

**Interview with
Leahgreatta Chiles Hairston
by Matt Moore,
June 22, 1997**

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Released Form signed by Leahgreatta Chiles Hairston,
June 22, 1997, at Camp Washington Carver, West Virginia

Transcriber not identified
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Leahgreatta Chiles Hairston Interview

MM: This is Matthew Moore with the Oral History of Appalachia Program at Marshall University. And I'm here today at Camp Washington Carver with Leahgreatta Harriston [*sic*, Hairston]. I need some basic information, such as your birth date...

LH: Birth date is 12 December, well December 23rd, 1955. Hometown is Montgomery, West Virginia, which is in Fayette County. That's where I lived when I attended the camp.

MM: And your current address?

LH: Currently it's in Charleston, West Virginia.

MM: And your occupation?

LH: I am a business manager with Merck Human Health Division.

MM: Okay. And your marital status.

LH: I am married. (**MM:** Children?) No children.

MM: Okay. And your educational background?

LH: I had a degree in biology with a chemistry minor, and a graduate degree, a masters of art, in interpersonal and organizational communications. Which translates into applied behavioral psychology.

MM: Okay. Your age at the time you attended the camp.

LH: It would range from the years of 8 years old through probably 15 years old.

MM: You've been here quite a few times.

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LH: Yes, several times. Probably, and before that, ever since I was born, actually. Because, you know, there were a lot of activities occurred here throughout the year. And many times the church, churches would bring groups of people here for picnics and that type of thing. Since, there's so much-, so many close ties with my family with this camp, as you've interviewed others in the past, Wendell Chiles, and those people, this camp was like a- a place we frequented, our whole family frequented throughout the entire year. And all during the year, not just during the summertime.

MM: I understood some of the other interviews, that the camp used to be used by a lot more people.

LH: Yeah, especially churches, you know, some of the other African American organizations.

MM: Okay. And some of the activities that you remember from the camp?

LH: From the camp? Well, as I was telling many people, my favorite activity was campfire, back in the '60's. That was, that was very exciting. It was kind of like the culmination of all the events of the day. And it was just a lot of fun bonding, and singing songs and you know, competition, the games, yet learning respect for [blank space] the and that type of thing. That was very important to me. The other activities I remember, I attended, at the time you know, when they had-, were, when I attended camp, in the age bracket that you were supposed to attend, not just a little kid running around the camp, bugging the campers. But I attended music camp, and participated in that as a full-fledged camper. And also, I would stay actually up here for almost the whole month, or at least 3 weeks. And behind the music camp, West Virginia State College would run science camp. And so, I stayed for the science camp. So, for the music camp, the best thing I learned, I sharpened my skills as a musician. And the things that I remember about that were that the competition is tough. I mean, kids came in here from Newport News, Virginia, and they were excellent musicians. And I was exposed to a lot of music that I would not have been exposed to at that age in the school in Montgomery. And therefore, when I went back home in the fall, I was, I was very good. I was very, very good, far beyond what the other kids at school were. And uh, that was directly attributable to being placed in with kids that were a lot

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better than me during the summer, even for a two-week period. It's just, it enhanced my music ability that much. And then uh, for science camp, it-, the same thing happened. We focused on projects here, nature here, uh, chemistry, you know, biology, all aspects of science. We were given a lot of information and even just a one week period. And it was the same effect when I went back to junior high or high school, you know, I excelled in all my science classes.

MM: A little bit about what you mentioned earlier about all your relatives, the path that you got here, [blank space] organization or a sponsor.....

LH: The way that I got here, to the camp?

MM : Yeah, your network.

LH: That pulled me into this camp. Well, it was definitely my family. It wasn't anything else. Because, I mean, it was kind of like an understood thing in my family that you would come to this camp and have this experience. You know, that was just the given. It was no questions asked. You were gonna come. Especially I came even before I was old enough to come. But definitely when I was old enough to come, it was a given. It was like no questions asked. You will go, and that's the end of the story. But it was, it was ...I have to say that I was less enthusiastic about coming up here than I think my sister or my brother, and I was the younger of three children in my family. Uh, because I did not like living the rustic life. But, so, from that point of view, I think I was forced to come. If I had been given a choice, I probably wouldn't have come, just because I don't like living the rustic life. And being, and being-, in cohabitating and coexisting with animals.

