

**Interview with
William Hairston
by Matthew F. Moore,
June 21, 1997**

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Released Form signed by William Hairston
June 21, 1997, at Camp Washington Carver, West Virginia

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PDF prepared by Lisle G Brown

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Matthew Moore: Okay, I need a little bit of basic information such as birth date, hometown?

William Hairston: April 30, 1949. Actually I was an ornery kid, St. Albans, West Virginia is what we call home, and I was coming to camp here from St. Albans.

MM: Residence?

WH: I live in Charleston, in Kanawha City. Is that pickin up over the.. Okay

MM: And your current address?

WH: I live in Kanawha City, Venerable Ave, 5316 Venerable.

MM: And your current occupation?

WH: I am a consultant, specializing in non-profit organizations. We do everything from needs assessments to..I do a lot of evaluations of a facilities and organizations. I work the United Methodist Church, Governors families, West Virginia Alliance for Special Needs Children, etc.

MM: And your marital status?

WH: Married, one child.

MM: Educational background?

WH: I have a Bachelor's in sociology [inaudible]...

MM: And your age at the time you attended camp?

WH: I was in the area of 13 to 15, well actually I guess the years were 14 years old and 15, and

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I was here even after that. When you say at camp, I think you mean the Four H camp, that was a.. I was probably 15 or 16.

MM: And the path by which you got to the camp, sponsor?

WH: Okay, now this gets complicated. I was a Kanawha county Four Her. Kanawha county Four H had integrated. This was, what you have to understand about this period of time was that it was a period of time when I think in the state of West Virginia, it was the early 50's where schools in WV had started integrating. And so camping programs by the 60's , the early 60's, I think it was 63, the Kanawha county Four H program integrated and so my basic experience in Four H was in the white program. We had an agent, her name was Julia Lowry, who was prior to integration, in Kanawha co. the Four H agent, in Kanawha co., the black 4-H agent in K. Co.. What happened was that she became a part of then the overall staff of K. co., her responsibilities included Cabell co., which had not yet integrated And so what happened was that Mrs. Lowry would take some of the black children, who were in the K. co. camp and use them or take with them with her to the Cabell co. segregated camp. And of course the kids from the Cabell co. segregated camp came here for state camp. And so my route then, was through 4-H, through Mrs. Lowry's segregated program in Cabell Co..

MM: Do you remember some of the activities that you all did at camp?

WH: Oh sure. We-always highlighted here was council circle, the evening event. Where we..It always done in the Native American Indian tradition. And we would have all of our camp fires. That was always big for all of us. In addition, we played sports, and we did crafts. We learned etiquette, was one of the things they were big on teaching us was etiquette. We..I don't know, we had several different classes. And in fact, back then, we still had what was called vespers which was a religious sort of evening, early evening. And of course the food. But, we did several kind of activities like that.

MM: Could you reflect on some of the people you best remember from camp?

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WH: Well, it's complicated because I tend to get people confused between Kanawha Co. and Cabell co. and here. The one person that was most influential to me was Mrs. Lowry, who was the 4-H agent from our local area. She had a large effect on me as an individual. She spent a lot of time with me. I can remember meeting a woman by the name of Billie Hairston, since my name was Bill Hairston, that was in itself interesting. She was the 4-H agent in McDowell co. and I just thought it was wonderful that there was a Billie Hairston here working with the kids. That was a lady of class and distinction, that was a wonderful woman. Mrs. Levesey, who was in Mercer Co. 4-H camp. Mrs. Levesey had two kids, two twins, Marilyn and Carolyn, I think, and I certainly remember the Levesey family and all that they offered. There was a Eugene Mitchell from McDowell co. Mr. Mitchell was the agent in McDowell co, he was one of the few men that was still involved at that point and you know there were lots of men before that, and I know because I know the history of the local folk, but Mr. Mitchell was still involved at that point, he was sort like the man that you go to, and talk things over with. He was also in a sense the disciplinarian. There was a Mrs. Childs, who was here, who cooked and she was a very, and she was a good lady and she had her own rules and things, no she was a music person, she didn't cook, but I remembered her, Mrs. Childs. And there were, those are the ones who stick out, there were I'm sure other folks here, those are the few that stick out.

