

DON McLEMORE
Big Bob Gibson's Bar-B-Q – Decatur, AL

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Date: November 15, 2006
Location: Big Bob Gibson's Bar-B-Q – Decatur, AL
Interviewer: Amy Evans
Length: 1 hour, 28 minutes
Project: Southern BBQ Trail - Alabama

[Begin Don McLemore Interview]

00:00:00

Amy Evans: This is Amy Evans on Tuesday, November 15th, 2006 in Decatur, Alabama, at Big Bob Gibson's Bar-B-Q, and I'm with Mr. Don McLemore. And sir, with—would you please state your name also your birth date for the record?

00:00:15

Don McLemore: I'm Don McLemore; my birthday is December 9th, 1941.

00:00:21

AE: And you are a native of Decatur, Alabama, correct?

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DM: I've lived in Decatur, Alabama, all my life.

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AE: How far back does your family go here?

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DM: Now wait a minute; I wasn't expecting that.

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AE: *[Laughs]*

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DM: I don't know. I really don't know the answer to that question.

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AE: Well we know it goes back to Big Bob Gibson at least, your grandfather, right?

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DM: We know it goes back to 1925 because that's when my grandfather started cooking barbecue in his backyard.

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AE: Do you—can you tell me about your grandparents—and I seem to recall that your grandfather worked for the railroad—but what they did here before they got into barbecue and what Decatur, maybe, was like if you have any idea in 1925—what stories that came through the family?

00:01:06

DM: Well now, like I said, I was born in '41, and I don't remember that far back hardly. I do know that my grandfather started barbecuing in 1925. Before he did that he worked for the L&N Railroad, I'm thinking maybe ten or twelve years, but I'm not sure about that, actually. He still was working for the railroad when he started barbecuing and kind of did that as a past-time in the backyard, but people seemed to like his food so well he decided he quit the railroad business—or maybe they quit him, I don't really know—I think he quit them, and he started selling to the public. He went into business with his brother-in-law, who was Sam Woodall, and they went out on Moulton Road—do you want to hear all this? Okay. Went into the business together and actually called the first placed Gib-All's for Gibson and Woodall. But now that partnership only

lasted about maybe a year—not because of any animosity but Sam Woodall had a brother by the name of Jim. He came back from wherever he was working, and I don't know where that was, and the brothers wanted to go into business together and so the brother-in-law went on his separate way and opened up what has become Big Bob Gibson Barbecue.

He moved up the road from where they were cooking maybe three or four miles and opened a place. And from there he moved around Decatur three or four times maybe in different parts of Decatur. And we're talking about little small places, you know, where you kind of go and you might stand up and place an order and might have a few chairs or stools or something; I don't really know. But then in the early, early '40s he went out on what is Highway 67, which is close to Interstate 65 where Princeville is now located. He had two restaurants out there; I vaguely remember the location of one of them and one is close to where the Hardees [fast food chain restaurant] is now located, which is almost right next to I-65. He was out there at those two locations ten years, came back to Decatur, and opened the restaurant up right in our location now—not in the building we're in but across the parking lot—in 1952. That is when my mom and dad went in business with my grandfather. My—my mom first. My dad was working right up the street at Alabama Hosiery Mill, which at that time was a really good place to work. But the barbecue business grew, and he decided he would just quit that job. And so after about two years that my mom was in the business with my grandfather, my dad came aboard too. And our family has been in the barbecue business ever since. I came to work with them in—I've got to think—1973 and have been here ever since.

00:04:05

AE: Now your—your mother is Bob Gibson's daughter, is that the family lineage?

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DM: Yes, my mother was the Gibson. My grandfather, Bob Gibson, had five children. He had three daughters and two sons. He actually had three sons. One got killed in a car wreck. And, in fact, he's going to be on the cover of a menu in a new enterprise that we're doing. We're doing a franchise in [Charlotte,] North Carolina, and my deceased uncle is going to be on the cover.

But anyway, all of the Gibson children were in the barbecue business—my mom with my grandfather—and I got to keep the Big Bob Gibson name. Her brothers and sisters went across town and opened just Bob Gibson, Jr. Bar-B-Q Restaurant, and my aunt and uncle went in business in Huntsville and opened Gibson's Bar-B-Q. And they're all selling—not all—the ones in town are no longer in business; the ones in Huntsville are still in business as Gibson's Bar-B-Q and as David Gibson Bar-B-Q. No connection business was—just a connection family-wise.

00:05:13

AE: Can you name all your aunts and uncles that are your mother's siblings?

00:05:16

DM: Yes, my aunt was Velma Hampton—married a Hampton; Ruth Hopkins; David Gibson; Bob Gibson, Jr.; and then of course my mother, who was Catherine McLemore, and she went by the name of Punk, now. When they were paving the road out in front of their house which is on Danville Road, back when she was just little, one of the guys paving the road, working on the road, started calling her *my little pumpkin*, and somehow she went from pumpkin to Punk, and she was known as Punk all of her life, and that's what all of her friends called her.

00:05:55

AE: Where does your mother fall into the—the siblings in the family? Is she the youngest or—?

00:06:01

DM: My mother was actually the—I got to think about that—she was the—she was probably the fifth—fifth child, and then my Aunt Ruth, who is the only one still alive today, was the youngest.

00:06:22

AE: Okay. But they all had an interest in the barbecue business?

00:06:27

DM: They all had an interest in the barbecue business. They all did go in the barbecue business, and that's how they made their living—all of them.

00:06:32

AE: What year was your mother born?

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DM: I don't know. Isn't that terrible?

00:06:39

AE: What—well the reason I ask is because I'm wondering, you know, if—how old she was or if she had been born yet when Big Bob started having his picnics when—and/or when he established the restaurant in '25.

00:06:53

DM: Yes, my mother was born when my grandfather started the business in '25. She was young—and I should know these ages, but I don't. I'm sorry.

00:07:06

AE: Well, okay. But you and my mom are the same age because you were in the same high school class, so I'm going to go on that because her parents were born in I believe in 1905 and 1908, so would your mother have been a teenager at least by the time these restaurants were open, do you think?

00:07:22

DM: Give me a minute, and I'll work this out. *[Laughs]* I know when they passed away, and I know how old they were when they passed away.

00:07:28

AE: Okay. A little math and—

00:07:30

DM: Yeah, a little math. My dad was born in 1915. So I think my mom was probably born in around 1918. That should be very close, so she was like seven or maybe eight when my grandfather started cooking in his backyard and selling barbecue.

00:07:49

AE: Did she have some memories or ever share any memories of when she was young and— and your grandfather was having these picnics?

00:07:57

DM: She just remembered people coming to the house and buying food. She didn't talk a lot about those early days; she talked about more when he was in business around town in those locations. Because, you know, a little time had passed from—from the time he started cooking until he opened the restaurants in town. So you know, if you're seven or eight and you're ten, eleven, or twelve your—your memory is a little bit better. And they would go from place to place. And, of course, my grandmother—back then it was hard to travel. I think they may have had a car. But—or they may have shared the car with somebody else. I'm not sure. But I—I do know she talked about going to the locations that he had and spoke a little bit of what they were doing there.

00:08:43

AE: Well and Danville Road was out in the country back then, was it not—if I'm thinking—?

00:08:47

DM: Yes, Danville Road was out in the country, and you are thinking of the right place. In fact, even when I was a teenager the house where my mother grew up was still on a—on a dirt road. The—the pavement ended about two or three miles north of the house. It's kind of ironic, one of our locations here in town—we have two—the restaurant here on 6th Avenue and the one on Danville Road—the location on Danville Road is only about maybe three or four miles from where my grandfather started cooking on the same—on Danville Road, the same road.

00:09:24

AE: And that location is it—did that open in the early '90s?

00:09:29

DM: That location opened in '90—'91.

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AE: Was that part of the reason to get that location was its proximity [to the original location] or did it—was it just the luck of real estate?

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DM: No, we just wanted to move across town, and it just happened that property was available and since the town was growing that way, and we thought that would be a good location, which it turned out to be.

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AE: Well can we back up a little bit and talk about the picnics that your grandfather used to have and what those were like and—and what kind of person your grandfather was?

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DM: Yeah, we can talk about those things. And now when you say picnics, the most vivid memory I have the picnics was I was older and actually out of college, but we did the big—big picnics like Monsanto [an agricultural biotechnology corporation], Chemstrand [a chemical fiber manufacturing company], and those kinds of things. There was, you know, 2,000 and 3,000 people, which back in that time we're talking about the early '60s—were pretty large parties, pretty large picnics. Now the family picnics that you know, where he was serving food other than that, you know, I don't have a lot of recollection of that. I wished I did, but I don't.

00:10:33

AE: What about—because I know in the film, my friend and colleague, Joe York, did on Bob Gibson and you and Chris Lilly talking about—and there were some photographs of nailing boards to trees to make tables and people standing up to eat and that kind of thing.

00:10:48

DM: Yeah, we did have a few photos, not very many. I wish we had a lot more. But one, in particular, you have got boards nailed on some trees that make little tables, and you've got these full of food. You've got pails of milk or tea or whatever, and you can actually see meat on the table, and you can see all these folks standing around. I don't know if that was a paid function or if that was just a family function where he cooked barbecue and fed the family. I'm not sure, but it's kind of a neat picture. I've also got a picture where the party I mentioned for Chemstrand [which became Monsanto], where he was serving at Delano Park, which is a park here in town, and this was haunted by health inspectors today, but he's actually got food already fixed in plates just stacked real high right there in front of him. It's kind of a neat picture, but it's not neat when [*Laughs*] you think about eating the food today, as health conscious as we all are.

