

Cover Page

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## **Bill Best: An Appalachian Heirloom**

The local bank thermometer reads 81 degrees then changes to 8:01 a.m. I'm on my way to meet Bill Best, the Appalachian bean farmer.

Surrounded by a world where, each day, everything seems to be moving faster along paved highways and encroaching buildings, I escape to the country. Driving through a tunnel of leaves and green speckles in my small pick-up, I emerge into a new world. Life slows down and changes color from asphalt-black to bottle-green.

As the tunnel opens, I see morning dew on fresh cut grass. Turning, into Bill's property, I park on a gravel driveway. I walk around until I find an older man, smiling, talking to some younger people. They look like students.

He looks at me and waves. He has white hair and a back that is slightly bent; he is 70. After countless years teaching physical education, coaching swimming, and directing the Upward Bound program at Berea College, Bill Best, '59, has returned to the life he was born into, a life of mountain farming.

"Since I was two years old my grandfather was showing me how to tell a young cockleburrow from a young sweet potato plant." Bill shares with me, "My mother got me involved in the heirloom beans, and it just so happens that in the last few years the heirlooms have gotten very popular." Today, one of the beans Bill grows is named after his mother, Margaret Best.

Passing the heirloom tradition on for several consecutive generations, Bill's aunt received a bean from her mother and then passed the bean on to Bill. "The Bertie Best bean is my aunt's bean and we know that it is at least a-hundred and forty years old."

Bill now teaches his grandson, Brian Best, the farming tradition.

As he talks, Bill looks up toward a blue sky that dances between moving white clouds. He smiles as he tells me stories about his family history, how honored he feels to be in the Best family. Wrinkles crease from the edges of his lips, and tiny crows feet creep from the sides of his eyes.

Bill attributes his love of farming to his mother. With a bit of intuitive intelligence, she predicted that a genetic downfall in beans would result in “a poorer quality of food.” She knew, he says, that genetic alterations would happen, that beans would lose their taste and texture.

Industrialized agriculture has taken hold of the market and mass-produced beans are shipped across the country from places like California and Florida. At the end of the lines, stores fling their doors wide open, ready to sell beans at a cheaper cost. But this cheaper cost comes with a larger price tag for local farmers, like Bill, who produce better quality beans. Thanks to industrialized agriculture, the consumer gets a chance to eat a tougher bean of reduced nutritional value that tastes more like a sliver of cardboard than a vegetable from the Earth.

In addition to farming, Bill’s commitment to creating a sustainable life as a farmer requires a dedication to all parts of the land. From the flatbeds of his property where he grows beans, tomatoes, and blueberries, to the green mountain that cascades behind his house, Bill uses every inch of his property.

To maximize his farming potential, he farms trees from his mountain, ones that have fallen in stormy weather. Today, he tells me about these trees. But, instead of pointing and talking, Bill takes time out of his busy schedule to bring me up his mountain.

Bill walks out of his greenhouse; his grandson stands nearby. Bill turns, saying, "Brian, if you can, while they're doing what they're doing in the field, if you could hook the setter to the tractor?"

Brian nods, smiles, and then waves.

Having made arrangements to continue the daily chores, Bill is ready to show off the forest resting behind his house. Getting into the miniature tractor, Bill and I will ascend the mountain. With the turn of an ignition key, a little engine growls to life; and, Bill's mechanical orange steed pulls out of the driveway and creeps toward an opening in the wood-line. The path seems rough, but Bill and his grandson have recently been clearing it. Although removing fallen debris for driving room, they don't usually clear any of the old growth trees unless they fall down in stormy weather.

As the tiny tractor makes its way up Robe Mountain, I feel buffered from the industrialized world. Eluding the reality of most, where screaming drivers trapped in their cars are on their way to work in expanding factories, I feel myself enter an Appalachian sanctuary, the forest of Squire Boone. Old growth trees surround us.

"These are the ones that are essentially virgin, that for various reasons have not been cut down ever, except to fall down. They're the ones that have been downed by storms or something like that." Bill Best believes in letting Mother Nature take care of her old and her young. "If you have a really big tree downed by a storm then it will sort of clear-cut maybe half an acre; and you'll have young growth come up between."

Creeping toward the mountaintop, Bill stops his four-wheel drive rover, and we begin to walk through his woods. He shares his knowledge. Telling me more about genetics in an hour than I have heard in my entire life, Bill talks about his tomatoes back down on the farm, how he needs to genetically protect

them. I imagine I am with Gregor Mendel. He continues his lesson with talk about the Irish Potato famine, explaining that genetic variation protects plant growth from fungi and other diseases. "All of the potatoes in Ireland were clones of two potatoes." Because there were only two variations of potato, the growth was very susceptible to fungus and thus died.

Bill stops talking, and the woods fall silent. We appreciate the moment in nature.

Later, as we drive down the mountain, Bill tells me that he started a project called the Sustainable Mountain Agricultural Center (SMAC) because he was motivated to work on sustaining the environment. The genetic testing done by major colleges and universities, he says, usually "caters to the big companies that give them the money to do the research. Of course the research that they do serves the needs of big companies and not the needs of the public at large. Well, I thought that somebody needed to serve the needs of the public at large, so I nominated myself. It was what I had already been doing most of my life; I just expanded it into SMAC."

Leaving the mountain behind us, Bill drives toward two wooden buildings about 30 feet wide, with roofs covered in plastic, facing south. One fabricated by the late Dr. Carl Kilbourne, '43, a founding member of SMAC, and the other built by son Michael, '88, these solar wood kilns are used for drying lumber. When trees fall, Bill's sons saw curly maples, walnuts, cherry trees, and oaks into lumber. They dry and cure the wood in the kiln, then sell it to woodcrafters, furniture makers, and others.

As I am about to leave, Bill smiles (as friendly as the moment I met him), and asks, "Do you have everything you need?"

I smile and thank him.

Before I run off, he asks me to recognize the other founding members of the SMAC: former Berea College industrial arts professor Dr. Carl Kilbourne, plant geneticist Dr. Elmer Gray, '56, and Dr. Charles Haywood, '49. Bill says that one of his sons, Dr. Michael Best, who teaches at Tennessee Tech., was also a founding member.

As I say goodbye to Bill, he is already walking toward his blueberry bushes. His wife Irmgard, '71, and grandson Brian pick berries, preparing to go to the local farmers' market and sell their produce.

Crunching my way off the gravel road, I begin to drive home. I look out of my right window. I see Brian and Irmgard picking blueberries. Bill walks toward his crops, kneels next to his grandson, and ends another day on his farm, reaping the benefits of all that were sown from the ancient soil of Appalachia.