

**Cora Hairston**

Where: Chief Logan State Park Museum

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Interviewer: Emily Hilliard

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**Cora Lee (Phillips) Hairston**

Cora Hairston, (b. 1942, Sarah Anne, WV) is a musician and writer from Logan County, West Virginia. She and her husband Fred, also a musician, currently live in Omar, West Virginia. Cora Hairston is the author of two novels, [\*Faces Behind the Dust\*](#) and [\*Hello World Here Comes Claraby Rose\*](#), both fictionalized accounts based on her childhood growing up in a Black coal camp. She spoke about her childhood, her music, and her writing practice.

EH: Emily Hilliard

CH: Cora Hairston

00:00

EH: So we are at Chief Logan State Park and it is May 3, 2016 and I'm here with Cora and Fred Hairston. Could you introduce yourself and tell me when and where you were born?

CH: Yes, my name is Cora L. Hairston, my maiden name was Phillips and I was born in Sarah Anne up Crystal Block Holler in 1942. Coal miner's daughter.

EH: And could you tell me a little bit about your family?

CH: I am the baby of 6 I had 4 brothers and 1 sister and they're all deceased now, but I'm the baby of them.

EH: And so your father was a miner?

CH: Yes, my dad was a coal miner and a very proud coal miner. He was a small man, not a big man in stature but he was a mighty man! (laughs) He loved coal mining. In fact, when he retired, and we had moved out of the holler that we were in to Omar, where we presently live, my dad would carry two scuttles of coal from across the creek, where there was a slate dump. He'd still mine coal every day. That was his pastime as a retired man from the coalmines.

EH: Wow.

CH: Yeah.

EH: What did your mom do?

CH: My mom was a housewife and she worked domestically down through the years, but she was a housewife and the best cook in the world and her nickname was Baby Doll, and my daddy called her Honey Babe. It was long before people actually knew her real name, which was Louanna. Yeah, she was Baby Doll.

EH: What are some of the things that she would cook?

CH: Oh gosh, there were rolls that you could smell a mile away and her Egg Custard Pies, oh gosh. Pinto beans never tasted like they tasted then. But there was one specialty that I regret not getting from her, you know how recipes... I just savored her food, but there was one particular thing that she made that I cannot master, and that was her gravy. Her turkey gravy. I don't know what she did to it, but I've never tasted anyone else's that tasted like that.

EH: Wow.

CH: She could cook!

EH: (laughs) So did you learn from her?

CH: Yes, yes, what I do know I did learn from her, from sitting looking and just watching and eating and seeing her beat a cake with her bare hands with the wooden spoon, with the bowl in her side, on the left side, and beating that cake! And even the sweet potato pies that we now have the joy of a mixer to mix up so it won't be stringy, she had her own method of stringing the sweet potato to get the strings out. Delicious.

EH: Do you know how she did that?

CH: I think it was through a cloth, a cheese cloth, or something like that. Or whatever it was. But the pies were not stringy. And her rolls were just, I don't know, her greens... I think it was just everything she'd fix, and if you don't know what chitlins are, chitlins are the large intestine of the hog, you know. So she was a master at making souse meat from the hog head and all of the feet, and all of that. Seeing her master that craft was unbelievable. It tastes nothing like what's in the stores now.

EH: Uh huh, so it was whole-hog cooking.

CH: It was whole hog cooking. I tell yeah. Threw away nothin but the squeal.

EH: (laughs) Why do you call it "south" meat?

CH: That's all I ever heard of it being is souse meat.

EH: Oh, SOUSE meat.

CH: Yeah, souse meat.

EH: Oh, yeah, I've heard of that. Okay.

CH: Yeah, homemade souse meat and that was like I say, I've seen it at one of the stores here, in fact I bought some, and it's... it tastes okay, but it's nothing like mama's. And another thing she was the master of was biscuits. And I remember as a child grabbing the cold biscuits off the back of the stove, which was a snack. And they were delicious—cold as well as hot. Yeah, she was a good cook.

EH: I'm a pie baker so I always ask about pies.

CH: I do pretty good, but I'm not a master baker at all. I just didn't pick that up. But that's about the only thing that I'm not good at. (laughs)

EH: And how many generations back in West Virginia does your family go?

CH: Uh, my mother originally is from North Carolina. I'm really not real sure from where in the south my daddy came from. Never knew any of his kin people. You know, he tells us he had a brother which we never met, but I think they had been separated years before. And so what part of the south he was born in, I didn't really know and we were his only family. And his pride and joy. And, but there were three things you didn't mess with and that was his money, his children... he just, you know he was a family man and he took no junk! His nickname was Daddy Rabbit. Everybody knew him as Daddy Rabbit.

EH: Do you know where that came from?

CH: I have no idea.

EH: (laughs) Do you know where in North Carolina your mother was from?

CH: Raleigh.

EH: Oh, okay.

CH: I think it was Raleigh. Or Reedsville, one of the two.

EH: I lived in Chapel Hill for a while.

CH: Did ya?

EH: Mmhm.

CH: My children are in Charlotte. Two of 'em are.

EH: Yeah, I have family from Thomasville.

CH: Okay.

EH: Could you tell me what your childhood was like in the coal camp?

CH: The memories of my childhood are great. I remember as a little girl running to greet daddy when he'd get off from work, to get that little taste of a sandwich that he may have left—purposefully. And running up and down the camp, doing double dutch and jumping rope and playing jacks, and we were outdoors children. And that was a great childhood, running up the camp past the graveyard, running as fast as we could past the graveyard to get up the camp to visit with other children.

