

2018 Vandalia Award Recipient

Bil Lepp

By Stan Bumgardner

At the 2018 Vandalia Gathering, storyteller extraordinaire Bil Lepp of Charleston was presented with the Vandalia Award, our state's highest folklife honor. It was only the second time in Vandalia's 42 years that a person known primarily for storytelling has received the award (the first was raconteur Bonnie Collins—who also performed songs—in 1990).

It was a fitting accolade for the five-time winner of the Vandalia Liars Contest. Bil has performed at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, guest-hosted the *Mountain Stage* radio broadcast, and entertained tens of thousands annually at the National Storytelling Festival in Jonesborough, Tennessee. In 2011, he was also honored by his peers as the first West Virginian to be named to the National Storytelling Network Circle of Excellence.

Given Bil's many achievements, my first question for him seemed obvious: "So, why just one L in Bil?"

He threw his head back and laughed (a characteristic trait)



Randall Reid-Smith (left)—curator of the state Department of Arts, Culture and History—names storyteller Bil Lepp as the 2018 recipient of the Vandalia Award. All photos by Steve Brightwell unless noted otherwise.



Bil (left) stands alongside his proud parents, Sally and John Lepp, at the Culture Center after being named the 2018 Vandalia Award recipient.

and then replied, “Well, there are two answers, one that only people our age would get. Back in the *old days*, when you got the highest score on a video game, you could put in only three letters. The other reason is that I just thought it would be cool. But then, I found out that Bil Keane, who drew *Family Circus*, also did that, so it took some of the edge off.”

Other than his sharp wit, there’s not much of an edge to the 48-year-old Lepp. The youngest Vandalia Award recipient in history has a friendly carefree style that lends itself to storytelling.

Bil was the fifth and youngest child of John and Sally Lepp. Growing up in their household, humor was like air, water, or food are to the rest of us. [You can read more about them in Bil’s Spring 1998 article “The Lying Lepp Brothers.”]

“In my family,” Bil recalls, “all truth was fluid. You could say anything in the name of entertainment, and it was always up to the listener to decide if it was true.”

The ability to tell stories and laugh about life was handed down genetically from his Grosspapa (German for grandfather) Gehard Lepp. Gehard was born in Russia, fought against the Bolsheviks during the Russian Civil War, and was forced from his homeland in 1920. As Bil quipped in his 1998 article, “Grosspapa came to America via Turkey, Austria, Switzerland, France, and Pennsylvania.”

But it was Bil’s oldest sibling, Paul, who would become his biggest inspiration. Paul Lepp, who passed away in 1998 at age 36, was an equally gifted storyteller. He won the Liars Contest a record six times. Bil stopped competing after his

fifth victory because he “didn’t think it was fair to tie Paul’s record without having him to go up against.” The Lepp brothers won 11 of the first 16 Liars Contests.

Bil gives tremendous credit to the contest’s founder, former GOLDENSEAL Editor Ken Sullivan, for recognizing our state’s storytelling heritage [see “Vandalia Award Recipient Ken Sullivan” by John Lilly, Fall 2015]. “I never would have gotten into storytelling without the Liars Contest,” he says. He adds, though, that it was Paul who really shaped the contest into what it is today—West Virginia’s premier competition for tall tales. Paul first competed in 1986, the contest’s third year, and helped make it “West Virginia-centric.”

Bil competed for the first time in 1990. His first two years, he finished second to Paul but then captured the title himself in 1992, defeating his brother for the first and only time (Paul wasn’t in the contest for Bil’s four other wins). Bil says that the Liars Contest is the perfect venue for becoming a West Virginia storyteller because “you have a large captive audience—since it’s held in one of the few air-conditioned places at the Vandalia Gathering—and that the audience, being mostly from West Virginia, already knows what you’re talking about.”

Bil entered the Liars Contest for the last time in 1999 (although he regularly returns as emcee), but his progeny

have kept the Lepp tradition going. His son Noah, 18, and daughter, Ellie, 15, have both won the Youth Liars Contest. One of the running jokes at the Lepp dinner table is to ask everyone who's won the Liars Contest to raise his or her hand. Bil's wife, Paula, is the only one left out, but Bil notes confidently, "She'd win if she entered." He proudly tells folks that he's the only father in the world who encourages his kids to lie.

