

Glenn Ohrlin: GO  
Tracie Wilson: TW

TW: Ok, uh, this is Tracie Wilson, I am interviewing Glenn Ohrlin for the Campus Folksong Club Oral History Project. It is July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2007, and we are at his home just south of Mountain View, Arkansas. So, uh, my first question is how did you become interested in traditional music?

GO: Well, I've just known a whole lot of it all my life since I was a little boy, I reckon, you know? And everybody sang, or a lot of people used to. And then on early radio you could hear every kind of music there was. And, I like cowboy songs and other kind of old timey songs.

TW: Did you learn from certain individuals, or—

GO: Sometimes I did, Yeah.

TW: Family?

GO: Sometimes, yeah.

TW: Did you come from a musical family?

GO: Yeah, some of them were. My father was very musical, and my mother could sing. I had an aunt, an aunt on my father's side and an aunt on my mother's side that both sang. And uncles, I had seven uncles on my mother's side and a few of them sang quite a bit.

TW: And you said you're from Minnesota originally?

GO: Yes, Uh-huh.

TW: Uh-huh, what part?

GO: I kind of, I grew up, or I was born in Minneapolis, but I grew up in Winger, just north of the White Earth Indian Reservation in Red River and the North Country.

TW: And the kinds of songs you liked to sing back then, was it called cowboy music then?

GO: Yes, if it was about cowboys it was.

TW: And you said then later you moved to California for awhile?

GO: Yeah.

TW: Were you a teenager then? Or—

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GO: Yeah, early on. Uh-huh.

TW: I see. And before you settled here- I guess I had read that you traveled around a bit?

GO: Yeah, I rodeo'd for a living, rode bucking horses, and I did that from '43 through '65, so I had done that for about 11 years after I got here. You know, from here, out from here. Before that I rodeo'd out of California, except I started in Nevada in '43.

TW: So you said you settled here in the 50's?

GO: Yes, 1954.

TW: Uhm, well, my next question is how did you become involved with the Campus Folksong Club? How did you first get in touch with the people there?

GO: Well, I met them at a Eureka Springs, Arkansas festival when people from here had organized a little society and joined early on, and they kind of levered me out of it after a while, but, I didn't need a boss real bad. And, but we all went to Eureka Springs and I met Archie Green there, and Julia [sic] McCulloh and one other guy, I can't remember what is name was now.

TW: Was he a student, or—

GO: Yeah, uh-huh.

TW: Student?

GO: And uh, they invited me up to Urbana.

TW: Uh-huh.

GO: And the first time I had these college gigs, then they had me at Southern Illinois, Purdue, and then Illinois. And Archie Green turned out to be a dynamic sort of person and he got me into University of Chicago festival and kind of made some contacts for me. I got to work Newport, Rhode Island and a few other things. And then I met everybody in the business there, so it was kind of a break, you know.

TW: So do you remember what you thought, or, when students or academics started becoming interested in your music?

GO: Well, I was kind of surprised.

TW: What were your first impressions of these people?

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GO: Well they were all awful nice to me, I realized that right away, you know, And I thought they asked an awful lot of questions and I kind of come out of a society that really didn't, you know, and—

TW: Right, right. Uh, and, so through your contacts with Archie Green and the other people who worked with him at Illinois you started making more contacts in the folk music circuit it sounds like.

GO: Oh sure, uh-huh. Yeah, uh- huh.

TW: So what kind of an impact do you think this contact had on you then, at the time, and then later on in your career?

GO: Oh, I don't know, I just kind of take things in stride. I don't tend to worry much about anything.

TW: Right right. Uh, and, do you remember, like, how other people might have reacted to you becoming involved in this sort of folk revival movement, uh, or this—

GO: Well, it was a big thing at that time, in '63, and then for a couple more years.

TW: Do you recall how your, like, neighbors or friends or family reacted?

GO: Well, uh, there were an awful lot of traditional singers around here then, and they still do a lot of music here but most of the old time singers that really knew a lot of old songs are dead now. And uh, oh, they thought it was interesting I guess, you know. They weren't too surprised or anything, uh-huh.

TW: Uh, in your pers— in your opinion did the political climate of the 1960's have an impact on how you saw yourself back then?

GO: Uhn-uh.

TW: No? And do you think that politics played an important role in how the students thought about traditional music?

GO: I just don't know. It seemed like they were really interested in it, you know?

TW: Uh, lets see. And, so who were some of the other singers from this area that, that you think were really significant at that time?

GO: Well, Jimmy Driftwood was pretty famous for, you know, his songs and stuff, but I don't want to comment much on him, we've kind of had a falling out.

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TW: I see. Uh—

GO: I was a little too independent, I guess.

TW: Uh, so what can you tell me that you remember about the concerts that you played at the University of Illinois or other campuses you played back then? Uh, what was the experience like?

GO: Well, I thought it was the easiest form of cowboying I ever found. Yeah.

TW: But they were responsive? The students were responsive to your music?

GO: Oh Yeah, uh huh.

TW: Did pretty big crowds turn out then for the concerts?

