

SUSIE HEADRICK
Leo & Susie's Famous Green Top Bar-B-Que – Dora, AL

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Date: September 29, 2006
Location: Mrs. Headrick's home – Dora, AL
Interviewer: Amy Evans
Length: 45 minutes
Project: Southern BBQ Trail - Alabama

[Begin Susie Headrick]

00:00:00

AE: This is Amy Evans for the Southern Foodways Alliance on Friday, September 29th 2006 and I'm now at the residence of Mrs. Susie Headrick, which is behind Leo and Susie's Famous Green Top Café. And Mrs. Headrick, would you please say your name and your birth date for the record, please?

00:00:21

SH: My name is Susie Headrick; that's my real name. My real name is Mary Lee, but everybody knows me by Susie. And I was born June 18th 1922 in Sipse, Alabama.

00:00:44

AE: So how is it that everybody knows you as Susie?

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SH: My mama had six boys; she definitely did not want another boy. And she called me Susie all the time that she was carrying me. But then when I was born, a minister's wife came down and she thought Mary sounded real sweet. **[Laughs]** So Mama named me Mary Lee, but I've been called Susie most of my life.

00:01:31

AE: And you were telling me that—when you said 1922, though, that was your real birth date?

00:01:38

SH: That's my real—1922 is my real birth date. But when I was fifteen-and-a-half years old, I wanted to go to work at an old-fashioned grocery store. It sold everything—nails, carbide [?], dry goods, groceries—so the man gave me a job. And I needed to drive to work, so I went to the Courthouse, and back then you didn't have to show your birth certificate so that—I said I was sixteen.

00:02:19

AE: And then that age stuck with you for the rest of your life?

00:02:23

SH: Right. Right, that's on my driver's license, so I was born in 1921. *[Laughs]* Yeah.

00:02:35

AE: So tell me then how you met your husband, Leo Headrick.

00:02:40

SH: Leo and I met in high school. He was a football player and I was a cheerleader, but I didn't date Leo then. He was dating somebody that was a little bit older than me. And after we graduated from high school, he was dating a girl across the road. And I had a date with his brother but this girl, she couldn't go out with him the night that he had a date with her, and I decided to not date his brother. I had heard that he was a little bit fast, so I didn't date him.

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AE: And Mr. Leo's brother's name was Lincoln, did I hear that?

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SH: His brother's name was Lincoln Headrick, yes.

00:03:46

AE: I can keep holding this [microphone], if you don't want to keep going back and forth. You can just relax.

00:03:49

SH: Okay.

00:03:51

AE: And now how long did you and Mr. Leo date before you got married?

00:03:56

SH: We didn't date but about a year and about six months of that he was gone to California taking a—a course that would help him when he got in the Army. Or he would—might have been taking the course thinking he wouldn't have to go, but he did have to go in the Army, but he took this course and it was a welding and learning things about airplanes.

00:04:42

AE: So he served in World War II?

00:04:43

SH: Yes, he served in World War II.

00:04:47

AE: Where was he stationed?

00:04:48

SH: Well he was in Biloxi, Mississippi, and in Florida and then he was oh, he was up north. I forget where it was. But he stayed in Alabama and Mississippi and Florida most of the time. Yeah, he was going to—he was going to school to learn to fly, yeah.

00:05:25

AE: Were y'all already married when he was serving in the War?

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SH: Yes, he—he was—well he was serving in the War, and I was pregnant and the baby died and I carried it for six months dead—I mean six weeks dead, yeah.

00:05:56

AE: That's hard.

00:05:56

SH: Yeah.

00:05:56

AE: Yeah. And that was your first pregnancy?

00:05:58

SH: That was the first one, and then I waited several years before I had—. My first son is—well, he used to run the Green Top, but he's a preacher now.

00:06:19

AE: And that's Preston?

00:06:19

SH: Preston, yes.

00:06:21

AE: And then your other son is, of course—.

