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Bob Chapman

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This is an oral history interview with Bob Chapman on November 23, 1998.

Interviewer: Where in Appalachia were you raised?

Mr. Chapman: In Pike County, coal town of McVeigh

Interviewer: What type of community was this? Was this a coal community?

Mr. Chapman: Oh yeah, (laughter) definitely, a coal camp, everything owned by the coal company, the houses, the stores, the everything.

Interviewer: Tell anything that you want to about the coal camp life, basically.

Mr. Chapman: It was pretty rural. We lived in a place called Homemade Holler at the head of Pond Creek. Typical mining camp houses, two families in each one, lots of kids for the most part, dirt roads, outhouses. Water was a spicket out in the yard. I guess it's what you get used to.

Interviewer: Did your family work for the coal company or what kind of work did your family do?

Mr. Chapman: Oh yeah, Dad worked in the coal mines. That's why we were there. I was borned her in Louisa and I was about three years old when Dad moved us to Pond Creek where he Mr.Chapman: worked for Eastern Coal Corporation.

Interviewer: What type of people were there? Was it a diverse community?

Mr. Chapman: Well, up in Homemade Holler it was primarily all white people. There may have been a few other nationalities that blended in well with whites. There may have been German descent, Hungarian descent. They were white people so there was really no diversification.

Interviewer: Were there any interesting stories or things about the community?

Mr. Chapman: Well, everyday life was interesting, lots of kids. We spent our evenings, especially in the summertime, all getting together to play. Either to play ball, of course, the girls always wanted to play school and, of course, they also had to be the teacher. And I remember one evening we were playing school and Deanna Buchannon was the principal and she decided that my brother was supposed to get a spanking. And she started to hit him and he grabbed the board and when she pulled back it put about a four inch splinter right down through the side of his hand and school was out and trip to the doctor.

Interviewer: they want to know anything that has anything to do with the community, any histories of the community that you know.

Mr. Chapman: I suppose the history of the community was pretty self-evident. It was a coal-mining place. Eastern Coal Corporation owned the place. They owned, they built the houses. Like I said the place where we lived was called Homemade Holler which literally means it was Mr. Chapman: made. They came up there with bulldozers, up the left hand side halfway and switched over and up the right hand side and made places and built houses. Those houses go back probably at least into the thirties. 'Cause Eastern always owned the place. They owned the company store. When you bought your groceries on bought them on time, and if you bought clothes you bought them on time, and it even got to the point where you could buy an automobile through the company store.

But the history, I don't know. The history of Pond Creek, I don't know if anybody could

Mr. Chapman: really tell it. It was an evolving place, families came and went. The kids you went to school with this year, next year probably wasn't going to be there. The turn over was pretty high.

Interviewer: What was the time frame that you lived there?

Mr. Chapman: We were there from about 1943 until I graduated in 1958. Well, actually we lived in Pond Creek that time but in about '54, we moved out of Homemade Holler and we moved up Straight Holler, the most crookedest road that I have ever driven, but it's called Straight Holler. Boy, that was something else.

We were in a different school district. Up to that point I had gone to McVeigh Grade School, but up in Straight Holler they had their own school. They had a little two-room school and the kids up there were forced to go to that. They had all eight grades. Fonzie McCoy was the head teacher and principal and God only power. I didn't know much of her family until later years, as a matter of fact, they're the McCoy's from Bear Creek, McCoy Glass. Up there school started a month ahead of time then the normal schools. So we were forced to start up there and Mr. Chapman: being the new kids on the block, we had to fight our way to school and home everyday. Well finally I got fed up with it and one morning we got into it on the school ground over a wasp's nest. And one of the Smith boys decided he wanted it to give to the teacher for science class and I said, "No."

He decided to take it and I said, "I'll throw it down and stomp it before I let you have it." Well, he grabbed for it. I threw it down. I stomped it. He stomped it. I stomped his foot. We got into a fight between the two little porches, probably about three foot distance there. Of course, Ms. McCoy broke it up and later that morning she told me to come up and take my whooping for fighting on the playground and I said, "Since Chester started it, when he takes his whooping, I'll take mine."

She said, "Well, Chester has already had a whooping for not having his lessons."

I said, "That don't count."

