

**CHICKIE RENFRO**  
**Regular & Volunteer - Carter Family Fold – Hiltons, VA**

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Location: Carter Family Fold - Hiltons, VA  
Interviewer: Amy C. Evans, SFA Oral Historian  
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs  
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Project: Carter Family Fold

**[Begin Chickie Renfro-1 Interview]**

**00:00:03**

**Amy Evans:** This is Amy Evans on Saturday, February 21, 2009. I'm in Hiltons, Virginia, at the Carter Family—Family Fold and in the Music Room here, and I'm with Chickie. And I'm sorry; I've already forgotten your last name—Renfro—Chickie Renfro. And if I could get you to introduce yourself and say your name and also your connection to the Fold here?

**00:00:23**

**Chickie Renfro:** I'm Chickie Renfro; I live in Johnson City [Tennessee]. We've been coming to the Carter Fold about twenty-nine years. We come every Saturday night and don't miss, unless we go on vacation or something like that.

**00:00:37**

**AE:** And when you first started coming, what—what made you decide to come and to also become a regular?

**00:00:43**

**CR:** Well when we came the first time, you know, this was very well known—not as much so then as it is now, but there was a lot of talk about it, so we decided we'd drive up one Saturday night. And Johnny Cash and June [Carter Cash] were here, and we came late, so there were no parking places, and we didn't get to stay. But then the next Saturday night we came, and we didn't dance at that point. There was a big tall gentleman that danced the first time; every time he

was the first one to hit the floor. So he—he got us down on the floor, and we have enjoyed it ever since.

**00:01:23**

**AE:** Now are you originally from Johnson City or you just live there now?

**00:01:29**

**CR:** No, we are originally from Johnson City. We moved to Knoxville and stayed three years, and we'd drive back to Carter Fold every Saturday night and then drive back home. That was about a 250-mile trip on Saturday, but we didn't want to miss. [*Laughs*]

**00:01:43**

**AE:** Now were you real familiar with the Carter family before the Fold opened?

**00:01:46**

**CR:** No. No, we just heard their music and enjoyed it and decided to come.

**00:01:55**

**AE:** So what is your favorite part about coming here?

**00:01:57**

**CR:** My favorite part for a long, long time was meeting Miss Janette [Carter]. When you came in that door she was just—greeted everyone with a great big smile and “Happy to see you.” And

I—the friendship you acquire at the Carter Fold is like no other in the world, and I think we come as much for that as for the music and the dance and—and the friends we have up here.

00:02:26

**AE:** Can you describe to me a little bit more about Janette’s personality and her music and presence on stage when she was here?

00:02:34

**CR:** She was one wonderful person. She greeted everyone with a smile, and you were greeted when you came in that door. And on the stage when she got up on Saturday night she’d say, “Good evening, ladies and gentlemen,” and she—she just meant that from the bottom of her heart. She was wonderful.

00:02:56

**AE:** And do y'all have regular seats, you and your husband [George] when you—?

00:02:59

**CR:** Yes, we do. Rita put a sticker on my husband’s seat, and my husband turned ninety in September, so on his seat it says *Reserved—George Renfro*, [**Laughs**] and then I get to sit right there beside him.

00:03:14

**AE:** Nice. And I know we had a conversation about your birthday before we recorded, but I haven’t—have I asked that of you yet?

00:03:20

**CR:** Not yet, you haven't, but I don't mind. I was born in Johnson City on November 8, 1933. And we started coming to the Fold when I was really older and wish I had been here sooner and learned to dance sooner because we sure have enjoyed that.

00:03:40

**AE:** And do you dance every—every night that you're here?

00:03:44

**CR:** I do. I help back in the concession until the music starts. When the music, starts I am gone.

**[Laughs]**

00:03:49

**AE:** So when did—when did it start that you started helping out in the concession stand?

00:03:53

**CR:** Well many years ago, when I'd come in—in the afternoon, Janette would be sitting out there, and she'd say, "Rita, honey, you don't have to worry anymore. Here comes Chickie. She'll help you." So that's been quite a while back.

