

**Oral History Interview of
Rhonda Weaver**

**Interviewed by: Curtis Peoples
April 16, 2011
Anson, Texas**

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

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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 Rhonda Weaver of Hamlin, Texas. Weaver talks about her involvement with the Cowboy Christmas Ball Association, her views of the ball growing up, and the tension between the ball and the city of Anson. Weaver also discusses the future of the event.

Length of Interview: 00:36:55

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Monte Monroe (MM):

This is Monte Monroe from Texas Tech University Southwest Collection, and I am in Anson, Texas. It is April 16, 2011, and I am at the events center of the historic Cowboy Christmas Ball. I am speaking today with Rhonda Weaver of Hamlin, Texas. I hope she knows my good friend Sheryl Lewis there.

Rhonda Weaver (RW):

Very well.

MM:

Anyway, we're going to be talking about a little of Rhonda's life and then about her affiliation with the Cowboy Christmas Ball. So if you would, Rhonda, please tell me about—or give me your full name and your nickname if you have one and your date and place of birth.

RW:

My name is Rhonda Lee Weaver. I was born and raised here in Anson, a lifetime resident of Jones County. The only nickname I have is Gan-Gan, that's by my grandchildren. What else did you say, I'm sorry?

MM:

Your birthdate.

RW:

My birthdate. I was born November 12, 1955.

MM:

Okay, very good, and what were your parents' names? Your father first.

RW:

My parents was William Thomas Lee, he went by Bill Lee. My mother was Nettie Elizabeth DeBusk Lee.

MM:

Okay, very good. Where were they born and if you know when they were born, just the year, that would be nice, too.

RW:

Both my parents were born here in Jones County to my knowledge. I cannot tell you the years that they were born. I know my mother is now seventy-seven, and my father was a few months older than her.

MM:

Okay, was he a veteran?

RW:

He was in the army, yes. He served there in the Korean conflict.

MM:

Okay very good. What were your grandparents' names on your the paternal side first?

RW:

My paternal side, my father's parents died very—or his mother died when he was four or five years old. His father was not around. He died back in—his dad died back in the fifties. I think it was prior to my birth, so I never knew them. I know his mother's name was Josephine.

MM:

Okay very good and your mother's side?

RW:

My mother's side, her parents were Rector and Elsie DeBusk. My grandmother was full blood German, came over from Germany back—I'm not even sure what year. They lived here in Jones County and were farmers and grew up out in the Corinth community, and then they moved into town and just lived two or three blocks over from where I grew up. My father was also finally settled and being a farmer and farmed for most of my life. I always wanted to be a farmer, but he wouldn't let me. So I married a farmer eighteen years ago.

MM:

Okay, so y'all are still farming now?

RW:

Yes, my husband has a farming operation which I help with it when I can.

MM:

And what crops do y'all farm?

RW:

He grows cotton, wheat, hay grazier, we run a few cattle and right now, a lot of just dirt.

MM:

All right, and his name is?

RW:

Davis Weaver, we married eighteen years ago in October of '92, and he had never been to the ball before, and so by marriage I brought him into the association also, of which he is now serving as president.

MM:

Very good, very good.

RW:

I say I am the non-historical historian. Since I came into the association they labeled me as historian, but I've really never really been the historian I should have been. They've always said, "Okay, here's you an article to put in our book that we keep."

MM:

That's great, I'm not sure I'm the historian I should have been either. Now, tell me a little bit about your childhood, the schools that you went to school at, the high schools you graduated from, what was your home life like? You grew up on the farm, so were you a tomboy? Were you a girlie girl? What kinds of activities did you participate in? What did you enjoy doing and maybe who were some of your neighborhood friends?