GO: Well, not all the time, but just a fair crowd at the first one, and small crowds at Southern Illinois and Purdue, and big crowds at University of Chicago about a year or two later. I don't remember exactly what years now, so.

TW: Right. Uh, so was it mainly in the Midwest that you played on campuses? Or—

GO: Oh, I've played on both coasts; you know Newport, Rhode Island and Los Angeles and San Francisco, eventually to San Diego. And then a little later on I got to go to the Arch in St. Louis a few times. And then for about 20 years I did the Border festival in El Paso, Texas every other year.

TW: Uh-huh. I see.

GO: Sometimes every year and sometimes every other year. Then, uh, everybody that was kind of pulling for me kind of died off or retired, you know, and other people took over at one at a time or two, and then it's kind of fizzled out now, so I like to go there.

TW: Uh-huh. To El Paso?

GO: Yes.

TW: Uh-huh. But you haven't been there lately?

GO: Not for a few years, huh-huh. The last, I think I was there four or five years ago, maybe four. And, uh, I enjoy it there very much.

TW: Uh-huh.

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GO: And my neighbor down the road he goes to Mexico often, and particularly along the border, and he was there so we had a good time.

TW: Is he a performer too? Or—

GO: No, he just likes to hang out down there.

TW: Oh, I see, to have fun?

GO: Yeah.

TW: Uh, so, back in the '60's was it this period of just a couple of years where you were touring these various campuses? How long did that last?

GO: Well, I think, uh, the college gigs, it kind of dried up after a few years, and, uh, but I still got to work a few festivals. And then in '83 and '84 the, oh, what the heck the outfit's name in uh, near Washington DC, uh, National Council of Traditional Arts formed a cowboy tour.

TW: uh-huh.

GO: It had 8 old cowboys from all over the country on it, and Joe Wilson was the manager, and we traveled all the western states and worked for arts councils. In the second year, '84, we did all the western states and uh, Hawaii. I was in Hawaii for ten days, and we spent a lot of time on the big island, which is mostly ranch country, and had a great time there. And then in '85 they started having a cowboy poetry gathering at—

TW: At the western—

GO: Elko, Nevada, and I was in on, uh, planning the first one a little bit. They hired me as a consultant. I was playing the San Diego, California folk festival and all the western folklorists were there at a meeting of their own, and they were discussing that so I got to go over there and put in my two cents worth. And I knew all these guys knew what they were doing, so I just kind of agreed with them and I probably got more credit than I deserved from it, but—

TW: Because I thought I saw that you're still scheduled to, to take part in the cowboy poetry gathering?

GO: Yeah.

TW: Yeah? You take part every year?

GO: Yeah.

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TW: I see.

GO: And it's the national poetry gathering now at Elko, Nevada—

TW: Oh, okay.

GO: And it's, Alco county, it's a huge county and its all ranch country. Basically just ranching and some gold mining.

TW: Do you still do ranching here?

GO: Yes, uh-huh.

TW: So you're not retired?

GO: Not plumb, just— I've still got a few cattle and one horse.

TW: Uh-huh. So, the Campus Folksong Club put out one of your LP's. Was that your first LP or was—

GO: Yeah my first one was through Campus Folksong Club

TW: So how did that happen, did they suggest that to you?

GO: Yeah they did, they said can we make an m—see they taped everything. And I did a few things over again in '64, stopping in Urbana on the way home from a rodeo near Chicago. I was still riding bucking horses.

TW: Oh really, you were? Okay.

GO: Yeah. There's a birthday card they gave me in Utah a couple years ago.

TW: Wow, that's great. Is that you?

GO: Yeah, uh-huh.

TW: That's a great picture

GO: That was the year I came here.

TW: Oh in 50— '54 you said?

GO: Yeah. Uh-huh.

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TW: Wow.

GO: Some friends of mine put that all together and had me a birthday party two weeks after my birthday.

TW: Oh, that's nice.

GO: Yeah.

TW: So you, you recorded this album in Urbana, then?

GO: You what?

TW: You recorded the album you put out with the folksong club in Urbana from, at your concert mostly?

GO: Yeah

TW: I see.

GO: And then I did a few songs over again, I think.

TW: I see. How was the— do you recall how the response to that album was? Did you—

GO: I think every folklorist got one. And that's usually the way it goes, with some small issues, you know. Uh-huh.

TW: But you've put out other albums after that, right?

GO: Yeah. I've done some for Philo and Rounder and basically never make anything off it unless you get paid up front. Now they try to get it back, so I think they're all in trouble, you know. I think the mafia owns them or something.

TW: Yeah, I don't know, maybe. Huh. And then a few years later, or was it around that time that you and Judy collaborated on this book project?

GO: Yeah I started, or they kind of talked me into doing it, and they were doing this project there at the press on music and American life and I got to do the first cowboy song book that they did. So I knew of some songs that I just knew about and didn't have, particularly up in the Dakotas and Montana and there, and I got a little grant from Newport to travel and collect them songs, and I did that. And I got that done in '68, and then in '70 I got the book wrote, and by '73 Archie Green got it published by the Illinois Press, but the book actually came out in '74.

