

**Oral History Interview of
Billy Mays Wise**

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

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

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Interview Series Background:

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

Transcript Overview:

This interview features Billy Mays Wise. Wise discusses growing up in Anson, Texas, her school years, and attending the Cowboy Christmas Ball. Wise talks about her favorite dances and reflects upon what the ball means to her.

Length of Interview: 00:30:56

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[Interview begins at 0:02:36.9]

Curtis Peoples (CP):

—I'm Curtis Peoples here with Billie Mays Wise, and we're at the Anson Cowboy Christmas Ball Pioneer Hall, and we're actually out here at the ticket booth. It's a little rustic, but it's working, and we're doing an interview about the Christmas ball itself and various aspects of it, but first I'd like to get a little information about you, so I was going to see if you could tell me, or if you don't mind, your place of birth, date of birth, and any kind of information like that.

Billie Mays Wise (BMW):

I was born here in Anson, not too far from where we are right now in 1931, depression year. I've been here off and on for most of my life for eighty years. My dad was born here.

CP:

And what was his name?

BMW:

William Emory Mays or Bill Mays. He was affiliated with the Christmas ball for many years.

CP:

What was your mother's name?

BMW:

My mother would be step-mother. We just call her Mother, Ethel Mays.

CP:

Ethel Mays and was she from Anson also?

BMW:

No, she was from Olathe, Kansas.

CP:

Olathe, Kanas, I've never heard of Olathe. But you said your dad was from Anson?

BMW:

Yes, he was born in Jones County, yes.

CP:

Were your grandparents also from Jones County or did they migrate here?

BMW:

My grandparents were from Heidenheimer, Texas, down close to Temple, south of Temple. They moved here, I don't have the exact date, and all of their children were born here which was five children in the area.

CP:

For you growing up here in Anson, what did your dad do? What was home life like?

BMW:

My dad was the consignee for the Guff Oil Company. He sold gas and oil to the farmers. Later, he and his brother, older brother, Roy Mays had three different stations in this area, Guff Stations. They didn't own the land or they really didn't own the buildings, but the Guff Oil owned those and they just managed them. Then they just got to be just selling to the farmers, gas and oil to be delivered in a truck.

CP:

Okay, well what was life like for you growing up? Neighborhood life or going to school? What did you like to do in school?

BMW:

I went to school here. I graduated here in 1948. Small town living and that's okay. My dad in the early forties went to California to work in the aircraft company out there, Avian Aircraft, as a timekeeper. So he was out there for about four or five years and then came back and then he and my mother, my biological mother, separated and divorced and he married then my new mom, Ethel, in California. She was a school teacher. They moved back here, and he began to do the Guff Oil business again.

CP:

So in high school, did you do any extracurricular activities? Was there music, band, or FFA or anything like that that you did?

BMW:

No, I was not musically inclined, so I did none of those things, but enjoyed my high school years and being with the friends. I still keep in touch with girls that I graduated with. I have been out of school in sixty-some odd years now. I still keep in touch with friends.

CP:

Well, you were beginning to mention there that you said your dad and mother have been involved with the Cowboy Christmas Ball for quite some time early on. Would you talk about that?

BMW:

I would say my biological mother and dad—

CP:

And what was your biological mother's name?

BMW:

Lottie.

CP:

Lottie, okay.

BMW:

They were involved then. In fact, my cousin and I, they went to—and I'm not sure exactly where New York City, I believe, the whole group of them went in cars. For advertisement, my cousin and I held up this big Guff sign, round sign, and we stood behind this so that they could have the picture of all the group. Well, I just hollered to my cousin, and I said, "Well, nobody sees us back here." So we stuck our one foot out from behind that sign, and of course, that's all you see of us is those two little legs, or one leg each sticking out, but I do not have that picture. I do not know what I have done with that picture.

CP:

And you were going to—what year was this that you were going to New York?

BMW:

This would have been when I was just about nine years old.

CP:

And you were going to New York to advertise—?

BMW:

They were going to New York, yes, and we stayed—my cousins and my sister and I stayed with my grandmother and granddaddy that lived here. They went up there. Of course, first time for a lot of little small town people to be in a great big city. I was tickled. My uncle was—he would say the most unusual things, but they were teasing him, in a way, about how much cowboy they looked. They all looked like cowboys with their boots, the bandanas, and their big hats. They said, "Oh, we're rough down there." They said, "You know, we'll ride anything that's got hair on it." They never let him forget that.

CP:

So they're going to advertise for the Cowboy Christmas Ball in New York. What made them decide to do that?

BMW:

I think they were invited to come as West Texas representatives of this particular thing.

CP:

Do you remember what the event was that they were invited to?

