

VICKI VIRTS
Family Friend - 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: 24 minutes, 16 seconds
Project: Carter Family Fold

[Begin Vicki Virts-1 Interview]

00:00:02

Amy Evans: This is Amy Evans for the Southern Foodways Alliance on Saturday, February 21, 2009. I'm in Hiltons, Virginia, at the Carter Family Fold in the music here—room back here right before the band arrives. And I'm with Vicki Virts, and, Vicki, if you wouldn't mind saying your name and your—your connection to the Carter Family?

00:00:20

Vicki Virts: Thank you, Amy. My name is Vicki Virts, and I grew up here in the community, lived next door to Janette [Carter] and [her daughter] Rita [Forrester] and spent a great deal of time in their home as I was growing up.

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AE: And if you don't mind my asking your birth date for the record, if you don't mind sharing that?

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VV: November 2nd.

00:00:47

AE: Okay, fair enough. And so could you just kind of talk about growing up around here and— and your experience in the kitchen of the Carter Family and—and music and all of that?

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VV: Sure. It was—it was a great place to grow up as a child. It's a very rural Southern community; everyone in the community is very close. And it was a—an easy time to grow up. It was before there was a lot of concerns about safety and as children we were just pretty much allowed to run freely between homes, and there was no concern about where you were. You left in the morning and came home at night, and during the day you were just floating from home to home, and wherever you happened to be was where you ate your meals. So I ate a lot of meals at Janette's house and she was—I can testify, she was a wonderful Southern cook.

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AE: What kind of things that she made stand out in your memory?

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VV: Well she was—I spent a lot of nights there, and she was a wonderful cook for breakfast. She got up really, really early before, of course, we rolled out, so she would get up at like 4:30 in the morning and make biscuits, and then we'd get up at maybe 7:30 or 8:00. And she would take the biscuits that she made earlier and split them and then toast them, so toasted biscuits and drinking Pepsi for breakfast at Janette's house is—stands out in my memory. But she was a great cook. She would—we would be, you know, like playing a game in the living room, and she'd disappear into the kitchen, and it seemed like ten minutes later she'd come out with a, you know, plate of homemade cookies or fudge or—she was just a really great cook. I mean she'd stir things up from memory; she didn't use recipes. She was, you know, the true cook, and you'd try to get her tell you how she made it, and she'd be like, “Oh, you know, you just take a pinch of

this or a pinch of that,” so you could never replicate what she made, but she—I guess she had the feel for it because she was a really good cook.

00:02:44

AE: Do you think that you learned anything about cooking from her that maybe that you brought into your adult life?

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VV: Oh, yeah. Absolutely. I think I learned cooking what you have, you know, using the local product because in that time period it was very much gardening and what people grew and kept their own chickens—that kind of thing, so definitely learned to cook with what you had and make do.

00:03:13

AE: And so are there any things that you try to replicate now? I mean are you a cook today and—and make a lot of home scratch stuff?

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VV: Well I am a cook but I’m also a person who works—has a forty-hour a week job, so I don’t cook like Janette did. But I do have some of her recipes that she taught—gave my mom a recipe for red velvet cake, which became one of my mom’s specialties and then my mom handed it down to me, so I always think of Janette when I make her red velvet cake. And she also—I have a recipe that she gave me years ago for a white fruitcake at Christmas time, and I’ve made that several times, and I always think of her when I make that, too.

00:03:56

AE: So when you were growing up and spending nights over there, was—was it just another friend’s house or were you aware of their significance as a family in the—in the music world?

00:04:06

VV: It was really more of another—it’s just a friend’s house. I mean we knew that A. P. [Carter] had been well known for his music at one time but, as a child, that really didn’t impress you, the importance of it and it—it really didn’t play into the relationship when I was a child.

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AE: Did you grow up in a musical household?

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VV: No, I didn’t, not at all.

00:04:33

AE: Is that kind of an anomaly here, because it seems like so many families grew up with music in the home as a form of entertainment here in the mountains, and so I’d be surprised to know that your family wasn’t really a musical family.

00:04:45

VV: I don't know. It—it was just something that wasn't present in our home and, you know, Rita was my best friend and it was present in her home, so it was just, you know, something you accepted as a child. You didn't really think about it.

00:04:59

AE: Did you enjoy the music?

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VV: Yeah, very much so. And at one time Janette even decided she was going to teach Rita and I how to play the Autoharp, and I think just like one lesson she realized that's not happening.

[Laughs] So that—that kind of died a quick death but—but she gave it a shot, anyway.

00:05:16

AE: Well and what about just kind of general Appalachian food traditions of this area and just, you know, how people are so self-sufficient and grow so much and can so much and how that relates to your family and what you knew about the Carters growing up?

