

**The David and Barbara Pryor Center
for
Arkansas Oral and Visual History**

University of Arkansas
1 East Center
Fayetteville, AR 72701
(479) 575-6829

Gillett Coon Supper

Larry Bauer

Interviewed by John C. Davis

November 10, 2023

Gillett, Arkansas

Objective

Oral history is a collection of an individual's memories and opinions. As such, it is subject to the innate fallibility of memory and is susceptible to inaccuracy. All researchers using these interviews should be aware of this reality and are encouraged to seek corroborating documentation when using any oral history interview.

The Pryor Center's objective is to collect audio and video recordings of interviews along with scanned images of family photographs and documents. These donated materials are carefully preserved, catalogued, and deposited in the Special Collections Department, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville. The transcripts, audio files, video highlight clips, and photographs are made available on the Pryor Center Web site at <http://pryorcenter.uark.edu>. The Pryor Center recommends that researchers utilize the audio recordings and highlight clips, in addition to the transcripts, to enhance their connection with the interviewee.

Transcript Methodology

The Pryor Center recognizes that we cannot reproduce the spoken word in a written document; however, we strive to produce a transcript that represents the characteristics and unique qualities of the interviewee's speech pattern, style of speech, regional dialect, and personality. For the first twenty minutes of the interview, we attempt to transcribe verbatim all words and utterances that are spoken, such as uhs and ahs, false starts, and repetitions. Some of these elements are omitted after the first twenty minutes to improve readability.

The Pryor Center transcripts are prepared utilizing the *University of Arkansas Style Manual* for proper names, titles, and terms specific to the university. For all other style elements, we refer to the *Pryor Center Style Manual*, which is based primarily on *The Chicago Manual of Style 17th Edition*. We employ the following guidelines for consistency and readability:

- Em dashes separate repeated/false starts and incomplete/redirected sentences.
- Ellipses indicate the interruption of one speaker by another.
- Italics identify foreign words or terms and words emphasized by the speaker.
- Question marks enclose proper nouns for which we cannot verify the spelling and words that we cannot understand with certainty.

- Brackets enclose
 - italicized annotations of nonverbal sounds, such as laughter, and audible sounds, such as a doorbell ringing; and
 - annotations for clarification and identification.
- Commas are used in a conventional manner where possible to aid in readability.

Citation Information

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**John C. Davis interviewed Larry Bauer on November 10, 2023,
in Gillett, Arkansas.**

[00:00:00]

John C. Davis: When you enter the southeast Arkansas town of Gillett in Arkansas County, you are greeted with a sign that reads, "Welcome to Gillett, home of friendly people and the Coon Supper." Since the 1940s, every winter the people of Gillett host hundreds of Arkansans to enjoy fellowship, kick off the upcoming political season, and to eat raccoon, rice casserole, and other local favorites. In the fall of 2023, the David and Barbara Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History began collecting oral histories and artifacts for the Gillett Coon Supper Oral History Project. The following is an oral history interview collected for this project.

[00:00:40] JCD: I'm John Davis interviewing Larry Bauer on behalf of the David and Barbara Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History. This interview is being conducted over the phone on Friday, November 10, 2023. Larry, would you please state and spell your full name and indicate that you're willing to give the Pryor Center permission to make the audio file and any other materials associated with this interview available for public use?

Larry Bauer: My name is Larry Bauer, *L-A-R-R-Y*, last name Bauer,

B-A-U-E-R, and I give permission to the Pryor institute to record this conversation.

JDC: Thank you, sir. So, Larry, where do you live?

LB: I'm in Gillett. I've—I was born in DeWitt, fourteen miles away, and have stayed in Gillett all that time. Went away to college and came back.

JDC: Good deal. Where did you go to college?

LB: Valparaiso University . . .

JDC: Oh.

LB: . . . in Northern Indiana.

JDC: Wonderful.

LB: I was a winner in the first draft lottery.

JDC: Oh, I see.

LB: So that's kinda why I came back to—I couldn't get a job in those days with some military obligation.

JDC: Well, thank you for your service there.

LB: Yes.

[00:01:58] JDC: So if you would, in just your own words, explain the Coon Supper. If someone was to ask you, "What is the Gillett Coon Supper?" what would you tell them?

LB: I would say now that it's—has turned into a reunion of—citizens that've moved away from Gillett that have graduated—that

graduated from high school here, and that's what it is now. We have probably close to 600 people that attend. I was just looking back at some of my information, and it started in—this is the eighty—this'll be the eightieth Coon Supper in [20]24, so it started in [19]44, and it was comin' out of the war, and the guys just were gettin' together to basically have a party. And if you had been deer hunting and you shot at a deer and it—and missed, they'd cut your necktie off at this party. And it started—they had a local guy fix barbecued raccoon. And that came from the tough days when people lived off the land and ate squirrel and deer and raccoon and whatever else they could find. That's how they determined what the meal would be. And it was—the traditional meal had sweet potatoes. I talked to an older gentleman one time, and he remembered eating baked raccoon and sweet potatoes, and I can't quite imagine what that tasted like. But barbecue helps a lot.

