

**Oral History Interview of
Suanne Holtman**

**Interviewed by: Elissa Stroman
October 10, 2011
Lubbock, 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 Suanne Holtman who discusses her involvement with the Cowboy Christmas Ball in Anson, Texas. Suanne talks about her early experiences with the ball, joining the association, and what the event means to her and her hopes for the future of the ball.

Length of Interview: 01:57:20

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

Elissa Stroman (ES):

This is Elissa Stroman, and today's date is October 10, 2011. I interviewed Suanne Holtman who is one of the women who is in charge of the Cowboy Christmas Ball in Anson. We conducted this interview in the afternoon in the Preston Smith room at the Southwest Collection, and we talk mostly about the Cowboy Christmas Ball and all that that entails. Okay, just going to start recording, and yeah. So how did you first learn about the ball?

Suanne Holtman (SH):

I worked with a lady that attended every year and kind of grew up, and my mother and daddy danced as young people. It was part of their social environment, but it never was part of my social environment growing up as a kid. Our schools did not have dances, very church oriented little community and we had junior, senior banquets, but there was no dancing. We had always heard about the ball, but had never attended. One year I was away at basketball games and Bernie was invited to go to the ball with some friends and he went and just kind of stood around and watched because he didn't know how to dance. Some lady came up and asked him to dance, and he said, "Sorry, I don't know how." And she said, "I'm a dance teacher, I can teach you." So he danced with her, and she had a dance class and we started going to learn the two-steps and the waltzes and the schottische and the old timey dances. We took our son who was about ten at the time and he was the instructor's guinea pig with her all the time. He didn't take the teaching very well because I could not dance with him. He does some kind of crazy modern step that is just foreign to my body. One year at the ball Michael asked me, I said—we were doing the mother, son dance. Michael does those things at the ball. And he said—I said, "Michael, tell John Ethan to come up here because he's way at the back." That's when the building was full of 850 people. So Michael says, on the PA system, "Johnathan, your mother wants you up front to dance with her." So we wait and Ethan doesn't come. Then Michael says, "Ethan, you might as well come or I'm not starting this dance until you get here." So finally Ethan wades through all this crowd to the front and we dance and he says—and people thought he was saying such sweet things to me from the look on his face, and he said, "You've sufficiently embarrassed me in front of this whole building and I will never dance with you again."

ES:

Oh no.

SH:

He has, but anyway, he doesn't appreciate that. Anyway, that's kind of how we got started with the ball. My dad worked with a man that was on the committee, and I had known him all my life. After my dad passed away we were visiting with him, and he said to us, "Would y'all consider joining the ball? We really need some new, younger members." That was like 1991, and we said sure because we had just gotten into the dancing thing. The thing is, when you're invited by a member to join the ball, you serve one year as a non-member. You get to work and everything,

you don't dress like the association members and they tell you at the end of the year if you still like us and we still like you, it's a go.

ES:

A probationary period.

SH:

A probationary, so, I mean, we did. We fell right into it, and I loved it, and I loved the tradition of it and that's what this is so much about is tradition.

ES:

Okay, so where did you grow up? Did you know about it as a child at all?

SH:

Yes, I knew about it as a child, but like I say, that just wasn't part of the function of, you know, social functions of my family at that time. I really don't know why. I think it's just my mother particularly was, when you're married and you have children you don't go to dances for whatever reason.

ES:

So y'all became involved and how did it grow into you becoming so involved in it today?

SH:

We joined in '91, so in 1992 we were full-fledged members, and as we were getting ready for the ball, the chamber of commerce collected Chester Fox, who was president then, and said that they had had some inquiries from Michael Martin Murphey about the ball and about wanting to play in the ball or be invited into the ball. So we thought that was really a neat thing. One of the members had tried to do that before and could never get through all of the managers and that kind of thing. So since you have this in with them, they had come to us and—don't play this so Michael will hear it—he tells the tale that we've contacted him, but it wasn't. Actually, Bernie and I saw him one time on Ralph Emery. It was just when he had first recorded the Cowboy Christmas Ball and it was Christmastime. And he was talking about that and Ralph Emery asked him, said, "Have you ever been?" He said, "You seem so enthused about this, have you ever been?" He said, "No, it's been a lifelong dream of mine, particularly since I performed, but my mother used to tell me tales about the old timey Cowboy Christmas Ball." So anyway, he was interested, and the chamber gave us a way to contact his booking agent. It was going to be such a process that Chester said, who was in his seventies by then, he said, "I can't do that, I'm too old. I barely do a president of this." And so he said, "I suggest that Bernie take over as president, and he's done this for us." So that's how Bernie became president. You don't really have to be elected his secretary if your husband is elected president. You just get that job because. So that's

how we got so involved in it. It was the negotiation of the contract, Bernie's negotiation of the contract with Michael, which was a ten-page thing of all the things, food you had to provide for him, the certain kind of drinks you had to provide for him and all that kind of stuff. We did all that the first year, but then we found out we didn't have to do all that. And they we were so happy with what we provided them, just good old country home cooked meal, that's still what we do today.

ES:

So before, who was providing the music? And I know separate nights there are other entertainment. So where do you get the music?

SH:

It's just really whoever. There's a process of going through. In fact, Bernie and I had to go through a process of that right after we were into the association. You just go to dance halls around and listen to bands. You hear names of bands and you go listen to them, then bring what you found out about them to the association members. If the music they play, you know, works with the kind of dances we do, it's not honkytonk—we do the traditionally old timey dances. So that's how we found them and that's how you found Lariat. We found a band called Lariat in 2000, and they stayed with us for seven years. And Muddy Creek, which we looked at Muddy Creek at the same time we did Lariat, and I think we went with Lariat, they had a younger, more younger guys on the stage, and they were decedents of long time Jones County families, which the ball was geared around Jones County stuff, but now we have our house band is—they came in after Lariat, and I mean we pay a band such a pittance of money, and Lariat just decided they needed a little bit more money. He heard me, the young man, head of it, heard me make a statement to—he went with me to an interview, radio, one of the radio stations in Abilene always has us in to talk about the ball. He heard me mention thirty-two thousand dollars, and he's thinking that that's what we get every year when Michael comes to us. Over a ten year period of time we had—because a lot of times when people come to see Murphey, they stay over another night and now it's too nights, and so we do get some extra money there. But that is what—and we don't. Our band, the one we have now said, “We get \$500 a night, a dance.” And we're going, “Well, our going rate is \$600,” and they just were elated because they just got \$100 raise. And it's still that. A lot of these people can go get places and play for a lot more money, but a lot of them like the reputation of, number one, we open for Michael Martin Murphey at the Cowboy Christmas Ball. That's on their resumes I guess if they present them to somebody wanting to play a dance is that they play at the Christmas Ball every year.

ES:

Then there's that tradition in the place that helps a whole lot.

SH:
Right.

ES:
So you mentioned it had to be vetted through the association.

SH:
Yes.

ES:
Are all decisions of the Cowboy Christmas Ball vetted through the—? Does the association make all the major decisions?

SH:
All major decisions are put before the committee, and there are, right now, are seventeen voting members of our committee.

ES:
So tell me a little bit more about the association members, their duties, and what all they do during the year and at ball time and that sort of thing.

SH:
Well, during the year we have the offices that are held. Of course, it's the president and the secretary, which secretary/treasurer and part-time historian, we do have Rhonda Weaver that serves as historian, but she's never really gotten into that mode. But she does many other things that are valuable to us. We traditionally have maybe three meetings a year. As it gets closer to December, you know, we start trying to make Pioneer Hall ready for that, first of November. That's what mainly most of the members—because that's all we have. We have president, vice president, secretary, treasurer, and historian. Those are the elected offices. Everybody else, when we came into it in 1991, you walk into the building, and when it's time to clean up and get ready for the ball and everybody there knew what they were supposed to do. I'm talking these are some people that have been members like forty-five years in the association. Now, you have to be a little more explicit on our new ones; they don't catch on that quick about what is done to get ready for the ball. When the year rolls around you have to wax the floor. That has to be done extra early. For instance, this year when we had our meeting last Sunday, we decorate with mountain cedar, it's talked about in the poem. We try to do the things with our decorations that you hear about in the poem that Larry Chittenden wrote at that first Christmas ball in 1885. We actually go out and cut our own live cedar. We have people that allow us to go on their property and cut the cedar. I like to really be involved in that because it was—when I first came into it, they were still using paper decorations, and, you know, things like that. I was just so excited to

be a part of something that has such tradition to it and such history of this area. So you listen to the poem and it talks about, you know, the bright colored shawls, which were quilts. It talks about the mountain cedar and using cattle horns as decorations on the cedar and candle lights that twinkled. So we started going and getting our own cedar. Well, this year, since it is so dry, we've really thought about that and talked about that in the meeting. We're not going to use cedar this year because any cedar that's out there is dry, even more so. It ignites—it's such a combustible thing. So, my husband Bernie volunteered to use some barbed wire and make some big, tight looking bows that we can decorate with, colorful bows, and some cotton that looks like snow, which we usually do on the cedar. This year is going to be a little bit different in our decorations, but it's because of our drought here in West Texas, which I'm sure they experienced in, you know, in 1885 as well. But traditionally our decorations are not changed. Only when changed—when I first came into this there were little white baskets that had plastic which was the kind of decorations you used. They hung in the windows. There are six windows at the south side of pioneer hall, and they hung there and the cedar was over the top of the window. Those baskets literally fell apart and the plastic foliage just disintegrated, so we switched that, but we only go to something different with decoration, and when we do change to different, we try to pull it from that poem that described what went on in the very beginning.