MM: What friends from camp did you stay in touch with?

WH: Ed Cabell. Who is from Mercer co., and he's now Dr. Edward Cabell, I think is his name, and he's in Morgantown now. But we were campers here together, in fact, Ed Cabell and I along with two kids from up around Charlestown, were the first four blacks that attended the integrated WV Boys State, 4-H , Boys State, at Jackson's Mill. Ed and I came from this particular camp, to that event, and these two from Charlestown, just sort of arrived, and we were the first, in 1964, the same year that I was here and we were to the two, Jackson's Mill, as the first black children that attended those.

MM: So you were actually a 4-H member?

WH: Yeah, I was very much a 4-H member.

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MM: Did you relate in other ways, besides the 4-H camp?

WH: I did, but only later on, after what's called a heyday, here, I consider myself one of , during those years of , 64, and 65, and 66, those were the final years here. If you read things that said the camp closed in 1974, actually the ending of the camping, here for the children really happened well I can remember, things sort of winding down about 1965. Later on, I was here as a counselor, I graduated high school in 66, and I came back up as a counselor for the all white Nicholas co 4-H camp, in that year. I was here for what we used to call Heritage Weekend, and those were weekends where kids would come in from all over Southern WV, to learn about the heritage of the mountains, and I was one of the instructors, in that event, so I was here for that. I later on came here, and these were the days when the camp was really sort of inactive, but they would use it now and then, and so I came to those kinds of events here. I can remember being at someone's family reunion, and my mind will not tell me who, but I remember spending some time here, so even after the 4-H part of this camp, because by 1965-66, those other counties that I was talking about, Mercer's, McDowell's, all the southern counties in WV, they were becoming a part of the overall 4-H program, and the need in their minds at that time to come here for camp was not there. And the kids were being channeled to Jackson's Mill, so, but I continued to come here for different events even after the 4-H program.

MM: Could you talk a little about the impact that the camp had on your African American heritage?

WH: Most definitely, particularly at that time. If you can understand that here's a kid, who came out of an integrated 4-H, local 4-H club, into an integrated camp Virgil Tate, in Kanawha Co.,, my experience in 4-H, was sort of a, just a total kind of experience different from what happened when I arrived here. When I arrived here, all of the sudden, the emphasis, I should say, was on.. Well all of the counselors for instance, were African American, all the , and the food, was a different kind of food, and the experience , just in itself of being in an all black environment, was a real sort of enriching experience. The fact that these folks, the folks that I told you about , the Julia Lowry's, the Billie Hairston's, the Eugene Mitchell's., these people no longer, were you just sort of one of .. I think in Kanawha co, back in the 60s, our camps

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averaged around 200 kids, and there were four of them, out here there were 50 of us, and we were all African American, or 40, and they really concentrated on us and our history. They taught us poetry, they did the songs, music, everything was focused for us, and it was, and it helped me to sort of get rooted early, in who I was, in WV.

MM: Do you feel that the African American youth today are missing something by being sent to an integrated camp?

WH: Most definitely. First, the assumption that they are being sent to an integrated camp, is questionable, I don't believe that there is the involvement in the community, definitely not the volunteer adult involvement, that there once was, in the old program. There isn't the involvement of the church community in the camping experience, that was another thing about here, there was always that connection to the church to along with the 4-H, I don't believe as a rule nowhere in the percentages, in WV, are African American children participating in camping experiences. There is a camp here at Carver now, that has 40 or 50 maybe kids, and the kids are in other places, but our parents are not as involved as they were in the old program. Our communities, aren't as involved, and I believe, just that the fact that one of the things that we were taught over and above our everyday school life, was this whole idea of, I guess you could call it discipline, a way to communicate with each other, a way to share with each other, that doesn't exist. Kids now adays, even my son, I believe, has an opportunity to do quite different things. His experiences is not a 4-H experience. He tends to be in Arts camps, String camps, and its a totally different, so I don't believe that the vehicle exists, for children, African American children, to be as involved in summer camping programs as they were. I forgot the question now..