[00:03:42] JDC: [*Laughs*] So it's the Gillett Coon Supper really out of just necessity and resourcefulness.

LB: Yes. Yes. And it was in January. Farming community. At the beginning they ha—we actually had coon hunts. I would go—when I was in high school and in grade school, they'd go to the—down toward the river before the bridge was there, there was a

ferry, and they'd actually have a coon hunt and roast hot dogs and marshmallows and drink coffee with a lot of cream and sugar, and then the guy with the coon dog would gather up, and all the kids'd follow him out through the woods. And they would actually get a coon once in a while.

[00:04:32] JCD: So you were mentioning that was in your high school years. What was your first experience of the coon supper?

LB: Well, it's our family's—my dad was in charge of the sound system when it started goin' into the high school gym. So but my first attendance would be probably 1961 or so when I was a freshman in high school. The—it turned into a—we honored the football team. It was mainly a kind of a booster club. It supported all of the—Girls State, Boys State, the summer baseball program, softball programs for the girls. And that's—and anything academic at the school that they needed, we supported that. So a lot of jackets and that sort of thing. And that's—I'm not sure when that started, but it was pretty soon after they started having it. [00:05:35] The first—they had meetings before [19]44. One of 'em was at the hotel in Stuttgart. And they—a gentleman from Gillett was the emcee. And then it developed there was a—you're gonna interview Scott Place. His dad, James Place—kinda the—was the, I would say,

the—he was so popular that that—his ability to be the emcee was one of the attractions of the Coon Supper. When they were—in 1965 I was lookin' back at an article—there were 1,100 people at the Coon Supper. Now we have about 600. I don't know what the fire marshal would've said about 1,100 people in our gym, but you know, that's how many people were there. [Laughter] And Mr. Jim was a really talented emcee, and he was—he did jobs all over the state after he got started bein' the emcee at the Coon Supper. He told jokes and just had a natural talent. His wife was not always real happy with some of the jokes he told, but that's kinda what got the popularity of the Coon Supper going. [00:06:53] Benny Craig, the—do you know—member that name?

JCD: That name rings a bell.

LB: The Colonial Bread Man?

JCD: Yes. Yes.

LB: He came—I'd say that was in the [19]50s. Then they started inviting the politicians. I remember—one of the suppers I was at as a high school student, Orval Faubus was there. So the—course, David Pryor was there, and Mark Pryor has been there. But it turned into a political event. And it was the first—every other year for a political—the year of the elections, it was well

attended by almost all the politicians, and it was kinda the jumping-off point for the political year.

[00:07:38] JCD: So, Larry, how does it differ from election year and non-election year.

LB: Course, we don't do—it's not political in that they give speeches. So we let the—we start at the federal House of Representatives and up to the governor is how we would let them speak. And they would, you know, give the speech of "Happy to be here," and that sort of thing. They didn't do politics. But they all came here. And there were events before the Coon Supper. Marion Berry, the congressman, had events at his house, and then he later on moved that to his farm, to the—a round top where they kept their equipment. And that's still going on. So the politicians would come that year. And but then off year, there wouldn't be as many. They still—there's still some, and of course the local ones would be there. But not so much the national. But that—they came because the crowd was there, but then it got kinda political. Sometimes the politicians think that they're the ones that got it goin'. Well, that—it—not exactly. But that kept it goin', let's put it that way, the fact that they would all come.

[00:09:00] JCD: So what would you say is one of the most

challenging parts of putting on a Coon Supper? You're in your eightieth year comin' up. You've had anywhere from 1,100 to 600, so either way, a sizeable number of people. Explain the logistics of such an event.

LB: Well, it's about that time of year. We'll get started. I've got the tickets for sale, and I'm in charge of the tick—everybody's—we've all got our jobs. And everybody in the—you—we really don't even have to have a meeting because the people that're—have survived from year to year always have the same jobs. One of the men you'll be talkin' to, Seth Place, he's in charge of purchasing the raccoon. And they'll—he'll probably purchase at least 500 pounds of raccoon. I'd say—in my opinion, and I don't—because I don't help with it, and I'm happy I don't have to prepare the raccoon. That's an unbelievable job. But they all get together, and they know what they're doing, and they get the raccoon parboiled and then barbecued for a day, so it's quite a process. [00:10:13] In my opinion, that's the toughest job is preparing the raccoon. But we have ribs and brisket also, so there's plenty of food for everybody. Sweet potatoes. That's kind of a tradition because of—again, back in the Depression times, that was kind of the meal. Whatever wild game and sweet potatoes and slaw and that sort of thing. But I'm happy I

don't have to peel fat off a raccoon.