ES:

I was going to ask, is there other things in the poem that y'all want to incorporate eventually or is there anything that you don't incorporate?

SH:

Oh, I don't think there's anything that we don't incorporate. The only thing that I would really like to get our association members to do again is we all need to go to some square dancing classes because we do do the Virginia reel, and we do do the schottische, and we do the old timey polkas and the Paul Jones which are all old timey dances. Then you add in the two-step which is not old old, but it's enough that you can bring modern kids into the ball, and they can still dance the western two step.

ES:

Going back for a minute, I seem to remember when we were talking about the association, the tradition is the president has to be a man and then the secretary is his wife traditionally?

SH:

Yes, it's just always been that way. I think it's because at the time the association was formed in 1937, there was not one female listed in the fifty people that were on that committee to establish the association. It's all men. Why? Because that's how it was then. When my husband resigned as president, a lot of the ladies said, "You've done it with him forever, you can be president." And I said, "No." and they said, "Why not? You can do that." I said, "I'm not saying I can't do

it. I'm saying it's because of what we do is a reenactment of what went on in 1885. Women did not serve in positions like that in 1885. So if we're true to our reenactment totally, then we need to be true to that, too." I said, "And I don't want it. I'm not saying I couldn't do it, and I'm not saying any woman couldn't, but I think as long as we try to strive to—" It's a reenactment of 1885. Women didn't wear pants in 1885, that's why they don't dance on the dance floor now in pants. So we strive to—and that's my one great fear is, "Am I going to be the only hard-nosed person left in this that does that?" I'm looking for somebody to bring into our association that will adhere to those values because when we first got into it, one of my friends said, "Oh, I'm so glad they're getting y'all on that committee. You're young, and now you can make it so women can wear pants." I'm going, "No, that's not a tradition. The whole thing of this is tradition." So we adhere to that still.

ES:

Are there other traditions that people have tried to, not break, but sneak in something new and you've said, "No, we're going to stick with it"?

SH:

People every once in a while try to, particularly guys, you know how guys are about their hats in West Texas. We make them check their hats at the door. Why? Because men did not wear hats in the presence of ladies, and if you get right down to it, they're bothersome on the dance floor. If you're trying to talk to somebody, you're constantly dodging that hat. So we do have people, but most of the time, if you explain to that person about their hat and we tell them—first of all, we have a group of kids that do our hat and coat check. It's a major fundraiser for the Hawley FFA kids. It costs you fifty cents to check your coat and fifty cents to check your hat. They tell people that tradition, and they know because they school these kids in that. If they have a problem with that person they come and get an association member. You explain to the person, "This is why; it is a reenactment, men did not—gentlemen did not wear hats in the presence of a lady, particularly on the dance floor. You don't have to check it, and I totally understand that because some guys are very ticky about their hats, but you may take it back to your truck if you don't want to check it. But if you're going to dance—" We used to let people—you could keep them if you were going to sit in the balcony area, but we had a big discussion about that one year because if you let it get past the check in place, it will eventually wind up on the floor. So there's just no hats in the building. And that includes the people—the only people that can have a hat on in any part of that building is band people on the stage. If they step off of the stage to their right, which is south, there is an area there that's just designated for the band and their stuff. They can have their hat there, but if they want to come and get a coke or go to the bathroom, they have to take their hat off and leave it on the stage, even the band members. Because once that first note of music is played, there can't be a hat anywhere in that building except on the stage. And Michael, several times transgressed. One year he gave me, in \$20 at a time, a \$100 that night

because he kept getting off the stage with his hat one and it applies to him. You can't take it off and told it in your hand, it can't go on that dance floor.

ES:

So he could have just put it on the stage as he walked away.

SH:

But he forgets.

ES:

Yeah.

SH:

And his generous enough to say, "How much are you going to charge me as a fine, Suanne?" "Twenty dollars." It's the same thing for a lady. Now, ladies can come in that building in pants, but they have to sit in the bleacher area, and they cannot—they can even be on the floor before the music starts, but once that first note of music is played, there can be no lady on that floor in pants. You can't even walk across the floor to the bathroom. You have to follow the perimeter of the building to get to the bathrooms. It's just that. That's the way they've always been, tradition, and that's what we are.

ES:

Right, so what do you recommend for people to wear when they come to the ball? What's the general—what do most people wear if we're trying to describe it fifty years from now?

SH:

From now? A lot of people come in what we called Sunday clothes, what you wear—and you know, that's gotten to be a problem, too, because now women wear pants to church on Sunday morning and we never did that. Sunday dress of some sort; it has to be a dress of some sort. It can be modern cowboy denim, suede skirts, that kind of thing, broom stick skirts, and just a dress of some sort. A lot of people, since Michael Martin Murphey has been coming, do dress in costume, in authentic 1800s clothing because we have a best dressed contest every night. We fix up this little old-timey hat box that has little trinkets and things in it to remember the ball by. The guys get a Timex pocket watch that has an old timey train on the front of it and they treasure those watches forever. We used to have a lot of kids and we even had kids best dressed. I always tried to pick out a book, something about Texas and something about the frontier for the kids. But not so many of them anymore dress in—but they wear pretty little Christmas type dresses and the boys have their jeans, shirts, and slacks on. So it's pretty much as long as you adhere to a dress of some sort and it doesn't have to be a certain length. One year some kids from the hat and coat check came in and said, "Suanne, Suanne, there's a girl out there and she has on a

miniskirt.” I said, “As long as it’s a skirt, it’s okay.” You know, we don’t like to see many miniskirts, but as long as it’s a skirt, it’s okay. One thing that is right now, in 2011 and back in 2010, we had young women that were wearing shorter dresses, but they were wearing the leggings, but they didn’t have feet. If they had feet in the leggings, they’re considered tights which is a form of hosiery for women, so they can do that, but when they’re just leggings with no feet, it’s considered pants. I had to explain that to two young women, and they were both very nice about it. One of them actually said, “That’s okay, I have a skirt in the car. I’ll just go get that skirt.” Because we have things in the back, skirts and things that we try to fit people in if they do come in pants. I actually don’t know if they can, but if they look at their tickets, particularly from Michael Martin Murphey it says plain on the ticket, “Dresses on the dancefloor.”

ES:

And cowboy boots, they’re not required, but do most people wear boots?

SH:

Oh yeah, guys get by so easily. In fact, I wear a pair of old timey cowboy boots under my dress, under my period clothing because that’s the most comfortable and when you’re on your feet, particularly when Michael Martin Murphey is there, eight thirty in the morning until about 2 a.m. the next day, your feet get tired and they don’t in my boots. That’s what I tell when people call and say, “What do guys wear?” If you’re a guy and live in Texas, most of you wear wranglers or Levis or western shirt boots, you’re set. So it’s not a problem for you, but even some guys now, they vie for our pocket watch thing, dress in frock coats and more old timey style for men of the 1800s.

ES:

Well, when we were there in April I just noticed all of the cowboys were—they had the very proper vests and the pocket watches already and the handlebar mustaches. Walking in there, you feel like you’re walking back in time.

SH:

And that’s what Bernie says. We had a gentleman come from South Dakota, called that first year, and I think this year will be his fifth consecutive year to attend. The first year he called—he had seen Michael at a performance somewhere up there in their area and Michael had talked about the ball, so he wanted to see what it was about. He said, “Well, can you tell me what makes this so special because we have some really neat dances up here.” I said, “Nope, I can’t really tell you. You have to walk into that building, and you have to feel that building and how long that building’s been there and that everything in that building is done in strict tradition of the 1800s, as close as we can to this day in time.” I tell people, when you’re in that building by yourself, like I work in there a lot by myself, sometimes early in the morning and sometimes even late at night, particularly with West Texas wind blowing out, it can be an eerie feeling, but

then it makes you think about what life might have been on the prairie when the wind blew so, and women were so alone and you're in this big, huge building all by yourself and the building's creaky. I told him, I said, "You have to come and experience it, and when you walk in there, you will know it is like stepping back in time as much as we can possibly make it." Even that first year when he was leaving that night, he said, "You're right, we'll be back next year." And this year will be—I'm pretty sure it's his fifth year.

ES:

So describe to me in your words what the building's like when you walk in during the ball or just describe the building itself.