00:06:23

SH: Richard, yeah. That's—that's the only children I have.

00:06:30

AE: What year did you and Leo get married?

00:06:33

SH: Oh, let's see, 1942, yeah. 1942 yeah.

00:06:46

AE: And you mentioned before we started recording something about you were working at a drugstore. Was that when y'all were married?

00:06:51

SH: Oh, yeah. Oh, first I worked at the little—a little grocery store that sold everything, and then I worked at another grocery—well it was a store that sold everything. But then I quit work

and had the two children, and then I went to work in this drugstore and worked there nineteen years. [I was a] good pharmacist. I didn't have a license, though, but—.

00:07:38

AE: How did that work? You were a pharmacist, but you didn't have a license?

00:07:42

SH: Well I almost got caught filling prescriptions, and sometimes the pharmacist would be loaded with something and I'd—well I'd help him count pills and different things, yeah.

00:08:05

AE: Okay, so you were doing this while your husband was working in the coalmines?

00:08:08

SH: Right. Yeah, and I was doing that while he worked in the coalmines.

00:08:12

AE: And I understand from your son [Richard] that he—his family has been in the coalmine business—coal business for a really long time.

00:08:19

SH: Right, his family had a—had a little coal mine, yeah.

00:08:26

AE: Can you talk a little bit about what that was like for him and—and what his days were like?

00:08:30

SH: Well he—he liked to—he liked it; and he was kind of well boss at you know—at their little coal mine and the bookkeeper. He was a bookkeeper, yeah; he was smart in figures. He could always add up the money without an adding machine. I wasn't that smart; I needed the adding machine, yeah.

00:09:09

AE: I understand you did the books or still do—do the books here at the Green Top?

00:09:15

SH: Well I do—*[Laughs]*—I keep up with the money. Yeah, I keep up with the money. I check their deposits and make their change up for the day and for the night and see if all the money is there, and I take it to the bank.

00:09:39

AE: So can you tell me again what you were saying earlier about what you thought when your husband decided to purchase the Green Top?

00:09:45

SH: Well I—I thought he was an idiot. And I didn't want to be a bartender and I—I'm a good cook, but I didn't want to cook in a restaurant, but when he come home and said he wanted—or come in—he came in the drugstore where I was working and said he wanted to buy it and later come and said he was going to buy it whether I wanted him to or not. I didn't see myself as a bartender and I didn't—I didn't know how to cook in a restaurant. That may not—I had to learn that and it was a lot different thirty-some years ago than it is now. But—when we first bought it,

well, it was kind of—it was kind of rough, and some people called it a beer joint and I never—I never did want them to call it a beer joint, though, but I learned to cook in the restaurant. And my husband, he worked on the day shift, and Richard and I usually—we worked at night and sometimes I'd have to straighten people out and—.

00:11:35

AE: Is it true that you kept a big old stick behind the bar?

00:11:37

SH: Yeah, I did that and—and at that time it had a different kind of machines in there, you know, that you could play on, and people would about want to, you know, bet a little money on it and they might get mad at each other. And eventually, we got rid of them. And on Thursday nights we'd have a big crowd from Jasper from the college [Bevill State Community College], and they'd sing and dance and have—and my husband, he—he always sang a lot especially when he had him several drinks. Sometimes I'd sing with him, but most of the time I was too busy trying to keep everything going. And when Jasper went wet—and I forgot what year that was—we got more into restaurant business. We still sell alcoholic beverages, but we sell more iced tea than we do that now. And back then, the restaurant was on the outside and, of course, we added a lot to it in the years. So it just kept through the years getting more like a restaurant than it was when we bought it.

00:13:31

AE: So what—why do you think that your husband wanted to purchase the Green Top in the first place?