7:46

As a child, it wasn't realized that we didn't have anything per se, you know what I mean? Because I think it was purposefully our parents that shielded us from the fact that there wasn't much. But we were never hungry, never clothesless, you know. I can remember my father and I

never knew this until some years later, but all of us children, we always ate dinner together. And he never bothered to put food on his place until after we had our food. And then he would put food on his plate. I never knew—I never paid any attention about it, you know, but at that time, but I found out years later that it was because he wanted to make sure that we were full. You know? And he would do without for us because his child hadn't been the greatest. So...

EH: That's sweet.

CH: Yeah, I had good parents. And I never, ever heard them argue!

EH: Really?

CH: **Never. Ever.** Heard my daddy say a harsh word to my mother or her to him. **Never.** And I imagine they had to have... I mean please! But however they did it, I don't know, but I never ever did! I thought wow—come on!

EH: (laughs)

CH: (laughs) Once you get grown and you get married, I'm like y'all had to have some disputes sometime! (laughs)

EH: Must have kept it...

CH: They probably went outside on the back porch or whatever, I don't know what they did...

EH: Wow.

CH: Yeah, but I had, my 2 oldest brothers... I can remember, oh my goodness. My daddy had built an additional room onto our little house and my 2 oldest brothers slept in that room and one night they were fighting over the cover. And they were grown men working in the mines themselves at this time. (laughs) Well my daddy ruled his house and I remember him taking his belt strap, his mining belt, and going in there and whippin them! (laughs) And they said, oops, time to go! He said, in my house you follow my rules—you know how that is? But yeah, I remember that so well. Them two grown men in there wrastlin over the cover! (laughs)

EH: Wow.

CH: Yeah, and they eventually left after working in the mines and ventured to the city. One went to Missouri and one went to Des Moines, Iowa, and my 2 youngest brothers followed later on to Des Moines, Iowa and the one in Missouri ended up coming back to West Virginia for a while. Then he went back to Detroit where he stayed and worked in the... for Chrysler for years. My sister married young and she's the mother of 15 and 11 living and we just lost one daughter which was the baby daughter. She died about over a year ago. But they had a big family and my sister passed some years ago.

EH: What was the community like there in the coal camp?

CH: Well, I can remember our little house set up on the hill. There were two rows of houses, double family houses down below the hill and there was one little house that set off from the two rows of houses and another house set up on the hill across from us. And there were the outhouses and the clotheslines and the well, and the coal mine up on the hill. And our little church up on the hill above our house. The little red church on the hill was actually true. It set up on the hillside. And I could run across the hill from where I lived. On that hill to my church instead of going down the hill and running up the road up the hill. And right below the hill where the church was a little lady named Mrs. Maxwell. And I don't know how old she was but golly, she had to be way up there! And got around better than any of us. But it was a joyous camp. You know it was, everybody was... it was a village. That... if you got in trouble, they were allowed to discipline you. It was just something that... respect was high. I'd say. Respect was high, which you don't see very much of anymore. But that's the way it was. It was a community of sharing, and so therefore I guess that's why no one ever went without because if someone didn't have something and someone else did, then they shared it. And it seemed always that there might be an extra person at our table. Which was a friend of a friend or other children that happened to be there, and they were all—no one was sent home. You know? IF you were there when dinner time came, you sat down and you ate. So, I just have good memories of my childhood. I wouldn't trade em for anything. Not for... not for this day and time, though.

EH: Was music always a part of your life?

CH: Yes. Music has always been a part of your life, as a little girl I don't know what age it was, but there was this lady in our church and her name was Dorothy Walker. And she had a beautiful soprano voice and she got several of us girls together to form a little group. And the one song that sticks out is "Tell the Angels."

14:33

And I was the one that was leading and the other girls were the background. And there was no music—no musical instruments. So the name of the song was tell the angels, I'm on my way. Tell the angels I'm coming home to stay. And I just loved to hear her sing and how she presented, you know, us to, how to do it. And then later on I met my husband's brother who was a friend going to school and that's how I met **him**, and he was all music and so was his brother and just in high school, as a matter of fact when I was a senior, I was voted best female vocalist of the school. And oh I could sing then! Now I'm croaking, but I could sing then and I sang all the time, it was just something that was in me. And my husband and I had bands. Singing groups and sang with him down through the years and then I think we closed down every night club in Logan! (laughs) Uh, I think we lost the guitar player or something and so Fred's very talented on quite a few instruments, so he took over the guitar and he put me on the organ. I knew nothing

about playing organ. He told me, put my hands on middle C, and stay there! I'm like okay, see here I am going wah wah wah (makes noise), you know?

But from that, that teaching, you know, I've gone on to really stick my teeth into it and I ventured a little out to the piano and I **love** it. I thank God every day for the gift of having the talent that I do have. Can't play like, I don't read music... can't play like anybody else, but I play like God wants me to. That's my way! And I just love it! Music is just in my bones and I've been blessed to write... I was naming them, in fact I wrote them down just make sure that I wasn't deceiving myself! That I have written 20 or more songs... and I have. And to me they're beautiful. I mean, I get joy out of singing them. And I try to do them **every day**, some of them. So I have been blessed to write those songs. And they're songs that I **need** to do something with because I feel that being a blessing to me, they may be a blessing to someone else. I've just never taken the time to have them copywritten and put in safety. But if I ever hear anybody singing, and I know it's my song, I'm gonna have to deal with me! I have sang some of em out in public before. In fact, just this last week, I was given a poem. And when I say given, I always feel there's been a gift that's been passed down through me, so last night sitting there, I happened to be going through my bill stack getting this month's bill's ready, and I ran across the poem that I had started but hadn't finished! And I thought huh! Maybe I should finish this poem, so I, while I was watching "Dancing with the Stars" and when a commercial (laughs), when a commercial would come on then something would come through the mind that would go along with the poem, and I finished it, oh about 1:30 last night.