MM: And spiders and bug....

LH: Right, right, right, right, that was not my cup of tea at all. [laughing] Okay.

MM: Okay. And some of the activities that you remember here at the camp?

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LH: Some of the activities.... Well, for the music camp, we had to put on a show. So I guess I remember at the end of the camp, you gave a big show, which I think is still a continued tradition. And so, that was exciting because you were able to show off. I guess in my heart of hearts I'm a show-off. And so, you know, at least at that point you could show off and show what you learned and, and show how you'd improved musically. And I played saxophone, so that was the kind of instrument that I used to enhance my music skills here, or I guess, my skills were enhanced and I was able to demonstrate it through my saxophone playing. And I think I remember, we had to do a little jazz ensemble, and I had never played in a jazz group before. And in fact, it was really neat to be part of a jazz group, and show my family that I could do that at such a young age of 14, I think, and be good at it. Because the kids from Newport News were a little older, but yet, I could still hang in there and do what they did. So, I remembered that, being able to play in a jazz ensemble at 14. I thought that was neat. And then also, from the science part, we had to make these little projects. And I think I was proud of the fact that we actually had to go out into nature and uh, make a display of insects and things. And, and you know, it was done in a way that was enjoyable and whereas-, and I was able to show to my family members and the people that came that I learned, even though I was in a place where I didn't like going out and getting bugs and taking the risk of running into a snake or something like that. So, I guess those were two activities that I remember, that I can think of right now. Again, I remember the camp fires. Those were fun things for me.

MM: Do you remember some of the people that stood out in your mind?

LH: Mmm-hmm. The people ... you mean the adult leaders or campers?

MM: Either.

LH: Okay, I'll start with the campers first, because that's always uh, that's always the fun thing, because they're your age, they're your peers. And uh, yes, I remember that there was some girls from Wheeling, West Virginia and there were girls from Martinsburg, West Virginia. And living in Montgomery, which is West Virginia, which is Fayette County here in the southern part of the state, those were only places that I had studied about in school. And you know, to

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actually see some people that were from there, so that when I went back to school, I could associate, you know, Wheeling with Regina or Pam or Martinsburg, with somebody, even though Martinsburg was way far away. And in those days, you know, we didn't have, well, I guess we had 79. It came later on in my life. But it was still so far away. It wasn't like a place that was really familiar. So, I remembered those girls, because they were very nice, they were very friendly. We got to be good friends. We were penpals after camp. We kept in touch through letters and phone calls, that type of thing. And it made Wheeling and Martinsburg real to me. I remember the kids from Newport News, Virginia, I remember one guy, his name was Clarence. Because he wasn't that much older than me, he was only a year older than me. But, I mean, but he was such a good saxophone player. And it was just totally amazing when I, when I first had to sit in a music class with him, I was so intimidated. Because, because they could do so much, musically, that we just hadn't been taught. And you know, I just felt, I felt so intimidated. And so, I remember Clarence from that feeling intimidated. And I can remember for the whole two week period working so hard, so that, you know, he could, he could feel proud to have me sit beside him, instead of looking at me with annoyance if I couldn't play something. So, and I remember, at the end of the first-, towards the middle of the 2nd week I had improved so much that you know, he, he could just sit there and feel comfortable with me sitting beside him playing my sax. The adults, obviously I remembered my aunt, Chiles, who was a musician, and who did basically uh, she ran the music department at the camp. She taught basic camping songs, the happy I remember her, she taught everybody that. I already knew it, years, and I knew it, because she taught everybody that. She always took people on nature walks, trail walks. And she was not afraid of snakes, she was not afraid of any animal,. And she had to calm kids down and animals came around.

