

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

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**Gillett Coon Supper**

Carolyn Berry  
Interviewed by John C. Davis  
May 3, 2024  
Fayetteville, 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 Carolyn Berry on May 3, 2023, in Fayetteville, 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'm John Davis, and we're currently at the Pryor Center. It's currently May 3, 2024. And we are discussing the Gillett Coon Supper. And on behalf of the Pryor Center, Mrs. Berry, I wanna thank you for sittin' down and talkin' to me today. And before we begin, would you please state your name and indicate that you're willin' to give the Pryor Center permission to archive this discussion and make it available for public use?

Carolyn Berry: Sure. I'm Carolyn Berry. I live in Gillett, and I'm absolutely—it's absolutely fine with me to have this recording published or used in any way that you see fit.

JCD: Thank you, ma'am. [00:01:28] So we're talkin' about the Coon Supper, and you and your family have a very rich history of the Gillett Coon Supper. And you currently—you live in Gillett? Around Gillett?

CB: I live about three hours—I mean, about three minutes out of Gillett now. Right.

JCD: Yes, ma'am.

CB: So I'm just out of the city limits.

JCD: And if—for people who aren't familiar, explain the Coon Supper.

[00:01:54] CB: Well, it was a supper that a group of men just, in fellowship, started as they would hunt the coon, and they would cook the coon and enjoy fellowship. And somehow, and I'm not sure how, it just grew into a community event. And it's—it binds our community together. We love doing it. We love—all organizations in town help with it and individuals help with it, but it's a community event that has just survived for a long, long time.

JCD: When—do you recall your first memory of the Coon Supper?

CB: You look forward, when you were in Gillett School District or the

Gillett school system, you look forward to the time when you were old enough to go to the Coon Supper. And that usually was in the seventh grade. You became of age for [*laughs*] the Coon Supper when you were in the seventh grade. And it was just a fun time because your football team was recognized and all the cheerleaders and all the people who—all the coaches who participated in that. And the football program, also the basketball program, they were all honored. And it was just kind of arriving at a stage in your life that you looked forward to as a schoolgirl.

JCD: Do you remember around that time when you first started attending the Coon Supper?

[00:03:49] CB: I don't, John, specifically remember that. I just remember that that was the time we got to go.

JCD: Yeah.

CB: My friends—their parents took us. Our dads were usually working, serving tables, and we'd sit with our moms, and hopefully girlfriends were close by.

JCD: One of those fun milestones . . .

CB: Yes.

JCD: . . . of youth.

CB: Milestone. Exactly.

JCD: We've heard—we've been able to collect other stories, and we're aware of the historical significance of the supper, particularly just for the state and its politics, particularly in the last several decades. What's the significance of the supper to Gillett, to the town of Gillett?

CB: I think it's just a source of pride. We get to show off our community and show off the people in our community, and we're—it's just a hospitality thing. It's just welcoming people in to see who we are and how we work together and how we live as a rural community.

[00:05:01] JCD: The supper's been going on for a little over eighty years at this point, I believe, and Gillett's a small community. How does a tradition like that continue? What does it take for a tradition like that to continue?

CB: It takes some dedication on a lot of people's part. Because I quite honestly was worried about it when we lost our school system, when we consolidated, because the school helped so much in preparing for it the day of and the day before. The home ec teacher, the students that were not in classes, that they were in study hall, they helped put chairs up, put tables up, set the tables. There was just a lot that the school provided for us. But somehow, people just stepped up, John, and took

control, you know. But there are three churches in town, main churches in town, and they all have people who bring chairs in. You know, the churches really—and the people in the churches really support it. And then there are two or three—there's the Farmers and Businessmen's Club that supports it who really is the—they're the ones who really sponsor it, I guess. And they have shrunk because the size of the town has shrunk, but there is still leadership there, young leadership there. And it—we do have a lot—we are very, I think, unique that we have a lot of young farmers that have stayed in Gillett and have families, and our churches are thriving and our—so that helps the community thrive.

[00:07:04] JCD: Yeah. So it takes people, right. It takes . . .

