1984

Interview with Bill Thompson (FA 195)

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[Tape 2, side 2]
[Bill Thompson talks about Breckinridge County, 1984?]
[Thompson a school teacher, historian, author & columnist]

[Scott]
Belcher: What kind of games did kids play?

[Bill] Thompson: You mean when I was a kid?

Belcher: Yea.

Thompson: God dang, we'd play at anything we'd get a holt of. Really, we made our games, like shinny and corn cob fights and rock fights and we made our bows and arrows, we made our sling shots. We used to get on Sunday afternoons, we'd shoot lizards off a rail fence with sling shots. If we could find a innertube where we could get some rubber to make a sling shot with. It wasn't nothing but Model T Fords and them little ole innertubes wasn't big around as a bicycle tire much. 30 x 3½ was the size of them, but they had good gum in them and they'd make a sling shot that'd shoot like a rifle. And we got pretty good at, we'd get out on Sunday afternoon, I get on one side of a rail fence and got a boy on the other side and darn lizards, you know, he if he sees you this side he'll run around on the other side and it takes two to get a shot at him. And of course you'd glance off once in a while and hit your buddy upside the head with a rock.

All kinds of things happened, but what I'm saying was, there were no toys to buy. You couldn't go to the store and buy a bicycle, there wasn't no mud road to ride it on if you could have got a bicycle. But there wasn't enough money in the country to buy a bicycle, we'd lucky to have shoes.

But, we learned to make our toys. For example, I'd whittle out a, find me a good hickory tobacco stick and made the best bow and arrow. Hard to whittle on and I'd whittle on that darn thing for a week maybe trying to get it whittled out just right so It'd be sort of a recurved job, and make it look pretty good, and it'd shoot like dickens. I always was fascinated in Indians and I felt sorry for the poor devils, being Daniel Boone and Simon Kenton with them long rifles and poor Indians never had nothing but a bow and arrow. So I kinda felt sorry for him. So I would make those bows and shoot 'em. And it'd take me a week to make one and I'd generally break it in two days. So that I'd want to see how far she'd shoot you know and pull her back a might too far and there went my bow.

But it does, I learned how to whittle, I learned how to make a bow, and I learned how to make a wagon, all except the wheels, a square wheel don't roll good. But we made our own sleds, there wasn't no such thing as going to the store and buying a sled to slide down the hill with. We'd get some planks and make our own sled and come down that old Bill Squire hill the prettiest heap and man we'd be sailing when we'd hit the bottom. Straddle a tree, skin us up you know, and it was all that much more fun.

We'd swim in the ponds and in the creeks and we never had any swimming hole, I mean pool, like they got now. I never heard tell of one. But bunch of us'd go on the creek Sunday afternoon, you know we'd spend all evening , half of it swimming. Then we'd get out in the woods and chase squirrels. Get a squirrel started and wasn't no way for him to get away. We never had a gun but if we'd run him in a hole, we'd take a green bear and, did you ever do that?

Belcher: No

Thompson: Why shoot you, we'd get after him and he'd try to climb a tree, we could climb anything he could climb. If he went in a hole we took a green bear and stick it down there and twist it around and around and get his tail tangled up in that green bear and pull him out. We caught more squirrels that way than ever did with a gun, because we never had enough money to buy shells for the gun. We could twist a rabbit out of his hole or anything with a green bear. You just take it and just start winding it and twisting it that way. It'll turn in there and get it wound up in his hide and you just pull him out.

This is the way we'd spend a lot of our afternoons and we'd line up on the hillside across a little holler, used to be a real steep holler with trees all in it and we'd get a half dozen boys on one side and half on the other and we'd choose up. No ill feelings but we'd have rock fights. And we'd throw, you had to watch close buddy, and, because they'd get smart with you and all of them throw at the same time. You'd see about a dozen of them coming through the darn trees and you'd have to dodge them all or get your head pecked. Though that don't sound like much good sense, but this is the type of games. We liked them kind of games.

Corn cob fights! You ever had a corn cob fight?