EH: Oh wow.

CH: It was completed. And so that is... my love of music carries me, I think is... carries me. I have a talented son. Ah! My son sings and plays beautifully. And I think music is just something that is universal and it gives me much joy. And I'm told that it gives others joy. Like I said, I can't sing like I used to but I still try. And I always will as long as I can. But I'd like to read you this poem I wrote last night!

EH: Yeah! I'd love to hear that.

CH: Being that I never thought I'd live to see a Black president...

EH: Mmhm

CH: This is not the only one that I've written, but this is how this came about. And why I don't know, so I titled it "The Dream," and it goes like this:

I had a dream one night of a day

I thought I'd never live to see

A man that is President of the United States



With color, just like me.

The dream was so real and exciting to me

For as a slave, I was not yet free

How in the world could this be, huh?

I saw myself in my dress of blue

As the parade in your honor was passing through.

Oh my God, can this be real?

Colored folks getting a thrill?

From toil and soil, sweat and tears

Hard, hard labor down through the years?

Oh Lawd, don't let me wake

And find that this was all fake,

This kind of joke, I just can't take!

A fool of me my dream would make.

Well, thank God I did awake

To find out it was not a fake.

You see it was my great-great grandmother's dream

She had talked about when she was a teen

She had told my grandmother as a child

Just wait, you'll see it in a little while.

To my mother the dream was passed,

And on and on to me the dream came true at last.

EH: Aw, that gave me the chills!

CH: Aw, thank you.

EH: You should send that to the President.

CH: You know, I called the White House, believe it or not! (laughs) I had the honor of meeting the teacher of the year Andrea Santos.

EH: Mm! They're there today, did you know that?

CH: Where are they?

EH: The teachers of the year.

CH: In Washington?

EH: Yeah, cause my friend is the Maine teacher of the year and she posted, actually at 4:30 they're gonna stream it online.

CH: Oh wow! Oh wow, and I'm so proud of her. She is such a sweetheart.

EH: So she's the West Virginia teacher of the year?

CH: Yes! She teaches at Logan High.

EH: Oh wow!

CH: And as a matter of fact, she honored me with being allowed to come and speak to her Spanish class for the whole day. It was wonderful. And anyway, she was telling me—we were at a women's club meeting and she was our guest speaker, and she was telling me of her journeys that she was going to be doing as teacher of the year and that the White House was going to be one of them. I said "Oooh girl, I'd love to give you my books to give to Obama!"

EH: Yeah!

CH: She said, I will I'll take em, I just don't know what I'll do...I said, well I tell you what, I won't put that pressure on you, I'll just call the White House. I dialed the White House and actually got ahold to whoever it was, they gave me the information on what to do to send a book to President Obama and Michelle and I also wanted to send one to Joe Biden and Jill cause I love them both too. So I've got to get on that, to send them—I've written 2 books and I would like to send them each a copy, and 2 poems that I've written, a hymn... I told them I don't want them to be tossed away or for them to think I'm sending them something vicious, but they said they scrutinize, which I figured they did.

EH: I think they run them through you know, a detector...

CH: So they would probably actually get them, wouldn't they?

EH: Mmhm.

CH: Oh boy, that would be great.

EH: Yeah.

CH: That would be wonderful.

EH: Did you see the video that was going around of the woman who was—I think she was 108, and she was dancing with them?

CH: Yes I did! That was wonderful! That was so great!

EH: That made me cry.

CH: That was so touching. And that was... this poem to think, 108, she would never **dream** that she would live to see that day. And to have that honor? I'd be dancing too.

EH: I would too. She was amazing.

CH: (laughs) Yeah.

24:03

EH: So was that, do you think, was that a real dream do you think?

CH: I don't know! I don't know how it came to me. It just did!

EH: Yeah.

CH: I would say that in years prior that they never would have ever even thought about it or considered it. Well, I have to say that in my lifetime I never thought that I'd see it. So I would say this is somebody's dream at one time.

EH: Oh yeah, many people's.

CH: And it actually did come true. So...

EH: So could you tell me about your books?

CH: Okay. My books came about... never ever thought about writing a book. You know, everybody says "I'm gonna write a book." But I never actually put that to thought much. But the colored school, the Black school that was here at one time, Aracoma High School, has an annual reunion every year somewhere in the United States and this particular year, some years back, it was in Columbus, Ohio, and several of us quote unquote **girls** were reminiscing about our childhood and there was something that two of us knew, that we knew that if the adults knew when we were kids that we knew it, what would they think, you know? And we were laughing about it and a lot of other things and somebody spoke up and said, I think it was April spoke up and said, you know somebody ought to write a book. And I, me and my mouth, I said, you know I'm gonna do that! And really, that was just, you know, flippant, and went on—this was in July