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AE: I think I remember that picture because it has the water tower in the background; is that the one?

00:11:42

DM: Yes, you have a good memory. It does have the water tower behind it.

00:11:46

AE: Uh-hmm. So when your grandfather started cooking and—was he—just a family thing or a hobby that kind of, you know, took over his life that he just liked making barbecue and entertaining folks?

00:12:02

DM: I do think my grandfather liked to entertain folks. The—the one thing I do remember about him, he never, never met a stranger. He could talk to anybody, was always happy going, and very, very, very outgoing—but he also liked to eat, and I think those two things maybe got him in the—in the barbecue business because he did liked to eat, and he liked to meet people, and liked to talk to people. And he was somewhat of a character, too. He and my grandmother actually divorced and—and back then you didn't—as I understand, you didn't hear a lot about those kinds of things. But the family stayed together, you know, pretty close—that wouldn't be a major problem with that.

00:12:45

AE: What year did he pass?

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DM: My grandfather passed away, I think, in 1972 at the age of 86, I believe.

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AE: Was he still involved in the business at that—that later age?

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DM: He would—he actually lived right next door to the business—small little house—and he was married at the time. He would work just part-time, but he was kind of free to come and go as he pleased. He didn't have to set hours; he just kind of did what he wanted to do, which is a nice way to do it. I'm getting that way myself, I think.

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AE: Well do you have an idea of what he saw happen before his eyes of the popularity of—of barbecue in his restaurant?

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DM: Now you know that's—that's one sad thing, I guess, if you think about the history of Bob Gibson, and he's the one that got our business started and it grew from a dug-out pit in the backyard to what it is today. But [*Sighs*] he—he never saw, I don't think, or even had an inkling of what it was going to become because even when he passed, well, we still had rather a small place. We could probably seat maybe 100 people, which you know is—is a fair-sized restaurant, but—and it was busy but he still wasn't known like we are today. He wasn't featured on TV, radio, wasn't written up in the magazines, and I'm sure he would be astounded if he was to come back and see what happened to the business that he started.

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AE: Uh-hmm.

00:14:18

DM: And it's kind of sad when you think about it that—that he didn't live to see that.

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AE: Well but he—he certainly lived fifty years of being in the barbecue business. I mean that's—that's quite an accomplishment.

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DM: Yes. No, that is. For one person to stay in the same business that long and—and you know, he didn't regress. He actually progressed and as he moved around to different locations, he went from a smaller place to a little bit bigger place each time, so he grew his business, too. I'm not trying to imply that he didn't do well; he did. So yeah, I'm proud of what he's done. And also even my dad, as—as involved as he was in the business, he didn't see it become what it is today. But it still hadn't reached the magnitude that it is; it wasn't as well known as it is today.

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AE: And how do you feel about where Big Bob's has gone in the past—the intervening years, since your father has passed and your grandfather and—and where Bob Gibson's is still headed? I mean you're still just going gangbusters, and you were talking about franchising in the future—
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00:15:30

DM: So how—how do I feel about how our business has grown?

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AE: Uh-hmm.

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DM: Well, you know, naturally I'm proud of what we have done with the business. I'm—I'm proud of the fact that we've taken the business that my grandfather started in the backyard and are basically cooking the same way that he cooked. And we had made some modifications and some changes to what he did but I'm—I'm proud that we've been able to—because of customers and—and friends and people and opportunities and being at the right place at the right time, we've kind of taken our business to a national level where we—in the barbecue world anyway, we're pretty well known. Part of that is due too to my son-in-law, Chris Lilly. He's a very dynamic young man and very well spoken young man. And he's good with anybody he talks to. And one-on-one, he's sort of a quiet person, but you get him with a group or in front of the camera or talking to a reporter or someone like that—he just becomes very energetic and very dynamic and very, very outgoing and just very well spoken, and he's a good advocate of the barbecue business and of the barbecue world.

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AE: And is your daughter [Amy McLemore Lilly] that he married, did she have an interest in the business?

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DM: Just in the dollars. [*Laughs*] I'm joking—I'm joking. They have three children and she is a full-time homemaker, and she's very involved in the schools. They have two boys and a girl, so she has stayed in the background sort of raising children—with the help of Chris, of course, but not involved in the business, per se.

00:17:02

AE: Well when she married, was it something that was kind of maybe unspoken that she marry someone who would be interested in—in being a part of the business or does—was that just serendipitous that he married into the family?

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DM: Well I think that was just a little bit of luck for—for us—us, meaning my wife and myself and Amy of course, too, and maybe also for Chris because when—when he and Amy married, Chris really wasn't a cook. He had to have the capability to become one because he's far exceeded what I can do. But you know, when he came aboard after he married Amy and they came in the business with us, he went back in the kitchen just like anybody else and learned the operation of how we do things and how we cook, and he's just really taken it to another level. I'm very proud of him.

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AE: Is Amy your only child?

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DM: No, actually we have three girls. Amy is the middle daughter. Our youngest daughter and our oldest daughter both live in Birmingham. And, of course, Amy and Chris live here together.

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AE: What are your other daughters' names?

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DM: Donna is the oldest daughter. Julie is our youngest daughter. Julie was a—was—is still a shoe buyer in the corporate office for Parisian's—it just sold out. That's why I said *was*; she still is, but she's going to lose her job. She isn't—she didn't choose to move to Charlotte [North Carolina], where Belk's is located. Belk's is the company that bought Parisian's out. And our oldest daughter, Donna, is a CPA, but she only works part-time because she's got two little girls, two and four.

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AE: Well and back to your grandfather, in the early days of him barbecuing—we've talked about the history but now to the—the bones of it and—and the meat and the barbecue part, when he was cooking in an underground pit in the early days was he raising hogs, or do you have any idea where he got his meat at all?

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DM: No, my grandfather was not in the hog-raising business. He would buy from local farmers that were raising pigs. They'd come by and—and again, you've got to remember that back in the '20s when he started, if you sold a couple shoulders a day, you probably had a pretty good day. So he'd buy a whole hog and cut it up himself and use the—all the parts of the hog pretty much to cook—the shoulders, the hams, the ribs—and cook those and sell them so—. But no, he—he bought what he sold; he didn't raise anything.

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AE: And was he doing meat only or was he doing other things? Like were there any sides at all back in the early days or anything like that?

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DM: As far as sides, I'm—I'm not sure. Now he did—I keep talking about the hog. I guess the thing he's more well known [for] than anything in the barbecue world is his white sauce. See, he was also cooking chickens—chickens and—and hog—hog—mainly pork. Sides, he probably had the vinegar slaw that we use today—nothing besides that, as far as the barbecue. He did have a Brunswick stew, which is the same recipe we use today, but he would cook that in a big black wash pot just on an open fire. And I'm sure he didn't cook the quantity that we cook; it was probably a smaller pot but that's the things that he cooked.

00:20:23

AE: And now the white sauce because he's pretty much known as the person who invented the white sauce, as far as most people say. And I think y'all even—do y'all even say that, that he invented the white sauce?

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DM: Yes. Yes, we—we do say that my grandfather invented the white sauce, and no one has come forward to dispute that so you know and honestly, to my—to my knowledge he is the person that did—started the white sauce. Now how he ever came up with the recipe, I don't have any idea. I wish I did know that, but I don't.

00:20:53

AE: Did he at the same time have the vinegar barbecue sauce?

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DM: Yeah, he's always had—again, to my knowledge—the vinegar sauce that we still have on the tables today and the white sauce, which is a vinegar-based sauce, too.

00:21:07

AE: Uh-hmm. So how, today, in what is Bob Gibson's and—and the white sauce, which is now all over Alabama—or not all over but there are quite a few places that have white sauce now—and to have started that trend, I guess, if you will, in barbecue and to be a part of where that started—?

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DM: How does that make me feel?

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AE: Uh-hmm.

00:21:27

DM: It makes me feel really good. And what really makes me feel good is when you go to some of the better-known restaurants in Alabama now, and you see that they have a bottle of white sauce. And some of them even call it the *Original White Sauce*, when I know it's not because they never had it before until just the last couple of years. But that's kind of neat to see that and—and I think it's sort of—it's kind of funny really and it makes me proud, too, that we are the ones that started it. And the other folks who have come, they have jumped on that bandwagon and are using it too, so it's kind of neat.

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AE: Yeah. And I think it's neat that a—a taste for it has developed along—you know, I mean that's—its popularity is that people have come here for so long so often that they have developed a taste for the white sauce that has demanded that it be recreated.

00:22:10

DM: Yeah. And—and another thing that's wonderful about that, since we are—market our sauce, our white sauce as well as our tomato sauce, I want everyone in the whole world to start liking white sauce. We'll just sell that much more of it. But that's—that's kind of nice, too. But and what you said, too, is true that folks have kind of developed a taste for it. It's kind of like taking a bucket of water and—and pouring it out and it just slowly spreads out, and that's kind of the way our white sauce has done. We started selling it like you indicated, and it slowly spread to other towns around, and now we're in about five or six states—not in every store, of course, but you know, different stores and different parts of the states but in about five or six states, selling not just our white sauce but our other sauces too. And, of course, we sell a lot of sauce mail order, too—all over the country.

