

**Oral History Interview of
Holtman, Bernie**

**Interviewed by: Andy Wilkinson
October 10, 2011
Anson, Texas**

**Part of the:
*Texas Cowboys' Christmas Ball***

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Interview Series Background:

This collection features interviews related to the Texas Cowboys' Christmas Ball in Anson, Texas. Topics covered include the traditions associated with the ball, the leadership within the Cowboys' Christmas Ball Association, music and Michael Martin Murphey, and the way in which the ball has changed over the years.

Transcript Overview:

This interview features Bernie Holtman. Holtman discusses his involvement with the Cowboy Christmas Ball in Anson, Texas, and his time serving as president of the association. Holtman talks about how he became involved with the event and what he sees for the future of the ball.

Length of Interview: 01:13:15

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Andy Wilkinson (AW):

This is Andy Wilkinson, it's the tenth of October, the year 2011. I'm here with Bernie Holtman. That was the receding voice of Monte Monroe as he left. We're going to be talking about a variety of things. Principle amongst them, the Cowboy Christmas Ball in Anson, but let me get some real basic things first. I have your address, [REDACTED].

Bernie Holtman (BH):

That's the mailing address, yes.

AW:

Okay that's what we need.

BH:

That's the mailing address.

AW:

B-e-r-n-i-e?

BH:

Yeah.

AW:

Is that short for?

BH:

Bernard.

AW:

Okay. B-e-r-n-a-r-d. Is there an initial?

BH:

A.

AW:

H-o-l-t—

BH:

m-a-n.

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AW:

Okay and what is your date of birth?

BH:

March 2, 1947.

AW:

And where?

BH:

Loma Linda, California.

AW:

Loma Linda. I think we talked about that maybe in your house. Okay, how did you get to Anson or Hawley?

BH:

I went into the military in the mid-sixties and went overseas and when I came back—

AW:

So Vietnam?

BH:

Yes, I was stationed at Dyess Air Force Base, and I met Red.

AW:

Red, that would be Suanne?

BH:

Suanne, that'd be Suanne, and that's how I got there.

AW:

So when—it was right after—was the war over with or your tour of duty over with? When did you get to Dyess?

BH:

1967 and then I went back—all of my time there was TDY I was never stationed in-country because of the airplanes. I was flying constantly and the twenty-one months that I spent there was all in and out TDY.

AW:

What flying? What was your job flying?

BH:

I was a crew chief on a C-130.

AW:

Ah, transport, big airplanes.

BH:

Yeah.

AW:

When did you get out of the military?

BH:

1970.

AW:

And had you met Suanne before then?

BH:

'68 I think it was.

AW:

When did the two of you get married?

BH:

It seems like 150 years ago, but really in reality I think '69. We were married at forty-two, forty-three years old. You kind of put it together, I don't know.

AW:

Well, I got married in '68 so I remember the math on that. So you were married in '69 and out of the service in '70. Is it correct to assume that you've been in the Abilene area since then?

BH:

Well, I got discharged. We went back to California, I went to school for a short period of time after the fact and found out that everybody was going to school and doing a lot of other things. Probably you being an educator where you are, you probably won't find this amusing, but you've talked about Vietnam and so forth and so on, anyway, I went to class one day, and I did a

paper for class. This professor gave me this paper back and I either got a D or an F, I don't remember. I went to ask him, I said, "Why?" I said, "Is it because of the way I put it together, the writing or what?" He said, "No, it's because of your content." I said, "What's a matter?" He said, "The content wasn't true." I said, "Really?" And we were in his office. I said, "Really?" He said, "Yeah, what you wrote about this, it couldn't be true." I said, "It is, every word of it is true." I said, "Well what makes you think it doesn't or is not true?" He said, "You see all those books up there?" And this kid was years younger than I was. He says, "You see all those book on the wall?" I said, "Yes, sir." He says, "All those books tell me that that's not true." Well, that was the wrong thing at the wrong time, and I told him he can take his place of higher education, his books, his PhD or whatever he had, and he could put it somewhere, and I left and I never went back.

AW:

During all this time period I was a police lieutenant, and so I have maybe a different point of view about education than a lot of people here at the university would have, probably a lot more a kin to yours.

BH:

But those are the things that drive people, you know, and he was probably a bona fide draft dodger or one of those that just didn't want to—you know.

AW:

What course was it?

BH:

English or something, I don't know. I wasn't much into school. I've got my own opinion about education, and education is for some people, but it's not for everybody.

AW:

Right. Well there's a difference between education and getting a degree, too. You can get educated all the time.

BH:

Well, life is education.

AW:

Right. So what did you do after you decided that wasn't what you wanted to do?

BH:

Oh, I did a little bit of everything. I started cowboying and doing that kind of stuff.

AW:

Really, where did you punch cows?

BH:

It was in California.

AW:

Where, what part?

BH:

Southern California. And then Red, a nurse by profession, and she was working for a urologist at that point in time. He decided he was tired of the California lifestyle, and unbeknownst to us that he was traveling around, they were looking for some place to go, to move to, out of that California stuff. They found a place in Northern Idaho, and they asked us would we like to go up there. And we said, "Well, what for?" And he says, "Well, I'm fixing to move my practice and I want Red to go." So we went to Northern Idaho one weekend, flew us up there, we flew into Spokane and then went down to Moscow where the University of Idaho is. The University of Washington was right there within ten miles of each other. We got a car and drove all around and just loved the country, you know? He said, "Okay, we're going to go to Idaho." So we picked up everything and left Idaho and I was going to work on a ranch or run a ranch up there, and I wind up working at a chemical company. The wheat farm up there in that part of the world is tremendous, and I worked on farming equipment and fertilizing equipment and all that kind of stuff for a year, and then we just decided to come back home, to her home which that was fine with me because I liked it here better than California. In about 1972 we moved back.

AW:

Is that when you started working in the safety industry that we were talking about?

