

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

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**Gillett Coon Supper**

Seth Place  
Interviewed by John C. Davis  
December 5, 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 Seth Place on December 5, 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 Seth Place on behalf of the David and Barbara Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History. This interview is being conducted over the phone on Tuesday, December 5, 2023. Seth, would you please state and spell your 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?

Seth Place: Yes. My name is Seth Place, *S-E-T-H P-L-A-C-E*, and

you have my permission to use this interview.

JCD: Thank you, sir. So the Pryor Center collects, preserves, and shares Arkansas stories, and in a unique piece of Arkansas history, particularly in the last eighty or so years, is the Gillett Coon Supper. And, Seth, we understand that you and your family have played a vital role in the history of the Coon Supper in Gillett, and on behalf of the Pryor Center, I wanna thank you for sittin' down with me today and tellin' me your stories about the Coon Supper and its significance.

[00:01:55] SP: Well, you're very welcome. It's always good to have—to tell the story. And it's been somethin' that has been around for—this is the eightieth year now. And it started out as a—just a—some people gathered up during the Great Depression huntin' raccoons just for somethin' to eat. And then it turned in kind of a tradition. And then when it—when they started havin' it at the school, it provided supplies for the football team, letterman jackets specifically, and then once we didn't have a school anymore, well, it's just a scholarship now. But my grandfather was the emcee for many years, and then he just kinda—after I came—moved back home, I fell into the responsibilities of preparin' the raccoons. And then it kinda ended up with the responsibility of purchasing the raccoons. So

I'm the purchaser, I guess you'd call it, of the raccoons. We buy about nine, eight to nine hundred pounds. Used to be a lot more than that, but we have ribs and brisket as well now, so I don't have to buy near as much raccoon. And I'm sure there are those that appreciate that. [*Laughter*]

[00:03:25] JDC: Seth, how much meat is on a typical raccoon?

SP: I would say on a big one that you would be doin' well to get five pounds of meat off of it. On a dressed, normal-sized—I call it normal-sized raccoon, eight to ten pounds—you would get—dressed out it would dress out four to five pounds, maybe. I'm not real familiar with it, but it's—if you leave the bone in it's—and we cut it up with meat saw, then we boil it with vegetables and then smoke it. We have to make sure that—they used to just smoke it, but the health department wants to—when you're servin' wild game, they wanna make sure that it's done all the way through, so we have to boil it. That's been a—probably better than thirty years now that they've been doin' that. And it really makes it much better. You can make sure that it's tender. You know, it's a lot less flavor intensive to boil it first and then just put a little smoke to it.

[00:04:38] JCD: What's your first experience of the supper?

SP: Oh, first? When I was a kid?

JCD: Your first memory . . .

SP: Yeah.

JCD: . . . that you can think of, yes, sir.

SP: Oh, yeah, I—sittin' out in the crowd with my parents, or with my mother. My dad was always workin'. But you know, workin' as a server at the Coon Supper. Sittin' out there listenin' to my granddad tell jokes to a thousand people. That was one of my favorite memories. He was a—the—a charismatic guy. And he would have jokes written down all year to prepare for the Coon Supper. But yeah, it was a—that's my first memory. And then as I got older, of course, I got into the tradition of gettin' ready for it once we got in—outta elementary school and into high school, why, we got—the students at Gillett High School were responsible for settin' up the stage, decoratin', and all that stuff. So I was always in on the preparation for it the week leading up to it. And then once I got out of school, why—in my senior year we were honored—the—you know, it's an honor for the seniors. The seniors get introduced, football players and cheerleaders alike, and I think they even do other sports now bein' that it's just a scholarship. It's not particularly for the football team anymore . . .

JCD: Yes, sir.

SP: . . . specifically.

JCD: Well, I—it . . .

SP: But yeah—go ahead.