Mr. Chapman: She said, "Go home and don't come back until you get ready to take your whipping." So I went home and I never did go back. The next day we walked out of that holler and went back down to the lower school and my brother and I were the only two kids in the whole holler that was allowed to go to the other school.

Interviewer: What was the distance between the two schools?

Mr. Chapman: Probably five miles between the two schools and we had always lived within walking distance because there were not school buses developed for the grade school. We had always had to walk. It was probably a mile and a half from where we lived in Homemade Holler

Mr. Chapman: and this added another mile onto it but we were more than glad to walk out of there and go back to the school with the kids that we knew. And the very next year though, they closed that school and made everybody go down there. So we just got ahead of the curve.

Interviewer: How many were in your family?

Mr. Chapman: Well, during the growing up years there was me and my twin brother, we were the youngest, and had a sister and brother that were twins that were the next two, then there were two other girls, older, that were separate. So that made about two, four about six of us growing up at that time.

Interviewer: What was a typical day? What were everybody's duties in the house?

Mr. Chapman: Well, for the most part it was just get up and go to school. Come home, do your homework. We didn't have much in the way of chores. 'Cause when you live in a coal community there's nothing much to do. You don't farm. You might raise a little bit of garden

Mr. Chapman: but primarily we'd just go to school, come home, go out and play, and go to bed.

Interviewer: Was there any sort of class system in the coal community?

Mr. Chapman: Oh boy, was there ever! You didn't hardly even associate if it was the foreman's kids or the boss man's kids (making quotation marks with his fingers). One of the, I still call her

Mr. Chapman: the love of my life, she was the boss's daughter. Lived in a big house up on the hill, above where we lived. It was okay to be friends with her, to talk to her, but you would never, ever think about dating those girls. Of course, the kids themselves weren't that way. But it was the parents, I suppose that in any corporation the boss doesn't want their kids playing with the employees.

Interviewer: Was there anything else that you found about your upbringing in that area?

Mr. Chapman: We finally moved out of Straight Holler. The company decided to sell all the houses and you either had to buy the house or move out. And so Dad decided to buy a house down there so we could move back down in the community, the number seven community. So, we moved back down there during my high school years and we were living there is '57 when my brother was killed in Korea.

And it was really weird. My first contact with black people, there was this whole little world that I didn't even know existed. From the house we lived in, there was one more house that were white folks and then there was kind of a little branch or creek running up through there, and then there was some other houses. I never, ever thought about who lives in those houses and one day I found out that there was a whole community back up in this little hollow and they were all black people. We saw them on occasion. Every morning we saw a bus pick them up and take them to school. We'd never give a thought to where they went to school or why they didn't go to our school until 1957 when they integrated Belfry High School. There really wasn't that

Mr. Chapman: many, fifteen at most, that came to our school. And the very first day there was riots, there Mr. Chapman: was fights and as soon the Williamson Daily News came up and wrote a story, "Race Riots at Belfry," no more problems the rest of the year. But it was really odd, I had lived my whole life, up until then, in that community and had never really given any thought about where these people went to school.

I knew where they went to church, because, they had a little church right there by the community. And the youth group from my church had gone there and sang and they had been to our church, but that was about the limits of our association.

Interviewer: You were talking about churches. What kind of church were you raised in, what kind of services were held?

Mr. Chapman: Well, I was raised in the Pinson Fork Church of God of Cleveland, Tennessee, Pentecostal, and I still look back on it as being my church, even though, in later years I left the Church of God and joined the Methodist Church. I still have roots. We had the fantastic youth groups. Friday night ballgames didn't mean anything to us. We were too far away from the high school and the ball fields and nobody had cars and we couldn't afford a bus, so we had our youth meetings on Friday night and we always had big crowds.

One particular minister we had, Reverend Otis Carter, he would write the Christmas plays for us and direct them and the youth group would put them on. During Christmas and Easter and they would go on, they weren't just one night things they would go on, for as much as six weeks a different part of it each time. It was really something else growing up there.

It was such a close knit group, even in high school. Most of us managed to wind up in the Mr. Chapman: same home room and Merrill Clemens was our home room teacher except my brother and I, we didn't, we decided we weren't going to go to high school. We didn't have any need for it, my 8th grade teacher Bess Hayes she kept coming up there and getting after Dad, "Make them go, make them go," so finally we conceded and we started the second semester of

Mr. Chapman: freshmen year.

