

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

University of Arkansas
1 East Center
Fayetteville, AR 72701
(479) 575-6829

Gillett Coon Supper

Drew Whiting
Interviewed by John C. Davis
December 20, 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 Drew Whiting on December 20, 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 Drew Whiting on behalf of the David and Barbara Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History. This interview is being conducted over the phone on Wednesday, December 20, 2023. Drew, 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?

Drew Whiting: Drew Whiting, *D-R-E-W W-H-I-T-I-N-G*. And I do give the Pryor Center full use of anything said here.

JCD: Thanks, Drew. I really appreciate it. So the Pryor Center is workin' to collect a topical oral history, if you will, of the Gillett Coon Supper. And we're coming up—we're weeks away from the eightieth Gillett Coon Supper. And I wanted to thank you for sharing with me your experience at the Coon Supper and your perspectives. And we're talkin' to a lot of different folks that have different experiences. Some are very involved, some are regular attendees that really are pleased to share their stories with us. And we also are using our KATV archive collection that we have housed here at the Pryor Center to give us a lot of great information and news coverage of the events from the [19]80s and the [19]90s in particular. But, wanna thank you for givin' us some time that you have today. For someone who is new to the idea of the Gillett Coon Supper, how would you explain it to somebody?

[00:02:35] DW: Well, I think it is a political—that kinda gets people in the door, the political part of it. The weirdness of tryin' to eat raccoon. I think it's just a bucket list. I don't—for somebody, especially from Arkansas, that they just wanna go to once. But you know, on my side, you know, with the scholarships then—it's

always been directed at the school, and then now with no Gillett High School, the scholarship part of it on my side. But yeah, just the weirdness of it, I guess, would draw people in.

[00:03:27] JCD: What would—what's your first experience of the supper? Do you recall?

DW: You know, I went to it, I guess, when I was at—I graduated from Gillett. So in 1989—I guess it might've been the 1990 Coon Supper, I was a senior settin' up—the football players always sat up on the top row. And I had some suspenders on. And Clinton was—president—or Governor Clinton at the time was goin' around meetin' everybody. And he said, "Wow, I like your suspenders, but Hillary won't ever let me wear suspenders." And you know, that kinda stuck in my head as far as a memory when I was young. And then as I got outta college and just started helpin', then that turned more into a role of being, you know, much more involved with how the supper goes now.

[00:04:39] JCD: So, Drew, how do you—what is your—one thing we're learning is a lot of folks who're involved in the Coon Supper have specific jobs to help ensure that it goes smoothly and successfully year after year. What has been your experience with the Coon Supper in that regard?

DW: Oh, so for probably the last—I don't even know. It goes way

Comment [SRL1]: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ensure>

back—twelve, fifteen years, I've done all the ordering, gotten all the food, get secured who's gonna do the plates, napkins, cups. I mean—workin' with Ben E. Keith, Sysco in the past, gettin' everything done. I help with the picking of the brisket, ribs, been getting the entertainment, and just kinda on the level of making sure everything's done. Kinda the checklist guy, I guess.

JCD: Sounds like it'd be quite a job.

DW: I have quite a few grey hairs. [*Laughs*] I'm not sayin' it's from that but [*JCD laughs*]*—no, it does. It gets pretty hectic there toward the end, but it always comes together.*

[00:05:56] JCD: That's great. And you mentioned brisket and ribs. When did the brisket and ribs begin to be served in addition to the coon?

DW: So years ago, we always had ham and coon. And then Jennings Osborne got involved, and he brought the beef ribs. And then after Jennings got sick and didn't come back, we knew we had to up our game. We couldn't go back to ham after he had those ribs. So Pastor Chad Philipp, being from Texas, he said, "Well, I think we oughta cook some brisket." And then we just threw the baby back ribs in. And so that's a couple-day process gettin' all that done. But it has helped, you know, keep people comin'

Comment [SRL2]: <https://www.benekeith.com/food/locations/mid-south/>

Comment [SRL3]: <https://www.sysco.com/Contact/Contact/Our-Locations/Arkansas>

because they do like the ribs and brisket.

[00:06:56] JCD: Are they smoked in the same tanks as the coon, or are they separate?

DW: Separate. Separate. We—now the coon is done at the school right there by the event. But we have a big rotisserie smoker that we do the brisket and ribs in off-site.

