

Indiana Hoedown IH020
Traditional Music from the Hoosier State

INTERVIEW WITH CLAY "PETE" SMITH
in his home in Star City, Indiana
November 27, 1980

PT This is Pete Smith, he's going to tell me all about the Hoosier Cornhuskers and how they got started.

PS Well that's a pretty long story, Paul.

PT Go ahead.

PS We started out just as a band playing square dances around town and a few clubs. We was making about a dollar a night, I guess, when we started.

PT Where was this?

PS This was in Logansport. ~~And~~, uh, then we started barnstorming, going up through Michigan and different states, you know. We found some place that had a band, ~~why~~ during intermission we'd put on an act for whatever we'd pick up in tips. And from there we come back and there was an undertaker, a very prominent undertaker, Charlie Chase that had the, ~~he had a~~, the famous boy choir on the national circuit, the Key circuit, for many years. ^{And} He was interested in people interested in vaudeville, and ^{he} took us over, bought us our first costumes and got us out first booking in the Logan Theatre in Logansport, Indiana. And then we started looking for a radio opening, and the first place we booked into a radio station was in, ~~at~~, at WRAK in Williamsport, Pennsylvania.

PT When was this?

PS That was in 1938.

PT And who all ^{who was} ~~was in~~ the band?

PS There was, ah, myself, Al Petit, George Parmeter, and Bonnie Jean Schmidt who we, a girl from Peru, Indiana. We started there, and uh, ^{now} how we got there was through ^a circus advance man. He had retired and he wanted to book us. He said if we'd get on the radio station he'd guarantee us he'd book us every night in the week. And which he did. Well, before too long, the bookings, he got us bookings all right. He booked us every night in those little towns. Our first audience, of course we didn't have any build up on the radio; our first audience was seven and we was charging a quarter apiece. That wasn't much money. ^(laughing) We kept going through, and finally one of the members of our band, George Parmeter, he got discouraged, went back home. We hired another boy, Andy ^{Handling} Handling from Pennsylvania. He was a music teacher and ginger and played guitar in George's place. George played out comedy, so I had to turn to comedy. I turned to being "Grandpap" at that time. And I played that role, besides my straight role. And then we played mandolin duets. Al played the mandolin and I played the mandolin, and we figured out another character from the mandolins. He was "Pic" and I was "Fucker" and I played a comedy character as Fucker. Something like Mortimer Snerd from the famous ventriloquist act that you know about. And uh, we stayed on there at Williamsport, I think it was about three years. Then we come back to Indianapolis, Indiana where we went on WIBC and we joined their famous Jamboree. And I'll never forget when first they started their Jamboree, we went into Tumbleston (?) Hall, we had a hard time amplifying it. The only way the engineers could amplify it was by putting the speakers overhead and pointing them down at the crowd. That's the only way on account of the steel in the building. That was the only place available for the Jamboree that was big enough.

We stayed there for about three years. And uh, during that time we heard about a girl singer over at Wabash, Penny West. So our, our girl singer was sick, so we hired her in her place to go on a fair circuit with. She said she didn't want to quit her job, she said she was working at Honeywell's in Wabash. Said she didn't want to quit her job unless she could get into radio. Well, we said we'd do what we could. When our girl come back we got her (Penny West) a job with the Blackhawk Valley Boys on WOWO in Fort Wayne. And she in turn had us to come to audition at Fort Wayne from WIBC Indianapolis where we were playing. We went to Fort Wayne, then appeared there. We stayed there for about three years.

That was during the war. And uh, I got called up to go to the army. And by the time I got to Indianapolis for the examination, they's decided I was too old. I was 39 years old, so they didn't want me. They sent me back home, and then they started the famous Hoosier Hop, which was on the Blue network from coast- to-coast. And on the Hoosier Hop we had, we had the Blackhawk Valley Boys, we had Judy and Jen, we had Don and Helen, we had Herb Hayworth, we had Penny West, and of course Patsy Jo Kelley, Strummin' Joe Trimm--and he's a very famous yedeller--Howard Ropa--he was a well known baritone. And the old man of the mountain, course that was one of our acts, Fred Oliver. And uh, we stayed on the Hoosier Hop for several years there until it ended, and then we went barnstorming again out at Findlay, Ohio. WFIN Findlay, Ohio. And we booked out of there until the gasoline situation got so bad that we couldn't get enough gas to make personal appearances. So we went to a club in Calumet City. That's Patsy Jo Kelley and Al and myself and another boy. I just can't remember his name right off. Played bass for us. He wasn't with us very long.

