

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

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Gillett Coon Supper

Ann Berry Coggin
Interviewed by John C. Davis
May 3, 2024
Fayetteville, 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

See the Citation Guide at <http://pryorcenter.uark.edu/about.php>.

John C. Davis interviewed Ann Berry Coggin on May 3, 2023, in Fayetteville, 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, executive director of the David and Barbara Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History, and we are located at the Pryor Center. It's Friday, May 3, 2024, and I'm with Ann Coggin, who is going to share with me some of her memories of the Gillett Coon Supper. If you would, please state and—your full name and indicate that you're willin' to give the Pryor Center permission to archive this audio file and make it available for public use.

Ann Berry Coggin: My name is Ann Berry Coggin, and I agree to archive—let you archive this and make it available for public use.

JCD: Thank you. On behalf of the Pryor Center, thanks so much for sittin' down with me today. So we're collecting stories. That's what we do at the Pryor Center. Right now we're collecting stories about the Gillett Coon Supper, its history, what it takes to keep a tradition like that going, and what the tradition means to the Gillett area and to the state. [00:01:45] So first, we'll start at the top. Where do you live?

ABC: I live right now in the Jackson, Mississippi, area, Madison, Mississippi.

JCD: And you're—lived in the Gillett area . . .

ABC: Yes, I grew up . . .

JCD: . . . growin' up. Yes, ma'am.

ABC: . . . in Gillett. Grew up in Gillett. I was born in Little Rock, but we moved to Gillett when I was eighteen months old. My dad went back to farm, and so I grew up my whole—graduated from high school at Gillett High School, so.

[00:02:11] JCD: Do you remember your first experience of the Gillett Coon Supper?

ABC: I absolutely do. I don't know the exact year, but I wanted to go to the Coon Supper. I mean, it was the biggest thing that

happened in Gillett and, you know, everybody was involved with it. And my—one of my best childhood friends did not live in Gillett, but her grandparents did, and she spent a lot of time with them. Her grandfather was James Carol Place, who was the longtime emcee of the Gillett Coon Supper. And so Melinda was her name, and Melinda and I wanted to go to the Coon Supper so badly when we were young, but *[laughs]* our parents were hesitant because her grandfather evidently told some off-color jokes, and so we had to wait. There was a lot of deliberating about when Melinda and I were old enough to go to the Coon Supper and, you know, and have the experience. And so it's kinda funny to think back now, but it was—so maybe I was around twelve or something that I finally got to go for the first time. And I thought it was just the best thing that I'd ever been to in my entire life. It was—lived up to all the hype.

[00:03:24] JCD: So to someone who hasn't been there, what is the Gillett Coon Supper? What does it look like? So when you go, what're you gonna see, what's goin' on?

ABC: Well, of course, for me, I knew everybody, you know, *[laughs]* who was working because—or I didn't know all the guests. So for me it was so amazing to walk in and everybody in town was there at one place for one night, and everybody really worked

hard and just was smiling and excited to welcome the entire state of Arkansas to our little hometown for the night. So you walked in and there were rows of tables which the high-school kids, I later found out when I was in high school, had set up, had spent the whole week setting up and—covered in white paper, and the football players and the cheerleaders were seated kinda behind the head table, you know. And there was a podium, and there was usually a band of some type. And a mus—someone who sang. And there was—but it was just a lot of people and a lot of fun, and it was just a big reunion. And of course, there was the ham and the—all the other things, and then the coon, the buckets of coon. So, yeah. And you had to have a little coon. That was the rule. If you were gonna come, you had to have a little coon. [*Laughs*]

[00:04:49] JCD: It—Gillett's a small community. And the supper itself—and you touched on this—brings a lot of people.

ABC: Yeah.

JCD: So outside of the political significance, perhaps, of, you know, a tradition like this—it kinda kicks off the campaign season each January of every year. What's the significance of the Coon Supper to Gillett, to folks in Gillett?

ABC: Well, I think it had a financial significance in that it did raise

money for our school and for our athletic programs, which were huge parts of our community. The school has consolidated now, you know, so it's a totally different thing, but at the time there was just—there's not a lot to do in Gillett [*laughs*], you know, on any given weekend. And so the sports, the football, the basketball—I mean, it was just—it was—those were smaller times. And so this helped fund being able to do those kind of things, and so that was really great. [00:05:53] But then there was just the whole organization of it all and everybody working toward a common goal. And I think it just builds a lot of cooperation in the community, a lot of good will. You were working together with your neighbors who went to different churches, maybe [*laughs*] voted differently than you, however, it just brought everybody together, and you were all working for this common goal. And it was—and everybody was so proud and so excited when the night came and we sold the number of tickets that we wanted to sell and all of those things.

JCD: You mentioned the school has still consolidated, but the Coon Supper continues.

ABC: Yes. Yes.

JCD: I think it's over eighty Coon Suppers at this point.

ABC: Yes. Yes.

[00:06:40] JCD: How does something like that—how does a tradition like this continue? What does it take?

ABC: I really, again, think it's the community. I think it could have easily fizzled out, but I think that there's just a lot—there's still many, many people who wanna see it continue and who want to—who just wanna see it continue. I don't know how to say it any better than that. And again, it's also—the political aspect is huge but, you know, growing up there, it was just almost such a treat that people from Little Rock would wanna come to our town and that we could host them. I mean, we went to Little Rock for everything. I went to Little Rock for the dentist. You know, I went to Little Rock for—to buy new clothes—school clothes, you know, for *[laughs]* so many things. And it was just so cool that for one night a year, the state was driving to us. And that was just—people loved welcoming the state to our town.