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SH: Well he was tired of working in the coalmines and he thought that—well, he was—he was about, I guess he was about fifty-five [years old]. Well he wasn't fifty-five; he was in his early fifties. But he was looking forward to when he'd become fifty-five he could retire from the coalmines, and he just thought he'd like—he just thought he'd like a restaurant better than he did working in the mines. And he said I had to—I'll not use the word—he said that I helped to make one son of a gun rich and it was time that he helped—that I helped him in—in a business. He was referring to the nineteen years that I had worked at the drugstore. The man I worked for was rich. *[Laughs]* And if I had been a little smarter, he would have sent me to college to be a pharmacist. I'm a good store clerk, a good PR person, yeah.

00:15:16

AE: I believe that.

00:15:17

SH: But hey, I—I wanted to help—I always did the dirty work, too, you know. That amazes me that these people, you know, don't want to pick up a cloth and clean the windows and, you know, I always have to do that, yeah.

00:15:39

AE: Well and I understand when you first purchased place you really didn't have any employees; it was just the family pretty much running it.

00:15:46

SH: Pretty much, yeah.

00:15:48

AE: And the Green Top's known as—as a barbecue place. Was your husband confident that he could carry on the barbecue tradition?

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SH: Yeah. When we first got it, it had one little pit out there. And it's covered up now by the cabinet where the coffee pot and all that [is], and it had—but we've got three huge pits now, yeah. And it just started growing. When—when we had been here just a little while it started growing, yeah.

00:16:43

AE: Well and your son [Richard] was saying earlier that he pretty much learned everything about cooking from you—even how to cook the barbecue?

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SH: Well he's learned a lot from me, yeah; he's a good chef. My husband and my older son [Preston] was great PR people. And they—they did everything. But Richard and I had the rough shift at night and we—we've learned a lot together out there, yeah.

00:17:28

AE: How was that decided on that your husband would work the day and then you and Richard would work at night?

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SH: Well I'd always had a dayshift job and cooked for the family that much—and I liked being able to go to the bank and going to the grocery store and I—I liked working at night, yeah.

00:18:04

AE: Do you have some stories that you remember from the early days working at night?

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SH: Well I—I'd work at night and a lot of times back then we had a jukebox and they'd—after we'd close the grill up and there'd be some in there that would still be drinking, and a lot of times we'd dance, you know, and—and there's a guy that he still works there, but everything that went on, he would come in the next morning and when Leo would get up to open it up he'd—he was the night watchman [*Laughs*] and he'd tell him everything that went on, yeah. He did. But I just always—I just liked to work at night, yeah.

00:19:15

AE: Were you glad or did you like it better working the restaurant and leaving the—the pharmacy or the drugstore, or did you miss that at all?

00:19:23

SH: Well—well no. If I'd been educated, I'd have liked to gone on, but when I was going to high school I was more interested in who I was going to have a date with than what was going on at school. And well Mom and Dad wanted me to take a business course, but I never was crazy about typing, and I didn't want to be a secretary; so I just decided to be a store clerk and I couldn't—I wouldn't go to a college because my grades wasn't good enough, yeah.

00:20:15

AE: So have you had—tell me what the restaurant has meant to you after being in it for so long.

00:20:21

SH: Well it's like I told you while ago, my husband made two good decisions in his life, and the first one was marrying me and then the next one was buying the Green Top. Through the years I've had a lot of good friends out there and it's—it's been hard work, but it's like I told them if—if I hadn't gone into the restaurant business, I'd have to be on Welfare now. I may not have a good living; I never have got rich, now, but I do have a good living. And it's fun at my age; I can go out there and there's people that came here—came out there when they was young and their mouth will fly open, they're so excited to see me at my age. And they hug me and give me a peck on the cheek, and it's just a joy to know that—that you've had that many friends in your lifetime, yeah. [*Excited*]

00:21:59

AE: And what do you think now about your grandson, Tony, being so involved in the business?

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SH: Well I think that—that's good for him; I think that—I think that he—I guess that's all he's ever known, see. So that will be something that, if he hangs in, that he'll have when he gets older, yeah.