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AE: And the white sauce was intended originally to be on the chickens only. And I know you baptized the chickens today, as you say, in the white sauce, but a lot of people use it on their barbecue also.

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DM: Yes, we have customers that come in here, and they're locals, as well as people that just come over and try it. They will try it on pork, or some even try it on ribs. Now personally, I don't

care for it on pork. I love it on chicken, and it's real, real good on turkey. But other than that—and it's good on potato chips; it's very good on potato chips. A lot of kids do that. I'm not a kid, but I still do it once in a while myself. But that's the things it's really good for. We do have customers, though, that just—they'll use the white sauce on pork and nothing else.

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AE: Uh-hmm. Well can we talk about the nuts and bolts of—of making barbecue and how Bob Gibson worked on an underground pit in the early days and how that evolved to a brick pit and what—what you use now?

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DM: Well now again, you're asking me some hard questions. I do know that he started cooking and had a pit in the ground. When he went from that to just doing a concrete block pit, I don't know. I would think because of the work involved in a dug pit, he probably changed pretty quick. I would have, if I had been him. But you know it's hard to beat just an old-fashioned concrete block pit. I mean you still people—see people cooking that way today in certain parts of the country and it's—you—you got your meat on the pit, you got your fire off to the side; so when you fill up the coals up under it, the hot coals and all the drippings fall down and the grease will get over it and a good smell and appetizing and—and it's almost like it marinades the meat a little bit. But yeah, that's a wonderful way to cook.

In the real world, though, where you have a big commercial business, it's really hard to continue to cook that way. We come as close as we can cooking that way. We still have the old-fashioned brick pits—not concrete blocks but brick and firebrick. We have a flat—flat grate and we have a big fire up in the front of the pit, and we cook with indirect heat and smoke. We don't

throw the coals under the meat anymore because of the fire hazards and because of the fire department, but it's as close as we can come to cooking just like my grandfather used to cook.

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AE: In the early days of the restaurant was he pitmaster—to assign a name to him as the restaurant owner and barbecuer—but did he—was he responsible for the meat mostly when he had the restaurant in the beginning?

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DM: In the beginning I'm sure he was because you know, you're talking about, again, not a lot of business. You couldn't afford a lot of labor, so I'm sure he did most of the work. Now we had a gentleman working for us, and he passed away about four or five years ago; he started working for my grandfather when he was out on Highway 67, which is close to Priceville that I mentioned earlier. And he started when he was sixteen [years old]. I may have mentioned that, but I think when he started, he started out doing dishes and just anything that needed to be done, but I think he evolved in becoming maybe a helper and then becoming the main pitmaster. And my grandfather was probably fixing the food and taking in the money and that kind of thing. But for the early part of his career, yeah, he was—he was, I'm sure, the main pitmaster.

When I really got to know my grandfather, though, and I can remember what he was doing; he was no longer working back in the—in the pit room itself.

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AE: So when this—when the restaurant that was next door opened in the '50s, did you say—

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DM: Right.

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AE: —was that—what was that to him then? Was that like the—the crowning achievement was to have this established restaurant because that—that location was there for a long time before it burned, did it not?

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DM: Yes, when my grandfather opened in '52—now again, the restaurant that he opened in '52 was not the same restaurant that burned in like '88, I guess. He came from out at Priceville—Highway 67—and got the place on 6th Avenue. And again, that's when my mom went in business with him. They started in a smaller place—bigger than where he came from but still not a real big place. And we never owned that building at that time. We—they rented—I say we—they didn't own it; they rented it. And any improvements that had to be made to it my mom and dad and grandfather had to make. And so they, actually, as time progressed, added on to that building. They started out with one pit. When we moved across the parking lot here in '87, we were up to three pits and added a private dining room, added a work room back behind the main building. So the building had increased a great deal again due to our efforts, not the landlord's efforts, and we still didn't own it because they wouldn't sell it to us. We tried to buy it numerous times. But yeah, the question you asked me, did—I guess did he move to a better place when he moved? He did but as they were at that place they made it a much better place than it was when he first came to it because of all the additions and the improvements that they had made to it. Even over there we cooked close to the way I told you earlier where you—you burn the wood in a pit and throw the ashes up under the meat; that's how we cooked over there. But we also had a

lot of fires over there, too. I mean numerous, numerous fires. I remember, myself, two really bad ones where we had to shut down for like three or four or five days to build back. You just couldn't cook that way now because of the fire department and health department.

00:28:36

AE: How—how might the barbecue have changed, as a result of those changes?

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DM: [*Sighs*] The barbecue, to me, hasn't really changed that much because as—as I told you, we still cook close to that way, the main difference being that we don't throw the coals under the meat. My recollection of how it tasted then and how it tastes now it tastes just as—just as good. I can't really tell any difference. It's a true story. I can't tell any difference.

00:29:05

AE: Are there some of the same vendors that you've been using over the years for getting wood and getting your meat and things like that?

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DM: The vendors that we used back in the early days and I say early days—when I came aboard in the '70s—the only one that I know of that we still use is—and it's not a meat vendor. It's actually the man that we buy produce from, Woodruff Produce, and it's the son now and not the dad but the dad was in business and my grandfather had bought from his family, the Woodruff family, for years and years and years, and we'll continue to do that. And now today the son has taken over that business, and we still buy produce from them. But as far as the meat vendors, all

that has changed. A lot of the ones my grandfather and my dad actually bought from have gone out of business.

00:29:54

AE: When Bob Gibson's was established as a restaurant in, you know, the early days, was there much barbecue in the area then?

00:30:05

DM: Well when my grandfather started in the early days in 1925, I don't know about that. I've heard my parents and aunts and uncles talk about a—a few, maybe one or two other small, small locations. And—and I say small in the positive sense because my grandfather was small, too, you know. All those were small. But there were a couple. And then when he went in business with the Woodalls, they became a factor in the barbecue world. They had a very well known restaurant, a really good reputation. They were out on Old Moulton Road and they had—they also had picnic tables at their place too and had wild game—peacocks and quail and rabbits and those kinds of things—so it made it kind of nice for a family to go out there. In fact, I went out there with my mom and dad myself before they got in business with my grandfather. And my great-grandmother and grandfather lived out there, too, across from the restaurant. I remember—I remember them just—just vaguely. But other than the Woodalls and—and my grandfather I can't remember anybody else. Back in the early days. Back when I was like a teenager.

00:31:20

AE: Well it seems then that family had a big part to play in the persistence of the restaurant with each generation being involved. Do you think—how—how big a part do you think that's played in the—in the history and now the future of Bob Gibson's?

00:31:34

DM: Now I'm not sure I understand your question.

00:31:38

AE: Well that Chris and Amy [Lilly], being the fourth generation involved in the—in the restaurant and how—because a lot of people that I speak with in the restaurant business that's family-owned their kids may or may not be—more often are not—are not interested in the family business, so it seems to be a generational thing, where it might see an end. But in your family the family interest has been maintained.

00:32:01

DM: Okay. That's a very good question because actually, we're talking about now Chris and Amy, being the fourth generation. Going from my grandfather, I think he really loved the barbecue business, the barbecue world—meeting the folks and doing what he did. My mom was very outgoing, too. She worked the front of the house, so to speak. She—she did the business part of the—of the restaurant. My dad was the pit master, so to speak. He worked always back in the back. He wasn't quite as good with the public as my mom was and I don't think—he liked what he did, but I don't even think my dad liked the barbecue business like I do. I love it; I love what I do. In fact, I'm probably more like my grandfather than any of the other cousins that I have—even more so than my uncles, maybe. And they all went in the barbecue business too, but

nobody loves it like I do—I—at least I don't think they do. And Chris—of course I'm third generation, Chris being fourth—I'm not sure Chris will love it as much as I do because I will go around and travel all over the country and eat barbecue, and Chris won't do that, you know. And, I guess, to do that you've really got to love barbecue. He loves what he does, but I think when you really get down to the nitty-gritty, I probably like it even better than Chris does. But he likes it well enough to keep the business going, so I—I think that is a plus. And—and you mentioned it is hard for a business to—to grow and especially to prosper and keep going, you know, and you—you can't stand still. Either you—**[Knocking]**

00:33:34

AE: You can get that.

00:33:36

DM: Okay, come in.

[Recording is paused for approximately one minute, as Mr. McLemore speaks with an employee.]

00:33:38

AE: All right. We're back, and we're talking about the family in the business.

00:33:41

DM: Yeah, I was talking about—in really anything else that you do, you—you can't stand still. You're either moving backward, or you're moving forward. And I think we've moved our business forward because, you know, my mom did like the business, and she was very good at

what she did. I love the business. I'm not saying I'm good at what I do but I—I love what I do, anyway, and the business has seemed to grow with me in charge of it. And Chris, with all the capability and—that he's got he's expanded it even more than I would have even dreamed that we could. So we've been very blessed, the fact that we all have had an interest in—to go from the person that started the business now to the fourth generation in the business still seems to be going forward and moving and expanding. It's really a wonderful feeling.

00:34:26

AE: Now you're saying that—how much you love barbecue and you love the business—can you articulate what that is about barbecue that you love so much?

00:34:35

DM: You mean what do I love about the barbecue business or just about barbecue in general?

AE: Both.

