

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

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**Gillett Coon Supper**

Wes Long

Interviewed by John C. Davis

December 21, 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**

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

**John C. Davis interviewed Wes Long on December 21, 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 Wes Long on behalf of the David and Barbara Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History. This interview is being conducted over the phone on Thursday, December 21, 2023. Wes, would you please state and spell your full name and indicate that you're willin' to give the Pryor Center permission to make the audio file and any other materials associated with this interview available for public use?

Wes Long: I will. My first name is Wes, *W-E-S*. Last name is Long,

*L-O-N-G.* And I do give permission.

[00:01:13] JCD: Thank you, sir. Now—and in behalf on—of the center, thank you so much for talkin' with me today about the wonderful traditions of the Gillett Coon Supper. Comin' up on the eightieth Coon Supper, the Pryor Center wants to commemorate the history and traditions of the event, and we greatly appreciate you takin' the time to speak with us today about your experiences of the Coon Supper. So, Mr. Long, if you would, to someone who might not be accustomed to it or familiar, if you would, explain the Coon Supper in your own words.

WL: Well, it is a gathering of new friends, old friends, politicians, in a small town of Gillett, Arkansas. It's been goin' on for eighty years. And we get together and eat coon. We also have ribs and brisket available. But it's really just a community of Arkansas gathering. But there will be people from multiple states, so it's a good place to see people and to be seen, and it's the first of the year, so it kinda kicks off the year and gets everybody in a good mood and startin' our new year off right.

JCD: What is your first—if you recall, what would be your first experience of the supper?

[00:02:38] WL: It would've been around 19—probably [19]87, 1988.

I know I have not missed one since [19]89, which'd be, what, thirty-five years this year? So my first that I can really remember is—course, it was to celebrate the football team. It's kinda evolved into a banquet where we celebrated the football team and gave some awards, sports awards, and announced the football team and the cheerleaders. Well, when I was in sixth grade, I was the manager of the football team. You know, helped the players get on the field and get everything set up before the game. And then I continued to be manager all through junior high while I played junior high ball, and then when I started playin' high school football, then I would attend bein' a player. So around 1988, [19]89 would be my first memories of actually goin' every year and rememberin' it.

[00:03:30] JCD: That's wonderful. So you've got considerable experience. You've gone to—well, to nearly half of 'em, which is wonderful. How have they changed over that time from, say, [19]89 to last year's? What are some changes?

WL: Really, there's really not anything that's changed in the structure of the Coon Supper, what happens. What has changed is of course we've lost our school. We're in a community where we've lost half of our population. A lot of it is due because in the Delta, either on Arkansas or Mississippi sides, we're just really

losing jobs. We don't have any kind of industrial growth. As agriculture gets—farmers get bigger, technology gets better, you know—used to you needed a hired hand to farm every 200 acres. Now one guy can do 6- to 800 by his self because the equipment's so bigger. So we've lost, like I said, a lot of our population center. We've lost our school. But we still honor the kids that are from Gillett to go to DeWitt in scholarships. That's really the only difference. The—we get the coon. We still do—we prepare it the same way they've done it for eighty years. We lay the tables out the same way they've done for eighty years. I mean, everything is almost identical except just the size of our town.

[00:04:47] JCD: What would—what's the supper's significance to the Gillett area?

WL: It's really our only heartbeat left. Like I said, you've got a depressed community, which is just common in this area. So it's our spark of hope for the year. You know, it really keeps Gillett relevant. It keeps a lot of the people in town upbeat that we have this event every year. You know, it is a lot of work. We don't make a lot of money off of it 'cause of the input costs that we have and the amount of work we have to do. And we're losing volunteers because, you know, some older people have

died, and a lot of the younger people have moved off. But it's good that everybody can come back and join back together and tell stories and gather, and it really is a beacon of hope for the Gillett community and southeast Arkansas.

[00:05:38] JCD: It sounds like the Coon Supper, and you've touched on this, takes considerable amount of effort and a lot of hands in the community. Ho—why do you think a tradition like this continues in Gillett despite all the challenges that you've just mentioned?

