

**Oral History Interview of
Karen Shelnett**

**Interviewed by: Monte Monroe
April 16, 2011
Anson, Texas**

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

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Interview Series Background:

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

Transcript Overview:

This interview features Karen Shelnett of the band Muddy Creek. Karen talks about her interest in music growing up and reflects upon her experiences playing with her band at the Cowboy Christmas Ball.

Length of Interview: 00:17:56

Subject	Transcript Page	Time Stamp
Background, childhood, and school	5	00:00:00
Music	7	00:04:55
Muddy Creek	11	00:08:56
Future of the ball	12	00:15:05



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Monte Monroe (MM):

This is Monte Monroe from Texas Tech University Southwest Collection. It is 4-16-2011, April 16, 2011. I am in Anson, Texas, at the facility of the Cowboy Christmas Ball. I have here with me Karen Shelnutt and we are going to talk about her being a member of the backup band here and some of the things about her life and about this wonderful event, The Cowboy Christmas Ball. Karen, if you would please give me your full name, any nickname if you have one, your date of birth, and your place of birth.

Karen Shelnutt (KS):

My name is Karen Shelnutt. I grew up in El Dorado, Texas, and my date of birth is 7-21-54.

MM:

What were your parents' names?

KS:

Wiley and Ruby Height.

MM:

Okay and your mother's maiden name?

KS:

Priddy. [?]

MM:

Okay, do you know where they were born? Your father first.

KS:

London, Texas, and my mother was born in Coleman, Texas.

MM:

Okay, what are your grandparents' names? Let's start with your paternal side first.

KS:

Daddy's parents were John Oliver and Lenny Height.

MM:

Okay and your grandmother's maiden name, do you recall?

KS:

Pearl.

MM:

Pearl. Okay and your maternal grandparents?

KS:

My step grandfather was James Taylor and Gertrude Boatwright.

MM:

Okay very good. Now, what was your home life like growing up? You know, your neighborhood or the farm or ranch you lived on or, you know, who were some of your playmates and things that you liked to do when you were a young girl?

KS:

Well, I grew up a tomboy. We only had boys in our neighborhood and we kind of lived on the edge of El Dorado, which is a small town, about fifteen hundred people. I had a twin brother, or have a twin brother, and Mother had two sets of twins. My oldest brother had a twin brother, but he passed away when he was two days old. Then I have a middle brother also.

MM:

And their names?

KS:

My oldest brother's name was Hubert Coy. He passed away in '09. Then I have a middle brother named James Earnest and he's four and a half years older than me and Kenneth. My twin brother's name is Kenneth. So I grew up playing baseball and trucks and climbing trees. Mother gave me dolls, but they kind of went by the way side because like I said, there was always boys in the neighborhood and no girls. I was born in El Dorado and graduated from El Dorado.

MM:

Very good, now what were your favorite classes in school and did you have any teachers or anybody else that influenced you in your life that you really hold dear in terms of your memory?

KS:

Me, I love music. So anything to do with music class, band, choir, that was about my favorite part of the school day. I had a music teacher in elementary, Mrs. Teal. She was a great influence on me on my music and stuff that I've just kept on with it.

MM:

And what grade did you first encounter Mrs. Teal?

KS:

We started having music in the first grade. She taught all those years that I was in elementary and high school.

MM:

So you would consider her a model for you when you were growing up then?

KS:

Yes, yes.

MM:

Did you have any others? Your parents or somebody in church or somebody else in the community?

KS:

My mother, she was a very Christian lady, and she always loved to sing. She took piano lessons for a little while. Even when I was in elementary she took piano lessons and everything, wanted to learn the piano and promote music and that's how I got started. I greatly admire my mother, her values.

MM:

Did you participate when you were in high school in any formal band activities or music choir activities or maybe in the church? Or did you participate in sports?

KS:

I started playing for church on Sunday nights. I was about eight or nine, I guess. My feet couldn't even reach the floor, the pedals, and they couldn't see me above the music stand. I played like that for a long time.

MM:

The piano?