BMW:

No, because there was so many different folk festivals that they went to that I don't know if this was a folk festival or what it was, but I noticed they had a picture of a group, and my parents were not in this group in 1938, but they were not in that particular picture.

CP:

And 1938 would have been the trip to New York?

BMW:

Now this was in the capitol building. You could see the capitol building behind, so this was in Washington, D.C.

CP:

Oh in '38.

BMW:

Uh-huh in '38.

CP:

New York would have been a couple years later, right before the war, I guess, a year or so before the war.

BMW:

Yeah.

CP:

Do you think there was an invitation to New York because of Chittenden or something like that and the poem?

BMW:

Well, it could have been. I really don't know because I really wasn't but seven years old at the time.

CP:

Okay, so is this one of your earliest memories of the Cowboy Christmas Ball? Do you have an earliest memory of the Cowboy Christmas Ball?

BMW:

My husband and I worked down here. We did everything except sell tickets in this little booth. At that time, there wasn't much of a booth. So we worked at pinning the tickets on, snapping the tickets on the person's collar or somewhere. We worked the concession stand; we worked the hat check stand.

CP:

And this is as children, or as kids, or did you say when you were married, you and your husband?

BMW:

Well I was married, yes.

CP:

Okay.

BMW:

Yes, my husband and I, we worked down here at that time. But other than that, they are just memories of knowing that the Pioneer Hall was here, had been built and was here.

CP:

So as a young child, did you come to the dances and dance and participate in dances?

BMW:

I came, yes, I did. When you come from a dancing family, you learn to dance early. As you could see in the video, there were several young people that were dancing. I did too.

CP:

So did you learn at home dancing with your father? Would he teach you?

BMW:

I'm not sure, you just learn.

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CP:

You just learn?

BMW:

You observe the Virginia Reel, and pretty soon you know how to do it.

CP:

What were some of the popular dances back then early on? Was there a certain dance?

BMW:

Well, the Virginia Reel, I never learned to square dance. I was not a square dancing person. They didn't have the Cotton Eyed Joe at that time; it came later. We did the Waltz, we did the "Put your little foot," we did the handkerchief dance. You put out your handkerchief and each one held onto it and you danced and then you turned around and met each other. Let's see what else there were, other dances that we did.

CP:

But you said that you didn't learn to square dance. Was square dancing very popular back then? Was there a lot of square dancing going on?

BMW:

Yes, yes there was.

CP:

Or was there an even mix or was there more square dancing?

BMW:

Every so often, everybody danced, and then they would say, "Well, we're going to square dancing now," and for a couple of songs, everybody that knew how to square dance got out and they had couples, I believe, four couples, eight, and each one had their own square. So they would dance, but they just did that ever so often because there were so many people that didn't know how to square dance. My parents went to the Wagon Wheel in Abilene and learned all the new different steps that there was to take and different callers. People they knew that called the square dances. So it was very popular, and they still have wagon wheel dances, and they give you instructions and you go and learn how to square dance, but I was not one of them.

CP:

What was the—growing up in those early years that you remember, what was the music like? Was it a big band or was it just like a few fiddle players? What would it be like, the music that was playing.

BMW:

No, it was just, you had—some of them we had the steel guitar, the fiddle or violin, well the fiddle is what we called it. Of course, the guitar and then later on drums came in which, to me, ruined western music, and that kind of stuff—

CP:

It didn't help you keep the beat any for dancing?

BMW:

No, I don't think so, no. I don't remember any drums or anything like that. It was just straight old guitar and fiddle and then the steel guitar and the violin.

CP:

I guess electrical instruments didn't really come along until later and so those early days probably would have been more—was it hard to hear the band playing with all those dancers or people just kind of went for it?

BMW:

No, I guess we did have microphones and a sound system.

CP:

Kind of pick up everything?

BMW:

Yeah.

CP:

Okay. You said your husband—what's your husband's name?

BMW:

Donald Cromeens.

CP:

Can you spell that, please?

BMW:

C-r-o-m-e-e-n-s.

CP:

Okay.

BMW:

He passed away, and then I married Mr. Wise.

CP:

Mr. Wise.

BMW:

But we never dance. We never came here to dance.

CP:

You and your first husband?

BMW:

Oh, he and I did, yeah.

CP:

But not you and—

BMW:

Not me and my second husband, Wise, would be his name.

CP:

And why would y'all not come to this?

BMW:

Well, we were working out of town, and so we had no occasion really to come here to dance.

CP:

From a young child I guess, and like you said with your first marriage, is the Christmas ball an event that you attended every year? Was it regular or just every now and then?

BMW:

Up until the seventies, I guess, we came every year.

