

RUDOLPH McCOLLUM
The Sparerib – Winfield, AL

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Date: September 29, 2006
Location: The Sparerib – Winfield, AL
Interviewer: Amy Evans
Length: 1 hour, 3 minutes
Project: Southern BBQ Trail - Alabama

[Begin Rudolph McCollum]

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Amy Evans: This is Amy Evans for the Southern Foodways Alliance on Friday, September 29th 2006 in Winfield, Alabama, at Sparerib Barbecue, and I'm with Mr. Rudolph McCollum. Mr. McCollum, could you please say your name and your birth date for the record, if you don't mind?

00:00:17

Rudolph McCollum: Okay, I'm Rudolph McCollum—birth date January 25th 1944.

00:00:23

AE: And we're on Highway 78 East in Winfield and your facility here—it used to be a gas station, is that what you said yesterday?

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RM: Yes.

00:00:34

AE: Okay. But you had another location up on the hill before. Can you talk about that?

00:00:37

RM: Yeah. When I started, there was this fellow that had the Skate Palace. His name is Odie Hallmark, and he had tried to separate his teenagers from his smaller kids by building another

[roller] skating area. And that didn't work, so he decided to—he wanted to use that space for something, so he had this idea that he would sell barbecue. And he had another person in mind to do the cooking. And I just happened to meet him in JC Penney's [clothing store] in Jasper [Alabama], and he was telling me about his idea. And somewhere in the conversation I told him that I could cook, and he kind of said, "Uh-uh." And but he had this other person in mind; this person had been in the catering business for a long time, and he didn't want to, you know, start a business. He wanted to continue to cater, so he turned Odie Hallmark down. And sometime later, Odie called me and asked me, would I be interested in doing it? And I said, "Yeah." And so he said, "Well let's try it." And then he asked me, he said, "Well what do you want the name to be?" And I—I thought a minute and I said, "The Sparerib." And he said, "The Sparerib?" I said, "Yeah." So we decided on The Sparerib. And he said, "How do you want to split the profit?" And I said, "Let's go fifty-fifty," so that's what we did. And I started—we started in January 1960—no, 1997—January 1997. And after about three months he—he got tired of it, and he told me I could have it, if I wanted it, so I told him I would take it. And my sister and my girlfriend, Annell Hall; my sister is Mary Spears, and I call her Donia, and my girlfriend was Annell Hall. So they decided that they would be my partners in the business. So we—this was probably about April that we started working together in The Sparerib. And we stayed there until December of '97. And then this place was empty, and my two partners said, "Let's go down here and look at this place." Well I—I resisted the change, you know. I didn't want to come. I said, "I like where I am," you know. But eventually, they got me to come down here and look at the place, and while I was looking, I saw the traffic passing. And see, this was [Highway] 78 then, and all of the traffic from the west came right by here. So I saw the traffic, and I decided—I said they for once, they got a good idea. So then we began to work on getting this place. And we—during

the—well we weren't open at all in December and—but by January the 5th we had this place ready—up and ready to go. And January the 5th was our first day here in 1998. And we've been here ever since.

00:04:27

AE: Well can I—I back up a little bit and ask first if you were born in Winfield.

00:04:33

RM: I was born in Fayette County, which is the next county over. Actually, I live about seven minutes from here in Fayette County, and this is Marion County here.

00:04:46

AE: What town in Fayette County?

00:04:49

RM: Fayette—Fayette the city and the county.

00:04:53

AE: Okay, got it. And then you told me yesterday that you were retired from school teaching, is that right?

00:05:00

RM: Yeah, I taught school for thirty-two years. I was a coach and—and well, I taught social studies, I taught science, PE [physical education]—but I coached everything, I think, but golf. I coached football, basketball, softball, baseball—.

00:05:21

AE: At a school here in Winfield?

00:05:23

RM: No, that was in Fayette.

00:05:25

AE: Okay.