KS:

The piano. Then I went to play the piano on Sunday mornings when I was a little bit older and played there until I was a freshman in high school. The preacher and his wife were being transferred, and the preacher's wife played the organ and so I went to playing the organ when I was a freshman in high school. I played for church all these years. I'm still playing for church. There for a while at Baird I was playing for two church services—the Presbyterians needed somebody to fill in on them, so they moved their church service to ten o'clock, and then I went to Methodist at eleven. I did that for about six or seven years.

MM:

Okay so your denomination is?

KS:

I was Methodist.

MM:

Methodist, okay very good. Did you play any sports growing up? You say you were a tomboy.

KS:

No.

MM:

No organized sports?

KS:

No, Mother was afraid I would jam my fingers or break my fingers and wouldn't—

MM:

Be able to play.

KS:

Yeah, and she didn't push me to do that.

MM:

And did you attend college anywhere?

KS:

I only went to Stenograph Institute for a couple of years.

MM:

Okay very good. Now, what is your current position now? Do you work?

KS:

I work, yes; I work for Edward Jones Investments.

MM:

Okay and what do you do with them?

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KS:

My title is branch office administrator which I guess is a title for secretary or general flunky.

MM:

Okay and that's here in Anson?

KS:

In Abilene.

MM:

Oh in Abilene. Okay, very good.

KS:

In Abilene.

MM:

Are you involved in any service activities or groups or extracurricular activities with either the church or elsewhere in the community? Organizations like Lions or Rotary?

KS:

No, just the band Muddy Creek.

MM:

Okay now tell me a little bit about your band experience. You mentioned Muddy Creek, but tell me how you funneled yourself into a band.

KS:

We originally—well, I was in a church band there for a little while before that, the Methodist preacher loved to play and he wrote songs and everything.

MM:

And what was his name?

KS:

Daniel Moore.

MM:

And which church was this?

KS:

Methodist.

MM:

No, the name of the church if you recall, the church that you attended, the Methodist church.

KS:

Oh First Methodist in Baird, Texas.

MM:

In Baird, Texas, okay.

KS:

And we had several that played and so we all got together and just did music for church and everything. We'd play at functions outside of church. Then it kind of evolved from that that the drummer and the guitar player knew some other people, so we started playing, got together with some other musicians at the drummer's house. That's how I met Jimmy, he's here today. And then we kind of just started playing old classic country stuff, just playing and having fun and somebody heard us and wanted to know if we could start playing somewhere else and kind of evolved from that.

MM:

And how did you drift into the country genre? What appealed to you about that?

KS:

I grew up on country music. My daddy and my grandpa played fiddle and my aunt played piano and banjo and fiddle and anything else that she picked up. I just grew up with country music.

MM:

Okay and you have a strong lineage of musicians in your past and people who sing.

KS:

Right.

MM:

Okay very good. Well, continue to tell me a little bit more about how you became involved and ultimately being the backup band here at the Cowboy Christmas Ball.

KS:

Well, we'd been playing around for—Muddy Creek was organized, I guess, started in about '92, '93, the last part of '92, first part of '93, somewhere around in there. And we'd just been playing locally and around. We do the classic country music that you dance to, you know, the two-step and cotton eyed joe and stuff like that. I don't know, Suanne called one time and said that their

former band was no longer going to be playing and would Muddy Creek be interested. So we told them yes we would give it a shot and see if they liked us. I guess we've been here two years now.

MM:

Okay very good. And who are the members of Muddy Creek and where are they from?

KS:

Okay Jimmy Dokey is the base player, he's from Hawley. Dwayne Burns is the steel player, he's from Anson, right outside of Anson they call Funston, I think. Gary Sanders is the fiddle player, and he's from Clyde. Pat Karraker is our drummer, and he's from Abilene. Then me, Karen Shelnutt, I'm from Baird, and I play the keyboard.

MM:

And just briefly if you can, tell me how all y'all met each other and how you ultimately formed Muddy Creek.

KS:

Well Jimmy was one of the ones that came to our former drummer, Chuck Bailey's house because he knew Chuck. Anyway, that's how I met Jimmy. Then Jimmy knew Gary Sanders, our fiddle player, and we brought him in, like I said, playing in the garage and having fun and then our drummer, I can't remember how we met him, how we got him going. He played with us for a long time, and then he quit about ten years ago to watch his kids grow up and played football, sports, and baseball and stuff like that. He has recently come back to playing with us here about a month ago. Dwayne, I think Jimmy knew Dwayne also and brought him in. That's basically—it's just kind of a word of mouth, you know, "Come play with us," or whatever, and then we've been together since.

