

**Oral History Interview of
Kris Nylander**

**Interviewed by: Curtis Peoples
April 16, 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 Kris Nylander of Hawley, Texas. Kris talks about her interest in sewing and making costumes and her involvement with the Cowboy Christmas Ball in Anson. Nylander also discusses her interest in history and the future of the Cowboy Christmas Ball.

Length of Interview: 00:29:56

Subject	Transcript Page	Time Stamp
Background information	5	00:00:00
Period costumes	8	00:07:50
Living history	10	00:12:28
Participation and growth	13	00:19:15

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Keywords

Anson, Texas, costume design, cowboy poetry, dance halls, folklore and traditions, holiday traditions, Jones County, Texas, sewing

Kris Nylander (KN):

I have no idea what possible.

Curtis Peoples (CP):

Here's one of my cards, I don't know if you've got anything in there or not, but it's got our information.

KN:

I may have gotten Monte's, but I don't—

CP:

What we're going to be doing here is recording this interview, what I have here is a release form that we're doing an audio recording only today, and this gives us permission to do the recording and to house it at the Southwest Collection and make it part of the Anson Cowboy Christmas Ball Collection there, and so if you agree, if I could get a name, signature, and date, that would be fantastic.

KN:

I'm the new bee in the bunch, seriously. I've only been helping out since 2008. Oh crap, do not lock the hall up, Suanne.

CP:

I don't think she's—they're not locking up.

KN:

I hope not because my purse is still in there.

CP:

Oh no, we've still got a lot of stuff to get out.

CP:

All right, and could I possibly get a mailing address for you, Kris.

KN:

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

CP:

Is there a phone number?

KN:

[REDACTED]

CP:

All right, well we'll get going here if you'd just like to have a seat and get comfortable. I'd like to first say that I'm Curtis Peoples here at the Pioneer Hall in Anson, Texas, home of the Cowboy Christmas Ball at least since the hall was built. Today I'm talking to Kris Nylander. Am I correct on that pronunciation? We're going to be discussing the Cowboy Christmas Ball. First off though, Kris, if you don't mind I'd like to get a little information about you, like, if you don't mind, maybe where you're from, place of birth, date of birth?

KN:

I was born in California in Berkeley. I moved to New Mexico where I was raised in Albuquerque. I married, had children, and ended up driving a truck for Roadway Express out of Albuquerque, which transferred me to Goodland, Kansas, where I broke my neck so I couldn't drive a truck anymore.

CP:

Was it in an accident?

KN:

Yeah, a work comp accident. I tripped over a computer.

CP:

Wow.

KN:

It was on the floor. I did some farming up there, had an idea forever, I'm 5'9 barefooted. I used to be skinny, skinny, skinny, and I was this tall at twelve years old so I learned to sew early. That is one of my claims to fame. I had an idea about doing horse show costumes on a computer. So I went to college and learned just enough to be dangerous on the computer with graphics and such.

CP:

Where did you go to college at?

KN:

Colby Community College in Colby, Kansas. Finally at my age, broken neck and fused and that kind of thing, the winters in Kansas are brutal, so I sold my place and was going to go back home to New Mexico. I had a friend here that I came over to see and bring my horses to, and she said, "Buy the house next door," so I did.

CP:

And this is in Anson?

KN:

In Hawley.

CP:

Oh I mean in Hawley, yes, I'm sorry.

KN:

I was reading an ad in Thrifty Nickel, I was thinking, Well, I could do some sewing for costumes or whatever and saw an ad for gunslingers, saloon girls, school marms, and I thought, Oh costumes! So I called the number, and it was Buck Carter. They were recruiting people for the Texas Gunslingers. That's our website on the bottom. We are atmosphere. We are not historical in any way, shape, except for the clothing. We provide entertainment and atmosphere for the little festivals around. Buck saw my sewing, and I thought that's what he wanted me to do, and that's why I went to his meeting. They recruited me, obviously, to be one of their characters. I now do the website, I now do the business cards, I now do the sewing for the girls' costumes. He introduced me to Suanne and brought me to my first ball in 2007. I actually won the best dressed that night at my very first ball.

CP:

Really?