00:34:40

DM: I love the business because you know, you kind of are free to do what you want to do. You're—and kind of like my grandfather, you're free to meet people, talk to people, which is—which is a nice thing. You know, you have politicians come in here. Our place has become a gathering place. If something new happens in town, you know a lot of folks will meet here and talk about it, so you kind of keep up with what's going on in the city and the state and the world. And it's just—it's just a good feeling to be around folks like that. And as far as loving barbecue, you know, you can tell I love to eat, but I really, really love barbecue. And I'll go out of my way with my wife when we're traveling to try different barbecue places. And a lot of times we'll

actually just make a barbecue trip and we may try—and I’m not exaggerating when I say this—twenty or twenty-five places in six or seven days. We’ve been known to stop at five or six in one day. My poor wife, Carolyn, will wind up drinking coffee, while I’m still trying barbecue. But I just love it. And if you’ll look behind you, I’ve got a big collection of sauce. I like to try different barbecue sauces and usually, if I find one that—that looks good and I think is good, I’ll buy two bottles: one to try and then one to keep and put on my “Save Rack,” I call it. But I just like what I do.

00:35:50

AE: Now when you’re out trying different barbecues, is it something that you do just to have an experience of a different style of barbecue, or are you kind of doing a little bit of independent research, if you will, and trying to see what other people do and how they do it?

00:36:04

DM: In a nice way, you’re asking me am I spying. **[Laughs]** No, I do like to see what the other person is doing. I like to see how their food tastes, how their sauce tastes, but we’re not going to come back and change what we do because we’ve been very successful the way we cook, the way our sauces are. So no, I’m not going to change that. Now I might get some ideas about how to change the menu, or maybe how we should greet the customers or waitresses should wait on somebody. But as far as the food, no, we’re not going to change that.

00:36:33

AE: When you're out trying and eating other people's barbecue, do you always get a sandwich or do you mix it up and get ribs sometimes, or is there something that you get a craving for and have to have?

00:36:46

DM: No, usually when I go and try other food—and that's the hard part about this: I won't get just a sandwich, or I won't get just ribs. I'll get—if they have a feast or a sampling platter or whatever they call it, where you can try pretty much all they've got—again, you can't eat all of that, but you can taste some of all of it. So our food bill sometimes is pretty high because of that.

00:37:06

AE: Well so then with all this experience with the different kinds of barbecue and throughout the region and the country, what do you think is different about Bob Gibson's that makes it stand out, especially in your mind, being the proprietor here?

00:37:19

DM: One thing—it goes back to I love what I do; I'm proud of what we do. I've tried to build a high standard of how our food is and how our service is. Not that other folks don't do those same things, but maybe we try just a little harder to excel in what we do and to be sure that our food is consistent every day—as best we can. And I'm not saying that sometimes it doesn't vary a little, but by and large, if you eat here today or if you eat her next week or next month, our food is going to taste about the same, and you're going to be treated about the same when you come here. And that's what we strive for, and I think that's why we've been successful. And we don't rest on the laurels of what we've done. You know, we do competition cooking. We've been very

fortunate and very blessed in things we've won and things we've done. And we've been very fortunate in some of the things that Chris has done as far as the TV shows he's been on and the people he's spoken with. But—but you can't let that just be a standard and take that for granted and then—then stop at that. You've got to keep trying to improve it. It goes back to what I said while ago: you can't stand still. You're either sleeping or moving forward, and so we continually try to move forward. And I—I truly think that is what has made us grow like we have because we—we do keep trying to improve and move forward. And I said we don't change earlier; we don't change what we do or how we cook. And in so many ways now, we do change a little bit, and I should expand on that a little bit.

In competition cooking, some of the things that we've cooked and the way we've cooked them—and I'm speaking of things we put on the meat that we cook—like we've come up with a different rub that enhances the flavor of the meat a little bit more. We don't necessarily change the way we cook the meat, but we change a little bit what we might put on it, like a rub. So—but doing the competition cookings that we've done, I think we have improved our flavor a little bit because we found what tastes good to judges, and judges are just like normal people. But you know their tastes are probably like your tastes or somebody else's tastes, so if we can please them with something we've come up with, we can please the general public too. So we have, I think, slowly improved our rubs. We've improved our pork because of the rub that we put on it.

My grand—I'll give you an example—my grandfather—we did, too, for years and years—all we put on our shoulder was—and this may be a bad word today, but people are going back to salt—we put salt on our shoulders. That's all we did and they were wonderful. The sauce—the red pepper sauce that we've got, we mop them with that. But since we've started competition cooking, we've come up with what we call a shoulder rub and so we rub that

shoulder down, and we did good with that and don't use the salt. Of course it's got a little salt in it, of course, but the flavor is better because of that. So what I'm getting at, because of the things we've done and the things we've learned and the things we've done, it—we've used those and applied those techniques to make our food a little bit better here—shoulder, rib, and so on.

00:40:17

AE: So then competition cooking has really influenced what you do here locally in Decatur in this restaurant?

00:40:24

DM: Yes, it has. One—one thing that we've added because of competition cooking—we've always cooked beef, like a beef round, because my grandfather started doing that early on. But we've started serving beef brisket here like they serve in Texas, and we did that because of competition cooking. We've got where we can cook that really well and won some contests with that, so Chris said, "Why don't we just start serving it at the restaurant?" So we have and people just seem to love it.

00:40:50

AE: Huh. I wonder what your local customers here—I mean I know by now they're used to you winning all these awards and everything, but I wonder what, locally, if it's—it's obviously well received when you come back with different things like the beef and all those things, but I'm really fascinated by competition cooking influencing what you do locally and what the locals—how that's received locally, which you—I guess you just explained. But it's not just a matter of

getting your name out there; it's a matter of kind of market testing different—different things that you can implement here in your business.

00:41:30

DM: I guess that's a pretty good way to put it, yeah. Because when we competition cook, we are testing new things. If we—if we arrive at something that's proven that we—we win with we don't necessarily change that. But ribs is a good example. Chris is constantly changing our—our ribs, just tweaking them, so to speak, just to make them a little bit better—a little bit better. And so if we find a winning technique with our ribs, we'll come back and tweak our rub here just a little bit to make our ribs better, and I think that's kind of what you're asking me—what we do here.

00:42:04

AE: But I wonder if kind of deep down—deeper into that whole thing—if there might be somewhat of a—a dilemma is the word that comes to mind, and I don't want to start any trouble but if you know—if you're on the circuit and—and the competitions are pretty localized like Memphis in May, for example. While it's renowned, Memphis has its own barbecue style, but if—if a different region, if a different style within the region is influencing your competition cooking, and then you're bringing that back to northern Alabama, does that not dilute Northern Alabama's style of barbecue?

00:42:42

DM: Now I'm glad you ask it that way. What we at Gibson's do, we take north Alabama to Memphis in May and have done very well.

00:42:54

AE: So what do you think people take away from those experiences that you have when you take northern Alabama barbecue to them?

00:43:02

DM: Well we have people come in from—and maybe they don't always travel directly here to try food, but they've heard about us and they've seen us on TV, and they've read about us. They'll go out of their way just to try food. I had a guy in here today from all places, Canada. I was talking to the gentleman, and he came in and said, "Would you mind signing this menu for me? I've seen y'all on TV, I've read about you." And—and naturally, I did, and he started talking about Memphis in May and the things we had won. So that was kind of nice.

00:43:32

AE: And I was wondering, sitting in your office here by the front door, I was hearing people kind of commenting as they walk in [the restaurant] and the things you must hear of—of people who are visiting here for the first time and when they walk in and what kinds of things you're able to overhear them say.

00:43:43

DM: Well the—the new people, the people that have never heard about us—the men always comment about all those big trophies out front. We have a bunch of Memphis in May trophies. You know, we won shoulder there six years in a row; we've won grand champion two times. And—and the trophies that they give are very, very nice and very eye-catching, and so that's the first things folks see when they walk in here. Then they see all the different awards that's on the

walls, and a lot of folks go around and read all that. So yeah, you hear a lot about that just sitting where my office is here.

00:44:09

AE: Now when you got really involved in the restaurant in the early '70s, I think you said, did you have kind of a vision of where you could take the restaurant and—and—or did that kind of—did the momentum of the popularity of barbecue kind of pick you up in its wake as you got more involved in the restaurant?

00:44:27

DM: I think the momentum kind of picked me up. [*Laughs*] Carolyn and I—my wife—went to Memphis in May—this goes back to competition—and tried to do something with the business that we had not done before. I guess in the—the mid-'80s thinking I might want to go up there and cook—well we went and saw all these big rigs and these big cookers and oh man, we just thought we were out of our element, and I guess at that time we were. So we came home, never thinking about going back to Memphis in May or even cooking in a contest. And then we joined the National Barbecue Association when it first was formed, I guess, in the early '90s and went to Kansas City and went to a competition cooking class. They have different classes that you can go to—how to prepare food and how to cater parties—just the whole gamut. So I went to one about competition cooking, and it just so happened that the man teaching that class had just bought a pit from another gentleman that was in that—in the class, I guess, kind of talking about his cookers, and I liked what I heard. And we had just signed up a big party to cater of like 8,000 people. And I knew that we were going to have to buy more pits to—to handle a party that size. So I talked to Carolyn and said, “What do you think about us buying a pit that we could do some

competition cooking on, if we wanted to, as well as my other pit, and just put them on the trailer?” And she said, “Well I don’t care if we do that.” So we wound up buying the pit from the man I met in Kansas City and came back and used it for the party that I mentioned. And then a friend of mine who works at the Arsenal was telling me that they were having a contest at the Redstone Arsenal that fall and wanted us to enter. So we did and came in fourth place our first time cooking, just exactly the way we do here. And from there, that’s what really got us into competition cooking.