PT Was that Daryl Fox?

PS No, that wasn't Daryl Fox. It was, I can't think of his name now. I got in here somewhere in this publicity. I don't seem to be able to find it. Anyway, he wasn't with us too long.

PT When did you go from WOWO to Findlay?

PS Uh, I don't remember the exact date, but it was, I think we was on, uh, we was on WOWO till '45. I think it was about '45 or '46 we went to Findlay, Ohio.

PT When you were in Findlay, were you the Hoosier Cornhuskers?

PS Yeh, we were the Hoosier Cornhuskers in Findlay and we stayed there, I think, two years, and we came back to Ft. Wayne and went on WKJG. It was a new station out on, on, uh, Cli..oh no, Calhoun Street. And we stayed there, I think, it was a couple years. And uh, in the meantime, while we were on radio we played two sustaining programs, half hour programs every day. And uh, while at WOWO we were on at 6:30 in the morning with Herb Hayworth. And we were on with Jay Gould on his Country Barn program at 5 in the morning. And when you play personal appearances till about 1:00 in the morning, that gets to be pretty early sometimes, to get up and put on a half hour show. And uh, Herb Hayworth, we was on at 6:30 with Herb on another program where we did some comedy and variety program. We had several on that, We had, I think, the Blackhawks and the Cornhuskers and Judy and Jen. It was a show, more or less, to kind of support the Hoosier Hop and plug it.

Uh, is there anything else you want to know? Course I forgot to tell you while we were playing fairs, our first fair date we were booked with the WJJD outfit. There was Doc Hopkins, and Karl and Harry, and uh, Little, oh that little girl, I can't think of her name now. But there was a girl duet and uh, they was originally from WLS, and they went to WJJD, and they booked us to appear with them at fairs. They booked us at that time. Gus Sun (Zahn?) saw us the next year. He wanted to book us individually. So he started booking us and I think we was about six or seven years, we booked out with Gus Zahn (?), and Barnes and Carruthers out of Chicago on fairs. And they sent us all over the country.

PT That would have been around 1950 or so?

PS Uh, let's see, yeh. It was around in that period. And it was very interesting in know... We booked, we appeared in about 43 different states while we was with... Course they had their bookers out of Detroit. That and they intermingled. They would send you from one booker to the other, 'cause it was the same company, on a blanket contract. They had an office in Chicago and they had one in Des Moines, Iowa. That's where we appeared with the Let Freedom Swing Revue for six weeks. And is there anything else now that you'd like to bring up?

PT Let's see. When did you end with the Hoosier Cornhuskers and start with the Prairie Pioneers and the Ozark Varieties.

PS Oh yes, I think it was about, let's see, it was before we were married. We got out of the Cornhuskers, was it? Was we married when the Cornhuskers busted up? No before we got married.

Audrey Smith: You broke up during the summer and we got married in the fall.

PS That's right. I went to work for General Electric, the Transformer Department, as a tester. And I was there two years and I got a letter from one of former members, Fred Oliver, that they had formed the Blackhawk Valley Boys and was working for Dick Slack on, uh, oh, see, shoot I can't remember that call...

PT You said the Blackhawk Valley Boys, did you mean...

PS No, with Fred Oliver and the, oh, Prairie Pioneers.

PT Was that with WLDS?