Didn't know anything about the school, nothing at all, and of course, we were just stuck in the first room that had openings, and next the next day, some of the kids said, "Why don't you come to our home room?" And we said hey, sounds like a good idea, so we went with all the rest of the kids and couple days later, the other teacher finally said, "Why didn't you come back to home room?"

We went to home room, "No you didn't," yes we did. Well, where did you go (laughing), we went to Miss Clemens. But they were real good natured about it, they just said, "Okay, stay there."

Of course, you know, back in those day, you could do pretty well free range in high school, every every morning we got together, we sang, we had Bible readings, we said pledge to the flag, anybody who wanted to take part could take part, if you didn't want to you didn't have to.

And, for a long time, we had no idea, that the principal was putting us on the P.A. system in the morning and the rest of the school was hearing what was going on in our homeroom. We took that as a pretty good compliment, he said that Merrill Clemens had the best homeroom, of any that that school had ever had. Kind of made us proud.

Interviewer: What else was there about the school, were activities a big thing at that point or were they not really a consideration?

Mr. Chapman: Well, as always, you know, any kind of high school, (clear throat) sports is a big thing. Belfry always had a pretty good team. Didn't get involved because I didn't have time, since I started the second semester of freshmen year, I had a lot of time to make up. And, I did, and we graduated with the rest of the class. So, we kind of didn't bother with sports in order to get the academic part of it.

Interviewer: You're talking about going, singing at the black church, were there any differences? Could you tell anything?

Mr. Chapman: Oh yes. Really, when you get right down to it, no, because, we were singing the same music, of course they had their own, they had their own rhythm that they sang in, a natural rhythm. Of course, being a Pentecostal Church, we were about as rhythmic as they were. But it was really interesting to attend their services. And, to have them attend ours, we didn't just go to their's, our youth choir went all over the, all over Pond Creek. Different churches and sang.

Interviewer: What were the differences between all the different churches? What's the styles?

Mr. Chapman: When I left my house, I had to go by the Baptist Church and then I had to go by the Pilgrim Holiness Church, and then I had to go by the First Church from Anderson Indiana, before I got to my church. And each, each, of course had their own peculiarities, of course the Baptist were just Baptist, for instance, the, this particular First Church of God Anderson Indiana, didn't believe in music. They had no music in their church, they sang, but everything was accapela. The Pilgrim Holiness Church, there wasn't a whole lot of difference, you know as a young person, that I could see, between their church and my church. The singing was about the same, the preaching was about the same. But, I guess the two big difference was the Baptist Church and First Church Anderson.

Interviewer: You were talking about one out of Indiana and one out of Tennessee, what does that mean?

Mr. Chapman: Okay, headquarters, headquarters of the churches. The Church of God that I went to, their headquarters was in Cleveland Tennessee, which means they were not just an independent church but they were a part of a large organization and the same way with the First

Mr. Chapman: Church Anderson, Indiana, their headquarters were in Anderson Indiana. They were just like the Methodist Church, because they're connected, connectural churches, which means they have in the hierarchy, instead of someone just going out and starting their own church and doing their own thing and making their own rules and regulations, you had standards that you had to meet, Like in the Methodist Church you have a Book of Discipline, and these are the sort of guidelines set down you know, by the hierarchy that you have to adhere to you can't just go out and preach anything you want to and call yourself by their name.

Interviewer: About what size was the community?

Mr. Chapman: Well, depending on what you call the community, if you just said McVeigh, probably several thousand. But you had, like I say, you had Homemade Holler, and there was probalby 30 to 40 families up there. Then each one of the little hollers, you had, when we moved back down when we bought the house there was a little holler that went up behind our house, had probably ten families in it.

Then just down the road, in the other part of number seven camp there was houses on both sides, all the way down. Probably another 20 -30 families, and of course up Straight Holler it was hard to tell how many there was, because, there was so many little branch offs and in each branch there was multiple families, but, it was pretty good size.

Interviewer: You listed about, I think three different schools you attended, I think? (Mr. Chapman motions two) Two? What were the differences between the two?