SH:

Old timey architecture, if you live in West Texas anywhere, you have been in an old gym somewhere that is made of brick or a natural rock, rounded top, that's Pioneer Hall. Originally there was only one door in the front and a little bitty ticket window over here. Maybe one door on the back from the concession stand that you could get out. There is a, as Bernie calls it, the buzzard roost, like a raised balcony area and originally that whole floor, which the floor measures seventy by a hundred a twenty, hardwood floor. And there was like a picket-type railing around the dance floor that nobody—you had to go through a gate to get on the dance floor because they were very explicit about not being on the floor for women in pants or if you hadn't bought a ticket to dance. You can buy a spectator ticket. So that was there, but we have taken down part of that now to allow, with crowds for Michael Martin Murphey, accessibility to the floor in the section, but it's around there, there's benches around the perimeter on the floor where you can actually sit down on the floor. There's a coat room for hat and coat check, why? Because this is a dance that is held only in December, three nights in December. It's supposed to be cold. Sometimes it's not quite that cold, but you had to check your hat and coat because people are going to be on the dance floor dancing. That's what you do when you come to the Cowboy Christmas Ball is dance from eight to twelve. It's a hardwood floor. We do wax that, not every year, but you know, every two or three years. There are six windows on the south side of the building that do raise where if it gets kind of warm you can put some air in, circulation into the building a little bit. In the balcony area, there are also six windows across the raised balcony area up there. It's totally open to the medal beams of the building, of the roof. Bathrooms are at the back of the building. There is a really pretty Christmas tree, because it is Christmas, a decorated Christmas tree at the back that has some history telling about Larry Chittenden who wrote the poem about the first ball back there. Then you add the decorations. We also had out a memorial wall for people that, if you were an active association member when you pass away, the men, we take a pair of their boots that the family gives us and put them in a wreath, and they hand in there with who they are and how long they served. One gentleman was Clyde Cooper. He joined in '69. I remember that because that was the year I was married. He was an old bachelor in Anson. They were married, and he had buggies. He had a hobby of

collecting old buggies. That's one reason he was fond of the ball because it ties to that past. horse collar, his boots are in horse collar. The ladies, when Bernie and I came into the association in '91, '2, I'm going, Where's the ladies memorial? I know some of these ladies have passed away, there wasn't one. So we have since added that and that's something—we try to have something—a picture of the lady and like maybe a broach or a bracelet that they liked to wear when they were there, and you put it in a shadowbox. We have pictures around the building, like our newlywed couples. That's something to look at in the building now. There's pictures of them—well, ever since '93, I guess, when we came into it and best dressed. People like my son and daughter-in-law are on that wall as newlyweds. Now their daughter that's three loves to go find her mother and daddy in that picture. You know, the ball tradition splinters out in many different ways to create more traditions. Like my family comes on Saturday night. I have nieces now that have started. That's a Christmas tradition for them. They come and bring their families and it's a family environment. It hasn't always been that way. It was when it was started, and you know, in the thirties and coming out of prohibition in the twenties and that kind of thing, it kind of had a honkytonk reputation for a while, but it is so family oriented now. We love children on the dance floor and you're, particularly when Michael's there; he has dances that he wants dads and daughters to lead off this dance, and then everybody else joins in with grandmothers and grandsons and that kind of thing. It's all about family because that's how it was. That's all people had back in the 1800s was very, very limited social. You know, if they got to get together at Christmas time for a dance, you know, I'm sure it was because imagine when the very first ball took place in 1885, Fort Phantom—I was talking about his earlier—Fort Phantom was an active fort then, and it's at least maybe twenty-five, maybe further miles than that. But they had women that rode horseback from Fort Phantom into Anson to the ball because it was just one of those social things that they didn't get to participate in. We have a couple that comes from Tahoka that they have three girls and they are all blonde headed, extremely blonde headed, and they're just like blab, blab, blab in age. The oldest one is probably twelve now. The middle one has been coming to the ball—she attended her first ball when she was three days old. She has not missed one sense. It's an effort for them. Their mom's a school teacher, and particularly since Michael has changed because they'd come on Murphey night, it's hard for her to get out of school and then they still have school on Friday, so as soon as the ball's over, they're changing into pajamas in the bathroom and going to the car, and the kids sleep all the way home. Heather says as soon as they leave in the car before they all go off to sleep, they're already talking about, “Mama, what are we going to wear next year?” So these are traditions that we'd like to see to continue. You know, just like for my grandchildren. I want my girls to grow up knowing there's some place you can go and dance that's wholesome and smoke free and alcohol free and very family oriented.

ES:

Now, are there particular dances—is there a program each night, are there certain things that are done at every dance or does it depend on the band?

SH:

No, there are certain—we like all of the dances, they play—like I say, there are seven dances in here. I probably don't have them written down and I'm not going to be able to tell you all seven of them. There's the Paul Jones which is a really neat crowd mixer. It's a circle game and I had a very prominent lady in the Baptist church in Anson tell me one time that they used to get to go to things because they would tell their mother that it was circle games, it wasn't a dance, it was circle games. As long as it was a circle, it's okay. The Paul Jones is a circle. Men are on the outside of the circle facing in and the ladies are on the inside facing out. When the music starts, the ladies move one direction, the guys move the other and you go around while the music is playing and then somebody either—they used to just—because it happened on that 1953 tape that we have filmed, they yell, "Paul Jones." The music is still playing and you dance with whoever you're stopped right in front of. Then now we use a whistle. They blow a whistle and you start dancing again. The longer this goes on, the little faster it gets. It's neat, a lot of young people like to do it, and a lot of ladies that do not come with a partner, it's a dance that they can really participate in. We have to really encourage all the guys sitting around. Their wife may not want to do it, "So you can come and do it. We need guys." That's what we say, "More guys." That's the Paul Jones and then there's the Virginia reel which the association members try to do the Virginia reel every night in protest to all the guys. The Polka, the Schottische, we throw the two-step in there, and the waltz. See, I missed one. There's one more. But they are all old-timey dances. Like on that tape from '53, they talk about the old timey waltz so I'm going, "What is the old timey Waltz?" I haven't heard that from any of the old people in the association. So Bernie googles it on the computer and brings me a copy of the old time Waltz, and Chris and I are reading it and it is like it's done almost like a Virginia reel, but to a waltz tune, which I'm going, This looks way too complicated for us.

ES:

Maybe that's why it didn't survive.

SH:

It didn't survive, that is probably true, but those are essentially—and Put your Little Foot, that's the other one, Put your Little Foot.

ES:

You talked briefly about the newlyweds. Different couples lead in. How does that—?

SH:

Every night we have all three nights, there is a newlywed couple because originally, that's what this dance was given for in 1885 was a newlywed cowboy and his bride that Mr. M. G. Rhodes at the Star Hotel wanted to honor. So, it can be a Jones County—it used to be, traditionally it was from the ranching and farming people of the area of Jones County. We reach out to everybody

there now. They do not have to be from Jones County. As long as you've newly been married in the last, you know, within the year of 2011, you can be considered. This year the night that Michael is there—I only had one so far, is my great niece, she got married in June. Her and her new husband will lead the grand march. The grand march I tell everybody, if you do not know what the grand march is, it's just a march around the ballroom and a certain form. If you don't know what it is, rent John Wayne's movie, *Fort Apache* and watch it and you'll see a grand march. It's a military thing because it's supposed to be done particularly like march, march, march. We just kind of walk now, but you go around the room once, just the couple leading the grand march, and then two people behind them and two people behind them. Once you get to the center, there's going to be somebody there. The newlyweds always go to the left, the next couple goes to the right, and that's usually a parent or a friend of the newlyweds. When they come back around to the starting point which is under the Texas flag, then they pick up whoever their sponsor couple is, whether it's their mom and dad or just a friend, so then they're four abreast. That four goes to the center and once again, the bride couple goes to the left and the next four go this way. The trick is now, once you get them coming all the way around, they go and they turn them up the middle and everybody, once everybody comes to the center from this group from the west and this group from the east, then because the grand march is done to the "Eyes of Texas". Once that song is played and everybody has promenaded around the building, the band breaks into "Home on the Range" which is a waltz. This all takes place at nine o'clock and then at nine o'clock the ball is officially underway even though they have been playing since eight.

ES:

Okay.

SH:

And everybody Waltzes.

ES:

Okay. Are there other tunes that have to be played at some point in the evening?

SH:

The Cowboy Christmas Ball poem is supposed to be, it says read during the night. We can eek past the reading of that which the wording is a very strange poetic thing. Just like Larry Chittenden refers to the Star Hotel as the Morning Star Hotel. Well, made a mistake one time I did, Bernie and I did in an interview, that a great-great granddaughter of Ophelia Rhodes who was living in the Star Hotel in 1885 with her family that owned it, M. G. Rhodes was her dad, said, "It is not the Star Hotel, not the Morning Star, it's just the Star Hotel." Morning Star came because it rhymed better in the poem than Star Hotel. So, I was corrected, but those are the dances that we do.

ES:

Okay, now before you were talking about the Hawley FFA helps out with the coat check. Why Hawley and why not Anson? Does that get into the larger question of the committee?

SH:

No, it really doesn't. We actually—when it started we were out of—when Bernie and I started into this, our son was like a sophomore in high school. There was nobody to do the hat and coat check that year, and nobody to do our concession stand, which they just served white, like, sandwiches, but we specify homemade desserts, that's what. So our son's class did that for the three years that he was in school. Then I had nieces and nephews coming along that still tied us to the Hawley School. When all my nieces and nephews were gone, whoever was sponsors of those classes, freshman classes that year starting out, thought it was too much work for not enough money. They don't understand the tradition. So we pitched it to—we actually pitched it to the Anson FFA first, and they didn't want it. So I said, "Hawley will take it." And they have. Hawley FFA has probably been there, I don't know, like maybe ten years or more, and it's one of their major fundraisers.

ES:

Well that's great.

SH:

One year was, oh, their eyes were so big because one of our friends that comes also is involved in single-action shooters as an association.

ES:

Oh yeah, yeah.

