

Darlene Campbell Interview  
with Abby Huggins  
May 26, 2017  
Campbell's Branch Community Center

00:01 This is Abby Huggins, today is May 26th, 2016 [correction: actually 2017], I'm at Campbell's Branch Community Center with Darlene Campbell for an interview connected to the Food and Dance Trail. Darlene, can you introduce yourself?

00:19 I'm Darlene Campbell. I am the chairperson for the community center here. And, I've been volunteering here now for twelve years.

00:32 Can you start by telling me about where you were raised the people you come from?

00:39 I grew up on Cowan and here in Letcher County. And I grew up in a close community that the Cowan Community Center was a big part in. Would go there and you could bring a can of food and get a cup of Kool-Aid and a bag of popcorn and they showed us movies on the old reel type, which was really interesting. We'd go to stir offs there. They would have a lot of things for the community there.

01:14 Tell me what a stare-off [stir-off] is.

01:16 It is where you take the sugar cane and -

01:18 Oh a stir-off! Oh, sorry! [laughs] Well, tell me about it.

01:23 Ok, you take the sugar cane and at that time, they used the mule to turn the grinder. So, it is, I was glad to be able to experience that. And then, getting to dip the apple in the molasses and eating it was wonderful.

01:40 Sorghum that folks had grown up Cowan?

01:45 Yes.

01:48 And the whole community?

01:52 The whole community participated, from small children to people in their 70s and 80s, we just all joined in together and did it.

02:03 What else do you remember happening at the community center?

02:11 I can't remember. Oh, I remember going to my first play at the Cowan Community Center and it was The Trail of the Lonesome Pine. And that's when I fell in love with theater and storytelling. And then we'd always have music there. We'd have community dinners. It was just a place where we could just gather and see how everyone was doing and just catch up.

02:52 Are you involved with anything there still?

02:58 I'm a member of the Letcher County Culture Hub, which Cowan is also a part of as well, so we work together on some things.

03:09 Can you explain what the Culture Hub is?

03:10 The Culture Hub is a group of organizations, various group of organizations that are joining together to promote the culture here in Letcher County and to make us stronger together instead of separate unities. We're combined to help each other and be stronger throughout the community.

03:40 What elements of culture are you working on or promoting?

03:45 Promoting, right now, we're promoting the folk dancing, bluegrass, flatfooting, two stepping, bluegrass music, gospel music, country music. And we gather together and dance and play music. Tonight actually is our jam, so whoever shows up is welcome to get up on stage. We're also having our potluck supper tonight, everybody contributes to our supper and it's usually quite delicious [laughs]. Everybody tries to out-cook everybody else. So, I enjoy that. It carries on the tradition of when people would get together at barn raisings and they would bring food or just any community gathering, food was always an important part of the culture here. And, that's what we're trying to continue.

04:51 So, food is a part of the events that you have here.

04:53 It is. Yes, we have our meals and music and dancing and storytelling.

05:04 Talk more about the food. What kinds of food are typical at the potluck or typically made for sale for concessions?

05:11 Ok. We've tried to become healthier, so we're including more vegetables and fruits and trying to limit on fried foods. Which fried foods is a southern tradition [laughs], so it's hard to get away from it. We'll still have to every once in a while, but we're trying to, like tonight, we'll have baked chicken, we have spaghetti bake, we have chicken and dumplings, which is a great old time dish, but still a favorite. Usually have like green beans, mashed potatoes, corn, things like that. And of course, lots of desserts.

06:03 Can you describe more of the music side of things. Describe what the event is like.