00:05:26

RM: Okay. And I went to high school in Fayette, but that was before integration. And I went to West Highland High School in Fayette. And then when I came out of college, I went to Alabama A&M in high school—to college. And when I came out of there, my first job was in Lamar County, the next county over, and I worked there three years. And then I moved to Fayette, which was kind of like home. And then I went to Fayette County High School, and I remained there for twenty-nine years.

00:06:04

AE: So when you retired and then you got into the business with opening The Sparerib at the Skate Palace, when along that timeline did you get interested in barbecue?

00:06:14

RM: Well I've always been interested in it. What happened was my mother [Josie Mae McCollum] learned how to cook barbecue from my uncle [Ollie McCollum], who lived in

Detroit. But every summer he would come home, and while he was here he would cook some barbecue. Well my mother learned how to cook from him and well, I loved the stuff, so I wanted barbecue regular. And she didn't want to cook it regular, so I said, "I'll do it myself." So I started cooking it as a teenager and been cooking it ever since. And I thought I really knew something about cooking, but I've learned a great deal—well more than I ever knew, after getting into this business.

00:07:03

AE: What kind of stuff did you have to learn after being in the business?

00:07:07

RM: Well I didn't—I didn't really know anything, like one thing for example is when I cooked ribs at home, when I would get them done, I would baste them after they were done; I'd put barbecue sauce on them and then cook them some more—cook the barbecue sauce in. Well I was going to do that when I got into business, but I found out a lot of people didn't want that; they wanted—they wanted to put the barbecue sauce on themselves. And then I didn't know—I didn't know anything about what the temperature of what cooked meats should be, or I just kind of thought I knew when it was done and—but once I got into business, the Health Department, you know, helped me to know what temperatures of different foods are—what they need to be.

00:08:05

AE: When your mother was barbecuing, was she doing ribs?

00:08:08

RM: Yeah, she did ribs. That's basically all she did. Well she did pork chops sometimes and chicken. But she never cooked the Boston butts.

00:08:21

AE: Did y'all have a pit or a smoker behind your house when you were coming up?

00:08:26

RM: Well we had a pit, a small pit that was down on the ground, you know. They built it up so far and then they—they'd put the fire on the ground, and then they had the cooking grill, you know, over the fire, and she cooked that way.

00:08:42

AE: And was your mom around to see you open The Sparerib?

00:08:45

RM: No, my mom passed away in [nineteen] '94.

00:08:52

AE: What do you think she would think about you being in the barbecue business?

00:08:55

RM: I really don't know what she would think. [*Smiles*] She'd probably be surprised in a way, but she knew I liked to cook. I don't think she ever would have thought I would have got in the business, and I—I don't think I ever thought about getting into the business, either, until the opportunity came, you know.

00:09:14

AE: And are you glad you did it?

00:09:16

RM: Oh yeah, I love it. I like—I like cooking and I like meeting people and talking to people and learning, you know. I still learn. Almost every time I'm over here I learn something, you know.

00:09:32

AE: Well and when I was in here working with your sister [Mary Spears], while you were finishing your ribs, we were talking about other barbecue in Alabama and she said—was saying about how you've gone other places, and you like other places' sauce and you learn from other people and other ribs that you like. She mentioned Archibald's in Northport [Alabama] and some other places. Can you talk about how you kind of learned from going around and having other people's barbecue?

00:09:57

RM: Well I haven't learned very much by going around to different barbecue places. Like I said, the main thing because I like barbecuing, so I went to these places to eat barbecue, you know. And some I liked. Archibald's was my favorite. I—I really think that's the best barbecue that I—I ever had. I think I'm the second best.

00:10:26

AE: Can you say why you like Archibald's so much, and then how yours is different at all?