and I don't know why it is but it seems like after you come off vacation and you're back down to earth and everything it seems like, what do I do now? And I was at that point and being retired, both of us sitting there looking at each other, and him looking at John Wayne from 1919, and I'm like well, okay! So I get on a computer and I thought, well you know, I'm gonna try to start on this book. Had no idea how to start it, what to write about, how I would go about it, had no idea. So, and sometime during that time of thinking, I thought, well I'll just do it as a child being in the coal field and raised up. So that's the way I started as a 5 and a half year-old colored girl, through her mind, coal miner's daughter on the Black side. And started like that and it's fiction with a **twist** of truth. You know all of the characters are fictitious, but you can't tell my friends that, they think they know everybody in the book! (laughs) But it is fiction and my vivid imagination and so that's how I got started on writing the book, and going down through it, I'd ask my husband things about the coal mines, you know, so he could kind of put his expertise into it since he is a retired coal miner. And then I'd read him some of the passages in the book and he said, "Cora. You're not gonna put that in that book." And I'd say, yes I am! He'd say, "Mmm Mmm Mmm, girl, where do you get your mind a-thinking? I'd say I don't know! But anyway I laugh at myself at some of the things... I've read my own book twice, that's just how hilarious I think it is. And so sometime I'd have... I actually know what a writer means when they say writers block, because then I would go like days or even maybe 2 weeks of not knowing where to take back up at. But then I'd get a burst and I was typing away and bouts continued to come, just riding along in the car, then I had to start taking notes and jotting down things that right then, to come home and you know get back on. And finally, you know, we were in Walmart one Saturday, Fred and I—I think we were having tires put on the car and we were walking through Walmart and in passing we met up with a couple of friends that I used to work with at the hospital, Ken and Carol Lundley, and we were greeting because we hadn't seen each other in quite a while and I was informing him that I'd written a book! He said, Oh, I've written two books! I said what? Really? So he was giving me information on what he'd done and I said, Ken I don't know what to do from here! You know, what do I do? How do I go through getting it out of my hands? So he was the one that guided me through the publishing company that he published his books through. They're self-published so I have to toot my own horn as the saying goes. Have to pay my own money! And so with his information that was how my first book got published. In fact I said Ken, I want you to proofread this for me to see what you think cause I didn't know how to take it. So I gave him whatever they call it, the thing you stick inside of the computer—you know what I mean, SanDisk?

EH: Yeah, USB.

CH: Mhm, and he took it home and he said... I said tell me what I need... critique, take out or whatever. He said, I wouldn't change a thing! He said, don't you change anything! This is this little nosey girl, and you leave her like she is!

EH: Uh-huh.

CH: So I said okay, so now the day I've already contacted the publisher, we've talked and they sent it back, the proofreading and all of this that and the other and she calls me one day and she says, Cora—which I don't know her, haven't seen her, we just through talking over the phone have had a rapport. And she says Cora, is Mr. Abernathy still alive? And I said, Mr. who? She said, turn to page... go to your computer, go to page such and such, okay so I do, she said, Mr.... is he still alive? I said Mr.... No girl! (laughs) I said, remember this is fiction. She said, oh my God it's fiction! That's right! I was gonna tell you to change his name if he was still alive! I said there is no Aunt Ceely and there is no Mr. Abernathy. She said... it reads so true. So that's just, you know. Now, oh gosh, I was on a writing spree then for sure! So I cut that book off from 5 and a half to 15 years old. First book. And I thought that's enough because at this, it takes place in the 40s and 50s when the negroes migrated from the deep south to West Virginia, Kentucky, anywhere there's mining... the book could be in Chile where the mines are, just anyplace where there are mines. And the little girl can be any little girl growing up in that era. And so I cut it off at 15 because I thought that's far enough because times have change and many things have taken place in her life and now she's at that adolescent age of teenage. And I thought okay, that's enough of... so I stopped it there and I had already started out on the second book, where she starts out from 15 to almost 18. Graduating. Integration has happened. A lot has taken place in those 3 years from 15 to 18.

And so the 2<sup>nd</sup> book, 1<sup>st</sup> book is titled *Faces Behind the Dust*. And it wasn't titled that from the beginning. I had titled it *Coal Miner's Daughter on the Black Side*. Well my corresponding through the publishing company said, Cora, I don't think that will work, you know Loretta Lynn already has that *Coal Miner's Daughter* so I don't think that... she said it's not a conflict of interest, but the title just wasn't gonna be too good for the book, so I did that as a subtitle and I am grand musician for Electra Prince Hall Masonic Lodge Eastern Stars, and we were holding, I think it was the 98<sup>th</sup> annual session in Martinsburg I think it was, so now here I am, I had had this title in mind for 2 years while I was working on the book. So I was at a loss for a retitle. So at the morning session I go to my keyboard and sat down and as my sisters in the Stars began to enter, I told them, before the day is over, I want you all to jot down a title for my book, I don't have a title now. So after the morning session, they came and laid pieces of paper on the keyboard and, but this little lady came running. She said "Ooooooh sister Hairston, sister Hairston, I've got it, I've got it." She said, "Ooh I've got goosebumps." I said, well what is it?! She said, "Faces Behind the Dust." I said, Ooh I've got goosebumps too—that's perfect. And because in the book there is a sentence with that very title.

EH: Oh wow.

CH: And I'm like Oh yeah, that's it! So her name was Sheila McGee. And so I honored her on one of my dedication pages. And so that's how that became titled. But the little girl's name is Claraby Rose! So the second book is titled, *Hello World Here Comes Claraby Rose*. With a vengeance. She's a teenager now.

35:11

EH: (laughs)

CH: So that's how, and I finished that and it was published and completed and out for July. It was on the market.

EH: Of this year?

CH: Mmhm. Well July of 15.

EH: Right. So where could I get them?

