

Claude Casey — Historian

Radio Executive Contributes Collection To Country Music Foundation

Claude Casey is an historian. You won't find him lecturing in a college classroom or writing in a secluded university office. He's much more at home before a radio microphone or on a stage at a square dance. Anyway, academic regalia would seem out of place on a fellow who likes to hitch up his overalls, lean on his hoe, and visit with neighbors while he helps tend the garden he and his plow-handle buddy, Charlie Planer, keep near his Johnston home. But Casey is nonetheless an historian.

This may come as a surprise to hundreds of people within the range of WJES, the station Casey and his wife Ruth founded

some twenty years ago. To most WJES listeners, his warm, folksy voice is that of an old friend who has personified the station for nearly a generation. Many know, too, that he spent over three decades in show-business as a country singer before he launched his radio enterprise. Yet even those who appreciate his extensive knowledge of country music probably do not realize the steps he has taken to preserve the history of his careers in the closely linked worlds of performing and broadcasting.

Early one Sunday afternoon last November, a white Chevrolet station wagon rolled into Casey's driveway on Pecan Street, where

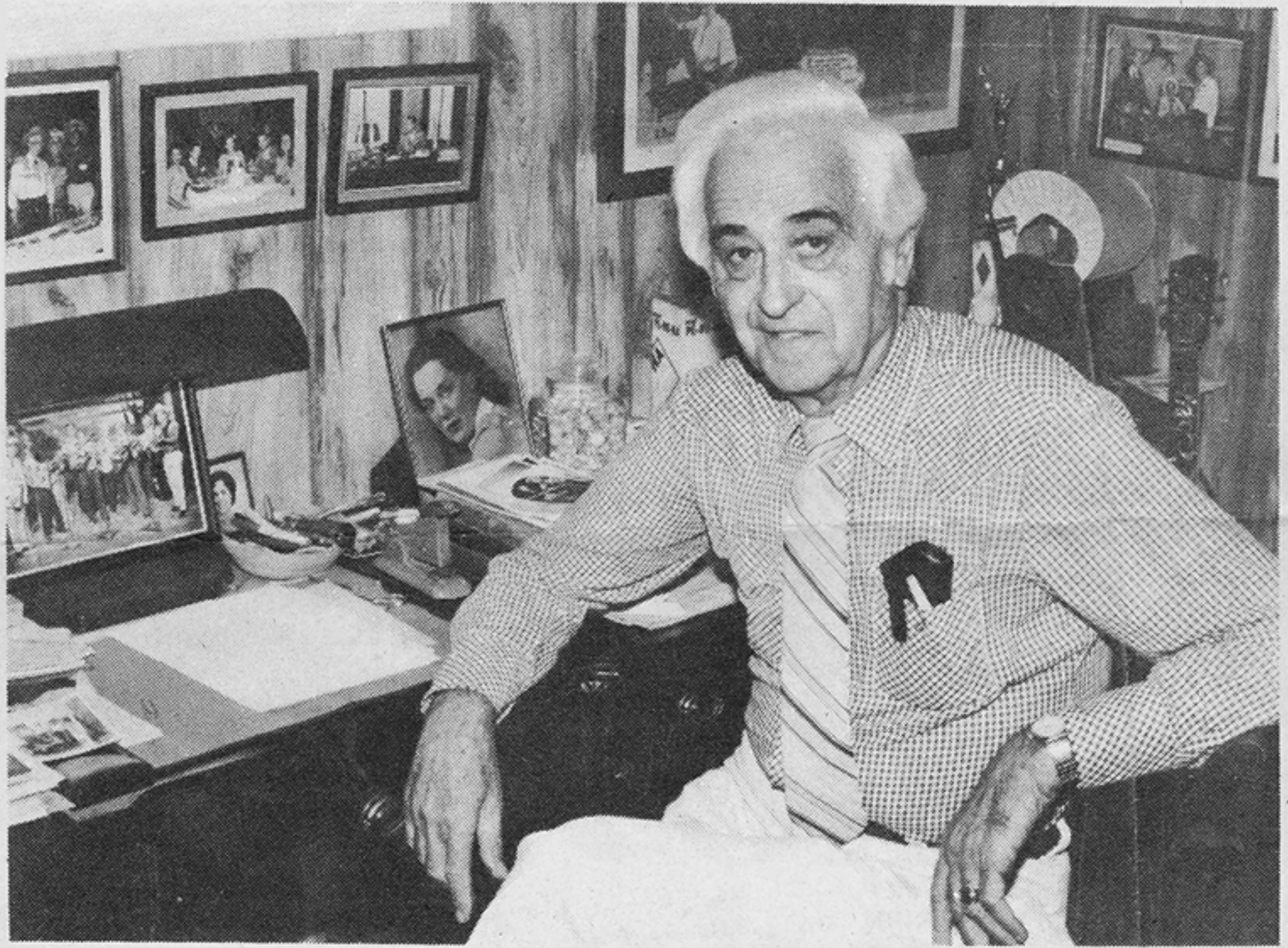
Casey stood waiting to greet John Rumble, Oral Historian for the Country Music Foundation in Nashville, Tennessee. In addition to operating the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, the Foundation maintains the largest library in the United States devoted to a particular form of music. The Country Music Foundation Library and Media Center houses over 3,000 songbooks, about 7,000 pieces of sheet music, some 100,000 recordings, and a wide variety of other materials, ranging from country music fan magazines to cowboy films. Rumble adds to this research collection by tape-recording interviews with