MM: Especially snakes, I'm sure.

LH: Mmm-hmm, she was not afraid of 'em. I remember her picking up black snakes and showing us that, that uh, even snakes that we thought we were afraid of, or animals that we thought we were afraid of, really were afraid of us, and given half a chance, would get away from us. And I remember in particular the bats in the Great Hall, the fact that when we came in the Great Hall, they wouldn't take 'em out, because they were up high and they just taught you

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that they were gonna stay there until night, and then they come down at night. I remember coming into the Great Hall in the morning, and some were hanging off the ping pong table, and I remember that at that point, she knew that it would be dangerous for kids that she actually move the bat and took it out of the Great Hall with her bare hands. I remember uh...I remember the Lynch's, Wesley, Mary, they had two daughters, Jean and uh, I can't remember the youngest daughter's name. But anyway, they were the, they lived as residents in the ... residence director, they lived up here all year long, through all seasons. And I remember they're great love and appreciation for this area, the land, the animals, the people. They tried to, when people came up here throughout the year and during the camp, they tried to communicate a lot of respect for the camp. And they wanted people to respect the camp, and to respect the property. It was sort of understood the minute you entered through that main gate, you were to hold this whole area in reverence. And I remember that that family communicated that. And uh...that's all.

MM: Did uh, some of these people serve as networks later on?

LH: Uh...yes and no, because ... you know, networking I think is a new con-, it's just a new word. In the African Negro community, colored, black community, whatever you want to call it, in the '50's and '60's, it was just kind of always necessary.... I mean, it wasn't even a word, network wasn't a word. I mean, it was kind of like everybody watched out for each other and took care of each other. Because especially if they had you under their wings, at some part and point in time in your life, they, they had a vested interest in your success in life. And they instilled in you that you were to do for others and help others in their path in life. And so, you know, it was kind of life, you said network later. (**MM:** Extended family) Yeah, it was more like this extended family, and it was just kind of like this is kind of understood that these people were guides in your life life and what you learned from them, you were supposed to have from other people in different points in your life. But now I feel a strong charge that it's important for me and for my family members, [blank space] this year, to pass that on to younger generations.

MM: Were you a 4-H member here?

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LH: I was not a 4-H member, because I was, that came earlier in time. I was born in 1955, and I really became a part of the camp experience in the mid to late '60's, and then well, late, late '60's. I think it was like a segre-, it was when there was segregation (**MM:** Okay). And so, my brother, who was 15 years older than my sister, particularly I remembered, she was a part of the segregated 4-H system. And that's when 4-H, you know, she was involved in that. As when I got of age, it was all integration, and there was not segregated 4-H system. So, when I came up here, this camp came under the wings of West Virginia State College. So, they still kept it culturally and her-, from a heritage point of view, African American. But it started-, it became integrated, even though the majority of the people here were still African American, we still had white campers and I don't remember any other kind, I mean, like Asian, Indian, anything like that. There was a few white campers. But it was, it was an integrated camp. I mean, there was nothing to keep anybody out that wasn't African American. But when it was the 4-H, I do distinctly know that it was just black people, because black people couldn't be a part of any other groups that were integrated. Because I grew up in-, I was in that transition generation, between segregation and integration, school and organizations, you know, everything.

MM: So, how did the camp impact your African American identity?

LH: It taught me about uh, it taught me about some of the history and some of the experiences during segregation, that I didn't experience, because I didn't grow up in a segregated time. Even though, I was on the tail-end of segregated times. But I don't say segregated times in a negative point of view. In other words, in the connotation that people were mistreated. What I mean is, during segregated times, you had to have this camp, you had to have separate but equal facilities. And so, but when I grew up, I was a part of, I could be a part of everything. I could be a part of all integrated facilities. But this camp taught me the good part of some of the segregation times. Because they were all wonderful, happy experiences at this camp. But, and so, I had the opportunity to experience that wonderful, happy experience when the majority of black people, in the continued tradition of this camp, plus you know, being an integrated system after I got out of the camp. And sometimes, my family had a hard time focusing, focusing me in on, on what it was like, focusing me in on some of the happy experiences, when African American or black people or Negro, or colored people, whatever you want to call us back then,

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were together, you know, as a group. Not bashing anybody, but just together as a group, a group, because you couldn't go anywhere else. So, you had a good happy time in the group together.