RW:

Okay, I was born and raised here in Anson. I was born out here in Anson General Hospital in '55. I have one sister, Donna, and we grew up here in town, we went to high school and elementary school here in town. We grew up in a Christian home, a very loving family. Our grandparents, our maternal grandparents were close by so they were with us a lot. As long as they lived on the farm, we got to go to the farm and play and get our bread sacks, the plastic bread sacks, and we'd go out and pick cotton. We'd go help pick cotton and pick peas. My grandmother loved to pick peas and she would get an apron and sit in the rocking chair and shell peas. To this day, that's still my favorite thing to do is get a big batch of peas and a rocking chair and just leave me alone and let me shell my peas. It's very restful and peaceful and has wonderful memories to it. We loved to go to the farm, but back when my granddad got ill and they came into town and bought a house over in Westover close to my parents. The street I grew up on had lots of kids. There was thirty some odd kids on Avenue N at one time. Everybody couldn't wait until school was out so we could go home and play with our Avenue N family. It just grew up in a simple time, simpler than what it is now.

MM:

What types of games did y'all like to play?

RW:

House, we had a vacant lot over there and we'd play house. The boys would play baseball, and it's neat because some of the kids that I grew up with and grew up after us, their parents had both passed away, and they bought the houses on either side of the lots, and they've got their lot there for baseball for their families and for the neighborhood families, and they bring church groups down there to play because there's such good memories on that lot. We used to go out to a dirt field out behind that lot, and the girls would draw them off a house and we'd take broom weeds and sweep the floor and play. We played kick the can and just things, just played.

MM:

When you went to school, what were the schools that you went to here in Anson and were there any teachers that had a particular influence upon you?

RW:

Yes, we went to Anson Elementary and then the junior high school was right next door to it. It was an old building, a two story building, and then on into high school. I guess there's a couple teachers that really influenced me, and one of them was Lucy Woods. She's Lucy Woods now. She was Lucy Carmen back then. She's still a very dear friend. We went to church together and her daughter and I are real close. She still just amazes me reminding me of books that we read and things. She was a high school teacher, actually.

MM:

What subject?

RW:

English, she taught English, and then later on she went into teaching home ec. Then Shirley Jackson was one of my junior high teachers, and I'm still very blessed to have her—I work with her. I work for the farm service agency here and do farming programs. Her husband was a farmer; her dad was a farmer, and so she had a big influence in my life and still does.

MM:

You mentioned your position. Tell me a little bit about what you do now.

RW:

I'm a program technician for the Farm Service Agency is a branch of the USDA. We handle the farm programs that the farmers work under for the subsidies. I'm in charge of the conservation reserve program which puts land into grass for ten years to help with erosion from wind and water.

MM:

Over what region?

RW:

Jones County.

MM:

Okay, just Jones County, okay very good. Now, are you involved in any civic service groups or civic groups or extracurricular activities here in Anson?

RW:

Not in Anson. I reside in Hamlin.

MM:

Oh I'm sorry, in Hamlin. I'm sorry.

RW:

My residence is in Hamlin. Now, I say I work. I have two towns; I'm here by day and there by night. When my mother was chamber manager for fourteen years, I was involved in a lot of her chamber activities as her help mate.

MM:

Here in Anson?

RW:

Here in Anson, yes.

MM:

Okay and she was director of the chamber of commerce?

RW:

Uh-huh, for fourteen years.

MM:

And tell me what you recall of her experiences with that and how she enjoyed that?

RW:

Oh, she loved it. I mean, she's one of these that just is always looking for some way to better Anson, you know. My dad came down with cancer in '91, I believe it was. There was a vacant lot there just down from the office. So she just started putting a flower bed around the tree and it

was her therapy she called it. And Daddy passed away in '93, and she continued to work around that tree and that tree grew into half a lot and then that tree grew into the whole quarter block, and people came and started taking area, and now it's called the Mays Memorial Garden, and it has lights and statues and a gazebo, and it's just a peaceful place to go and sit. She's all about Anson and making it beautiful and helping it grow. Like I said, she's the ticket manager now for the Christmas ball and sells Michael Martin Murphey tickets. People just come; they can't wait to come, and when they come, they ask for Nettie, they want to me the lady that they've talked to. I mean, even if she is my mother, she is a wonderful face for Anson because she's happy, positive, and very friendly.

