

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

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Gillett Coon Supper

Gabe Holmstrom
Interviewed by John C. Davis
November 10, 2023
Little Rock, 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 Gabe Holmstrom on November 10, 2023, in Little Rock, 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 Gabe Holmstrom 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. Gabe, 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?

Gabe Holmstrom: Yeah. So my name is Gabe Holmstrom, *G-A-B-E H-O-L-M-S-T-R-O-M*. And I grant the Pryor Center permission to use this audio and what we're about to talk about here today about the Gillett Coon Supper.

JCD: Thank you, Gabe. I—we really appreciate it. As you can imagine, we're collecting oral histories about the Coon Supper, its traditions, and surrounding events and history, and we're very eager to have your perspective, so we thank you for sitting down with us. [00:01:46] If you would, Gabe, tell me where you live.

GH: So I live in Little Rock, Arkansas. Downtown Little Rock.

JCD: And your history with the Coon Supper is, in part at least, from your time workin' for Congressman Marion Berry, is that correct?

GH: That is correct. That's how I got drug into this whole deal. I didn't know—I really—I may have heard of it, but I certainly wasn't that familiar with it until I started workin' for the congressman.

[00:02:17] JCD: Do you remember your first Coon Supper?

GH: I do. I do. It was—I was an intern. I was interning when I was still in college, and one of the things they said, "Well, you gotta come down and see the Coon Supper and be a part of that." So I went down there, and I just remember it—what sticks out in

my head, and I think I've repeated every time someone's asked me about this since, is that it was like a true slice of Americana. I mean, you had a old-school gymnasium that had those creaky wood floors, the basketball goals that had been raised up into the ceiling, the banners that—showin' off the prior athletic successes, and then you had the kids all lined up in—football team in their letterman jackets, and Miss Arkansas was there. You had folks in NASCAR t-shirts and then other folks in fur coats. So it was a complete mix.

[00:03:38] JCD: What year was that?

GH: That would've been in 2001.

JCD: And have you attended most of 'em since?

GH: I have not missed one since.

JCD: That's wonderful. So oh—well over twenty years of Coon Suppers.

GH: Well, I guess let me clarify that. I have been in Gillett [*laughs*] for every single one of these, but in recent years, when we've started—we've made the pre-Coon Supper the scholarship fundraiser. I probably haven't been to the actual Coon Supper in probably five or six years.

JCD: Okay. Yeah, and here in just a minute, I wanna ask you about the pre-Coon Supper fundraiser as well.

GH: Yeah.

[00:04:24] JCD: So as someone who isn't from Gillett, but as you said, certainly appreciates this wonderful tradition in Arkansas, what do you think is the supper's significance to the Gillett area and the state as a whole?

GH: Well, I think it is very much a part of the identity of the city of Gillett to the point where—you know, a lot of the small towns in Arkansas have a welcome sign when you cross into the city limits. And that's the case of—for Gillett because it's—you know, they have the sign that says "Welcome to Gillett, home of friendly people and the Coon Supper." And so that's very much a part of their identity. The population of the town substantially increases in size, more than doubles, during the Coon Supper. But no, it is definitely part of the city's identity. [00:05:32] As far as how it relates to the state, this is something that Congressman Berry was very proud of, and he would always—you know, any time it would come up in DC, he would encourage and invite his colleagues to come on down and promise to show them a good time and something they've never seen before. And the ones that took him up on that, they most certainly had a great time and got to experience this very, very unique event. It's interesting, in the years that I've been associated with the

congressman and then with the Coon Supper part, the number of people and the wide variety of phone calls that I get leading up to the events where budding politicians and candidates—you know, it's one of these things that has this mystique of being a must-do, must-see, must-participate event. And whether that's actually true or not—I think that's probably up for some debate. But it certainly has the aura around it that it is. Now that was probably a lot more important in previous years, previous decades, as the media world has changed. But you know, this became an event that politicians attended and candidates attended because it was an event that a large number of people gathered. And so that was an attractive way for these candidates to hit a lot of people and see a lot of people in a region at one time.

[00:07:28] JCD: And I think you touched on something there that's very significant, that the Coon Supper didn't originally begin as a political event but has become one and has survived significant changes in the way that campaigning is conducted.