00:46:21

AE: And that was before Chris came into the family and got part of the business? You were doing that on your own with your wife?

00:46:27

DM: No, that—Chris was in the family at that time. In fact, I won’t—I’ll never forget this—and they may not want me telling this, especially with you taping it—but that first contest we cooked at—and that was in 1996—and Memphis in May—you can cook whole hogs, whole shoulder, or ribs, or you can cook just one. And you can still win just cooking one, but we didn’t know that at the time, because that’s how new and raw we were and green. We thought you had to cook all three, so we cooked the shoulder, the rib, and the whole hog. And this dear, dear lady that’s become a good friend of ours was a judge. And we cooked a whole hog, and she was judging it; and Chris was new, and he was shyer than he is now, and she asked him, she said, “Chris, would you mind getting me some of the bacon?” He said—and I’ll never forget this as long as I live—“If you’ll tell me where it is, I’ll be glad to get it for you.” *[Laughs]* And so she told him where it was on the hog, and he got it. Of course we didn’t—we came in last place in hog.

00:47:24

AE: Oh, my, how things change, huh?

00:47:25

DM: Yes, how things change. Since then, Chris has been invited and I've gone with him—we cooked at a plantation in Charlotte. We cooked in Florida. We've cooked for a lot of people cooking whole hogs so he—he now knows where the bacon on the hog is.

00:47:41

AE: Was the whole hog—was that something he did specifically for the—the competition?

00:47:45

DM: Well see, Memphis in May, you—you cook the whole hog, shoulder, or ribs. We've only cooked them in two competitions in our whole life—the first two contests we entered. We haven't cooked any more hogs in competition since then.

00:47:57

AE: Was there anything inside you when you did that about maybe something harkening back to your grandfather in cooking?

00:48:04

DM: About the reason we cooked the whole hog? No, we just thought that we had to cook the hog because of the contest because they were cooking hogs. We thought we had to cook one, too. It turned out we didn't have to, so once we found that out, we haven't cooked any more in

competition. Chris could now because he—he can cook a hog very well, but at that time we couldn't.

00:48:24

AE: Well then, what about competition? Because I know when y'all were in Oxford and that a lot of what Chris does, there's like a performance element in what he does with his charisma and then also the demonstration that is what y'all do when he, you know, pushes down on the shoulder to show how tender it is. And what do you—what do you think about that kind of performance element of barbecue when, you know, traditionally it's a really behind-the-scenes kind of thing?

00:48:52

DM: Well I guess I don't really have the answer to that question. I think his charisma, though, is kind of what's got us where we are today in the barbecue world because—not just in competitions but he's gone to Florida; he's cooked at South Beach two or three times with some pretty well known people being there. He just got back from Arizona, cooking for Kingsford Charcoal. They had twenty-five editors of some magazines coming out that they wanted to entertain, so they hired Chris to come out and cook for them. And now they're talking to them about coming to New York in March. But that's not a firm thing, but they're talking to him about coming out there and doing the same kind of thing. He also taught a class while he was there. He's been to a wine vineyard in California, Napa Valley, twice, cooking for people out there. And again, it's because of the way he relates to people, the charisma. He's a guy that—and not just breaking that shoulder apart, you know, it's more to it than that. Once you break that shoulder apart, it's got to taste pretty good. I don't care how much charisma you've got, if the

food doesn't taste good—well he does both. But the charisma has helped in the competitions, where the judges come on the side and say how good they think the food is. But he still has got to stand on its own, too, and that's just like our restaurant. Regardless of what we do and we've won—and I tell my folks this all the time, people come in and look at those awards, they expect our food to be good. If they sit at the table and it's not, those trophies don't mean a thing, and they don't come back. So it's not just about trophies; it's about the kind of food you serve, it's how you treat folks, it's how nice you are to them.

00:50:37

AE: So what is that going to be like when Bob Gibson's grows yet again and—and you get into franchising?

00:50:44

DM: Well we're hoping it's going to stay the same way, and we're trying to be very, very selective about who we sell franchises to. We're not really out pushing franchises right now; we've only sold one. We've had numerous calls about them but—and we return the calls, of course, but we're really not trying to sell another one right now. The first franchise that was in Charlotte, North Carolina, January 8th, and we want to get that one up and running—running well before we would try to sell another one.

00:51:12

AE: And are you really literally over—overseeing most every element in the beginning to make sure that things are up to standard for you from—from your perspective?

00:51:22

DM: Yeah. The people in Charlotte are coming up here the first week in December and training for about three weeks, which is maybe not a great time because of Christmas, and we're so busy that month, but they need to open in January, so we are going to train them. And then we'll send a crew over to Charlotte and spend at least two weeks helping them to get going. Chris has a got a friend in New York that owns a—actually owns a small barbecue place, but he's really known for his steaks and another steak restaurant that he's got. He's going to come down and help us with steaks over there. We've—we've changed our menu up a little bit for the franchise. We're going to do a couple of steaks, just a little bit of seafood, just try to pull the people in that don't necessarily want just barbecue. It's still going to be a barbecue restaurant, and it's going to be called Big Bob Gibson's Bar-B-Q and—and barbecue is going to be the main thing we serve, along with our homemade pies. We haven't even talked about pies. That's one—that's one of the best things that we do. *[Laughs]*

00:52:16

AE: You don't have to tell me. *[Laughs]* I love your pies—but a time and place for everything because I do want to ask you also about the—the retail element of what you do and the sauces and the—the rubs and everything and when that came about—if that was kind of parallel to the competition circuit or if that happened a little before or after that.

00:52:39

DM: We actually started selling our sauce before we started doing competition cooking. The first sauce that we sold was our white sauce because, again, it was so unique, and we started selling that in 1994. And then when we started—I went around to a couple of the local grocery stores here in town—three of them, I think—and asked them, if we bottled our sauce, would they

let us put the sauce in the stores, and they all said, “Yeah, we’d be happy to.” And so it kind of started from that and grew, and I guess we got in a couple of warehouses. One was Mitchell Grocery over in Albertville [Alabama], who handles a lot of stores. And we got in Piggly Wiggly, which helped a great deal. And after we bottled our white sauce, and that went pretty well, we—and we won some sauce contests with our tomato-based sauce, and so we got some stores to start handling that, and it just kind of grew and grew. And then we got a call from a Mrs. Stratton’s Salads in Birmingham, who does pimento cheese, potato salad, and that kind of thing; they wanted to become the primary distributor of our sauce and wanted to handle it all. Well it had kind of outgrown us because Chris and I were doing all the delivering, mostly. We had one—one other guy that—that helped some, but Chris being the main one. Well Chris was just too busy to deliver sauce, really, and that was taking away from his other functions and, you know, what he was really good at. So the call came at a good time for us, and so after some negotiation we—all that and Mrs. Stratton’s did all the distribution, handling all the website sales, making up gift-boxes, the whole thing, which really frees us up a lot. And they’ve grown the business a lot because they had the capability. They had the trucks to make the deliveries; they were already calling on the stores. So it’s been a good move for us and for them, too, I think.

00:54:25

AE: Uh-hmm. And it gets your name out there just—

00:54:29

DM: Well, yeah.

00:54:29

AE: —in a whole different area.

00:54:31

DM: The very nice thing about it, even if you didn't make any money, the free advertising is wonderful because people walk in the store and get Big Bob Gibson Bar-B-Q—and especially now that we're franchising. So I think it's a no-win situation for us really—well I guess really it is a win-win situation for us.

00:54:47

AE: Well then let's talk about the sides again, too, because we were talking earlier about when your grandfather was barbecuing, you know, when did those become a part of the restaurant and have they remained the same all these years, and where did those recipes come from?

00:55:02

DM: The sides, you said?

00:55:04

AE: Uh-hmm.

00:55:06

DM: The sides that my grandfather sold were very simple. Even when my mom started working with him and gone in business with him, all he had was—was the meat, he had the coleslaw, the vinegar coleslaw, and the potato chips. That's all you could get. After my mom came aboard, and they were open a few years, they started doing a—a mashed potato salad—a mustard mashed

potato salad, and then for years that's—that's all. They had potato salad and coleslaw and potato chips. We didn't actually add barbecued beans until we moved here in '87, and the bean recipe that we serve here is actually Carolyn's, my wife's, recipe that she made at home. Took that same exact recipe and just enlarged it, and we make it in twenty-gallon pots, and that's the recipe we use.

Now the other sides—well again, here we don't have a lot of sides. We have the baked beans, we have potato salad, and we have coleslaw—still have the chips of course. We've added a barbecue potato. We were the first barbecue restaurant in Alabama, to my knowledge, that started selling the barbecue potato and, at the time, they were cheap to buy because we used the real big potatoes, and they wasn't used for anything else. And those became an instant hit. Carolyn and I have talked about it and we said, "If we could just sell ten or fifteen a day, that would add to the business." Well it's far—far—far exceeded that and now you can't hardly go to a restaurant in Alabama and not get a barbecue potato.

00:56:37

AE: About what year was that that you added that?

00:56:41

DM: I think we had been opened here maybe two years, so around '89—'88 or '89 that we started doing that.

00:56:48

AE: And was that your idea?