00:05:33

VV: Well, they weren't really different than every other family because every family did that in the community; everybody had a large garden and canned and froze vegetables. That was, you know, just part of everybody's lifestyle. So they weren't really different from the rest of us in that way. And I—and I think as we grew up and—and we became working moms we kind of dropped a little bit of that tradition, but I see it coming back. I don't think we lost it totally. We still do a little bit, you know, like jellies or pickles or, you know, kept a little bit of it going; but I

think we're starting to see it more come back and—and suddenly it's a really popular movement with the local foods and I—I'm not sure if you're familiar with Barbara Kingsolver, who—who wrote a really you know interesting book about that movement [*Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life*,] and she's from our area. And I think suddenly people are thinking it's a new idea, but it's not. It's an old idea that is just coming back.

00:06:37

AE: So she lives in the area still, Barbara Kingsolver; her book is *Animal Vegetable Miracle*. Has she ever been out to the Fold?

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VV: Not that I know of. I don't, but I hope she comes. We'd love to have her. [*Laughs*]

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AE: Well I think she needs to come out here. So how long have you been helping out here at the Fold?

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VV: Oh, I think I have helped out here off and on since its beginning. For many years, probably about twenty-five years, my mom ran the concession from the beginning of the—the Fold, once the crowds grew a little bit. Janette asked my mom to—to take the concession and so she was kind of an autonomous person in charge of the concession, but we always helped her off and on when she needed it. So that went on for twenty-five years, and then my mom passed away and Rita started taking over the concession, and it just felt right to continue with our role here. It was

a connection to the past and to my mom and to Rita's mom, so we just kept—kept coming. It just felt like home, so we're still doing it.

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AE: And what's your mother's name?

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VV: Her name was Ann Vickers and she and Janette were really, really close friends. They had a wonderful friendship and working relationship, so it was a really nice thing to see.

00:08:04

AE: So how have you, since you've been, you know, so close to the family and affiliated with the Fold since the beginning, how have you watched it evolve over the years?

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VV: Well, of course, it's grown. It started as a tiny little idea of Janette's to have music in the old store building, which is the museum now and it's grown—it outgrew that locality really quick, and they built this Fold building, and it's just continued to grow and it's lost a little bit of its intimacy. When it first began, it was more locals and everybody knew everybody, and at the end of the show on Saturday night—Saturday nights Janette would always stand at the door and hug everybody and tell them to come back next week. And it's gotten so large, and there's a lot more people coming from outside the local area that it—the intimacy is not there, but it's still a really good family place to come. And—and I think it still is a—a venue where people of all ages

come and feel comfortable and have a good time. You still see the children, the teenagers, the adults, the elderly people, just like in the beginning, so I don't think it's lost that.

00:09:24

AE: Well can you talk a little bit about the practicality of having the concession stand, of course, but also the significance of—of serving up some traditional Appalachian foods, like the soup beans and the cornbread and people who come from all over the world to the Carter Fold?

00:09:37

VV: Well it's a good way for them to get a—a taste, literally, of our flavor of the area because that is just such a part of who we are is our—our local food traditions with the soup beans, the cornbread—that kind of thing. And it's also a way to make what we serve financially available to everyone. It's inexpensive because it's what's available locally, and that's something that Janette felt very strongly about. She wanted this to be a place where families could come and feed everyone for a—a reasonable price and she wanted to make something available for vegetarians, so the tradition of the egg salad sandwiches were started and continues today. So it's—it's just a good way for everyone to see that this is what we're really like here and it's unpretentious; it's just who we are. We're not trying to impress everybody.

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[End Vicki Virts-1 Interview]

[Begin Vicki Virts-2 Interview]

00:00:02

Amy Evans: All right, this is Amy Evans again and on February 21, 2009, in Hiltons, Virginia, and I'm back with Vicki. We were just talking about the Fold and had to stop and start again, so here we are. And now Vicki is telling me that she has a good story to tell about cornbread.

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Vicki Virts: When Rita and I were about twelve years old, we decided that we were going to make supper for my parents. They were working in tobacco, and we came home from school and were like, well, we'll cook supper and have it ready when they get there. And, needless to say, we hadn't done this before, and we decided one of our dishes was going to be cornbread, which we had—we weren't sure about the recipe. So we got out a recipe book and found one for cornbread, and the difference between the recipe and what we made was that the recipe called for self-rising flour or called for plain—plain cornmeal and we had self-rising cornmeal, which already has all the ingredients in it. So we made the cornbread by the recipe, and we put the soda in it. Well when it came out, you could actually see veins of soda in the cornbread. It was horrible. And so when—when my dad cut into it and it, you know—just everybody was like, “Oh, this is bad.” Nobody would eat it. So they gave it to my dad's coon dogs. He had a couple old hound dogs and he threw the cornbread out in the backyard. And the dog ate it and gobbled it up, and coon dogs are always starved to death, and the dog ate it up really quick. And he goes—you know, he's looking really in pain, and he goes around the corner of the house and you hear this horrendous belch out of that dog [*Laughs*]. And it took like, you know, years for Rita and I to live down that little episode about the cornbread. So that was our first foray into cooking, but Rita is a great cornbread cook now so—.

