

**Oral History Interview of
John and Judy Deatherage**

**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 John and Judy Deatherage of Anson, Texas. John and Judy discuss the Cowboy Christmas Ball in Anson in terms of how the dance has impacted their life and the way in which they have seen it change over the course of their lives.

Length of Interview: 00:27:07

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Curtis Peoples (CP):

Here's one of my cards for Texas Tech. We're at the Southwest Collection. If it's okay, I'd like to record this; I've got this little audio recorder right there. What I have here are some release that if you don't mind signing, it's talk about film and video and audio recordings. Today we'll only be going audio, and this just gives us permission to record you and to put it in the collection there at Tech with the Cowboy Christmas Ball collection. Now if that's okay, if I could get each of you to—name, signature, and date. And since I've got two of you here.

Judy Deatherage (JD):

We can sign one.

CP:

Or if you want to just sign—yeah, I guess we could do one name there and then another name and a date. We could do that. Right over here on that side.

JD:

Do you need it printed?

CP:

Signature's just fine. That'd be just fine.

JD:

His name, too?

CP:

Yes. And today is what? Sixteenth?

JD:

It is, already. It's half gone.

CP:

All right, well if you want to, just have a seat there and get comfortable, and we'll get started here. Okay. First let me start out, my name is Curtis Peoples from Texas Tech, and this is for the recorder here. I'm here in Anson, Texas, at the historic Pioneer Hall, home of the Cowboy Christmas Ball doing interviews with today with John and Judy Deatherage. We're out here in the ticket office doing our interview. Rustic, but fitting, I think. We're going to be talking about the Cowboy Christmas Ball today, its history and a little bit about you all, too, if you don't mind. As we get started here, if I could—I guess we'll start with you, John. If you could just tell me maybe a little bit about yourself, where you're from, where you were born and when you were born.

John Deatherage (JD):

I was born in the south part of Jones County, in a place called Hamby, a little community out in the south part of the county. I lived there all my life until I married, and Judy and I married in '59 and have lived in Anson ever since. I first came to the Christmas Ball in the early fifties. I don't remember just exactly, '53, '54, or '55. I don't guess I've missed a year since being here at least one night during the ball.

CP:

So how old were you when you first came to the Christmas Ball?

JD:

Well I was about seventeen.

CP:

About seventeen, and how about you, Judy?

JD:

I was about fifteen when I got—my parents didn't allow me to come until I got older.

CP:

When were you born and where?

JD:

I was actually born in Abilene, but my parents lived here, so I've lived here all my life, 1941.

CP:

Okay, so what was life like growing up around this area back then?

JD:

Good.

CP:

It was good?

JD:

We grew up in the very best of times in the very best place.

JD:

Yeah, I would say so. We had a lot of fun, we played hard, we worked hard.

JD:

Had a lot of freedom that kids today probably don't have. Maybe more in a small town than the city, but we could go at night, we could walk all over town. I rode my bicycle all over town, roller skated to school. I mean, we had freedom, and it was safe. It was a good life, good growing up, good parents. We all had good parents.

CP:

Your parents, you said they were from Anson? Were they born here, too, or—?

JD:

No, my parents were not born here, but they lived here from about—my dad lived here from the early twenties, and my mom in the late thirties.

CP:

Where did they originally come from? Do you know?

JD:

My mother was born in East Texas in Montgomery County, Fostoria, and her father worked for an oil company, and so she had lived a lot of places around on oil leases. My dad's family came here from Normandy, Texas, when he was about a year or two old in the twenties.

CP:

What about you, John? Where did your family originate from? Or is it right here in Anson?

JD:

Well, right around this part of the country, not in Anson, but like I say out of Abilene, a community called Hamby, it was in Jones County, farmed a ranch there for years and years.

CP:

Parents born and raised there?

JD:

Around there, yes.

CP:

So you said growing up was great? What about high school and extracurricular activities? What did y'all do? Is there any certain clubs that you were in or did you play music or FFA or any of that kind of stuff?