06:11 Well, when you first come in, you'll see people gathering on stage. Sometimes it will be a group that we've hired to support the local music in the area. Or, on a jam night, it will be a group of different musicians and they'll take turns getting up and playing their music. We have a house band called the Campbell Valley House Band and we're here to help and support anybody that wants us to. And, we encourage people to express themselves however they feel. We've had a young man who just, he's fourteen years old. In October, one night here, got up on stage and his parents did not know he could sing. And, he likes a lot of Merle Haggard tunes. So, he got up and sing and everybody's jaw just dropped. He has a wonderful voice. And then, in November, one of our volunteers here gave him a guitar. And he's playing it very well now. So, it's just surprising the talent that is hidden and we just help to try to pull it out to encourage everybody. We start out

with our young people that would like to sing. We open our show if they're here, they're opening our shows. They're our futures and so they get to start. They'll sing songs, some have already started composing their own songs and they'll get up and sing and the community is just so supportive of it. We've had gospel groups come in and share their groups. We've had people from, let's see, Pistol Annie's was the group name and they were all female bluegrass group from Canada. And, they just stopped by one night on a jam and we just gave them the whole stage and just let them go ahead and perform and that was just wonderful to have that experience. We've had people here traveled here from different countries. We've had them from China, Indonesia, Pakistan, that's just to name a few. We just enjoy sharing our culture with them but also learning parts of their cultures as well.

08:59 How do folks from all over find out about this?

09:02 Well, I work with a group, Dave Cooper from Lexington and he brings people in to show them the Appalachian culture, so he'll bring some in. Also, Appalshop's been really wonderful and supportive of letting people know where we're at. Actually, they were the one that told Pistol Annie's where we were. And, just, mostly by word of mouth. And, still it amazes me, we've been here doing this jam now, going on our thirteenth year. And, people locally that still don't know about it, I'm amazed when they say, "We didn't know you do this." I say, "Well, really, we don't try to keep it a secret." And there's something occurring right now that I hope to keep it from being a secret. We're working to support the possibility of getting broadband in Letcher County. And, we're working with the Letcher County broadband. We have, we hold meetings here to keep the public informed. And, through B&B Communications, we're going to get Broadband provided here at the community center. They're donating that service and we're really appreciative of that. So, with that, we're hoping to do live streaming of what we do here, maybe to reach other people and invite them to come out. If they can't come out, they can enjoy listening to us on their computers. We've also talked about the possibility of this being an unofficial, right now, work hub for people who can get employment for work at home services with Apple. And if they can't afford to put in their own internet then maybe we might could provide that service to them for a while so that they could have employment.

11:15 AH: So a work space for people to have access to reliable internet.

11:18 DC: Yes.

11:22 AH: That's wonderful. Can you talk more about the process of what it took to get broadband approved here? Or some of the challenges of that?

11:32 DC: Ok. We are an area that has not been served with broadband. Some people have satellites. Some people have DSL. And it's not a reliable service. I compared it to being on an island and you had a two-way radio and you were trying to reach somebody else. Maybe you might get bits and pieces and they might get bits and pieces but you can't get the whole thing. So, I think it's been about five months ago that the Letcher County Fiscal Court decided they wanted to look into getting broadband available. And, so, they offered to form the Letcher County Broadband Committee. And, Jim Ward said it was the first, the County Judge Executive, said it was the first committee that he's never had to call anybody. People were calling him, wanting to be on it. These are people that are really dedicated, very knowledgeable and when they told that we qualify as an underserved or not served community and wanted to first see how the

community felt about it and we had a little bit over a hundred people here for that meeting, showing their support that they're interested in it. And with that, the committee has applied for grants. They've talked to state officials, congressman, senators. They've just gotten in touch with everybody that they can to try to make that a reality. So, we're still working on it. Still waiting to see on some grants, but it's all looking good that we can get broadband throughout our community. And we're all excited.

13:42 AH: Yeah. That is very exciting.

13:45 DC: Of course, I'll probably have to update my computer, but that's ok too. [laughs]

13:51 AH: Can you talk some more about the community in general, here, known as Campbell's Branch?