00:56:50

DM: Actually, mine and Carolyn's. Now I try to keep up with what goes on in the barbecue world, and I had heard about—there was a restaurant in Texas, I think, called Luther's that was doing a small potato with barbecue, and that's what honestly gave me the idea of doing it. But we decided to do, instead of a small one, a great, great big one, more than almost you—you could eat to make you want to come back. Because if you think you're getting more perceived value than you're getting, then you'll come back. So I think that's what made it so successful; the fact that it was good too—.

00:57:21

AE: So Bob Gibson's has been responsible for a lot of innovation in the barbecue world. I mean not just in Alabama, but things that have influenced barbecue elsewhere. I wonder if there's room for more innovation in the future of barbecue.

00:57:36

DM: I hope so, and I'm trying to think of what it could be. [*Laughs*] I do rack my brain about what we could do, especially to have the impact that the potato has, but I can't think of anything and—and believe me I have tried. We have added the barbecue salad, which everybody has got a barbecue salad. We didn't start those, but those go very well, too, for people that are, you know, health conscious. So we sell a lot of salads, too, but that's pretty much the extent of our menu, with the exception of—of course we have the Brunswick stew, I think I mentioned that, maybe. But we have the homemade pies, and that's pretty much it.

00:58:06

AE: Well let's talk about the pies, then. When did they become part of what Big Bob—Big Bob Gibson's is known for?

00:58:12

DM: I do know that my grandfather did not start selling pies, when he first started cooking. I don't really think we started serving pies until maybe the early '50s, when he came here on 6th Avenue. The pies were my grandmother's recipes and, I think, an aunt's recipe. And again, all we serve is the coconut cream, the chocolate—these are meringue pies. We call them Heaven High Meringue Pies—and then a lemon icebox.

00:58:44

AE: Peanut butter pies?

00:58:47

DM: Well now, we try to keep that a secret [*Laughs*]—not a secret, really. We don't serve it here every day. Special functions, we'll cook a peanut butter pie. When we got to Memphis, we usually take peanut butter pie—special parties. Again, we'll do them but on a regular basis we don't make those. Those are really expensive to make.

00:59:03

AE: So the—the pies have—I mean, as you know, I grew up eating here and the—or at least once a year—the pies are an obvious standout, especially to a little kid with a sweet tooth and a big girl with a sweet tooth but they're—they're always the same, it seems, and always excellent, and I wonder if, when they were established from your family's recipe, if they took on the kind

of popularity immediately and people were trained in making the pies, or was that a gradual kind of phenomenon that the pies really became a signature item?

00:59:40

DM: Well the—the story about the pies is—is sort of sad, talking about the employees—and employees is not the right word, either, because it's people that I've known basically all my life—the pie ladies. The ladies that started making our pies were working for us pretty much when we opened up in '52, '53. And the main pie ladies worked with us up until the last three, four, five years, and they've slowly just passed away. But I think that's why the pies stayed so consistent and so good because the same people made them every single day. One of the ladies that was making pies started working for my grandfather when he was on Highway 67 that we mentioned earlier. She started working in 1947, and she worked up until about a year before she died, which was maybe two years ago.

01:00:33

AE: What was her name?

01:00:35

DM: Mattie Johnson. Mattie Johnson worked for us making pies. Evelyn Harvell—she's still living, but she's no longer able to work. Betty Nighton. Polly Woodall. Polly has passed away. Betty has had to retire because of health. Now we've still got some really pie ladies working here. Joanne Gunner, she's been working for my family for probably twenty-seven, twenty-eight years, and she's the main pie lady. Vera Ramey, she is still making pies; she's worked for us

since the—probably early—late ‘60s, early ‘70s, and she makes pies now. So we still have a good pie crew; we just don’t have the old long-term pie ladies.

01:01:22

AE: Well what is it, from your perspective, about the pies that is so special—besides the people who have made them for so long—and how it’s been such an integral part of the business?

01:01:31

DM: Well I think the people mainly but the fact, again, that—that it’s a good recipe, first of all, and then making them the same way every day—every day.

01:01:40

AE: And is that something that you’re going to oversee and insure the quality of in—in the franchise, also? Are the pies as important as the barbecue?

01:01:47

DM: Yes, we’re going to serve the exact same pies. We talked about expanding pies a little bit and doing pecan pie and actually doing a peanut butter over there that you mentioned. But we decided just last week we’re going to go with just the three that we do here, the same ones: the coconut, the chocolate, and the lemon icebox. Do the peanut butter for special occasions, like we do here and maybe even do a pecan for special occasions. But on a daily basis, just the three.

01:02:13

AE: Is there one of the three—do you have any idea—that sells more than the other?

01:02:18

DM: On a regular basis the coconut probably outsells the other two. During holidays, the chocolate outsells the other two. It's kind of strange.

01:02:27

AE: And I remember from the film [a Southern Foodways Alliance documentary short called *BBG BBQ*], you talking about quantity and how here you—you—about 100 or so pies are made a day but during Thanksgiving and Christmas it—it multiplies by the hundred.

01:02:38

DM: Yeah, more than 100. In fact, we were just talking about this this morning with my pie ladies and one of the—the salesmen that we get our pie goods from. Of course, next week is Thanksgiving; Tuesday night my pie ladies will come in, and we'll start cooking about eight o'clock. And I told the main pie lady, Joanne Gunner, the lady I mentioned while ago, I'm going to let her make a decision of how many we make because they're the ones that do all the work. And I said, "I don't want you to get mad at me when I come in, and you is worn out from making pies. [*Laughs*] So I'll let you set the goal. " So we're shooting for 700 pies that night. That's a lot of pies.

01:03:17

AE: That is a lot of pies.

01:03:18

DM: We can sell more than that. We'll sell out of pies, but you know you can just physically make so many pies.

01:03:23

AE: Do you have standing orders every year from the same folks to come get pies?

01:03:26

DM: I'm sure we do. Now you know, I couldn't tell you who, but I know folks who have bought our pies for years and years and years. And we'll start taking the orders—I mean we already have started taking the orders for Thanksgiving.

01:03:36

AE: Do you eat a pie from here on Thanksgiving?

01:03:39

DM: Oh, yes.

01:03:40

AE: Do you have a favorite flavor?

01:03:41

DM: I think my favorite is probably the coconut. Lemon is very good in the summertime when it's hot but I guess my favorite—favorite is the coconut. Do you have a favorite?

01:03:55

AE: Chocolate. [*Laughs*]

01:03:56

DM: Okay. All right.

01:03:57

AE: So I've been sitting on this question for a while but are you—are you an only child? Do you have brothers and sisters?

01:04:03

DM: I have a sister—younger sister. She is two years younger than me. She's not involved in the business. Her husband was an engineer, so that's they decided to do other things.

01:04:13

AE: So do you plan on retiring, or do you see a day when you won't be here in this office in this location in Decatur?

01:04:22

DM: Well I told my youngest daughter, Julie—she was talking about the move when Parisians was bought out by Belk's. Well she didn't have a place to work. I said, "We'll I've got an office for you in Decatur." That would be the only way I'd move out of this office, I think, and we were kind of joking about that. No, I don't see retiring. I'm going to slow down a lot, but with franchising and all the other things we do, it's hard to just stop. And again, you know, I like what I do so why quit?

01:04:47

AE: Uh-hmm. Well I know Chris and Amy's children are—are young, but do you hope or—or think that maybe they'll be in the business when they're of age?

01:04:55

DM: Yeah. Let me tell you just a quick story about it. His—his children now are sixteen and fourteen—the boys are and the little girl is ten. Two or three years ago we were talking about the kids coming in the business kind of as you always talk with family, and the little girl said, “Well I’m not going to go in the business because I’m not going to work for my brothers.” But now one of them might come in the business one day and maybe all of them. I don’t really know. I’d like to think that they would because you hate for the business to just stop.

01:05:28

AE: Is there—as far as the two locations here in Decatur, I know Chris manages the—the other location and you’re here pretty much—is there a time that if and when you do retire that he would come here? I mean is this kind of like the mother location that would be the nest for future generations, or is that something that you thought about at all?

01:05:47

DM: Oh yeah, I have thought about that. This would be the location he would come to because this—this is the—the bigger location and this is—if somebody comes to town that’s just heard of us and has never been here, this is where they come. And so yeah, Chris would come over here. He’s happy where he is. I think he likes me being here and him over there, but if I ever quit, he’d come here.

01:06:05

AE: Uh-hmm. And well, can we mention the sign for the record? I know you told that story to Joe [York] for the film [*BBG BBQ*], but the sign out front of the running pig that’s not running.

01:06:12

DM: Oh, yeah. Tell you what happened about he sign you mean?

01:06:15

AE: Uh-hmm.

01:06:16

DM: Oh yeah, the—the sign—the neon sign that we've got was the sign that my grandfather got or had built in 1952. It's got a pig on it and the pig had—the feet did move. They were dancing. And his hand, he had a knife or a cleaver chopping meat. So he would dance and be chopping meat at the same time. Well the city passed a sign ordinance that you couldn't have a moving sign anymore so we had—and this has been years ago—so we had to stop the pig from dancing and stop the pig from chopping meat, so it's just a pig standing up out there now. But it was really a good-looking sign in its day when it was doing all that.

01:06:56

AE: Well now if—if you wanted the pig to be dancing again or running again is that a—a switch you can flip or has the neon been, you know, taken away in those parts on the sign?

01:07:06

DM: Yeah, all that's been taken away. We'd have to redo the sign if we was able to get it to dance again.

01:07:12

AE: How long ago was it that that ordinance went into effect?

01:07:14

DM: You know, I don't think that when we built this building here, which is back in '87, that we could do that, so it's been that long.