RM: Well his is—is cooked right. It's cooked over hickory wood. It's cooked right. It's not too done and it's—it is done, and it's just got a good taste. It's got a better taste than any I've ever had anywhere. And mine is—is different because I—I can't cook with wood. What I do is I cook with charcoal, but I use chips for the flavor. And I use different kinds of chips. The year that I got into business *Home and Garden* had a—in their spring issue they had a barbecue section just—it was a long section in there with all kinds of barbecue. And that helped me a great deal because I didn't know—I didn't know you could cook with anything except hickory—or maybe oak. My mother used some oak. But I didn't know you could cook with, you know, all kinds of fruitwoods and—and I know that what the different kinds of woods does like the hardwoods [**Phone Rings**] your hickory and the oak and the pecan—they give your meat a more—a heavier smoke taste. And then your fruitwoods gives it a lighter smoke taste, and so I just—I use whatever, you know, I have handy. And I—sometimes I mix it. And so I've—I've tried a lot of different things. And I think—I think, you know, mixing it, you find what you like and—and you stick with that, you know. And what my theory about barbecue is—and I learned that from somebody else—is you cook it, you make you a hot fire and you cook it. And actually I learned that while we were at the Skate Palace. A man came in and he said that his wife had brought a barbecue sandwich home, and she gave him a bite and so she took her sandwich back and told him said, “Go get your own.” Right, he came to the Skate Palace, and he ordered two barbecue sandwiches and he stood there and—and ate those two barbecue sandwiches. And while he was eating he said, “You know, a lot of people say there—there are secrets to, you know, picking barbecue and,” he said, “me,” he said, “I just build me a hot fire and cook the hell out of it.” So I—I took that to heart, and that's what I do. You know, like Al Roker on the *Today Show*, he

says he cooks his ribs twelve hours or something like that. Well I cook mine, and it takes me about an hour-and-a-half—between an hour-and-a-half and two hours to cook mine and I—I make sure that they are done. I'd rather them be a little bit over-done than not be done, so I—that's my—that's my goal is to get them done—make sure they're done.

00:14:07

AE: Well when I walked up this morning you were saying it was one of those days, you just didn't get your fire right. Can you talk about what influences that and how you can manage it?

00:14:15

RM: Well it's—it's me. Sometimes I put too much charcoal, and sometimes I don't put enough. And if you put too much, then your fire is too hot; and if you don't put enough, of course, it gets too low before you're finished cooking. And what happened this morning is I didn't put enough, and before I finished my ribs, I had to put some more fire in there. And I—I guess I'm just not good at estimating. I guesstimate and sometimes I—most of the time I get it right, but sometimes I get it too hot, and sometimes I don't get it hot enough.

00:15:00

AE: Is the smoker that you have out there, is that something that you had up at the Skate Palace or something different?

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RM: I had it at the Skate Palace, but when I built that smoker I didn't—I wasn't intended to get in business. I built it for home. And what I had been cooking on it at home was a fifty-five-

gallon barrel, split and, you know, fixed for grilling. But the first time I cooked for the public, I cooked at an Old Fashioned Day in Sulligent, Alabama. And I didn't know anything about the health rules, but the Health Department came and they just—they just tore me apart. They told me I had to have a covering on the ground, they told me I had to have a—a covering over me, and they required that whatever I cooked, it had to have—be between 140 and forty degrees, either hot or cold. So the only reason they let me stay that day was it was my first time. They said—they told me next time I wanted to come to Old Fashioned Day to call them first and then get permission to come. **[Laughs]** And so I learned, you know—they told me that I couldn't cook for the public on that fifty-five-gallon barrel because I didn't know what had been in it. And so it was old anyhow, and so what I did is I went looking for somebody who would build me one on the same order that—that barrel was made up. And I found—I found a person who would do that and let—let me tell you, this person when I went to him he—he asked me—he said, “What do you want?” And I had already been to one place and the person told me—I wanted a six-foot long by two-foot wide grill, and the first person I went to told me, he said, “You're talking about—about 600 dollars at least,” you know. And I said, “Well I don't want to do that.” And then he sent me to another person and that person told—asked me—said, “What do you want?” Well I decided that I would cut down on the six-foot business and I said, “I want it five-foot long, and I want it two-feet wide.” And he told me—he drew it on a piece of metal and he told me, he said, “I can build that for 150 dollars.” And I—I kind of didn't want to scare him off so I said—I talked about something else for a few minutes and then I—I said, “Build that thing.” And so he said, “Okay.” This was on a Wednesday and he said, “You come back next Wednesday, and we'll see where we are.” Well I went back the next Wednesday, and he told me, he said, “Man, I already got more into this thing than I told you I could build it for.” And I asked