CB: Takes people.

JCD: . . . a community . . .

CB: And it takes . . .

JCD: . . . wantin' to work together.

CB: Exactly. And people kinda know their role. And as they are becoming too old to fulfill that role, they've seen their dads and their moms, and they just continue it.

JCD: I love that. [00:07:28] Do you have—you may have many.

What is one of your favorite memories of the Coon Supper?

CB: Gee. I don't know, but I will tell you what I've been thinking of as I've known I was coming to visit with you today. I've been thinking of my memories of the coon hunt, which was such a fun time. It was a—you know, it started with a coon hunt, and then the Coon Supper. So for years and years when I was growing up, and even with my children, we had an annual coon hunt. And it was always in the same place down in the Arkansas River bottoms on a—some land owned by the Truax family. And w—there would be dogs. Somebody—people would bring their dogs, and we would actually go out and try to watch them tree a coon. I don't especially have the fondest memories of doin' that, but it was a weenie roast, a campfire, just a lot of fun for kids.

[00:08:45] And there was—the first coon—official coon hunter that I know was Dr. Robert Whitehead. Homer Whitehead, Robert Homer Whitehead. They called him Dr. Whitehead, of course. And he brought his—he was a country doctor out of DeWitt, but he had lived in Gillett when he was first getting started. And he brought his coon dogs. And it was—that was just the most fun thing for a kid to get to do. The daddies took 'em. Usually the mamas didn't. It was the kids and the daddies. And it was just a fun time.

JCD: And it was—as—just leadin' up to the supper?

CB: Yes.

JCD: Was it pretty close on the calendar?

CB: Yes.

JCD: Wintertime?

CB: Yes, wintertime. Absolutely. Probably late fall.

JCD: So somethin' to look forward to in the winter.

CB: Yes, it was just . . .

JCD: Yeah.

CB: . . . a fun time.

JCD: Well, that's great. [00:09:40] What does—and I've asked everybody I've interviewed this question. What does coon taste like for someone who's never had it?

CB: Well, there's all kinds of descriptions. And [*laughs*] it just takes a lot of barbecue sauce for me. That's what it takes for me. And I can't tell you what it tastes like because I just smother it with barbecue sauce. [*Laughs*]

[00:10:11] JCD: So you had mentioned earlier there's a pre-Coon Supper gathering. Would you mind sharin' . . .

CB: Oh.

JCD: . . . what that is, explainin' it?

CB: Yes. Marion started inviting people in the political arena to come by our house. We—at that time we lived right across the street

from the school. So it was a good place for people to—who had traveled to stop in and get a refreshment and then walk over to the Coon Supper. So it kinda started as just a drop-in place for pe—for those who were traveling to come rest a minute and visit a minute with anybody else and just walk across to the Coon Supper. [00:10:59] And one of my most vivid memories is Dale Bumpers coming. And he was so gracious, and he just was so complimentary of first one little thing or other in the house. And I thought, "Oh, my goodness, he is such a politician. [*Laughs*] He's so good at it. He's so good at it." And walking over to the Coon Supper with him. But it started with that, and then it just kinda grew. And it was just an open house. And then eventually it outgrew our house, and we moved to a venue on Main Street. And then that became unsatisfactory, so we moved it out to our farm shop. And that's where it is—that's where they have it today.

[00:11:55] JCD: Is there anything else you'd like to share in terms of the Coon Supper or the community of Gillett and . . .

CB: Well . . .

JCD: . . . how it's related to the Coon Supper?

CB: Well, it's just—it just affords a lot of memories to me, and at my age there's so many that I love thinkin' about and how these

home ec teachers, these other teachers, how they just worked so hard to get ready for it, and then the community. It's just a good memory. It's very good memories for me. And I still go, and it's—I enjoy it still.

JCD: That's wonderful. Well, on behalf of the Pryor Center, thank you so much for . . .

CB: Well, you're welcome. I . . .

JCD: . . . sharin' these memories with us.

CB: I'm happy to do it.

JCD: Thank you.

CB: You're welcome.

[End of interview 00:12:48]