KN:

Yeah, so I'm forever plastered on the wall inside there on the hall. When I walked in the hall it was something that I had no idea what I was going to walk into. It was like going back to high school. I used to go to sheriff's posse dances south of Albuquerque. It's the same, it's this family atmosphere and I walked in the hall, I'm going, Oh it's a sheriff's posse dance, oh goody, goody, goody. Childhood memories, really. I got to know Suanne and learning the history. Obviously you can tell my accent, I'm not a Texan. I was raised with a lot of tradition. My father is an immigrant from Sweden, and we were raised with a lot of tradition and then to see this with, you know, we've been going and this will be the seventy-seventh year in a row that we've been doing this ball. I volunteered to help that year, and then I volunteered sort of, was kind of requisitioned the next year, and then they kind of asked me if I wanted to be a member. Well, I'm not married, so, something in the bylaws, I think, but don't quote me, it's a married couple thing.

CP:

Somebody told me that, that you have to be married to be in the association.

KN:

So I am an honorary member by definition and by choice because the association members all wear the same outfit. You saw that when you were here at Christmas. All the gals had the white blouse and blue skirt.

CP:

Oh yeah, and then the guys had the blue jeans and white shirt and now the vests, and I guess a little black tie.

KN:

And the tie, well that's the ball uniform for association members. Since I sew and I'm not a full member, I'm allowed to wear the uniform which just tickles me because I can wear anything I want because I sew, and so consequently I do. I go off in left field with whatever drips my trigger, and I do historical period costumes. I found a place to get period patterns.

CP:

To do these historical period costumes, where do you get these patterns at?

KN:

It's a place online called Truly Victorian and the gal drafts—Ashley drafts things so you can size them properly to these modern-sized women because we don't wear corsets. Well, Suanne does, but most of us don't corset up. These patterns are designed from the originals, but drafted and altered so that it can be fit.

CP:

A little more modern.

KN:

To a more modern, more laid back, but they still look the same. The end result looks the same. Yes, I'm sewing new dresses for the association ladies next year.

CP:

Now when you say you're sewing new dresses for the association ladies, boy, that's kind of a tongue twister there, isn't it? Why are they wearing these dresses if they have this uniform? Are they just getting new uniform dresses every year is that what it is?

KN:

Yeah, well no, no, not every year. Kris did volunteer for every year.

CP:

As needed, I guess.

KN:

The girls had commented because I try to make a new dress for myself every year for the ball. "Oh, it's so pretty." Oh it's this, oh it's that. Now I'm the one that had the brothers from foreign countries at the dinner. So jokingly in the family, "All right, if you're not going to take me with you, you have to send me fabric from where you go." So both of my brothers have been wonderful about sending me fabrics from China, Thailand, you know, Lithuania, every place they go. So yeah, I can make some really stunning looking dresses. The silk brocade came from China, yeah, I can do something with that. We come from artistic parents, so I can look at a piece of fabric and go, Oh yeah, I see. Some people have crafty eyes for things, some people have painty eyes. I can look at a piece of fabric and go, Oh yeah, cool, I know what to do with that. So I sew.

CP:

If I remember right, you sewed for the wives that came along last year.

KN:

Yes, and also the brothers had a silk puff tie with their outfits, yeah. Yes, I did for each of my sister-in-laws.

CP:

Besides association members, are there other people that attend the ball that you sew for around this area?

KN:

No yet.

CP:

Not yet, hopefully?

KN:

A friend of mine, Laurie, that came to the ball this year, I did sew her dress. The gunslingers that I'm with, that goofball group,, yeah, I've made most of the dresses except for one or two on that.

CP:

Do you just do women's clothing or do you also do men's?

KN:

I haven't really ventured into men's. I've done some shirts for our deputy for the Gunslinger bunch, but men's sewing is more tailoring than sewing, and it is an art in itself, just as alterations of a ready-made piece is an art. I'm not that talented. I sew. I'm not a seamstress, I just sew. I don't know if you had seen that, it's my telltale version of how I got my brothers here. I coerced them.

CP:

I haven't seen this, I'll have to—well she did scan it. You little gal in there did scan it; if you would like you can take that.

