

**Interview with
Thomas W. Chiles, Jr.
by Sharon Brescoach,
June 21, 1997**

**Oral History Interview MS 64-0564
Special Collections
Marshall University Libraries
Huntington, West Virginia**

**Oral History of Appalachia,
Marshall University
Huntington, West Virginia**

Released Form signed by Thomas W. Chiles, Jr.
July 5, 1977, at the Simmons High School Reunion,
Marriott Hotel, Charleston, West Virginia

Transcriber not identified
PDF prepared by Lisle G Brown

© Marshall University, 2003
All Rights Reserved

Note: In the original transcript there were blank spaces.
These have been indicated by [blank space] in the following text.

Thomas W. Chiles, Jr., Interview

SB:...hoping if I set this here, it will be able to pick both of us up. (**TC:** I hope so) Uh, and since, basically what we're going to do is try put together some information to [inaudible] oh, this one's different. But you do have one over there.

TC: [inaudible]

SB: Well uh, we'll get you taken care of, that's fine. Actually, since we've been talking....

[tape shuts off no conversation—equipment being checked]

SB: let's just keep talking. Uhm, basically, we're just trying to record the historical significance of the camp, so. And uh, so, I'm going to get some information for the archives, and some of it's like birthdays and things of that nature.

TC: Doesn't matter, I see it there.

SB: Okay. So, we'll do that and once we get through this, then we'll stop and make sure we've got everything before we go on. Okay, first of all, I need to give my name, which is Sharon Brescoach. And I'm with the Oral History of Appalachia Program at Marshall, Marshall University. And I'm here and I need to get your name.

TC: I'm Thomas W. Chiles, Jr.

SB: Okay. Could you spell your last name for me?

TC: C - h - l - l - e - s.

SB: Okay, great. And your birth date, sir?

TC: My birth date was April 22, 1932.

Thomas W. Chiles, Jr., Interview

SB: Okay. And uh, now, I know your situation is a little bit.... did you attend the camp?

TC: Yes, I did.

SB: Okay. And so, what-, where was your hometown when you were attending?

TC: Mount Hope, West Virginia.

SB: Mount Hope. Uh, your current residence?

TC: Oak Hill, West Virginia.

SB: Oak Hill. And gender is male (**TC:** Yes!) [chuckles] Past occupation?

TC: Director of Washington Carver 4-H Camp.

SB: Wonderful. And uh, current occupation?

TC: I'm with the Fayette County Board of Education.

SB: As ... in what capacity?

TC: I'm director of attendance. I do a lot of things for 'em. (**SB:** Great) Anything needed.

SB: Do you know Randy Rhodes?

TC: Sure, I know Randy.

SB: Okay, I used to work for a yearbook company, and so I....

Thomas W. Chiles, Jr., Interview

TC: Know Randy quite well, saw him yesterday.

SB: Wow. Uh, and marital status?

TC: Married.

SB: And uh, your wife's name?

TC: Sharon Lynn Chiles.

SB: Okay. Children or grandchildren?

TC: Children and grandchildren.

SB: Okay. Names and....

TC: Thomas W. Chiles, III, Thomas W. Chiles IV, uh, Thomas Estralia, and Jose Estralia.

SB: Wow, wonderful.

TC: And Alex Chiles, Alexander Chiles.

SB: Okay, are those children?

TC: Those are my grandchildren. (**SB:** Grandchildren, okay) Well, my children are Thomas W. Chiles, III, and Estralia.

SB: Okay. And education?

TC: Oh, BS, West Virginia State College.

Thomas W. Chiles, Jr., Interview

SB: Okay, great. Well, let's try this, and

[tape off/on]

TC: I just wanted to tell you one thing else about my children and everything. I told you I'm Thomas W. Chiles II, 1 was born in April, 1932. I was my father's only son. Okay. My only son is Thomas W. Chiles, III. He was born April 1962. His only son is Thomas W. Chiles, IV. He was born April 1992. It takes us 30 years, but we get it right.

SB: [laughter] That's great. (**TC:** True story, not planned) That's wonderful. Okay, uhm, what did your parents do when you were at the camp?

TC: My father was in education at Fayette County Board of Education.

SB: Tradition, uh?

TC: And my mother was, also. But my mother was also a counselor here at camp.

SB: Oh, great.

TC: From the time they opened it.

SB: Wow. How long did she....?

TC: Until it was closed in '76. '75 was the last year she was up here.

SB: Wow, that's amazing.

TC: She was director of music.

Thomas W. Chiles, Jr., Interview

SB: Great, great. Uhm, with regard to income levels of the campers here, could most kids afford it generally, or....? Or was it...? How...