BH:

No, I did day work and worked on some ranches and worked on some feed yards and that kind of stuff. I held a couple other jobs and then I went to work in a refinery in 1974, and worked there till it closed in 1997. That's when I got into the safety field.

AW:

Great. How did you get interested in the Cowboy Christmas Ball?

BH:

That's another funny story in itself. Red and I, even though we're married, we have our own separate lives and our own separate things that we enjoy, so forth, and so on. All of our married life we have allowed each other to do what we want to do. During that period of time, she liked

basketball. She played basketball in high school, so she'd go to every basketball game that was around or whatever. So one particular day in December, I don't know, it was in the late eighties, I guess, mid-eighties, I had gone deer hunting at Leuders, which is northeast of Anson. It was cold, it was about four degrees or something. I got home and I decided I didn't want to stay and watch nothing on TV, so I had never been to the Christmas ball. So I decided I'd get dressed and go up there. So I did and I went in the building, and it was full and there was people dancing, having a big time. I just stood around and watched. I just bought the ticket to go in. I was standing around watching all these people dancing and so forth and so on, and this young lady came over and asked me to dance. I said, "Ma'am, I can't dance a lick. I don't know how to dance at all." She said, "Yeah you do, you're lying to me." I said, "Well, I would just prefer to deny." So she kept coming back and kept coming back, kept coming back. I told her, I said, "I don't know how to dance." So anyway, she convinced me, and I took my hat off and got on the dance floor and she drug me around all night long. That was my first experience with the Christmas ball. Later to find out that she was a dance teacher.

AW:

The deck was stacked.

BH:

Yeah, and Red continued to go to basketball games, so I continued to go around to little dances and she'd be there and she'd teach me how to dance and so forth and so on. Then ultimately she gave Red and I dancing lessons and all of us would become very good friends, and years later on she told me, "Remember the first night of the Christmas ball and you was over there?" I said, "Yeah." She said, "You know, you really couldn't dance worth a lick." I said, "I told you I couldn't." So that was the first time I was there. I don't know, we went one other time, and of course, Red being from Hawley and knowing the people that were in the association, we went one time or something. Anyway, we got invited into the association, and that's how you get in is being invited by a current member.

AW:

So when did you get invited in, was that '91? Is that what I remember from lunch?

BH:

I think, yeah, that's probably pretty close. We were in it a year, and I think I got elected as president in '92.

AW:

Who was the dance teacher? What was her name?

BH:

Carla Bird.

AW:

Carla Bird.

BH:

B-i-r-d.

AW:

Does she still go to the dances?

BH:

Occasionally, yes.

AW:

What was it like? That's a pretty fast start in '91. You're president by '92.

BH:

Well, what happened was, in that period of time, most of the membership was probably in their early sixties or where I am now, which I'm sixty-four. So at that point in time Red and I were the youngest, or probably the youngest. You know, it was kind of time for a change, I guess. There was some talk about Michael wanting to come and do the ball and there was one of the other ladies that had tried to intervene that there and my opinion was that I think she kind of messed that up. But anyway, they asked me if I could maybe get a hold of it and I told them, I said, "Well yeah, I'll see what I can do." So I called Michael's agent or whatever, Art Fegan, I don't know if you know him or not.

AW:

I know the name. I've never met him.

BH:

I called him, and he said, "Yes, Michael would like to play there," or he'd asked or something, I don't know, and I said, "Okay, well maybe we can work something out." We started the negotiations and the contractual agreements. When I did that and kind of got all of that together, then they decided that maybe I ought to be president, so I got elected president from that point.

AW:

Now for the recording, when people are listening to this a hundred years from now, that's Michael Martin Murphey.

BH:

Michael Martin Murphey, yeah.

AW:

Were you up on the history on the Cowboy Christmas Ball right there at the beginning?

BH:

Oh no, it takes a good—you have to do research and study, like anything, you know. Over the years Red and I have done that so much that we have gone back, and the old timers and the people that have gone on, they're almost personal friends because we talk about them all the time. We know who they are and where they came from and those kind of things.

AW:

Well, I know we were talking at lunch and you had mentioned both you and Suanne had mentioned that there wasn't a formal way to educate new members, either people that come to the ball, about its history. Knowing now how much—I mean, I know now how much the two of you know about it that I just wondered if you had gotten some tutoring to start with or you had to dig it all out yourself?

BH:

Well, what should really take place is the member should tutor the younger people.

AW:

That didn't happen with you; you had to find it out on your own.

BH:

Well, we got it because they told us, you know, because the older people told us. But now the younger people, they won't listen to what you're telling them, and they don't try to—it's like they want to come to the party. They don't care if they know—oh, I went blank, but the girl that got married, the first name was Sara, and what was the boy's name? I know it, but I can't recall it right now, or Mr. Rhodes was the young proprietor in the Star Hotel and the Star Hotel is now, or the Star Hotel was sitting about where the court house sits now, which I'm going to write something and these are the things that you're going to have to know and learn and study and you've got to come to meetings and you've got to do these things from this point on, kind of a policy statement from new members so they kind of understand what they're required to know and do. Anybody that joins an organization should be interested enough to learn those things. Some people just, I don't know, they're not. Let me tell you, let me go back to Art Fegan. Art Fegan was Michael's business manager, and we had some pretty nice conversations initially, which contractual negotiations usually are and finally you're going to get down to the nut cutting. When we got down to the part where we're going to send you the contract, you know,