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AE: Well, you got to start somewhere.

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VV: Yeah, absolutely. [*Laughs*]

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AE: So do you make cornbread still today? Is that a staple of your kitchen?

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VV: I do make it, yes. It's a little bit better than it used to be. [*Laughs*]

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AE: Well you've had lots of—of trial and error over the years, I'm sure, but would you mind sharing your recipe and kind of your approach to cornbread?

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VV: If I can remember it. It starts out with a cup and a half of self-rising cornmeal—self-rising and then a half a cup of self-rising flour, an egg, a half a cup of oil, and a cup of buttermilk. And you stir all that up, of course, and have your cast iron skillet on the stove and heat it up and put, you know, like a little—oh, about the size of a hen egg, as Janette would say, of shortening in the—the skillet and let that heat. Take a little dry cornmeal and sprinkle in it and that keeps it from sticking and pour your batter in and pop it in the oven at 450 [degrees] and bake it. That's it.

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AE: So is that recipe something that you got from her—from Janette?

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VV: It's actually from a relative of Janette's, Fern Salyer, who is one of Janette's first cousins, and that's her recipe.

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AE: Yeah, I've been hearing a lot about Fern's cornbread. *[Laughs]*

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VV: Yes, I tell you, we all enjoy that. And it's probably the same one Janette used; I don't know, but I would imagine it's similar, if not exactly the same.

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AE: So I love that little bit that you just said about a hen egg of—of shortening in the—in the skillet. Are there any little other things like that—that Janette used to say about cooking or her own little ways of talking?

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VV: Well, as I said before, she never really had exact measurements. It was always, you know, a handful of salt, you know, just in the palm of your hand, a little circle of salt, and she seemed to know exactly how much that was. And a hen egg of butter or a hen egg of, you know,

shortening, walnut-size, you know, she just used everyday items to kind of help you visualize how much to put in.

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AE: And it—you said that you brought a recipe with you today. What is that?

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VV: I did. This is just a recipe that we developed for our cider here at the Carter Fold during the cold months. We always sell spiced cider, and we have, through trial and error, came up with our own little spice mix that we add and—and this is it.

00:04:28

AE: Want to read it out, too?

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VV: Well you start with a gallon of either apple cider or vinegar, and we make our spice mix ahead of time, so you can make this and store it in a plastic baggie. And you take a cup of brown sugar and then you add either two sticks of cinnamon, or here we just use one teaspoon of the ground cinnamon because we don't really have as much time to simmer this as you might at home. Then we add six whole cloves, a half a teaspoon of ginger, and a fourth of teaspoon of all-spice and just put it in your cider and—don't bring it to a boil, just let it simmer slowly. It's really tasty. And if you're at home and you have time, you can throw in like some orange slices or lemon slices, you know, to fancy it up a little bit but—.

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AE: How long has that been a winter tradition here?

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VV: Gosh, probably, hmm, I don't know. I would say at least five or six years but maybe longer. Time—time kind has a way of getting away from you, so I would think at least that long.

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AE: Have there been other kind of seasonal food things that have been introduced over the years or things that have—were introduced in the beginning that aren't here anymore?

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VV: Well, when Janette first started the concessions, she made her own barbecue, her own homemade barbecue. It was—we called it barbecue, but it was more like a Sloppy Joe. It was a ground beef that she boiled down and then added barbecue sauce to, and that was a tradition for a long time. But the crowds have just gotten so large and—and people now have, you know, outside jobs, so they don't have as much time to cook, so that kind of fell by the wayside and they just buy you know barbecue. *[Laughs]*

00:06:19

AE: Now Rita was talking earlier about homemade desserts and things, and I just walked through the concession stand and saw a bunch of beautiful slices of cake. Can you tell me anything about those?

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VV: Well those are—different ladies have just kind of taken this on as—as their project and—and every week they make a couple of homemade cakes, and whatever recipe strikes their fancy is what you get that week and—and they’re wonderful. They’re homemade and gigantic slices, big enough for about two people out of each one, but it’s really good. And it’s just, I think the Fold is a wonderful place because it makes everyone feel like family and everyone belong, and that’s what these ladies who bring the cakes are a part of that feeling.

