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Oral History Interview: Burl Collins

Burl Collins

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Burl Collins

BC: . . .coke.

CC: Uh, huh.

BC: Is that number on the bottom?

CC: Uh, yes. Okay now, uh, what's your name?

BC: Burl Collins, B-U-R-L.

CC: Burl Collins and you're how old?

BC: Well I, I'm 71 soon be, I was born in 19 and 3,
/ CC: 1903. / October 25th.

CC: Uh, huh.

BC: And I, I was, uh, raised in, uh, McDowell County and
I was coal miner / CC: Coal miner? / that's the
first work that I done.

CC: Um, mmm.

BC: (Coughs) and I went to work when I was 15 years old,
(coughs) 'cuse me for coughing. Any more questions
now you want to ask me on that?

CC: Tell bout the coal miners.

BC: Well yeah in that coal mine you see I, I worked in
the coal mine for 33 years / CC: Uh, huh. / and I
got hurt awful bad a few times. Got some of my
buddies killed / CC: Ooh. / so I just drifted on
and, uh, finally I, I got married and I was working
in the mine on a loading machine when I got married.
I was married in, uh, '23 / CC: Um, mmm. / '23
and me and my wife has had 11 kids.

CC: Eleven kids?

BC: Um, mmm had eight girls and three boys.

CC: Uh, huh. Do you think, uh, things today are alot
different then they was?

BC: Oh they're completely different.

CC: Do you think people are less friendly today, more friendly?

BC: No, uh, no I don't think so. I tell ya the time has come / CC: Um, mmm. / that people don't look after each other / CC: Um, mmm. / now any more right now and I know this does happen. Maybe your next door neighbor he may be dead and you don't know a thing about it / CC: Uh, huh. / till the ambulance ready to come in get him / CC: Um, mmm. / . But it use to be it wasn't like that. If anybody got sick the whole community knowed it and they helped him out if he, uh, had a garden or they had a field of corn why all the neighbors got in there and we had corn schuckings, we had bean stringing, we had apple peeling, we had fencing, barn raising, house raising all that, you don't see that no more.

CC: Why do, why do you think you don't see that any more?

BC: I don't see it in this country, no.

CC: You don't see it in West Virginia?

BC: No not in West Virginia, no sir, never hear tell of it. That's all faded away, / CC: Um, mmm. / that's all left / CC: Um, mmm. / and if I'd of thought when I was a young man a growing up if this thing would've got in the shape it's in / CC: Um, mmm. / I couldn't believe it.

CC: No.

BC: Now you take back there when the, in, uh, 19 and 3 when I was born / CC: Um, mmm. / you never knowed what a television was, you didn't know what a radio was and tell you too, they had telephones some type I don't know but wasn't too fancy / CC: Um, mmm. / and, uh, the cars had just begin to come out in 19 and 3, the first car was made I believe come out in 1903 I believe it was / CC: Um, mmm. / . Well you see back there then never knowed what a airplane was

- CC: No. didn't know what none of this stuff.
- CC: How did you get from place to place?
- BC: You walked and, uh, uh, rode horses.
- CC: Walk for miles and miles.
- BC: Oh yeah. I tell you what I use to do. I use to walk six miles every morning and six that evening
- CC: Shew. back. I never thought too much about it.
- CC: Did you go to school, a school?
- BC: No I was going to work
- CC: Oh. and you see I walked to school, I walk from over two miles
- CC: Uh, huh. and we didn't have but just them two books. We had the reader what we called a first reader and you had arithmetic
- CC: Um, mmm.
- And in arithmetic they got this here thing cobbled up for books now
- CC: Yeah. you don't know what you are reading. This book, course I ain't got too good a education. Now you know what education I've got?
- CC: Um,
- BC: I but went to the third grade
- CC: Hum. and I've had peoples ask me you tell me you didn't go no further than the first grade
- CC: Um, mmm. and how can you tell me all bout this stuff. You know I just said to myself, I'm awful bad to pick up papers and read
- CC: Um.
- I find one on the street I pick it up, I don't know I just got a habit I don't care if it's nice but I pick papers up and, uh,
- CC: Uh, huh. we've got some kids that's went to college
- CC: Uh, huh. and they can't sit down right now and tell me how many board, feets in a board. Now figure that out, can you?
- CC: No I can't.
- BC: Well I can. And all of that stuff now my, I've

got two kids went through high school.