CH: Amazon. com. Barnes and Noble, and I toot my own horn from the trunk of my car. Like 50 cent did! (laughs) People say, you got any books? Girl, I keep books! I'm never without my books, you know, just in case someone wants some. So, yeah, that's how the book came about. And everyone's wondering if there's gonna be a trilogy, if there's gonna be a third one and I don't know, she's a full-grown woman now. So I had already asked my pastor to do some hail marys over both of those! So, really have to pray for the third one! Because she's a woman and how do I guide her through her womanly years and still make her a lady. And, but human. And without being salacious! And 50 Shades of Gray! (laughs) So I'm still working on that, I don't know whether it'll come about or not. But I've also started working on 2 other books that are completely not of any similarity to the 2 that I've written. So I'm just on a writing roll. Got nothing but time that God has granted me, being a cancer of 6 years, I am blessed and highly favored! And I thank him for all of the blessings you know. And so. I'm just living my life like it's golden with my husband who I drag everywhere, you know. And getting ready to take him on a Caribbean cruise.

EH: Oh! That'll be fun.

CH: It's gonna be fun. We'll probably lay out under the sombreils or whatever you call it. But yeah it's gonna be fun.

EH: What are the 2 upcoming books about?

CH: Well one is about this girl whose had this boyfriend through high school and well, should say junior high on up through graduation and he, well, I don't want to give too much of it away but she's, she's kinda miffed at him right now in the book because she's at one college and he's at another. And he's, thinks he's been a little careless and she's caught him and... It's good. I think it'll be. I think it's gonna be pretty good. Because... I don't want to give it...

EH: That's okay, that's okay. I'll just wait to read it.

CH: But I think it's gonna be good. And it's gonna be shocking! From the start in the events that take place in it... it's gonna be a little shocking you know?

EH: Good! Keeps you on your toes.

CH: Sort of a thriller type thing.

EH: Cool!

CH: Yeah.

EH: Can we go back a little bit to what you did after high school in your working years?

CH: Right out of high school, which was in 1960, oh I can remember standing outside under the sunshine and beautiful day and some of the girls were just crying “Oh I’m gonna miss you!” And me and my girlfriends were just saying, oh they crazy! (laughs) Oh we were headed to the big lights, bright cities, you know! So yes, my aunt—my mother’s sister took my cousin and I who had graduated at the same time—she was in Virginia—too Chicago. I was in Logan one day and Chicago the next! And having my high school diploma in hand, I went job hunting. Well my first job was at Spiegel—I was a pre-adjuster, had a desk job. You know, that was pretty good. I stayed in Chicago for roughly a couple of years and one thing that came about during my... with my singing, working at Spiegel I had become friends with some of the girls there and there was one lady who was in her, I think she may have been in her early 40s. With 3 or 4 of us being virtually teenagers between 18, 19 or so, she was sort of like our mother hen. And so when we’d want to go out, she would chaperone us. And we were at this particular club and I can’t think of the name of the club, I’m not sure whose club it was, but Red Fox was there. And it was the Red Fox Review was the name of the show that was being presented. Any time a song came on, on the jukeboxes at that time, I was always singing and so here we are, I’m singing along with the... I’m trying to think of the song now, can’t think of the song I was singing along with... I was overheard and being overheard, I was asked if I would sing you know, on Red Fox’s stage—are you kidding me? So, okay, not that particular night but it was going to be the following Saturday. Well, all my friends were all excited, they buy me this beautiful blue taffeta dress. It was beautiful. Full and, I can visualize it now, for me to be all dressed up up there. So I can’t remember the song that I sang but I did. And after that Red Fox and one of his I guess, what you say, assistants or whatever, came to my aunt’s house to ask if I could travel with them. And my aunt was my guardian and in that day, you don’t do as you do, you do as you’re told, you follow instructions, you follow orders. I never had a desire to be a star or a singer. That was not in my... it just wasn’t. I liked to sing but I never wanted to be a, per se, and so they were talking about me and I wasn’t allowed to be in the room—I was in the kitchen, but I was listening. I was eavesdropping. And my aunt was very soft spoken, little short dumpy lady, beautiful caramel colored lady with hair over her shoulders. She was sitting there and she says, “Well, if one of her brothers goes with her, I might consider it. But I can not allow her to go with you by herself.” So that was the end of that. And but I **never** ever, **never** ever regretted that being from the coalfield, dumb as dirt, I mean hillbilly all of the... they even talked about my accent and I didn’t think I had one! But they thought it was the cutest thing, because I’d say “up there” and “down

yonder” and you know all of that slang. They say... I’d say “we going up there?” “up there?” They’d say “up **where?**” “Up there!” Anyway, when I came back home because when I left I was in **love**, and so **love** brought me back and I’ve been back ever since. And so married my teenage love. We’ve been together so long now—lord have mercy! We were dating when I was about 14, 15 and I’m 73 now, so put those years together! (laughs)

EH: Wow, I wouldn’t have guessed 73.

CH: I am. I am. And so I worked at Fico Manufacturing for some years, had my children in between and worked as a teacher’s aide through the school system, got me a little college in at Southern, and could type like mad. I was typing over a hundred words, you know, on those old type writers. So I had the typing experience when I went to Logan General as a nurse’s aide and worked there and loved, LOVED working as a nurse’s aide. As a matter of fact, Billy, I forget what Billy’s last name was-- I was coming in to Walmart and he was leaving last night, and he’s almost 90 now, I think he’s 80 something. And he saw me—he calls me Cory. He says “There’s my Cory!” and we hugged—he’s real tall. I said, “Billy how you doing?” He said, “I’m getting old and ugly!” I said “you just **stay** the way you are!” But he is one of the patients that I remember as a nurse’s aide that we stayed with all night because he had been in a severe mining accident. He was in Ward D, this was in the old hospital, and we were afraid, as nurse’s aides, we were afraid to leave him. We didn’t think we’d see him the next day. Cause he was messed up, he was crushed. And we were virtually worked with him around the clock. And he credits us with saving his life.