MM:

Good, good, now, and that takes us into your affiliation with the Cowboy Christmas Ball. Let's talk a little bit about that. When did you become involved and how did you become involved?

RW:

Growing up in Anson my family was not a dance family. They never went to dances or anything like that, and it was not considered a proper thing for a young lady to be at. I was never allowed to go during high school, any of the dances. It didn't matter what town it was in or the Christmas ball, I wasn't allowed to go. Now, when my aunt came from Dallas, my daddy's sister, Josephine Widdelsey, we would come down here because she was here and we'd get to come down here one night and sit in the stands and watch. I can remember the chicken wire. I don't know why I remember the chicken wire being around the stands to keep people—I assumed it was from throwing something, I don't know—but it was around the stands and it was around the bandstand part. I just thought it was so neat, and everything was so pretty. Well, when I married in '74 to my high school sweetheart, Tony Littlefield, there is a tradition here of the grand march every night. It's led by a newly married couple. So Tony and I were asked to lead the grand march. We didn't even know how to dance. So Cody and Myra Boggs showed us how to waltz because after the grand march, then you break into a waltz, and that finishes out the dance. So they taught us how to waltz enough to get us to the edge of the floor, so we could get off. The next year they asked us if we would consider joining as new members. My sister, Donna, had also married by then, and she was married to Larry Hall, so they joined at the same time around '75. So I've stayed with the ball ever since then. I didn't know how to dance when it started and so Clarence Holt, who was one of the lifelong members here, taught me how to dance. I always called him the Gentle Giant. He was a shorter man in stature, but he was big in personality and he was just so gentle. I remember him as being such a gentle, sweet man.

MM:

Did Clarence impart, when he was teaching you how to dance, did he impart any of the history and tradition of the Cowboy Christmas Ball to you?

RW:

I think the history and tradition was how to dance right, you know, how you hold a lady, how you treat a lady, and how a gentleman acts. It always amazed me because I wasn't used to it that when a dance is over, the gentleman, he would take his hand in mine and put my hand through his arm and escort me back to my husband. It just made you feel like a lady. I think that's what a lot of the ball is, is the tradition of men and women treating each other with the respect and the men treating women with the respect. It's neat; it's neat.

MM:

So what was your—aside from dancing and participating, has your participation in the ball changed over time? Are you involved with the cooking or the organizing, or the selling of tickets like your mom? Or is there any particular component that you're involved with?

RW:

My official title is bow maker. I used to work for a flower shop here in town. That was one of my first jobs out of high school because I married right out of high school. So I make the bows for the men's memorial boot wall up here. I make the bows and then we decorate with the cedar boughs, the week before the ball I make the bows for that. Other than that, now since we have this ranch dinner on the night of Michael Martin Murphey—that is one of my big jobs is to cook. Cooking is my love; I love to cook and used to be a cake maker and decorator. So I love to cook, so Suanne and I are usually the first ones here and the last ones out because we get in there and organize it and get it all going, make sure everything is done. So I guess you could say we're assistant cooks for the ranch dinner.

MM:

Very good, now you were mentioning the men's memorial bow wall out here. Tell me a little bit about that.

RW:

Yes, we have a memorial wall for the men and women who have passed on that were members of the board. For the men we use a grapevine wreath and have their boots inside the center of the wreath. One is set and straight and the other one is upside down over the top of it.

MM:

And what is that to signify?

RW:

That's just to signify their passing.

MM:

Okay.