him, I said, “Well—well what are we going to do?” And he said, “You just stick with me,” he said, you know, just—he said, “I’ll go ahead and build it and we will—.” He said, “Don’t you worry.” And so he said, “Come back next Wednesday.” Well I went back next—the next Wednesday and he had it all built, but it was too heavy. I was intending to—I thought I could—me and somebody else could pick it up and set it on my truck, but it was too heavy. I couldn’t even move the thing. So then he told me, he said, “If you bring me an axle,” he said, “I’ll put it on wheels for you.” And so I took those wheels by, and he put it on the axle, and then when I went back he—he called me and told me it was ready—and when I went back, he told me he said—he said, “Come on back here in my office. I want to show you what—where I quite writing.” So I went back in his office, and he had a notebook there, and where he had quit writing what his cost was—was 543 dollars. And I told him, I said, “Can we sell this thing?” I said, “I don’t need a 500-dollar grill.” And he said—he said, “I told you what I would build this for and,” he said, “whatever you give me,” he said, “I’ll—I’ll be satisfied because you,” he said, “I made the price.” And I thought a minute, and I said, “Well I want to be fair and,” I said, “I can come up with 300 dollars.” He said, “I’ll be happy to get 300 dollars.” So he was happy, and I was happy and—and he told me that—that grill would last longer than me, and I believe he’s right.

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AE: Was this a local guy that made this for you?

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RM: I don’t know what his name was, but his business was called L&S Sandblasting in Fayette.

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AE: Had he made a—a grill before?

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RM: I'm not—he probably had because he did welding, and I'm sure somewhere he had done it before. But I told him exactly what I wanted, and he wrote down what I wanted, and I told him how far I wanted the fire grill from the cooking grill and—and he built it just like I told him to build it.

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AE: And did you recover that 300 dollars pretty quickly after you started putting ribs on it?

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RM: Well, yes and no. I felt like I was blessed to get the grill for 300 dollars in the first place. But when we started the business in—in this particular town, ribs were not—people—people didn't like ribs. And when I started off, I would buy one box of ribs that would last me the two days that we were open. But they caught on, and so they've been doing pretty good ever since.

00:21:36

AE: Before you started The Sparerib at the Skate Palace, was there a lot of barbecue and specifically, ribs—I guess not—in Winfield?

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RM: No, I don't think so. I think the Boar's Butt cooked some ribs. I know they cooked some baby-backs because I ate some. But I don't know of any other place that had ribs.

00:22:01

AE: Well and I stayed at the Rainbow Motel last night, and I think I told you earlier that they said, without me even asking, that yours were the best ribs that they've had, so you've got some local fans for sure.

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RM: That's good. I'll put an extra rib on their plate when they come.

00:22:16

AE: And so back to the—the smoker and—and working with your father and everything, your sister was saying today that she could tell by the way you were walking when you came in that your fire wasn't right.

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RM: Yeah, I'm—I'm kind of an emotional person, so I guess, you know, she can tell by the way I walk and—that something is wrong. I'm—actually I do a lot of kicking and throwing stuff
[Laughs].

00:22:44

AE: What time do you get here in the morning?

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RM: Well I don't try to get in here at any particular time. I'm retired, and I just when I wake up and get ready, I come. I try to come early, but I don't have any specific time to get here.

00:23:05

AE: Well y'all are just open on Friday and Saturday and—but then I was by here yesterday, which was Thursday, and you were cooking. So do you have—what kind of schedule do you keep and days that you come in?

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RM: Okay, usually on Thursday I come in and usually I just season my ribs, and while I'm seasoning them, I cook my Boston butts—that's the usual scenario. Yesterday I had decided well, I had—I had enough Boston butts already cooked, so yesterday I decided I would cook some ribs and kind of get ahead, and so that way I didn't have to cook as many today.

00:23:48

AE: Uh-hmm.