00:04:10

**AE:** And so do you have a specific job back there or you just generally help out?

00:04:13

**CR:** Just generally help out, uh-hmm. Anything they need to do—for me to do I can do it. And then the first thing I do is clean that stage real good because the floors are so beautiful and we get all the dust under—off of it every week, so it's nice and shiny.

**00:04:33**

**AE:** So you really take pride in your volunteering here as much as you do your—your being a patron?

**00:04:40**

**CR:** Absolutely, I sure do. [*Laughs*] I love it, uh-hmm.

**00:04:43**

**AE:** And you feel like you're a part of the Fold?

**00:04:45**

**CR:** I certainly do. [*Laughs*] Yes.

**00:04:48**

**AE:** Do you and your husband save room when you come up here for supper here at the Fold?

Do you like to eat here?

**00:04:53**

**CR:** Yes, we do. Lots of times we eat here, uh-hmm.

**00:04:56**

**AE:** What do you like to have?

**00:04:57**

**CR:** I love those hot dogs, and I like the barbecue, but—and she makes wonderful egg salad that’s just better than you’ll ever find anywhere. And I sort of have to watch the cholesterol, and I do have to be careful about some of those things, but every once in a while I indulge. [*Laughs*]

**00:05:19**

**AE:** Well now can you describe maybe for me a—a typical Saturday night? I mean I know they’re all different with the different musical acts, but just kind of how things operate around here?

**00:05:27**

**CR:** Yes. The music starts at 7:30, and Rita opens the show and they always have—sing a Carter Fold song—two or three of those before the band is brought out. And then when the band is brought out, then they play the dance music and then they play Gospel tunes, and they’ll play a waltz tune and a variety of music. And the people who like to dance get up and—and participate. And those who don’t—enjoy watching. [*Laughs*]

**00:05:58**

**AE:** Now since you—you have been here so long and you were able to witness the transition after Janette passed and Rita, you know, took over—we might need to answer that door. Hold on. Okay, we’re back. I was just going to ask you since you’ve been here—coming here so long and have been so connected with the family and when Janette passed if—what kind of the—the

change of guard was within the family and also with the—the regulars who keep coming and what that—that transition was like?

**00:06:28**

**CR:** Well it was very hard when Janette died [in January 2006]. She—she was terribly missed and Rita just carried right on in the way her mother wanted her to do. And she did a wonderful job with it, but it was sad—very sad. And see, Joe Carter, Janette’s brother] died before Janette, and then she had a son that died; Don died and Joe and then Janette. And it was—it was a huge loss. It was—you really felt the—missing her when you came in.

**00:07:06**

**AE:** Was there—during that time did they close here or did they continue having shows?

**00:07:12**

**CR:** They continued with the shows. All of—.

**00:07:16**

**[End Chickie Renfro-1 Interview]**

**[Begin Chickie Renfro-2 Interview]**

**00:00:00**

**Amy Evans:** This is Amy Evans again on Saturday, February 21, 2009, and I’m back with Chickie. We had some technical difficulties earlier, so I’m back with Chickie Renfro. And we

left off, I believe, talking about after Janette passed and the transition that the Fold experienced. And you said that they didn't stop having the Saturday night shows, but can you kind of explain maybe the—the general feel of the place with that loss and how it affected the environment and also the—the crowd, the regulars who came here for so long?

**00:00:32**

**Chickie Renfro:** Well I think the regulars came right on. They were sad about the passing of Janette. The people wanted to keep the Fold going and keep it as she would have wanted it. And it was sad but, you know, you have—you carry on. And—and I think people did carry on. And it will for a long, long time yet.

**00:00:58**

**AE:** Was there a sense, though, with—because I know that Rita was telling me earlier that she was always—every Saturday night she's reluctant to get on the stage but she feels like that's part of her charge carrying this on but that—. You know, is there a sense of just the—you know, the end of an era with Janette's passing and the—the Carter family kind of fading away?

**00:01:15**

**CR:** Well, yes, there was an end of an era when Janette died. She was the Rock of Gibraltar here. But—and Rita, before her mother died, never would go on the stage; she would never sing. But then after—after the passing of Janette, Rita knew that if it continued, that's what—that would be her responsibility, and she's done a fine job.