Mr. Chapman: Well, one was the elementary and McVeigh Grade School which was the building I, well, okay there was three. There was a little two room up in the country. At the McVeigh Grade School, of course, we had all eight grades. And, it was in two building, each one two-stories, a wooden frame building. The one up in the country was only two rooms, single-story,

Mr. Chapman: and I don't know, if, I didn't mention but up there you even had to bring your own drinking cup.

The teacher brought a pail of water and you had to bring your own cup, if you wanted a drink. And lunch usually consisted of an RC and a Moonpie. But, when I graduated from McVeigh, in the eighth grade, and we actually had graduation with caps and gowns and the whole nine yards. And, but they wouldn't let my brother and I march together, they had to split us up, boy girl type thing.

I always remember I marched with a girl named Phylis Rae Ball. And when she stepped up on the stage, she caught her toe in the hem of her gown and almost fell. Anyway, after we graduated from there we went to Belfry High School of course there everybody was bused (clock chiming, Mr. Chapman makes comment about clock).

Of course I finished up there in 1958 and graduated from Belfry High School.

Interviewer: Did they have the same kind of graduation ceremony at the high school as they did the eighth grade, did you have caps and gowns and the whole ceremony?

Mr. Chapman: Oh yeah, the whole nine yards. Belfry was, pretty progressive for its time, like I say, they had pretty good ball teams and a pretty good band. And everybody mostly went to the usual junior senior prom. Senior banquet and one thing I think that the kids probably don't have nowadays, we had our separate baccalaureate prior to graduation and, we were even allowed to pray (laughing). But, those were good days.

Interviewer: What else do you think that was interesting about that? What people would be interested in knowing about that whole area, growing up there?

Mr. Chapman: Well one thing is that I think a lot of kids missed out on growing up with their fathers. Because usually, you got up and went to school, your Dad was already at work. If he worked day shift. By the time you got home, he was home, but usually too tired to talk, if he Mr.

Chapman: worked second shift, you were lucky if you saw him on the weekends. My dad worked second and third shift most of the time, which meant that, I was gone to school when he came home from work.

And he was gone to work, when I came home from school, and so I, Saturday and Sunday was about the only time that I actually saw him, and I think a lot of kids missed growing up with their Dads. But because of the shift work like that.

Interviewer: Did he ever talk about his work in the mine? What type of work did he do?

Mr. Chapman: Well, I think he probably did just about everything. He started out with a pick and shovel and physically loading the coal and then as the machine age progressed and they got automated equipment in he ran the different pieces of equipment, but most of the time his job was hauling explosives, and that's why he had to do second and third shift. They could only haul the explosives when there were no other miners in the mines, so he would haul the powder and the blasting caps and sand and rock dust and put them in place. On the second and third shift so that way when the day shift came in everything was in place for them to work with. Pretty dangerous.

Interviewer: Did they have a lot of accidents in the mines there?

Mr. Chapman: No, actually during the period of the time that I remember anything at all, I can't recall any major accident at Eastern Coal.

Interviewer: About how long did your father work there? What was the average length of time that most people worked there?

Mr. Chapman: Well, most of them went in, probably as soon as they were old enough to start work, and they worked till there were 65, if the mines didn't kill them. So many of them wound

Mr. Chapman: up with black lung and various other problems caused from the dampness and the poor air that a lot of them didn't make it until 65.

Interviewer: A lot of the children who were raised there at this time, what did they end up doing? What did they go on to do?

Mr. Chapman: Well, most of us took advantage of one of the unique courses taught at Belfry (high school). Instead of just reading and writing, they taught Rt. 23. It's probably (End Side 1/Begin Side 2).

As I was saying, you know, Escapism 101 was taught at Belfry and, that's exactly what most of us did. There were very few who stayed around because there was nothing but the coal mines. And the only way you got a job in the coal mines was, somebody retired or was killed, so created a vacancy. So the minute, and that's not exaggerating, you know, the minute we graduated, we left.

We graduated on Friday night, and Sunday morning we left home and went to Ohio. And never to go back. And this is what most kids did, if they had anyone anywhere that they could go to, the minute they got out of school, especially if they weren't going to college, then they were Ohio and Michigan bound. To go find work.

Interviewer: What kind of jobs were they looking for in these areas?

Mr. Chapman: Pot luck. You took whatever you could find, of course the ones going to Michigan were all hoping to work in the automotive industry. Same way with Ohio, with Northern Ohio, same thing, I wound up, in Delaware, Ohio, for a while, working for Rainco Automatic Controllers. And, then in 1960, I went in the Army. Stayed for 21 years (laughs).