[00:07:48] JCD: Speakin' of people coming to Gillett for this, I understand you've got a story about—well, it's covered—it was covered in the news, and there's photos of a plane crash that was a near miss, could've really turned tragic. Turned out to be okay. Everybody was okay in this accident. But I was wonderin' if you would share your story there.

ABC: Sure. So I believe I was home from college the year this

happened. I was either in high school—but I believe I was in college, home for Christmas break. And my dad was going to pick up then Governor Clinton and Senator Bumpers, who were flying on a small plane into the DeWitt airport. And there are no lights, really. I mean, on—it's just an airstrip. It's not really an airport, it's just a, really, an airstrip. And we borrowed—my grandparents had one of those big vans, you know, fancy vans with the captain's chairs and like the little couch in the back and [*laughs*—so we borrowed it, cleaned it all up to go pick up the dignitaries, and I was in the front seat with my dad, and we were watching the plane come in. [00:09:08] And it was not a—it was a bad night as far as weather. It was icy, and it was a bad night. And we watched the plane land, and then all of a sudden the lights just went out. And it was terrifying. I mean, it was just so dark. I mean, we shined our headlights down the runway, and we're sitting there tryin' to figure out what to do. And then very quickly, out of the darkness, came walking the governor, the senator, and the people who were with them. And we just breathed a huge, huge, huge sigh of relief. I mean, it was—it became a great story, but it was very scary at the moment. We did not know what had happened. And you know, the details are out there for actually what happened with the

plane, but that was just my experience as probably a nineteen-, twenty-year-old kid just thinking, "Oh, no. This would not—this could be a terrible tragedy," and then just the relief of seeing them walk up. And they were all laughing. They were [*laughs*] like—they were in an unusually good mood for what they had just been through. But you know, I think they were just relieved. So, you know.

[00:10:32] JCD: The story I've heard is that as Bill Clinton and Dale Bumpers are walkin', probably to the van, Bill Clinton says somethin' about how, "Well, at least we'll never lose Arkansas County." [*Laughter*]

ABC: Yes. Yes, I do remember that. I do remember that. And then my parents lived across the street from the school. So we went right to my parents' house, and they always had a pre-gathering at their house, so we went right there and, you know, and went on with the evening. And I really don't even know how they got back to Little Rock, but . . .

JCD: 'Cause the plane was damaged, right? It was . . .

ABC: Yes.

JCD: . . . off the runway.

ABC: Yes, yes. They did not get back on that plane. So, anyway.

[00:11:13] JCD: You had mentioned earlier that everybody has to try

coon when you go to the supper. I ask everybody this. If you've not had it before, what does coon taste like?

ABC: Really bad barbecue? [*Laughs*]

JCD: And it's smoked.

ABC: It is smoked.

JCD: And you put a lot of sauce on yours?

ABC: Yes.

JCD: Yeah.

ABC: Put a lot of sauce. It's just real fatty and kinda—it's just, you know—anyway. It's fun.

JCD: It's part of the tradition.

[00:11:44] ABC: It's worth the tradition. Also one thing that I don't know that a lot of people know about that was really a big part of my childhood, too, was we had a coon hunt, a community coon hunt. And really it was like a big hot-dog roast. I mean, and—you know, in the woods. But we all met on like an October evening. It was dads and their kids in this clearing in the woods down by the Arkansas River on some land the Truax family owned. And we would have a bonfire, and we would roast hot dogs and have supper, and then there would be the people who actually hunted the coons and their dogs there, and then they would go out on a coon hunt. And so that kinda kicked off the

season for the Coon Supper was the coon hunt.

JCD: I can see how you would look forward to that.

ABC: Yeah.

JCD: Sounds like a lot of fun.

ABC: Oh yeah, it was a big deal. It was fun.

[00:12:43] JCD: Have you ever had roles in the Coon Supper? One thing that we've learned in talkin' to folks is that, you know, it takes a lot of members of the community, a lot of volunteer hours, a lot of effort and work. So what are some of the things that, especially growin' up, that you did to help facilitate the supper?

ABC: Well, in junior high and high school, every student—I mean, we basically probably shouldn't've done this, but we didn't go to class for the week before [*laughs*] the Coon Supper. We were too busy moving chairs and tables and decorating, and so it was all hands on deck. And again, it was just fun. We—it was hard work. It took a lot of time, and then there was the tear down, you know, afterwards. So but that was—that's really the only role I had, and it was something that everybody, all of my classmates, had. We were all invested in and doin' the hard work to make that happen. And I wonder, now, without the school there how they get that all done. I'm sure it's—I don't

even know the answer to that question. But it's quite a big, labor-intensive job.

[00:13:58] JCD: Do you have anything, maybe a favorite memory?

Is there somethin'—if you could think back and put yourself in that spot again, is there anything that stands out?

ABC: It's just—I choke up. It's just seein' Mr. James Carol up at that podium just havin' the time of his life, singing, you know, "You Picked a Fine Time to Leave Me, Lucille." I—you know, and just laughing, and then, you know, frequently my dad would just be off to the side. It was before he was in office. My dad didn't run until—for office until I was grown and married and had a child. My sec—two children, actually. So this was just, you know, as a, you know, as a young person. Just watching the delight and—in Mr. James Carol, and just thinking he was so funny, and just watching, you know, my dad laugh and enjoy the evening. I don't know. It was just magical.

JCD: Sounds like a wonderful memory.

ABC: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

JCD: Is there anything else you'd like to add that you can think of?

ABC: I don't think so, but I would just say that obviously if you've watched a lot of footage of my dad, he was big on oral history himself, so thank you for the work you do. It really matters, and

it means a lot.

JCD: Well, thank you. I'm honored to get to sit down with you today
and share these stories.

ABC: It's okay.

JCD: Thank you.

ABC: Thanks.

[End of interview 00:15:35]