**00:01:45**

**AE:** So how many years now has it been since Janette passed—three or four?

**00:01:51**

**CR:** Five years, maybe—this is terrible, but maybe four years. [Janette Carter passed away in January 2002.] Time passes so swiftly.

**00:02:01**

**AE:** Has your twenty-nine years as a regular passed swiftly?

**00:02:02**

**CR:** Oh, I can't believe I was born in 1933. **[Laughs]** Yes, it has and you think, well, maybe they got my birthday wrong. **[Laughs]** But it—time has passed swiftly, and as the years go by they pass even faster. **[Laughs]**

**00:02:20**

**AE:** And you were telling me before about how you're not on any medication. You just had a doctor's visit. And do you think that these Saturday nights you can attribute them to your good health?

**00:02:28**

**CR:** Absolutely. You see, we—we interact with people and enjoy friends that have been friends for a long, long time; and you hear the good music and you get to dance and get your exercise, and there are so many benefits from all of that.

00:02:44

**AE:** It keeps you young, huh?

00:02:46

**CR:** Yes. [*Laughs*]

00:02:47

**AE:** So I think, too, we also started talking a little bit about just a general night here at the Fold and what's that like—what that's like, if you could describe that?

00:02:55

**CR:** Okay, the music starts at 7:30. I think we said that before. But when the people get in, sometimes they come later, and they keep coming in. And the music starts and people are ready to dance and they have a—a break and people will get up and get something to eat, and but before the music starts lots of people go to the concession and have their dinner. And it's wonderful. [*Laughs*]

00:03:31

**AE:** In your experience working the concession stand is there any one thing that sells the most from back there?

00:03:35

**CR:** Okay, I think it all goes pretty good. The—the—they're selling a lot of barbecue, and I think hot dogs are the top seller because people love those things, and they make their own chili

here, which is very good and those good ole onions to go on there; it makes a good hot dog. Sometimes they'll have—Rita will fix homemade soups—soup beans, and cornbread, onions—that—that goes big are the beans and cornbread. People love that.

**00:04:11**

**AE:** Do you imagine that a lot of people when they come here realize that they're also, you know, in addition to this traditional music, they're also getting some traditional food, especially with the soup beans, and cornbread?

**00:04:21**

**CR:** A lot of them are surprised when they come and they have soup beans, and cornbread. And then a lot of them will come, and if she doesn't have soup beans, and cornbread, they want to know where those soup beans—are. But she makes good soups lots of times—chili soup and—and it's all very good. And—and I think last week we had potato soup, and it was good.

**00:04:45**

**AE:** And do you come to—you and your husband come to the [Carter Family Memorial Music] Festival each year also?

**00:04:50**

**CR:** Yes, we do. We sure do, Friday and Saturday, uh-hmm.

**00:04:55**

**AE:** Tell me about that.

**00:04:55**

**CR:** Good times. **[Laughs]** There are lots of good bands at the Festival, and it's on the Friday afternoon and Saturday until about 11:00—on Friday nights until about 11:00 and then the same time—from about 1:00 until 11:00 on Saturday, and there is about five or six bands that are scheduled each day. And then there are a lot of people that are on the outside jamming that they've brought their instruments, and they'll be in little groups playing and singing and—and then some of us have brought our dance boards, and we can take those outside and dance on the outside too.

**00:05:36**

**AE:** You bring your own floor, basically, to dance on?

**00:05:39**

**CR:** Yes. Yes, we do. This little friend of mine who—I met him when he was about four years old, and when he was about sixteen he made me a dance board, and on each corner of it he put a chicken, **[Laughs]** and I treasure that. You can't dance on the ground out there, so we bring our boards and dance outside.

**00:06:02**

**AE:** So do other people have stylish boards like yours or is yours a standout?

**00:06:05**

**CR:** Mine is a standout **[Laughs]**.

00:06:09

**AE:** How about your dancing? Is it a standout?

00:06:10

**CR:** Well I don't know about that. But I enjoy it. I'm not the best, but then you don't have to be the best, and you don't have to do what everyone else is doing. You can do what you feel like, you know, as long as you're nice about it—you can just do your own thing, freestyle, and I like that. There's a little girl that's been coming for about six years now, and her name is Faith and she just sort of latched on. And every Saturday night when she's here we dance together. She's a beautiful little redheaded girl, and she often sings with Rita when they open the show.