PS WLDS in Jacksonville (Illinois). Thank you. I can't remember too good. Anyway, I was with the Prairie Pioneers about three years and uh, Fred, he got a little greedy and started to booking us, uh, another sponsor in on Uncle Dick Slack's time. And of course that ended his career with the Prairie Pioneers. Then we, uh, Uncle Dick Slack called us to his office, wanted to know if we could form a band to fill in there, which we did form the Ozark Varieties. That was Uncle Dick's name. He had his own theme song that we had to use and, uh, we were on that then for... Red and I carried the program alone till we got musicians. We had Bobby Homan and Barbara Price and Winnie Price, uh and uh, the Waddips (?) girl from Grass Creek. I can't remember her name. Yeh, Eileen Waddips (?) from Grass Creek. She was terrific on the accordin. But before we got her we had Johnny Herrington. Johnny was one of the best accordin players I think I've ever heard any place. He was with us three days and went out in a boat, and hit a stump or something, and was drowned. And then we got ahold of this Waddips girl and she filled in for him. We had Bobby Homan, who worked for us in Fort Wayne by the way, and Darl Fox. And uh, we were there about two or three more years when I got into the insurance business then and came back to Indiana. And that was in 1958. I kind of give up on the music business.

Till here just recently. About a year or so ago, uh, Larry Edmundson, he wanted me to come over and rehearse with him and my wife and myself. She plays guitar and sings, Audrey. We've been with them ever since. We haven't been tearing up the world. We have a lot of fun. Larry's a pretty good singer. He, he's made some tapes, sent to Nashville. And uh, he belongs to the Country Music Association. And uh, they seem to like his voice down there. I don't know if he'll make anything out of it yet or not. But we'll find out sooner or later. He's wrote some pretty good songs though. And we play a few dates around here now. And we call ourselves the Country Bluegrass.

And that's about it as far as my playing's concerned, Paul. That I can think of.

PT Well, I've got a few questions.

PS OK.

PT Basically, when the band was, uh, when the Cornhuskers was, uh, started out with you and Al Petit and...You two were the core of it all the way through?

PS And yeh, well George, George Parmeter was one of the originals with us, and a boy by the name of Ray Alberts, but the two of them, course Georrge dropped out in Pennsylvania. And of course, Ray, he didn't want to go to Pennsylvaniz. So that, Fred Oliver played bass for us there.

PT And you played fiddle.

PS I played the fiddle and mandolin. Doubled on mandolin. And Al played accordion and doubled on fiddle and mandolin. He did play fiddle on our trick fiddle act. We had a trick fiddle act. By the way, we appeared at the National Hillbilly Contest in Springfield, Illinois. And when we went and signed up for that contest at Springfield and heard all those terrific musicians and singers, I said 'what are we doing here?' I didn't think we'd get anyplace. I says 'well, the only thing we can do is go out there...' and it was judged by an applause meter. And we went out there and did our trick fiddle act, and just forgot about them and went back and wasn't listening to the other guys. I says 'I don't think we've got a chance.' But we did get quite a bit of applause. Jim Day, he was a comedian from a radio station. He was the MC. He come out and said 'the winner of the band contest is the Hoosier Cornhuskers!' I like to fell over (laughs).

PT How did you come up with the name the Hoosier Cornhuskers?

PS Well we come up with Cornhuskers first because of the environment here in Indiana. There's alot of corn raised you know, and we wanted to be a country band, and course there was a Cornhuskers on WLS. And I said we can't, can't have that so we just come up with the idea well, we'll put Hoosier on the front of it. That'll make it the Hoosier Cornhuskers. And Charlie Chase, the undertaker, had the famous Chase Boy Choir on the road so long, he thought that'd be a food name for us, too. He agreed with us. We did a lot of training down there in his undertaking parlout, around the hearse (laughs).

PT You were telling me how you used to do, book schools. Can you...

PS Well, we used to write a letter describing our act. What we had on our act, the names of the personnel. And in the letter we would put a contract with three open dates. And uh, the sponsors of the school...course we got the names of the schools from the county superintendent, all the names in our listening area. And we sent one out to each school that way. Well, when we got our contract back, if we made a booking on one date, well we'd fill that, and there's two open dates, why we'd fill that in with some other schools, you know. And we'd give them choices if they wanted a date that was already booked, we'd have to write them back and tell them what other dates we had that wasn't filled. And most generally we'd book it, another date. We had senior classes and 4-H clubs and everything for sponsors.

PT And when you were on the fair circuit you were appearing with a lot of other different types of acts.

PS Oh yes, see, they had, most generally when we had the, with the Let Freedom Swing Revue, we had magicians, acrobats, trapeze flying artists, animal acts, and everything in conjunction with the, uh, ten girl chorus line and a, a stage band. And it was, we enjoyed that six weeks tour better than any of them, I think.