Bil became a full-time storyteller in 2002 and quickly established a national reputation. I asked him whether his own "West Virginia-centric" stories ever go over the heads of non-West Virginians. He said he was questioned about it only once. In 2000, his first time at the National Storytelling Festival, somebody declared that he wouldn't have much of an audience for West Virginia tall tales. Bil laughs again and says, "Well, I've now performed in at least 40 states, and there is almost always someone from West Virginia, or someone with positive connections to the state, in the audience." In fact, his "West Virginia tall tales" made him even more popular as he established his own niche on the national stage.

Bil's written books of material on different topics, but his most popular stories revolve around an imaginary place called "Halfdollar, West Virginia," located "somewhere under



Bil competes in his first Liars Contest, in 1990—before he'd grown his signature mustache. Photo by Michael Keller.

Summersville Lake." When he takes the stage, he strives for two goals: make the audience laugh and shatter negative stereotypes about his home state. He intentionally dresses down for the part—donning a T-shirt, jeans, and a ball cap—and portrays a fictional cast of characters from Halfdollar,

much like in old radio shows. It often catches people off guard as his distinctly West Virginia characters use their vast vocabularies to talk about deep philosophical, theological, and political ideas. As Bil puts it, "I think it shocks a lot of people to realize that West Virginians can dress the way we do and



Bil spins a yarn for a packed crowd at the 2018 Vandalia Gathering. His Vandalia Award is displayed to his left.

talk with our accents and still recite Newton's 'second law of motion.'"

Bil's stories often focus on West Virginia themes, such as railroads and fishing, and avoid controversy. A graduate of Duke Divinity School, he once was a United Methodist minister in the Meadow Bridge area of Fayette County. His storytelling gigs keep him so busy that he doesn't have time to be a pastor anymore; however, he still works in some religious humor and delivers guest sermons at churches from time to time (rarely offending anyone). Even his seemingly non-religious stories draw upon his faith, emphasizing themes such as humility (the braggart getting his or her comeuppance) and helping the poor.

While Bil has written some political pieces for online and print sources of late, he approaches it with his customary wit and tries not to pick

on specific people or parties but rather the institutions. He notes that each year, our legislature introduces a few bills that provide him with good material. Bil believes that humor is a positive way to tone down the prevalent political rhetoric, observing, "You're not going to convince anyone that they're wrong just because you think you're right."

Bil seems so much at ease on stage you might think he's winging it. While he does make up occasional one liners on the spot, he writes and rewrites his stories for six to 12 months. "Then, it takes me another six months of telling them before I really feel like they are coming together," Bil says.

He works so hard at it, in part, because he wants people to understand more about his home state while having a good laugh. The bottom line is that the material must be relatable. Even though

he's talking about small-town West Virginia, his stories and messages are universal. He likes to quote author Stephen King, who refers to himself as the "literary equivalent of a Big Mac and large fries." Bil says he's been called the "jelly donut of storytelling"; he argues, "What's wrong with that? Who doesn't like a donut? Especially a jelly one? What's wrong with giving the audience an hour of humor? An hour for everyone in the room to put aside their religious or political differences and just laugh? I'm happy to be the person who lets them relax, forget about what's going on outside the theater, and just laugh together."

As self-deprecating as Bil can be about himself and his stories, he truly has become an ambassador for West Virginia, not just nationally but back here at home. He eagerly spins his yarns at state conferences and conventions, often



2018 Vandalia Award recipient Bil Lepp.

giving non-West Virginians their first real introduction to the Mountain State. He's definitely evolved into this role. As he admits, "In the beginning, all I wanted was to win the Liars Contest, and to do that, I had to have stories that depicted West Virginia in a positive light. And then, I started getting invited to other states and became more aware of the negative image that others have about us. I wanted to change their stereotypical views of West Virginia in a non-confrontational way. That prompted me to develop this cast of characters who could speak articulately and

humorously on many subjects using West Virginia accents. So, without ever directly saying that West Virginians are way smarter than you think we are, I just tell my stories, walk off stage, and hopefully leave the audience thinking, 'Huh, I thought we were going to get more of a Larry the Cable Guy.'"

"So, I put more of a conscious effort into that," Bil says. Before the moment gets too serious, though, he adds with a grin, "And I don't know that I'm smart enough to do anything else useful."

When you talk to Bil Lepp, it doesn't take very long to

realize he is very smart on many subjects, dearly loves West Virginia, and has a rare innate talent to make people laugh. What better ambassador could West Virginia have? Just as New Jersey has Bruce Springsteen, West Virginia has its one-and-only Bil Lepp. Keep us laughing, Bil, and keep showing the world why there's no place like West Virginia. 🍁

You can order Bil's books and audio recordings or book him for a show by visiting Leppstorytelling.com.

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