Interviewer: Once you finally left the area, did you experience any of the hill billy stereotypes,

Mr. Chapman: did anybody have any preconceived notions knowing you came from Kentucky?

Mr. Chapman: Well, you're pretty safe going to Ohio and Michigan, cause I think most of those people came from Kentucky. They always said if they ever shut down Ohio and Michigan, Kentucky would not be able to hold everybody who came home. So, I never really experienced any of the hill billy stereotyping for that reason. Of course once I went in to the service I traveled so much that it was pretty hard to tell where you were from. You know, by the way you talked, being in such a melting pot, there were so many different people.

Interviewer: Okay, you have gone back to this area where you were raised and I think they're doing mountaintop removal there now, what have you seen that's gone on there?

Mr. Chapman: Yeah, I guess the biggest thing that I've seen is that it's all going downhill, every time I go back to Pond Creek. Once you turn over the hill onto 199, off of 119, everything it just seems like has gotten worse and worse. As the years have gone by everything is just sort of run down, trashy, the roads are bad. Since the coal is gone, there don't seem to be much reason, you know to maintain the place.

But, up in the head of Straight Holler there, where they're starting mountaintop removal, the blasting has already destroyed people's wells up in that area. There's no city water as you might call it, and of course there's no city sanitation up there either, they've either got their private septic systems or outhouses or that thing. And most people have either drilled wells or a dug well. They have repeatedly come up and, I have one friend in particular who I keep in contact with. And they've come repeatedly and taken pictures of the foundation and the house and the basement and so forth to check for cracks, because they know that when they start blasting, the shock waves through that rock, it's cracking foundations on people's houses and like I said it's already destroyed most of their wells. So the coal company that's doing this is going to have to foot the bill to run water lines, you know, all the way up there to get water back

Mr. Chapman: to these people.

Interviewer: What of the community is left there? Before it was families, what people live there now?

Mr. Chapman: Well, it's pretty much, it's still families. But there's a lot of poverty, a lot of welfare, a lot of unemployment. When the mines shut down, you know, most of the people, they were not old enough to retire, but yet they were too old to try to start a second career so they just sit there.

Interviewer: What year did the mines close? Do you know?

Mr. Chapman: Well, it wasn't any particular year, it was started way back there, they started scaling down even back in the late '50s. They discontinued the temple at number seven and everything went through the temple at number eight which was probably five or six miles down the highway. And they tore up the tracks and then little by little they just started pulling out. They closed the number seven mines, and shifted everybody to other. The number eight mines and number nine over on Blackberry. And they just slowly just shut everything down.

Interviewer: The people who still live there now, how much of the area has been taken over by mountaintop (removal), I know that it goes on a lot, but what do they think of what's going on and how much is going on?

Mr. Chapman: Well, actually other than the fact that it's disrupting the lives by the blasting and so forth, they're not really effecting the housing areas so much because what they're actually blasting off is sort of a rural area, where there were no houses. But, the side effects of it, is going to be what really hurts people, when they start filling in the creeks. They're going to start causing run off, erosion, destroying the water shed, destroying wild life habitats. These things,

Mr. Chapman: you know, are the things that can't be replaced.

Interviewer: I know you have moved back to Louisa, where you were born. What have you noticed about the differences between the two communities? I know it was a different time, but, just the two communities in general.

Mr. Chapman: Oh, Louisa compared to McVeigh, well, I suppose, the biggest thing is just that here people seem to care more about the way things look and try to keep it clean, for the most part. Of course out in the rural country you've got trash dumps, but up there on Pond Creek, it's just, the whole place seems to be a trash dump. Everything's junky, old junked cars sitting along the side of the road, a lot of the houses as they become empty and fall down they just leave them. It's really disheartening to go up there and see the place.

Interviewer: Did they used to be very particular about the way things looked in McVeigh? Was there community pride more than there is now?

Mr. Chapman: Oh yeah, I remember back in the early '50s, the company maintained the houses, everything was maintained well, if they needed painted they were painted. They wound up putting shingles, kind of a fiberglass siding it was about the size of shingles but they were siding and they did all the houses. Everything looked good, people took pride in their houses, but it just seems like that when the mines closed it just broke their spirit.