PT How big a part did you have on the show?

PS Well, uh, believe it or not, the band would...the uh MC would introduce, the band, uh, would play, the MC would introduce us and then the band would play about so many bars of "Turkey in the Straw" till we could get out to the microphone. And we did about seven to ten minutes. And that's all, all we did. 'Course none of the acts were long. We did about seven or ten minutes of our best stuff and went into our theme, made our bow and the band'd give us a chord off. That was it.

PT I heard you say vaudeville before. Would you call that vaudeville, that kind of...

PS Well they was considered vaudeville acts, most of them, like the old-time vaudeville. And they had dancers, acrobatic dancers. And I'll never forget up in Bimidji, Minnesota in August. We had a two-girl acrobatic dance, and they had to dance on the stage in August, and there was frost on the stage in August.

PT Did you, uh, play mostly small towns or ...

PS Yeh, we played anything. That had a school, you know, a consolidated school. Most of them were consolidated over in Ohio and Illinois, uh, even down in Missouri and Michigan, Indiana. But our fair circuit took us all over the country.

PT County fairs, State fairs?

PS See, yeh, uh, County, State. Whereever they'd send us.

PT Yeh, and that was with the booking agent?

PS Yeh, the booking....Gus Zahn (?) and Barnes and Carruthers booking agencies.

PT You said, you said you started the band off as, you wanted to be a country band. Were your audiences basically country folk?

PS Most of them, yes, yeh, the most...

PT Did you get into the cities much?

PS Well, we, the only cities we'd play would be at schools, or something like... Of course, we did go out west one time on a theatre circuit, to our dissappointment. Went out west and, uh, Bill Barrs had heard about us and he wanted to book us on the theatre circuit during, right after fairs were over. Out west. So he said he had bookings in Utah, Idaho, uh, Nevada, and uh...'Course we couldn't book in Arizona. They had a law that if you booked there, they said don't stop there, because if you do you have to get different license plates on your car and everything else. So we didn't book...I think it was Nevada, Oregon, Idaho, and Utah. And we booked a circuit of theatres out there for Bill Bower. Well, Bill he's, he booked us and paid us off for the first two theatres. And then he would go on to the next and set up a show. And we got a telegram from him that he was closing the thing. I think we played about six or eight, through six or eight of them bookings in the theatres. And he said he was going to quit and he beat us out of about three or four hundred dollars and took off. But we had quite an experience out there. We was out there about a month, I guess, playing those theatres. But that's about the closest to any city stuff we ever played.

PT You would play six days a week on the radio, two sustaining shows?

PS That's right.

PT And publicize...

PS Publicize your appearances, yeh. And uh, while we were in, uh, Jacksonville we played, uh, all over our, uh, listening area with the Prairie Pioneers. Then comes the Ozark Varieties in the same territory. And we had about five appearances we could make with new comedy, new songs and that was about our limit. Well, when we run out of our limit we conceived the idea that we'd book Nashville acts in here. We'll play about fifteen minutes to open it up and turn it over to them, you see. So we did. Well, we booked Hank Williams, Lonzo and Oscar, Mama Maybelle, and uh, there was, there's one there that used to have a gospel show on Nashville. We booked her and I can't think of her name. Can you think of her name, Audrey? MM, I can't think of her name, now, but any...
remember

AS Martha Carson.

PS Martha Carson, yeh, and uh, we booked her and I guess I said Mama Maybelle, and uh, Grandpa Jones, and Stringbean. *And uh, we had quite a time with the fellas, too, while we was bookin'.*

PT What kind of material did you do? Where did you draw your material from?