JCD: I see. Okay. Do we see more people eat the ribs and the brisket than the coon, or is it a roughly mix of thirds, there?

DW: You eat more of it. You know, most people are gonna try some coon, have two or three pieces. But if you wanna get full, you're probably eatin' the ribs and brisket.

[00:07:45] JCD: I see. [*Laughs*] As we said earlier, we're comin' up on the eightieth Coon Supper, and with just a couple interruptions, the pandemic and a few things like that. But it has been an annual tradition. How do you think—how does a tradition like this continue?

DW: You have to have some people that, you know, that really, really want it to continue. The history, the—you know, from the town of Gillett, and just lookin' back on people that went before us and how much involvement they had, it's one of those things you don't really want it to end on your watch, I think, as much as anything. There's not, you know, there's not many towns,

many small towns the size of Gillett that get the, you know, the national exposure, and that comes from the Coon Supper. I member one time they were—Gillett—the Coon Supper—I think it was when Pryor and Cotton were runnin' against each other, and we were on the front page of the Wall Street Journal right next to El Chapo whenever they caught him. So you know, there's not many towns that—in Arkansas that can say they've done that.

[00:09:12] JCD: Not at all. Not at all. And it seems as we learn more about the Coon Supper, we learn that there are a great many hands that are doin' numerous tasks to ensure that, as you said, it continues, and it continues to the—into the next generation of folks. What do you think is the supper's significance to the Gillett area? You mentioned the history of it and the tradition of it. Could you speak to that a little bit?

DW: Well, you know, it was so tied into the school. The money that raised from the Coon Supper, it always went to letterman's jackets, blankets for the football team. And as the high school closed and moved to DeWitt, then we, you know, started with scholarships, and it's just a part of the town. And it's not great that the school isn't there to benefit from it, but I mean, we still honor the kids that are from the area. So it's—I don't know. I

may have to restate. [*Laughs*] I think I got off on the question on that one.

JCD: Well, it seems like it's particularly important to the Gillett area to keep it goin'. Would you say it helps with the identity of the community after the school had been lost?

DW: No doubt. I mean, when you drive through Gillett, I mean, the sign says "Home of friendly people and the Coon Supper." So it's definitely the identity of Gillett. Definitely.

[00:11:04] JCD: Well, I've gotta ask you because I've—seems like this comes up quite a bit. For someone who's never had it, what does coon taste like to you?

DW: It's definitely a taste of its own. Not many dark meats like that almost have the hue of purple. It's so dark. [*Laughter*] But I can't—the guys do such a good job, and that's—with cookin' it. I mean, to cook 700 pounds and you got every piece, you know, fallin' off the bone, and they take time to get it cleaned up best they can, take every piece and turn it over in the smoker so it smokes on both sides. I mean, there's a lot of effort and time put into makin' it good. It's—I mean, there'll be—there's a lot of time invested in makin' it as good as you can. But it kinda has its own flavor. It's not bad, it's just different.

JCD: You mentioned earlier that you help with the—some of the

entertainment and music. What kind of musical acts do y'all typically have, and when did that start?

[00:12:26] DW: Oh, they've had entertainment for as long as I can remember. You know, there's been local entertainment. Like community choir's done it in the past. Had the prison band. For several years we had the prison band, but we got caught one time without entertainment because I think like three days before the Coon Supper the lead singer got out, and we didn't have any entertainment 'cause they didn't have a lead singer.

JCD: [*Laughs*] Oh, no.

DW: So we had to rethink goin' down that road sometimes.

JCD: And you said, "got out." Did he escape, or had he been released?

DW: He did not. No, no. He did not escape. I shouldn't've said that.

JCD: Oh, okay. He'd been released. I see.

DW: [*Laughs*] Yeah, he got released. [*JCD laughs*] Yeah, that was— it would've been a better story if he would've escaped. No, it— we just had, for the seventy-fifth year, we had Rick Crawford and Triple Nickel. And the last two or three years we've had a band outta Little Rock. And it's just kinda who fits. And I've had all these ideas of getting, you know, some of the people that've been on *The Voice* or Justin Moore when he was up and comin',

Comment [SRL4]: <https://crawford.house.gov/about-rick>

and then they get too big or whatever for our \$500 allotment.

So you know, it just—but Jason Lee Hale has been playin' the last two or three years, and he does a good job. He gets it. He kinda knows what he should be playin' and how, and he's worked out well. So it's not—we don't have a formula for entertainment. It just kinda ebbs and flows through the years.