Belcher: No.

Thompson: Well you aint lived yet. You'd get a bunch of boys and get out around the barn where they had been feeding the hogs and cattle and you,horses, used to work horses, mules, fetch up the mules and they didn't eat the cobs, they just eat the corn off and big fine cobs all in the horse stalls and mule stalls. And we'd choose up sides and have corn cob fights. And you get where them old cobs been soaking in a hog lot out there has all wet and mud all over it and its just like a rock and you hit a fellow upside the head with it and you can make him turn around like he's having fits.

But one time in particular, the funniest thing I ever saw . My buddy and myself, we'd take on all the rest of them and have a corn cob fight and there was about a half dozen more. Well they got us himmed up in the barn and there wasn't no way to get out without

getting peppered good. So we got in a stall. Had a tame mules called Gip and Jake and we kept both of them mules in the same stall. And every other plank was left out from about your waist up and so there'd be a crack about 6 inches wide and then a plank and another 6 inches and a plank and another 6 inches in space see. And we got back in there and it was dark in there, they couldn't see us, but we we could see them out in the driveway. And they got to, they'd stick their head up to that thing to see where we was and we'd caught 'em and we could bang them. But they just got to standing back and throwing through the holes and we was running out of cobs. There wasn't nothing to it and they knew we was out of cobs, so they would sneak up and peep through the crack and well, Sye got to scratching down under the manger hut for some more cobs and he found a hen's nest and out came 15 hens and he got one of them eggs and the leader of the other gang, he stuck his head up to try to see where we was and Sye hung him right between the eyes with the egg. It was a mess cause that corn cob fight wound up in a fist fight. But this was all fun. Nobody, no ill intensions with a fellow you'd just skin his head with a corn cob if you could and that was part of the game. Kinda like boys playing football. You know one boy can tackle another fellow and break his leg and what a football player he is! No ill intensions, you just hit him too hard.

I don't know, games were you get two boys together and if had not any money and no where to go anywhere he found a game. We used to play marbles. Now marbles was one of the oldest games in the country, used to play rangmen. That's where you had five marbles. Made about an 8 inch square, put one marble on each corner of the square and old middler was about a third bigger than the others. And you could either shoot 'em or you could throw 'em, or pitch 'em, but you had to pitch from a line back here at a certain distance. And some of those fellows got so good enough that they could knock old middler, if you knock middler out, the game, you win the game, whoever knocked ole middler out, the big one, he got the game. Some of those got to hit old middler 2 out of 3 times. You know, they were just deadly with that game.

Alright now, then they came up with a new game where you'd put 'em in a ring, a whole bunch of marbles that you would play keeps and each boy put in five marbles in the ring, maybe we had a half a dozen shooting, you had 30 marbles in there. If you shoot a marble, hit it, and knock it out it was your marble, put it in your pocket. And if you were good enough and knocked them all out you got them all. Well, I was a pretty good marble shooter. And I shot marbles 'till the skin, well I still got scars on my knuckles where I rubbed, fudge a little bit you know. You had to knuckle down a bit, but if you fudged too much it didn't count.

We didn't have referees. This is another thing I liked about the old games. You didn't have a referee. You didn't have to have a referee.

There wasn't even anyway to get one, so so we made our own rules and we abided by them. You just didn't deviate from the rules of whatever you, were your own rules that we made up. Now, you got a game where you got a referee, if you can cheat the referee and get by without him knowing it, your ahead, see. But you couldn't do that when were without a referee because they'd hairlip you. The whole bunch of them would, down on you, you wouldn't play with them next time. Nobody cheated, in those kind of games, course they weren't very restrengent rules either.

But games as such though, now when we got a little bigger we'd have baseball games, got to playing baseball and we'd walk five miles, I walk 5 or 6 miles many times just to pitch a game of baseball. I could throw that apple too man. But, then we'd play baseball, and then when we'd got travel, automobiles you know, somebody'd take a truck and we'd travel to play baseball all over the country. Maybe drive 25-30 miles to a ballgame. But games, basketball and football, we were grown before there was such a game, in our area. Now they played football for a long time and they played basketball for a long time, but we didn't have access to it. And even while I was teaching school, I never did teach school until just before two years before I quit there was a gymnasium where we could play at, in the smaller schools. One gymnasium in Breckinridge County, and no, Cloverport had a gymnasium. The rest of the schools in the county had none.