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TW: Oh, I see. So you wrote most of it or—

GO: All of it. Except Harlan Daniel did a discography/bibliography in the back for all the songs. And he was a real scholar, and he knew a tremendous amount about everything.

TW: Where was he based?

GO: Well he was in Chicago then, but he moved to Memphis and opened a rare book store. And he died there.

TW: I see. So did you work much with Judy when you were working on the book? Or did you work mostly here—

GO: Well, I just— I was here and they were there so I, uh, there's some of them, ain't got tunes to them, you know. They're just poems, you know. And they were surprised by that. They didn't know there was so much cowboy poetry, and there's an awful lot. And I kind of associated poetry with tough people that told them around bars and stuff like that. And some were kind of rollicky, and uh—

TW: When did you stop, uh, working in the rodeo circuit?

GO: Well, 1965 was my last year.

TW: So there was a time when you were doing both?

GO: Yeah, in '63 and '4 and '5, and then I quit rodeoing.

TW: Oh, I see. Um, and have you lived in this house for the same amount of time since you lived here?

GO: No I built the house. And I lived across the road for a few years when I was building this house.

TW: And, uh, are you involved, or were you involved in the, with the folk life center here?

GO: Yeah, I play there once in a while. Uh-huh

TW: You still do?

GO: Yeah, they put me on about once a month now.

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TW: Oh really? That's pretty often. Were you involved in getting that established? Or do you know the people that were involved in that?

GO: Well, I kind of knew everybody that was and kind of played on their programs and then they kind of levered me out of it.

TW: Oh. Uh, I'm trying to think. I don't know if I have really any more questions.

GO: Yeah, Well...

TW: Yeah, I think I might have covered everything. Is there anything else you think I should know about?

GO: Oh, I don't know.

TW: Have I missed something?

GO: I'm going back to Elko again, and Cody, Wyoming has cowboy music every April at the Buffalo Bill museum. I enjoy them two an awful lot.

TW: That's in April?

GO: Yes, uh-huh.

TW: And Elko?

GO: That's late in January or early February.

TW: Oh, so twice? Oh, late January or— Right about that time late January

GO: Yeah, uh-huh.

TW: I see.

GO: And if I just plumb retired I'd still like to work Elko and Cody 'cause it's just like home to me. I've lived in Wyoming, too, before. Well, I was living in California and worked a lot and traveled an awful lot in other states and spent hitches in different places and—particularly Wyoming and Arizona.

TW: Uhm-hm. So when you met Archie Green was it because he was interested in cowboy music in general?

GO: I don't think so, he just—

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TW: Just by chance?

GO: He wanted to— He talked to me a little bit, and he asked me if I'd sing a cowboy song. And we were sitting around a park there in Wrigley Springs and I sang "The Hell-bound Train," and he liked that. Uh, that's how come the book got called "The Hell-bound Train" and the record too.

TW: It's a good title. So Judy was with him when he came down and—

GO: Yes, uh-huh.

TW: And one other person who—

GO: Yeah, I can't remember their name now. I might if I heard it again, but—

TW: I'll tell you the people I've interviewed so far and you can tell me if—

GO: Okay.

TW: Fritz Plous—

GO: Who?

TW: Fritz Plous. He was a student.

GO: Yeah, I think I met him. Uh-huh.

TW: Yeah, he told me about coming down to Arkansas and sleeping on Alameda Riddle's porch and listening to the whipporwills with some other students.

GO: Oh, yeah.

TW: I don't know.

GO: When they first started having the folk festival here in '63, and then the years after that there was a lot of people from Chicago and Urbana would come here.

TW: In the mid sixties?

GO: Yeah.

TW: After '63?

GO: Yeah.

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TW: And a couple other people I've interviewed are Vic Lukas—

GO: Yeah.

TW: Uh, Jarvis Rich, he was another student.

GO: I don't remember that.

TW: And I think that's it. Doyle Moore—

GO: Doyle Moore I remember. I was trying to think of his name.

TW: He was a professor but he was—

GO: Yeah, he was an art professor there.

TW: Right I interviewed him too.

GO: Yeah he was a good guy. I liked him.

TW: And Judy.

GO: Yeah.

TW: And maybe that's it. I'm supposed to interview someone named Jont Allen.

GO: Who?

TW: Jont Allen? Jonathon Allen, I guess.

GO: Oh I don't guess I remember him.

TW: Yeah so maybe that's it. And did you know the Mayfields at all? Lyle and Doris Mayfield? They also performed with the concerts—

GO: Yeah I think they did an album—

TW: Yeah they did an album called "The Green Fields of Illinois."

GO: Yeah, uh-huh Or part of an album, I don't remember which.

TW: Yeah, right. Some other people were on it, too. So I'm going to hopefully talk to them. They still live in Greenville, Illinois. So that's about everyone I have.

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Glenn Ohrlin: GO  
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GO: Okay

TW: Well, okay. Well, thank you very much.

GO: Oh, you're welcome.