and the cost—and I think, when I first talked to Art, I think Art told me that Michael's typical fee was fourteen thousand dollars. I told Art, I said, "Well, I guess that's okay." I said, "But I don't—" Well, I said, "Let me horse track and put it to you this way, you got a thoroughbred that you think is a real runner and you want fourteen thousand dollars for this old horse. And I've seen this horse and it looks like pretty much a nag to me, and I'm going to give you five hundred dollars and that's the bottom line. Now somewhere in between we're going to have to come to an agreement." He went to running backwards because I guess he never dealt with anybody that swapped horses and done that kind of stuff before. Anyway, we came to an agreement. We figured it was equitable for everybody, and he sent me this fourteen page contract which I'd never seen before or anything like it. I thought, Well, this is not going to work. So I got a red pen and just started writing everything out that we weren't going to do and start writing anything that they were going to do. We came to an agreement, and during the course of the sixteen or seventeen years, there's been years that the contract was never issued and Michael and I had been living off of handshake. But then Michael changed, Art went his own way. I talked to Art a time or two, and he said, "You know, I've never dealt with anyone like you before." I said, "Well, that's probably understandable." He said, "You're kind of one of a kind, I guess, maybe not necessarily." I said, "Well what kind of—since you're going out of the business with Michael and these kind of guys, what are you doing now?" He says, "Well, I've gone into the circus." I said, "Really, Art? I thought you was in the circus business before?" So anyway, Art never saw him. We had the greatest relationship. I called him, he'd talk to me. We really enjoyed talking to each other, so it was a good experience, I guess, for the both of us.

AW:

This is good information. So what was the first year that Michael was there, in '93, year after you were president?

BH:

I think '93, yes, '93. I think it was '93.

AW:

Have you had to break in some new agents along the way?

BH:

Yeah, and I haven't changed my approach or attitude. The last one we have, what was his name? He's the modern kind of agent. He wants everything up front. He wants to know what you're going to do before you do it. You have to ask permission to do it, and I'm not going to ask permission to do anything. The first time I sent him the contract back that was bleeding red, he likely went into cardiac arrest, you know. He'd send e-mails that were kind of derogatory and demeaning, and I never even responded to them, you know.

AW:

Now is that the current manager he has or the one right before this one?

BH:

Well, he's changed again. It was the one—

AW:

Before, okay.

BH:

Right. Yeah, what was his name? Mike—

AW:

Drudge.

BH:

Drudge. Yeah, I called him Grudge.

AW:

Mike Grudge.

BH:

Well I don't know, he might have had a big head or I don't know. We just never clicked.

AW:

Can you talk a little bit about how the Cowboy Christmas Ball has changed in those years since '91 when you became a member, or even those years in the mid-eighties when you were first going.

BH:

Well, everything has to evolve a little bit. When I was elected president I told those people that before I accepted it, before they voted it or whatever, I told them, I said, "Look, in looking and listening and seeing what's going on, we're in a hole here and we're digging instead of climbing out and we need to do something differently.

AW:

And the hole was financial?

BH:

Everything, everything.

AW:

Attendance?

BH:

Attendance, the way we were doing things, you know. The thing with Murphey kind of changed things, you know. And most of these guys is farmers and ranchers, they know, I said, "Even you guys know that you got to change your crops or change these bulls. You've got to tweak things a little bit." I said, "My intent is not to change anything. My intent is to tweak it to make it better." We've changed the decorations a little bit because the decorations that were there when Red and I came in, and you could probably appreciate where these old fan type Christmas balls that was made in China or Japan and they fold up into a fan, but you take them apart and they'd make a Christmas ball or something. Those had been used so long that they were falling plum apart. Over the windows the ladies had some little white baskets with flowers in them, and they were pretty and cute in their day, but they had used them so long, and the heat of the building had deteriorated them, so we tweaked the decorations because we couldn't get that style of decorations anymore. Basically what we do even today is pretty much the same thing that was done when we joined. I guess you can attribute that to Red and I because that's the way we were taught. Some of the younger people wanted to change things and we said, "No, we can't change it." Since we got our historical designation, we use that as a tool to say, "No, you can't do that because now it's historical based on what was presented when it was done." We're still tweaking, but we're not changing anything really.

AW:

You'd think that something like the Cowboy Christmas Ball, being an historic event, that change would be something that would destroy the whole idea of it.

BH:

Right. Well this year with the drought in our country, the pastures are so dry, and typically every year we'd do cedar and put it over the windows and the ladies would decorate the cedar, but the cedar is so dry and all the needles and everything, there's a tremendous fire hazard with good cedar, but with bad cedar you've got a real bad problem. So I told Red at the last meeting we had, or I told him, you know, "Maybe some of the guys were thinking about the fire hazard, which that's good. Maybe we needed to change that so we're going to use barbed wire and the ladies are going to decorate. I'm going to make some kind of barbed wire something I don't know. They're going to decorate that. We're not going to be importing more of a fire hazard than we already had. So that we're not deviating from that so much, we're just tweaking it a little bit.

AW:

Right, that's what I mean. It seems like that's kind of the way that it would go. You mentioned just a little bit ago that Michael Martin Murphey's involvement had made a big difference in at least the operation of the ball. What has that been?

BH:

Well, it's helped us monetarily. You know, Michael brings people in and through the contractual agreement we get the first thirty-five hundred and then Michael gets the remaining, I don't know, ninety-one hundred dollars or whatever it works out for ticket sales. I think when I become president, the way the ball was headed that I don't think it would be the ball that was—I think it would be non-existent. I mean something that you really look forward to because the old people that used to come, the older people, they're all going on. The younger society of today, going to a dance or going to something of that nature, they've already done that by the time they're six or seven years old. That's nothing new to them; there's nothing refreshing. There are two—in our building there's no smoking and no drinking, which that in itself is you're playing to another crowd. Although a lot of people like the smoke free environments and they like where there's no alcoholic beverages. So it's kind of a tossup, but younger society, the society we're dealing with today, I don't think they like the old ways. I think you get some of the younger people that have gone away and then they come back, but the Christmas Ball used to be used like for family reunions. They would meet at the Christmas Ball for those three days and that would be a family reunion. They would put the kids on the floor and palate us to sleep at night.

AW:

Kind of like some communities treat Fourth of July as a reunion time as well. Was that reunion aspect of the ball still a factor in the eighties, the 1980s, when you started going?