MM: That's right. Could you talk about some of the roles that the counselors had, like some of the things you mentioned earlier.

WH: We had very talented people, here at Carver, people who obviously cared about you, and when I say that they cared about you because they're giving up, most of the people that I mentioned, were people who were paid to be here, but there were a lot of volunteers too. I don't

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know whatever the reason I can't remember their names, but people who would give up a week's vacation, to come out here and spend with the kids, and there were people who would work out here, at the pool, for less money than they could make working for the city of Charleston's pool program, just so they could be here with us, to take part. There were people who would take time with you, and as I look around and I see a lot of these paths, and things, I can remember walking through these paths with people who just simply would ask questions like: who are you, what do you want to be, what do you want to do, and they challenge you to be a little more than you were. They-there was no such things as lazy dreams, and dreams were always wide open. They kept you thinking about what you ought to be, what you should be, you know what your accomplishments are. It was here, of all places, and people find this hard to believe it, but it was actually here that I had my first opportunity to speak to the public. This is um..I think it was Billie Hairston who simply said to me, "Go out and make this announcement", and it scared me to no end, but I got up and I did that, and people laughed at something and I found that I could say things that would make folks laugh. As a result of my being able to stand up in front of the people here at this camp, it turned me into this loudmouth..whatever that speaks all over the world and all over the country. But, it was actually here that I had my first experience at standing in front of a group of people, and actually speaking to them, communicating with them, and I wonder if I would be doing some of the things I do now if it weren't for that, that experience. Yeah it does.

MM: Do you remember any gender differences at the camp, as far as activities?

WH: Yeah, I probably not supposed to say this, but the boys were treated differently from the girls. And when I say this, I don't mean that anybody was discriminated against. We. .I can remember having meetings over here in the cottage with just the guys, and I can't remember the topics or subjects. I remember that some of the homemaking things-we had .a lot of our agents were not just 4-H agents but they were also home demonstration agents, and I remember they would deal specifically with the girls with some of those activities. But, for the most part, I can't remember, we had tribes, we were separated into tribes-and I don't recall there being difference between. .girls didn't have one, and boys, they were all together there, and as far as the leadership within the tribes, what we called chiefs, [inaudible] ... I remember

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that being pretty equal, so, while there were these distinct differences that one believed that a girl should do this and a boy should do this, I don't really remember as anything that would be significant.

MM: In general, the importance of the camp to you personally?

WH: This is where I had my opportunity to be. .I guess you really call it leadership development. Nobody said that's what it was, but we were being taught to be leaders. We were taught to be folks in the community involved, to be people who challenged the system even. .that's hard-that would take me a long time to explain what I mean by that. I believe that it was leadership development, the opportunity to learn a little bit about leadership, to have the examples that were here.. the folks that were here that were already leaders in our minds, and to watch the way they acted, and the way they interacted with us, so leadership development, probably the thing that I took away from here. Just that knowing that I could be, and given some of the basic tools, how to speak, how to talk, how to dress. When not to interrupt... the whole music influence, the fact that we needed to be out in front with our music. Leadership developments.

MM: Do you remember any stories?

WH: This place is full of stories-again, that's where one gets real confused because I can't. .because I was coming in a rather strange going from the white program back into the black program, back into the white program. It's real difficult to remember specific stories that came out of here, you think about all of the stories. I can remember though, Mr. I wants say that Mr. Lynch was here, even though I cannot remember Wesley Lynch being in camp with me. I really, that is not a memory that I have and I meant to check to see exactly where he was in 1964,65,66, he may have been in Africa, maybe that's why I don't remember that. I can remember him telling the stories, or the people giving him credit for a lot of the stories about. .Native American Indian kinda lore things. I can remember hearing history about specific individuals and the stories around Booker T Carver, Booker, T Washington, George Washington Carver, and those kinds of things. I can remember hearing lots of good history lessons about people that had been here before us. Blacks, not a lot on camp back then, I don't

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remember us getting a lot history on the camp.

