

Transcript: Eddie Stillwell

Interviewee: Eddie Russel Stillwell

Interviewer: Kurtis Rogers

Interview date: November 30th, 2018

Location: Webster, NC

Length: 27:13

START OF INTERVIEW:

Kurtis Rogers: So, are you aware that you're being taped, and this will be used for the Mountain Heritage Center and Special Collections?

Eddie Stillwell: Yes

Kurtis Rogers: Well thank you first off for giving me your interview and your story. If you would please start off with your name, age, your family, childhood, and the education that you received?

ES: Eddie Russel Stillwell. Born and raised on Little Savannah. Born and raised in the Webster Little Savannah community. I have two siblings: I have a brother and a sister. My mother and daddy worked on our dairy farm. My mother died about 40 years ago, then my daddy has been dead for 11 years. He remarried after mother died and they lived together for 30 years. I went 8 years to school at the Webster Elementary School, then I went to Sylva Webster School for 4 years, and finished high school, I never went anywhere else. I started preaching when I was 20 and I'm 69 now, so I was preaching the 25th of October for 49 years, familiar to it. I have pastored 10 churches in Jackson, Swain, and Macon County.

KR: Did your father influence you or any of your family members have any pastoral experience?

ES: Daddy was a deacon at Webster, but nobody in my family preached.

KR: Did your father have any influence upon your pastoral ambition?

ES: Oh yeah! I was raised in the church. I wasn't made to go to church, but I was raised to go to church. I had every opportunity to go to church and sometimes I did not go, but I regret some things. I regret some things, but I guess we all do. [clarified which church, Webster Baptist]

KR: Can you tell me any of your experiences with the church in your childhood?

ES: We had a young man, a fellow who loved young people who was really enthused with young people. He had people that would go to Mars Hill and places for Ministerial School. He would bring them in and let them run weekend revivals. We just had a real good childhood. Then we had a man, Ray Macula, come to Webster, he would stay for 27 years and would commute from Waynesville until they bought a parsonage next to the church. Then I got out of church for a while, but we had real good younger church life.

KR: Whenever you were younger did you participate in any type of missionary trips or work inside your local community?

ES: (Shook head no) Nothing like that until I started preaching.

KR: What church did you go to as child again?

ES: Webster. When I started preaching, I—[clarifies location with KR] my first church was a little brick building called Fogkick, that's where I started. I stayed there for three years. It was like a college to me. I was green and I did not know anything much. An older deacon, and he was a chairman, that were so kind and gentle with me. Then one place, the next, after another the Lord led me to grow. I have a have always worked I had a job at a college that was a permanent job from '71 til '76, and then the Lord led my out and came out and I started working three days a week. I do whatever it takes I'm on Social Security now, but whatever. I personally don't like working more than three days out of the week. My son works here at the cabinet shop and he helps me part-time; he has another job too. And another older man works part-time too that helps me around the shop. But when the phone rings, I'm able to just go; I don't have to ask nobody. I try not to be here a lot. I do quite a few funerals and things. I try to help people and be with people when they're sick.

KR: Did your church have an important role in your community? The one on Speedwell?

ES: We're not there now, [more location discussion] We don't have a lot of people, but the church has a great impact on the community.

KR: Can you explain what kind of impact you had?

ES: We don't have a fellowship hall, but we built a huge community building and we use it for all the dinners and fellowship, they have family reunions and they invite the pastor and his wife. Some people accuse me of liking it just to eat, but I like the fellowship. Then we had a fellow just died—our Sunday School director died from cancer, he was 61—he'd retired from the service, then come back and worked 20 years as a carpenter, but he just started on Social Security and the church helped while he was sick. Just different things: whatever the opportunity

for the church is. It is not as much as I'd like sometimes, but I think the church should be the vocal point for, I think it should be the nicest and the best and the most practical place in the community. As far as helping people and seeking out people to save, seeking people when they're hurting. We have a rest home service once a month, and we now have a member of our church in that rest home and we go on the second Wednesday night of the month we go there and we do quite a few things.

KR: Do you do fundraiser dinners and things like that?

ES: Sometimes. When I built this shop, I built a house, then I built on to my trailer and fixed it up, and then two years later I built this shop. I wasn't doing cabinet work then, I was just doing carpenter work, but I've always liked to do cabinet work. I would have milked cows if Daddy had room, but I still have a farmer's heart. But I came back here and I had to make the choice, so I decided to build cabinets. If the phone rings, I can be gone and not have to hold somebody up on a house or something. Then, we take cabinets somewhere, I belong to the Baptist Men of North Carolina. For the last 14 years, we take cabinets to the mid-west in September and October, and we have fundraiser every year, sometimes two, to raise money to go—members of the church go, maybe some outsiders, but—this year seven people went and five of them belong to our church.