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AE: Before your husband passed, was he hopeful that his grandson—that Tony would stay with it and—and keep it going?

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SH: He didn't—I don't think he worked—he didn't work that much then. He's been dead nearly ten years. Well I imagine it would, you know, it made him happy that he was working out there because the—about the time he got real sick the older son [Preston] started preaching so yeah, he was glad that somebody in the family was going to help out, yeah.

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AE: Well then tell me about living just ten steps behind the Green Top. How long have you had a house back here?

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SH: When we first came down here, people was bad to break in around—so there's a little building behind the Green Top, and we put us a bed in that and we would night-watch—sleep out there and go home in morning. I would—but then we decided that—that was too much trouble and we decided to buy a trailer and put it behind; that's what this is, except we built onto this, yeah.

00:24:45

AE: So what year—do you remember what year it was that you put a trailer out here?

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SH: No, I don't remember what year it was, but we had been here close to—I guess we've been here close to thirty years, yeah.

00:25:02

AE: And did you like—have you liked living behind the restaurant all these years?

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SH: Yeah. Yeah, I like living here because I could always go out there and check on things. If they needed anything, I could take care of that. And I like it now. I go out—well I usually go by when I'm going to the bank and leave them their change for the day, and then when I come back from the bank, I always take the deposit books back out there and look around. And if somebody is in there that I want to talk to or speak to—and I get me a Sprite and come home and eat lunch. And I usually cook for me and Richard or anybody else that drops around. And then about seven o'clock at night I go back out there and sit and talk to different ones.

00:26:29

AE: When you make lunch for Richard or other folks what do you like to cook?

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SH: Oh, I cook—well one night I had country-fried steak, and last night I had fried chicken and green beans and a rice casserole and corn on the cob. And Richard ate, and my preacher's son and his wife was coming back from Florida, where their son is helping coach, and they ate and Richard's grandson ate. Yeah, they all love fried chicken. But I've got a—well, I don't know what—he's a neighbor but he also does little odd jobs every once in a while, and if I need anything done in the house—he's got a good-looking wife, but she don't like to cook turnip

greens; she don't like to smell them, so he gets me fresh turnip greens, and I cook them and peas and pork chops. Oh, I just cook—I can cook anything good, yeah.

00:28:16

AE: You don't mess around it sounds like.

00:28:18

SH: No, I don't! [*Emphasis Added*] And I can make good dressing. And if we have a dinner at church, I make it. Used to, other people would make it some, but now they just depend on me, the people like me to do theirs, so yeah I'm a good cook.

00:28:45

AE: Do you like barbecue?

00:28:47

SH: Yes, but I don't want to go out there and eat it every day. But I usually eat one—once a—I eat out there—well, I'll eat out there tonight. About once a week. But now last week I had a lady friend come by, and she loved it. She—if she visits me, she tries to visit at lunchtime. And I ate out there twice last week, yeah.

00:29:23

AE: Well and when you wake up in the morning, do you get a big waft of hickory smoke coming off the—the pits there?

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SH: Well I've put up with that so long I don't pay any attention to it, no.

00:29:37

AE: You just—you don't smell it anymore?

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SH: No, I don't. That's what my doctor—I have a lot of allergy problems, and for years I smoked cigarettes, but I've been quit about twenty-five years because I was having a lot of problems. And he says that the—if I get sick with the allergies, it's from the secondhand smoke and being around that. But I—I think they put too much into that.

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AE: Secondhand barbecue smoke, he's saying?

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SH: Well no, the cigarette smoke.

00:30:22

AE: In the restaurant?

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SH: Yeah, but I don't guess he thinks about me—most of that smoke is outside from the meat, yeah. But it doesn't bother me, yeah.

00:30:39

AE: Well and this is—

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SH: I can see it—I see it coming up and going down that way.

00:30:47

AE: You can see it out of your back window here?

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SH: Oh, yeah. And then if you're coming in off of the highway, well, you can just see that smoke bubbling up. That means I'm doing business, yeah. **[Laughs]** That doesn't bother me, yeah.