00:06:56

**AE:** Is your husband a big dancer, or are you usually out there by yourself?

00:06:59

**CR:** Usually we are by ourselves; sometimes dance together. He does the two-step but he's—he's ninety, so he just sort of shuffles along and then there are some ladies that really look after him. *[Laughs]* And that's—

00:07:17

**AE:** And he likes that.

00:07:18

**CR:** He loves it. *[Laughs]*

**00:07:20**

**AE:** What is your husband's name?

**00:07:20**

**CR:** George, uh-hmm.

**00:07:22**

**AE:** Is he out there right now? All right. I look forward to meeting him later. So, being connected with the family for all these years and volunteering here at the Fold, have you gotten an idea over the years about what great cooks all these women in the Carter family are and—and how that is such an important part of who they are as a family here in—in Hiltons?

**00:07:40**

**CR:** Oh, yes. Yes, they—they are great cooks. And when June and John came, their cook wrote—made a cookbook and I have one of those, and it's got all of the recipes in it—their favorite recipes—and I often cook from that book.

**00:08:01**

**AE:** Is that different from June's *Mother Maybelle's Cookbook*? It's something else?

**00:08:05**

**CR:** Yes, it is uh-hmm. This is one that I think her name is Peggy Knight wrote [called *Cooking in the House of Cash*], and she was June and John's cook, so she has written recipes that she cooked for them. And it was things that June and John liked and what they were used to eating up here, like those good homemade biscuits, country ham and gravy. **[Laughs]** Yeah.

**00:08:29**

**AE:** So did you interact with June and John when they would come up and be here at the Fold?

**00:08:34**

**CR:** Well they—we were asked not to approach them, but when we'd get down on the dance floor, you'd catch John's eye and give him a little wave, and he'd always wave back. And that way, I didn't bother him and it didn't cause anyone else to want to run up to them because when one person went, you had someone to follow behind you. So we respected that very carefully.

**00:09:04**

**AE:** That's—I just can't imagine, you know, the loss of having losing all those many people in such—such—.

**00:09:13**

**CR:** Short time.

**00:09:15**

**AE:** Yeah. and just what that's meant for this place.

00:09:17

**CR:** One night June and John were here, and John was not supposed to have hot dogs, but Janette brought him two hot dogs. and he had his nurse with him. So he—you've never seen anyone in your life cram a hot dog the way he crammed those hot dogs. I mean he was getting rid of them. **[Laughs]** But he loved that, and I don't think that hurt him a bit. You know, he had something he enjoyed then, and I think that was good. But Janette brought him two.

00:09:46

**AE:** Do you have one of these [cookbooks,] *Recipes from the Carter Country Fold* [actual title is *Recipes from Carter Country*]?

00:09:52

**CR:** Uh-hmm. Yes, I do.

00:09:55

**AE:** Do you cook from it?

00:09:55

**CR:** Yes, yes.

00:09:58

**AE:** What do you like to make from it?

00:09:59

**CR:** There—there—I like to—the—they have some good—some cake recipes in there and meatloaf, and I think there’s a recipe in there for dilly beans, which is like—sort of like a pickled beans, pickled beans. There are a lot of good ones in there. *[Chickie Renfro has some recipes in the cookbook, as well: Sunshine Soup, Salmon Cakes, and Easy Chocolate Candy.]*

**00:10:20**

**AE:** Did you grow up—growing up in Johnson City, did you grow up with a lot of the same kinds of foods?

**00:10:27**

**CR:** Oh, yes, we sure did. We always had a big garden, and we had the potatoes and green beans and onions and radishes and all the good things out of the garden. And then my dad worked for a produce company, and we had all of the good vegetables from there. And my sister told me that the reason that I was named Chiquita was because my dad was in charge of ripening the bananas, and they ripened them with gas, I think, and he had to control that. And my sister said that’s why I was named Chiquita because of the banana. *[Laughs]*

**00:11:07**

**AE:** What’s your sister’s name?

**00:11:09**

**CR:** Patricia. That was a twin sister, but she’s passed now.

**00:11:13**

**AE:** Patricia and Chiquita. So when you got married did you keep a garden then also, or was it just when you were growing up?