KR: Can you explain who and what the Baptist Men are?

ES: Baptist Men are men of the Southern Baptist denomination. I help a lot of independent friends, but the Baptist Men are the people that come out of that. Have you ever heard of the WMS? Women's Missionary Society? It's just like that: The Brotherhood. They used to be called the Brotherhood, but they're the Baptist Men now.

KR: So you made a lot of carpentry and cabinets and sent them over to the mid-west?

ES: Yes, this year we did a unique job. We usually just do one job, but we did two jobs this year. When you do one job and people see it other people want it. I have a friend that we done one for two years ago in Gillette, Wyoming. He left a big huge job to go out there to start a mid-western warehouse to bring stuff from all over. A lot people bring tractor-trailers full of left-over stuff from construction jobs, or houses, and warehouses that are going out of business, if the church wants to buy part of it. Then there's food in these missionary trips, then he distributes it to his missionaries. They have three trailers and a truck, and it's just the nicest thing you have ever seen. Then we put cabinets in the warehouse, and then he told a man about that, so then we put cabinets in a missionary's house in Wyoming. In Montana, we put cabinets in a church that was made out of a barn that was one-hundred years old. It's just great experiences with good people. We have a wonderful time going and coming; we take three days to go then three days to come back, staying the night somewhere. We just have a great time. People gets ahold of us and feeds us and it's wonderful—I feel like sometimes more than I deserve.

KR: I know you talked about this before, but did any preachers have a profound impact on your pastoral ambition?

ES: Oh yes. Robert Blanton, Ray McCall, he's a pastor down at the Webster Church, and Hart Nicolson, an older man that used to be at the Balsam Church, and I could just go on. Mr. Billy Ed Hasket, older preachers. Mr. Billy Ed Hasket told me one time—I had a farm, and he'd already retired—he brought a glass of water to the field one day and he said “Eddie, pull up under this tree here, I wanna talk to you a few minutes.” One of the things he said, was to never

be rude to someone that wants to give you advice. He said you take advice from these older fellows , and if you can't take it, then do it like a trunk: you put in there and if you use it okay, if you don't okay, but you don't hurt anybody's feelings. That's been real valuable to me over the years, and I try to in the same category with younger preachers, but some of them will take advice and some of them know more than you do. Some you can help some you can't.

KR: What exactly did these preachers give to you?

ES: A lot of advice. A lot of support and a lot of prayer. Two men prayed for me on the mountaintop I found out. Another thing that might be valuable to you is that thirteen of us started preaching within the same year, we were all young men, and we stayed together, oh we seen all kinds of things happen. There's a Speedwell cemetery over there on the hill, and we would meet and pray sometimes about three times a week and sometimes stay up until three o'clock in the morning. We've seen people saved, seen things happen, we seen families put together. This one boy called us one night, and he was in jail, and we prayed him out of jail. All kinds of stuff. But we've leaved, some of the boys went different places. Four of them went off to college, and they didn't come back here, and two of them have died.

KR: So you have a brotherhood within the community? You were talking about the Baptist Men, but you have a smaller subsect.

ES: Yeah.

KR: Bill Crawford says that your profession, being a pastor, is a calling. Do you have any thoughts on that?

ES: Oh yeah. I had the Lord call me to preach, and dealt with my heart. If not, there would have been no way that I could ever preach. We used to have horses and horse shows, and a man that I wouldn't have ever thought would have gone to church, but he was going with this girl in the 1969 in October, there was a revival and she'd asked him to go to church. He come home Sunday afternoon, and I was at the horse ring, and he said, "I don't know that I'd ever been to church, but I just went to church," and that was about all. I didn't live much for the Lord then, sorry to say, but anyway, he came and said "I want you do something tonight," and I said "What?" He said, "I want you to go to church with me tonight." I said, "You got to be kidding me." He said, "No; I got saved last night." So, I went to that revival, and during that revival, I announced my call to preach. And then after that—he's right, it's a calling—the passion in the church is a calling, and it's a very valuable calling and I have been blessed and I have enjoyed the journey. I've made a lot of mistakes and a lot of failures, but it's been worth every mile to serve the Lord. I don't regret the mile; I regret some turns and decisions I have made, but I don't regret doing things for the Lord.

KR: Do you think pastors should have a degree in theology?