TC: Mmmmh, yes, yes, yes. Because it was always subsidized. We weren't here to make money. And uh, it didn't cost much for a child to come up here.

SB: Okay, was it subsidized uh, like through....

TC: Through the state, really, they didn't care how much we made, as long as we both broke even.

SB: Okay, great. Uh, what was your age at the time that you attended camp? Or ages?

TC: Ooooh. I told you, I came up here when they dedicated the camp. [fading out]1941, 42, I was with the [blank space] High School band. We came up from Fayetteville to the camp dedication. And then I was just 10 years old. But I was in the high school band. At that time, if you could play, you were in the band. And I played trumpet. And we had the dedication ceremony in the big building, in the main hall.

SB: Wow, that's great.

TC: That wasn't the first time I came up here. I was up here before then. We stayed in, we brought our own little tents up here with the boy scouts and stayed over by the swimming pool, when they was still building on the building. As I recall one night it rained, and we all had to run over and sleep on the porch.

SB: So the boy scouts utilized it before 4-H did.

TC: At that time, yes, at that time. We didn't want to [blank space] we had a swimming pool, that was the only swimming pool we were allowed to swim in, in West Virginia. Couldn't swim in any other swimming pool. They had one at Mount Hope, but we couldn't use it. In Beckley and

Thomas W. Chiles, Jr., Interview

Oak Hill we couldn't use it. So, when they put the swimming pool up here, we came up from Mount Hope to use the swimming pool. That's what we had to do in those days.

SB: Uh, did you attend the camp more than once?

TC: Sure, sure. [blank space] my mother was here, and I was

SB: So, so many you probably...

TC: Yeah, well, [blank space] in the early '40's.[blank space] until I began working on my own. And even when I finished college, '53, that summer I was up here as a camp counselor. I was in charge of science, a science camp. I had [blank space] science.

SB: Wow, that's great. What activities do you remember going on at the camp back then?

TC: Oh, hiking, swimming, uh, just having a good time. [blank space] more learning.[blank space] But it was just having a good time in the summer time. That was all it was for.

SB: Uh...it says ... what did the camp and the activities mean to you in comparison to like your daily life, your every day life?

TC: Like I said, it was so much different. I couldn't go swimming any place. We had a little creek behind us in Mount Hope and I couldn't go in there. water. So, it was just to come out to the open air and have a good time. They had good outdoor activities, which we didn't have. Played baseball, softball, volleyball, which we didn't have organized. SIB: So you just played on your own in the neighborhood?

TC: That's right.

SB: Wow. Uh, what do you remember best from camp?

Thomas W. Chiles, Jr., Interview

TC: Uh, some of the camp leaders that I had, some of the directors of the camp. [blank space] Williams, and the way that he would always come into the kitchen, come in through the dining room and holler, "Is everybody happy?" We were starving. [laughter] He wanted to know if everybody was happy all the time, and the adults, and the activities that they carried on for us. And these are things that stuck in my mind quite a bit about the camp, was how, it was like we had some caring adults in those days. And even the cook, old Bob, Bob [blank space] from up in Mount Hope to cook. He was, wanted to make sure that everybody had enough, everybody had some good food, everything, you know. in the kitchen.

SIB: Wow, it sounds like that tradition still holds that wonderful group of people here today. And so, the other question was, uhm.... where were those people from? You mentioned....

TC: [inaudible][blank space] from Beckley. And he was principal of a elementary school there. And I can't remember what the name was. And uh, she was a director of arts and crafts. She was from Beckley. [audio difficulties] I didn't see but once a year, but I see them up here. [inaudible][blank space] And one other thing campfire. And playing Indian. [inaudible] stand in the line straight, had to make the most noise.

SB: Yeah, I'm sure that was

TC: Oh, yeah, yeah.

SB: Uh, what friends did you make in camp that you stay in touch with?

TC: Oooh, quite a few. I still have some friends that I don't see too often. And, but I recall them. There were two brothers that I met up here, and they were in school at State. And I still see them every now and then. [blank space] And the Dial family out of Beckley. I still keep in touch with them, I met them here at camp. Quite a few of them that I still see. Because I live back in Mount Hope, near my own now. **SIB:** Wow, that's wonderful. And it says also, did any of those friends serve, from the camp, serve as a network for you down the road?

Thomas W. Chiles, Jr., Interview

TC: Not really, not after we got out of the camp, finished high school and finished college I didn't see them that much.

SB: Okay. Did you relate to 4-H in any other ways?