**00:11:21**

**CR:** Oh no, we had—we had—kept a garden and we moved to Knoxville and stayed three years. I had a daycare previously to that, and we'd bring children up here from the daycare. And when we came—we didn't have a good garden spot in Knoxville, but when we moved back up here, it's been about a year and a half now, the first thing I had done was have me a garden spot plowed up. And last summer we had a really pretty garden, and we had corn and beans and potatoes and cucumbers and squash and all those good things—tomatoes.

**00:11:57**

**AE:** So do you still can and put stuff up?

**00:11:59**

**CR:** Yes, yes, sure do. And then after that part of the garden was over with I planted me a—a patch of greens with turnips and spinach and mustard and all that, so I got to put me up a lot of fresh greens.

**00:12:15**

**AE:** Are there any special family canning recipes that you use or techniques?

**00:12:19**

**CR:** I guess they're just ordinary techniques. I can't think of anything special, just get all those good vegetables put up and saved for winter.

**00:12:33**

**AE:** Well has there been an artist here over the years that you're especially fond of that you like to see coming back or a night that—in your memory that really stands out?

**00:12:45**

**CR:** Yes, I always like to see Doc Watson come, and I also like Wayne Henderson. And I like the—the old Roan Mountain Hilltoppers and—and they—they are an old band. And White Top Mountain Band is a good old band. I like the bands that play the older music with the fiddle and the banjo and all those good rhythms.

**00:13:08**

**AE:** Did you grow up in a musical household?

**00:13:10**

**CR:** Well, not really. Of course we listened—my dad would listen to the radio, *The Grand Ole Opry*, but back when we were children, I guess we didn't pay a lot of attention to that. But then we sure have enjoyed Carter Fold.

**00:13:27**

**AE:** So you're just going to keep every Saturday night booked here in—in Hiltons until eternity?

00:13:35

**CR:** Saturday night is reserved. [*Laughs*] Yes, we'll come as long as we can—sure.

00:13:39

**AE:** Have you brought friends and relatives here over the years that you've introduced them to the experience of—of here?

00:13:46

**CR:** Oh, yes. Yes, we have. Lots of people, uh-hmm. And I have a granddaughter, sixteen; she loves—or she's eighteen now. She loves to come up here. And they don't get to come very often, but we've brought a lot of children up here through the years.

00:14:03

**AE:** On just a regular Saturday night is there generally a pretty mixed crowd, as far as the age is concerned?

00:14:09

**CR:** Yes, it's—it's a very good mixed crowd there. There are a lot of young people who come and we try to—when they're on the dance floor watch out and help them. But there are a lot of younger people and middle-aged people and—and young old people [*Laughs*] that come. It's a good mixed crowd. You'll see a lot of white-top people here [*Laughs*]—white hair. But it's—it's really good.

00:14:38

**AE:** Is there anything that you would add or change or suggest about what goes on here that—  
that would make it even better?

00:14:49

**CR:** Keep it going [*Laughs*]. I think it's good and I—I love it.

00:14:55

**AE:** Well the admission charge tonight is five dollars, is that right?

00:14:56

**CR:** Yeah.

00:14:58

**AE:** What was it when you first started coming?

00:14:59

**CR:** Three dollars. [*Laughs*] And that was, you know—it hasn't been five dollars too many  
years, but where in the world can you go to get a program on Saturday night for five dollars like  
Carter Fold? No place. No place.

00:15:16

**AE:** Have there ever been any like surprising happenings here or unexpected guests or  
interesting things that are kind of different—made it a different night than it usually is here?

00:15:27

**CR:** Let's see. Lots of Saturday nights there will be guests who come that are unannounced that are really good. I can't think of those right now, but lots of times there are very good artists that come for—to play a tune at the halftime. It's really good.