01:07:24

AE: So 6th Avenue is now chock-full of all kinds of signs, and I would think that a running pig would not—would be the least of people's worries here in town.

01:07:32

DM: I was just thinking about that very thing last week. There's a couple I can think of right now that are flashing signs, which, to me, is no different than the pig dancing or chopping meat with that cleaver or that knife.

01:07:44

AE: Maybe we should get a petition started to get the—the pig running again.

01:07:47

DM: Maybe we should. I would sure sign it.

01:07:50

AE: *[Laughs]* Me too. Well I've taken up a lot of your time here, and I'm sure we could talk for hours on end, but I wonder if there's something about the barbecue, specifically and—and your

process and what makes it different that you'd like to add or—or contribute that I haven't asked that is important about what you do here.

01:08:11

DM: No. If—if I do know what made it different, other than what I've already told you about—the tender loving care that we give it—I wouldn't tell you. There's nothing. It's just the fact that we like what we do, and we're very particular about how—our people that work here, how they process the meat and cook the meat and, again, how they treat people, and I think that's the secret to our success.

01:08:33

AE: Well and since you've now received such wide success nationally and—and internationally, what do you think that that has meant to Decatur and to your hometown?

01:08:43

DM: I think the people in Decatur are proud of what we've done. I know that the Tourism Board is because they send folks here all the time and they tell us that—and this sounds like I'm tooting my horn, and I don't mean it that way because we have a lot of good things here in Decatur, but a lot of people come to Decatur to—to eat with us, eat our food, and while they're here, they do other things, too. And I've had a lot of folks tell me from the Tourism Board that we're the number one attraction in Decatur—tourist attraction—and that makes me proud, naturally.

01:09:13

AE: Well and they had—the State Tourism Office had the *Year of Alabama Food*, and y'all were high up on that list. I know that they singled out a lot of different places around the state. But what do you—what do you think about that and culinary tourism and people traveling from far and wide to come have some of what you make here in Decatur, Alabama?

01:09:31

DM: Well that makes you really proud of—of what you've done. It makes us proud that we started from a little hole in the ground pit, and we've come where chefs will come and eat our food. We were like you mentioned, The Year of Alabama Food, we were Culinary Ambassador for the State of Alabama; we had been invited to cook at the James Beard House in New York, where before they pretty much just invited well-known chefs. Well they invited us as a barbecue restaurant. I still call this place a barbecue stand; I got that from my mother. A barbecue stand, you know it's a little small building, a hole in the wall place but that's how I think of us—a Barbecue stand and not a Barbecue restaurant. But we went to New York at the James Beard House and cooked a five-course barbecue dinner—high priced, not from my point—not for us. We didn't get paid a lot of money, but the people that came to eat paid a high price to eat there. And we served our pork ribs and we served barbecued pork; we served a Brunswick stew, and we served some barbecue sausage, and we served our Heaven High Lemon Icebox Pie and all that was a big, big hit. But it—it kind of makes you feel good to pull into New York—and by the way, that was my first time to ever go to New York. And we had called ahead. You had to have a place to park your rig, and that was kind of hard to get permission to park our big rig right out front of the James Beard House. That summer before—we went that fall—the police chief and the fire chief of New York had been here and they ate—and they ate here at the restaurant and we comped them their meal, never thinking we'd see them again. Well because they were going

to New York, we had to find a way to park and getting a parking permit. So I called the police chief—not that I know him personally. I don't. But anyway, he remembered he come to Decatur, and he remembered our food. He assigned a detective to us the whole time we were there; they blocked off the street and gave us parking places and met us when we came in. When we pulled up in that big cooker, they came and said, "Oh, my goodness!" We though Oprah had showed up because of the way they were acting. They had already towed two cars off that parked in our places. And so we got to park our cooker and parked like three cars there along the streets. Then we cooked that night and served the James Beard the next night, and then the next morning Chris was on the *Today Show* with Al Franken—I'm sorry, not Al Franken, Al Roker.

01:12:08

AE: Al Roker.

01:12:08

DM: Franken is—had a radio show a couple weeks ago. But the—the police lieutenant, he met Chris at four o'clock that morning and drove him down to the station where they were going to have the show, which I thought was above and beyond. And then they took the cooker—after we were through with all that and—and impounded it so that Chris and Amy could stay in New York and enjoy the city, because that's the only way we had a place to park it. So they put it where they impound cars, and then Chris went and picked it up, and they left town. I thought that was kind of neat. *[Laughs]*

01:12:42

AE: That is. That's some special treatment in the big city. So how—how have people in places like New York City—how have they received your barbecue?

01:12:51

DM: People in New York just—not just our barbecue; I think they love all barbecue. The first year we went up there and cooked and, as I told you, we have—we—everyone—lines as far as you can see. You just don't see the end of them. Once you start serving, people are in line 'til—'til you quit. And we've run out of food all three times we've cooked. But the first year we went, if you're familiar with what a pork shoulder looks like it's got a skin hunk on the end of the shoulder and as you cook the shoulder that skin hunk kind of gets hard and crispy—not the meat but the hunk. Well you never think that folks in New York would even know what that was. Well as Chris was up on our cooker and we have a table and a cutting board—carving and pulling that meat apart, folks told him, “Throw me some of that skin! Throw me some of that skin!” So he cut the skin off in little pieces and just slung it out in a line close by, and folks would catch it. And as they got their meat—their sandwich—they'd put that skin on it. Now that's a Southern thing; that's not a New York thing. But we didn't have any skin hunk left in the city of New York, and I couldn't believe that. And that's a true story.

01:13:53

AE: Uh-hm.

01:13:54

DM: So that tells you what people in New York think about Southern barbecue.

01:13:57

AE: Well and I think it speaks, too, to a lot of people who are displaced Southerners and that the experience of barbecue and coming from a place like Alabama and just what your memory of—of food can make you want and have a taste for and—and what that can mean. And especially, you know, even personally coming here and—and eating here with my family and what it means for me to come here to Big Bob Gibson’s and have—have a sandwich and some pie. But I know that it is, you know, locally, when we were talking about what it has meant to the community here, how it is a gathering place and that it is, you know, this physical location, I think—and I’m starting to ramble. But what I’m trying to get at is that the place speaks to the food and—and enhances the experience in a different way, so actually coming here—it’s a different barbecue experience than—than having it even across town maybe, you know, as far as memory and food is concerned. Do you have a lot or get a lot of feedback from your customers who have been coming—families who have been coming her for generations and—and what that means to them, specifically?

01:15:03

DM: Maybe not specifically [*said pacifically*], but I know holidays, when you know kids just like yourself, children who have moved away, then they come home and visit their parents or their relatives or whatever, most of them make a point to come back and eat with us at least one time while they’re here—sometimes a lot more than that. You know Dean Jones who was—the actor with Walt Disney, every time he comes to Decatur, his first stop is Big Bob Gibson’s—the first place he goes is right here to eat. And that makes you feel good, it really does. But not just him. Anybody that comes back in town, we like for them to come back.

01:15:39

AE: Do y'all have—I don't ever know because I always get the same thing—but do you—if someone has a preference for like inside meat or outside meat or mixed or anything like that, do you do special—special order sandwiches like that, or is it just all one thing?

01:15:53

DM: Oh no, it's special; it's what you want. If you ask for outside, you should get outside; if you ask for inside, you should get inside or mixed or whatever—how you want it.

01:16:01

AE: Uh-huh.

01:16:01

DM: And hopefully, if you ask for it, that's the way you'll get it.

01:16:06

AE: Okay. Do you remember—just thinking about prices and menus and things, do you remember the early days what a sandwich went for or what a slab of ribs would have gone for and what they are now?

01:16:16

DM: Well I can remember sandwiches. I'm going to age myself. I can remember when a sandwich was a quarter. That's been a long time ago. Ribs—see, at the restaurant we didn't sell ribs for a long, long time. My grandfather started out selling ribs because that was part of the hog that he was buying, so he wasn't going to get rid of anything. But in the restaurants we didn't serve the ribs. It was just the pork and the stew and the chickens, mainly, and a little beef.

01:16:46

AE: Did your grandfather do anything else with the hog, or did he make hogshead cheese or anything like that?

01:16:49

DM: Now see, I don't—I don't know that because back when I got to help my grandfather, you know, we were already buying things from like a packing house or whatever.

01:17:01

AE: And how about your hickory; where are you getting that from these days?

01:17:03

DM: Right now we have one man that supplies all of our wood. He—he follows loggers around. And it's kind of strange, loggers don't want hickory, so they kind of cut it up and just leave it. So that's how we get most of our hickory wood. It kind of hurts me to cut—I don't cut trees but to see all those trees cut. But if we're going to cook this good, tender pork, we have to have the hickory, and that's all we cook with is hickory.

01:17:31

AE: How much wood do you—do you have an idea of how much you go through in, say, a week's time?

01:17:35

DM: I'd hate to even guess. I mean if you look at our woodpile, it's tremendous out there. We go through a lot of wood. About to say how much, I don't know. We usually have two fires going—two pits going full time all the time, so it—it takes a lot of wood to do that.

01:17:53

AE: Do you have any idea of how many sandwiches or—or barbecue plates go out of here in a day?

01:17:58

DM: No, that I don't know. It's easy to keep up by potatoes. We sell 300 or 400 potatoes a day—just the barbecue potatoes.

01:18:06

AE: At this one location?

01:18:07

DM: This one location, yeah.