MM: You learned probably a lot of things here that you wouldn't have gotten in the public school system.

LH: Absolutely, absolutely. And as my parents were always very worried about that, because they grew up during segregation, and they always had happy, wonderful, bonding experiences with, with colored, Negro people. And my brother and sister did, too. But I didn't. Because I came up in that transition. So, they-, my parents felt like they always had to work harder to get me into a majority black system where there was going to be good, wonderful nurturing the way they experienced it. So, I did learn that, as part of the camp experience.

MM: Okay. So, being in this transitional stage, maybe you could compare a little bit maybe about before and after integration in the camp. **LI:** Before and after integration, okay. Yeah, I think I can do that. Because I can remember coming up here as a little kid and seeing my sister perform at the camp, and being part of that. And uh, the experiences were not that different. It wasn't that different. It was just that Camp Washington Carver, which was a wonderful experience, went from being owned, no, not owned, directed, maintained by Negroes, or African Americans, to being directed, maintained by West Virginia State College, and the Cultural Arts Center. I'm really proud, though, that a lot of the history has been maintained, while it still has become an open, integrated system. But really and truly, I don't see a difference. I think that the people have always been associated with this camp, continue to care, you know. And I think that when I was a kid and it was, it operated as a segregated place for only, a place for black people, that there were people that could care for the facility, that really cares, and really had a vested interest in the people, kids that came here. And when I came here, as a camper in the mid to late '60's, it, that continued, the people continued to care. And we have white instructors. I'll never forget.... We, I had a white band instructor from St. Albans, Mr. Caddie. And you know, he had respect for the camp, he had respect for the history of the traditions. But basically, you were here to learn music. You know.... and music's music,

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whether it was in a a segregated system or an integrated system. And we learned music, and we did it well. You know, so, you know, it really, it really didn't change, I don't think. I think that the traditions of maintaining the camp and making sure that the campers learn and had a wonderful experience and went back home prepared to compete or do whatever to excel, occurred. Did I answer the question?

MM: Sure. Do you remember or no, okay. On the issue of African American youth today, do you think that they're missing something by being sent to an integrated camp, as opposed to the old...?

LH: No, because I know, I mean, the guy that's the director this year, was my brother. And I know what his goals were, and so, no, they didn't miss anything. Mmm-hmm, that's the long and short of it. You know.... We, my brother and I talked, and he talked to all my family. And it was, I know it was his goal to give them a nurturing experience at camp. Many times kids don't get it at school, and that's not to blame the teachers or anybody. I think in general, schools today, there are a multitude of problems, for a multitude of different reasons. But I, I think that the camp, the design of this camp was to help everybody cultivate the best that was within them. And that was always the goal of the camp, I'll have to say.

MM: Okay. As time's gone on, do you think the role of the counselors has changed any?

LH: Yeah, I think it probably has. Because we live in different times today. You know, back then, I think, well, when I came along, we were still very respectful of the '60's, the late '60's and early '70's. But today, I don't think kids have a lot of respect for themselves or anybody else. And you know, that's just the way it is. So, I think that the role of the staff had to be tough. And I know my husband was very involved in that, you know. And I think that's important, because I think that it had to be strict, and they had to know certain rules. And I think that counselors closer to their age wouldn't have been as effective. That's, that's, that's my opinion. So, uh...I don't, I think it has changed. Because when I was in, I think that they could have older because I think basically, kids had more respect in the '60's, even though the '60's was a different time. We didn't have hippies up here, you know. I mean, the hippies were the rebels. We weren't

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rebels, we learned, we knew we had to behave, or we would be killed at home. My parents ruled by fear, you know. And most of the campers that were here in the '60's had parents that ruled by fear. And we were afraid of our parents. We were afraid that if we misbehaved, we would be killed. And we usually were.