Wife: Irvington.

Thompson: Ma'am?

Wife: Irvington.

Thompson: Yea, that's right, Irvington. Irvington had a school that had a gymnasium in it for a while. But we played in the mud or in a dirt court, and you can't bounce a ball goo, you know, on a dirt court. It'd be rough and we learned to pass that ball. We was the passingest club you ever saw, boy, cause you can't dribble it. Especially if it was a little bit muddy, you know, it won't dribble worth a darn. You got to learn to pass that ball and pass and pass and pass it quick 'til you got it worked under the basket, and we turned out some terrific ballplayers couse of the simple reason that they couldn't dribble it, they had to learn to pass it, and they learned how to hit that darn hole too. And if the wind was blowing 20 miles hour from the left side we learned to aim that far to the left and make it go in there. Old Dentucky Windies!

But most of our games we made it for ourselves. No firecrackers, whoever heard of firecrackers for Christmas until I was big, big boy. But when we'd butcher hogs, sometimes 12-14 hogs every fall, we'd take the bladders, blow 'em up and dry 'em out, they'd get

just dry as powder, and you could blow 'em up with cold air and then when you got ready to Christmas morning, we'd hold them in there by the stove, that air'd expand they'd get bad, they get just as tight as a fiddle drum. And you'd jump off the porch on them, they'd sound like dynamite going off. We had the awfulest firecrackers you ever saw out of hog bladders. Jump off the porch and so once in a while one didn't bust and he'd throw you a devil's summerset. Cause it's, it's like jumping off the porch on a football you know, if it don't bust you you,? But these were all sports, that we played. Tin can a dog, a stray dog came around if we'd catch him we'd just as sure tin can him as his life. Did you ever tin can a dog?

Belcher: No.

Thompson: Or a cat?

Belcher: No.

Thompson: Well, you aint seen nothing. Here's a good little story on how we did what you take a tin can and take put 2 or 3 gravel in it and tie it to a dogs tail. Now boy, he gets on the ball and you never seen anything run like he'll run until he hoops it around a bush or something and break the string off. But now he'll walk on down the road, bawling every jump.

And when we were in school there was a fellow had a little grocery store up there, we had to go past his place. I oughtn't tell this, it shouldn't been done, but did it. He had an old cat that get in his store every day and wasn't his cat. But it come in the store every day opening, lay up on a sack of beans. You know we didn't have pork-n-beans, we had beans in a sack, a hundred pounds navy beans, a hundred pounds of pintos, and that kind of stuff, and sugar in sacks and everything else in hundred pound bags. Well, that darned cat'd get up on one of them sacks and lay down on it and didn't nobody want to eat the beans or the sugar either after the cat been laying on it. So, he wanted to get rid of his cat and he told me and my buddy he'd give us a quarter if we'd take that cat out and kill him. Well, I didn't particular object to killing the cat for a quarter, I'd a killed a man's mule for a quarter. But we decided a better way, we'd get rid of the cat and he'd never come back and he wouldn't have to kill him. Well he said just as long as you keep him out of here and he don't never come back, I'll give your quarter. So we got the cat and got a nickel candy sack, you ought to try this sometime. Just take a little old penny, nickel bag, a candy bag, paper bag, and blow it up right tight and put 3 or 4 navy beans in it, tie a string around it, and tie that on to the cat's tail. Well, when that bag starts raddling he'll take off like a scalded dog, and aint nothing can run faster than a cat, not even a scared dog. We had the door open and had him tighted right towards

the door, but we raddled that bag and he got turned some way or another. And the first jump he made he head up on top of the counter, and the next jump he made he got up on the shelves. And he had a whole bunch of glasses and lamp chimneys and that kind of stuff, and the cat got up between that and the lamp chimneys and the wall, and he went down through there just like that, and with that paper bag on his tail and he was getting with it. Well, Guthrie, got so he didn't know what to do. He was wrecking his store so he grabbed a broom and tried to hit the cat but he always hitting behind him. Between the cat and Guthrie both he tore his stove up. Aint no telling, I mean he did tear up. Well, me and Syeleft. We went on to school. Never did know how he did get her cleaned up, I never saw no more, just what I told you about. And the scallow beast never did give us our quarter, but the cat didn't come back.