MM:

Very good, very good. Now you've briefly talked about how you became involved in the Cowboy Christmas Ball. What was your first experience like and how deeply involved are you now? Are you a member of the board or are you just a member of the backup band? I know I saw you playing with Michael Martin Murphey's band this year. Tell me a little bit about those experiences and what your first impressions were and what they are now.

KS:

I'd always heard about the Christmas ball. I never had been before. I always wanted to, but just seemed conflict on the weekend that they did it and couldn't make it. The first time that we came here to play, I was very impressed with the organization of the ball itself and how well it ran and how it flowed. Michael Martin Murphey did an outstanding job, and the first night we came, we

played right before, forty-five minutes before he came on. That was an experience because we set up on the floor and then we had to move everything out of the way so his band could play and everything. And then after the next night, we had to come beforehand and set everything back up on the stage. So that was an experience. We had to hurry, but the dance itself, it was enjoyable to watch all the different people that come to this. I think that was a highlight to me just watching the people, the enjoyment they were having dancing and just socializing. You know, people from all over the country come to this. That was our first year. And then last year, it was a little more in tune of what was going on and not as many people came on the Thursday night that Michael came because it's hard for people. It wasn't as crowded, but people still enjoyed every minute of it. We, the backup band, are appreciative that they've asked us to do this. Like I said, we love what we do. That was our pact when we first started that as long as we enjoyed what we were doing, we would keep on doing it.

MM:

Well let me ask you this, Karen, are you a member of the board of the band or are you just playing as the backup of the band?

KS:

Just playing as the backup band.

MM:

Are you familiar with competing events going on in town relating to Larry Chittenden and cowboy poetry or the Cowboy Christmas Ball? Are you aware of any of those types of things?

KS:

Yeah, I know they usually have the poetry reading the same weekend. Then Snyder had a Christmas ball that same weekend also last year.

MM:

What do you see this event being long term? And do you have any aspirations for the event long term?

KS:

I think it'll keep going as long as the enthusiasm of the board is there. They do need to probably start bringing in younger members because of the older ones, you know, are getting up in years and are not going to be able to do this much longer. I know they've lost several here in the last couple years. As long as they can keep the enthusiasm going and get people willing to help, to come in to help them, I think it will keep going.

MM:

Very good. If it was up to you to tweak or adjust the Cowboy Christmas Ball, how would you do that to assure a prosperous future for this event?

KS:

Right now I can't think of anything that they need to change. They're trying to keep it as close to tradition as possible.

MM:

And when you say close to tradition, what do you consider that to be?

KS:

The way that it was first started, the songs, basically, and the way the timeline of each event that they did, you know, no hats and ladies wearing dresses; trying to keep the traditional, from the very beginning on up in the years as they go. If they keep that going, that's what makes it unique.

MM:

How do you think that it benefits the community or West Texas in general or future generations? Do you see what its impact is or what it could be?

KS:

There's a lot of history in this dance. When the people come from out of state or even towns here in Texas, it never has been before, they go back with a different attitude as to what happened back when their grandparents or something like that that they might not have even realized. There's a lot of history here that they can learn from.

MM:

Is there anything else that you'd like to share with me today about either your own life or your band or the Cowboy Christmas Ball?

KS:

No, not really. The Christmas ball, I hope, is here for a long time because, like I said, it is a historical thing that people can really enjoy and learn from, too, and to listen to a lot of the people talking that's been here for years, you learn a lot.

MM:

If you could change any one thing, what might you think it would be?

KS:

Not a thing.

MM:

Very good. Well thank you, Karen, very much. Before we end here, do you have any children?

KS:

I have one son, Gary, he's thirty-six. I have a daughter-in-law, Amanda, and one granddaughter, she's fifteen months old and her name is Avery Grace.

MM:

Very good, very good. All right, thank you, Karen.

End of Recording



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