CC: I probably couldn't even tell you how you cou-, how you schuck corn.

BC: On what?

CC: How to schuck corn or, uh, . . .

BC: You can't?

CC: No.

BC: Well you, you feed schucks just rip it off, rip it off and take it off and there's a big corn crib where they kept the corn you just laid the corn over in something like a big bin just throw the schucks back / CC: Uh, huh. / . And I, we, I've been to them corn schuckings and I've been to them fencing and there'd be so many people there / CC: Yeah. / that maybe I wouldn't get to touch my hand / CC: Yeah. / and may . . .

CC: Is that what you did for in your spare time that then?

BC: Well what we done we just set a day well just say we was going to have a fencing / CC: Um, mmm. / we'd get out and tell the whole neighborhood we were going to have a, a fencing on a certain day / CC: Um, mmm. / . Now what we done, everybody in that community come in there and the men's wives and the kids they come and they done the cooking and there's something else now what we had, we had the best food, we ain't got eating today.

CC: That eating.

BC: All that eating I tell you know I learn my lesson off this trick.

CC: What kind of foods did you have?

BC: Oh listen you name it and we had it. You name it, we had chicken, we had turkey and we had pumpkin

pies p-, any kind of a pie they baked it like that and we had our own milk, we had our own butter. We didn't go to the store and buy stuff.

CC: Everything homemade?

BC: Every home, buddy they was awful good cooks / CC: Um. / and buddy you just absolutely you have just good eating. I tell you something else you never see, / CC: Um, mmm. / y-you didn't back there when I was born and raised up you hardly ever see anybody sick like you see this day and time, / CC: Really. / you hardly ever see that cause I tell you the reason why. We raised our own stuff / CC: Uh, huh. / and it was all fresh stuff / CC: Uh, huh. / well if one got sick why they'd get out there and, uh, get um some, uh, medicine and they stayed, people, people learnt how to make this medicine out of these, uh, herbs like I've got these right out here / CC: Um, mmm. / And in this day and time now if you get sick go to the doctor.

CC: Yes. What kind of herbs, what kind of . . .

BC: Well there's different kinds just like I talking to that man right out there bout that I was. There's different herbs / CC: Yeah. / that you can use. You can use these old juniper, you can use that catnip / CC: Uh, huh. / Now that, you know what catnip is I reckon?

CC: Yeah.

BC: Well that is, when a baby come / CC: Uh, huh. / that's the first thing you done when out, that's the first thing we done we went out there and got us some, uh, catnip and made up a tea / CC: Uh, huh. / and we put our babies on that, they done good on it. You don't see that no more.

CC: That made the babies healthier, fatter?

BC: Yes it did honey, some grow up, / CC: Uh, huh. / I don't know how you feel about it. My wife had

sev-eleven babies. You know my wife was never in the hospital in her life / CC: Really? / in all that, everyone of them kids was borned at home / CC: Oh. / and everyone of um was good, healthy kids everyone of the last one.

CC: Natural childbirth?

BC: No it was everyone of um was perfect / CC: Oh. / and that basis the ground for the mystery. But I tell you what we didn't do, my wife wasn't a bit 'lution, we wasn't a bit 'lution at all and I lived with my wife for about three years for I married her and I liked from, I married on the 14th day of July and I liked from the 14th day of July to the 25th of October / CC: Huh. / of being 20 years old and, uh, I went to working in the mines, well I was working in the mines on a loading machine / CC: Um, mmm. / when we married and, uh, we've been together going on 52 years now and we've never have had no fights but we've had some, / CC: Uh, huh. / we've had some arguments don't you think we ain't.

CC: Did you get, did you get married in a church?

BC: No.

CC: No?

BC: No when my wife, no I meet a fella a preacher going through the country / CC: Yeah. / I went and got him and he said I'm a going by so I went down there that morning and got my wife and, uh, you talking about, now I had a wedding / CC: Uh, huh. / . Buddy I guess it was, I can't tell you how many people was there. Well my daddy-in-law come to me and he said what are we going to do, said we going to have a wedding and he said well I'll furnish half and you furnish half. We had anything that you wanted to eat / CC: Uh, huh. / we had it even down to our home. Anything in the world that we, I reckon you can name that you wanted to eat was there and they was a eating there at five o'clock that evening / CC: Uh, huh. / and I got bigger crowd and of course me and my wife

we, uh, they, they sees us to the table and, uh, we had, we, we had waiters / CC: Um, mmm. / and I give that preacher five dollars for to marry me / CC: Five dollars? / and that . . .