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AE: And they’re all local? Are they older ladies?

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VV: Well they probably are. [*Laughs*] We don’t like to think of ourselves as older, but I guess they are. You know, they’re—they’re ladies whose families are grown now, and they don’t have the full nest and have a little bit more time, so yeah. And they are local ladies who come every week and this is just part of their—their tradition. You know, they look forward to coming and seeing all their friends on Saturday night and helping out, and they all love Rita. They loved Janette before—I think Janette and Rita both just have this way of making people feel loved and appreciated, and if you talk to people about Janette, and I’m sure you’ve noticed this, that everybody felt like they had a special relationship with her. Their relationship was one of the most special, and she just had that ability to make everybody feel like they were special and—and Rita does it, too.

00:08:12

AE: Now have you had, over the years, some nights that—that stand out in your memory here at the Fold?

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VV: Well there are, you know, everybody has their own special favorite bands, and you can just remember nights when the chemistry was right, the band was great, and the crowd was really enthusiastic, so there are certain nights. The Red Clay Ramblers were an old-time band that everybody has always loved and their—their performances here at the Fold have been really special to a lot of us and just that kind of thing, you know. Some nights are on and some are off, but they're all special in their own way.

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AE: And what kind of—what kind of things do you hear from people who come here for the first time and have this experience and come for the music but then get so much more?

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VV: Well you—you hear a lot of surprise from people about how inexpensive it is because I think people are used to going to a venue and—and just being bled dry financially, you know, and that's not what the Fold does. We're—we're trying to offer things at a value that people with families—large families can come and—and, you know, afford it. So we hear that a lot and we have visitors from—we've had visitors from Japan and a lot of different foreign countries and that's always really interesting to see their reaction to our food. I remember one couple from Japan came and—and they ordered and obviously they spoke no English, and they were just kind of pointing at what they wanted and they ended up with a hot dog and they opened it—they

opened the paper so carefully and looked in. It was just like them opening a Christmas present. They had no idea what they were getting. So it's fun to see the people's different reactions like that.

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AE: Do you ever try and like really push the soup beans and cornbread to people as a more traditional kind of food of this area or people just—it's just up to the people to figure it out?

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VV: No, we don't really push anything. We're just like, you know, try—and word of mouth goes—I mean we don't need to push it because people in the—the audience are pushing it, you know. They've got a bowl of soup beans and cornbread, and somebody is asking them about it and they're saying, "It's great. Try it." So we don't have to, you know. It does it itself.

00:10:47

AE: And we've got the band [Tennessee Skyline] arriving here. Hey, how are you doing?
[Laughs] And we're in the green room here. Well is there anything about Janette or Rita that I might not know to ask that you would like to share?

00:11:03

VV: I can't think of anything except that they're really genuine people who are doing this for totally unselfish reasons. And I don't think people realize what a sacrifice it's been for them to do it. I mean it—it takes—and it took with Janette and it still continues to take with Rita, so much of their time and they do it for totally unselfish reasons because they want to carry on the

traditions of A. P. And you just don't find people who are that unselfish very often, and I think they need to get a lot of respect and a lot of honor for that. And I totally feel that way. It's just so nice to see somebody do something for an unselfish reason.

00:11:51

AE: Well and that begs the question of what the future might be for the Fold if—when you know—if and when Rita retires or isn't here anymore to carry on the legacy. Is there someone standing in line to—to take it on?

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VV: Well, I really feel hopeful. There—there is a different generation, the next generation of grandchildren, Janette's grandchildren. Rita has two sons, and her brother Dale has a couple of sons and her brother—her older brother, Don, had a daughter, Melissa, and Melissa has a son so there's—there's people, you know, and their time will come when they're ready. I think some of them will step up to the plate. I have no doubt that the Fold will go on.

00:12:39

AE: Do you think that the—the music will change much or the food as—as decades pass by?

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VV: I think the changes in the food will be—will be slow like they have over the last thirty-five years, you know. Things gradually change a little bit but not a lot and the music, I—you know everything changes. Nothing stays the same. That's just life. But I think the goal of the Fold will always stay the same to present entertainment in an affordable family atmosphere and to—and to

educate the public about the music—the acoustic music of the mountains—so I don't think that's going to change. There might be subtle differences, but I think that will stay the same.

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AE: Well is there a note that you'd like to end on? That seemed like a good one.

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VV: No. Thanks, though. It's been a pleasure to speak with you.

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AE: Thank you so much, Vicki.

00:13:38

[End Vicki Virts-2 Interview]