

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

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Gillett Coon Supper

Scott Place

Interviewed by John C. Davis

November 14, 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 Scott Place on November 14, 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: So I am John Davis. I'm interviewing Scott Place on behalf of the David and Barbara Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History. This interview is being conducted over the phone. Today is Tuesday, November 14, 2023. Scott, 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?

Scott Place: My full name is Dennis Scott Place, *D-E-N-N-I-S S-C-O-T-T P-L-A-C-E*. And yes, I'm willing to do anything for David Pryor.

JCD: Thank you, sir. And do you prefer Scott or Dennis?

SP: Scott.

JCD: Yes, sir. Okay. So, Mr. Place, before we begin to talk about the Coon Supper, do you live in Gillett or in the area?

SP: Yes, on Main Street in Gillett.

[00:01:47] JCD: Very good. And I know that you and your family's history with the Gillett Coon Supper goes back some time. If you were to explain to someone what the Coon Supper is, what would you tell 'em?

SP: Well, it started as just a men's gathering. A lot of coon hunters. This was in the last years of World War II, and the men just have a get-together and go coon huntin' and all that. Well, being just men, it started gettin' a little rough. And so they decided they would have a yearly thing and invite the women. And that calmed everything down a lot. And it just grew from there. Well, then I believe in 1948, Gillett was the recipient of school consolidation. They closed a lot of the one-room schoolhouses and stuff around this end of the county, and made a school in Gillett, a bigger school, and they started havin' the

football team and all that. And it just kinda grew. And then they invited the local politicians and then all that. And the money that they raised by sellin' tickets, it all went to buy the awards for the football players and cheerleaders and all that, the jackets and everything. And then it just—it grew as the town grew back then, as the school grew, and it just got bigger and bigger. [00:03:46] And I got in on the first of the self-cooking one that—when they first started doin' it, well, they hired different, I'd say, barbecue joints to help cook. Well, we had a visit from the health department, and they wanted all the meat to be boiled to keep from having anything that was not completely done or something and have somebody get sick, you know, somethin' like that. And when I was in college, it got too big, then, and you couldn't hire enough. So we actually made the big pots and everything and start—and bought bandsaws and everything to process the meat and all that and started cookin' it all ourselves when I was, I think, when I was a sophomore in college in [19]73. And so I got in on the first of the self-cooking and been doing it ever since.

[00:05:14] JCD: So for several decades, it was people just lendin' their skills, their rooms, and their kitchens and preparing the coon and then bringing it to the dinner, is that right, until . . .

SP: Well . . .

JCD: . . . 1973?

SP: . . . all the side dishes were prepared by the women of the community, barbecued rice and all that. And then they—most of the coon was cooked by hired cook—by barbecue places.

JCD: Okay. Yes, sir. So . . .

SP: Oh, I can remember—and the health department made us shut down. They used to serve a big ol' piece of pie with every plate. It had merengue on top, you know, like three inches tall, the homemade pies. And people would actually go in, and they'd look to see what kind of pie they's gettin', and they'd trade off with another plate, you know, to get [*laughter*] the kind of pie they wanted. And but the—with eggs being in the homemade pies like that, the health department wouldn't let us do that anymore.

[00:06:33] JCD: Well, I know it's quite a large operation. And would you—if you would, spend a few minutes explaining the process of preparing the coon and smokin' it.

SP: Okay. It starts out—my son, Seth, is now the coon buyer, and he buys the carcass from the local hunters. He has several that hunt particularly for the Coon Supper. And we had some difficulties in—back in the [19]80s. One—when the price of fur

was high, there was no problem to get plenty of coon. But then the price of fur went down, and so that—there wasn't near as many coon hunters. And we've gone to western Arkansas for a few years there to—or basically just covered the state tryin' to find enough coon to put the Coon Supper on. And but that's relieved now. There's plenty. Of course, we added to the price to make it worthwhile to go coon huntin'. It—you know, maintain a dog and everything else. So it's not any problem now to get enough coon.

[00:08:13] JCD: Do you pay by the pound? Is it by the raccoon?
How does that work?