CC: You got married in a house or in a church?

BC: Right out in the road, right out in the middle of the road.

CC: Middle of the road, wow.

BC: And that, but you know what I'm the only one, they was ten of us in my family, / CC: Yeah. / my dad's family and you know I'm the only man in that bunch out of that, (coughs) ten / CC: Uh, huh. / that was b-b-born away from the old home place and dern me if I didn't marry right where I was born.

CC: You did ?

BC: Yes sir, / CC: Hum. / they, now they, my dad went to losing too many kids and he thought he'd change places to see if it didn't help some / CC: Um, mmm. / and how they moved away it wasn't too far well I was born / CC: Um, mmm. / and I thought about that a million time, uh, marry exactly where I was born at.

CC: Did you go, did you go to church? What was religion like back then, church and . . .

BC: Well it's all together different now, / CC: All different . . . / completely, I've never seen anything like it.

CC: Really?

BC: Never seen nothing like it. Did you know back there when I was born / CC: Uh, huh. / there was two churches the only ones I knew anything about, only one I ever hear anything about / CC: Yeah. / and I tell you what it was. Now the Free Will Baptist / CC: Um, mmm. / and the old regular Baptist, now the old regular Baptist pulled off from the Free Will / CC: Um, mmm. / and

set up their own. Now that, I'll tell you what else, we had, we had nice church house and we had there something else we had, we, somebody get wind well we need a church in this community
/ CC: Yeah./ we'd all gang in there buddy and have women eat and cook and sometimes we make out of logs.

CC: Uh, huh, you ma-you built the church?

BC: We built the church our own selves / CC: Uh, huh./ allright I'll tell you what the fact now I see this and I can prove it of different ones if you didn't get to the church on Sunday / CC: Yeah./ right early / CC: Yeah./ you didn't get no seat.

CC: Crowded?

BC: Buddy and I tell you what too, we had some of the best preachers you ever seen in your life / CC: Yeah./ and you couldn't give um no money that's like now if they took this money out of this here church business you wouldn't even have a preacher.

CC: Really?

BC: The money they collect they're making a killing off the preaching and. . .

CC: Now they make a killing but back then they couldn't. . .

BC: Oh no, no why you never thought about giving a preacher any money, / CC: Really?/ lord no and if you didn't get there, if you didn't get there get your seat, drag around behind like they do around here now / CC: Uh, huh./ forget it, forget it. I tell you what I see, I see down at that house pack so tight the aisle was standing full and every, them windows all raised and every head that could be stucked in there. Do you see that today / CC: No./ no you don't / CC: Not anymore./ you go up to the church houses see if they ain't, why who they preaching to, a bunch of seats that's all you done.

CC: They need money now too.

BC: Well it's, it's a money deal, it's a money deal

∠ CC: Um, mmm.∠. Now you take different ones

I, I believe in helping, I believe in the treasure in the church, I believe in owning a home and helping

a fella, but I don't believe in putting up some big

preacher up there and he owns cadillac cars and big

fine homes and airplanes and everything now ∠ CC: Yeah.∠

I can't see that. But if you took that money out of

the churches today, hum um you'll not have no church

at all, ∠ CC: Yeah.∠ it's out, it's out (coughs).

So that's the way that thing work. Now if you, if

you had a funeral, if you had a funeral say if somebody

die, ∠ CC: Um, mmm.∠ we all die, we die from the morn

of time and we're still a dying and will die ∠ CC: Yeah.∠.