BH:

I think so because even today, the whole family comes, and some of the families are still large, you know, and some come from here and come from there. A lot of the families that just live locally just come at one time. We've been trying to make it kind of—in Anson since we've been doing the meal and all that other kind of stuff, it's kind of become a social event, but the social event is not Anson per se, it's the people that are coming from far off. We have people come from everywhere, and we're selling tickets to the meal and they look forward to that because it's kind of an up close and personal kind of thing.

AW:

I want to get back to that in just a second. So Murphey, Murphey's fame, his notoriety, and the fact that people really like his music. Having him there at your event was a real shot in the arm financially.

BH:

It has not been a big shot.

AW:

Really?

BH:

Well, if we get the first thirty-five hundred, then we make thirty-five hundred dollars, but it takes about four thousand or more to put it on. So what we make this year just gets us enough to put it on the next year. It's very hard for us to do repairs and those kind of things because we're working on a wait till next year kind of thing. So it's important, and that was the contract thing we set was we got the first thirty-five hundred. After that, that will get us by, that will get us to put it on, and then if we have a halfway decent crowd Thursday night and Saturday night, then we might make, you know, two or three hundred more. But it all goes back into the big night one when Michael comes and everybody comes in because we're doing the meal, we have to do the decorations, we have to do the publicity. We can't spend a whole lot on any of that because we work so close.

AW:

And I think at lunch, again, you and Suanne were telling us that the building was completed in 1940.

BH:

1940, it was started in 1938.

AW:

Yeah, Works Progress Administration, CCC building along with a local contractor put it together. The same time they were doing CCC work on the swimming pool.

BH:

And the park area there. There's a plaque on the swimming pool, and I think that plaque was placed over there for that little quadrant that they did instead of putting an individual plaque on it, but you can look at the buildings, they are both similar the way they're built and everything.

AW:

Before Murphey got there, where did you go to get music for the dance?

BH:

Local bands.

AW:

One band play all three nights or different bands each night?

BH:

You know, from mid-eighties back, I don't know. And there really hasn't been all that many bands, you know, because we've gone back and researched that, too. So for the most part it's been all three nights, you know, and as you know, if you're going to play one night here and then have to move, well that you know, why not stay one place and play three nights instead of moving around all the time. And the bands that we've got, they've all provided good music and they've kind of enjoyed playing three nights in one place.

AW:

Has the music changed? Is it more contemporary country music in today's world? I know Michael Murphey takes some interest in trying to play some traditional things he's researched. I know the history of the ball and what would have been played at various times. Is your other music been—your other bands been that interested in the history of it or are they more contemporary bands?

BH:

Well, we've talked with the bands and kind of asked. We've had a good general discussion about the kind of music we want and the kind of music that they want to play and so forth and so on. Michael's music is kind of more contemporary in what he does because he does his ballads and things off his CDs. But he does a lot of just regular traditional stuff and that's the waltzes and the two-steps and the schottisches and the Cotton-Eyed Joe. That's basically what has been done there ever since Ms. Barrett wrote her pageant, and that's since 1938 and 1940. So the music has pretty much stayed about the same also, you know, the fiddles and the mandolins and the steels and all that kind of stuff. It really hasn't gotten too far out in left field. The only thing that I guess you consider very contemporary and maybe left field is we've allowed and we've encouraged the high school kids as a money making project, we've kind of worked or asked the local high schools would they like to participate in a way of earning money for FFA or projects. The only one that's really responded is Hawley. They've been doing it from thirteen, fourteen years, I guess. So late in the evening, you know, when the crowd's kind of waning and the people are kind of going away then I'll tell them kind of play the Bunny Hop or something them kids can dance to and they have a big time, so they kind of get a reward, and they let them do the chicken dance or whatever it is, I don't know. Although they participate in the older style dances, and they've done the Virginia Reels with us and all that other kind of stuff, so they get a reward for their work. And the kids over the years have been real receptive and they've gotten long dresses made and they've learned the dances and learned the Virginia reel and want to participate. It's not just a dance, and we don't promote it as a dance. We promote it as a family-oriented type event. When I wrote the application for the historical marker, it was also included

that it's an education and training event where we educate young people of Texas as to the old ways and how their parents grew up and so forth and so on.

AW:

Do you get some of those kids back once they grow up?

BH:

Yeah, some of the first groups that worked with us in the early nineties are now getting married, and they're coming back and doing the grand march as married couples.

AW:

Yeah, I thought it was interesting that the first event of the evening is the grand march with married couples from that previous year, I guess, leading the march. That dates back to the history of why the ball got started in the first place.

BH:

Yeah, that goes back to when the poem was written because Larry Chittenden was at the hotel. Actually, it was a wedding party, it wasn't a ball or a dance, it was a wedding party. Apparently they were doing a dance or something and he was taken with it and he wrote it into it as a ball.

AW:

So in some ways, he invented it out of a wedding party.

BH:

In some ways, yes. He kind of partnered with Mr. Rhodes because Mr. Rhodes had it, you know, he honored the young group or the young newlyweds, and he was staying at the hotel and everybody got invited, and then that's how Red and I do our little play thing, you know, everybody got invited and she was one of the ladies coming from Abilene on the stage.

AW:

Well tell us about the play that the two of you do. What got it started and what's the purpose of it?

BH:

Maxine Perini, which is Tom Perini's mother in Abilene and Tom Perini is a well-known cook.

AW:

Yeah, Buffalo Gab, great steakhouse.