ES: Not every time. Not unless the Lord is in it: if the Lord leads you to do that I think you ought to, but I think the calling comes first. Oh yeah, and by all means, I think that when God calls you—my mother wanted me to go, we have a little place out in Hendersonville, a two-year school called Fruitmen. My son-in-law is a preacher, and he went there. My mother wanted me to go, but I went to the Fogcliff Church, and none of them believed that you ought to be a call preacher, so I didn't feel like I ought to just leave them after getting there. I didn't go. My hat's off to people who have an education the right way.

KR: What other experience workwise have you had before becoming a preacher?

ES: Just working on the farm.

KR: Do you think these experiences on the farm influenced your decision of being a minister?

ES: Maybe so. I rode that old tractor for three and half years and I felt that the Lord was calling me to preaching. We used to have a judge that lived down the road, Lacy Thornburg, but he bought an old farm down here and let us lease it for several years. It was on the river, and I'd run up and down the river and sing and preach and one day, he didn't tell me until after that his first cousin would hear my sing and the next morning, he said, "Eddie is gonna preach one day." Daddy didn't say nothing to him or me either. I said, "Why did he say that?" He said that you were a singin' and a preachin' and you'd stop and get down to pray and I'd say "Yeah, when I'd stop to get down to pray, I'd say 'Lord you have to send somebody else; I can't go.'" But, during that revival the man, he was an older man, he wore a 14 shoe and his feet were so wide he had to cut them on the sides. Robert Parris was his name, and people like that have crossed paths with me you know, different things and different states and different communities.

KR: Did you form many connections with other ministers around the area when you first started and now?

ES: More so then than now. No reason: we just get older and people go their way. We have funeral things that we do with a lot of people. That's about the only time I see a lot of preachers.

KR: Being a preacher, do you envision your role in a specific way? Do you believe that your role has impact on the community?

ES: I would like to think it did. I don't want to be bragging, but I'd think it did.

KR: What kind of role should a preacher have in the community?

ES: I think that he ought to be the most upstanding person in the community. I think he ought to live what he preaches. I think people ought to respect him, as well as him respecting others. I think he ought to be a leader; he is a leader if he's in the right place. He is a leader of the church and a leader, most of the time, in the community.

KR: In your years of pastoral work, have you weighed in on a lot of social issues in church?

ES: I try to stay away from that, sometimes we have to make decision. I've never allowed politics to get into the church and my leadership. I know worse trouble'll come by doing that. I try to lead the people in the direction the Lord would have me to go.

KR: Did you feel like you had a responsibility to guide individual lives in social issues? If so, do you have an example?

ES: Not really. Since I started preaching, we had liquor in the county, but it was just in town, but beer is sold throughout the whole county is wet. I really regret that, we tried to take a platform against selling beer. We created and signed a petition—

KR: Did other churches and the community sign the petition?

ES: No. About every church in the county, but there were some that did and some that didn't. I won't call any names, but some didn't and some of the members didn't. If the churches had done what they needed to do, we wouldn't have it now.

KR: So, you think that churches can cause a political cause?

ES: They can say yes, and they can say no, and they can take a stand that really means something, if they will.

KR: Do you think that the role of ministers has changed over time? Like your role in this community: has it changed over time, or do you think that preacher's roles have changed? Robert Blanton told me that pastors have become more to community members at large now, have become more just here to marry people rather than spiritually guiding individuals.

ES: I sort of agree with that. I think they have become more liberal. Yes to anything and no to not much. And wavered away from the Bible. Our church and I have, but our church don't have to have it to believe it, but I'm King James man. And our church will not allow anything else, it's in our bylaws not to allow anyone to preach anything else. People are preaching out of anything now and people are accepting it.

KR: Do you think people are moving away from preachers being pillars in their communities?

ES: In some way, in the respectful way. In some ways, there are still some great people, men out there that sacrifice and do a lot. I know a young man that went with us to, on the trip, and he's thirty-one and he has a real eye, and real heart. He has a family, but he is closing his business.

His daddy and he had a mulch business, and a car lot, and he had a mechanic shop that he's closed. He's doing what I'm doing, closing to just two or three days a week. He has a real heart. If he says in the will, and I don't have any doubt he won't, he'll make a real pastor, a real preacher. He's probably got the most spiritual church in this country right now, but it's not all like that. People have gotten away from the spiritual touch. When I first started preaching things it was different. People could have told me things that are changing like they would, and I wouldn't have believed them at all. But the devil has really taken ahold of a lot of folks. But God's still God, the Word's still the Word, and ain't nothing going to change it no matter what we do.

[pleasant ending chitchat]