WL: Well, it's about pride and givin' back. I started—there's about three or four of us that start in October orderin' the tickets, ordering all the table carts, getting the sponsors, makin' sure we have the coon, getting all the food ready. So it's really a labor of love. Like I said, it's a lot, it puts a lot on us, but it's a way to give back to the community. We know that it's gonna be a positive thing for our community. So I think that it's special that you feel part of it, that you're giving back, that you're doing something that is positive for your area. And you just don't mind doin' it.

JCD: Yes, sir. Do you have specific roles that you do every year?

[00:06:40] WL: Yes. When we used to—you know Farmers and Businessmen Club used to have thirty or forty members. Well,

now we're down to probably ten or fifteen that only comes to meetings. So we kinda have—everybody kinda has their own responsibility. We've kinda just stepped up, say, "Well, I'll do this every year." So every year, I order the tickets, order all the marketing for it. Now that we've lost our, really, leader, Pastor Chad, last year, which is just heartbreaking 'cause he just dedicated so much time, I've started taking over the roles of making sure we get all the letters to the politicians, all the press releases, you know, all of our marketing done through that channel. But—you know, and I don't mind doin' it. Jason Grantham does a tremendous amount. The Place boys are so important to it. Drew Whiting—there's just so many people that have bigger roles than I ever will. So you know, I don't mind doin' it.

[00:07:35] JCD: Yes, sir. And if you would, it's come up several times and—but just for our archival sake, would you explain the Farmers and Businessmen's Club and its role in not only the Coon Supper, but just Gillett in general?

WL: It used to be a group of the, you know, bankers and businessmen and, actually, mostly farmers of the area. They formed a nonprofit to, you know, start the Coon Supper and keep it going and then, you know, fund scholarships throughout

the year. People have come to the club—like if they needed help, you know, cleanin' up a yard or doin' somethin' around town. It's just kinda been that positive beacon of hope for Gillett. But it has dwindled in size as our population has, too. We've roughly lost around 50 percent of our population in the last twenty-five years. So with that, you know, we've lost way more than that of our members of our Farmers and Businessmen Club. But it's just somethin' that's unique to Gillett, and it's just an organization that people kinda depend on and make sure that this event happens and, you know, just keep the heartbeat of Gillett goin' the best we can.

JCD: That's a—it's clear that the community cares a great deal about . . .

WL: That . . .

JCD: . . . about its neighbors, which is a wonderful thing.

WL: They do.

[00:08:48] JCD: What do you think—I'm sure you have several, but what are your favorite memories of the supper?

WL: I think most of my best memories are the week leading up to the supper where all the farmers get together and prepare the coon and the fellowship that they have, the stories that they tell. You know, just sittin' around the fire visitin' with your older

generation, listen to a lot of stories. You know, when you're younger, you always think the older people had it better. Man, it was so much cooler back then. And so it is really good to kinda hang out with those guys and to keep the friendships up with those guys and hear their stories from the [19]60s and [19]70s and [19]80s, what we call the glory days. That's probably my favorite part. And then just getting to see everybody when the Coon Supper's happening, just to see a lot of friends that you maybe only see once a year or once every two years. It's good to keep those connections.

JCD: So a lot of your memories are tied, not to the event itself, but the preparation, the work . . .

WL: Yes.

JCD: . . . of the event itself.

WL: Absolutely.

[00:09:48] JCD: Oh, that's nice. That's nice. What's—what would you say is one of the more challenging parts of puttin' on the Coon Supper? It's—I mean, you're gonna feed hundreds of people, and as you said, it's a small community. What are some of those challenges of puttin' it on?

WL: The—most of the challenges now are getting enough volunteers to show up to help set the tables up and get everything ready.

We've kinda got the ordering of the—you know, the Places take care of the coon, Drew takes care of such—the other part. Everybody's got their own role. We've kinda got it down to an art. We know exactly what we've gotta do. We've got it written down. We've got the process. But just makin' sure everything gets there on time, all the ingredients are there on time, nothin' really happens the two or three days before that prevent us from not bein' able to have it. But the people in town and the Farmers and Businessmen Club really step out and step up and make sure that everything is ready. And we've just really never had a catastrophe. The weather always—you know, sometimes it's cold and raining, but the weather always seems to cooperate pretty good around Coon Supper. Usually it's cold, but you get to sit around a fire, so it's—they're good memories.