BH:

His mother did a painting of the Cowboy Christmas Ball. She went one time and she was an artist, and she went one time and did a painting of the Cowboy Christmas Ball. And it's part of the permanent collection at the Grace Museum in Abilene. They had somebody that would go there. They have kind of a little seminar or something and people could come in and somebody would come in and talk about it. So this person couldn't do it this year or didn't want to do it anymore or whatever, they asked Red and I if we would do it, and of course, Red doesn't pass up an opportunity to talk and she said sure. So I just kind of went along for the ride, she says, "What are we going to do?" I said, "I don't know, let me just think about this." I wore 1800 period clothes and a six gun and a bowie knife. You know, I was dressed in that period. And she had on a gown. I said, "Let me start on this from the 1885 thing or a little before and run up into the fifties somewhere, and then I'll pass it off to you and then you take it from there." She said, "Okay." So I was the old rancher west of town that had the hundred million acres out there, you know, and was pretty scruffy and took a bath once a year and so forth and so on. I started my little spiel about there was going to be this party at the Star Hotel in Anson and everybody was invited and I was going to go and there was going to be ladies there. That would make it special and I would have to take an extra bath, you know, and I just kind of drug out the whole story intertwined in this line of bologna, you know, to make it entertaining, you know how that works. So anyway, I told the story up until about the 1950s about how the cowboys have come to town and they didn't get to see ladies very often and how shy they were, men would get to dance, and about them bringing the fiddle and the violin and all that by stage. And then Red took over and went from the fifties and brought it up current. It was only supposed to be about thirty minutes or so. After we got done talking and doing our thing, then everybody wanted to start asking questions and we were there for about two hours or a little longer, I don't know. It was fun to do, you know, to see the reaction of the people and those were people that had been to the ball and/or had lived in Anson and lived in Abilene and had never been. It was a way of communicating, you know, and putting a different spin on it. That's what we did.

AW:

How often have you done that?

BH:

Once.

AW:

Just once?

BH:

Yeah.

AW:

It seems like you ought to do that more often.

BH:

You know, I told Red, and you know, the building, Pioneer Hall, is in Anson, Texas, but the Texas Cowboy Christmas Ball doesn't necessarily have to take place in Anson, Texas. It can take place in Lubbock, Texas, or it can take place in Dallas with the same members and the same clothing and the same format, just in a different location where people could participate. I contacted Bass Hall and had gone down there, and their facilities aren't big enough. You know, they told me they'd like to have something like that, but they don't have facilities big enough to do something like that. I mean, in Anson, Texas, you're kind of—we want all family members to be able to come to the event. You could put—and people would probably pay a lot of money to come, but if you ask a lot of money than the kids are going to get left at home. So you're missing a teaching experience for those children. So we've priced our tickets way down so a family of five or six or eight or ten can come, eat, and not be broke.

AW:

And just for the recorder, tell them what the price of a ticket is.

BH:

They're fifteen dollars. Now if this event was to take place in Dallas/Fort Worth, Denver, Chicago, New York, they'd be sixty to three hundred, I don't know, whatever the market would bear. It would probably would worth every penny of it.

AW:

Well, several times in our short talk on the recorder this afternoon, and of course, many times before when you and I have visited, one of the things that's really struck me is that in some ways it really is not an Anson event. It's not an event that is dominated by people in Anson either running it or participating in it. There's a lot more interest in it from a lot wider area.

BH:

It's a worldwide event, really. You know, if you get down to it, like I wrote in the historical marker, this event belongs to the people of Texas. It just happens to take place in Abilene, but hasn't gone outside of those boundaries because it belongs to the people of the world because everybody in the world wants to know about Texas and the cowboys and the western way of life, and this is the way it's presented because we've had people from Russia, from Japan, and Hungary, and all over the United States. They don't understand how this happens or why. It's just something beyond—well, you've been there. I couldn't tell you as many times as we have talked, and now you understand it. Two years ago I couldn't have told you, "Andy, this is what takes place and this is how it works." You couldn't envision it.

AW:

Right, you have to see it.

BH:

This is just one of those things because when you walk through them front doors going into Pioneer Hall, you're not walking in 2011, you're walking back in history. You see people in modern dress and you're thinking, "Where did they come from?" But you are looking back into history. The windows on the side of the building are not made for looking out, they're made for looking in.

AW:

Well put. Does that explain something that I found a little interesting was how little embrace there is by the community for this event. You know, as an outsider you'd think, "Well gosh, everybody in town's got to be just tickled to death." It seems like that's not necessarily the case.

BH:

Well, in order to explain that I'm going to have to be brutally honest.

AW:

Please.

BH:

And people, I don't know if people are going to hear this or see it or read it or whatever, but unfortunately churches, and probably that's a wrong statement, but anyway, let me resay it. A lot of people believe what they're told, not necessarily what they see. They're driven by their upbringing; they're driven by other people that's in their specific little clique if you want to call it that. So they get the tunnel vision. So you get three, four, or five entities all working against each other, and you can make something very bad out of something that is really good. Okay now let's take Anson, Texas. Population of about 2,500 in its heyday, or maybe 3,500 I guess. You have Church of Christ, you have Baptists, you have Methodist, Presbyterian, Hispanic, and you have the black community. Now, I'm not saying anything against any of those people, but you have all of those fractions that are fighting against each other and one doesn't believe what the other one believes in, therefore, we're not going to go over there and do that. A lot of people that are in those groups that manage, dictate, or rule a community live outside the community. You know, the affluent people don't live in the community, they live outside the community or outside the city limits, but the dictate what goes on in the city.

AW:

So the people with money that live outside of town and don't want dancing at the Christmas Ball still have an impact.

BH:

Right, the book, *No Dancing In Anson*, I started reading it. I bought it and it was written by an outsider, and I can't recall his name or where he was from. He came in and wrote that book because a fraction in Anson couldn't see why there couldn't be no dancing and a fraction didn't want no dancing. There was some pretty serious business going on during this timeframe. People were killing each other's dogs, they were burning down outbuildings, and they were threatening each other.

AW:

And what years was this?

BH:

Mid-eighties, and then you have to go back—I started to read it and I put it down, and This is hypocritical, this this bigoted, I don't want to read this garbage. I put it away and probably nine or ten years later I picked it up and read the whole book, and I'm not from Anson, and I didn't realize all that stuff was going on. And then after they finally passed it—the dancing thing—

AW:

Which allowed dancing.

