

EH: Thanks so much, Bill!

BH: You stay healthy. Good talking to you!

EH: Yeah, you too! Alright, take care.

BH: Uh-huh, bye-bye.

44:29

END OF INTERVIEW

END OF TAPE