EH: Wow.

CH: But he was our baby, we took him under our wings. And every time I see him the memories just flash back. But I worked at Logan General for 30 years going from a teacher’s aide to medical records where I was a file clerk and then I went on to being a transcriptionist and then going, transitioning over to the new hospital I was given the position as Radiology Coordinator. And I was there for 30 years and after that retired in 1997, I think somewhere like that. July the 8<sup>th</sup>. Never regretted a day of retirement in my life! But yeah, that is my work life and now, you know just my life reverts around my church work, my community work and my home and my family and my grandchildren... my music and writing and housework! And... (laughs)

EH: It never ends!

CH: So I’ve got a full life, people think I stay gone but really I be shut up in the house 2 or 3 days because it’s like—I don’t want to go nowhere! So it’s like, came in from prayer meeting Wednesday and didn’t go back out ‘til Saturday, it’s like where am I going? I go to Walmart, church and home, Walmart, church and home. SO... that’s the life unless we take out to Charlotte or something like that.

EH: Yeah, or your cruise.



CH: Yeah. Well getting ready for the cruise, yeah! I'm gonna enjoy that.

EH: You've got some good cruise clothes on.

CH: Well I'll tell you, wait 'til you see it! I got him some yesterday, gotta make sure he can wear 'em, though. Yeah, we're gonna enjoy it.

EH: How have you seen things change around here?

CH: Oh my gosh. Logan used to be so FULL of people. I mean people. IN the community where I live now, massive, massive people and the community where I was raised, all around me, oh, there is nothing now. People everywhere! And children playing. And just people enjoying life, it seemed. Sitting out on the porch, hollering at your neighbor, even, it's just nothing like it used to be. I look at the way that children are today and how I don't know what has happened. I don't know where we went wrong. When I say "we", I mean as a **nation**. I think we got it backwards. And I'm gonna say this and I'm gonna say it boldly.

49:34

Because it's my opinion and like noses, we all got one! But I think when they took discipline out of the home and prayer out of the schools that we lost our children. Like I say, being raised during my era, respect was expected I mean, there was no if and buts about it! It was high. And either, even the teachers that are left today, right now, my husband is 81 years old and there is a teacher who's still living, when we attend these reunions that Aracoma has annually, these 80-some year-old men, when this particular teacher walks by, they all, they revert back to childhood, with respect. "How are you coach?" I mean it's just that mound of respect. And I don't see that. I wish that—I've got a cousin that's a teacher. And like Andrea Santos. If we could clone them and have that type of teaching reiterated. And if we could open our children... that have children. When I say children, like my children—and that generation, and just pour the knowledge of our childhood into their heads to let them see how raising these 2 kids now is so different. I know times change, it's inevitable, but there are some things that need to stay the same. And that is the mound of respect and I don't know I just see such a sadness in how our youth is being swallowed up in the system of jails, drugs, and all of the negativity that has been... place a burden on their shoulders. If you've got a child that comes out unscathed these days you are among the blessed because it's so sad to see. And it's not because we don't have. I don't know what it is but I think that... I just think that sometimes we... greed and fame and fortune and whatever it is that takes precedent over what should be in rearing our children has gone. And it's so sad that I don't know... as the saying goes, about drugs, and the cliché comes up, "Oh I was drugged as a child—drug to church!" (laughs)

EH: I never heard that one.

CH: And now, you know, its—“Do you want—are you going to church today?” We—you didn’t have a choice! You know, it’s like, you were going to school and church whether you wanted to or not. Those were two things that you were going to do. Now if you happened to be sick on Sunday morning and didn’t get up for Sunday School and church, there was no needing getting well at 3 o’clock thinking you were gonna go to the movie. If you were sick that morning you just may as well stay sick because you weren’t going anywhere. And I think those rules have been—they’re gone, you know. It’s what the child wants. And I don’t know. I hate to sound like I’m being hard or harsh, but I just see it, you know. Not in every child, but your environment doesn’t have to determine how you come out because you can rise above your environment you know. But that’s where it takes, that village. It takes that village, you know. And I still think that, don’t want to sound preachy, but I still think the church still has a big part to play in that. **But** it still starts at home. So, you know, if they would only—if you can’t bring ‘em, send em! You know. And the nurturing needs to be—they need to be nurtured. And but I really do blame the system in some way, in the way that we allowed somebody to take—now that’s not for everybody and like I say, if you don’t want to pray, don’t pray! If you’re not. But that may be the only prayer the children hear. Is at school. Or wherever and I mean, I don’t know, just so much has changed and I pray for this generation and the future, you know, because things have not—I looked from 9/11 and I wrote a song about that. About how things have not changed in the terrorism and the war. If anything it’s gotten worse, so you know. We need to turn from our wicked ways and get back on our knees! And he said you know, he’d heal the land! But hard heads, my daddy used to say, just makes soft minds, you know what I mean?

EH: Yeah, yeah.

CH: So.

EH: Yeah, my mom’s a teacher and she sees that too.

CH: Yeah?

EH: Yeah, she always says it starts at home.

CH: It starts at home.