Well now, these were things we did, with no ill intentions, you know, but they just happened. Just accidents that happens to boys. A boy is a walking accident anyhow, uou know that? Oo, but as far as games, we had fun. We knew how to have fun. You got to work at having fun.

I,I still do, I don't do anything that I don't want to do. If I have to wash dishes, my wife gets sick and I have to wash dishes, I can have more fun washing dishes than you can shooting marbles. You know, you got to get your head in gear. If you, something you know you got to do, all you got to do is just start wanting to, see, and that way you don't ever have to do anything that you don't want to. If you know you've got to do something, just commense to wanting to, and have a ball doing it. It's that simple, now it took me a long time to learn that, but the quicker you learn it the more you can play all the rest of your life. What else you want to know about?

Belcher: What kind of toys were better for children? The kind then or the kind now?

Thompson: Well, confounded, the ones that they get now are a whole lot nicer. You can buy anything that you can think of. You just have a dream and somebody will make it. And, they're nicer but they don't care nothing about them cause they play with them w while and they bust it and get them another one you see. The old toys that we had were lots better because they had to make them, and in making them, they learned how to make things. Now nobody knows how to make one of these electronic gadgets that you buy. And you, something you got a battery in them, why, or something with assortment of battery, wears out you've got to go get another battery, or most of them, or most of them are just thrown in the junk pile when you get through. The toys that we made, we were proud of them because we made them ourselves. And if you didn't make it yourself you didn't, I never knew what a store baseball bat was 'til I got to playing pretty good class ball in college. We made our own baseball bats, and made pretty darn good bats too. You could knock a ball clean out of the country with one of them. And that's all a bat is, is something to hit a ball with.

Yea, I think the toys that we had were far superior far as the benefit of the toy to the child. Cause he had a personal interest in that toy after having made it, or helped his Daddy make it, or helped his Uncle or his Grandfather. Worked together on it. And he learned something about making toys. Tha's far ahead of what you buy.

Another thing, you talking about swimming, we have these swimming pools. The man concrete swimming pools, and high diving boards and all that kind of stuff. They're alright but you, how many times did you ever see a boy break a leg running on the scum gutter around him, and ram his foot under the fence of a, one of these high chain leg fence around him and got his foot stuck underneath of it and got to getting it out and all this kind of stuff. We swimmed in a pond, in a creek, and mud banks, swimming aint no fun unless you get that mud squishing up between ya toes. That's when swimming is best.

There was a fellow, lived up here by harned, Isle man, they had a real fine pond. It was a deep pond too, goodest, best pond to swim in you ever saw, except wouldn't let boys swim in it. He had some fine horses, and fine cattle, registered stuff, and he didn't want the pond muddred up. So he wouldn't let the boys swim in it. But, a bunch of them knew one day, Homer Alexander, did a Denver Robinson and a couple of his brothers decide they'd sneak over there because they knew Isle was doing something to a homecoming and be'd gone all day. So they were going to sneak over to his pond and go swimming . So they went, and the youngest one, he was a boy, they didn't want him to go because he wasn't big enough. So he was tagging along behind, and they tried to get him to go back and he wouldn't do it. So one of them, his older brother, offered him a nickel. Homer offered this little one a nickel if he'd go on back home and not go with them. Well, he wouldn't do it, he was going with them, find heck. So they thought once about whipping him and running him home, but they knew better than that because if they whipped him and made him go home, he'd tell his Daddy, and his Daddy would tear them all up. John Keal would have busted every one of them's hide. So they didn't, they knew better than to run him home. So, they had to get through a big beach woods to get to this pond and when he got over there Homer got a big idea. He said he'd, he knew where those yellow jackets nest. And he got it up where those yellow jackets' nest was and he took a stick and he drew a about 3 or 4 foot circle around that yellow jackets' nest. And he told him he'd give him a nickel, and a nickel looked like a wagon wheel back then, a boy didn't see a nickel but once or twice a year. But he offered him this nickel if he'd take off his breeches and do a shirt tail dance in that circle while, till he counted to a hundred. But he didn't know there was a yellow jackets' nest in it. So he took his breeches off and he got in there, and they started , and he started to count, and the other one started to dance, and he was really getting with that dancing. Directly, he