00:23:48

RM: But that's usually—usually I come in on Thursday and cook the Boston butts and season the ribs, and then the next day—on Friday I come and all I got to do is start cooking ribs. And I also cook chicken after I finish the ribs.

00:24:04

AE: Can you share a little bit how you season the ribs without giving too much away?

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RM: Well, to be honest with you, all I use is salt. I don't—I don't—when I first started, I used salt and season-all but I—and it was just my choice. Nobody said anything, but I just decided I'm going to just use salt, and so that's what I do.

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AE: And why is it that salt—what is it about the salt that you like to use that just by itself?

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RM: Well really that season-all, it had—it kind of smelled. It was—you know, you could smell the seasoning, and I didn't like fooling with it, really. I didn't like—you know, while I was seasoning them, I didn't like to smell it, you know, and—and so I decided that I would just go with salt. And I think they're—I think they're just great with just salt. I think some—I think some places you get ribs, they've tried to do too much with them, you know, and—and I think they—they really don't need that.

00:25:17

AE: And then while you're smoking the ribs you—you baste them a little bit with some water or are you using something—something else?

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RM: No, I—I just cook them with that salt on them. Now you saw me using a water bottle yesterday, but what that's for is when your fire blazes up, that is to put that blaze down. The ribs, they have a lot of fat on that backside and—and so they'll blaze up. You have to be careful with them. Now I can—I can cook my chicken and my Boston butts without staying with it, but I have to stay with those ribs.

00:25:59

AE: What do you do to your chicken and your Boston butts when you're cooking those?

00:26:04

RM: Well I don't cook them over the direct fire; they're not directly over the fire. I cook them on each end of the grill with my fire in the middle. And with the ribs I cook them directly over the fire. So that grease dropping down it will blaze up.

00:26:25

AE: Do you season the chicken and the—the butts differently?

00:26:29

RM: Yeah, my sister seasons the chicken and she does—she still uses the season-all. The butts I just—I just use salt, again.

00:26:41

AE: Can you talk about when we were in the kitchen earlier we were talking about how you chop the butts, instead of you doing the pulled pork and all that? Can you talk about how that evolved—that story you were telling earlier?

00:26:52

RM: Yeah, when I went into this business with Odie Hallmark, I had planned to slice the pork. But after I cooked the first butts, before I could say slice, Odie had chopped the Boston butt. And after he chopped that first one, I liked the idea. Because what you do when you chop it, you get a

mixture of your inside meat and your outside meat, and so you get a seasoning all through your chopped meat. Whereas, you know—and I learned this from a teacher colleague; he said he cooked in the Navy, and one day we were at lunch and he was talking about cooking Boston butts and he said, “No matter how much salt you put on the Boston butt, it’s only going in maybe a quarter of an inch.” So beyond that, you don’t have any seasoning in it, but when you chop it altogether, then you do have some seasoning.

00:28:02

AE: And your—your customers tended to like that, too, you were saying?

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RM: I’ve met people in—well, I know specifically, I met a man in Tuscaloosa, and I don’t know how we were talking—got to talking about barbecue, but I told him that I ran a barbecue place in Winfield, Alabama, and I told him where it was. And he said, “Oh,” he said, “you’re the one that chops it in those little squares.” And I said, “Yeah.” He said, “I’ve been by there and,” he said, “I like it.” So that has happened more than once, you know, people—a lady came by here and she was saying that she was getting some pork and some of her family had told her to go by that place where they chop it in the little cubes, so—so they like—they like it in the little cubes.

00:28:58

AE: And it’s become your barbecue calling card. People know it’s you. That’s great. Can we talk about your sauce a little bit and start back to when your mom was barbecuing? And I’ll ask you if she made her own sauce.