JD:

Well, I was in the FFA and 4-H. I did not play sports. Like I said, we lived in the country and rode the school bus into towns for school and all, so we didn't have a chance to play sports in those days. Every kid didn't have a car then like they do now. You either rode the bus or you walked.

JD:

John's family was all very musical, though. They all could play musical instruments except him.

CP:

That's interesting. Did you just choose not to, or—?

JD:

No talent. People asked me, they said, "Do you play the fiddle?" I said, "No, I don't play one, but I can doggone sure tell when you can't play one."

CP:

So you've got an ear for it too.

JD:

And he could tell you every song, the name of it, and how it goes, but he can't play any of them.

JD:

My uncle played for the Christmas Ball here for years and years.

CP:

Did he? What did he play?

JD:

He played the fiddle.

CP:

What's his name?

JD:

Popcorn Deatherage.

CP:

Popcorn?

JD:
Yes.

CP:
Deatherage, that's an interesting name. How'd he get the name popcorn, do you know?

JD:
Oh, I don't know how he got the name, but that's the only thing I ever knew him by really was Popcorn, but he played here for years and years, played the fiddle.

JD:
Excellent musician.

CP:
Was it a band back then or what was the music like back then when you first started coming?
Was it a few people on stage with some microphones or did they have electric instruments?

JD:
No, they didn't have electric instruments at first. They just had a—well they had the fiddle and they had a couple, three rhythm guitars and a bass fiddle. Most of the time in those days they had a piano. That's before there was keyboards and all. He made great music.

CP:
Was it hard to hear the music without a lot of instrumentation?

JD:
No, not really.

JD:
They had microphones.

JD:
Those days you didn't have it so dang loud. You could sit and visit and talk and still hear the music to dance to. It wasn't so loud that it drowned everything else, like it is everything you go to this day in time. It was very good music.

CP:
So those first experiences coming to the dance, what do you remember or what are some of your earliest memories about coming to the dance? They really stand out like, Wow, this is what I remember about—

JD:

I don't know, everyone would get together and you would see people that you didn't see real regular basis and all them, and it was just a fun time. You looked forward to it every year going to the Cowboy Christmas Ball.

CP:

Sort of like a reunion, I guess.

JD:

We had a group of friends that came every year and we used to have parties before. People would come and stay and we'd eat at the house or something and we'd go the house after the ball and cook breakfast. We had a lot of friends that always came. We always had a really good time.

CP:

Do you still have a lot of friends that are coming or groups doing that kind of thing these days?

JD:

Well, most of them have gotten too old.

JD:

You and I were married in '59, we led the Grand March here in 1959, the year we were married.

JD:

Our best friends married the next year and we led it with them that year. She had been part of the ball for years and years.

CP:

So what was it like leading that grand march? Were you nervous or did you feel honored to do that?

JD:

Yeah, we were honored to be asked to do it. They usually ask the most new newlyweds or something that always led the grand march.

JD:

We were honored, too, a couple years ago, a young couple were just married and they asked us to be second with them because it was our fiftieth anniversary since we had led the ball.

CP:

And who was that?

JD:
Luke

JD:
And Betsy Sprayberry.

CP:
Are they just friends or family members?

JD:
Well they're parents are on—they're friends.

JD:
Their parents are on the board here with our son and all now.

JD:
Yeah, that was an honor.

JD:
That was fifty years later.

CP:
Almost to the day I bet. That's great.

JD:
It was fun.

CP:
So are you members of the association? Or do you just come and attend the event?

JD:
We just always and come and attend the event. Our son is a member of the association.

CP:
Have you ever thought about becoming members?

JD:
We did long ago, but we're too old now.

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JD:

They need young people, everything like this needs young people.

CP:

I guess there's a lot of work involved to put these things on.

JD:

A tremendous amount of work.

JD:

It's like everything, there's a lot of work.

JD:

To be successful it takes a lot of work, and it takes a lot of time.

CP:

When you first started coming in the early fifties, what was it like then and then maybe did you see the ball changing over time as it gets into the sixties and maybe seventies, eighties? Anything that stands out or are things kind of staying the same?