SH:

They ride horses and shoot balloons and shoot targets and that kind of thing in the old western tradition. So they have the clothes to come to the ball, but one night he came and he flips back his front coat, unbuckles and lays his guns on the desk to check. Now, not only do they not have live ammunition, they don't have any blank ammunition in them at all, they're just empty, but he thought that would be really cute and we have a really cute picture of kids doing that. That's why the Hawley FFA instead of the Anson.

ES:

So is there in tradition a check your guns at the door?

SH:

There's actually an old time—and it used to say that—even Ophelia Rhodes wrote in her letters, I had the privilege of knowing one of her great-great granddaughters, and she said that her mother wrote in her letters in later life about when she was ten years old at the first one. Her bedroom happened to be downstairs in the hotel. That is where the guys check their hats, their guns, and their spurs.

ES:

Oh their spurs, I never even thought of that, too.

SH:

There had been, and it kind of deteriorated, and one of our members had like a reproduction done of it. It says, "Gents check your guns and spurs." We still request that guys don't wear spurs on the dance floors. That, too, applies to Michael because sometimes he wears spurs and his dress. It's because particularly if the dance floor is too crowded it can become a tripping or it could actually hurt a lady, and you don't want to hurt your lady fair.

ES:

Well and I thought, too, it could actually possibly scar the floor.

SH:

Well, we probably wouldn't have worried as much about the floor as we would have actually harming somebody.

ES:

Let's see, can you just, for the recording, describe, I don't know, the history of the Cowboy Christmas Ball as you see it, as you tell people. If somebody wants, in one sentence or one paragraph, What is the Cowboy Christmas Ball? Why are we still doing it? Can you articulate that?

SH:

One paragraph, huh?

ES:

Let's just go with however long it takes.

SH:

No, I probably could do it in a lengthy paragraph.

ES:

Yes.

SH:

If you start at the very beginning as it's been passed down to us in time, actually, Juanita Hollis Beasley that was in the association for forty-two years and actually served as secretary and treasurer with her husband as president for twenty-two years. They have both passed away, and she had relatives that attended, actually, the first ball in 1885, and Doc Hollis is mentioned in the poem, but her grandfather and father actually attended the first one in 1885 so she had a lot of ties there. But it started—the very first one was in 1885 to honor a newlywed couple, a local cowboy that wintered at the Star Hotel, and he was particularly fond of Mr. Rhodes that owned the hotel, and Mr. Rhodes was very fond of this young man, so the story goes. Anyway, he honored him, and I guess in that time period you couldn't just have a party every day because people didn't have the ability to come from out, you know, and there weren't that many people in town. So they spread the word to all the outlying ranches at Fort Phantom Hill that here was going to be a Christmas party to honor this newlywed cowboy. When that was taking place, there was a young reporter from New York by the name of William Lawrence Chittenden, better known as Larry Chittenden that had come to Anson by stage from Abilene after he had driven a tinker. Tinker was guys that traveled around selling pots and pans to ranches, not just to towns, but to outlying ranches and things like that. This was a way to help his income as he came from New York to Anson, Texas. Anyway, he came from Abilene by stage and was staying at the hotel and happened to be there when this first dance was held. The poem wasn't published, I mean, he may have gotten the thoughts for his poem that very night, probably did, but his poem, this was 1885, and his poem was not published until 1890 in the *Western*—I'm trying to remember the old name of the—it's *Western Observer* now, but it was *American Western* or something like that, paper in Anson. That poem was published there, and it was just what he saw at that dance, the cowboys and their colorful clothes and the women and their beautiful dresses and the dances that they did with how the dresses flowed. They just talked about the cowboys getting dressed up and coming into town that they always didn't get to do. The ladies, all the single ladies were there, or the guys, to dance with. That happened in 1885, and we're not sure how, you know, they were sporadic. It wasn't yearly. Larry Chittenden always remained kind of tied Anson. He moved away at the time of his death, and 1934 he was back in New York and he lived in the Bahamas for a while, but became the really West Texas rancher. He stayed on the ranch for a long time and has poems about ranching life in West Texas. But he died in 1934, and they were just getting ready to have the first reenactment, and all the ladies in town that knew him in 1885 were still here, some of them had never married. So they were really excited about how they could do this and maybe get him to come back for the ball. In September he passed away before the ball was supposed to take place in December. They started not to do it, but then they just decided just to do it in his memory. It was in the high school gym which was painfully crowded. Then they had one every year; 1934 was the first reenactment, and there has been a

reenactment in Anson ever since. This year, 2011, will be our seventy-seventh consecutive reenactment. In 1937, they formed the association. They were incorporated and protected under incorporation through the secretary of state's office in Austin. In 1937, Ms. Barrett who wrote, Lenora Barrett, who was the school library. She knew Larry Chittenden as a girl growing up in Anson. She has a copyright to the pageant, as she calls it. It is still copyrighted to this day. The copyright will expire in 2032. I just found this out recently. Even after Ms. Barrett passed away in 1955, her sister in the seventies, the patent copyright was running out, and she redid the copyright which that copyright is still in effect until 2032. So I told the guy in the Library of Congress in Washington D.C., "Well I guess I won't have to worry about that anymore because I'm quite sure I won't be here in 2035."

ES:

So what is copyrighted, the whole concept or the programs?

SH:

Not the concept because the concept was already there from 1885, it's the reenactment pageant of what her vision of what went on in 1885. Since she knew him personally, you know, it is easy for her to involve him in the now time when she was going to copyright that. What is copyrighted, they told me there is the concept of her pageant. It's a reenactment of a dance in 1885. You can't copyright the music because it's not hers. You can't copyright the dances because they're not hers, but she can copyright that she is putting all of that together in her pageant.

ES:

Okay.

SH:

And the poem itself and the music itself to the Cowboy Christmas Ball was never copyrighted by anybody. It is what Michael calls open domain. Anybody can do anything with that, but—and what is copyrighted to us is the name that she gave it which is Texas Cowboys', with the apostrophe after the S on cowboys, Texas Cowboys' Christmas Ball. That is copyrighted to us.

ES:

Okay, we want to make sure we get that right because it's often seen as the Anson Cowboy Christmas Ball, but she did copyright it.

SH:

And that, when they formed their charter through the secretary of state's office in Austin, it was that, it was chartered then as the Texas Cowboy Christmas Ball of Anson, Texas. So it's a long name. Even Cowboy Christmas Ball is a long name to write on anything. That's why we always

do TCCB. But that is what her concept of that pageant and that name is what still belongs to us. And you know, people have Christmas balls everywhere this day in time, they really do. Dr. Moak, who is a physician in Abilene and he has brought his family. I guess ever since '93 when Michael first started coming to Anson to the ball. His daughter went away to college, and several years ago now, she called her Daddy. She was going to San Marcus, and she was just really, "Daddy, you need to call our friends in Anson at the Christmas ball and tell them somebody down here has taken their name, and they're having a Christmas ball and they're even having Michael Martin Murphey there, too, and he belongs to Anson." She was really upset. But they do have and they do call it Cowboy Christmas Ball, and it can be their Cowboy Christmas Ball, but it can't be Texas Cowboy Christmas Ball.

ES:

And so the Cowboy Christmas balls that are around the state of Texas, they're all derivatives based upon the original one?

SH:

The original one.

ES:

Okay.

SH:

And if you ever want to incorporate your Cowboy Christmas Ball and say Texas Cowboy Christmas Ball, the attorney general's office in Austin is not going to let you do that because we have had several, particularly University of Texas fraternities, particularly the fraternities were wanting to start a scholarship fund, and they wanted to name it Texas Cowboy Scholarship Fund, whatever. Well you can't take that Texas Cowboy and even do it into a scholarship fund without us saying, "Yes, you can use that Texas Cowboy," and I guess that's why—I mean, this is my own thought about the cowboys, you know, our Cowboys football team. Why didn't they be Texas Cowboys? Maybe that's why, I don't know. But we have had several letters from people saying, you know, like the ones from UT people came through attorneys wanting to do this. And as long as it wasn't going to be a dance, you could do a scholarship fund. You can use our Texas Cowboy for scholarship fund, but not a dance. We would never give it away to anybody for a dance except us. And you know, those are some things that probably a lot of people in our association don't even know.

ES:

Yeah, I think it's fascinating how she was able to get around copyrights and say, "The event in general is copyrighted." So this was in the 1930s when it was initially copyrighted and then it kept on.

SH:

Yes, her copyright came to her in 1937 and at the ball in 1938. She was very unhappy and her letters and all that stuff we gave y'all where she wrote to the association. If modern dance is allowed to be injected into the ball as it was this year in 1938, the ball will cease to be what it is supposed to be in just a matter of a very few years. You cannot inject modern dance and keep it as a reenactment of what it is supposed to be. And then she surrendered her copyright to the association in 1938, "For general harmony of the community" is what she said in the letter that y'all have.

ES:

I'm going to have to look at that letter, and we may need to scan that and put that up somewhere. So I guess from the beginning, even from the thirties, reenactment was the central focus and it's been a constant struggle to keep it historically accurate.

SH:

And you know, we're not exactly probably, but we're as close as we can be in modern time. We keep it as close and that's my greatest fear is that, you know, here I've been in since 1991, '92 officially and who do we pass this to?

ES:

Right.