BH:

Which allowed dancing, but you had to have a permit and you had to go by the guidelines and the Christmas Ball wasn't grandfathered. You had to get a permit which cost \$25, three days before the event. You had to go by all the guidelines. But then after they got that passed, they only had one or two dances for the kids in Anson and went away. They still to this day, if they want to have a dance or a prom or something, they go to Abilene.

AW:

Really, even though it's legal now?

BH:

Even though it's legal.

AW:

So it's legal, but still frowned upon?

BH:

Oh yeah, oh yeah. And the older—not the older people, but the younger people that were children now are grown up and are adults, they're the same way that their parents were. The law's never going to be supported by the community of Anson. It's a shame because there's

some economic gain there to be made, but it just won't happen. Red and I have been trying for twenty years and I decided several years ago just to move on. It's unfortunate. And I think what happened when Pioneer Hall was built, Pioneer Hall was built way outside the city out there on the little hills. It was outside the city limits so we don't have to worry about that old building down there, you know. And the city grew and it finally got Pioneer Hall inside of it.

AW:

So now they're stuck with it.

BH:

You know, in the early days, it's like anything. There was some rowdiness that went on in there and Jones County is dry, but everybody would import their spirits of whatever kind. But we couldn't control what went on outside. We only could control what went on inside. There's been some things the church has blown out of proportion because in the twenty-seven years I've been around, I've never seen nothing, you know. The horror stories that you hear, I've never—

AW:

There were certainly no horror stories going on the night I was there last year. It was a family event, and I've seen church picnics a lot rowdier than that. It was really quite a nice thing.

BH:

Not only being the president and the window washer and the lightbulb changer and everything, I've been security and the comp. Early on when I was president, and even before, it was not unusual to see two DPS guys, county sheriff, and city police standing by the back door or the front door. We haven't had that in years. I've only had one incident where I had to throw somebody out of the building and the police know if I call them I need them. I don't make no bones about it. Either you're going to go by my rules or you're leaving my building, pure and simple. I'm going to call the cops.

AW:

You know, I would think the rules that you operate under in the first place would discourage a lot of trouble makers. I think it would be good to describe for the recording what are the rules having to do with the dancing and dress and so forth. You've already mentioned no smoking and no drinking.

BH:

Yeah, there's no smoking and no drinking. We have to watch that pretty close because some people will try to come in with a coke can or something and we tell them, it goes in the trash right here. All ladies have to wear dresses. It can either be a modern-type dress or a long period

type dress or a long evening type dress. In the rules it says no split skirts, but we really have to qualify that because some type skirts have a split in them to allow walking.

AW:

What you're meaning is pants, dresses—

BH:

Pants, dresses, or culottes which we're familiar with. A lady can't be on the dance floor in pants at all. If we see a lady on the dance floor in pants, they're either asked to leave the dance floor or we try to accommodate them with a skirt or something where they can enjoy the evening. For the men, they can't wear their hats on the dance floor, period. They can't hold them, they can't carry them. You've got to check your hat, and the reason why is because in the old days the men took their hat off in the presence of ladies, and we encourage that today. That's the only rules unless you're outlandish or anything else, you can have a big time with us, but it's pretty well clear if you've been out of hand, then you're getting out of the building.

AW:

A lot of people, though, dress in period costume.

BH:

They do, yes.

AW:

That's something quite different.

BH:

Yes, and each year we have more and more and more. People can kind of get out of their straight, everyday life and go back to someplace that maybe they've never experienced or would have liked to experience. Some of the guys do it and some don't, but more often than not the ladies will wear the gowns. Some of these gowns are very elaborate. You know, twelve hundred bucks is not much probably for some of these gowns that I've seen the ladies wear.

AW:

That's pretty remarkable.

BH:

What astounded me the first time I went—and there was no period clothes in the mid-eighties when I was deer hunting. But what amazed me as much was the mass of color and movement and the building was full. And that's today, it's the same way, it's the color and movement, it just is amazing.

AW:

Yeah, I noticed in that film from 1953, no one was in period costume, other than 1953 period costume.

BH:

Yeah, and most of the guys were wearing white shirts and ties. The ladies were wearing church dresses. Red told me one time, she said, "All the guys are wearing khakis. They're wearing khaki pants and white shirts." I said, "Red, you've got to figure what these guys did. Most of them, that's all they had. They had worn out khakis to work in on the farm or the ranch or wherever they went, and they had new khakis to wear for Sunday." My grandfather, his Sunday dress was starched bib overalls and a khaki shirt.

AW:

Yeah when I was a kid only kids wore jeans, men wore khakis.

BH:

Khakis, yeah.

AW:

And white shirts. What is next for the ball? It seems like it's a real struggle to keep—that's an old building and to keep it in shape, especially when you don't have a reserve of cash built up to tide you over from year to year. What's the future looking like for the ball?

BH:

Well, I'd like to say it's grand for the next forty, fifty, or sixty years, but at this point in time you're only looking ahead a year at a time. The building, the menial jobs, the repairs—in the past I've tried to do them, whatever, with the help of the other members if they were interested or wanted to help. Some of the repairs we've had to contract out because it's just beyond our knowledge base. We'd like to put a new roof on it and redo the floor. Probably between those two, we're probably looking at about forty thousand dollars. This day in time that's not a large amount of money, but you just have to find the right person or persons or groups who want to help us in that regard. We struggle with that because we don't know how to do that. We just don't have the means, we don't know how to get to those kind of people. The other thing is is the membership. The society's changed and the attitude's changed. People today are more mobile. The Christmas Ball was a highlight of the year. The Christmas Ball not only celebrated the season, but it celebrated the renewal of friendships and the loss of life and love and all those things. Society, they don't think like that. They've kind of drifted away because we're more mobile, we have more things. We have all them cell phones and all them little widgets. We have all that when we're six or seven years old. By the time we're twenty-one, we've got spaceships and we can go to the moon if we want to. Holding and preserving history is very difficult.