RW:

Now, we have one up there that stands out on its own and that was Clyde Cooper's. Clyde was a special man all his own. He was just a very special part of the Christmas Ball, he was one of those gentle giants, too, and giant he was. He was very tall, very thin man, and he loved to dance. He was a bachelor and never married, and so he was the social—he was very social and he went around and made sure he danced with nearly every woman in here to make them feel welcome, make sure they had a dancing partner. He was a collector and his boots are inside a harness from a mule team or a horse team because he had a lot of old farm equipment and stuff that he had collected. So his family after his passing gave us his harnesses from his animals that he had kept. And his boots are inside it. Now for the ladies we do a shadowbox with their picture and all of us have jewelry that we wear with our dresses, and most of them are broaches, so we try to get a broach for most of the women. That is another story I'd like to tell you is, when my grandmother passed about ten or twelve years ago, we went through here things and had a lot of jewelry. My mother was going to use it for some art stuff, and I said, "No, you're not." Well I have about five sets of broaches and matching earrings that were my grandmothers and they're now over a hundred years old. So I have a set that goes with—a different set for every night to go with my dresses that were hers.

MM:

How neat. Now how far back does this tradition of the memorial wall go?

RW:

We probably started it twenty years ago, you know.

MM:

And do you remember how the idea immersed?

RW:

No, I really don't. I think we just felt like people needed to know who they were. You know, we had pictures hanging on the wall, but nobody really knew, "They're not in the picture anymore, what happened to them?" So we wanted to do something for their history to show that they were here and what they meant. Just in the recent year, we've moved it up to the front wall, and Bernie Holtman is writing a history on each couple and what they did and his memories of them. We want them to be remembered because they were important to us, and history's important to us. We need to keep their values going.

MM:

Speaking of values, what, as a leader and your current husband as the leader of the organization, the president of the organization, the association now. What are your personal aspirations for the event into the future? Where do you see the Cowboy Christmas Ball in Anson being ten, twenty years? Or where would you like it to be?

RW:

I would like for it to be still like it is now with the traditions, with the values, and teaching the young kids what it's like to be a lady, what it's like to be a gentleman. Society now does not lend to that, and there's a lot of things about the past that were hard, but there's a lot of things of value that we need to remember of how to treat each other—respect, honor. In today's society there's not much of it. This holds that tradition.

MM:

In terms of tradition, or in terms of this event, if you could change any one thing that you think would make it better or improve it in any way, what would that be?

RW:

If I could improve it—

MM:

If you were God—

RW:

If I was God and I could improve it, I would reach down and touch the hearts of the people of Anson, the bulk, and I say the bulk, as in ninety-two percent at least, if not more, percent of the people that come to the Christmas ball, are not from Anson. I can remember after I was inducted in here, and I know there was problems prior to that, but the city tried to shut us down. They did not want the Christmas ball here, and there was a movement of No Dancing in Anson and that's become a laugh, and people all over the United States know about No Dancing in Anson, but there was a great push to get rid of the ball. At the time there were some problems because there was a lot of things happening down around, not in the building, but outside the building that families did not want their children—not bad things, but drinking. So over the last twenty years, we've tried to change that and make it better, but the people still remember that. There's a lot of people who, "Oh, I've never been down there. I didn't know anything about that. I've never been in that building. I didn't know anything about the ball." And they've lived here all their lives.

MM:

Rhonda, I want you to tell me as much about this as you can. You say that your parents didn't allow you to come down here when you were young, when you were in high school. Can you

explain the reason for that to the best of your knowledge? Also, you say that the city tried to stifle the Cowboy Christmas Ball. Elaborate a little bit more on this, not controversy, but this ill will that has emerged between ninety-two percent of the citizens of Anson and the good people who want to have the Christmas ball and preserve these historical traditions that they think are classic American traditions, as you've already described.

RW:

Back when I was in high school, my parents just didn't believe that a lady went to a dance hall.

MM:

Was this for religious reasons?

RW:

A lot of it, yes. My grandparents were very staunch Methodist, and you went to church every Sunday, you had your bible in your hand, you sat still your hands in your lap. My grandmother was the type of, she saw somebody raising their hands in church one time, and she looked at me, she said, "If you ever do that, I'll slap you out of the pew." She was very staunch in her beliefs, and you just didn't do that. My parents were raised that way. You know, there was dance halls around the area, but she made sure I wasn't there. I mean, the night before I got married in '74, I had to be home at midnight. They were very strict parents which I don't find fault with. There's a lot to be said for that, but the people of Anson, over the years have just not—they've not shook loose of the bad stigma we got back in the seventies.