[00:06:22] JCD: It would appear that it's—the supper itself is important, obviously, to the Gillett area, but also to the state. What—if someone were to ask you, you know, what is the Coon Supper, and why do people come every year, what would—what do you tell 'em?

SP: Well, tradition, for one thing. It's—people that have come for years bring their children, you know. And it's—we have people—the politics, for one thing, were always a big part of it. For some reason it morphed into the big inaugural political event of the year, supposedly, and we would have a lot of—especially on an election year we would have a lot of representatives and then Miss Arkansas and the governor occasionally. I know Bill Clinton came several years when he was governor. Mike Beebe was always there. And then it was an opportunity to, you know, to shake hands with the people that you've elected. It's—it was pretty neat. Lookin' back—I didn't realize the significance of that when I was a kid, but looking back now, that was, you know, that was really neat, to be able to shake hands with someone that was eventually the president, and that was pretty neat.



JCD: Yes, sir. Well, and I think for people that don't live in Gillett, it—the Coon Supper's a wonderful reminder of our state being still pretty small.

SP: Right.

JCD: And that, you know, retail politics, knowing the people you're electing, still means somethin' here.

SP: Yes.

JCD: And so that's a special memory that you have that I'm sure a lot of folks have in Gillett.

[00:08:22] SP: And it eventually—you know, when I was a—either the tenth or eleventh grade, I can't remember, my grandfather passed away, and we were presented with a plaque. They called him Mr. Coon Supper, James Carol Place. And he was a—I've still got the plaque at my house. The stuffed raccoon has since deteriorated, but I have the plaque still at the house. And I remember bein' on—standin' onstage in my football jacket with my family bein' honored for his service. So it was—we got lots of memories. I mean, every year for twenty—you know, what is this, 2023? So it'd be right at twenty-four years I've been a part of the preparation for it. I'd say the last ten years I've been the—in charge of purchasing the raccoons. And we've gone from, you know, basically takin' a whole week to cook the stuff

from thawing to soakin' in salt water to sawin' it up and boilin' it and smokin' it. It took basically most of a week to do that. Now we can do it in two days. We're centralized. We're actually at the school doin' all the work there now 'cause there's not, you know—the buildings have been donated to the Farmers and Businessmen's Club so we don't have to—we can do everything there on site, and it's a lot more streamlined.

Comment [SRL1]: <https://www.facebook.com/p/Gillett-Farmers-and-Businessmens-Club-100068429408296/>

[00:10:11] JCD: So explain to me how you purchase the coon. You have hunters out there who kill the coon and then come to you, and you purchase? Is that how that works?

SP: Yes. It's—used to it was strictly local, pretty much. They would put a ad in the paper, and people would bring it in, weigh it, and—of course, dressed, fully dressed coons is what we would purchase. And you would have, you know, a vast array of different hunters and trappers. Now I'm basically down to two guys now that bring me all of it. And they—it's—one guy's a trapper, and the other guy's a coon hunter. And so I just—I pay \$1.60 per pound dressed, and I have 'em leave a foot, one foot, intact for identification so there's no funny business. But that was just—that's tradition, too. These guys, they wouldn't [*laughs*] try to do that to me. [*JCD laughs*] But in the past you would have some attempts to slip possums in.

JCD: [*Laughter*] I guess when you had the—runnin' the ad in the paper, some folks get some ideas.

SP: Right, right. [*Unclear words*]

JCD: So you've got a hunter and a trapper.

SP: [*Unclear words*] [*Laughter*]

[00:11:44] JCD: Well, that's what I was gonna ask is—your hunter and your trapper—are most of the raccoon comin' from around the Gillett area? Is that where they're gettin' 'em?

SP: Well, they're—one batch—one guy comes from Malvern, and he stays at the White River Refuge for a week to ten days and coon hunts, and he has that. So it's comin' from the White River Refuge, that guy's raccoons are. And then the other man is from the other direction. He's across the river at Dumas, and he is a trapper that traps nuisance coons at a huntin' club. So they're all corn-fed, healthy, [*laughs*] healthy coons. There's not any road kill or anything like that like some [*JCD laughs*] some people have tried to throw that at us before. But there's all kinds of good stuff gets started.