AW:

Especially in an active way, a thing like Cowboy Christmas Ball.

BH:

It's something you only do once a year.

AW:

Well, and it's not something that lives in a history book, it actually lives in the Pioneer Hall. That's also a very different kind of thing.

BH:

And it lives in the hearts and souls of people, and if those people go on, then that's a loss.

AW:

Well, that's a thing to ask about also. You and Suanne were the younger generation when you got involved, you as president, and Sue Ann as treasurer and secretary and so on. Is there a generation coming up behind you now ready to take over?

BH:

Red and I are at the age now that the older people were when we went in. So now the people that are coming in, what few members we have are our age when we went in, you know, mid-thirties, early forties. Yeah, it's difficult. The people that are in there, I think they see the worth and they want to do something, but they're wound up in their own lives, too, because they have a hard time prioritizing things and what is important. We all live in importance in our daily lives, but what do we want to do a hundred years from now? So you have to be able to look and live outside the box, you have to have some kind of vision as to what's going on. Then I came up with a suggestion or idea that if something was to happen to the ball, and it's in the bi-laws that the building and the property and the monetary value, whatever, would be passed on to a non-profit organization or something of that nature. And then two or three years ago now, I came up with the idea of, which was well-received at that time, we would pass Pioneer Hall onto Texas Tech University for maybe relocation and revitalization, you know something, and still used. I mean, there's a lot of things that I could see that it could be used for. It could promote history. It'd just have to be relocated. Texas Tech may not be the only recipient, but it kind of fits here with the collections library and so forth and so on.

AW:

Yeah, and we have the Ranching Heritage Center.

BH:

Red and I, since we'd talked about that and we've discussed it, and we've approached Tech, we've come back up here, and there was place out there that we think it'd fit very nicely and fit in the holiday season because now you have this big huge building. You could actually have a ball out there and you could generate money for the school.

AW:

Oh yeah, I know for my daughter's work out there, they'd love to have a place where they could have a large crowd like this. They don't currently have one.

BH:

That's such a huge building. You could do things at any given holiday for both the Heritage Center along with—it fits with the buildings that are out there, it really does because the Ranching Heritage starts with the dugouts and goes all around to the modern ranching kitchens and forth and so on. It would work, it would really work.

AW:

Plus I don't think the ranch has on its campus any CCC buildings which would be a nice addition. I don't think any of the things they have there date from the CCC.

BH:

Right, yeah. It's just a cool old building. We were in there the other day when we did our dedication for our historical marker. I did the final presentation and spending so much time in that old building alone working, it depended on the heat and the humidity and the outside temperature. That old building moves and pops and cracks. You spend time in there and it talks to you, you know. Then when you get tired, if you go up and sit on the buzzard's roost and look out across the floor, eventually you would hear the music and see the dresses and the color. And it wouldn't talk. The day I did the presentation I told everybody to be real quiet and close your eyes and then the building wouldn't talk to us. We were in there the other day having a meeting and it was popping and cracking and moving and whistling. It's pretty unique.

AW:

That is for a fact, that is for a fact. Well, what have I not covered that we need to talk about?

BH:

I don't know, ask anything else you want, I don't care.

AW:

I mean, there will be more things to talk about as we dig a little further into it, but I think this is a good place to get it started. One little quick thing, your last year as president was two years ago, is that right? One year ago?

BH:

Two years ago now, I think. I think this is going on the third year. It's been a struggle for them guys, they don't—I don't know, I can't say that their heart's not into it. Their heart just doesn't know. I think they all want to do a good job, and they all try, they can't see and they don't feel. It's nothing against the individuals, you know. You know as well as I do that sometimes there's somebody that just, I don't know, I don't want to pat myself on the back. But that was why I quit because in anything you do, somebody has to learn something and sometimes the only time you can learn is to walk away. It's kind of like taking the little child that can't swim and finally you just pick them up and throw them in. The guardian angels are watching them and standing there, but you're going to have to swim. I don't think I can let them fail.

AW:

It doesn't look like you and Suanne are going to do that. You're still pretty active.

BH:

I'm active in a lot, but I do most of mine now that's not highly visible. You know, they didn't know when I was writing the historical marker. They knew that it was probably—but it took me fifteen years to do that. I knew that there needed to be something done, but number one, I didn't know how to do it. I didn't know how to approach it, so I stood off out there and nothing ever happened and it was time to swim. I got on the websites and got all the information and I just started gathering everything that Red and I had gathered over the years. I don't know, the document when I submitted it was—I don't know, sixty something pages of photographs and documents and letters and all those kind of things. I got letters from everybody, and when I presented it to the historical commission in Anson, they said that they had never seen anything done like that before. There was a window when you submit those historical things, it has to be submitted like from December 15 to January 5. There's like a month that everything has to go, it has to be submitted. It has to be submitted to your local historical commission, and then they have to, in turn, review it for its worth and then submit it to the State Historical Commission. I met all those requirements and they said, "You're looking at a year. You're looking at no telling how long." So anyway, I submitted it, the historical commission in Anson put their blessing on it and sent it to Austin. Within forty-five days, we were told that we were granted historical recognition. I don't even think it was that much, thirty days or something. The thing I wrote, and continue to write, remembrances, and you've probably read some of them maybe. There's nothing really written. There's nothing. Although we have a historian, but the historian has not done anything. I just started writing. At the end of each year I just started writing notes, you

know, making notes about what I saw and what I heard and what I felt and what I thought, disappointments and highlights and so forth and so on. And then it evolved into describing the members, the spouses and what they did and how they did it and their quirkiness. It's not meant to be critical of anybody. I write and see everything black and white. You know, it's just the way I am. Anyway, so then that evolved, and then I started writing about the people that are coming from everywhere that I don't know, but here they are. They're just people. Well, that turned out to be, I don't know, forty pages, fifty pages or something. It's just some dummy's notes. I'm no writer, I don't know English. It's just the way that I see and feel things.