SP: Yeah. When I first started doin' it, we's payin' twenty-five cents a pound for a carcass, and now we're payin' \$1.60. So [*laughs*] that makes a lot of difference. It's worthwhile to you to go—the commercial coon hunters go out and kill ten coons in a night, and they—that's pretty good livin'. And then we take and we keep 'em in a freezer after we buy 'em, or Seth buys 'em, and we got two big ol' chest-type freezers full. Now I think he's—we've cut back to about—between eight and nine hundred pounds. Back in the early days when we just served—the early days of our self-cooking, I'm talkin' about—when we just served coons and then about thirteen hams for people that would not

eat coon. So we had slice hams. I got in on that, too, at the school's cafeteria. Mister **Fritz Eichler** had a grocery store down there and processed meat and all. He showed us how to cut the muscles apart and cut a ham across the grain and all that, and it's very tasty, you know. And but I liked to cut 'em. But anyway. [00:09:58] Then in around 2000, maybe [19]99 or 2000, Jennings Osborne came in and wanted to help. And he started serving big ol' beef ribs and the other things to go along with the coon because we were—before that we—there was one year that we bought 2,200 pounds of coon to get enough. You know, gymnasium was just full of people, and that was all you could eat other than that ham. And let me tell you, it takes a lot of folks to cook and process 2,200 pounds of coon. And after Jennings Osborne came in and supplemented a meal, well, then we've cut back, now. So it's more like a delicacy rather than a full meal. And we're back to about eight or nine hundred pounds instead of 2,200. [00:11:17] And now—after Jennings Osborne passed on, well, we decided to keep supplementing, and so now we'll have ribs and—but just pork ribs and brisket. Cook brisket and all that, and it seems to work very well. If you want coon, you can eat coon, and if you would rather have something else, well, you can eat something else.

[00:11:55] JCD: How long do you keep the raccoon on the smoker?

SP: It starts—we took a day out of the cooking process under my suggestion about ten years ago 'cause it used to be a full week between soaking the pieces and the—thawin' it out one day, cut it up another day, and soak it in salt water or brine for a full twenty-four hours, then we would boil it the next day and then smoke it the day of the Coon Supper. And now we've cut one day out of that process now. With the lesser amount of coon and all, we can do it faster, but it's still—and it makes a tastier product bein' fresh rather than being—dragin' it on another day. And you smoke the coon for, oh, three or four hours in a heavy smoke. And then we'll take it all out of the smoker and make sure you still got a little bit of liquid in the bottom of the pans. You don't wanna scorch any of it on the wagon. And take—put on gloves and everything and turn each piece over in the pan so it'll smoke the other side until that—the meat will turn red or like maroon. Then you know that's good. Then it's real rich tasting meat. I like it when it's cooked right. And but there'd be three or four hours to each side in that heavy smoke. And then it may be shirtsleeve weather that day, or it might be snowing, but [*laughs*] that's just Arkansas.

[00:14:10] JCD: [*Laughs*] What temperature do you try to keep it at?

SP: After it's cooked or during the smoking process?

JCD: During the smoking process.

SP: You want to—we have converted tanks. I don't have a thermometer on it, but converted tanks that have flip-up doors and an expanded metal screen inside that holds these aluminum pans. And you want to not be able to hold your hand on that—on the outside of that tank for just—you know, if it's two seconds, that's—you wanna keep that warm. You don't wanna get it so hot that it boils the liquid out of the pans 'cause it'll scorch. And so it's all just a learning process, and over—well, it's over almost fifty years I been doin' this. And . . .

JCD: Yes, sir.

SP: . . . you learn a little bit as you go.

[00:15:22] JCD: I would think so. So you're—it's about an eight-hour smoking process, give or take?

SP: Yeah. We usually get through about the middle of the afternoon, and then you go home and clean up and get ready to go to the Coon Supper. Now after we get through with the smoking process, we have a dedicated tank up there at the gymnasium that is probably the world's only coon warmer. [*Laughter*] It's a four-wheel wagon with converted propane tanks. It has doors and stuff in it. It has burners in the bottom of it, and it's the

same way with that. You wanna keep it warm. And we put the rice and the sweet potatoes and the ribs and the brisket all in this warmer just to keep it warm. And that's another thing you wanna walk by, and it's according to the ambient temperature. You know, you want it to just be warm to the touch for—just—but not boil anything, like that, and it works very well.

JCD: So what kind of wood do you typically use when you're smokin' raccoon? Mr. Place, can you hear me? [*Beeping*]

[Recording stopped]

[00:17:09] JCD: So we had a brief interruption with our phone bein' dropped, but we were talkin' about—I had asked the kind of wood that you use to smoke raccoon.

SP: Kay, we use mostly oak, but we have a little bit of hickory mixed in because we use—there's so much smoke if you use all hickory, it kinda gets too strong. And but anyway, that's what we use. We end up usin' mostly oak.