13:57 DC: It's a wonderful community. It reminds me of Cowan when I was growing up, the community members are concerned about each other. If there's a need, they try to help the best that they can. They like to farm. A lot of them do. And, we had gotten away from it, but we are seeing more people in the area going back to farming now. It is mostly right now a community of, not just senior citizens but adults. We don't have a lot of children like we once did in the community. And, I think that's probably where families had to move away to try to find employment. So, we're hoping to, if we can get job opportunities here, maybe we can bring some of them back. I know my son had to move away to get employment and I'd love for him to be able to come back home. We have a lot of storytellers, we have the infamous Lee Sexton and he lives in our community and he has shared his ability, his musical talents all over the country. And even in several different countries. So, we're pleased to have him here and just the different people that have different talents to share and not just like musical talents. But, the cooking, the if we needed something fixed then we have people who will come in and do carpentry work for us. And it's just, it's just wonderful just being in a neighborhood where people want to help each other.

16:13 AH: And that's expressed in different ways.

16:14 DC: In different ways. So, I do have some younger people in their 20s that would like to, if we get broadband here to help us to develop a website for the community center and they have the technology experiences that a lot of us don't. And they want to come in and share that. And I think that's wonderful.

16:44 AH: Can you talk some more about the history of this place?

16:50 DC: The history of this place. This building here was the Campbell's Branch Elementary School. And, it was the focal point of the community. And, actually, I have pictures of many of the Mother's Day dinners here where mother's would cook food and bring it in and we'd have people from all over the county who would want to come in and share the meal. But, the students would eat lunch with their mothers. And then here, they would have fall festivals, and always as part of the fall festivals, we would have the music and the dancing where they'd have square dancing here. The cake walks, which we still continue to do on Friday nights. It was just a great gathering of people bringing them together. They were supporting the school. It was a small school, but everyone knew everyone else. So, it was a place that my children went here. I felt they were safe here, they were loved here. I felt welcome at any time as a parent to come in with any issues that I

may have. It was just a really unique, it was a small school. It was a K-8 school and then over the years, as the enrollment dropped all over the county, they had taken the 6th-8th and moved those to Letcher. It continued as a K-5 for several years and then because of financial reasons and student enrollment dropping, they had to close it as a school. The community members got together, a group of us and said, we just can't let go of it. It's too big a part of our lives that we just can't give it up. And so we began an action team. And I was one of them that was on the original team. And we approached the school board about using it as a community center. And, they were very supportive, actually let us lease the building for \$12/year, which was wonderful. And, we started out having a lot of children involved in different programs. Martha Watts was the family resource director at Letcher and she was also on the council here and served as a chair person for a long time. And she would have like fishing with father's day, we would have pioneer cooking day. We would have something that we could have the children do. And, over the years, in the immediate area, the number of small children began to dwindle down. But, we still have some children come to our Friday night shows and they get to participate how they want to. Some of them will sing. They love the cake walks. And, they really like to tell me what to do a lot, and I usually do what they tell me [laughs]. So, we love our children and we want to encourage them. We were thinking about maybe this summer, and I hope that it can develop, maybe having some outside movie theaters. Making little box cars out of boxes, actually, that they could sit in and we'd have a big screen for them to watch. And we also plan on, in July, doing an old fashioned barn dance down on our stage outside. So, and we're looking into that maybe having the box pie suppers. Have you ever participated in a box pie supper? You have to fix a pie and then you fix some kind of meal to go with it and you decorate your box, you don't put your name on your box. And then, they auction it off. And, the gentleman that buys your box gets to eat supper with you, out of your box, at that time [laughs].

21:36 Coal miner's diner style.

21:38 DC: [laughs] Yes. So, that's something that's in the plan that we hope to do. And, we hope to have our old fashioned barn dance down there and just have people of all ages come and participate. We do have our cruise ins from the monthly, from May through October. And I really have to hand it to that group. It's called the Campbell's Branch Cruise-In and the people who head that last year had a back to school jump start where that they had inflatables and games for the children, but they also had school supplies to give out for the children. It was a really great way to end the summer for the children, just before they went back to school.