KN:

John and Yoko came six thousand miles from Yokosuka, Japan, and Eric and Ruda only came about fifty-five hundred miles from Uppsala, Sweden. Other than that, I'm Suanne's gopher. We only live a mile apart there in Hawley, and we're both retired and I like the ball and I like doing things. It is important to me to preserve something. I mean we're part of living history, and that's kind of an eye opener when you stop and think about it.

CP:

So I guess that's probably what's most appealing for you, it's living history?

KN:

It's actually something that a hundred years from now, people can look back and see—like what we're doing with the movies, Judy and the older lady, Hazel, Helen, the one that donated the dress.

CP:

Billie.

KN:

Billie.

CP:

Yeah.

KN:

They were pointing out the people from the 1953 video that they knew. "Oh look, there's that one as a child and here's this one." And further on down the line, somebody's going to go, "Oh look, there's so and so." People need to know, we need to keep our roots and our history preserved.

CP:

So being that excited about it, do you have aspirations for the future of the event? Thoughts, what would they be?

KN:

Well, I'd like to get some more people involved that are as dogmatic as Suanne and I. There's no other way to put it. Suanne and I are just absolutely dogmatic OCD about this ball, but we have the time. But for whatever reason, we both have the love of the tradition and the history that goes with it.

CP:

Do you go out into the community and talk to it to the younger people, students? Do you ever have plans to do that? Going out in dresses or doing exhibits at the schools?

KN:

Suanne and I have talked about that. Last year we were really busy getting the hall ready for the ball, for the dedication. You've seen our plaque, doing a lot of repairs. We were just gung-ho all year long non-stop, but she and I talked between ourselves about going out and going to a history class or an English class or something, you know, talk to the kids about, This is the way they dress, this is what the dress was for, this is why, this is when. Come to the ball and see what we do. It's a fun thing. You don't have to dress this way, but if you would like to and feel like—like my sister-in-law's both, they wrote their—I guess I should have given you that, but Suanne said she had already given you that, too. Both Yoko and Ruda wrote their impressions of the ball from their points of view. I think it was Yoko said that she never thought about what kind of national costume Americans would have, and neither did I. The Japanese have a kimono. Koreans have this, and other countries have a recognizable national costume, and Yoko didn't think of a national costume except blue jeans and t-shirt until she came to the ball. She said, "Then I understood, I could see the history where it came from."

CP:

What would you call that national costume? I mean, is it somebody that's in a Martha Washington dress or something like that?

KN:

Well yeah—for this particular ball, it would be mid-1800s and that's the styles of the dresses that we have at the ball now is mid to late- 1800s. So quieter time, old west time, something that the world identifies with and says, "Oh, that's American Old West, or oh, that's Japanese, or oh, this is Russian." There's a particular style that we associate, and that's what she did when she saw the dresses at the ball and stuff.

CP:

Were these Victorian era dresses that you're doing, then do you see English influence there, I guess? Would that be there because you had Scottish and English people coming over for ranches and starting this? I guess maybe the wives would be carrying those traditions from Europe.

KN:

They would be, so it's a conglomeration and you hit the nail on the head, Victorian Era, because Queen Victoria was all the way through that era. That is the style, more or less, of what the Old West is represented like.

CP:

And then adapted to the environment.

KN:

Yeah, to the environment—yeah, there's a lot of—finding out just walking around, Suanne and I went yesterday to the TV stations and we went and had lunch. She even stopped into the quick store for something in costume. Getting into a modern vehicle with the underpinnings and the amount of dress that's involved, fabric, you've got to get all this stuff inside and then figure out how to close the door and get the seatbelt on and then drive.

CP:

What kind of looks did you get as you were walking around? Were people like, "Well, what in the world?"

KN:

"What are you dressed up for?" Well of course Suanne had on her new Christmas dress which is a red and green plaid, green skirt, doesn't look half bad. Of course, everybody said, "Is it Christmas already? That looks like Christmas. What are you guys dressed up for? Oh, you look so pretty." And we went and had lunch at the Hickory Street Café which is an old Victorian house that's been turned into a restaurant. Of course, the kids who work there said, "Oh, you fit right in our house," which yeah, that particular style of dress that we had on was of that era. It's fun.