TC: No, because I came from the city, I mean, from a small city, and I didn't have the farm animals or anything like that. So, other than to try to better yourself. And I remember some of the slogans about the 4-H, what they stood for, what they stood for. And I tried to live my life, you know, somewhat according to it.

SB: Heart, head, hand and...

TC: Health...

SB: Health, thank you. I was never in 4-H, so I can be forgiven. Uh...okay. Do you remember any adult activities being held at the camp, like 4-H extension or...

TC: Sure, sure, sure. Well, like I said, both my mother and father [inaudible]... they even had parties up here. Leave from Beckley, Mount Hope, come up here for parties and things like that. [inaudible]....[blank space] To picnics and parties.

SB: Wow. What was the fraternity again?

TC: Kappa Alpha Psi.

SB: Okay, great. Uh, do you think that the camp influenced young black children at the time, with regard to their personal identity?

TC: Sure they did, sure they did. Like I say, we had no place to go, other than here. And we had good leadership up here. Enjoyed being up here. you could play ball. [inaudible] SIB: Well,

Thomas W. Chiles, Jr., Interview

and I see one of the things they're doing here is trying to instill a sense of pride, and I wonder if that's tradition that's been carried on for years.

TC: Sure, sure, that's what we did. Put on plays, everything else.

SB: That's wonderful. Uh, and we're also interested in experiences if you were here before integration, and after integration, make a comparison.

TC: Sure. Make a comparison. [blank space] Kids is kids. We had a good time when it was a small black camp, and since it's been integrated, kids have been having a good time, you know.

SIB: So you don't see, really, any differences at all?

TC: No, uh-huh. [inaudible][blank space] Kids are kids.

SB: They're talented, a great bunch of kids, I think.

TC: And not just the talent, but to leave 'em alone. They seem to a lot better together. But the adults ... what can I say? putting their wisdom in to them, you know.

SB: So you don't think they're missing out on anything, by any stretch of the way?

TC: No.

SB: Okay, great. Uhm, let's see ... I'm trying to see if this is ... all right. Well, it says, "What do you think were the pros and cons of segregation and integration at the camp?"

TC: Shewww! [blank space] [inaudible] ... like I said, camp is camp. Camp was having a good time, and camp was get something other than [inaudible].... we had band camp, we had church camp, we've had fun camps, we've had all kind of camps, you know. It doesn't matter. As long as the child has a good time in a good, safe place.

Thomas W. Chiles, Jr., Interview

SB: That's great. Do you remember your counselors? Or....

TC: Sure, sure, sure.

SB: And were all the people that worked at the camp also African American?

TC: Sure, it was an all black camp.

SB: Okay. Uhm.... let's see, were there any of the counselors that particularly influenced you?

TC: Mmm-hmm, James L. Brooks. He was a science teacher from Mount Hope. That's why I got a degree in science. He was my counselor one summer, two summers. [inaudible]

SB: Great. Okay, do you see that there were any differences with regard to what boys did and what girls did at the camp back then?

TC: Yes, girls weren't as active in sports back then as they are today. Because girls weren't supposed to do these things.

SB: Well, did you know that they have girls boxing?

TC: Sure, sure. Everything nowadays. I'm glad of that, too. girls just sit back and watch us play. Now girls get up and play.

SB: Yes. Well, did they have other activities, like arts and crafts or something?

TC: Yes, they did. Usually when, most time in the evenings, girls'd sit back and watch the-, watch the baseball games and watch the tackle football that we played, and anything else, they just ... just didn't participate like they do now.

Thomas W. Chiles, Jr., Interview

SB: Right, sounds like nothing's changed, because the girls are still watching the boys.

TC: Wellllll, they play now more.

SB: Well, they do, but....

TC: They get up and play now. [inaudible]... ..much football, they played softball and baseball, they played [inaudible] ... good volleyball games very seldom had a girl in it. They [inaudible].... but they played ribbon.

SB: Oh, well, good. Well, I'm sure actually the boys kind of watch the girls now, too. [laughter] (**TC:** Sure, sure, sure) Okay. Let' see ... describe to me what you think is the importance of Camp Washington Carver?

TC: Oh.... (**SB:** We're getting near the end, so they're getting tougher) [inaudible] I see it from two points. Young black male camper who would really enjoy being up here, and then looking forward to being the camp director. So, I don't know. It's hard for me to distinguish between the two right now. But uh, it's very important. [inaudible] ... not just from economically. We hired a lot of people up here. And the black kids were able to see other black people working and doing things, which they didn't see before. But when I was his director we brought Chicago and New York, and they really enjoyed it here, because [blank space] groups basically from the inner city youth. And they really enjoyed it. They had never been to a place like this before, hadn't seen it. And one time, as far as I can find out, I was the only full-time black camp director in the United States. And that really meant a lot to me....[blank space] [inaudible] ...came down here and saw what we were doing, they would come in, big city walk and big city talk and they [inaudible] ... say they would see us next year.