SH:

I'm looking—I'm looking for somebody that will because that's my greatest fear is that if you don't have somebody that can be as obnoxious and passionate as I am about this, about even walking across the floor. And if you explain to most people, they're not going to be ugly about it, they're going to understand that this is tradition. But if you let those things start happening, if you let Michael Martin Murphey wear a hat on the floor because he's Michael Martin Murphey, you know, then everybody else is going to think that they can get away with that, too. That's why he has, you know, helped us so because he adheres to those traditions. He appreciates that and when he transgresses, he admits he did it.

ES:

So there are some things, though, that have had to be progressed with the times.

SH:

The music for one thing.

ES:

The music.

SH:

I mean, they play George Strait music at our dances and people love to dance. That's good two-stepping, cowboy music, George Strait music. And they sing now, and I think I was telling you that, that watching that 1953 film that y'all put on a DVD for us is that they didn't sing then. It was just music. They played the music. They had people that called the square dances, but they didn't sing "The Eyes of Texas." And we don't do that in the march, either, in the grand march when they play "The Eyes of Texas." It is just for the march.

ES:

I was trying to think of other things that might have been updated. The hall is electrified, but that wouldn't have been the way in 1885.

SH:

It wouldn't have been the way in 1885, but it was—and when they built that building in—it was started in 1938 and completed in 1940. The changes that have been made that I can see from pictures, is the front door. They changed that single door to a double door, and they added an extra single door over here through the years for wheelchairs to come in. There is a ticket, the ticket booth outside where we sell tickets through, was added sometime to that building. If you look at some old pictures—and I found this in one of my old programs, and I'm going, That's where they sold tickets from that little bitty window because there was a single door right there by that little window and they sold the ticket and then you could come through the door. But then as it progressed and they were having bigger crowds and everything, they made double doors over there to make access easier. Since the changes we've made to the building, we've upgraded the bathrooms a little bit to try to accommodate handicapped people, but when you have a building that is old as ours, it's really hard to—and particularly now that we're historic, you know, you're not supposed to make changes, particularly to the outside of that building since it's historical.

ES:

Right and when did you get that marker?

SH:

2009.

ES:

Okay, so pretty recent.

SH:

And it's not just the building that's historic. Our event is historic, and it says so on the marker.

ES:

The marker's kind of two in one, the building and the event within.

SH:

That's why it's so big because it's both things, and it's attached to the building because we felt it would be safer then because a lot of people go around—so many in Jones County, a lot of their historical markers had been stolen because they can melt that stuff down and sell it and get money for it.

ES:

I remember there was one on the way into Abilene that was like on a granite marker, but somehow they ripped it off and they just quit replacing it because people were stealing it.

SH:

So ours is attached to the building on the front porch.

ES:

Yeah, I remember seeing that now, so that makes sense. So we're kind of getting into issues. What are some of the issues today that y'all are having to deal with, anything? I know it can go in any different direction.

SH:

Smaller crowds, maybe, but Ms. Barrett started a book in 1934 when they had the first reenactment, and I remember when Nola McKay from *Texas Highways* Magazine did an article on us. I just kept referring to it as the book so she named it *The Book*, that's what it is now, the book. When she started that, it was, I don't know, gah my whole thought process left me. Tell me your question again, Elissa.

ES:

We were talking about issues, and you said that smaller crowds, and then you were saying the—

SH:

Smaller crowds, right, smaller crowds, money to do upkeep on the building that you need. You know, the building has been there so long. They have, like, boarded off about three of the six windows on the north side of the building because the glass was all broken out for whatever reason. I'm not sure it was vandalism, probably just time. We need to restore those, and restoration takes lots of money. We do what we can, the association members, you know, we're responsible for the upkeep of that building, and the guys and the girls do what we can to that, but we—you have to have a lot of money to do some of the restoration that we need to do. So we are looking and trying to see what grant writing can be done, but even grant writing now and

help from the federal government, I mean, they're in bad enough trouble without trying to take care of us. But anything we do, we have to like save up our money for. Dodge Jones Foundation in Abilene one year gave us, as an anonymous gift, \$1,500, and we had a matching \$1,500, and that's when we were able to upgrade the bathrooms a little bit. I mean, like the flooring was about to fall in in the guys' bathroom and that kind of stuff. So we put a new roof on it in 1998 to the tune of \$10,000. We had five and we borrowed five and were able to pay it off in like three ball periods, but what we need to do is going to take a lot more money. You know, the floor needs a lot of work because now we're back to 1998. That roof is shot now with West Texas heat and because it started out as ten and now they have asphalted or whatever they put on roofs, that black stinky stuff, and it cracks and crumbles over time, and it's done that again, and the floor is, if you walk in Pioneer Hall right now, there's a big, up by the stage, bunch of trashcans to catch a leak. I came up with flipping our rugs that we have that are cloth stuff on the top, it's rubber on the back, so they're lying to catch that rain, and it all ripe right there on the top of that rug, so you have to be inventive to take care of Pioneer Hall. We still try to keep it as much as we possibly can in that time period.

ES:

So funding is a big issue, just general upkeep of the ball, just keeping it in the black seems to be a problem each year.

SH:

Each year, you know, we have enough money to, oh, keep the electricity on in the building because you need that on. That's something else that blew my mind not long ago. The ball's always been with WTU, West Texas Utilities. I got a bill—we leave it on because it's only like \$6 minimum, you know, and if you're not doing anything you don't get over that minimum. But now, we get a \$16 distribution fee plus our \$6 minimum.

ES:

That's each month?

SH:

Each month now.

ES:

Oh my.

SH:

So now we do a lot in the dark when we go, we don't turn any lights on.

ES:

Right, right.

SH:

Of course, you can unplug the outside lights. You don't have to have those on, but that's another thing. The guy that does our electrical work for us, member, has been going to—they did a bunch of rewiring and used to, you could go in, look at the electrical box and you can flip off everything you don't want on, where all the lights are really bright, like all those spotlights on the stage and everything, you can flip all that off. Now I have to say, "Okay, what's off now, what's off now?" Because he's never redone the box with the names. That's a project for an anonymous person that I won't name. But those are things you have to think about there. We, at one time, really tried to let the community use that building for functions, but you have to remember, the building was built for the Christmas ball in December, in winter, so in June, if you want to have a wedding in that building, it'll melt the icing off your cake. Then just people did not take care of it from the sheer historical fact of the building, you know, we still require if you're going to use that building, if you were going to use it, no smoking, particularly in the building and we prefer no drinking in that building. You would go back after somebody used it and even if they had to lose their deposit, they didn't care that they stamped out cigarettes in the building on the floor and just left their beer cans crumpled on the floor. So if you're not going to rent to one group, you have to not rent to all in this day in time. It's discrimination.

ES:

Right, and that renting could have helped bring in revenue throughout the year.

SH:

Right it did, it did.

ES:

So do y'all ever do fundraisers through the year to try to—?

SH:

You know, you think about doing fundraisers and Michael's always talking about, We need to do a fundraiser here, we need to do a fundraiser here. People that are going to come to that fundraiser live 150 miles away.

ES:

That's true and that's something we've been talking about before this came on.

SH:

That locally, it is not supported, but it's not just that our ball is not supported, pretty much anything outside of sporting events in Anson. When they used to have—they started a Larry Chittenden poetry gathering because the opera house in Anson is beautifully restored. They got grant money to restore that. It's beautiful on the inside now, and that was really neat because it was in conjunction with the ball. It was on the same weekend as the ball, so people that are in town for the ball could go during the day up to the opera house to stuff that was on up there. Then somehow they lost all their funding on that, too. It got to be where somebody else took over from the original people that were doing it, and they thought the ball took away from there event instead of thinking that we add to each other. So they still do that, like, on Saturday, but they have their barbeque supper starts at eight o'clock, which is when our ball starts, so it's hard to do fundraising in that town. Now, the one fundraiser we have which started, this year will be our third. It's called Cowboy Christmas Ranch Supper. We're into these long names. It can't just be one or two words. Michael suggested we do this as a fundraiser and sell fifty tickets. The first year we only sold thirty because we thought that's all we could do because the whole concept of that dinner is done by association women, not women, members because guys cook. Bernie's a better cook than I am, and I really don't care that he's a better cook than I am. So the men and women of the ball, but our age of members has so increased that we do not have that many members that can. Our older members, we don't request them to do anything. All they have to do is be able to come to our ball. Any event that we have, if they can get there, we want them there because they are what built this and what kept it alive to now. So anyway, we do this ranch supper and it's the meal that we've actually provided for Michael and the band since they've been coming in '93, which was pitched to our members as a potluck meal. So the ladies really kind of ran with that, that, oh, Juanita Beasley was just elated to bring her famous apricot cobbler, which was wonderful. So anyway, Michael said he's talked for years about, "You need to do that; you could sell this many tickets to that." We reached our maximum, we are only going to sell fifty tickets, and that's what we have sold this year. It's sold out, and then we allow for the association people that come and we have some younger members that have younger kids at home that they bring to that. We always allow for extra people for Michael because Michael likes to invite people. We like for him to invite people, too. That's how we found Tech people. So this year we're cooking for probably about—I think our last count was like 127, so we're rounding that off to 130.

ES:

Wow, so fifty tickets, but all the other people.