JCD: So are they being trapped and hunted right up to the supper, or are they . . .

SP: Yes.

JCD: . . . collected sooner and then are frozen?

Comment [SRL2]: <https://www.fws.gov/refuge/dale-bumpers-white-river>

SP: I request that they start procuring the coon after the first frost so that you don't have any parasite issues, and then—so that's—these two guys are—they don't bring me anything until after the first or second frost so that that's not an issue. And then they hunt all the way up—hunt and trap all the way up to the week before the Coon Supper if I—if they don't fill the quota before then. Last year I was done by Christmas. I had it all—all 900 pounds by Christmas, so they didn't have to hunt long for me. But they have a market for it elsewhere.

[00:13:45] JCD: I see. And so do you store it in a—do you have a locker or freezer of some sort?

SP: I have a—in the field house there at Gillett that used to be the football locker room, which is where we keep all our supplies now. The meat saw, the pot—boilin' pots, and all that stuff. And in there I have two deep freezes. And I fill those up. Both of those deep freezes filled up to the brim depending on the size of the coons and how they're arranged in there when they bring 'em to me. It's kinda like a jigsaw puzzle tryin' to get 'em [laughs] put in there. But anyway, they're—it's usually between eight and nine hundred pounds with those two freezers full. And so that's where I store 'em. And then a couple of days before the Coon Supper, we get 'em out and let 'em thaw, and then we

cut 'em up, soak 'em in salt water.

JCD: Are you involved in that process, too? So you . . .

SP: Oh, yes.

JCD: . . . procure and then you help out afterward as well.

[00:14:48] SP: Yeah, we cook—there's four or five, up to ten people that show up nowadays. Used to be, you know, fifty, but people have since passed away and moved away, and it's not as big as it once was. But we—yeah, we—it's the same crew every year, pretty much. We'll get it taken care of and get the fat trimmed off of it. And the main thing is just to soak it good in salt water and make sure it gets some of that wild flavor out of it, so to speak. And then when we boil it, we usually—in the past we've just used a standard vegetable broth kinda deal where we put onions and celery and carrots and salt and pepper or—and boil it and make sure it's completely done, tender, before we smoke it, but the last—I had a friend that was really good at cookin' crawfish, and he would always put lemons in the crawfish boil, and it cleaned the flavor up a bit, and he always had the best crawfish. And I asked him about it, and he said, "Yeah, it's the lemons. That's what I do different." So I got to, the last four or five years, where I put lemons in the boil also. And it really seemed to make a difference in the end product. I've had

several people, a lot of people, over the last two or three years that have said it's better than it used to be. And I said, "Well, I think it's the lemons." So I'm gonna [*laughs*]*—*I'm gonna keep—I'm gonna stay with that and keep puttin' lemons in it.

[00:16:31] JCD: Yeah, that's a good compliment from folks. And then . . .

SP: Right.

JCD: . . . are you and your—I know your father, Scott, is . . .

SP: Scott.

JCD: . . . involved in the smoking, is that right? Of the raccoon?

SP: Yes. So when we get it done, we have two big metal tanks, and we'll start a fire and get a good bed of coals goin', and then we'll scoop coals into these big tanks and get it—get the heat built up and get it smokin' good, and that's how we smoke the coons for an hour and a half or two hours and get it good and browned up and put barbecue sauce on it. And then it'll go into the warmer until it's time to serve.

[00:17:22] JCD: Well, it sounds like—and you mentioned earlier that there's tradition to the dinner or the supper itself, but it sounds like there's a lot of tradition and a lot of family connection with you and the preparation for the event.