I always remember the first pastor that I had, that I can remember at Pinson Fork Church Reverend Whorley, he was a carpenter and he worked for the company and I can remember him coming around and if you had a broken board in your porch, all you had to do was report it, and they came and fixed it. If you had a porch post fallen, anything wrong, a roof leak all you had to do was report it, they came and fixed it. But in the later years, everything just changed.

Interviewer: What were the houses like? You haven't really talked about that too much. What were the sizes?

Mr. Chapman: Well it was pretty much standard coal camp houses. They were two story, two family dwellings. You had two rooms upstairs and two rooms downstairs and a back porch and that was about it. You shared the front porch, it usually had a divider down the middle of it so you stayed on your own side.

Most of the time I guess it was, you tried to get along with the people next door because, what are you going to do if you couldn't? (Laughing) You know, I mean, they're going to live there. I can remember some, in Homemade Holler at various times we had one of my dad's cousins lived in half the house and, so we got along pretty good. But quite a bit of the time we wound up having the whole to ourselves. Except one time when my stepmother's family moved in, then we had to block up the doors and plug up our holes. We didn't get along with them too well.

Interviewer: Was there much discontent in the community? Basically did everybody get along?

Mr. Chapman: Oh yeah, basically there in Homemade Holler I think everybody got along, I mean, you knew everybody. You knew the families you knew the kids, we hung out at each other's houses. We, sort of looked out for each other. The teenagers, we would make a penny here and go to the store for the older people. There was a little store at the mouth of Straight Holler. White's Grocery, well it was Dotson's at one time until he married the Dotson girl and changed the name to White. We could go, you know we'd go to the store for some of the older people or babysit just typical community type thing.

Interviewer: What all did the community consist of, other the houses, and the store and the coal company? Was there anything outside of that?

Mr. Chapman: No. Nothing really, I mean there was no such thing as, what you have nowadays as a community center or a game room or nothin like that. When we played we played out in the dirt road or on the front porch or in some cases the houses were built up kind of high and you could play under the front porch. But, it was pretty well, just out in the street for us.

Interviewer: What's one of the most memorable things? Is there anything that just comes to mind at all? About the people?

Mr. Chapman: Well, I, being a twin had it's drawbacks. Yeah, I remember two families down the street, and they kind of liked us. One of them started showing a little partiality to my brother and this other lady got upset with her, so every time they did something for him, she'd make sure that she did something for me, to try to balance the thing out. I remember, it was in the late '40s, for Christmas that year, we had asked for a toy gun.. Of course at that time there was not metal ones to be had. So what we had was made of sawdust and tar. They were molded, and I picked an Army 45 and my brother picked a six shooter and of course the first time we went out to play and the other kids had his and they dropped it and there went the barrel. And so the kid's mother bought him a new one and they went through that one and I think he went through about five and I still had my well molded Army 45 and I kept that thing. Well, I still had it after high school and had it packed away somewhere and when my brother, after he was married his son was digging through and found it and he laid claim to it, so I guess that one was well-constructed 'cause it made it through to another generation.

Nowadays, people say "Tar and sawdust!" but you have to remember that this was after the war and you know still during the depression years and there just wasn't the metal to be put into toys as there is now. Of course nowadays most things plastic.

Interviewer: So you did live in this area during the tail end of the depression. What effect did that have on the Appalachian Communities?

Mr. Chapman: I think probably it helped to make close knit. Because anytime there is an outward threat it causes people to be closer. I don't guess we ever thought about it. You know, being kids growing up, we never thought about, the greater scope of things as to why is there only tar and sawdust guns and why is there only this and that. That's the way it was. We had one good pair of shoes and one good pair of pants and that was our Sunday-go-to-meetin clothes. We never thought about why that don't we have this and why don't we have that, we were just, I guess, satisfied with what we had.

Interviewer: Would you consider being raised in this area as being a positive or a negative? This is my last question.

Mr. Chapman: Well, I think it's for my case a positive experience. Being raised in a community where you knew people, where you knew who your friends were. You knew that in a time of crisis you could count on the people to be there for you. I don't think you find that too much anymore in even in the cities or small towns, most of the time people don't even know who lives in the house next to them. But we knew, we knew who lived from one end of the holler to the other.

End of Tape.