CP:

From the TV appearances and stuff, I mean, were the reporters excited for it, or is it something that they had seen before and were used to?

KN:

Well, we kind of dropped in on them hoping to plug today, a last minute thing with costume, just a “Oh my god, yeah, let’s plug this for what’s happening this weekend” was our idea. Yeah, we have done it for the ball. Suanne and I were up dressed July?

CP:

That must be hot.

KN:

It was horribly uncomfortable, even at nine o’clock at night. We had to wait for the ten o’clock news to be interviewed on camera. Yeah, they’re terribly uncomfortable. I don’t wear corsets, Suanne does. I don’t know how she stands it, but I can’t imagine being corseted up. You have to realize that those people were used to no air conditioning. They could tolerate more than we can these days because we’re used to refrigerated air, air conditioned cars and air conditioned buildings. “Oh my god, it’s so hot outside.” Well yeah, but they had fans and they had natural breeze. They were conditioned to a different type of climate. Maybe they could stand it, maybe they were tougher than we are.

CP:

So coming here, and really just here for the last five or six years getting involved, I guess you’re beginning to learn the history about it or you may be well-versed in the history now, but do you think it’s important for local participation? Is it Anson, is it Abilene? What needs to happen to help this grow? Or is it the whole area?

KN:

For some reason, the town of Anson has not ever been friendly to the ball, I understand.

CP:

I don’t know the story, but that’s what I understand.

KN:

I don’t know the story exactly, either, or why, but Anson does not participate. The town does not promote the ball like it should or like I think it should, but that’s an opinion. They’re not behind the ball. This is an event, it’s a big event, it’s a three day event and we work our hineys off getting ready for it.

CP:

It brings dollars to the town and I mean people are, I guess, shopping.

KN:

It would if the merchants would stay open—if they'd stay open, if the restaurants would stay open until midnight. We've got people that leave here and go to Abilene to I-hop for after the ball breakfast. You know, we've got restaurants right here in Anson. If they could stay open, they would have a heck of an influx for breakfast. I think there's only one motel here in town with—I don't know how many rooms, but there's only one motel. The restaurants don't stay open. The businesses don't seem to go out of their way to encourage staying open in the evening for people that might want to shop before they come to the ball or who knows, but they don't participate. And it's not like Albany where Fandango is and that whole town just really, really works to put that on.

CP:

Great marketing plan.

KN:

I don't know how they do it, but we have trouble. Yeah, Suanne and I go around. I blab to everybody, "You've got to come to the Christmas ball, it's so cool, blah, blah, blah and Michael Martin Murphey." I'm excited about it. I think it's a really neat thing, and obviously with no family close, it's kind of my Christmas thing. I get to do the baking and the cooking and the sewing and socializing with the people. I don't know; I don't know how important any of this is going to be for your interviews.

CP:

No, it's all important. I think your passion is, as somebody coming from outside of this area in and getting into it, it's how to then get that passion into the people who are already living here that this is your history that's happening. I think getting out and being seen in costume might be something. I was talking to Davis, I said, "Well, you know, being a teacher do you think it's important as a teacher and a history buff getting it into the schools and teaching these kids?" I think he said they've had some history day kind of things over here before, but then they maybe take about more than that. I don't know, nobody has the answer to the question.

KN:

I don't think the support will come from the immediate area, unfortunately, and that's really sad. Like I said, having been raised with tradition, years and years and all my childhood—Swedish, old country Swedish tradition, it's one of the reason I wanted my brothers to come to see this because it is. The one brother from Japan is a history major. That was his passion, so he was really into it. The house I bought just happens to be the exact floor plan of my mother's house, the same side of the road. I've got most of my mother's furniture. The boys were coming home for Christmas; that was the idea in my head. When you walk in the house, you know its Mom's

house, although, it is Kris's house. You know, most of the furniture—I did all the Swedish cooking, I did the gingerbread house just like we had when we were children.

CP:

Did it take them back?