SH:

By the time you add, you know, five members in our house band which they bring their spouses, that's ten. We allow anywhere from fifteen to twenty for Michael's group, and then you add the association people in there, and then you add our honorary members that come and most of them

come single, though. But then we have some people that since we have started doing this dinner with actual guests besides Michael and the group, we have some volunteers, some of my high school chums that I went to high school with volunteer and that loosens us up to be able to mingle with the people that we have sold tickets to so you can tell the story of the ball to them and that kind of thing and do some PR work.

ES:

That's great. I'm trying to decide which questions to ask. What do you hope to see happen with the Cowboy Christmas Ball in the future, long term or short term?

SH:

I hope long term, short term, it doesn't matter, to keep it as much like it's been handed to us as we possibly can. That so generations from—my granddaughter who is three, that she can bring her children to something that is very unchanged and that my Mimi used to help do this. And that's what I hope for. And I hope for some young people that we can train and get them to think the same way we do about—you can have other thoughts if you want, and that's what Bernie says about me. "Suanne, when you are trying to get somebody to do something and you think your way is the right way and then they inject something into that, the look on your face tells them they are all wrong." I said, "If it's about the ball and it's outside of what we do in the ball, they are all wrong." I apologized one time to some members about, and then I said, "I know you think I am hardnosed and I guess I should apologize to you about that." And then I said, "No, I am not because if I'm not hardnosed about this, then you'll pass something on that is not true about the ball and is not factual about the ball and that doesn't keep it to the way it's always been, so no, I take my apology back." When the ball comes, there is no room for changes that are not absolutely necessary. I understand that our music is a little bit different than even what they played in 1953, I understand that. And I understand that they sing now, which I didn't even realize that until I was watching that DVD the other day, that people sing now. And that's fine, but they sing the songs of not necessarily old, but the music is the same type of old music that has always been there.

ES:

In the tradition of.

SH:

In the tradition.

ES:

So what do you think needs to happen for the ball to be sustained in the future? Are there things that you can see that needs to be done, aside from the roof being fixed?

SH:

The most sustaining thing that we need is we need some younger people that—I mean, they can have their own ideas, but their own ideas truly, truly have to fit into all the round holes. There can be no square pegs in our holes.

ES:

Well, it seems like there's a lot that can be done surrounding the event to help the event and you don't have to change the integrity of the actual event.

SH:

Right.

ES:

So how does my generation get involved? How do we—?

SH:

We just somehow need to get a lot—it turns off a lot of—now I have to say that Greg and Allison Pinkston that are members of the association and have been, this will be their seventh year. Their daughter is a senior in high school this year. We also have another member that their daughter is a senior in high school this year. They have been bringing for the past three years, they are bringing kids. They come and they like what they see there, those two little girls do. They have brought their classes and a lot of the high school kids in Anson to there. The FFA kids at Hawley have brought a lot to there. What I would like to see is with a lot of, like, the FFA kids that there are more family, more parents involved in that activity that actually come with their kids to that. I mean, the kids see it and they like it. When you go away to college, keep coming back. Bring somebody back with you. That's what we need is we have to make it as much as old as we can, but make it where the younger people understand that this is tradition and understand tradition and this is something that you want to pass onto your children as well.

ES:

I would think, too, it would help a whole lot with the younger generation and getting the community more involved, getting the Anson community, and it's probably helping that they're bringing their classmates out. It's just going to take some time.

SH:

You really would think it would. You would think if your children were coming, you know, even if they're old enough to go, if you've never been, wouldn't you like to go and see what your children are going to? I mean, that's what I see.

ES:

I thought it was really interesting the Chittenden, you know their little festival, and then y'all had the ball, and why couldn't Anson get behind that, the chamber of commerce, and have, you know, the hotels get together and the restaurants stay open and it would be this huge draw for this tiny little West Texas town?

SH:

That's what we've always thought, and you would think with the changing of mayors recently it might help because I know that the major, I know him, he used to come to the ball and so did the other major that just went out. But Anson is like the kids that are probably pushing fiftyish now, that were teenagers when I was working in Anson and that their parents were controlling the social, what went on in Anson. The only social aspect is church and church functions, basketball games, football games, and track; that's it. So you're hoping that when those kids, if they stay in Anson, they're going to change. They were there; they wanted a prom in their town. They wanted to go to Cowboy Christmas Ball, you know, down to Pioneer Hall, but Mom wouldn't let them. And now they're the same way that their parents were which is crazy. So I don't know how to change that about Anson. Nobody has ever been able to try to figure out. I mean, that Larry Chittenden thing they had, they had the top names of cowboy poetry in its heyday. It was free; you didn't even have to pay to get in. The people, the performers got tired of coming and playing to so few people in the audience, and then the people that weren't performing would go sit in the audience because they didn't want their fellow performers up there to have to play to nobody. I don't know; I don't know the answer. I truly don't. We've tried to, you know, I have suggested that the association join the chamber of commerce. Let's get involved in the community, and if we're involved in the community, maybe that will make them want to be involved with us. It doesn't help. It doesn't help if we participate in their Christmas parade and all that kind of stuff. It still doesn't change. This is Anson, back in the first of August, they were having an end of summer ice cream party. The chamber of commerce was putting it on, it was for the whole community, homemade ice cream, free. We'll have games for the kids to play, businesses, you can set up tables to promote your business and all that kind of stuff. Kris and Bernie and I took a table and took some candy stuff and had our flyers there for the new ball and set up a table. I'll bet there weren't thirty people there out of the whole town. We were the only—now, one of the special ed. teachers, she had her kids there doing face painting or something and they had a table next to us. We were the only other function that had a table. So it's like you're whacking your head against a brick wall and don't know how to change it.

ES:

That makes it more—it's not just y'all's function anymore, it's just the entire town doesn't get invested in—

SH:

One time we talked one of the local restaurants to staying open after the ball. What do you want to do when you've been at a dance? You had supper early because the dance starts at eight. You danced all night long, you may have had something to nibble on there and to drink there, but you want to go sit down, you want to go eat breakfast.

ES:

Yeah, you don't want to go straight home and go to bed.

SH:

No, no, you want to go to breakfast. They stayed open one time, and they were busy, it was packed, but it only happened once, and it only happened because she was my friend. Then it just wasn't worth it. We asked one of the other restaurants that's been there forever, Bernie talked to him, and he said, "Oh I can't get any of my help to work late like that." Bernie said, "Aren't you the boss?" There was one woman, and she has passed away a long time ago now. She used to buy, when she would go to market, she knew that there were going to be people coming into town and she had a little gift shop, type thing downtown Anson. She, at market, would buy western oriented Christmas stuff because she knew she could sell that to the people that came there. That's the only person. Your county people don't come. You know, they came to our dedication when we had our historical dedication. The president of the Jones County Historical Society said, "You know, we have never had a dedication that was this elaborate before. I mean, we did the Pledge Allegiance to the Texas Flag and the United States flag, the Anson band came, part of the band came and played the songs. We had refreshments; we had this big huge cake in the shape of Texas that was really pretty. He said, "I can't believe we didn't video that because we've never had one like that before." It just wasn't done, we didn't either. Those VHS tapes are all mine that I did when we were there and when we used to video. We just got tired. You know, we just got busy. It's not that you're tired, you're just busy doing other stuff.

ES:

Yeah, y'all just need more help to have people document it. It seems like in the thirties—what was that lady's name that copyrighted?

SH:

Lenora Barrett.

ES:

Lenora Barrett. It seems like Ms. Barrett was the—if it weren't for her, it wouldn't have been recreated, it wouldn't have stayed through the thirties, and it seems like today, if it weren't for you, it wouldn't still be hanging on.

SH:

You know, I credit Bernie with so much. He was a great president. Bernie has a—some lady told him one time he had a caustic personality. He can be, but it's usually because he's right about what he's saying, and he doesn't want to waste time with all that other stuff. But you know, there are—I mean, I'm over passionate about it, I know that. This summer we were in Colorado and we stopped in some place, and I can't even remember. It's a BB gun that—something flyer.

ES:

Is it Red Ryder or something like that?

SH:

Yes, Red Ryder, yes. The man that invented that, he has a museum there. We stopped in there because we'd never been in there when we were in Pagosa Springs, so we stopped in and this lady was just the volunteer there, you know. She gave us all the spiel and we're thinking, Oh we're done, we can go. Well she followed us around everywhere we went, and she was telling us everything and I looked at our friend and I said, "Please tell me I don't sound like that about the Christmas ball." He said, "Pretty much." So I know I am to the point of obnoxious sometimes, but that's okay because it has to be or it's going to go away.

ES:

I'm taking a class right now, and that's something that I've noticed. There are these musical traditions that if they don't have somebody who's their champion who says, "We're going to keep this going if it kills me, we're going to keep this going," then it just dies off immediately. You have to have people passionate about it.

SH:

The dinner that we do, some people have gotten a little bit lax about what they're supposed to bring, so last year Kris and I came up with this idea. We can assign—we provide the menu, I mean the recipe even, simple foods. They are potluck type foods, it's nothing fancy. Well, we didn't find out till this year, it wasn't very well received. So we sat down again and laid out everything and handed them out. Evidently they were kind of offended by that. I told them, I said, "You know, you can cook whatever you want." And some of them were saying, "Well, I do great green beans, and I want to do green beans." I said, "Maybe we should have gotten together and planned this, but they're all too busy. Any time you try to get them to something, they're going here or going there, that's the hardest thing I ever do is schedule a meeting. I told them, I said, "Y'all can change anything you want. You're going to have to coordinate and tell us what you're doing because some of us may be doing what you want to do." Then I sent out an e-mail and I said, "Starting in 2012, somebody else can step up and chair our dinner." I didn't tell them that in my letter, "If you chair this, maybe you're going to see that somebody wants to bring nothing but a relish tray. Well, if you have a sit down dinner like that, a relish tray doesn't go

very well if you're just doing dips and you're just standing around talking and that's fine, but no, you can't just do a relish tray. You have to bring real food." So those are the things. You've got to get some people that—and I don't know why—these girls, young women, are not any younger or older than I was when I jumped into this. And if you accept the invitation because you're invited to join, we invite you and you say yes.