Comment [SRL5]: <https://jasonleehale.com/>

[00:14:25] JCD: Out of the jobs that you have, and it sounds like you have several in terms of the logistics and everything, what's the most challenging part, do you think, of putting on the Coon Supper every year?

DW: Most challenging is—it's not the—it's not people. 'Cause it does take a lot of people, but they'll be people that you hadn't seen all year and—come around, and that night they show up with their whites on and ready to help and serve. You know, it's like most things, the logistics of getting stuff to Gillett, makin' sure that we have everything that we need and fresh, which is sometimes hard. But since we have the cafeteria now—the school donated that to the Gillett Farmers and Businessmen. And so we have access to more freezer space, more refrigerator. That was—tryin' to coordinate with the school and have our stuff in there and the school's stuff in there, that got to be tough logistically. But that make—it's a little easier now to pull off since we have

that building.

[00:15:46] JCD: I see. Well, Drew, is there anything else that you'd like to add or somethin' that I haven't asked you that I should? If . . .

DW: Well, I have—my daughter, who is gonna be a senior this year, my youngest, she's been helping with the coon part of it, I don't know, probably since she was thirteen, I guess. She kinda wanted to go over there. Well, when you're cutting the fat off of the coon—so after it's boiled, they take knives and they put it on the table, and the guys all stand around, and they cut the fat because, I mean, it is very, very fatty. And so we get that cleaned up. And she wanted to help. So she's a—I mean, she's pretty small in stature anyway, but she's standin' around this table with all of the guys and cuttin' the fat off. And that went on for about a year, and the next year she was there, and Scott Place, who I think you've talked to . . .

JCD: Yes, sir.

[00:16:54] DW: You know, been the head coon cooker for years. He'll usually try some out of the—just as it's boiled. And it really needs to be—the whole process, barbecued and smoked [*laughs*] to be good. But all of the—he's the only one that would do that except Sophia. And she would grab a piece and eat it off the

table. And those thirty guys standin' around cuttin' fat could not believe this little girl would do that. And so they always—I mean, they thought it was good that she would, but they couldn't believe that she did. But . . .

JCD: So she's earned her Coon Supper street cred.

DW: She did. [*JCD laughs*] She did. She makes some of 'em a little queasy [*laughter*] when she would grab a piece and eat it, but she always enjoyed it, and she always liked helpin'. But not many fourteen-year-old girls are neck deep in coon fat, I can guarantee you.

[00:17:59] JCD: So if you would, tell me a little bit about the family traditions of helping out at the Coon Supper. It seems like there are a great many multigenerational families and groups that've helped put this on through the years.

DW: Oh, absolutely. You could look back to probably when it started, and the core group of families that had it goin'—there's—they're still there. And you know, I don't—as long as it's goin', that won't change. It's like a [*unclear word*]. You don't want it to die on your watch. And that's kind of—you know, it just gets passed down, and that's what you do in January. And my family's always helped. My dad's still involved. He's seventy-three and still cuttin' up the coon with the saw, you know. And it's just—

it's a community full of people that like to help, and you don't get paid. You don't, you know, get any accolades. It's just that's what you should do. That's what your dad did, and that's what your grandpa did, and that's what you do. And that's not only the Coon Supper, that's just the community. Very, very helpful. And so yeah, I mean, it's—a lot of helping people in this community.

JCD: That's a wonderful thing. Wonderful tradition. Well . . .

DW: I think all traditions are probably that way. You gotta have people willin' to sacrifice their time to keep stuff goin'. And so, you know, Gillett's no different.

[00:19:55] JCD: Well, Drew, is there anything else you can think of?

DW: I'm actually surprised that I was able to talk this long.

[*Laughter*] I was like I don't—ordering supplies is not a—not great to talk about.

JCD: Well, your stories and perspective are valuable to us and appreciated, and on behalf of the Pryor Center, I wanna thank you for givin' us your time today.

DW: Oh, absolutely. I'm glad y'all are doin' it. Glad it's gonna be saved forever.

JCD: Thank you very much, Drew. I really appreciate your time, and I appreciate the work that you and numerous others put in every

January to make sure that the Coon Supper continues.

DW: Yeah, well, hopefully I look forward to meetin' you on January 13.

JCD: Yes, sir. I'll see you there.

[End of interview 00:20:43]