MM:

And what caused the bad stigma?

RW:

Back in there—and I'm not against—understand I'm not against any religion or any church beliefs, but we had a very strong and still have a very strong Church of Christ church here in this town. They were in the higher political seats at that time. The mayor was Church of Christ, a lot of the school board, the city council. So they just decided that since there was so much drinking and bad influence outside the building, we must be the same way on the inside. They didn't come in to see, they just looked at the outside. I can remember one year in particular that we got word inside the building that they had police set up on the corners of the blocks and as people left here they were going to start stopping them and taking them into jail if they had been drinking and that sort of stuff. They did everything they could to shut us down and it seems like ever since then Anson's just been removed from us.

MM:

And what time period was that in your recollection?

RW:

Well, I joined in '75, so I would say '75 to '80 or soon thereafter.

MM:

And you have competing events occurring in Anson at about the same time. Both of which has ties to Larry Chittenden and the famous poem. One is the Cowboy Poetry Reading and then of course the Christmas Ball. Can you make the distinction between the two and how this other event with the Cowboy Poetry Reading immersed? Was it a reaction to what were the perceptions of the Christmas Ball or what do you think?

RW:

I'm really not for sure. There has always been a group in Anson who has worked against the groups like the chamber and everybody who tried to promote Anson. They would try to work against Anson. I don't know why. Anson's never—there has always been a group in Anson that didn't want to cooperate with the others, and if you tried to do something to really promote Anson, they would do something opposite. I have never been to the Larry Chittenden poetry reading. I honestly don't know anything about it except that they do not seem to want to try to work their schedule with our schedule, so it would draw more people into the town that weekend. There was one weekend when they did do theirs early in the day and were through by ball time and people came in and got to do both. It seemed to work real well. Since then, it doesn't seem like they've had that same kind of schedule.

MM:

And have you heard rumors or do you have any inclination whatsoever as to why that is? And who makes up this other group that predominately do the Cowboy Poetry Reading?

RW:

I do not know who is on that board. I'm not sure who's on there right now. You know, our schedule has been the same since before I got here. It's always the full weekend before Christmas, period., whether that ends on the twenty-third or if it ends on the sixteenth. Whatever, it's always the weekend before Christmas; it's been that way since the beginning, I guess. It's one of those things again, people don't work together well.

MM:

Now, what do you see the long term legacy, not only for the community of Anson, but for people who come literally from the four corners of the world to participate in this event? What do you see the long term legacy of the Cowboy Christmas Ball for future generations?

RW:

I hope they look back on us and find things that they learned while they were here that affected them enough that they can take back and teach others about respect and honor, that they can see us as a window of history just like some of the other events that we know of. It's like being able to look back into history because we tried to keep it exactly as it was. You know, there have been others that tried to change things, you know, "Oh, we don't need that kind of dress," or "We don't need that kind of music." But we've tried to keep it as traditional, the way Mrs. Barrett wrote it, as we possibly can so that people can see that this is what it was really like. It's not something made up, it's not something because this is the way we wanted it. This is the way it was.

MM:

In recent years you've had the participation on Thursday nights of Michael Martin Murphey and his band, The Rio Grande. How has that benefitted the event and can you see other participants or would you like to describe other participants and some of the other bands and what type of music that's played and the type of dances that appeal to you and things of that nature?

RW:

You know, when Michael came to us, we were probably in one of the hardest financial times that we've been in. We were at the point of we weren't sure we weren't going to be able to stay on. When Michael came, not that we're not making any money off of it, but we were able to pay our bills, we were able to do some repairs to the building because the building was falling down. Had Michael not had associated with us, I'm afraid we weren't going to be able to because like I said, the participation here in the local area is not good. I live in Hamlin, Texas, and I can't tell you ten people in Hamlin has ever been to the Christmas ball, even with me over there singing about it. As far as the music, I hope it stays just like it is, you know.