JD:

I think pretty well staying the same for years. Maybe the last few years there's not as much interest seems.

JD:

The crowd is not like it used to be. I think it's the times because we've always been part of the rodeo at Stanford, and it's the same thing. Today there are other things people do. At one time, the Christmas Ball and the rodeo at Stanford were like a great big reunion. Everybody came and you saw people you didn't see, and there was huge crowds. The crowd is not that large anymore, but there're dances going on everywhere and at the same time, and the same thing with Stanford. Now people go to the lake and do all these other things on the Fourth of July. Back then that was all there was. That was the main thing going on.

CP:

So you've got more activities now.

JD:

Yeah.

CP:

Same amount of people, but just more things to do.

JD:

Just spread out more.

CP:

Do you think there's a need to try to get more of the local people back into this or looking outside this area to try and bring people in? I mean, what do you think is important for participation in these kind of events?

JD:

Yes, it's kind of part of our history to me. I want to see people participate.

JD:

It's a thing that as time goes by there's less and less interest in this kind of thing from young people. Look at western movies. When was the last time you went and saw a western movie at the theater? They just don't make them anymore. People's interests are different. People that make movies don't even know how to make that kind of movie. Kids are growing up in a different era, you know, and grown, and they have different interests and things.

JD:

For so many years, too, in Anson they didn't allow dancing. There was no dancing allowed. At the school there was, you know, and so the kids didn't get to come to this. But I've noticed, and this is good the last few years that a lot of the younger, the high school kids and all are coming now. And that's great that they're coming.

CP:

So that no dancing thing has kind of gone away, I guess?

JD:

They've eased up on it. I think they may even have a school prom now or something, but you know, we weren't allowed to. And when my son—when Clay grew up, they weren't allowed to.

CP:

But y'all still came to the ball?

JD:

We did, but the other kids his age didn't get to come because it was not a favorable thing here.

CP:

That's a real interesting story. I'd like to learn more about it sometime.

JD:

There's a book.

CP:

A *No Dancin' in Anson* book, yeah, I'm going to have to read that. Well what is it that's the most appealing to you about the Cowboy Christmas Ball? I mean, what is it that really appeals to you about it? You've got to come here every year.

JD:

It's traditional, it's history, its friends.

JD:

It's something that is always done that we've been a part of, and we've enjoyed it, and we think it should continue, but it'll be hard for it to continue on like it has been over the years because there's just so many other things and everything.

CP:

So I guess your aspiration and thoughts and what you'd like to see is to grow.

JD:

Yes, definitely.

CP:

And how do we make it grow?

JD:

That's the question.

JD:

If we had an answer to that, it wouldn't be in the shape it's in.

CP:

I was talking to Davis, I was like do we need to get out to the schools? Can you even go out to the schools and have history days and say, "Here's your heritage," and invite those kids over or go on out and talking to them?

JD:

I think there would probably be a way they could. I belong to a writing group of old ladies and we just did a deal in Merkel a couple of weeks ago. They have a big day for Texas Independence, and they don't have it on Texas Independence Day, but during that month. They bring all the school kids to town and they have gun fights in the street and they have us riding through, and they have a lot of stuff going on teaching them about the history of Texas.

CP:

Do the kids seem interested?

JD:

Oh yeah. They line the streets.

CP:

Because I hear a lot of people say, "Oh kids are not interested in history." But I don't know if I believe that or not. You know, even as urban as things have gotten and everybody watching TV and kind of not really into their roots and local anymore, it's still—

JD:

But that's the reason everyone still watches TV. They watch these—they've got it on their computer, they've got it on their phones, you know, and it's nothing new, like nothing to look forward to because they've got it all right there anywhere. They see all this daily. When we was kids, we had telephones, but it was the old hoot and holler kind mostly, especially if you lived in the country. You just used it when you had something important to do. And no television forever and ever. You know, it's just a different era and different times.

CP:

So I guess you look forward to the Cowboy Christmas Ball as something exciting.