MM:[clears throat] Excuse me. As far as the impact of the camp when you attended, on gender issues, do you think there were differences in the activities for....?

LH: Uh, no, not really. I mean, you know, gender for me was never a big issue. And I really didn't. I've never seen gender as a big an issue as other people have in society. Probably because I have the African American experience in this country. So, it, I never saw gender as a big issue. I mean, from my perspective and my perceptions, it just wasn't. You know ... men and women, boys and girls, the genders are male and female, are different. And again, I think what we learned was respect for that. We knew that, we knew that uhm...we didn't even think about sex. I mean, we thought about it. But we didn't even think to try stuff here. Other than kissing. So, you know, they had rules, you know, the boys dorm, the girls dorm. You know, we didn't have-, it was not even thought to do co-ed dorms-, I mean, co-ed living and sleeping together. I mean, no one even expected it. But, so, I never really saw any ... any kind of unusual or anything that really upset me about the genders.

MM: As far as the general importance to the camp....

LH: Mmm-hmm, what do I feel was the general importance the camp was to me? Uh...it made me, it broadened by perspective about myself. Because it made me focus on some qualities that I had [blank space] science in areas that the camp focused on. And myself, know what I liked and what was of interest to me. And it helped me to know that I really did love science, I excelled in science, it helped me to excel in the discipline that we did. [noise in background] I will finish this after the golf cart leaves! It helped me to excel in the disciplines that were part of the camp, music and science, you know. And I went on and I have a degree in biology and minor in chemistry, and I work in human science, I've always worked in science. So, that's how it helped. Uh...them music, you know, it enhanced it. I think I explained in the beginning. When I

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went back in the fall, you know, I just excelled in band, anything that I did musically, in my community. Uhm...is that all you needed? Or was there something else?

MM: Oh, that's fine. Do you remember any stories or have any personal stories that you'd like ...**(LH: Yeah)** ... okay.

LH: I think of ... we talked about the animal experiences. And I know, I've heard my husband and my brother and my sister [blank space] I notice that they had an animal experience at the camp this year and every year. As far as I can remember, there's always an animal experience, because that was a part of Clifflop and Camp Washington Carver. You were in the middle of nature and so, but you had to learn to co-exist with whatever. Well, I remember one year at music camp, my mother and her friend, Mrs. Atwater, came up to visit the weekend between-, because we stayed for a full 14 days. And the weekend between they came to visit us and brought us some food. So we decided-, they decided to have a little picnic. And her daughter was also a camp member, Adrian. So, we went to the picnic tables in the back, you know, and we had our deviled eggs and our sandwiches and all that, and then, the yellow jackets came! I mean, it was just like all these yellow jackets.

MM: All at once?

LH: Yes, they just converged on us. And they converged especially-, so we ran, gathered up the food as fast as we could and man, tried to get in the car. But they converged on Mrs. Atwater. And the reason why was, because she had on this really sweet smelling cologne! [laughing] And that was one of the things that they always told us, never, you know, you learn, don't wear anything, I remember our saying, "Don't wear anything sweet smelling, no cologne, just your basic deodorant." Because animals, some animals like sweet smelling things. And then, you know, we-, so, Mrs. Atwater got stung all over, and my mother, she-, they had to leave immediately and they had to take her and get some care. So, that was a horrible experience. And it was always vivid in my mind. Because I can remember her screaming. She was just screaming in pain and agony with those yellow jackets stinging her. And then, I think I told you the stories about the bath. Yeah. And then uh, another story is uh, the friends and the

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loves. I mean, you always had camp sweethearts, you know together. So, you know, you had your first summer love experience at camp. You know, [blank space] and girls in the dorm at night talking about boys, and you know, the crushes and stuff like that. So, it was kind of fun. Some other stories ... oh, they used to always have this little pop machine. It was right over there by the window as you went into the kitchen. And you could only get pop out of there at certain times. go through the day, you know, waiting, hurry up to get to that time of the day until you could go and put your money in the machine. It was one of those neat machines you know, that had Coca-Cola written on it. You put your money in and you know, the coke bottles slip in these slats. But it would only pull out, you know, if you put your money in at the right time. You had to time it to pull your pop out of there. That was kind of neat.