GH: That's correct. I mean, it's still—you know, so now it is—people wanna go down there, and candidates and political staffers want to go down and get a picture of them eating their piece of coon or with a picture of the Coon Supper cup. It's a lot of—you

know, the cup that they produce every year, that becomes a collector's item, if you will. You see these in antique shops around the state. And it's kinda funny because of my association with this, oftentimes people will see these out, and they'll just—they'll pick one up. And I've had multiple gifts over the years of the Coon Supper cup from 1966 or 1984, and it's just one of those funny collector items that people that collect political paraphernalia, they gravitate towards. But so yeah, around that weekend, social media in the modern era is flooded with the pictures of people at the Coon Supper events, but that wasn't, obviously, always the case. But when candidates went down there, they went to work the room and talk to the local leaders and local businessman and, you know, spread the word and try to get elected. [00:09:15] Former governor Mike Beebe has a fantastic story that he weaves and ties his ability to win his first election due to the success he had at the Gillett Coon Supper. So I don't know if he's on your list to talk to, but if—it's a great anecdote about how when he walked into the Coon Supper after goin' to the pre-party at Congressman Berry's house that was across the street, everybody had these Beebe buttons on. And the gentleman that was in the race before saw all these people with all these buttons, and then ultimately

dropped out of the race because, he said, "Well, if, you know, if Beebe's got all this support, there's no way that I can win."

JCD: And the rest is history for then gov . . .

GH: And there you go.

JCD: . . . later governor Beebe.

GH: And he never—yeah. He never had an opponent until he ran for governor.

[00:10:17] JCD: That's somethin' else. Well, tell me about the pre-supper, the pre-party.

GH: So that goes back, it's my understanding, to the [19]70s. So Congressman Berry and his wife, Carolyn, lived in a house across the street from the Gillett School. And their—it became a gathering place. So there was no cocktails served at the actual Coon Supper, but a lot of times these elected officials or these candidates would—they would wanna stop in, maybe have a cocktail and, you know, meet with Marion and Carolyn and see other local leaders there before going over to the Coon Supper. So that kind of grew and grew and became quite the gathering point where people would stop in before goin' over. When Marion decided to run for office in 1996, he turned that into a fundraiser for his congressional campaign. And so all the years that he was in office, he would host an event beforehand that

would be a fundraiser that would kick off the year that would benefit his campaign. And that wa—it was a good way to get, you know, some of his supporters from other areas of the state, and that helped build the crowd for the Coon Supper 'cause people would come to his event, and then, you know, you're already down in Gillett, you might as well drive or walk, however it was, over to the school and participate in that. So that's how the pre-party started. [00:12:14] And then when Marion left office in 2010, there were several of us, including Mitch Berry, the congressman's son, and some of his former staffers like Chad Causey and Erika Chudy, as well as Ben Noble, who was a relative of the congressman's who had longtime been involved with this. We got to talkin', and it was really one of those things where people had been accustomed to coming to this pre-party. And you know, the decision was made that first year, "Well, we don't know what we're gonna do, but we're just gonna figure out how to have a pre-party, and people can come, and that's it." And we had a couple guys—you know, we brought guitars. We never had music or anything before, but we had a couple guys to sing a few songs and entertain folks. So that was the first year that we did it after the congressman had retired. I guess I'm missing a little bit of history here. The—when the event was at

the congressman's house, when it turned into the fundraiser for the campaign, it got too big to stay in his house, so they moved it to the local pool hall. And then later on in the congressman's career, he had built a new farm shop, so he brought the whole operation out to the farm shop. And so in 2011 when, you know, we did the first event that was not to benefit his campaign, it was out at the—it was, again, out at the farm shop. [00:14:07] So we didn't know if anybody would show up or not. And to our surprise, they did, and there was a lot of feedback, "I really hope you guys keep this goin'." So we had some conversations, started talkin' about how do we make this work and, you know, we're bringin' these people together. They're willin' to pay money. How should we, you know, how should we create something to benefit from this? And you know, one of the ideas that I felt real strongly about is a lot of the folks, a lot of students, are interested in politics, want to learn more about it, and then a lot of ways you do that in politics is through internships. Well, it's expensive to live in Washington, DC, and at that time the in—most of the internships are just not paid. So we came up with the concept to have a scholarship that would provide a stipend for a student at Arkansas State that wanted to go and have an internship, you know, related to public service

somewhere. So you know, if it was interning in a congressional office, it was interning in the White House, those were the kind of things that we were encouraging, and we wanted to encourage more of. And so that's where the money goes, and ever since we've—you know, this is—I have to raise money a lot in my other—in my real job. And this is the only event that I've ever been involved with that before we even start planning, sponsors call us and say, "Hey, are you guys doin' this again? We've got our money ready. We wanna make sure we're still a part." So that's a pretty cool thing to me.

[00:16:01] JCD: So you've got this pre-Coon Supper fundraiser, and then the Coon Supper itself's a fundraiser as well, is that correct?

GH: That's correct.