JCD: I think you've got the better job [*LB laughs*] selling tickets.

LB: Yeah.

JCD: So you sell the tickets, and then Mr. Place procures the coon, and then you've got individuals who prepare and smoke 'em.

LB: Right. They—it's the same guys every year. The only way you get off of these jobs is to pass away. So.

[00:11:02] JCD: And what are some of the names? You've mentioned some, but what are some of the names and their jobs, if you don't mind sharing?

LB: Oh, well, you've got—the ladies in town prepare the sweet potatoes with the sugar and the—we still use the school lunch room. Then you have the desserts. We have a pastor's wife, Joni Philipp that—she has a list of the names and calls them, and they get all the cakes ready to be—they do those at home and then bring 'em to the gym that day to be distributed. We used to have the high school kids on Thursday and Friday—we—it was a Friday event, and the high school kids would help set up all the tables, the 1,100 or 600 chairs, and we'd go all through the community to the different churches and get the folding tables and chairs. And then so there was—there were crews that did that. [00:12:03] So I mean—and way back when, again, one of

the committees I always liked was the Wood, Site, and Light Committee. That was the coon hunt committee. They had to get the wood for the fire, they had to pick a site, and they had to have a generator for lights. So that was their job. But so those are the kind of the committees that we've got. And they're really not committees. It's we have a meeting and let everybody know—they know what they have to do, they know when they have to do it, smokin' the brisket and ribs and—it all comes together.

JCD: It sounds wonderful. [00:12:45] So it's always been a fundraiser. It was originally a fundraiser for the area, the high school kids. And you mentioned jackets. So letter jackets, this sort of thing?

LB: Right. Right.

JCD: And trips to Boys and Girls State. So what is the contribution target these days?

LB: Now—I looked it up. We started a scholarship program in 2008. That—we lost—our school was consolidated in about 2010, so we started a scholarship program, and that's the main emphasis now. Right now we give at least four scholarships at \$4,000 each. And we've actually distributed over \$150,000 in scholarships so far. And they're lu—we don't have any

overhead. There's no salaries or, you know, postage. It's just the normal stuff is all we spend. Everything goes towards the scholarship. Unless the school—if DeWitt High School or DeWitt Elementary request money for academics or computers or—we would support that also. But that's been pretty gratifying. We have sponsors. All the businesses around here sponsor the event, and that's how we come up with that kind of money to award those scholarships.

[00:14:16] JCD: That's wonderful. And I guess some of that money goes to—did I understand correctly that the coon is—the raccoon is purchased? Is that right?

LB: Yes. It's—that's right. I . . .

JCD: Okay. From area hunters?

LB: Yep. He's—we have a freezer truck that we plug up and get it ready to go, and we store the raccoon in that, and he has guys now that—again, they know it's that time of year, and they contact him and work that out. They have to dress the raccoon, but it has to—there has to be one foot left on the carcass.

JCD: And that way you can identify that it's in fact raccoon?

LB: Right. It's a raccoon and not somebody's big kitty cat or somethin' like that. [*Laughter*] So it's quality control.

[00:15:09] JCD: I see. [*Laughs*] So in its eightieth year, why do you

think it continues? I mean, this a uniquely Arkansas tradition. It is well known statewide. How do you think it continues? What is its significance culturally?

LB: I think it's a community thing, that they're proud of their community. The reunion—you know, with what's happened with the population transfer, our state—it's moved from southeast Arkansas to Northwest Arkansas, and I think it's just—they're just determined to keep it goin'. It's not as easy as it used to be with the number of people that are here, with population trends, the size of the farms. I was a banker. When I retired in [20]13, I probably had twelve farm loans that I made as opposed to when I started at the bank when we had like thirty or so. So you know, consolidation. Our kids havin' to move away to get jobs. And I've got three kids, and they're in Arkansas, Texas, and Mississippi, so that's what happens to our—these small communities, especially in southeast Arkansas. So I think there's a determination there to keep it goin' as long as we can.

[00:16:41] JCD: Yes, sir. What's your—and I'm sure you have many, but if you could think of one of your favorite memories of the supper through the years, what would one of those be?

LB: Well, Senator Bumpers was there one year—one of the years he was there and—the farm's events. And we have our white

jackets, and we serve the tables. And they—someone—one of the servers came by his—where he was sitting and noticed that he didn't have any raccoon and asked him if he would like some more raccoon, and Senator Bumpers said, "No, I've eaten all I wanted." And so he moved on, and the gentleman next to him asked the senator—he said, "I didn't see you eat any raccoon. When did you do that?" He said, "About four years ago."