00:31:03

AE: Well in this beautiful home here, do you—the flowers and all out front, do you garden? Do you keep that up?

00:31:10

SH: I fool with those pots, yeah. But somebody else plants—planted the little ones around the tree. But I was telling Richard, I said, “Gee whiz,” I said, “what am I going to do with all this mess?” You know, because it's going to get cold, now, but most of those pots and even the tree I put it on that little front porch, yeah, and it stays there all the winter, yeah. And there's two that I'll put in that window—there—the crown of thorns and on Easter Sunday I take it to church and put the cross in it, yeah. And sometimes I take something out the yard, too.

00:32:27

AE: Well it's a lovely home and it's tucked away—just a little diamond in the rough back here behind the Green Top.

00:32:32

SH: Yeah, well it started out with just the trailer. The front—the front part is a trailer and I told—I guess it was about twenty years ago I told him [Leo], I said, “I’m ready to buy a—a big new double-wide trailer.” He said, “No,” said, “we’ll build on.” So we built a little room back there, and then we built this. Because by that time, the grandchildren were getting old enough that they would want to come and spend the night, you know. So if I was going to stay here, I just decided to—we built the—had the little front porch glassed in to put the plants on and had this and that built and I—I had another home—well it’s—it’s called Sumiton now, but when I was a little young girl it was called Hull, and it was a coal mine—little old coal mining camp. My dad was—worked at the mines. And so Leo said that—well, I let Richard have that house; he lives in it. And somebody asked me if I wanted to go back, and Richard said, “Would you like to go back over there and live?” We’d just swap. I said, “No,” I said, “I don’t want to do that. I want to live where I’ve lived; this is my home.” And I told him the—the next place I want to go would either be to a nursing home or the cemetery. I don’t want to move, you know. So we agreed on that, yeah.

00:35:25

AE: What did—what do you think about that likeness of you and your husband that’s on the sign out on the highway? What do you think about that?

00:35:31

SH: Well I think I looked better [*Laughs*] than that picture, but I don't know. I guess it pretty much tells what I look like, yeah.

00:35:47

AE: Well and Richard was saying that y'all named this Leo and Susie's Green Top pretty much after you bought it. Is that right?

00:35:53

SH: Yeah, uh-hmm.

00:35:55

AE: You wanted the people—make sure people know it was yours?

00:35:57

SH: Yeah. Yeah, [the] lady that we bought it from [Edith Carey], she didn't much like it when we said Leo and Susie's Green Top because when she had it, it was just Green Top. And she was down here and she said, "Well why did you do that?" And I said, "Because I want to know who's—I want my friends to know who's running it and who is in charge here," yeah.

00:36:28

AE: Uh-hmm. And so that seems like it's been a good thing and just kind of the legacy that is the restaurant—?

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SH: Yeah. Uh-hmm, yeah.

00:36:37

AE: So what do you think about all this attention from folks like me and the TV people coming tonight, coming to ask you about your family and the restaurant?

00:36:45

SH: Gee, I didn't know. I don't even know what all that's going to be tonight. He just told me that I needed to be out there at six o'clock so—. But I'm used to—I mean, a lot of times there's TV and radio stations and people that work for them come in out there. And especially if it's stormy they come and park up on the hill don't they, yeah. And around—yeah.

[Richard walks into the room.]

00:37:22

AE: *[To Richard]* Does she have her TV date now?

00:37:25

Richard Headrick: Huh?

00:37:25

AE: Does she have her date with the TV folks now?

00:37:28

RH: No, no.

00:37:29

SH: What is it?

[Short pause, about ten minutes]

00:37:33

AE: All right, we paused while Richard came in for a minute. But we can wind this up, so you can have your evening and be on TV. But do you have any final thoughts about your decades in the restaurant business and your family carrying on?