JCD: That's great to see so many different people in the Gillett community and in the state pitchin' in in different ways. What's—I'm sure you have several. What would your favorite—one of your favorite memories of the supper be? And it—maybe one pre-Coon Supper a—memory, and maybe one that stands out durin' the Gillett Coon Supper itself.

GH: The—for—you know, on the actual Coon Supper, you know, I—again, there's just nothin' like walkin' into this old high-school

gymnasium, and you see these people—and again, I—as a staffer, I'm in the background. You have this roomful of people, and everyone's—you know, they're—so oftentimes, especially in election years, the event will sell out. And so people are always scramblin', "Well, how do I get a ticket? How do I get a ticket?" And so there's always this scramblin'. I'm sure Larry talked [*laughs*] a lot about his job managing the ticket sales and makin' sure everybody gets taken care of. [00:17:30] But the—you know, when the congressman retired, they asked me to go up and say a few words about him, and you know, tha—typically me getting up and speaking is not something I'd have to do, but I—you know, they—'cause they have a—you know, typically they would have somebody up there local that gets up there and tells jokes. Well, I don't wanna get in a competition with a comedian or anything like that. But no, it was—that was quite the experience. That was something memorable to have the opportunity to get up there and speak to everybody and share some of my time—share some of the stories of my time traveling First Congressional District with Congressman Berry. That would've—that was a real—I guess that was a special moment. [00:18:20] And then the—you know, course at—I guess the best, you know, the best, most memorable thing is your first bite

of coon, right. And everybody's—has seen a lot of the description about this. There's a great video of President Clinton where he describes what eating coon is like. And but yeah, I remember getting—bein' there in 2001 and grabbin' that buck—bein' passed a bucket, and you look down in it, and it just like looks—and there's just a bunch of barbecue sauce on some sort of meat that has been spoke—smoked, so there's not a whole lot of options other than reachin' down in there and grabbin' a piece and takin' a big ol' bite.

[00:19:09] JCD: So, Gabe, what does coon taste like in your opinion?

GH: [*Laughs*] Well, it has a heavy flavor of barbecue sauce, so. It's a little stringy. There's some, you know, there's some associations of—maybe where chicken could be applied, but maybe parts of pork. But I'm grateful that the opportunity only presents itself once a year. So it's—but yeah, it's a great tradition they have.

JCD: Well, Gabe, is there anything else I should have asked you or anything that you would like to share?

GH: Well, let's see. The, you know, the—I guess, you know, talkin' about the pre-coon event. You know, the congressman was of a different generation. Marion was of a different generation, and then a different generation of politicians. And you know, we

always had to put out these plywood campaign signs. And in the years I've been involved with campaigning and politics, he's the only candidate that I've ever seen that still made us use these plywood signs. And that is a chore installin' a 4x4 plywood sign or a 4x8 plywood sign. And it was always very important that, leadin' up the Coon Supper, that we had to have our campaign signs out with the arrows on 'em to show people how to get to the farm shop and so that—it was—you know, the amount of discussions and, you know, conversations that have been had over these signs is just never ending, really.

JCD: Was colorful language sometimes employed?

[00:21:32] GH: Well, only when you forgot the campaign signs, yes.

[*JCD laughs*] Yes, I mean, that was most certainly the deal.

And I'm not so sure—I think this was for the Coon Supper where we had some folks in that wanted to go duck hunting one morning, and I remember being—I think I was—this was my first year workin' for the congressman. This was after the internship completed, and we all stayed at the house. And he had this old Suburban. And it's, you know four o'clock in the mornin', and he says, "Gabe, go out there and start the Suburban up so we can go pick these guys up to go duck hunting." "Okay. Yes, sir." I had never started that Suburban before. And I remember goin'

out there. And he didn't tell me—he just said to go start it. And so I just get in this old Suburban and turn the keys on, and then it just lurches back in reverse and starts backin', goin' down the driveway. And I'm slammin' on the brakes and the tires are squealin', and there's a van parked right behind it that—fortunately I stopped until I hit it. Or and I don't hit it, but he comes barrelin' out the house and starts yellin' at me, you know. "What's goin' on? What're you doin'?" Well, he didn't tell me that it was a stick shift. [*JCD laughs*] And so I just turned the key, and it was—fortunately it was in reverse and not first. Otherwise I'd've driven through the wall on the back side of their carport.

JCD: That's a unique memory. [*GH laughs*] That's great.

GH: There's no other way to describe it than that.

JCD: I love that. I love that. Well, we sure appreciate your time, Gabe, and appreciate you sharin' with us some Coon Supper and pre-party Coon Supper memories.

GH: Absolutely. No, I appreciate you guys doin' this. And there's a—I look forward to seein' you guys down there.

[End of interview 00:23:41]