started to dance livened up. And he started to shoot, and he got to going higher and higher all the time, but he stayed with it. And it's doubtful if anybody, any ballet dancer ever got as much altitude as that boy did doing that. But he got up, he stayed up with it until he got up to a count of about 80, and ole Ashley slowed his count down a little bit, or I believe he'd a made it. He had to give her up. Well he went out and rubbed his busters awhile and he wanted to try it again. That nickel meant enough to a boy at that time, that he was willing to try it again and try to win that nickel. So, well, the countdown began, and he started to dance but he didn't get but to about 30 or 40 that time. Now the trade was, if he stayed there 'til he counted to a hundred, he'd get the nickel and go with them. But if he didn't, he had to go home. He ducked his head and went home rubbing his busters. But these kind of things boys would do. Now this was a game, the pond was a toy, or your creek was your toy, if your swimming hole. And it beat the concrete swimming pool like the aces beat deuces.

I took this boy down here on Rough River, we had a place on a big high bank. Am I going too far on this?

Belcher: No, I'm just checking it.

Thompson: We got up on a big high bank, higher than that ceiling. And we saved, we went in the woods and cut a White Oak, second growth White Oak , that was 18 feet long, and we cut one plank out of that whole dang log. And we had the thing about 4½ inches thick at the back end and 14 inches wide, and it was tappered all the way to where it was just one inch and about an inch and a quarter thick at the other end, and only ten inches wide. And we anchoured that thing in the bank, and put a deadman on the back and one up there in front so that it couldn't do nothing but set there. We dug a trench in the back, about two feet deep and it was just like loading concrete . So we got ready to try her out, when we got her up. The water was about 12 to 14 feet deep, I tell you we'd get up on that thing and bounce a time or so, now boy that thing would throw you in the air. Now there never was such a diving board. It was about two thirds of it sticking out over the creek. First time I dived off of it, I thought I, I got clean up amongst them limbs on a sicamore tree, I went so darned high. And what we learned how to do it you know. And this was a fabulous experience, in doing these kind of, we learned how to make a diving board, and we learned how to anchour it so that it couldn't do nothing but stay there. And boys learn things by doing things, that's why your toys were so far superior to the modern ones.

There's one more thing, gives you an insight as to what I'm saying. Did you ever see a Shirley Temple doll, or some of those dolls that they used to put out with real pretty, beautiful hair, and compared them to a cabbage patch doll, that they're putting out?

Belcher: Okay, I've heard that children were more responsible back then. Is this true?

Thompson: You mean more responsible than they are now?

Belcher: Yea.

Thompson: Well, in some kids, yes, and some kids, no. You can't make a, I can set examples either way and prove it either way you want to prove it. But, in general terms, I would say they were, for the simple reason they didn't have as, their scope of activity wasn't anything like what it is now. What they did, they had to do within walking distance or ride a horse. And they had to eat. And they all had to work at a job. If they lived on a farm, now I'm talking about country kids now, I don't know a darned thing about people living in the city, and except for right after we was married I lived up there for a year in Louisville and I promised the Lord if he'd forgive me for that I never would do it again. I like it out in the country, and I wanted to raise my boys in the country. And did, by Ginney.