[00:17:47] JCD: So to go back a little bit to your time with the Coon Supper, I know you've been involved in the cooking for some time. I think you'd mentioned around the time you were a sophomore in college. Before . . .

SP: Yes.

JCD: . . . that, were you attending regularly as a child?

SP: Well, the—they always, in the early years, always honored the football team and the cheerleaders. And so until I got outta high school, I was sittin' up there. And after I got outta high school, well, then I start helpin' serve, if that makes any sense.

JCD: Yes, sir. Sure, sure. So your first memories of the supper—as a football player, probably, as one of the honorees, one of the guests. And then you transitioned to cooking pretty early on as well, in the early [19]70s, is that correct?

SP: Yes.

JCD: So . . .

SP: Yes, that's correct.

[00:18:53] JCD: Yes, sir. And then I understand your father was very actively involved in the Coon Supper as well. Would you mind sharin' a little bit about him and his role in it?

SP: Well, he was the master of ceremonies for years and years, actually from the beginning up until—I don't remember if it was [19]89 or [19]90 was his last year that he was master of ceremonies. But he'd get up and tell jokes and sing a little bit, or maybe with a guest or something like that, and we—a lot of times we had local talent sing, and so we put up a stage—actually since we don't have a school there anymore, we got to leave the stage up, but every year we'd put up a stage for the

performers. And it was just quite an event. It took the—and course this is a very small town, and it just took basically all the people from the school district at—to help between the women cooking and making the side dishes and all that, and settin' up tables in the gymnasium for a thousand people, and puttin' table cloths on and plates and chairs, and all that. It's just—it was just a big, big event, and people just loved it to see folks that they hadn't seen in years. And it was just like a big reunion, I guess you'd say.

JCD: What's—what was your father's name?

SP: James Carrol Place.

[00:21:07] JCD: So your father was the master of ceremonies for decades, you've been very involved for several decades, and then you mentioned your son, Seth, is also involved, and he purchases the raccoon from the hunters, is that correct?

SP: Yes. Yes.

JCD: How long has Seth been involved in the Coon Supper?

SP: Well, since he got outta high school. He got outta high school in 2000 and went to Jonesboro, but he—I mean, he's been back here farming since 2008, I believe. And he's been helpin' with this. It's just what you do when you grow up in Gillett. You just help with the Coon Supper.

JCD: Yes, sir. Well, I think three generations of Places workin' on the Coon Supper is somethin' special.

SP: Well . . .

JCD: What do you think is the supper's significance to the Gillett area and to the state?

[00:22:20] SP: Well, so Seth has three sons, and they all help.

JCD: Oh, okay.

SP: And so you got four generations. [*Laughter*]

JCD: I love that. That's wonderful.

SP: Actually, the youngest one, Sam, he's still in high school, so he'll be sittin' with the football players. They still honor the Gillett—the old Gillett school district football players and cheerleaders. I think about—there's a large percentage of girls that are cheerleaders and everything else that are all from—some way connected to the Gillett school district, and they'll be honored, too.

JCD: That's great. So four generations of Places.

SP: Yeah.

[00:23:21] JCD: What would—through all your years and involvement in this, and I know your family's just one of many that've been involved with it and continue to be, but what do you think is the supper's significance to the Gillett area and to the state as we

come up on the eightieth?

SP: Well, my dad always said to help out with this because in, like I said, in 1948 Gillett was the recipient of school consolidation. And in most of my grown life, there's been some effort to get rid of small schools, and we try to keep the recognition of this Coon Supper and the small community and family feeling like that to help keep Gillett on the map. And it worked from 1948 to 2004. And finally, I don't know, farm economy or whatever, but it just got to where we were forced to consolidate. And it's workin' out okay.

JCD: Well, I think it . . .

SP: We still have the Coon Supper.

[00:24:58] JCD: Yes, sir. Well, and I think that's a testament to the—to you and others in your community to keep it goin' every year 'cause as you said, it's a lot of work, I'm sure.

SP: Oh, gosh. [*Laughs*] We was discussing with a banker friend of mine and—when the—we saw that the school was gonna consolidate, and we said—wondered how long will we continue to have the Coon Supper. And he piped up right quick and said, "Well, I'll tell you how long we're gonna have it. As long as you'll keep cookin' that coon because I'm not gonna cook it." [*Laughter*] We just keep cookin' it.