22:30 AH: So when did the music, the Friday night music start?

22:34 DC: The Friday night music started off as just a simple jam. We had seven people and that started, about thirteen years ago. We started in one of the classrooms. We had seven people sitting in chairs in a circle. Didn't have any sound system. People would come and sit in chairs around the room and listen. And they would just pick and sing and it grew from that. Until that we had to expand to a double room. We had to actually take a partition from the wall out to make a double room. And, then, it grew to where that we said we're going to have to have a larger room. And we had started selling hot dogs and baked goods and stuff to try to keep it going. And, people were enjoying the food. So, we worked together to develop the gym, which had a high ceiling. So, we lowered the ceiling for the sound reason. And, the kitchen's right next to it, so that makes a perfect opportunity to include the food with the dancing. And, so now, that's how we're here. So, over a twelve-year period, this is what we evolved into. And really, at times, this is not a large

enough room. But there's no where for us to grow anymore here in this room. But, yeah. There's been times that we might have people lined up in the hall with the doors open, listening. And I told them the only thing, I can't knock any walls in here, but maybe we could do a second story that they could just look down, like an arena.

24:19 AH: A balcony.

24:21 DC: [laughs] Yes.

24:23 AH: How many people would you say on average come?

24:26 DC: On an average, anywhere from forty-fifty. But we've had, like I said, we've had sometimes. This room will hold seventy-five to a hundred easily. And, like I've said, we've had them to where they've been out in the halls. So, probably about 150 maybe to come at one time. And that's a full house, that's when I say, let's go outside. [laughs] And we have had, we did do festivals every year. That lasted for about seven years. But, because of financial reasons, we couldn't keep up with the bluegrass festivals. We just couldn't generate enough income to support that. And, I'm really sad about that because it's a beautiful grounds to have a festival on. But, maybe someday we can maybe start that again. I hope so. We've had the Moron Brothers there. We've had some really good, Cumberland Gap, Will Caudill and Route 7, 7 South. We've just had numerous, great, musical groups there. And I'd like to see that be a reality again. And of course, the concession stands down there, they served food too. And, one year, the favorite meal was cornmeal gravy and cornbread and fried taters. So, I don't know how many pounds of potatoes was fried, but I can tell you it was a lot [laughs]. That's still a favorite meal here for that. And the big breakfast goes really well too, with the gravy and the biscuits. Sometimes, you can't eat healthy all the time.

26:31 AH: Yeah, well I hope that that festival is able to return if that's something -

26:37 DC: I would love for it to and the committee would like for it to. We had, it used to stay on the second Saturday in June and then, with Appalshop, with their Seedtime on the Cumberland, that's on the second weekend of June, so we couldn't compete with that. So, maybe moving it to a different time, we might can start small and build back up. And, we'll try.

27:10 AH: Can you talk some more about the music traditions that are coming out of this area?

27:16 DC: The music tradition.

27:21 AH: Like you mentioned Lee Sexton.

27:23 DC: We have the old time bluegrass with the drop thumb picking here.

27:30 AH: On the banjo.

27:30 DC: On the banjo. We have, you know, the flattop guitar, there's a lot of great guitarists that plays here. We have people who do the Earl Scruggs' style, the three finger banjo playing. And, I'm trying to think of, I can never think of this gentleman, Merle. With the guitar, with the drop, playing with the pick. Can you think of his name? I can't think of his name. Is it Merle Travis?

28:17 AH: Not Merle Watson, Merle Haggard. A bunch of Merles.

28:19 DC: No, it's not. I bet it's Merle Travis.

28:22 AH: Merle Travis.