AW:

I've got to tell you though, Bernie, the things that you write like that are the stuff that other writers have to have to write whatever they're going to have to write. There's a big difference as that a professor that was on the wrong side of the argument still noted, there's a difference between content and form. The content is really important, he just happened to get it wrong. The content's the key. You can be awfully polished, but it's got to have something to say.

BH:

I didn't do it because of any self-recognition, I wrote it because it's something that if we didn't write it, it's lost. It's just like if we don't sit down and talk, we don't—the indigenous peoples didn't have many ways of writing so they told stories to each other. If they didn't have that, the indigenous people would have nothing. They don't know where they came from, nothing. That's why I did it, you know, just because. In there did you read the one about, what was his name? What was that guy's name? They called him Charming William or something.

AW:

Oh yeah.

BH:

Oh yeah. There's so many characters, and what bothered me the most is this has been going on since 1885. There's been so many characters, there's no names. People from 1885 has been carrying this on and cherishing it and moving it forward and there's no names; there's nameless faces.

AW:

Is Charming William the fellow who was there last year, or he's an earlier figure?

BH:

He's earlier.

AW:

Well, there was a fellow there last year who was very interesting who was all dressed up and came and danced with everyone. Suanne pointed him out to me. He comes from Dallas or Fort Worth to the dance, but he's always dressed up. I'm as really impressed.

BH:

Is he the one from Austin?

AW:

Maybe Austin, yeah.

BH:

What is his name? He's in there; I don't recall his name right now. He always brings, I think—I don't know if it's his wife. I don't know the relationship, could be. The way they'd dress looked like a throwback to German descent. They come from Austin, and they dance and have a big time. I can't recall his name. Yeah, he's a character, but Charming William, he was a real stand out and I'll tell you this story because it probably needs to be on here, but he was from the Austin area and I wrote about him in remembrances, and every year the ladies would get to clamoring and chattering about Charming William. "Is Charming William coming?" I got to thinking, Who is this guy?

AW:

And what year would this have been?

BH:

Oh, this was early on when I was president, probably '93, '94, in there somewhere. But anyway, you know, they're talking about Charming—and I couldn't put a name with a face or nothing. I'll try to do it the way I wrote it was, Who is this guy, where does he come from, what does he look like? All the women talk about him. Is he like Elvis Presley, George Strait, Theodore Roosevelt? This guy must be huge in stature and must be an iron jawed dude and all this other kind of stuff. He's got it all because that's all the women talk about. So Charming William shows up. I want to see him; I want to see what he looks like. I got to be like this guy. Where does he live? I'm going to go there; I'm going to find out what he does. I want to be just like him. So anyway, Charming William shows up, and I find him, and the women are all around him clamoring and hugging and everything, you know, having a big time. I could get to where I could see the guy and I can't see him. He's in amongst these women, and he's shorter than most of them. He has long gray hair and a ponytail and four or five rubber bands on that pony tail hanging down across the back of his flannel shirt, plaid flannel shirt. His britches are clean and nice. They're a little bit too short. They almost touch the top of his boots, but he's well liked. All the ladies loved this guy. So I go on and enhance it a little bit, but when it gets right down to it,

William didn't have a significant other. William would dance with all of the ladies that had lost their spouses. So he came and had a good time and offered conversation and offered to dance with the ladies and everything. So he was Charming William. The whole spectrum is full of characters.

AW:

That's pretty amazing. I'm really glad you're writing those down. You're not done with them, are you?

BH:

Well I thought I was, but now it's become more of a living document, and every year I—it's become harder, too, because now you're writing about people that are no longer with us. Like I said earlier, a lot of these people have become close friends, so now you're writing about close friends. Another thing that I've started doing because I'm a loner, you know, up to the point to sometimes I can't stand myself. But in history, people need to know who's who and what they did. So in the building, you've seen the pictures of the ladies in their little corsages or their little broaches or whatever, Red started that. It's kind of like a little monument to the ladies. For the gentleman, they do the boots and the wreaths. So what I started doing, I don't know, four years ago or three years ago, time gets away from you. I started writing little stories about the individuals, so people could relate to them and they could see the boots. Oh yeah, there's a pair of boots and here's a picture of a lady, but you can't put the picture of the lady because there's no pictures of the men. So I started doing stories about their significance and where they play in here and what they've done.

AW:

Yeah, I wish somebody had been doing that in the 1880s and nineties.

BH:

Yeah, but people don't look. You know, this was probably only a one or two year thing at the hotel. Mr. Rhodes might not have thought this had been going on a hundred and twenty-six years later.

AW:

Well, I guess Chittenden really did do his remembrances. That's where the poem came from.

BH:

Yeah, he did ranch verses that had some pretty good poems in them, and that was all he did. Then he went on and moved to Bermuda and did a Bermuda thing, but I guess, you know, that would be kind of like a person that does a one-hit song, you know? Then they just go away.

AW:

That poem definitely struck a chord because it's a real favorite, even today.

BH:

Even when it was put to music, it was sung by the cowboys at Christmastime at the Plains when they were watching after their cattle and stuff. It's had a great impact. All we do today is a history of our county and our state. Who would have ever thought I ever would have gotten involved just by telling one lady I can't dance. It's kind of a crazy thing.

AW:

It is odd how a little thing will have an awfully big impact.

BH:

Yeah, well I guess you kind of roll around until you find a niche or something.

AW:

All right, well let's put a fork in it and call it done for today, but I know there's going to be more that we would like to talk about, and we'll get a chance to do that.

BH:

Yeah, there's probably a whole lot more stories.

AW:

Well, I'd like to tell them with that recorder and get that building talking to us.

BH:

Yeah, it would be nice if we could figure out some way to get that building up here.

AW:

Yeah, well we'll get to working on that.

BH:

I hate for the University of Texas to get it.

AW:

We'd really hate that. Thanks, Bernie.

BH:

Thank you.

End of Recording



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