ES:

And how does that happen? Do you—would you go to the ball or you'd see these women go to the ball for a couple years and then—

SH:

Actually, it's mostly like they're friends of yours or friends of your friends and they say, "Oh this couple, they really like to dance, and they're really involved in the community and all that kind of thing." I tell everybody, "You need to look at people and see what talents they have to bring to us, that's what we need. We need carpenters that can carpenter." That's how it's always been, you brought what talent you had to it. I guess my talent's bossy.

ES:

Organizer or taskmaster.

SH:

Yes whatever, whatever.

ES:

Now do the association members, do they have to be couples or can it be like a single woman?

SH:

Couples.

ES:

Okay.

SH:

Why, and I'll tell you why. This was Juanita's version of why.

ES:

Okay.

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SH:

Because they tried having a single woman in there one time, and they didn't like—now, if she were married, she could dance with her husband all night long if you wanted to. You can dance with—like Juanita's husband could have danced with this other lady, and it wouldn't have bothered, but if that lady's single, it bothered Juanita that she was dancing with her husband. So Juanita says it should be couples, but it has traditionally been because you think back a long time ago, you didn't do a lot of cutting in dancing. You danced with who brought you to the ball.

ES:

And most women got married pretty early on.

SH:

Right, early in life, that's what they did.

ES:

And they became involved in organizations, and it makes sense.

SH:

So our bylaws do pretty much specify legally married couples under the laws of Texas, and that means man and woman.

ES:

And I seem to remember you telling me back in April that if somebody gets divorced, that only one member stays in the association?

SH:

Yeah, now Clay brought that to us because they had that in another organization he's in, they had that. We've never had that problem, but he seemed to think it would be a really huge problem if that ever happened that if you're in the association as a couple and you divorce, if you cannot decide between you which one is going to stay in and which one's going to go out because you're not both going to stay, then it has to be done in the divorce decree.

ES:

Oh wow.

SH:

Now we've had some like Rhonda, she was married before and divorced. Her and her first husband were in the association together and I remember Gladys saying—and Gladys is the lady that is now ninety-eight and will be ninety-nine in January. In 1993, she said when Rhonda and Davis got married, we were at a meeting and she said, "Well, I guess we better go about the

business of electing Rhonda's husband since she's married him, I guess we have to vote him in." But no, it has to be a couple.

ES:

So what if a single individual wanted to be involved? They could, they just couldn't be in the association?

SH:

They can be involved in like the honorary thing over here because our r three honoraries are, two of them are divorced and one of them is widowed and they can be, and why that's okay, I'm not sure. I guess it's because they don't officially dress like us and they can't vote.

ES:

Now it's one of the honorary members that's doing all the dresses for y'all.

SH:

Correct, she chose to be. She doesn't want to be a member.

ES:

Okay.

SH:

Because if she's a member then she has to dress like us and she makes all her own outfits and she likes to wear a different outfit that nobody else has on like her every night. That's her choice.

ES:

Okay, it's interesting though that she's one of the honorary members and she does the most work practically all year round.

SH:

If it weren't for her with me, the two of us together last year, you can't believe everything we did to that building last year, just Kris and I. Our sign that's at the—which the Anson FFA did for us, but the polymer thing that they had put on had weathered off really bad, and so Bernie and I got it down from there together and to Pioneer Hall, and then Kris and I went off and on with that forever. I don't know how many coats of polyurethane we put back on that thing, but it has—of course, we haven't had that much rain either, but it still looks great, but when we were going to put it back up, we thought we could do it by ourselves. It's a good thing Bernie was there that day because we would have never gotten it. So there are some things she and I cannot do by ourselves, but she has been a godsend to me because she is another me. She is totally immersed in that and doesn't understand why all of our members don't have that same drive, you know,

and commitment. That's how she was raised. If you're going to do something, you're going to do it right or don't do it.

ES:

I think it's just the mindset. Maybe some people aren't realizing that even from the beginning, this was meant to be as historically accurate as possible. There's no leniency on that. I think that's amazing, even from the beginning. It was a reenactment to begin with.

SH:

A reenactment—what do you think that word means?

ES:

Well, for the recorder, what do you think reenactment—?

SH:

Reenactment, you make it as much today as much like it was in 1885 as it is today on anything you do. I don't care if you're reenacting a 1962 sock hop dance that I would have gone to in high school if we danced. You make it as much like it as you can. That's what a reenactment is, you know what it was like then, you've learned. If you're in this, surely you have sought the history of it to know and that you can tell if somebody walks up to you and asks you—by the way, there were two ladies that worked on that first reenactment and they were both school teachers that never married in Anson, Hybernia H-y-b-e-r-n-i-a Grace and Ms. Barrett's is L-e-o-n-o-r-a. It was the two of them together and she has quite a few books, Ms. Grace does. If you look up in the handbook of Texas, she has some books that she did about Texas.

ES:

Okay, so they were all about preserving and chronicling Texas history.

SH:

Right. Ms. Barrett was the school librarian and that diary, y'all have that diary.

ES:

Oh yes, from the forties.

SH:

Have y'all had a chance to read that?

ES:

Some of it, yeah.

SH:

And she's a very precise exacting person. It's just that's what it takes. And it's like y'all, if you don't do these things, than a hundred years from now if we're all here, who's going to know? Wouldn't you like to know what it was like when your grandmother was young?

ES:

And it's things like these oral history interviews that I love doing because it's the little things that we're talking about now that a hundred years from now we may not even think is important and they're like, Oh my gosh, this tells me so much. So that's why we want to be sure and get to talking to y'all and talk to you multiple times and make sure we cover everything that we can.

SH:

Right, right, and there may be something coming up every time, you know, that might be a little bit different or to remember. That's just like—I remember when we first came in 1993, that Michael year, Saturday nights were really special, too, because a lot of people that lived away would not come on that night Murphey was there because they don't like the crowds, and that's not what the ball was really about. They come for the tradition on Saturday night because that's always when they came. We heard about and Bernie wrote in his remembrances of the ball, he wrote about Sweet William. He said, "You hear the women talk about Sweet William and you just can't wait to meet." This went on forever, you know, with us new in the association and wonder if he's coming this year when we'd be doing stuff at the ball. These ladies that knew Sweet William would be wondering, Think he'll come again this year? He's been here, he's come for so long. You know, he's getting older, he lives all the way in Houston. Do you think he'll come? When Sweet William comes in, he's this guy in this funky looking vest, and he has his jeans on. He's appropriate in every way. His hair's pulled back in a long gray pony tail and he dances the appropriate dances. He's not out of norm of anything about the ball other than maybe a little bit of his looks. Bernie said, "I expected a 6'4 really handsome guy." And Sweet William was not that. And then there was this little guy that came from Big Spring that was a professional dancing teacher. He really complained to Bernie about, Whatever you're putting on the floor is making a residue on my dancing slippers. And he was just really a pain the little man was, and the hat thing, he wanted to totally just disregard the hat rule. So they were getting ready to leave, and he had gone back to get and had his hat, fixing to go out, and then she decides she has to go to the bathroom. So he's standing back there and the song comes on and he just can't stand still for that song. So here he is dancing around the edge of the floor with a hat on his head, and Bernie's trying to catch him, and he sees Bernie coming from behind and he dances even faster and waltzes out the door with his hat on his head. So there are memories like that of people that you just really like to see come back. I know y'all heard that story about the little couple from Rotan that went as children, you know, young dating people and they hadn't been since they had gotten older, and she's in a wheelchair now, and the young couple next door to them in the small town, they didn't have any family, it was just her and him and they kind of looked after

them, and we were just kind of doing some advertising on KDRP which is out of Haskell, and she heard that about the ball, and she was talking to this young lady that helps them and she said, "Oh, we used to have so much fun when we would go to that ball, and I just so wish that we could go one more time before we're gone." I'll get all teary on this one. They came, that couple and their two little kids brought them. They came in the front door, she's in her wheelchair and he pushes her around the parameter of that dance floor to the tune of the music and the flow of the music. And she's tapping her feet every once in a while. She didn't have foot pedals and she can touch the floor every once in a while. She tapped her feet all night long as they made it around there, and as they were going out the door she looked at me and she said, "Thank you for keeping this, so we can come again one more time." And you know, it's things like that that make me passionate, and if you don't hear those things from people, then you don't, you know, maybe that's why because they don't mix enough with the people to hear those stories.

ES:

I think that's one of the reasons why we need to be there and we need to ask people to tell their stories because it even happens with me in the archive. We'll bring in materials, and it won't mean nearly as much until I hear the stories behind it. You just need to see, you know, one little story that can make it all have so much more of an impact.