28:22 DC: Anyway, and we have people that are starting that style, guitar playing. We have, from here, Lee taught Freddy Campbell. Freddy Campbell was one of Lee's first students. And, then, my husband, Artemis Campbell, who is Freddy's brother, they worked together and learned to play. Their father played. Several members of their family played. And then, we have, Alice Campbell, who is Freddy's wife. Her maiden name was Shepherd. And they were from Leatherwood and her family was great musicians as well. As a matter of fact, Freddy and Alice and two of her sisters and a nephew formed the bluegrass Bits and Pieces band, which have traveled all over the world. And they were one of the first bands to ever take rock and roll songs and convert them to bluegrass, which was really unique. And, let's see, what else for the traditions here? We have people who will drop in occasionally. There was a young girl, about ten years old that brought a banjo in and my husband sat and just showed her a few of the chords. And, she began to pick it up to play, and so, we'll have people come in, can you show me how to do this? Lee also taught Jack Adams who is a very well-known banjo player now. And, he taught him the old time bluegrass and Jack still plays that, but he's also going to the Bluegrass School of Music, where Dean Osborne is teaching some different techniques as well. So, he is grown into a wonderful banjo player. And, we need more fiddle players, if you know any fiddle players. You want to play fiddle? [laughs]

30:45 AH: That's one thing I haven't tried. But I know some fiddle players.

30:47 DC: Oh do you? Well, you need to send them our way.

30:51 AH: And Jack's in Sunrise Ridge, is that right.

30:56 DC: Jack plays in Sunrise Ridge with Shawn Stamper. Taylon Combs Kincer, Natalie Thompson, who plays the fiddle, and Shawn's daughter, Whitney Stamper. And, she plays the upright bass and does an awesome job. That's a pretty young group there. Jack and Natalie just graduated high school last year and Whitney's close in there too, she's in college, she's going in to being a doctor. And, we've had different people with different styles to come in and show what they know. And, it's wonderful to have those experiences. And, dancing. We have some people that have some in and shown us different dancing techniques. One I still want to learn to do is the Charleston. Dr. Artie Anne Bates said she'd teach me how to do that [laughs].

32:11 AH: Yeah, talk more about the style of dancing that people do here.

32:15 DC: The most common is the flatfooting, we call it. It's a hoedown type where that individuals keep their feet in the beat, but it doesn't matter the pattern that they move their feet, just as long as it's in the beat. Then, we have the two-stepping where you have couples that dance around the floor together. I'm trying to think. That's mostly what it is.

32:53 AH: And then, you said, on occasion, you might have a special barn dance.

32:57 DC: Yes, we're wanting to hopefully start this in July and have it down on our field down on our stage there. And we want to try to have it close to July the 4th just to have it as a celebration for the community to come in together. If we do, you're going to come?

33:19 AH: Yeah. I'd love to know about it, yeah!

33:27 DC: We have done square dances here. The only thing, the room layout makes it difficult. But, we can do the small square dancing sets. But, we want to do them on our floor down in our field in front of the stage. And, we have a wonderful caller. He's, unfortunately he can't, because of his lung capacity, he can't call a whole dance, but he wants to teach us how to do the old time calling and that's Wid Fields. I know Randy Wilson calls and that's something that I'd like to do is to be able to learn to call, call square dances.

34:12 AH: Me too.

34:13 DC: You want to too? Alright.

34:15 AH: We'll work on that. Actually met Wid recently.

34:20 DC: He's a character.

34:22 AH: Sure is.

34:24 DC: But he knows a lot about square dancing and calling it. In the old time way. The old time square dancing way. I'd like to keep that alive.

34:36 AH: What do you mean by the old time way?

34:38 DC: It's the way that he'll, the way that he'll tell you to pair up or to, it's different than calling it promenade and things. He has his own different terminology. And, so, yeah, I'd like to learn more of that. I can't give you any examples because I've not been able to try it yet. But, I hope to learn it.

35:09 AH: But yeah, he has certain rhymes and certain moves that are different, or he calls them different things than Randy might call him.