[00:11:01] JCD: Are there any of those stories that you hear around the fire that you'd like to share for our records?

WL: Probably most of 'em I can't say in the interview. [*Laughter*]

JCD: I suspected that. That's why I thought I would ask that way.

WL: It's really mostly just—you know, they tell stories of farmin' that year and, you know, to people that aren't from here, they're gonna just think they're borin' stories, but when you know the people involved, it just makes 'em funny. You know, it's a

unique area. I lived in Benton for several years. Course, I always came back for it and helped. I'd take off that week to come help and work. But we had a football coach here one time that was in Bauxite. Very successful. John Watson. And he coached my brother. But he left the year I started hi—football. And in Benton he—we lived in the same area, but we seemed like we always got our hair cut at the same place. And he would always ask about all of his friends. "How's Esther and Sam, Marie, and all them doin'?" and we would talk. And one day he looked over at me—we was both gettin' our hair cut—and he said, "You know, these people up here, they ain't like us." And he didn't mean anything by it, but these two girls kinda took offense. And I'm like, "No, you just—you don't understand. When you're from Gillett, it's just different." [00:12:12] It's a good kinda different, though, and he—you know, people that live here, it gets in their blood, and they wanna come back. Most of the time they left was for an economic opportunity. So when you know the people from here, the stories are just much better.

JCD: Absolutely. Well, I think it's all a testament to what a special community you have in Gillett and that area.

WL: We do. We really do.

[00:12:41] JCD: I gotta ask 'cause I've asked almost everyone I've

talked to. For those who've not tried it, how would you explain the taste of coon?

WL: Well, if somebody tells you it tastes like chicken, they're probably not tellin' you the truth. Coon tastes like coon. It's not the worst meat in the world. It's probably not the best. But if you like a gamey meat, you know, it is very edible. I encourage people to try it. I've had some coon that I really liked. You put barbecue sauce on it, we smoke it, we spend a lot of time in the preparation of it. But it is a wild game, and you're gonna get a wild game flavor.

JCD: Very good. Is there anything else I've neglected that you'd like to share just on the history or the importance, the meaning of the supper to, not only the Gillett area, but really the state as a whole?

[00:13:40] WL: Well, I think it does establish, you know—it is kinda evolved into a political event. Like I said, I think it helps the Gillett area, helps our politicians—you know, even local area and the state politicians kinda get their name out. It gets them a chance to kinda come to the event. You know, they don't really speak anymore. They can just wear their jeans, be normal people, you know, meet the people, get their issues out there, so it's a really good way to start off the political season. And it's

just an important event to the state and the community and even the nation.

[00:14:15] JCD: I love how the Coon Supper in some ways sort of beats back the trend anymore of everything bein' done on social media or virtually. It's still very personal, personable, and that's somethin' that I hope the Coon Supper gets to continue for another eighty years.

WL: I do, too. And like I said, it—you're right, it's kind of—you know, people can—they don't have their phones out, everybody's visitin', you know, everybody gets up and walks around. If you ain't seen that in ten years or twenty years and—you just never know who you're gonna run into. So if you've never been, I encourage you to come at least once to see what it's all about.

JCD: That's wonderful, Mr. Long. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

WL: No, sir. That's fantastic. I am very thankful that y'all are doin' this. I think things like this keep the Coon Supper goin', keep it interestin', keep it in the media, keep our history goin. And I'm like you. I hope we can keep goin' for another eighty years.

[00:15:12] JCD: Yes, sir. Well, on behalf of the Pryor Center, thank you so much, Mr. Long, and I look forward to meetin' you in January in Gillett.

WL: Well, good. We look forward to you, and thank you very much.

JCD: Thank you, sir. I sure appreciate you.

[End of interview 00:15:24]