00:15:55

**AE:** And are you going to have a hot dog tonight?

00:15:56

**CR:** No. *[Laughs]* I might but I—you know, I have—I'm very dedicated to about watching my cholesterol for right now and I don't want—I generally don't have a hot dog, but I might have an egg salad. *[Laughs]*

00:16:19

**AE:** And when you—I want to ask you, too, when you clean the stage, have you already done that today? You said that you do that—.

00:16:24

**CR:** Yes, I have. Yes.

00:16:25

**AE:** Can you describe maybe what that's like—what that's like because it's—it's a sacred space out there, and you're in charge of making it look its best on a Saturday night, and if there's any kind of maybe ritual to what you do or anything special about it?

**00:16:40**

**CR:** Well, you have to be careful about what you put on the pretty hardwood, so I don't have a mop. I take a towel and put it over a broom and take me some rubber bands and fasten that down good, and then they have this floor cleaner that we put on that and you go over that. And if you don't have the floor cleaner, you dampen your towel just a little bit to get—but it's amazing what comes off on that towel every Saturday. And I don't know where it comes from because, you know, we do that every week, but this week there have been some people working out there and you needed to get that grime off of it. It's easy to clean.

**00:17:19**

**AE:** Do you visit the [Carter Family] Museum very often?

**00:17:23**

**CR:** Yes, Mrs. Francis is in the Museum at night, and quite often I'll go out there and see if she needs anything or needs help getting back in or anything, uh-hmm.

**00:17:33**

**AE:** Are there any artifacts that are in the museum or pictures out here that you're especially fond of?

**00:17:41**

**CR:** Oh, I love them all. I love those—the picture out front of the A.P. Carter and Family, and I love the pictures of Janette and—and Johnny and June and all of them and—and in the Museum

there is just lots and lots of wonderful pictures and clothing and things like that—that they wore that’s quite interesting to see.

**00:18:09**

**AE:** That’s a great slice of history here.

**00:18:11**

**CR:** Yes. And then out in the little cabin, for Christmas it was decorated in the period of time that—that it should have been and had—had them little calico ornaments and things on the tree and it was really pretty. I enjoyed that—had a fire in the fireplace. It felt good.

**00:18:31**

**AE:** You got your dancing shoes on tonight, Chickie?

**00:18:33**

**CR:** I don’t have them on now, but I have them with me. *[Laughs]* And they’re all polished and in an old sock to keep them pretty and white. *[Laughs]*

**00:18:42**

**AE:** Oh, I can't wait to see you strut your stuff out there tonight. And is there anything that we haven’t talked about that you want to add about the Carter Family or food or working here or dancing here or anything like that?

**00:18:55**

**CR:** Just come and have a really good time, good food, good dancing, good music, good people.

**[Laughs]**

**00:19:02**

**AE:** Speaking of good people, I wonder if you would mind telling me that story you told me earlier; would you mind sharing that about the tickets or no?

**00:19:14**

**CR:** I—I can. We had a family that was having sort of a difficult time, and one of the Carter Fold regulars purchased twelve tickets, and they added four to them and gave them to the couple so they could continue to come to Carter Fold. And that—that's the way people are up here; they look out after each other. And there used to be a—a gentleman come, and—and I just loved him dearly. His name was Gus E. Lane and he was tall and slim, dark skin, and had no teeth but he—and he would hitchhike from where he lived to Carter Fold. And then I think in later years Janette paid his way back in a taxi. But he was always the first one on the floor and—and encouraged people to come down to dance and he was just—he helped work on the Fold here when they built it, and he was just a wonderful person. I loved him.

**00:20:22**

**AE:** Sounds like the Carter Family is a lot bigger than—than people may know it to be, with all the folks who come out here every Saturday like yourself.

**00:20:28**

**CR:** Oh, it sure is. It—it's hundreds and hundreds of people who love Carter Fold, and I'm one of them. [*Laughs*]

**00:20:38**

**AE:** All right, Chickie. Well thank you so much for visiting with me. I've enjoyed it.

**00:20:42**

**CR:** Thank you.

**00:20:44**

**[End Chickie Renfro-2 Interview]**