01:18:09

AE: When did the drive-thru—when did—when was that established?

01:18:14

DM: We built our drive-thru when we built the building we're in right now, which was in '87 and then at Danville Road when we built that—opened that one we had a drive-thru there, too. And we fill up, you know—the dining room fills up. But the bulk of our business is still take-out

through the drive-thru and through the counter and then through the catering the parties that we do.

01:18:35

AE: And can we—selfishly, for personal reasons—can we talk about the old restaurant before you moved across the parking lot here and—and what it looked like? I mean and this is to satisfy or blow to pieces my memory of it, but I just remember it being lots of chrome and the—the circular counter in the back. Am I remembering that right, where there was a cash register near the back?

01:18:58

DM: Yeah, you've got a good memory. The—the front, it was like—I'm not sure what kind of glass you would call that but a glass that you—you could see through but you couldn't see through—kind of a wavy effect. And it had chrome on the front, a little brick on the front; it was white and it had black and white plaster around the walls, if you remember that. It had a—a small dining room on the side, like if you were facing the front where the sign was, you were standing at the street, you would go in the door, the dining room would be on your left. The cash register is all the way towards the back, where that circular counter was that you mentioned. And behind that was—it used to be years ago a—an old drink box. Maybe you couldn't see that so much, but there was a drink box back there. And then through that was a kitchen where they washed dishes and made the stew, and through those doors you go on back further it's where the pit room was. But yeah, you remembered it pretty well.

I remember when they actually had little small jukeboxes in each booth where you could put your money in and—and actually, a big jukebox up front and that—that’s maybe before your time. That’s probably in the mid-‘50s, I guess, yeah.

01:20:07

AE: When—when you built this place here and you were designing it what—what was your vision? To kind of reinvent it, since you had the opportunity to build it from the ground up?

01:20:17

DM: Well it didn’t—I liked the building, and it’s a very nice building, but it didn’t turn out the way I had really planned. I kind of wanted it to look a little more country than what it looks. I was thinking about using some tin, which we didn’t do, like on the roof. It still looks like a barbecue place, I guess, but not exactly the way, when we started building it, that I thought it would turn out. So like as we started building, we’d make some changes and make some more changes and make some more changes. We—we were not going to do a quartile floor; we wound up doing a quartile floor. We got a little bit fancier brick outside than I had intended. Which I like them very much, but it’s still not the look I thought we were going to have. The restaurant in Charlotte—the franchise that we’re doing—is going to have a look I think that we maybe thought we would get here. Except it’s—I’m sorry.

01:21:11

AE: No, go ahead.

01:21:12

DM: Except there's going to be no brick over there but it's going to be a lot of tin like metal roofs, tin roofs that kind of thing. It's going to look—it's going to look like a barbecue place for sure. The Danville Road location does look like a barbecue place. We had more experience when we built that. It was like a log cabin, and it's got a real metal roof. It's got a wrap-around porch. It's got a high ceiling—wood ceiling—and it looks real neat.

01:21:33

AE: Uh-hmm.

01:21:35

DM: But you learn as you do things. And this was our first building we built.

01:21:41

AE: And there's—are there going to be any changes, do you think, to this building at all, once the North Carolina place opens? Or are there going to be some things that are kind of worked out over there that you can then apply here at all?

01:21:53

DM: I don't think we'll change anything here. The things that we did there will apply just to the other buildings that—franchises—but as far as what we do here now, we won't change anything, I don't believe.

01:22:05

AE: Well and when you did come over here and you kept the sign, was that an—important to you to keep that neon sign?

01:22:11

DM: Oh, yeah. I would not have even thought about coming over and not taking the sign with us. I really like that sign. The sad thing—that's not the kind of sign we're going to be using in Charlotte. I kind of wanted to use a sign like that. Chris thought maybe we didn't need to do the pig, and so we left the pig off. Yeah, but you know, I—I—Chris needs to have his say too, so—you know, so I let him express his opinion, and that's what we went with.

01:22:39

AE: Yeah.

01:22:39

DM: Personally, I like the pig.

01:22:42

AE: And quickly—you don't have to go into this in much detail because it's in the film, but we were talking about you and Chris collaborating and working on future projects and being innovators for your own business and then in barbecue as a whole. And the story about that sauce that y'all developed together and really just kind of at the last minute entered it—was it at Memphis in May that you—?

01:23:00

DM: Yes, ma'am. Yeah.

01:23:00

AE: —entered your tomato sauce?

01:23:02

DM: Yeah. We had been using a—just a commercial sauce here—tomato sauce here at the restaurant, and I had told Chris, I said, “Chris we need to have our own sauce that we can make ourselves and not have to buy it.” He said, “Okay.” so I started—and I like to tinker with sauces more than Chris does. I said, “Well I’m going to start working on a recipe.” And so I did. And so I gave it to Chris and gave him my recipe and the sauce and I said, “Taste it and you try to make it better.” So he did something, and then he’d give me his recipe and said, “You try to make it better.” And we did that for a while and, you know, we didn’t do it every day. This process took a year or longer. And then we were getting close to Memphis in May, and we wanted to have a sauce to turn in, so Carolyn said, “Well y’all got to just decide on one or the other and—and turn one in.” So what we did—and this is a true story, too—we just took my last recipe, Chris’s last recipe, and combined them and turned it in and won—the first time we ever entered Memphis in May and won first place sauce, so we haven’t changed it since.

01:23:54

AE: What do you think it was about the sauce that made it a winner?

01:23:57

DM: Well, I mean, it tasted good for one thing. And it kind of got the judges’ attention. And most of our customers seemed to really like it. We’ve actually won a lot of other contests with that sauce since: we’ve won Best Sauce on the Planet and we won Memphis in May [Best] Sauce

again, and we've won *Chile Pepper Magazine* and National Barbecue Association, Texas Barbecue Association. So we've won a lot of things with it.

01:24:18

AE: So how does that make you feel to—to win with something that you and—and Chris created together and then this vinegar-based sauce that your grandfather, you know, came up with and that you've been using all these years in the restaurant—how you can add something new and it can be that popular that fast?

01:24:36

DM: Well it makes you feel good but see we—we haven't won with just that. We've got a mustard sauce here that we've won as many or more awards than we have with the tomato sauce. We've got a habanera sauce we've won awards with. Our rib rub that we use on our ribs just won a Scovie Award, which is a pretty big deal in the barbecue world as—first place, actually, for a table seasoning. So our rib rub is not good only on ribs, it's good on—on chicken and on—pretty much anything you want to put it on.

01:25:12

AE: Uh-hmm.

01:25:12

DM: So that all makes you feel good that you can do things like that.

01:25:15

AE: Do you eat barbecue every day?

01:25:17

DM: I used to just about every day. I still eat a lot of barbecue—maybe not a full plate but, you know, go back and get a little bit. But yeah—but I like barbecue. I really do.

01:25:27

AE: Do you cook at home at all?

01:25:28

DM: No, my girls laugh about that. They say, “My daddy is in the barbecue business, and he don’t know how to cook.” I can barbecue; I just can’t cook. But now Chris can cook; he’s not just a barbecue man. He’s a—I would call Chris a chef with no chef training. He is really a good cook. Now he won’t go in and cook a meal like meat and potatoes and that kind of thing, but as far as off the wall things he—he can really come up with some good recipes.

01:25:55

AE: And that makes me think about when you first came back to the restaurant and were getting involved in the ‘70s and really being a part of what’s going on here; did you come in and have a single role that has kind of been the same all along, or did you kind of work your way through the restaurant and spend some time at the pit and spend some time doing different things?

01:26:16

DM: I came in and sort of spent time doing it all—working in the pit room, working out front, and I had worked in the restaurant a little bit growing up—not a great deal but you know, enough to kind of know what was going on. But yeah, I started in the back and kind of worked up front.

And I didn't work in the back a long time because my mom and dad were kind of ready to slow down a little bit at that time so—. And my grandfather was, you know—had already passed away. But we just kind of would take turns closing up. All my friends say I work a lot harder now than I did then. I guess that's true, but that was a good time not to have to work so hard with kids growing up at home. But I—you know it was—it was a good move for me. I sold computers for thirteen years after I got out of college. I majored in accounting but I—I never actually practiced accounting as such. The degree was good in this business, you know, knowing how to handle books and that kind of thing. But yeah—yeah, I think it was a good move for me coming into the barbecue business.

01:27:14

AE: And where did you go to school? University of Alabama?

01:27:16

DM: I went to—yeah, University of Alabama. And actually, all three of my girls went there—not my girls—our girls went there, too.

01:27:23

AE: Uh-huh. Was it ever a question in your mind about getting in the business, since you loved it so much, or was it something that you knew maybe you weren't ready for when you were in the computer business and that?

01:27:32

DM: No, no, I knew that I was going to run the barbecue business. I kind of wanted to go out and make it on my own in the business world, which I did, but I never would have made it—I'm

kind of like Julie, my daughter that wouldn't move from Birmingham. I wouldn't move from Decatur, so—because I knew I was going to takeover this business one day.

01:27:47

AE: Well is there something that you'd like to add or a final thought to our interview here?

01:27:54

DM: No, you have done a very good job of—of quizzing me pretty good. You've done very good. I appreciate your time today.

01:28:01

AE: Oh well, goodness, I definitely appreciate yours. It's been lovely. Thank you.

01:28:05

DM: Thank you very much.

01:28:06

[End Don McLemore Interview]