JD:

Yeah, you've got to go and you have to go see people.

JD:

It's a good social gathering then of which there's so many now, but there weren't that many back then.

CP:

So were you all big dancers or do you like to just come and watch or—?

JD:

Oh no, we danced. We rodeoed forever, and of course that was—you couldn't wait to get to the rodeo over where you could go to the dance anyways.

CP:

Now, were you just going to rodeos or were you riding?

JD:

No we rode.

CP:

You rode?

JD:

Our first date was to the rodeo dance.

CP:

So what did you do in the rodeo?

JD:

Well I rode bulls and bareback horses.

CP:

Oh really? I've always thought about doing that, and as I got older I was like, "Better not do that."

JD:

Well, you're pretty smart not to do it. It's fun, it's something that people just have to try for themselves and you either like it or you don't like it.

JD:

It's for kids.

JD:

It's for young people and it's a pretty tough old go, but it's a thrill too.

CP:

So what is it that you think is the long term legacy of the Cowboy Christmas Ball? Is there a legacy here? And what do you think that legacy is? Is it the cowboy tradition, is it family, is it just history of the area?

JD:

Cowboy tradition and the way of life as it was, and I think it does not need to be forgotten. It's like the ranch life. It's just part of this area.

JD:

It's just a part of history that's going to be gone, the whole western way of doing things of life as it was when we was a kid. It's just playing out because they just changed ways of doing things.

CP:

Technology does have a lot, but I've been talking to some people, they kind of see some of the younger kids going back to more traditional country sounds instead of new sounds. Do you see kids maybe taking a little turn back? Do you see that?

JD:

Well, we see it because that's what we like and have always known. Kids of our kids and our grandkids and all do because that's what they've grown up with. Other kids, I don't know about.

JD:

Because we're in the minority because of this way of life there's fewer and fewer of this kind of life that's out there for people.

CP:

You said your son Clay is on the association. Is he a board member?

JD:

The boy in the wheelchair?

CP:

Yeah, Clay, is he a board member or is he just part of the association?

JD:

He's part of the association.

CP:

What about your grandkids? Are they interested in coming to the dance?

JD:

We don't have any grandkids.

CP:

No grandkids? I thought you had mentioned grandkids there for a second.

JD:

Our friends' grandkids.

CP:

Your friends' grandkids. Do you see any of those younger kids interested in coming to these types of events or get excited about it or anything?

JD:

You know, I don't really. I don't really see kids as interested and excited about it as in the past. We were watching more of the films in there of 1953, and we picked out several people that we knew that were in the deal, some older. I was telling Judy, Nearly all of them that we knew are dead from 1953, they're getting old and some of the young ones, but there are not many of them that are still active in it. Most of them have moved on somewhere else.

CP:

I guess a lot of people leaving for the cities these days.

JD:

Well, that's the thing here, there's not anything for the young people to do to make a living, so they have to go somewhere else. There's no opportunities here for them, basically. If you drive there in town and look at our town you can see that. I've driven around and I've seen people and I was like, Well, they don't look like the type that would go to the Cowboy Christmas Ball, but then you never know what somebody might be interested in, but those are just first appearances. I think it's interesting you said that Anson kids are finally starting to—

JD:

Last year I noticed there was quite a few of them high school kids here, there was quite a lot of them, and that's good because Tommy and Cindy Sprayberry are members of the association and they have high school kids. So their kids were here and a lot of their friends and I thought, That's good. And the Pinkstons are members of the association and they have high school kids and they had a lot of their friends.

JD:

Then there's also some people here last year that live here that have never been a part of the Christmas Ball or the dance crew and all, but they were here last year because they had grandkids that was from out of town that was here and they were here and interested in dancing, so saw some of that going on.

CP:

So maybe more of the town will be getting involved in it. I think that's important for it to grow.

JD:

Yes, I do too.

CP:

But I hear that's a whole other story.

JD:

We were just commenting in there watching the movie of the '53 dance, and all the men had on ties, and that's something you very seldom see anymore. But they were all wearing ties of some kind. I remember coming as a kid, we always wore a tie.