[*Laughter*] [00:17:33] So any—but now the most recent one—I have to te—we had a young guy from MSNBC and his—a young lady that took care of scheduling and everything called me from New York City and wanted to come to the Coon Supper if Tom Cotton and Mark Pryor both were gonna be there. So whenever we found out that they were actually—both of 'em were actually gonna be there, MSNBC sent those two people to come to Gillett, Arkansas.

JCD: This is leading up to that 2014 election, is that correct?

LB: Yes. So a young, Black guy, super nice, a New York City kid—so anyway, so I meet him at the gym and tell him about the fundraiser at Marion Berry's farm. And I give 'em directions on how to get there. It's about five miles outta town in the country. And there's—there was signage to get him there. So they go out to the event, and they come back, and I saw—I was—had to

stay at the gym and work, and course. And I asked him how it went. He said, "Oh, it went great." He said, "You know what?" I said, "No, what?" He said, "I was gettin' kinda scared. I've never been on a dirt road that long." So he—[laughter] but he was a super nice guy. And we have Coon Supper ties, the Western tie, and we have sponsors do glasses that have the year and the Coon Supper logo on it. We made sure they had all of that. And I made sure he got one of those ties, and I told him it has Gillett Coon Supper on the tie. I said, "Now the next time you go to one of those black-tie events in New York City, you need to—you'll have to wear this tie." And he said, "Man, I can't wear that tie." [Laughter] But he was super nice guy. And they did a report on MSNBC. I don't know if any of that's still out there or not. But . . .

[00:19:45] JCD: We have footage of it, yes. Well, I'm sure you were very hospitable to anyone that comes in . . .

LB: Oh, yeah.

JCD: . . . from outside of the Gillett area, even if they're from New York.

LB: Yeah. We've had people from Canada one year. He had a—they had lunch. They were traveling south from Canada for the winter, and they stopped at our local restaurant here, and they

said, "Are you gonna go to the Coon Supper?" and the guy goes, "The what?" And he came to see me and got two tickets. And he said, "Well, we have raccoon in Canada, but we've never thought about eating 'em." So we've had—it's—just the—back when Mr. Jim was the MC, he always recognized all the different towns. In the article I read, there were thirteen states represented and thirty-something towns in Arkansas. So it was a—that's when it got started.

[00:20:50] JCD: Wow. Well, I've got only one more question . . .

LB: [*Laughs*] Okay.

JCD: . . . and it is what does coon taste like?

LB: It really tastes like barbecued raccoon. I—you know, I've had people say it tastes like chicken. And I eat one piece of raccoon every year since I sell those tickets. And my wife—we've been married fifty-three years and back here that long, and she had her first piece of raccoon last year. So but it just—it's a wild taste. You know, lo—like a wild meat, but course these guys, they've got this recipe going with the onions and the—everything they put in the par—when they parboil it 'cause it has to be parboiled first. Then they strip the fat off it, and they put it on the smokers and barbecue it. So it's kinda like fryin'. You can eat anything fried, and that's kinda the way the barbecue flavor

does for it.

JCD: [*Laughs*] Well, is there anything else I should have asked you that I haven't? Anything else you'd like to add?

[00:22:01] LB: Yes, there is. I wanted to mention—in the [19]70s, it'd be the mid-[19]70s, we had a graduate—football was a big deal in our little town. One of the young men was Bob Cover, and you're gonna interview his older brother, John Cover. Bob Cover was killed in Vietnam. And one of the coaches in the mid-[19]70s came up with the idea of the Bob Cover award. And it was voted on by the team and—the guy who supported the team and his players, his fellow players, the most because of what happened to Bob Cover. So that was a prestigious award, and it was awarded to one of the players every year. And my son got that in the [19]90s, so that's how—and that was a big deal. And that's—there again, there were so many more people here in the area population-wise, but they came to see, you know, that football team honored and the seniors and cheerleaders and the Miss Arkansas County, and it was all local. Now we don't have that, but they still—we still got a good group coming.

[00:23:22] JCD: Well, Mr. Bauer, I wanna thank you for your time and sharing your stories with us, and your commitment to this unique Arkansas tradition through the years. We at the Pryor

Center certainly hope that there's another eighty years in its future.

LB: We do, too. And we certainly appreciate the interest that y'all've shown in it.

JCD: Well, thank you so much for your time.

LB: Thank you.

JCD: And that'll end the audio recording there, Larry. We sure appreciate it.

LB: I hope it went okay.

[End of interview 00:24:00]