SP: Yes, sir. Yeah, it's definitely somethin' that I'm proud to be a

part of, especially since we were able to—even at—you know, our school has been closed since 2009, and we've done it all these years since then with the cooperation of the DeWitt school district that owned the buildings at the time that still let us have all these things. You know, they've been more than gracious on that. And then now they've given the buildings to us, so we're able to have it indefinitely as long as we can continue to do it.

JCD: That's wonderful.

[00:18:16] SP: We've paid out a lot of scholarship money just from this Coon Supper event since—in 2007 I think is when the football team was no more and they—anybody that was in school in Gillett could go to DeWitt and play football even if they were still in high school in Gillett. And then in 2009 the school closed except for the elementary. It was still there.

JCD: So you're . . .

SP: And that's somethin' I'm very proud of.

JCD: Yes, sir. So your grandfather, your father, and you. Are there any other Places involved in the Coon Supper?

SP: Yes. My sons come serve and have been, you know, honored at the Coon Supper, bein' athletes from DeWitt. So they were—anybody in the—any Gillett kids that were goin' to school in DeWitt, and then now it's just the district, like anybody in the

district that wants to come to the Coon Supper gets mentioned.

JCD: So you're now in the fourth generation of Places.

SP: Oh yeah.

JCD: That's wonderful.

SP: And they're as big a part of it as they can be, being that two of 'em are out of high school—three of 'em are out of high school, and the other one's a sophomore, so they come back and help when they can.

[00:20:03] JCD: So when you're not—and it sounds like this is a job in and of itself, especially as we get closer to the event in January of every year—when you're not preparing for the Coon Supper in Gillett, what do you do for a living?

SP: Farm.

JCD: In the Gillett area?

SP: Yes. Yeah, we's—also generations—a generational—my grandfather was a farmer, my dad was a farmer, now I farm as well.

JCD: That's great. Just a lot of—you're steeped in traditions. That's wonderful.

SP: Yes. Yeah. I'm in too deep, but I can't get out. [*Laughter*]

JCD: Well, that sounds like a wonderful thing, Seth. It really does.

[00:20:55] What's the most challenging part of puttin' on an



event like this?

SP: We've recently lost our friend and our president, Pastor Chad Phillipp, that has been basically runnin' the show, you know, for years. And we lost him a while back this year. And he was a massive, massive part of not only the Gillett community, but the DeWitt community as well. He was a part of the athletic program. He was the announcer for the football games. He—I mean, he was just—there was not a finer man in ministry. And he's severely missed. And I think his contributions are gonna be hard to fill. His shoes are gonna be hard to fill, the organization and all that. We'll get it done, but it will definitely be more difficult, and there's a sadness.

[00:22:10] JCD: Yes, sir. I'm sorry to hear that. I've read—obviously we weren't able to speak to him for this project, as he passed—was it within the year?

SP: Yes.

JCD: And but we've—you're not the first person in our interviews to speak very kindly of him and his impact on the area.

SP: Yeah, he wasn't my pastor. He was the pastor at the Lutheran church. But he was every bit the—he was as big a part of my faith life as any pastor that I've had in my own church.

JCD: Yes, sir. Is there anything that you would want to add for

Comment [SRL3]: <https://www.essexfuneralhome.com/obituaries/Monte-Philipp#!/Obituary>

someone to better understand the Coon Supper, to better understand Gillett, the Gillett area, that I haven't asked about or we haven't talked about so far?

[00:23:14] SP: Gillett is a—has always been an unusual place. It's easy to overlook places like Gillett in the modern age that we live in, and it's—everyone's always willin' to help. And it's kind of a way of the past. And the Coon Supper in itself kinda speaks to that. The way it used to be, kinda. It's enjoyable to see people come back again and again and to have the ability to serve others and to serve the memory of those who have gone before us. I just—it's a huge part of my love for this part of the world down here. And I—it's changing, and people move away and pass away and all that stuff, but it's still Gillett, and it's still—I'm still honored to be a part of it. If you haven't—if you've never been here for the Coon Supper, it's certainly something<sup>3</sup> that you won't forget, I would think. And it's not for everybody, of course, especially the *[laughs]* the entree. *[Laughter]* It's not. But that's why we ended up havin'—cookin' other stuff, you know, over the years is it's definitely an acquired taste. But if you like it, you like it.