EH: So she sees the shift. But that makes me think about your songs and how you get inspired to write. So what do you write songs about and when you write, do you write them down, do you go to the piano, what’s your writing process like?

CH: Sometimes, in fact it has happened in the middle of the night while I was sleeping. I wake up with a song. I have gotten up out of my bed and gone to the piano and tried it out. And if I don’t put it down right then or tape it right then, they I lose it. And I’ve lost some during that time. So some songs are inspired like 2 songs I wrote for my sister during the time that she was going through her cancer and during her last days. You know when you’re going through

sickness, all your family can be around you but you feel you're all, you're in this by yourself. So those songs, some are inspired. I wrote one song just recently, revolved around Trayvon and Michael Brown. And it's entitled "Come On in the House Little Tired Boy." Come on in now so that you can rest. You've played and played, stayed and stayed now, come on in the house little tired boy." And this is mom calling her little boy in from play. "Come on in now, you've been out all day." One song that I wrote when my cousin died, Joan lost her son. That song was around him and it was titled "Read Me that Story, Mama, about the Man from Galilee." And it's very very pretty. And some songs, like I said, the one that... we were on our way as a matter of fact to Charlotte, my oldest son was sitting in the back and dad was driving and I was asleep! And I woke up startled, sort of like. I was reaching in my pocket book to get pen and paper, and Gerald my oldest son said... he's named Fitzgerald so we call him Gerald, he said, "what is it mom?" I said I've got to jot this down! This song was just coming to me. Well this was November and September the 11<sup>th</sup> was a year, had been a year. And so I was trying to write what was in my mind and try to hum along with it as it was coming. And so this song has been written for what, 10, however long years, it was 9, 10 years? 2001 I think was when it was, so it was a year later, a year and a couple of months later that I wrote this... the song was given to me. And it was titled "These are the Days." But now I've got to retitle it! Because it's "These are the Years" after the day the tower walls came down. And it's beautiful, I think. It's a litany of what's happened and so some of my songs come through inspiration, some come through joy and I wake up and I think about the goodness of God and I look out I see the trees and the snow or the blanket, how he covers the ugliness up with the snow, and the trees are, you know, I'm like God, you know you are awesome! So then there came "Almighty God, father of the universe, the maker of everything. Almighty God." And... ah! That gives me a thrill just even thinking about it. But it's just, you know, was just, I don't know, I wrote a song that is, has a little, sounds a little "Lean on Me" tingle to it. Now when I do that one, I am off in lala land! I am high on praise then! And I get that joy out of me and God. All-time... I guess that's why I've never put them out there. One of my songs is in the book—the first book. It was during the time the little girl had a best friend and she'd been sick all of her life. And she passed. And she left Claraby something and that was this song. And she told her she could sing it if she wanted to, she'd have to do it her way. So Claraby put the tune to it, she got the nerve up to sing it. And it's called "I Believe." And that's just how they come, just like this poem. I never know when they're coming. I never sit down and say I'm gonna write me a song. I could be singing just an old hymn from a hymn book and finish that and something will come that will flow and a song will come from that. So...however he gives them to me...

EH: And you've never recorded them?

CH: No. You know, I think Dooney—when I say Dooney, Landau Eugene Murphy Junior. He lived right across the street from me, from us and I had written 2 songs and he was always all night you could hear him in his bedroom doing his music and stuff you know. So I had called

him up, called him over to the house and he brought his recorder over and I said, “I want to put these 2 on CD.” So I did the music to ‘em. So while he was there I sang to them. So I know those 2 are on a CD. And then I had Billy Dingus, a mighty piano player here in Logan, and I went to his house where he had a studio, it’s been years ago, and he put the music to one of my songs. And those are about the only three that I actually have... other than me recording them on a cassette or something. But I have none out there in the atmosphere. And every year I lie to the people at Aunt Jenny’s—they say, “you don’t have—don’t you have a recording.” I say, “I don’t have one, next year, I promise!” I lie every year, I’ve never done it yet! (laughs)

EH: (laughs) What’s Aunt Jenny’s?

CH: Aunt Jenny

EH: Aunt Jenny Wilson?

CH: Aunt Jenny Wilson, yes! Pickin’ in the Park. I’m blessed every year to be asked by her grandson to come and participate, you know? So I get the pleasure of doing it on Sunday cause I do all gospel and it’s a great honor cause they allow me to pray over the food, and I’m like alright now! Just let me preach a little bit here! But it’s been an honor for some years past to be a part of Aunt Jenny’s Pickin in the Park, you know?

EH: Great. When is that?

CH: That’s usually around Labor Day isn’t it honey? Usually around the Labor Day holiday. And they have an array of musicians that come in and fill the day with singing. A couple of days, I think it’s Saturday and Sunday. But they still, I think they have it on Fridays all the time at the building that’s called Pickin in the Park. It used to be at the amphitheater but it seemed like every year it would **pour** rain so they had to take it inside. I get a joy out of it.

My husband has gotten to the point now, he’s, he still plays so don’t think he can’t play—he still gets in there and tears that piano up! But his wind is short and all and he can’t, his stamina to try to fill in a concert or something like that. Now he and Bob Noon, who’s my brother, from another mother, he and I and Fred would get together with some of the guys and reminisce. He loves Motown and all... and I do too. So for Fred’s 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, he gave him a big party and we just had a Motown time. It was great.

EH: Fun.

CH: Yeah.

EH: Well I hope you do record. I’ll try to make it to Pickin in the Park but I hope to hear you sometime.