There's so many people there at that grave to dig that

grave for half a number maybe never get down to the grave,

maybe never get a chance to throw a dust full of dirt

∠ CC: Yeah.∠. I tell you what happened now right

out there, now I'm from McDowell County ∠ CC: Uh, huh.∠

and late one evening one of my neighbors runs the post

office out there come out there said Burl him and his

wife said we're in trouble. I said you are, huh. Said

yeah we are I said well what is your trouble now. He

said we've got a grave to dig and said we can't get

nobody to dig it and I said where you going to dig it

at he said we want you to go to Iaeger, ∠ CC: Um, mmm.∠

that's where I'm from and he said over, I said I know

where it's at. Well he said can't get nobody to help

dig that grave down there and he said we want to get

you to go down there said we'll pay you well for it,

I said no pay in it you know ∠ CC: Um, mmm.∠. Next

morning early (coughs), uh, well the man's son, uh,

his daddy is the one had to dig the grave. They come

and got me and I don't know it's about, it's about

80 miles from where I live to where that was at and

I had to go down there an old man 71 years old to

dig that grave, help dig that grave. And that's

what that's come to ∠ CC: Yeah.∠ and it, now listen

when you think, now you think things are going to get

any better you're wrong, it's going to get worst and

∠ CC: Yeah.∠ worst, going to keep getting worst.

Now I'm a bible reader my own self ∠ CC: Yeah.∠

and God Almighty said, Jesus Christ said I will take peace from the earth (coughs). . .

CC: Um, mmm. Is that what you think is happening, peace is being taken?

BC: Absolutely, you read that there, you read the Revelations and you read that. I'll tell you another thing I want you to read, I want you to take this bible, you ain't never read a bible, read it / CC: Uh, huh. / . I want you to read one chapter for me and I want you to read it all and it's the 24th chapter of St. Matthew if that don't convince you and he asked him what is going to be the end / CC: Uh, huh. / . And he told him, and he said when you going to see all this come about, earthquakes, wars, pestilence and rumors of wars, and all of that / CC: Yeah. / and it tells you exactly the day you read that and you say well I'm a living in that day. You can't, like an old man down here he said if anybody, I can't (coughs) convince anybody say they need to read no further / CC: Yeah. / now. . .

CC: We're living in a doom day.

BC: Now the bible says back there, I can't tell you exactly where all this is at / CC: Uh, huh. / he said there would be perilous times, / CC: Uh, huh. / perilous times and there'd be, he said there'd be signs and there'd be wonders. Where you see them I read about things going on you see um every now and then they ain't never come up with it yet / CC: Um, mmm. / . Now you take them old flying saucers they don't know where that's coming from. Like I hear a fella say one time, I think he's a preacher / CC: Uh, huh. / when that great light come out of the north, now you ever see that?

CC: No . . .

BC: I seen twice, I seen twice buddy that looks scarey and he, the man he got up preaching now he said that great light he said there's no two ways about

it said you needn't get scared he said it tells that in the bible this will happen, said we'll, we'll see it now said he told it for it happened said we see it.

CC: That's a sign.

BC: That's a sign just like that but he told them all surely they would see it before the end, / CC: Um, mmm. / you know. You bout done I've got to get out of here.

CC: Oh, okay, uh, okay how bout if you just told me, uh, what were some expressions that they used back then that you don't hear anymore?

BC: Well it'd be different things. Anymore, anymore when you went to a church it'd be sister, it'd be brother and, uh, it'd be neighbor and it'd be this and that but you don't hear that anymore / CC: Uh, huh. / Anymore you hear they might be a cussing you out, uh, (coughs) you don't see that back there then, / CC: Uh, huh. / no you never see none of that trash and everybody that walk up to you they thank you, can I help you in a way, or something like that you know / CC: Yeah. / That's out / CC: Uh, huh. / and it's going worst and worst and get worst can't get no better. Any time that it will be peace on this earth anymore / CC: Uh, huh. / is when Jesus Christ comes back the second time there'll be peace on this earth. He's going to stra-he's going to make way don't you think he ain't, somebody think he ain't a coming back yes he is coming back to. He'll be back and I'm going to tell you one thing you're going to see a sight more before he comes. There's alot of that stuff got to come through yet he spoke of would be here in the last days and that soul in you, your ev-every living soul on this earth. Now that soul they think well it may be made away with, no it don't, a million years from the day your soul is a going to be alive somewhere / CC: Hum. / Read that, read the Revelations, read the, read the 4th chapter / CC: Okay. / Is there anything else you want?

CC: Oh no, uh, I thank you.

BC: Well I thank you and maybe I get to see you again.

CC: Okay bye, bye.

BC: Bye, bye (break in tape).