MM: That you may not necessarily have gotten in the public school system.

WH: Oh well no. A lot of stuff didn't happen in the public school system happened here. The public school system was not really focusing on multicultural education back then, so yeah your right, a lot of those kind of things happened right here, but I can't remember specifics.

MM: Are there any stories that you would like tell from your personal experiences at the camp?

WH: You know. The one thing. .this isn't a story, but the one thing about this place, and it's silly really, When we would get up here in the morning, and you know we're out here in the woods, and it's so different from what a lot of us were used to. But, the thing that I remember most specifically about this camp was after a good night of council circle and folks giving you all this kind of information and education was getting up early in the morning and comin out and seeing snakes in the pool. As dumb as that sounds, that's one of the things I can always remember here, was that there were always, we would come out early. I think somebody would say that you gonna, that we would have to raise the flag. We always had a flag raising ceremony in the morning. It was a way to honor our country and to honor our state, and it was always a part of what we did. And so I can remember having the distinction of being one of the people responsible for that so I was up early. Snakes. This place was full of snakes. There were snakes everywhere. And every morning out there in the pool, the snakes would be in the pool. Now, that's not a story, but it's one of those visual memories I have of this place. There were snakes everywhere. I can..I can remember just hearing stories about folks that had met here, folks who had married here. I can remember ... people from the local community, pastors who would come in and deliver some really nice sermonettes I guess you would call them. These were local men who came in from this Baptist Church. I think the Baptist headquarters for black churches, black Baptist churches is near here. In fact, I am sure it is, it's out there on 19 somewhere now. But, I can remember folks from over there coming over here and giving us little messages. I am specific, I guess the best thing that I can say is that I always wanted to be here. They were short experiences, and at that time in my life, I was a young teenage kid, and I

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was experiencing a lot of camping programs. I was involved in 4-H. I was involved in the United Methodist Church, and some of the camping programs there. And I love to go camping. This was the only place for me, where I could find an African American audience, and African American group of adults, and this was in fact, probably the most favorite place for me to come simply because of the ambiance, if that's a good word, simply because of the just it felt so good to be here with these folks, and they make you feel good. I don't want to color that by saying everything here was rosey, you know you got jumped on, you got screamed at, you got punished, you got. .and a lot of the resources here were different from the resources say in Camp Virgil Tate or Jackson's Mill. Those places had a lot more money, and could do a lot more things for you. But these folks concentrated a lot on us, and they really, really made you feel good about yourself. In the long run, if I had to do it over, if I had to choose, I would rather be here. If I had to choose between the camps. I think now looking back on it, this, even though the overall 4-H program to me was the basis of a lot of who and what I am, and always say that. The basis of my 4-H program was my summer experiences here, so this was the foundation for me to then go into quote that white community and become quote the leader there because I had this experience. These folks gave me the opportunity to do some things and be some, do things that when I finally go to say Jackson's Mill I was ready and I was prepared, and so I could easily move to that maze that they had and come out a leader. Same thing, and we talked about this, Ed Cabell and I both talked about the fact that I think that what made it easier for us to integrate, be the first black children at Jackson's Mill was the fact that we had been here, and they had prepared us, and that we went there ready.

MM: Was that the boys state?

WH: Yeah, it was the first boy. At that time there was boys state, girls state, and older youth, and they somebody made the wise decision decided that the first black children should be at boys state. And so they sent us. And we, and I should add that in that first camp we both, we both did very well as far as leadership, You know, we both did extremely well in moving in to that camp and taking over roles of leadership and being a part of those camp. But that's what we were told to do, so you know we just did what we were supposed to.

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MM: That's all I have, unless you want to add some more.

WH: No, I guess that's it, cause I could go on and on. I sit here and like I said, one does after were talking over 30 years ago. One does get to a point where they confuse, one camping experience with another. There were just some things unique here that make it stand out. That's it.

MM: Thank you.

WH: Um Huh.

END OF INTERVIEW