CH: Oh, okay! Andrea Santos and I are going to pray, we have promised that we're gonna sing at her church real soon. So we have got to get together. But I have got to wait until the girl gets unbusy! She's busy, so...

EH: Well let me know anytime you're going to perform and I'll try to make it down.

CH: I will.

EH: And I could record you if you wanted. I mean I'm not a pro music recorder, but I could make a recording just so you have it.

CH: Oh you could? You know what I've been thinking, now when I say me I see, I've even prayed about this because I don't want it to be like I'm trying to, when I say about my books, I'm gonna toot my own horn about my books, I'm gonna toot that horn! That's just it. But my songs and my son writes too and he's got some beautiful songs that you know, that we are just not doing anything with and, but I have been thinking for the last several weeks about doing a concert with a litany of my original, all of these originals and having a concert. I don't know how I would go about it and it's not for anything but just for them to be heard. And but I wanted to not be seen as being braggadocios. You know what I'm saying?

EH: Yeah, I don't think anyone would think that!

CH: Ah, I could care less! (laughs) I've gotten to the point, I could care less! But you know that's something I've been thinking about.

EH: Yeah, that would be great!

CH: But we'll see.

EH: I think you should do it.

CH: We'll see. And hey, I'll call you up and get you to record it—that'd be one way of getting' it recorded!

EH: Yeah, totally!

CH: Okay, alright. That's... sounds like a winner. Sounds like a winner.

EH: Well I don't want to take up too much more of your time...

CH: Honey, we don't have nothing but time on our hands!

EH: (laughs) I did want to ask you about—you said you play Rosa Parks? And is that for the Humanities Council or that's for the museum?

CH: Well, Debby? Where'd she go...

Debbie (from Chief Logan State Park Museum): I'm right here. You need me?

CH: My Rosa Parks portrayal that I do here is for...

D: Black History Month.

CH: It's for Black History Month.

E: Okay.

CH: But it usually ends up being done in February because of the weather.

D: The weather. Exactly right!

CH: Well, March. We did it in March this year because the weather was—last year was the same thing.

D: We had four...

EH: Oh wow.

CH: And then we had 2 colleges attend. Was it Jesuit College out of St. Louis, Missouri. They were wearing a t-shirt... in attendance.

D: Aunt Jenny Festival.

CH: I thought about Aunt Jenny. That's Pickin in the Park. But I did my Rosa portrayal here at the museum and they bus in the children and it's such an honor and a great thing, you know. And I go to the schools. My cousin, she's a first grade teacher up at Holden and she got me started in it coming up through her school doing it. Then I do it at the churches, you know, during Black History Month and all. But it's been a pleasure learning as I go about how important Rosa was in that struggle.

EH: Yeah, yeah.

CH: And playing her is an honor. It's keeping her alive!

EH: Yeah. Well maybe next time I can interview Fred if you're up for it!

CH: Sounds like a winner!

EH: But I wanted to ask too if there's other people you know who are musicians or who have knowledge of their community memories, who I should also interview.

CH: Okay let's see... oh you're talking about in the Black community or just...

EH: Any, any... I mean it would be great to do more in the Black community but really it could be any in Logan or the area.

CH: Well now in our band, Vern would be a good one.

FH: Mmhm.

CH: What's Vern's last name? Vern Dotson.

EH: Okay.

F: Oh you said Vern?

CH: Not Bernie. I'm talking about Vern who played with Bob. You don't know his last name? Is it Vern Henderson? Okay. He would be a good one to interview. And for music.

EH: Great. And he plays guitar?

FH: Bass.

CH: He plays the bass. And Tinker, oh my goodness. Oh yes. I cannot forget about Tinker.

EH: Vern...

CH: Henderson.

EH: Henderson? And Tinker...

CH: We call him Tink but his name is Garland, "Tinker" is his nickname. His last name is Ball. He's a mighty saxophone player.

EH: Okay.

CH: And I would like for you to interview Rev. Michael Pollard. His mother Mrs. Jean Pollard.

EH: P-O-L-L-A-R-D?

CH: P-O-L-L-A-R-D. His mother Jean, she passed. She was killed in a car accident. But she was a musician among **musicians**. And he could really give some history on her. For sure.

EH: Okay. And are they all Logan-based?

CH: Yes. Rev. Pollard lives up in Man. Garland lives in Logan—Garland lives at Omar as a matter of fact. Right down below me.

EH: Okay. And maybe I'll just get in touch with you for their contact.

CH: Okay. That'd be fine.

EH: And Joan's your sister-in-law?

CH: Joan's my cousin.

EH: Oh cousin, okay. Do you think she would be a good interview?

CH: Oh, I'm sure, she has a lot of knowledge. In fact, she was over New Employment for Women for years, under the Quaker ship, you know?

EH: Okay, that's what this was for, the book, Beth Spence's book-- with the American Friends Service.

CH: Yeah, mmhm, yeah. She is now the president of our local chapter of the Aracoma Alumni Association.

EH: Oh, okay! Well that would be great to get some of those stories too. Well is there anything you'd like to add?

CH: Well I appreciate you asking me for this interview. As you can see, I'm never short of words!

EH: I know, we could go on for hours! That's a good thing!

CH: (laughs) So this has been a pleasure and I appreciate you even considering me!

EH: Oh, well I really appreciate you taking the time.

CH: Just say I'm just blessed and highly favored!

EH: Great well I can't wait to read your books.

CH: Great, great! I appreciate that.

EH: Alright let me turn this off. Yeah, I might... do you have copies with you?

1:14:59

END OF TAPE