SH:

And when Michael first started coming I had a call from a gentleman, a very older man in Clyde, which is you know where that is. He asked me, he said, "I used to go to that, but because of my condition now I cannot, but they used to broadcast that over the radio. Do you think they'll ever do that again?" I said, "Probably not, sir, but I really wish they would for people like you so you, once again, could hear what was going on in that building."

ES:

Have y'all ever tried to get one of the Abilene stations that broadcasts wider?

SH:

You know, one came out, one that was getting started, and if they're going to come and do that, they want to do it like they do everything else for a business, just stand around and talk about it, not broadcast what's going on, on the dance floor. Plus, you're going to have to pay them mega bucks to do it. And KRBC did that just because it was something for the community. They came all the way from Abilene to Anson to do that, but it was for what the ball was and entertainment for people. Of course, people can do anything for entertainment now.

ES:

Right.

SH:

And you know, that's one thing that's hard on us, but we see more and more young couples coming at least one of the three nights and bring in two or three small children with them. It's like, Maybe they are hungry for a slower pace and a more civil environment where it's friend talking to friend, even if it's just I'm meeting you for the first time.

ES:

Right, right, and I think it's hard to describe what that room's like or it's hard to get across to people what it's like until you walk in there and you really do—

SH:

Till you walk in, just like Mr. Jones from South Dakota.

ES:

Right, right you really do feel the history. So I guess it was in the fifties then that KRBC came out and broadcast and that probably—

SH:

It was probably like in the end of World War II, at the very end of the forties and into the fifties that they did that.

ES:

Because I was trying to figure out what sustained the ball in the fifties, sixties, seventies in that time because it held on somehow.

SH:

It did, and if you read that ledger book, you will see that some years the crowds are off, and then some years you'll have 900 people in that building on a Saturday night. You know, we've never had 900 people in there on a Saturday night, but we have made like \$1,500 off the gate on a Saturday night which is good at \$5 a ticket. See, that's another thing, and I'm probably in trouble for that, too, because I keep dragging my feet on that. They voted to increase our prices for tickets because you can't go anywhere or do anything for \$2, but if you're going to come and just be a spectator in that audience and watch, why should you pay \$10 to do that? And why should we require them to do that? We're not out to make a fortune off of this. That's not what the ball is about. I would rather have twenty people come at \$5 apiece to dance than to get ten people there at \$25. You defeat your own purpose, and then you start, so we say, Okay, what are you going to do about traditionally you get an older group in this ball? You're still bringing in people that used to come a long time ago. They are on limited income, so you're going to jack the price up, even \$10, and so instead of paying ten for them to get in, they're going to pay \$20, and they've had to pay more for gas to get here.

ES:

Right and I can imagine a lot of the older couples, they have to have somebody drive them and so they've got another person that has to pay that money and they're probably not going to dance.

SH:

Right, they're there to help them.

ES:

Yeah.

SH:

I said what about traditionally we don't charge kids. You have to be a pretty old kid before you're going to get charged to get in, probably thirteen, at least to get into the ball.

ES:

Which is what's done in museums, you don't charge for kids to enter a museum.

SH:

So then they've got this long scenario—this was a Clay thing—about the ages.

ES:

Zero to this age.

SH:

Oh yeah, yeah, yeah, and you've got to factor in and be sure you've get the Medicare age people. whatever. So every year, this would be the third year that Kris has forgotten that and she's updated the website to where those prices are already posted out there on the web, so we can't go back on that. That's how we've gotten around it. But I still say, I would rather fill the building with five dollar people than make this corner full with twenty-five.

ES:

Have y'all ever set out tip jars or donation jars or anything? I'm wondering if you let them know, Our roof is getting old.

SH:

Michael talks about that and people will come to me and hand me \$20. They don't want—they're not going to give you their name. We had a great time here, we've never been to anything like this before. There is a man that comes, he grew up in Anson. He used to always come on Friday night when Michael was there and they ranch and they can't be away for Thursday too.

They still come on Friday night. He hands me a hundred dollar bill. I think we were like nineteen years? Nineteen years, so he has given us \$1,900 in these years.

ES:

Do you know his name so some day you can—?

SH:

Oh yeah.

ES:

Some day you can say something.

SH:

Oh no, I always do. He's not anonymous, he just hands it and says, "Here, this is from me and Lisa." He used to say to me before we redid the men's bathroom, "I certainly hope someday you save up enough money to do something about that bathroom floor before we fall through there." The year the ball came where we had had the bathrooms redone that year, and as soon as he came in, I saw him, spotted him. I was at the front of the building, I went all the way back where he was. I said, "Come, come quick. I have to show you something." I took him by the hand and we went in the men's bathroom together. He said, "Thank goodness." And he always does that. Now we have some people that came to us, to the ball because of Michael. When they had fires up here, way past Lubbock, way up on the Oklahoma/Texas line up there when they had all those fires that burned out ranches, Michael did a benefit up there and these people met them, the Hendersons. They don't care if I tell their names. They came to the ball. They called and got tickets and came. They've been coming back every year since. They used to send, like, I would get a check, oh, three or four months after the ball was over. I'd get a check for \$100 or \$200 from them. The year before last, I got a check from them for over \$400. They donated a steer that was being sold at auction to us. The check came directly from the auction to us because it was designated as a sale for us. That way all the deduction stuff for them is already taken care of there at their auction. The steer was over five hundred dollars. Every year they do that.

ES:

That's amazing, that's great.

SH:

And they buy—they came last year to the—and they are the most unassuming people that, you know, it's just they appreciate saving the tradition as a farmer rancher that they are of what that first one was about. They appreciate that. But they came to the dinner and they're coming to the dinner again this year and then they buy ten tickets for their family to the dance, just to the dance. So there are people out there that do. And probably if we ask more, but it's going to be—

you'd have to ask that night. It's people that are away from here that would give. And Bernie's always told Michael, "If you want to do anything for the ball, you're going to have to do it in Fort Worth, Dallas or somewhere where people know about the ball and the surrounding that you can pull from people." He said, "That's what you have to understand is that the population we're pulling from immediately around us is not what comes to the ball all the time.

ES:

I was thinking about do y'all lose people because of football games or like if Anson's in the playoffs that year, and then I realized not a lot of Anson people actually go to the ball, so you don't have to worry if there's a playoff game that day.

SH:

Yeah, well you would lose an association member if they—and Ethan graduated from Tech, his graduation was, guess what? The weekend of the ball. I said, "Why didn't you graduate in May?" He had always said, "I'm not going to walk across the stage. All I'm going for is my degree, and I don't have to have it coming across the stage. You know how long you'd have to sit there?" So he didn't, but I told him, I said, "Jonathan, if you want to do that—" because it was on a Friday. I said, "As soon as—" No, when did he graduate? Do you have graduations on a Saturday?

ES:

Yeah, Friday and Saturday.

SH:

Yes, that's what it would've been. He would have graduated Saturday, so we would have had Michael there, and Bernie and I would have been there from eight thirty in the morning and usually by the time you send Michael off, it's like two thirty, and then you close down the buildings and whatever, so we may get home three o'clock. We would have left Anson come here. And as soon as his graduation was over, we would have turned around and been back in Anson in time for the ball that night. Now, not everybody would do that, but that is what—

ES:

You make it a priority, and that's the problem.

SH:

These are our out-of-states so far this year.

ES:

Nebraska, Florida, Kansas, Oklahoma, and South Dakota. Nice, nice, that's great. You've got a notebook right here, I'm going to say it on the recorder, so it's not just like, Oh look at it—you've got a notebook with all the reservations for the ranch supper.

SH:

For the ranch supper, yes, which is sold out fortunately, and this is my little book that I keep everything in about the ball. This is MMM which stands for Michael Martin Murphey, just the ball tickets over here. Then in the back I keep my deposits over here at the back of that. Well, it's supposed to. Where are they? Anyway, this is my whole book. I had a bigger book and it was just too big. This is addresses that I need for everything here. It's all in one book.

ES:

So you have one of these for every year?

SH:

Mhmm.

ES:

See, that's another one of the things that we'd love to have eventually is have all these notebooks because it's record keeping stuff.

SH:

And I will get you most of those. It was a different system when Netty was selling, when she was at the chamber, Netty B. We got into this, she was the chamber manager and she sold the majority of Michael tickets over the phone. I had—when she gave me the money from that, I had a book. So from 1993 to 2010, you can see every ticket we sold for Michael Martin Murphey in that.

ES:

Wow, that's great.

SH:

Then the dinner was in there and in the books for last year, and then I changed the way I was doing it because I'm more mobile with this than that. And this is another thing, people from out of town want to know, "Where can we stay?"

ES:

Right, right, so you've got everything.

SH:

So I now have in my book the motels in Abilene that are easy access off of I-20, and the one motel that we have in Anson, one modern motel in Anson. They appreciate you giving them that, and I know they look it up on the—and they can say, Well I can get it off of the computer, I said, “But I have it right here for you.”

ES:

Right, right, and it's more personal, they're not going to be at some shady motel that way.

SH:

Right and most of them are new out there.

ES:

Well, the recorder is starting to say it's got a low battery. Is there anything else you want to add to all of this?

SH:

No, just the reiteration of the ball is something very, very special, and I know you can say that because you've been. It is something that we will strive to continue as much unchanged as possible.

ES:

Great, well thank you very much.

End of Recording