performers and executives who have made country music the worldwide commercial force it is today. Together, Rumble and the persons he interviews are helping to document the country music story.

Like many individuals involved in the country music field, Casey is easy to interview. Though they had never met except by telephone, he and Rumble reviewed Casey's career with the ease of longtime friends reminiscing about old times. For the better part of two days, the pair conversed — with tape recorder running — pausing for coffee or for home-cooked meals prepared by the expert hands of Ruth Casey. Claude also

took his visitor on a tour of Johnston that included stops at the Caseys' and Planers' huge garden and the efficiently run offices of WJES.

To Rumble, however, the high points of the tour were Casey's den and his backyard storage building, humorously christened the "shed house" by its owner. Both spots were piled high with photographs, newspaper clippings, songbooks, recordings, and other memorabilia. Excited and impressed by this treasure trove, Rumble said exuberantly, "It was a researcher's delight. I felt like a kid in a candy store." Casey has long possessed the historian's instinct for



Claude Casey in his den at home surrounded by memorabilia of a generation in show business.—Citizen News Photo by William Hart.

preserving the past, and his donation of this collection to the Country Music Foundation ensures that the materials he has saved will be available for researchers and writers for years to come.

Thanks to Casey, patrons of the Country Music Foundation Library and Media Center in Nashville can examine fascinating photographs of Casey's long tenure at Charlotte radio station WBT, where he performed with the Briarhoppers and the Tennessee Ramblers on network shows during the 1940's; his appearances in movies like *Swing Your Partner* (1943) and *Square Dance Jubilee* (1949); his radio and television programs in Augusta and Greenville during the fifties, and the recreation park he once ran in Ellenboro, North Carolina. In these photos, many of the personalities whose paths crossed Casey's also appear: Judy Canova, Eddy Arnold, Robert Mitchum, Grady Cole, to name only a few. Numbered among the most valuable components of Casey's donation are scripts he helped to write for WBT's "Dixie Jamboree," a network feature of the forties, business correspondence relating to his personal appearances, and contracts that shed light on his songwriting and recording activities.

Casey and Rumble discussed many of these items on tape, so that researchers will be able to consult both oral and written sources. As Casey put it, "We began to

appreciate better the opportunity we have today, an opportunity unavailable until tape came along. Both of us thought, "How wonderful it would be for people living now, had someone been able to record the voices of Abraham Lincoln, Robert E. Lee, or better still, some of the average Americans who lived a century ago." Rumble added, "Having the recorder at our disposal made us more aware of our responsibility to preserve the history of country music — one of America's most vital cultural traditions — in the words of people like Claude, who have contributed so much to it."

It took the two men a couple of hours to load the Country Music Foundation's station wagon, and they had to use a wheelbarrow to haul boxes from the "shed house." "I hated to leave," says Rumble, "because the Caseys made me feel right at home. But Claude and I plan to talk again, after I've had a chance to study systematically the items he has presented to the Foundation." And in Claude Casey, historian Rumble knows he has found a kindred spirit who shares with him a keen interest in country music, and an understanding of the goals and methods of grass roots research.