00:37:46

SH: Oh, the other night I was out there, and these four men came in, and I went over to speak to them. And two of them I knew real well; they used to come all the time. And they got up and hugged me, and we carried on a conversation, and one of the men said he was from Fayette [Alabama], and I asked him if—if he knew M. W. Gravely; he was the—M. W. Gravely passed away, but he had a business in Fayette; and his son took over the business when he passed away. Well when I told him that I worked there when I was fifteen-and-a-half—worked for him in Sumiton when I was fifteen-and-a-half years old, he just cracked up and he said he couldn't wait to get back to Fayette and tell M. W. Gravely's son that he had talked to somebody that worked for his dad when he was alive, yeah. I mean there's just something—somebody comes in every week that I've known for years.

And oh, I forgot to tell you; when we were trying to transform the business from rough things going on and ugly talk, there's a good-looking guy, he was—he was an engineer and I was—he was—he had—had a pretty good bit to drink, and he was talking ugly. And there was some ladies in there and some children, and I went over to him and I said, "You're gonna have to watch that mouth." I said, "There's ladies and children in here, and I don't want to hear it." And

he said, “You mean that—that you don’t want to hear that in the Green Top?” I said, “That is right; I don’t want to hear it.” And he got up and left, and he said he wouldn’t be back. But the next day I was cooking at home, and I looked out and this good-looking, smart, educated man was coming to my door to apologize to me for talking like that and hugged my neck. And he said, “Miss Susie,” he said, “don’t you ever let me talk ugly in the Green Top again.” **[Laughs]** So it’s things like—oh, and one Christmas years ago there was a nice looking fellow, and he worked with the Alabama Power Company; and he had gotten loaded in Birmingham, and he came to the Green Top. And he wanted something to eat because he lived in Jasper—close to Jasper—and when he ate—and he wasn’t supposed to go to sleep in there and put his head down on the table, but I let him and we went ahead and closed up and cleaned up everything. And at two o’clock I woke him up and I said, “It’s—it’s time; you need to go home.” And—but he had almost had a wreck over close to a bridge and he said, “Oh,” he said, “Miss Susie,” he said, “my wife is going to kill me.” He said, “I don’t know whether it would have been better for me to hit the bridge or go home and listen to my wife.” But he went home and Christmas—when Christmas came, he gave me thirty dollars for Christmas. And I never had bought any good makeup, and I used that thirty dollars to buy Merle Norman [brand] makeup. And he—he doesn’t come in much anymore, but he and his wife, they come by not long ago and he—he’s a fine Christian man. Well he was a fine man then, but he’s a Christian and in the Baptist—bit Baptist Church in Jasper. So I mean I have a lot of treasured memories—memories. **[Emotional]** And that’s—you know, you think about all the good things that—that you did, you know, and when we first came down here, why I didn’t have a whole bunch of stuff myself.

But there was a girl that was a go-go girl over to a place on the other highway, and they had run her off, and she come in the restaurant hungry, barefooted. And she asked Leo if—if he

could get her a pair of shoes. So I didn't have many, but I helped—me and her had the same size foot. And I gave her a pair of shoes, we gave her something to eat and gave her the money to get to Birmingham. So there's been some bad things, you know, that—that I wasn't too crazy about, but then I think about **[Emotional]** the good things that has happened that is treasured memories.

00:45:00

AE: Uh-hmm. That you'll never forget and neither will those other people that you interacted with.

00:45:04

SH: Yeah, I'll never forget them, right.

00:45:08

AE: Well that might be a good note to end on.

00:45:10

SH: Right.

00:45:12

AE: Yeah, all the treasures from your time at the Green Top.

00:45:14

SH: Yeah, that's right. I think about the girl that didn't have any shoes a lot of times and—yeah.

[Laughs]

00:45:23

AE: Well I appreciate you letting me sit here and cuddle up on the couch with you for a little while.

00:45:26

SH: Well I enjoyed it. I've enjoyed it.

00:45:30

[End Susie Headrick]