But, on a farm, you all work. You get up every morning, you got the cows to milk and the horses to feed, and the hogs, you got to get them fed, and you've got a darn good appetite when breakfast comes. And you come in the house and eat a half a dozen buiscuits and sargum and mollasses and some gravy and have meat or sausage and you're ready to go to the field and work, and then you work all day. Followed a team of mules or whatever your doing.

But another thing, boys learned to do things. You talking about responsibility, a boy on the farm, the cows get out. Next morning, eating breakfast, the Papa told every member of the house what to do that day. And he'd say, boy go out there and find where them cows got out and fix the fence. He didn't tell you where the cows got out, you had to find where the cows got out. And he didn't tell you how to fix it, you had to figure out how to fix the darn thing. And you learned responsibility just by the way you had to live. And there wasn't no question whether you were going to work tomorrow or not, cause the work there had to be done or you didn't eat. You know, we all worked together too, food and clothing. We shared and shared alike, both with the work and as a recipient for the product of you work. No work and no eating, it was about that simple. So, responsibility, responsibilty was a thing you learned without know-it.

We had a teacher in college, one of the greatest teachers I ever knew in my life. And he was a hard one, too, but he was raised in exactly the same kind of conditions I was talking to you about. He worked like a dog when he was a kid, and if a neighbor had a mule died, he'd go skin him, and sell his hide, he'd get 50¢, maybe a dollar for a mule hide. And, if the neighbor wasn't going to skin

[Kreisler ?]

him himself, he'd skin him and sell his hide, or cows. He hunted oppossums every night. He would shoot rabbits and sell them for, get 15-20¢ a piece for a rabbit. Back there you could buy a box of shot gun shells for a quarter, or 30¢, and he made a lot of money during hunting season by killing rabbits, setting steal traps and , and with a coon dog. Dr. Chrysler who's teaching down at Western University, down at the University now, is the guy that I had reference to. And he was one of the greatest teachers I knew, but he learned when he was a kid what hard times were. And he recognizes some boys that are in the school now that come from rural areas, and he has both sympathy and impathetic abilities. He can put his self in the place and walk in the other boys moccasins better than any teacher than I've ever known in my life. And he could explain something to you, when he got through, if you couldn't understand it you didn't belong in college. He could do that job. But he was raised in that kind of a background and they'd make your teachers. Go on, what else do you want to know about?

Belcher: Okay, I've also, let's see, I also wanted to ask about morals. Do you think morals were better back then than now or not?

Thompson: Well, Yea they were, for the still, the same cotton picking reason, you had about 4 or 5 neighbors that you were within reaching distance of. Other than that you had to go several miles to hunt up a new neighbor, and so you a

(Interupted by the end of that side of the tape)

Thompson: Your morally, every way, conditions made you have better moral standings than is necessary. Now, in first place, there wasn't any dope, if your going to rest that in. That has to do with morals. Your morals go down when you get doped up. And if you had any whiskey you had to make it yourself, and that was against the law. So there wasn't, you didn't have access to alcoholic liquor and definitely no drugs at that time. You could get a bottle of moonshine, we knew where the bootleggers were, but we sure didn't bring 'em around. We didn't bring any moonshine home or Pop would tear us apart.

But the thing that made it compulsive to keep your morals up, you don't lie, for several different reasons. When you tell a fellow a lie, it'll catch up with you and you know a fight is bound to come back to you some time or another. And, if you tell a lie, it don't take you long to realize you don't believe anybody says cause you know your a lier and you think everybody, your just like everybody else, and so you learn real quick, it don't pay to tell lies. Because of what it does to you. You don't hurt the fellow you lie on, you hurt yourself. And the same things true with stealing. If you steal a pair of breeches from me, you never made any breeches yourself, and maybe you can't steal some more, so you aint got no breeches next time. Or if you steal them from me,

and suppose I come back and steal them from you that night, and you steal them from me, and we wear them out stealing them from one another, and nobody makes any more breeches. I mean just the conditions at that period in history made it necessary for people to be honest and truthful. A man's word was his law. That was his bond.