PS Oh, we, uh, picked it up just among ourselves, you know. WE would use joke books and stuff and rearrange it. I'd written comedy for the Hoosier Hop and we used some of that stuff and rearranged it, you know. And make up comedy, and uh, we did a mock classical tune that was kind of nonsense, but everybody liked it. And Al and I did a trick fiddle act. The way we arranged our show: we come on with our theme back of the curtain. We'd have somebody, a school organization to pull the curtain. We'd give them the nod, you know. And then, uh, the MC would walk up and introduce the act. And the first number which would be most generally fiddle tunes, something fast. And then we'd have songs. We had, we had solos, duets, trios, quartets, two mandolins, and electric steel. We had a lot of variety, to work on for an hour and a half show. And our comedy. But I had to get away to put my makeup on. So while I was putting my makeup on, we'd send Darl Fox or Bob Homan out and they would sing three or four songs solo. And then I would, uh, by that time I'd get my makeup on and Al and I'd come out then. We'd go through a comedy routine that we had worked up. And uh, we always closed each show with a hymn. And we had an intermission about five or ten minutes. Lots of times we sold box candy. We sold pictures, and uh, we had a song book made up. We sold a lot of song books, and uh, different things like that.

PT Can you tell me about the song book?

PS Well, there was this company advertised that they could make you a song book that would be legitimate, and they could put your name on the front of it, you know, your picture and your name on the front of it, which would be legal and you could sell it. So that's what we did. We ordered about a thousand of them. We got rid of them.

PT Did you do any of the songs that were in the book?

PS Yeh, we, we learned some of the songs. And would sing them, you know, to, of course, to publicize the book. Yeh, we learned some of the songs. But I'll say, there was some pretty poor songs in it, and then there was a few good ones in it. There wasn't any hits in it that's sure.

PT Anybody in the group write any songs?

PS Well, not at that time. But after we got in the Ozark Varieties, or, will, Red Thompson and Lois, they had a couple records at Acuff-Rose publishing company,

but they were never released. I guess if you had four or five thousand dollars they might of released them. That was the time that they was having so much trouble with the disc jockeys, you know.

PT Um, so you would play six days on the radio?

PS Two half-hour shows.

PT And probably six appearances a week all year round?

PS Well, uh, most generally we was pretty well, after we was on the air a while... 'Course right when we first started in on a new station you had to get the listeners first. And uh, we put ads in the paper, you know, we was on the air. And the radio station would cooperate pretty good with us about publicity. And on their other shows, they'd plug us, you know, that we'd be on a certain time. That way you could build up pretty fast. After you built up, well, then you could ride on then and get your bookings. You may not have the crowds to start off with as you would after you'd been on there for a month or so. But after a month or so they'd pick up. The more listeners you get.

PT Was it a good way to make a living?

PS I enjoyed it very much. It was a , it was a little nerve-wracking and hard on you, you know, you'd have an early morning show, and be on a personal appearance maybe way up in Michigan someplace and get back about two o'clock in the morning, go on the air at five o'clock in the morning. It would make it pretty rough.

PT So there was a lot of traveling?

PS Yeh, we lived out of a suitcase a lot of the time. I want to tell you, but we would be on location...yeh, my wife just reminded me, we had a thirteen weeks contract on, when we was with the Prairie Pioneers, we had a thirteen week contract on television at Springfield, Illinois, too. That was quite an experience.

PT Your own show or...

PS Yeh, it was sponsored by a bunch of merchants in Springfield. They, I forget what they called, they had a name for it. But we was sponsored. That show cost them about \$500 a program, which is pretty expensive. So after our thirteen weeks was up they decided they'd terminate because it was too expensive.

PT It was a weekly show?

PS Yeh, mm, once a week. It was an hour show, though.

PT How did all the travel and roac, uh, being on the road, how did that effect family life?

PS It effected it quite a bit, 'cause you had to be away from home most of the time.

PT You didn't give it up when you got married, did you? Like a lot of folks have done.

PS NO, we, uh, we'd get home most generally on weekends. Sometimes with these fairs, well we couldn't. 'Cause, well, sometimes you had to play saturday and sunday. But we had it arranged, our bookings and everything that, 'course in schools, you never booked much on saturday and sunday anyway. It was always on friday and we'd always make it home on weekends. 'Course we was gone all week. But when we was in Pennsylvania, I moved my family to Pennsylvania, and 'course, lived in Fort Wayne at the time I

was on that station. 'Course Indianapolis, we'd travel back and forth every weekend. We was on Kokomo, too, for awhile. I forgot that one.

PT Were any of you shows called the Hoosier Cornhuskers show?

PS They just introduced us as the Hoosier Cornhuskers, the National Hillbilly Show. No, it wasn't syndicated as a Hoosier Cornhusker show.