KN:

Oh yeah, oh yeah. My Lithuanian sister-in-law says to me, "Well, where do you want Eric and I to put our things?" I said, "Oh." Eric's nickname is Lurch. "Lurch, you and Rude are in my room, and John and Yoku are in Mom and Dad's room." And I turned around and did something else and Eric took off and he knew exactly which bedroom I put them in because that was my bedroom when I was a child. The other one was Mom and Dad's bedroom as children. Literally home. That's why I wanted them to see this because it was something so traditional that we were all used to. I wanted them to see it.

CP:

Do you think there's a long-term legacy here? What is the future for the Cowboy Christmas Ball?

KN:

Personally, I think it's a little bleak at this point. You see, these are the members. There's only half a dozen of them and then Buck and I? So what do we got? Twelve—

CP:

Twelve to twenty I think is what I've been told. There's no definite number. Should the bylaws be revised or kept like it is?

KN:

I don't get into that.

CP:

You don't get into that.

KN:

See as an honorary member I can voice my opinion on anything, but I don't have a vote so I haven't gotten into the bylaws, I don't know.

CP:

Is it going to take—do you think it needs more money? Is it more promotion? Money's always good because then you get more promotion.

KN:

Money is great, yeah. We need to find a way to get some money to do some drastically needed repairs. But how we go about that, you see, John Compeer broadcasts this for the last couple weeks through all the little newspapers and the *Abilene Reporter News*. Suanne went on the radio; we went by the TV stations and whether or not they did a blurb, just as a calendar item coming up, I don't know.

CP:

It's people's busy lives, I guess.

KN:

Yeah, but it'll be lost. The sad thing is it will be lost. Suanne looked at me and she says, "What do you think about moving Pioneer Hall up to Lubbock?" And I said, "What?" She said, "Well, they've said that if the ball ever ceased, that they would take the building." I said, "Well in that case they'd have to do like they did London Bridge and take it apart brick by brick, number it, move it, and put it all back together which is a heck of an undertaking.

CP:

It would take major grants and things like that just to get it done.

KN:

It would be marvelous if this could be preserved and used up there because we only use it at Christmas, those three days at Christmas. I guess they've tried allowing other people to use it and they don't take care of the building. They leave it trashed, you know, they don't abide by what the rules this building were made for which is what any—

CP:

And that's sad because they could rent it out for events, but you've got to be able to take care of the property.

KN:

And we don't have the members that would come and police other events and make sure—you've got to clean the hall, you've got to prep the hall, you've got to clean up afterwards because whoever you rent to really doesn't. You have to make sure there's no alcohol, there's no gum on the floors, there's no drinks and food. We just don't have enough active members that are in a position to be able to police a number of events. And that's sad, too. I don't know, it's a sad thing. I hope it doesn't go away; I hope it doesn't die. Probably as long as Suanne and I are here it won't, but she's number one and I'm number two, and those are pet nicknames that we've given each other. But yeah, it's just something that struck me, I don't know why. I have no idea

why, maybe it's the tradition of the whole thing, the history of it. I don't know. I was raised without a television, so I learned to read. Maybe that's why history appeals to me, I don't know.

CP:

Do you have any parting thoughts or anything you'd like to add before we go today?

KN:

No, I'm just glad that you guys found us and you're going to preserve some of this. Suanne's been preserving it all in her house for all these years.

CP:

Well, we're lucky that she has because a lot of things have gotten lost along the way.

KN:

No, I'm just thankful you guys found us, and you're taking the time to preserve what we do have, help us with finding ways to move ahead. I don't know that moving into the twenty-first century totally, I mean, we've got our tradition with Michael Martin Murphey and with our house band. I don't know that the association has the money to hire other people because Michael does really a good—almost a volunteer job there.

CP:

Plus then it could actually begin to change the whole thing.

KN:

Yeah, it would change the feel of it with a more modern band, you know, like you'd find in a western bar or something. It's a different style. It's still the same, but it's a different variation of westerners. I think we're being locked out.

CP:

Well Kris, I want to thank you for taking the time to do the interview and your passion for the whole event.

KN:

Well, yeah, that's what Suanne wanted you to hear, my passion. Yeah, I love it, but how important is that to you guys?

CP:

It's very important.

End or Recording