[00:24:57] JCD: So I gotta ask, what does—to you, what does coon taste like?

SP: It has a beef-type texture. It's a little bit fattier 'cause it is a fatty, dark meat. But it's—to me, it's good and if—I'd say smoked—like roast beef with a little smoke to it is what it kinda reminds me of. It's not—*[laughs]* I really don't—it's—in and of itself, it's just raccoon.

JCD: It's in its own category.

SP: Right. And it's similar, I guess—if you've ever had bear. Bear's kinda this dark and fatty. It's similar to that. And it's—as it should be. They're omnivores. But *[JCD laughs]* so it's all—it's a meat—it's a taste all to itself, I guess you could say.

[00:26:02] JCD: That's wonderful. Well, is there anything else you'd like to share that I haven't thought of or that you haven't discussed?

SP: I suppose that's it. It's just a bunch of country boys *[laughs]* wantin' everybody to come see 'em. So it is a—and we had—Marion Berry for years was a huge part. He would have people—course, you know, political connections and things like that, and he would have—bring groups of people and friends of their family. But we lost him, too, so it—there's a lot of memories there. But it's—there's definitely a lot of history here, too.

JCD: Yes, sir. Well, Seth, I wanna thank you on behalf of the Pryor Center for spendin' time with me today to talk about the Gillett

Coon Supper and your memories of it, your active role in it. And we certainly hope for another eighty years. We hope that more generations of Places continue to play such an active role in a unique Arkansas tradition.

[00:27:25] SP: Now, I will say that we're not the only, you know, families that've been in the—you know, on the field here for years and years. It—there's a lot of 'em. They deserve every bit the credit that we seem to get. But it's a group effort. It's a community.

JCD: That's wonderful. And really it's a wonderful, wonderful slice of Arkansas.

SP: Well, I appreciate you callin'.

JCD: Yes, sir. So we're gonna be down there for the supper, and I think we're gonna go for the pre—the Arkansas State scholarship fundraiser event beforehand.

SP: Right. Gotcha.

JCD: And so I wanted to get you on the phone today, but we may, if you're okay—and I don't wanna interrupt your work. I know you'll be busy. But we might try to get some photos or some camera footage or somethin' of you doin' your work or even the facility or somethin' like that when we get down there, if that's okay. But feel comfortable tellin' me if you're too busy, you

don't have time. That's okay. That's why it was important for us to chat beforehand.

SP: Yeah, that's fine. We can arrange that. We'll—it's kind of a mess up there now because they—the school buildings have been purchased by individuals, and—well, the parts that—we own the gym, the cafeteria, and the field house. And but the football field and the high school and the elementary have all been sold to private individuals, and they're in the process of cleaning it up and demolishing it, basically. So it's a bit unsightly right now. But as far as right there where we're—where we'll be cookin' at, there—I mean, pictures and all that is totally welcome.

JCD: Well, great. Good deal. Well, we look forward to comin' down, Seth. I've not been myself, and I've only been the executive director, well, for less than a year now. This is—it was on my top of my list of things for us to capture, and I'm just thrilled that you and many others have been willin' to sit down with us and tell us more about it.

SP: All right. Well, I appreciate you callin'.

JCD: Have a good one, Seth. I sure appreciate it. And I'll be sendin' these forms in the mail soon, and if you have any questions, feel free to just give me a call any time.

SP: All right. Thank you.

JCD: I appreciate you. Thank you. Bye bye.

SP: Bye. [*Beeping*]

[End of interview 00:30:14]