MM: I am old enough to remember those.

LH: Yeah, so they had that. The other thing that they don't have now that was a lot of fun, and a lot of activity centered on the porch around it, and that was, they had a shuffle board thing right there. And [blank space] come out to play shuffle board, and I don't see kids doing that now at all. It's so much fun. And uh, so, you said, anything about the boys and girls. The girls would always team up against the boys and we'd have shuffled board contests like that. It was a lot of fun. We had a great time. Because you could stand anywhere on the porch and -18- watch people playing shuffle board. So, it was kind of neat. The other thing that I can remember are, there, the storms up here always seemed more magnified than storms anywhere else. I don't know, maybe it was because uh, there was no, nothing around but trees. And so, you know, from on top of the hill, someone....

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BEGIN SIDE 2

LH:...so the story about the storm. One evening, we were in the Great Hall, and I don't know, we were having some kind of program or something and somebody was lecturing to us. And it started thundering and lightening and pouring down rain and all of a sudden lightening came out of the sky and hit a big old tree, and it split the tree. I don't know where the stump is, but I mean, we came out-, it was like somebody had turned on a zillion lights, you know. And it just

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looked like something blew up. And we heard this huge noise. CRASH! And this loud thunder. And everybody jumped out of their seats and ran, eihhhhh, and we ran out of here. And lightening had struck a tree and it just split it down the middle, like a huge lumber jack just took an axe and split it down the middle. And the tree was just split on both sides. And you know, it just freaked everybody out. And, and let's see. Oh, one time at music camp, this was a funny story. You know, we always had a nurse. And you know, ever-, somebody's always gonna get sick at camp. So, so, at the music camp, we had a chorus, everybody had to be in the chorus. And so, we had this music teacher from West Virginia State College, her name was Mrs. Johnson, Gladys Johnson. And she always wore these little shoes, mules, that had no heels. I mean, the lady's dead now, I hate to talk about anybody that's dead. But anyway, everybody used to laugh because you know, out in the middle of camp she would strut around with these little shoes on with no heels on and be kind of prim and proper, and everybody else had on tennis shoes and whatever. And so, she, if you got sick, Mrs. Johnson said, "Oh, you just need a dose of Maloxx." And so, no matter what happened to you, you got Maloxx. And so, everybody said, "Oh, we can't get sick, because we have to take Maloxx." Well, then at the end of the camp, we were supposed to do this song called, "Don't I know [inaudible] Well, we had decided-, we had a little conference, we decided that when Mrs. Johnson got up there to direct us, we would sing it, but instead of singing the words we would use Maloxx. And we did it! And she was freaked out. And we did it. And she just stood there, and then just all of a sudden, her mouth dropped and she just busted up laughing. But we had rounds going [singing song about Maloxx to tune of camp song] You know, we were just being little uh, kids, annoying kids, you know, up to a bunch of antics. But we figured if we all banded together and did it, what would she do? Nothing. Because we all were doing it, to get the point across that we didn't want to take Maloxx. So after that nobody had to take Maloxx, and all she did was laugh, so that was kind of fun. Yeah, those are a lot of stories that stand out in my mind, I think.

MM: Is there anything else you'd like to....?

LH: No, just the fact that I really feel like this camp is important. And I think that this year, and I hope in the future, that uh, the traditions that have always been a part of the camp, and that is excellent, carving out a couple of weeks in a kids life to just give that kid as much focused

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attention, and to strive toward excellence, is a very important tradition to continue.

MM: Thank you.

LH: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW