

PEGGY HENSLEY
Family Member - Carter Family Fold – Hiltons, VA

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Date: February 21, 2009
Location: Carter Family Fold - Hiltons, VA
Interviewer: Amy C. Evans, SFA Oral Historian
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs
Length: 21 minutes, 55 seconds
Project: Carter Family Fold

[Begin Peggy Hensley Interview]

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Amy Evans: This is Amy Evans on Saturday, February 21, 2009, and I'm still in Hiltons, Virginia, at the Carter Family Fold in the office with Peggy, who was working the ticket table out there earlier. And we've got a little bit of Tennessee Skyline playing the background. We're in the office behind the stage. But, Peggy, if you would please say your full name for the record and then also explain a little bit about how you're connected to the—the family and the Fold.

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Peggy Hensley: Okay. My name is Peggy Hensley. I consider myself a closer friend than a relative. I'm very distantly related. My—my great-grandmother and Janette's [Carter's] great-grandmother were half-sisters, but I consider myself a closer friend than family, but they've always been a part of our family, and we're very, very fond of the Carter Family.

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AE: And may I ask you to state your birth date for the record, please? And I can hold this.

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PH: April 27, 1948.

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AE: Okay. And you're—I said before we started recording, I understand you're the coleslaw connection, so why don't we just start there?

00:01:00

PH: Yeah, okay. Okay. I belong to the Hiltons Ruritan Club, which we no longer have a Ruritan Club in Hiltons, but for years we served food at the [Carter Family Memorial Music] Festival, and one of the things that we served was typical Appalachian foods: cornbread, soup beans, coleslaw. And our coleslaw was kind of unique because it has a vinegar dressing, a cooked vinegar dressing, and we did that for two reasons. First of all, it's really, really good with soup beans, and second of all, in the heat of August it—you don't have to worry about mayonnaise and it spoiling and poisoning people, which we certainly didn't want to do. So we have—we had a lot of requests for our recipe on the—on the coleslaw and it almost tastes like a chow-chow, if you're familiar with chow-chow. It almost has a chow-chow taste to it, so—but we served—at the festival we served—. Also we'd serve green beans, we—a few years we actually had a salad bar; we served corn on the cob; we served funnel cakes, which is not—you don't really think of those as typical Appalachian but they—people loved them. But most—the most thing people really loved was our soup beans and our cornbread. In fact, we'd have people come and buy cornbread and just eat the cornbread, you know, so I don't know. And we did that probably for twenty-five years we served at the festival so—. We served a lot of soup beans during that time.

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AE: Can you talk a little bit about the—just the relevance of soup beans and cornbread in this area?

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PH: Well I understand that in a lot of other areas it's actually called bean soup, but for some reason in the Appalachian we say soup beans. It's a very much staple item; it's—it's—I'm sure it was during the Depression; a lot of people raised their families on the cornbread and soup beans. It's a lot of protein without having to have meats, and it's really good.

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AE: Now do you mind unfolding that recipe you're holding in your hands and—and dictating it here?

00:02:58

PH: Sure, you want me to dictate it to you? Okay. Our coleslaw recipe is one large cabbage head, one large pepper, one large onion, three-fourths cup of sugar, teaspoon of salt, and a teaspoon of celery seed. Chop your cabbage, pepper, and onion and mix that with your sugar, salt and celery seed and just sit that aside. And then in a saucepan you mix the three-fourths cup Wesson Oil or Crisco Oil—a vegetable oil—cup of vinegar and a teaspoon of dry mustard and bring that to a boil and pour that over your cabbage, mix it, and just chill it and—and it's just—it's really good. It's a good, tart coleslaw. I've heard some people say they call it German Coleslaw, but we call it Carter Fold Coleslaw, so—.

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AE: Are there some other recipes around in—from your family and growing up and things that you've gotten from—from Janette [Carter], maybe, along the way?

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PH: Well we used to have lots of covered dish suppers here at the Fold. The people who—who were close to the Fold and who worked, like my—my dad and Flo [Wolfe], which you met earlier had the same birthday, and we'd always have a covered dish supper for their birthday. And we always ended up—it was funny, we always ended up bringing the same. Everybody kind of had their signature dish. Janette made one—well Janette made wonderful rolls; she would always bring rolls. She would always bring macaroni and cheese, was one of the things she would always—she made wonderful meatloaf. My mother made good friend apples, and she made salmon cakes; that was kind of the thing she brought. Johnny Wolfe's [Flo's husband's] mother made these wonderful little apple pies, little apple pies that you would—I mean the cooked apples, the canned cooked apples that she would raise, you know; she would can the apples herself, and so that was one of the things Mrs. Wolfe always brought and potato salad. And she made her potato salad the way a lot of older women here in the Appalachians did. She mashed her potatoes, rather than do the cubed potatoes like most of us do in this generation; my grandmother did the same thing. They mashed their potatoes just like mashed potatoes and put egg and a cooked dressing and onions and—and chopped eggs in it—not usually celery because I guess celery was not that easy to obtain back in the earlier days. And I'm trying to think of some the other things. Gladys [Carter Millard, A. P. and Sara Carter's oldest daughter]—oh, Gladys made this wonderful—that was Flo [Wolfe's] mother—Gladys made this wonderful potato—sweet potato casserole, that was usually what she would bring. And we all had our little dishes that we would bring and we—we had wonderful food here at the Fold.

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And Janette made wonderful, wonderful homemade ravioli. Now that's not very Appalachian, 1 but her homemade ravioli was great.

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AE: And do you know how long ago they started doing the cookbook, the Carter Country Cookbook [*Recipes from Carter Country*]?

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PH: The Carter cookbook was probably done back in the '80s, yeah, and—and then it's been a good seller and it's—it's a good cookbook. Most of the recipes in it are tried and true recipes, you know, so it's a good cookbook.

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AE: Now is that something that was—you know, happened by customer demand or is it something that Janette came up with?

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PH: Well Rita, I think, actually came up with the idea and—but we did have a lot of people who would ask for our recipe like our coleslaw recipe, so we decided it would be a good idea to ask a lot of people that come to the Fold [for recipes], and it's real nostalgic for me now to go through that cookbook. So many of the people that have recipes in that cookbook—cookbook are no longer with us here at the Fold, so it's—it's a nostalgic thing to go back through it, but it's been a bestseller for a long time. We still sell them. In fact, I sent one of the Carter cookbooks to a friend in England recently and got a very interesting phone call with her asking me what some of these ingredients were. They call their things differently over there so—.

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AE: So can you kind of put your finger on what it means for the Carter Fold to be what it is to music and to celebrate the Carter Family but also be this place of traditional Appalachian food and sustenance and—and part of that whole experience?

00:06:54

PH: Well, I don't know. There's just—there's just a—a feeling about the Carter Fold that's different. It—it is a family place. When Janette started the music, there was nowhere to go—that you could go in this area and hear music on a regular basis. I mean we'd have music at special events, but there was nowhere that you could go every week and hear music. And I think Janette's—Janette's work helped bring a lot of young people to appreciate our culture here in the Appalachians. We've been, you know, there was a time when people were almost ashamed of our heritage and ashamed of our music. Janette brought a lot of pride, and she brought a lot of young people. A lot of this music would have been lost if it had not been for Janette and the same thing with our Appalachian foods. It—it—I work at the door at the Fold, so I see this area through other people's eyes every Saturday night, and it gives me a renewed appreciation for what we have here. And I think that's what the Fold does. I think the Fold holds up a mirror to us that we can see how—how blessed we are to have the Fold and—and to be here in this area. You can tell I'm pretty sold on the Fold, I guess. **[Laughs]**

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AE: No, it's a very unique place. And then tell me, too, about the—the dancing, all the clogging and the tapping.

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PH: Okay, what do you want to know about that?

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AE: Well—

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PH: It's traditional. This area was settled mostly by Scotch, Irish, and English people, and so we have a lot of—a lot of Celtic heritage and—and our—our clog dancing is real similar to river dancing in a lot of ways. You know, a little bit of different steps and things but—but I'm sure that's—I'm sure that's the basis of our dancing. Older people—my granddaddy was a really good dancer, and they called it flatfoot dancing. They did not use the taps; it was more of a soft shoe, but it was the same step and the same, you know, the same rhythm, so it's—and, again, the—the Fold has helped—had helped keep a lot of our dance traditions alive, too.

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AE: Is—I'm wondering about all the really tiny young people with the taps on their shoes. Are they—are they here doing that because of the Fold or is there another venue for them to dance?

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PH: Well, there are other venues. After Janette started the music here and people saw the success there, things sprang up. I mean it's really easy in this—in this time to find a lot of places to go dance and to go listen to this kind of music. We have—in Kingsport they have Bluegrass on Broad on Friday nights. They—and it's free music and they—they just get lots of people, you know. But, yeah, I would think the Fold probably encouraged a lot of young kids to get out

because it's accessible. In fact, several years ago—couple years ago the *Times News—Kingsport Times News* did a poll of the young people on different things, and the Fold was voted their favorite place to hang out, which surprised me but—but we get a lot of young people. And a lot of young people have a real appreciation for the music and who play the music so—.

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AE: Is there any kind of musical education component to the Fold?

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PH: Not anything formal. There's—at the festival we have lots of people who park, you know, who—who get together and jam in the—in the—out on the festival grounds, so I guess you'd consider that an informal music education. And we have had a couple of things. One year Janette had the—Janette did a workshop on Carter Fold music and Carter Fold songs—or Carter Family songs. That was back in the—probably in the late '70s—early '80s. And then we had a clog group from out in Ashville [North Carolina] that came over and did some—some square dance workshops. But other than that, I don't know of anything that would be considered a formal workshop, but it's a wonderful place to informally just latch onto somebody and learn music so—.

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AE: Over the years that you've been coming here, have—do you have any like performers or evenings that stand out in your memory?

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PH: Of course, Johnny. When Johnny Cash would come, that was always special. Over the years we've had lots and lots of wonderful musicians from a lot of places. We had—one of my favorites was Mark Pruitt's Band from Ashville; Katie Lars Band from Cincinnati, Ohio; Joe Vale and the New England Boys from up in—and they were real funny. They—they said when they came and—and everybody started to dance they—they told us later, they said, "We're going to take y'all with us to New York because they say you can't dance to this music," you know. Let's see. Some of the other—of course the McLean Family. We've had lots and lots of wonderful musicians. We've actually had Waylon Jennings performed on the stage here. We've had, of course, Johnny [Cash] and June [Carter Cash]. We had a gentleman several years ago with Bill Clifton from Australia whose name was Slim Dusty. That was his stage name, and I guess it shows how relative famous is. He—he was visiting Bill and he—he performed on the stage. And—and a month or so after that we had some people from Australia, and I told them, you know—I just happened to mention in passing that Slim Dusty had been here, one of their country singers, and had sung on the stage, and they were really impressed. And I found out that Slim Dusty was the Australian equivalent of Johnny Cash. And I—I got on the Internet and checked—checked him out and I found out his voice was the first—his singing voice was the first singing voice to be beamed from space. The Space Shuttle, according to the—according to the website, the Space Shuttle in '80—in the mid-'80s, when it was passing over Australia, played Slim Dusty singing *Waltzing Matilda*, and I could have gotten this man's autograph and did not realize, you know, that he was that well known so—. Yeah, we've—we've had over the years—we've had a group of Zuni Indians who came and played the—as a guest spot played the—the flutes that they play. Shut your eyes and you almost could feel like you were in the desert, really. And we've had some Russian groups that did Russian folk songs. We've had

Japanese people perform. We've had—we've had a lot of people. I met people from all over the world, literally. And it's certainly enriched my life and it's—and I think the Fold has enriched a lot of people's lives. I mean in Scott County, you just don't get the chance to meet people from Russia, ordinarily; you're just not going to cross paths with them.

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AE: Now why does—what do you think the Fold has meant—you know, we've talked about what it's meant to the musical community. What about just the personal community of Hiltons and—and having so many volunteers and family members who come?

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PH: I think the Fold sort of defines Hiltons as a community. You can tell people you're from Hiltons, and they'll say, "Oh, that's where the Carter Fold is," you know, so—so it's very much a big part of the—I mean it's a very—it's been here thirty-some years, but it's just like it's always been here and, as I say, it sort of defines—the Carter Family and the Carter Fold sort of define Hiltons as a community. And it gives us a sense of pride. It gives us a sense of pride to realize that people will travel to our little community to hear something and it gives us—gives me a sense of pride that—that all different people from a lot of different backgrounds appreciate the same things we do.

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AE: Do you have a sense of—of people who come here for the music and are surprised by the food?

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PH: Oh, yeah. Yeah, and people who come—people who come for the music—sometimes it’s funny when we’ll have—like we have the Governor’s School from Tennessee and some of the kids, you know, they’ll come in, and they’re not quite sure, but by the end of the evening they’re just having a wonderful time, you know. So it’s amazing sometimes to see people come in, and they just don’t know what to expect but by the end of—by the end of the night they’re—they’re fans of the Fold and of bluegrass music so—. And the food, yeah, people are surprised with the food, too. You know, the homemade—everything being homemade. They enjoy that so—.

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AE: You have some folks who come and—and think it’s just, you know, hot dogs and nachos but then you’ve got the soup beans and the cornbread, and they’re surprised and start asking questions about where that came from?

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PH: Yeah, we—we do and a funny thing, one night I was working in the concession helping out years ago and Colonial Heights is a little community—it’s a community on the other side of Kingsport, and I know you heard tonight when some—Rita asked where people were from, somebody said, well, Kingsport. Well we consider Kingsport—most people who live in Scott County work or have ties in Kingsport. And so we don’t really consider that—we consider that local, but these two guys came in and one said, “Well, I’ll buy the hotdogs and the drinks.” And the other one said, “Well he ought to. I bought the gas to come over here.” And I thought, where are they from—way—you know, I was expecting no closer than Philadelphia. And I said, “Where are y’all from?” And the guy said, “Colonial Heights, clear on the other side of

Kingsport. Have you ever heard of it?" *[Laughs]* So I guess distance and time are relative, you know but—yeah, we do have people who are surprised when they come in. We have—we have people who are from—I think maybe sometimes visitors are surprised that—that we don't—they don't see the typical Appalachian stereotype that they—they expect to see when they come down here so—. And I guess that's a good thing, you know. It's a good thing that—that they come down and they actually see us the way we are.

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AE: And change expectations?

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PH: Right, right, and—and, as you said, the Appalachian Mountains are a beautiful place. My roots go very deep here. My family goes back seven generations on each side here in the Hiltons community, and it's just a very—it's a very dear place to me, and I love to see other people come and see the beauty of the place.

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AE: So do you and your—and your family—immediate family—have a lot of recipes passed down over the generations?

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PH: Yeah, quite a few. Quite a few. My mother was a fantastic cook. She really was. She and Janette and Gladys were just—you know, they could feed a multitude just those three. So, yeah, my mother was a wonderful cook. I don't claim to be as good a cook as my mother. My mother

cooked very good traditional foods and I'm—I'm not quite as a traditional cook, but I can certainly appreciate it.

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AE: Now you were talking about how, you know, Janette establishing the Fold really saved the music of this region and—specific to the Carter Family, of course. What do you think about saving the foods of this region? Do you think the Fold has—has a hand in that?

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PH: Yeah, I think—I think that—the Fold has definitely helped. You know, when I was growing up we—there was not a lot of ethnic foods around. You know, there was one Chinese restaurant in Kingsport, no Mexican restaurants. I have a funny story that a friend of mine told that moved here from California. Want to hear it? She had moved here—she married a guy from Scott County. She lived in San Diego. She married him, and they got married when he was in the Navy and they lived in—in San Diego for—well her children were young—young teenagers when they moved back here. And he felt the call of the mountains calling him home, so he wanted to move back to Scott County. And you can imagine what a change Scott County was from San Diego. But anyhow, they moved with him and—and after they had been here a while, her children really wanted some Mexican food. So she decided she'd make tacos. Well you just didn't get a lot of ethnic ingredients back in those days; this would have been back in the [nineteen]'70s. So she went to the local grocery store and she got the—everything for the—that she needed for the tacos, the hamburger and everything, but she couldn't find any taco shells. So she went up and asked the man behind the counter if he had any taco shells. And he looked at her and he turned around, and he looked back behind him at the shells—at the shells behind him and

he turned around and he said, “Little lady, I don’t even know what kind of gun would shoot them.” See, he—he [*Laughs*—I mean taco shells, he probably never heard of taco shells. We just didn’t have a lot of—. And now, you know, we have a lot—you can go to Kingsport and you can get Thai food, you can get Middle Eastern, you can get Indian food, you know, you can get lots and lots of Japanese and Chinese and Mexican food. So I think places like the Fold are important to—to, you know, it’s good to enjoy these other things, but it’s good to keep the grounding of what—what we’re used to, what—you know. I think it’s always good to remember where you came from.

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AE: Definitely. Excuse me. Well is there anything that I wouldn’t know to ask that you want—want to add?

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PH: Well, how do you think this area is different from Mississippi? Do you—food-wise?

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AE: Oh, goodness. Food-wise. Well there are not a ton of beans in Mississippi. Cornbread is a little different, I guess. But there’s a lot of canning and saving and—and vegetable gardens. I mean I think it’s a generational thing, as much as it is, you know, a regional thing—definitely a Southern thing.

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PH: Cornbread. Do y’all put sugar in your cornbread?

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AE: No, ma'am.

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PH: You use yellow cornmeal or white?

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AE: Yellow.

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PH: See, up here it's predominantly white cornmeal. I know people who—who have—have moved up North, they don't get white cornmeal up there. And my aunt would always stock up on white cornmeal. When she came down here, she'd buy enough, you know, to—to last for a while, so it's funny how you have the preferences, so—.

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AE: And a couple of people have told me that they use exclusively the—is it Three Rivers Cornmeal?

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PH: Three Rivers. My—my mother used Three Rivers a lot. Martha White makes a good cornmeal. I'm not particular as to brand. I don't, you know—but my mother made wonderful cornbread. Joe Carter loved my mother's cornbread. *[Laughs]*

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AE: What was special about your mother's, if you could say?

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PH: I don't know. Joe just said her—her cornbread always—she didn't use a recipe. She just sort of, you know, just—but—but it always turned out the same. It was very consistent and he just liked her cornbread so—.

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AE: All right. Well I don't want to keep you out there from that party. It's—it's going strong out there now. But Peggy, I appreciate you sitting down with me. Thank you.

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PH: Oh, you're more than welcome. It was—it was very interesting, and I'm flattered that you asked me. I hope I've been able to answer some of your questions.

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AE: You've been a wonderful help. Thank you so much.

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[End Peggy Hensley Interview]