35:18 DC: Yes.

35:20 AH: And he would call at Carcassonne, is that - ?

35:21 DC: Yes. He would call at Carcassonne or just any place where they'd get some music together and some people to dance. That's one thing that my mother said when she was growing up that it was common for them to dance at barn raisings and things like that. But also, if a group of young people if they had somebody who could play a fiddle or a banjo in the group and they were somewhere and they had a good flat spot to do it they just went ahead and had a square dance right there, you know? So, it was just - it's been part of our history for a long time. And it's, I want to see it keep going, I want to pass it on to younger folks. I hope that we can get them as



passionate about it as we have been. We do have some that seem to be. I've seen some little five years old can square dance with the best of them.

36:28 AH: Thinking about that passing on, what are hopes that you have for this community or Letcher County or as far as you want to go?

36:42 DC: Well, yeah, I mean, I don't want to limit it to just Letcher County, it's something that I would like to see us preserve in any area. I mean, any culture, to keep culture alive, your local cultures. It, and I think it's the reason it's so important to get young people involved so that they do, you know, love it and they can carry on. It's always been our goal here that that's what we want to do is preserve our culture and to pass it on to younger people so that they can remember it. And, we know, it will change, it evolves over time. It evolved from when my parents was growing up to when I was growing up. And, that's just natural process of life. But, we'd like to keep the basics there. We do intend to have some cooking classes here that hopefully we'll get some children involved with and learn to cook in the kitchen. And of course, we're going to work on some cooking that will address some health issues that we have here, to eat heart healthy, for people with diabetes. And, thinking of our young children to fight juvenile obesity. So, and that's, you know, that's part of the dancing. That is so healthy and such fun exercise, you don't even know you're exercising. We did, we'll cut loose every once in a while with a little line dancing, whatever people want to do, we just jump right in. If you miss a step, just go on, you'll catch it the next time, so, that's what we talk about with the music, you know, if you miss it, that's fine, just keep going, no one's going to put you down for it, laugh at you over it. It's just learning.

39:04 AH: Mistakes are learning.

39:05 DC: Mistakes are learning, yes. I do my share [laughs].

39:11 AH: We all do if we're honest, right? Yeah, it seems like a place that is rooted in traditions but open to new ideas and new people that come through the door.

39:24 DC: We are. We've had some wonderful choirs come here.

[Second Recording]

00:07 DC: One of the goals for Campbell's Branch Community Center is to be home to everyone, to everyone to be welcome. Just if you are going home to see your mother, your father, your brother, sisters, aunts, cousins, that's what it feels like when you come here. And also the heart of the community, if they know that there's a need, they've always reached out to help. We've had household showers for people whose lost their homes to fires. We've had fundraisers for people who were battling cancer. Just, if we know that there's a need, we try our best to help. And, that's what family and friends do, and that's what we are here. Everybody's home place and everybody's family.

01:02 AH: A place where everybody can gather and be taken care of. Take care of each other.

01:07 DC: Feel loved.

01:14 AH: It's a very special place, I'm glad I can come here, I'm glad that I am welcome.

01:17 DC: You are welcome anytime you want to.

01:20 AH: And, it's every Friday

01:24 DC: Every Friday night, supper starts at 6, music starts at 7.

01:31 AH: And you've got plans for it to keep going?

01:35 DC: As long as I'm able [laughs].

01:40 AH: Well, I appreciate your time and all the things you've shared and your commitment to creating a home for people. Is there anything else you want to say?

01:53 DC: We've always got room, anybody that wants to come in and help volunteer or to give us ideas. We're here with open arms, welcoming.

02:06 AH: You might be out in the hall, but you're welcome.

02:07 DC: But, you're welcome, yes, I'll come and visit you, even out in the hall. [laughs].

02:13 AH: Well thanks, Darlene.

02:14 DC: Thank you very much.

02:17 [End of Interview]