SB: That's wonderful. What year when you were saying that you were probably the -11- only uh,....

TC: In the '70's. (**SB:** In the'70's) 1975. (**SB:** As late as that?) Sure, sure. I don't know

Thomas W. Chiles, Jr., Interview

[inaudible] ... not full-time in the United States.

SB: That's amazing, that's just amazing.

TC: Maybe some of that, I don't know, I'm not in the camp world any more. But when I was in the camp, [inaudible]....

SB: That's great. An accomplishment. Uh, and also, what do you think was the perception of the camp by outsiders?

TC: What do you mean by that, now?

SB: Just people outside the community, whether it be uh, other African Americans, or whether it be white population?

TC: [blank space] loved it. They knew what it was here for. [inaudible].... [blank space] And in the latter years, the white community here [tape fading out].... In the latter years, the white community, they were okay. But in the early years it wasn't that way.

SB: So, was it real difficult being here?

TC: Very difficult in the beginning. [inaudible]....

SB: What year was this?

TC: [inaudible][blank space] That was in the middle '50's. (**SB:** That's quite a....) But a difference when I came here in what, 1970. The first year I was here I was [inaudible].... at the same school. They hadn't changed it.

SB: Boy, it seems like some of the [blank space] today just don't realize how recent all this is. I mean, I was not brought up in a [blank space] I was very ignorant to racism, because my

Thomas W. Chiles, Jr., Interview

parents weren't that way. However, on the other hand, it hit me how recent all this was. It's really a dramatic thing.

TC: It's good, it's good, that's the way it should be.

SB: We learn from our mistakes. And that's why

TC: I hope that

SB: Well, we certainly still have a lot of progress made. (**TC:** Right) And also, the final question (**TC:** The final question...) the last and final question, what I said, tough, I didn't mean difficult, but it's one that you really kind of feel ... lots to think about. And the same way with this one, is to try to just think of any stories that you might have about the camp. And it can be either when you were a camper, would be great. Or also, when you were the director (**TC:** chuckling)... .either one, if you would like to choose, or if you have one or two things you might find

TC: I don't know about stories about the camp. (**SB:** Nothing you want to put on tape, no?) No, I enjoy being up here with [blank space] because I've been up here so often. And I've had so much and so many stories. One time I had a young man working for me up here doing something. And we were just talking about trash.[blank space] tractor, a man with a wagon on the back of the tractor, you could take it down the road and use this trash dump. Every day he had to do this stuff. So, me and [blank space] And I was, I guess, at his house [blank space] camp director. [inaudible]... [blank space] And the tractor started rolling and he tried to jump. Well, he jumped in [blank space] got his leg caught between the tire and the fender. So he turned the tractor off and he ran up here to get me and I went down there. The fellow from Clifftop was down there, and happened to be coming up the road. And he stopped, and he was trying to get the lug wrenches, get his lug wrench and everything. So, he takes [blank space] and [blank space] hadn't been taken off the tractor in probably 20 years. Couldn't break [inaudible] [blank space] caught between the tire and the fender. [blank space] And last year, I was [blank space] State College's homecoming. And this fellow walked up to me, and he said, "You remember me, Mr. Chiles?" And I said, "How's your leg?" I remembered him. I saw that

Thomas W. Chiles, Jr., Interview

look on his face, I knew who he was, you know, I said, "How's your leg?" I said, "You get it caught in anything lately?"

SB: What a great story.

TC: This was a true story, you know. [blank space] Chuck, Chuck Valentine. [inaudible] His father was the coach over at [blank space] and I knew his mother well. And he worked [blank space] I hadn't seen him in about ten years. He was bigger than I am now, you know. And had a moustache and a goatee, you know. But I recognized him when he came to me, you know. "Mr. Chiles, you remember me?" "How's your leg?" [laughing]

SB: That's wonderful. Was there anything you think we should know about the camp, that you feel that you'd like to uh, put on archives?

TC: No.... not that I know of. (**SB:** Anything we missed?) No, no. I didn't [inaudible]... And he, he didn't know how to handle it, kids fought and fought directly, fought with everybody up here. [inaudible] I didn't like that. [inaudible]...

SB: Well, it looks like they love each other now a lot.

TC: Looks like it now, this is the main thing, main thing.

SB: Well, Mr. Chiles, I certainly appreciate this.

TC: No problem.

END OF INTERVIEW