[00:25:51] JCD: What are one—and I'm sure you have several. What are one of your favorite memories of the Coon Supper through all your years of involvement?

SP: Oh, my—definitely my dad. He just had the gift of gab and could—he's kinda the—oh, he'd been called the Will Rogers of the rice fields, and that was kind of a nickname he had. He'd get up, talk, stumble around, and just tell jokes on people. And he studied the jokes and everything else in the wintertime before the Coon Supper and all that and try to get one that just fit a certain person, you know. And maybe somebody new in the community or somethin' like that. And he just—I don't know. He had a gift for doin' that, and everybody enjoyed it. And he knew the—oh, when you introduce, say, the representatives or politicians and that kinda stuff, there's a certain order that you're supposed to do, and he tried to do all that correctly. And when—even—when my mother wasn't kicking him under the table. And [*laughter*—but everybody enjoyed that.

[00:27:42] JCD: Yes, sir. Well, I've gotta ask—and I know you said earlier that you like the taste of coon, and you said it's a rich meat. If you had to explain it to someone in some other way, what would you say it tastes like?

SP: I been asked that a hundred times, and I don't know, it's, you

know, it's just a lot richer than any kind of beef or squirrel or anything else. And you just pretty well tell it's coon. But when you barbecue it and smoke it so much and make that deep, rich flavor, I think shoe soles would do. [*JCD laughs*] And it's—I like it and eat a lot of it while we're cookin' and all that. But once a year's enough. That's not like we have coon every Sunday dinner or anything. It's just an item.

[00:29:08] JCD: Yes, sir. Yes. Well, Mr. Place, is there anything else that I should ask you or you'd like to share?

SP: No, I just, you know, I don't know how long it'll keep goin', but we just kinda take it a year at a time now and it's—'cause it's a—the money made on the supper now is used for scholarships. And it helps out, helps a lot of kids goin' to college. And even kinda changed up some and we give the scholarships to kids goin' to trade school, and that kinda thing seems to be pickin' up some. And I just, you know, hope—we'll keep havin' it as long as we'll keep sellin' out the seats. And when it's profitable makin' money for scholarships, we'll just keep havin' it. And I guess when people quit buyin' tickets, we'll have to quit.

[00:30:29] JCD: Yes, sir. Well, I know we at the Pryor Center hope y'all have another eighty in you.

SP: Yeah, I hope so. I helped throw David Pryor in the lake at—

down at Monticello when he was runnin' for—I don't remember if he was runnin' for governor or for senate.

JCD: I know—you know, it's—I know exactly—I have images. I was a professor at UAM before I came to the Pryor Center. [*SP laughs*] And I had befriended our archivist. And it took him a few years, but he found photos of David Pryor getting tossed—you may be in the photo. And then there's a few of him smilin' holdin' his shoes. [*SP laughs*] He's already out of the Weevil Pond there.

SP: Oh, the guy standin' there with his back to the camera is me.

JCD: Oh, wow. [*SP laughs*] That's wonderful. That is wonderful.

SP: I brought it to his attention when he came to the Coon Supper that year, and he had on the same tie that he had on the day we threw him in the lake.

JCD: That is wonderful. [*Laughter*]

[00:31:53] SP: Of course, we weren't protestin' him or anything, it was just—that's just what you do when you go to Monticello. You get thrown in the lake.

JCD: [*Laughs*] Oh.

SP: But anyway, you look at that—I know the picture you're talkin' about and the picture—the guy that's got his back to the camera on the left side, it'd be the north side of Pryor. That's me.

JCD: I will look at that picture again soon. That's wonderful. Oh,

that's great.

SP: [*Unclear words*] I might get an annual out here and look at it 'cause I think it's in the school annual.

JCD: Oh, that's great. That is wonderful. [*SP laughs*] Well, I don't wanna take up any more of your time than I already have, Mr. Place, but on behalf of the Pryor Center, I wanna thank you for speakin' with me and also for your hard work and your family's hard work and your townspeople's hard work for keepin' the Gillett supper goin' after all these years.

SP: Well, thank you for helpin' us keep it alive. And also make a note I think the world of David Pryor, too.

JCD: Yes, sir. Yes, sir. Well, thank you so much. I really do appreciate your time.

SP: I enjoyed it. Thank you.

JCD: Have a good evening. We'll see you at the Coon Supper.

SP: Why, [*laughs*] thank you, John.

JCD: Yes, sir. Bye bye.

[End of interview 00:33:20]