CP:

And did you come as a family with parents and kids?

BMW:

Yes.

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CP:

So it's really a family event, I guess.

BMW:

When they weren't dancing here, we were dancing at Carpenter's Hall in Abilene.

CP:

And is that another dance hall?

BMW:

That was another dance place, yes, an upstairs dance place on the south side of Abilene.

CP:

Carpenter's Hall. I'll have to look into that. Were your parents members of the board of the association? Did they have any—?

BMW:

Oh yeah, in the sixties—well, the fifties and sixties. I suppose they had a board then. I don't remember too much about that part of it.

CP:

Over the years, say, as you can remember like in the late thirties, early forties, and fifties and sixties, was it all pretty much the same or did you see changes happening as it went along? I talked to some people earlier and said it was a little bit rough at one point maybe in the early sixties. They got a little away from a family event and they said it could get a little rough, and so they were worried to come here.

BMW:

Yeah, of course at any event like this, of course, there was no drinking in here. You could not BYOB, so if you had anything, and we didn't know, that was judging to see, you went outside.

CP:

Everything stayed outside.

BMW:

And hopefully smoked, but I noticed I saw some people smoking on that video.

CP:

That would have been '53?

BMW:

Yeah.

CP:

Have you ever served on the board for the Cowboy Christmas Ball or anything like that?

BMW:

No, I have nothing other than working down here with my parents.

CP:

With your parents. Do you see a need for more local participation in the community for the Cowboy Christmas Ball? Is there enough people you think here in the area working to make it happen?

BMW:

Well, there are some people who just think dancing is not the proper thing to do, you know, but my daddy always said, "I'd rather have you out here on the dance floor where I can see what you're doing, than in somebody's back seat somewhere." He said, "I'd rather have you on the inside here than be on the outside looking in to see what's going on and who's here."

CP:

True. Now you said you stopped coming here in the seventies. Was that when you got remarried the second time?

BMW:

No, I didn't marry until the nineties then. No, my parents moved away and in '74, he retired, but they had not been affiliated with the ball association for a couple years before they moved.

CP:

Is that why you stopped coming?

BMW:

Well yes, kind of hurt feelings and different things. I don't know what exactly was said, went on, or what happened, but they stopped coming. That was the end of it.

CP:

Oh, so your parents sort of had a falling out with someone?

BMW:

Well, I don't know what happened. I know they didn't come anymore, especially in the early seventies.

CP:

Did they ever come back to the events? That was it?

BMW:

And I've been back just as an observer with my daughter a couple of times, but not to come and dance.

CP:

You don't dance anymore?

BMW:

No, well I have problems.

CP:

You would like to dance.

BMW:

Yes, yes I love to dance, but I have a physical illness that would really advise me not to dance.

CP:

Sure. When was the last time that you came to the Cowboy Christmas Ball?

BMW:

I imagine it's been four or five years ago. I came with my daughter and friends from Snyder.

CP:

So you've come with your daughter, that kind of brings up the issue of this long-term legacy. Is this something that your children are coming to or grandchildren? Do they have any interest in the Cowboy Christmas Ball? None at all.

BMW:

No interest.

CP:

And just your daughter came just to kind of see, just to come with you to help?

BMW:

California, yeah.

CP:

Oh, they're in California, okay.

BMW:

No, we don't come, and we don't participate.

CP:

Okay. Do you think you're going to come back to the Cowboy Christmas Ball? Will you be back this year or any time in the future?

BMW:

I might come as an observer just to come and see.

CP:

And you were talking as we were walking out here about there was a railing around the hall there. Can you talk about now there's a cut out part in the middle that you said that used to not be there? What was the reason for that again?

BMW:

Well, the people that paid a dollar, maybe, just to come and watch those that didn't dance or didn't want to dance, but just wanted to be here, then you paid for a ticket to come in to dance. I guess you could go up in the roost and sit down if there was no place to sit. I've seen it when all of the places had people sitting on them. If you needed to sit down, you would have to go up in the stand then to sit. That just kept the people that didn't pay to dance off of the dance floor.

CP:

And I guess it's changed now where you can just come and go as you please.

BMW:

Well, I suppose now that there's a cut out there so that—though I don't know if people are paying just to come and look and then all of a sudden, "Do you want to dance?"

CP:

Well I know when I was here, we were just kind of watching and I was like, "It kind of makes you want to dance when you see them all out there dancing and the band kicks off."

BMW:

Well, that's true, that's true. I have nothing against dancing. I love it.

CP:

Do you have any aspirations or thoughts for the future of the Cowboy Christmas Ball, what needs to happen or do you see any idea of where it's going or what it needs to become?