JD:

John always wore a tie till the last year, too, this is the first time I remember him not coming with a tie.

JD:

I don't know, it's just sort of tradition and it's just something that's—

JD:

Dress up and go.

JD:

—got less and less importance to people over the years, I guess.

CP:

Is there anything you would like to talk about unless you think people need to know about the Cowboy Christmas Ball that's probably what was the most important thing or even just something that's a memory for you?

JD:

Well, to me it's just good, clean, wholesome fun and something the whole family can do. You very seldom, in years past, there was some drinking, there's never been any drinking inside. In the year's past, you had to go to the car if you had a drink. It's a different atmosphere now. You don't even see people going to the car now and drinking.

JD:

It's really gotten to be a family.

JD:

It's more family deal than anything.

JD:

And you see a lot of little kids here. People come bring—little ones dancing, and I think that's great.

CP:

That's probably where it starts is getting them educated then, but that's kind of like I guess you guys were coming up around this, growing up with it, like you said, being around it.

JD:

Yeah, we didn't think anything about it because it's been the way of life for us.

JD:

But when I grew up here, I went to school here and I said we weren't allowed to dance. We didn't have high school dances. My parents rented the hall and had a dance for me and my class for graduation, and there was maybe one or two kids in my class that could dance.

JD:

They all sit around and watch. They didn't know how to dance, they didn't dance, so—

JD:

They couldn't dance because they'd never been allowed to dance, it was just the churches there, it was taboo, the churches here, and even one year my mother was the chamber manager. Oh no, one year they were having a homecoming dance. This was later, after my sons. The members of the school board came and looked in the window to see who and if any teachers were there, names.

CP:

Really?

JD:

You were not allowed to do that. It was not an accepted thing, so the balls had to come around past that because the town was not for it.

CP:

I guess that's maybe one good thing about changing times is maybe that's easing up a little bit.

JD:

It has, yeah, it has. I never saw anything wrong with it. I said, "I'd rather the kids be in their dancing and where you can keep your eye on them than out on the highway."

CP:

So has it been a steady drop off or has it gone in cycles with people in attendance? Because they've said things have been down these last couple of years.

JD:

Yeah, a little.

JD:

It's just eased up I'd say.

CP:

Has it done that in the past and then kind of come back up or has it been steady at the time?

JD:

No, I don't know if I ever noticed that.

JD:

No, it's always been—

CP:

Has it always been on a Thursday, Friday, and Saturday?

JD:

Yes.

CP:

Yes, okay. Was there anything else y'all would like to add here?

JD:

I don't know of anything we could add to it. It's just something we've enjoyed over the years and still enjoy.

JD:

Been part of our life ever since we started going together.

CP:

I heard about it in the past, then we decided, Let's get in the van and go over there and see what's going on. We've been talking to Michal, and we had just had a grand time. We came down for his show. Now unfortunately we couldn't stay for the whole thing because we had to drop back, so we're going to make plans to go see the whole show and the whole dance.

JD:

Well, Michael Martin Murphey I think—

JD:

Has really brought it—

JD:

—has just really been a shot in the arm, but as far as going to dance, it's the sorriest dance they have the night he's here.

CP:

Just too crowded?

JD:

Well, yeah, and he don't make dance music. It's sort of like doing the Bohemian bop to a hillbilly song. It's not good dance music as far as we're concerned. A lot of kids now don't know the difference.

JD:

They love it.

JD:

You go to a dance, and they don't know the difference, and they think it's got to be loud, and the sorrier it is, the louder they play it everywhere you go. But it didn't used to be that way. They played music where you could sit and visit and talk and still hear the music, but now it's turned up so loud that—

JD:

We're of the old western swing music era, and we still like that kind of music to dance to.

JD:

You know, if you hadn't got a fiddle in a band, you don't have a band.

CP:

Well, I sure do appreciate it, and thank y'all for coming out and sharing your time with us on a Saturday. I know everybody's real busy.

JD:

We're glad to—

End of recording



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