MM:

Do you like the western swing, any particular dance? You said that you didn't know how to dance when you first came here, which particular types of dances appeal to you the most, or do they all appeal to you?

RW:

I love to do the waltz. That is just my thing. I love to waltz, I love the little foot, "Put your little foot." Some of the dances now, I can't participate in because of aging knees, but hopefully one day soon that'll be where I can get to do that again, but the waltz is my favorite dance out of all of them. I think it's graceful, and of course, I love the big dresses and the dressing up and all of that.

MM:

Now the backup band is of course, Muddy Creek. They play on Friday nights. Do you enjoy Muddy Creek as well as the Murphey band and would you like to bring in other people as well?

RW:

I'm not one that likes to change a whole lot. If it's working, don't fix it, just leave it alone. Muddy Creek does wonderful. They play the music that the people that come here like. They run a lot with the traditions I believe as Ms. Barrett intended it to be. We had another band prior to them for several years, Lariat. The funny side of Lariat is that the two boys that play in the band, their grandfather was mayor here at one time. He was from the Church of Christ. It was always ironical that they would come and play the ball and he was a Church of Christ who has never been down here. That's funny, but you know, even at the same time they played the music we wanted, but they still didn't quite have the tradition behind it that Muddy Creek has seemed to find and some bands prior to it because they were younger, they weren't brought up in it. They didn't understand the true tradition of it to bring that in. I love fiddle music, I love to dance with the fiddle music and stuff.

MM:

And you feel like Murphey and his band have made a contribution or at least have been able to merge in very well with the traditions of the Cowboy Christmas Ball?

RW:

Yes, yes. And what I like about Murphey is he honors the past. He understands the cowboy ways. He understands the respect and the honor. He understands families and that this is a family deal. That's what we want it to be. We want it to be all about bringing the kids. Like I said, I started in '75, my first child was born in '79, I had two boys and they were brought down here. They danced sitting on our arms or on my husband's shoulders. They were down here. They don't live here anymore, and they don't dance, which breaks my heart. I wish they did because it's fun, but Murphey understands family and the need for bringing family up like this. Anymore, people don't turn off their televisions and put down their video games and their cell phones long enough to enjoy something like this together, and that's what's neat. He honors people and their positions and their history and what they're about. I appreciate everything he's done for us. He's part of our family now. I feel like if I had his phone number and I wanted to talk to him, I could call him and talk to him, and he'd talk to me just like anybody, you know, like everybody else. He's just one of us now.

MM:

If you could define, briefly, what you see as the traditions laid down by Ms. Barrett, do that for us now, of this event.

RW:

She wanted it to be a social event where men and women could get together respectfully and enjoy the simple times.

MM:

Very good, very good. Lastly, I'll ask if you have anything else that you'd like to share either in your own life. I'd like to hear your children's names, your two son's names or anything else you'd like to say about the Cowboy Christmas Ball and your final impressions that you'd like to leave to posterity about the Cowboy Christmas Ball.

RW:

My children's names are Dirk Littlefield, he's my oldest, and Jathan Littlefield. Dirk now lives in Houston and Jathan is in Hamlin. I'll always hold—so many have died that I truly loved here.

MM:

Tell me some names.

RW:

Juanita Beasley, J. O. Beasley, Dub Vincent, Clarence Holt. They were all very special to me. They were here when I came in. They taught me a lot, a lot of things that I never have been experienced in my life. Juanita made me strong; she was very strong woman, a pioneer woman. Clarence was the gentle giant. They were all just very special to me, and I hope that what I've learned from them, that I can leave to the next generation, too, that I can take the good and leave the bad that there was behind, but there's not been that much. They're all very hard working people. They loved you strongly when you got out of line or something was wrong, they weren't afraid to let you know because they loved you. They taught you respect and honor, and that's what it's all about. Friendships are strong down here. We're a family.

MM:

Very good, well stated, Rhonda. Thank you very much, and we hope to see you next year at the Cowboy Christmas Ball.

RW:

I'm looking forward to it.

End or Recording