BMW:

Of course, I haven't come so I don't know if there's more people, if there's less people. Well I did see Michael Murphey Martin [sic] one time and that was in San Angelo. I really don't know what—like I say, whether it's better, but I would imagine that there are lots of people that still love to dance and will dance and keep it going. I think it's a heritage thing, really, that I think Anson ought to be proud of. I'm not sure; there are some people that are very proud of it.

CP:

I find that interesting because it's such a great event that not everybody's proud of it, but like you said, there's religious factors there that have to be—latched onto. So you quit coming in the seventies and you've been back a couple of times you said? Or has it been many times?

BMW:

I think—I'm going to say just two times, maybe, I've been back since the seventies.

CP:

Is there anything else that you would like to add about the Cowboy Christmas Ball, something we haven't covered, something you can think about that maybe is important that people need to know, be about the history or some event that happens?

BMW:

Well no, not really. I guess everything I've told you is what I can remember.

CP:

I did see a picture earlier from 1949 that Clay showed me that said that was the only year where women were allowed to wear pants on the dance floor. Do you remember that year?

BMW:

No, I don't. As far as I can remember, it was always skirts, you know.

CP:

That's what I was told and he showed me a picture that he said, "That year it was so bitterly cold that winter that they allowed women to wear pants. That was the first time and the last time that

that only happened for the event. So I thought that was real interesting. There's a picture of people out there dancing, and it's his aunt and uncle and she has on jeans.

BMW:

That had on jeans, yeah. Well let's see, '48, I graduated in '48, married in '49. We lived in Dallas.

CP:

So you weren't even coming at that time.

BMW:

No, no, not then.

CP:

Well, Mrs. Wise, I sure do appreciate you taking your time out of your day to come down and visit with us.

BMW:

Thank you.

CP:

And you've got my card up here, and if you can think of anything, or if you have any kind of pictures or stuff like that—I think you brought some—

BMW:

I can find some more. I'm not sure, you know, I had some, and I have given those to people that I thought they were in them, in these pictures. I gave those to those people.

CP:

Well, if you know of people that are associated with the ball that maybe have not heard about what we're doing and having this collection at Texas Tech and helping to preserve the history of the ball itself, be sure to let them know what we're doing and to contact us.

BMW:

I left a dress that my mother wore several times down here. So I'm donating that to your archives.

CP:

Are you really? Well thank you so much.

BMW:

Yes, yes, you can have that. That was just part of the things. And this particular dress, my biological mother also wore a dress like this. Most of the ladies that went on this trip that they went to when they went to New York had that type of dress, just different colors. And then my stepmother then had this one made for her.

CP:

Is it a specific type of dress? Does it have a name?

BMW:

It's like a Martha Washington dress like Martha Washington used to wear. It has the little white collar here and the bustle type thing on the sides with the inset here, and it has a hoop that goes around it to make it stand out.

CP:

Well, that's great. Would they make dresses yearly or is this something that they would just make one dress and bring it out once a year?

BMW:

Well, they would get together and either whoever was a seamstress would make the ones or somebody else would make it for them, but they would have them in different colors, and most of the styles was the same, but it would be a different color so that they would all look alike.

CP:

And you said they'd wear these on these trips to New York. Do you remember any other trips that were made or did you go on any of these trips?

BMW:

NO, I did not go on any of them, no, I did not.

CP:

Well I'll have to go in there and take a look at the dress. That's real interesting. You said it was from Ethel, it was her dress? Do you remember what year it was made?

BMW:

No, I don't. I have no idea. I don't even know who made it. She may have made it, I'm not sure.

CP:

I think you were recognizing some people in that film earlier, or were you not?

BMW:

Yes I did.

CP:

We'd like to sit down with you if you could at sometime, come back with that movie and if that's okay, maybe if we could come to your house or we could meet at the library or here at the Pioneer Hall wherever and sit down with that video .We sure would like to go through that from beginning to end, write down, Oh there's such and such, we'll write down the time that that happened, minute and second, and it sure would help us out a lot to identify people so that in the future—

BMW:

Yes, I recognized several people in there.

CP:

Did you have any family members that you recognized?

BMW:

Yes I did.

CP:

Were you in there yourself?

BMW:

No.

CP:

No, I guess you were still in Dallas at that time?

BMW:

Well, I wasn't here evidently or else was working in the concession stand or the booth.

CP:

Oh that's right; you were probably fanning tickets or something.

BMW:

Yeah, so we were really—we really didn't get to dance much because we were doing concession stand and hat check and coat check and pinning on the tickets.

CP:

Well, I sure do appreciate it.

BMW:

Oh well, thank you.

End of Recording



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