00:29:10

RM: No, what she used was she used Kraft [brand] barbecue sauce, and that's what I used until I got in this business. And what happened, Odie and I went to Aberdeen, Mississippi, and there's a—a packing plant there. We went there to see if we could get our meats from this Comer Packing. We went there, and on our way to the packing place, there was a barbecue place there. And so on the way back we stopped, and we talked to the guy that ran that barbecue place. And we asked him about his sauce, and he said what he did was he—he took the Cattleman's [brand] barbecue sauce, and he mixed whatever he liked with it to suit his taste. And so that's what we did. We started buying Cattleman, and we just mix, you know, what we like in the sauce. We just put it in there, and that's how we come up with our sauce. And we're getting a lot of requests for our sauce. My favorite sauce was Archibald's. His is a vinegary sauce. It's thin, and it's a little hot, which I don't like hot, but it had a good taste. And I didn't think very much of our—our sauce. I knew that was going to be a problem for me, but people here like it. They'll come and buy just the sauce.

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AE: So did you ever—since you liked the Archibald's sauce so much, did you ever try and replicate that at all?

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RM: Yeah, but I failed. I—I couldn't figure out what—I knew it was vinegar in it, but I didn't know how much, and I didn't what else was in it, so I never could match their sauce.

00:31:21

AE: Can you share some of the things that you add to the Cattleman's sauce to—to make up your sauce today?

00:31:26

RM: Well I don't make the sauce. My sister makes the sauce, and I'm not sure she knows what's in it. *[Laughs]*

00:31:37

AE: Well Cattleman's—I mean I've seen the jars in there, but is that something that you just get through food suppliers, or is it available to the public in retail?

00:31:44

RM: It's—we get it at Sam's, yeah.

00:31:49

AE: So—

00:31:50

RM: We prefer the smoky, but they have an original and—and they have smoky, and we prefer the smoky.

00:32:00

AE: And well, I'll be tasting it later, and I look forward to that, but is it—with the changes without knowing specifically that goes in it because [your sister] Miss Mary makes it, but is it—is it a little more vinegary or richer or tomatoey, or can you describe it at all?

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RM: It's probably more tomatoey. I don't think there is very much vinegar in it.

00:32:28

AE: But you like it?

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RM: Yeah, I like it but I—it's not as good as Archibald's to me. I like his, but we'll have people that come in here and they have told us—they have asked us whether ours is vinegary or not, and so there is a lot of people that don't like vinegary, and there's a lot of people that don't like sweet sauce; so ours is not vinegary, and it's not sweet.

00:32:58

AE: Do you still go to Archibald's and get some sauce from time to time?

00:33:02

RM: No, but I should. Actually, we went to Archibald's about a month ago for the first time in a long time. And we just happened to be passing and my sister said, "Let's get some ribs." So we went in and we got—she a sandwich and me a sandwich. And so I hadn't been there in—in quite a while. I just been eating home-cooking.

00:33:34

AE: So you eat some of your barbecue every day, or a lot of times during the week?

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RM: Most of the day—most every day I eat some of it.

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AE: Do you prefer the ribs over the other things?

00:33:47

RM: Yeah, I prefer the ribs. I—I'm almost exclusively a rib eater. Now every once in a while I'll eat a chicken half, and even less often I eat the chopped pork. I—I just love ribs. And when I—every—you know, when I go to barbecue places, that's what I'm looking for: ribs.

00:34:12

AE: What do you look for when you're making—when you're cooking your ribs? What—what do they look like when they're done, and how you want them to look?

00:34:20

RM: Well they are brown. They have a pretty brown color. And I read where if the—the juice runs clear, they're done. But—but I make sure. I go beyond what, you know, what I think is done because I want to make—if anything. I want to make sure that they're done. I don't want to sell anything that's not—that's not done. Now I have a meat thermometer, but with the ribs it's difficult to—to get a correct reading with the meat thermometer. Now with the Boston butts, it's big enough, and you just stick that meat thermometer in the middle and—and, you know, you get a pretty good reading from them. But ribs are thin and, you know, sometimes a thermometer goes all the way through, or you don't know where it is. It's easy to touch a bone and that kind of stuff. So I have to kind of just instinct with my ribs to see whether they're done or not.

00:35:28

AE: Are you looking just at the outside of the ribs to see when they're done, or do you cut off an end and look and see what the cross-section is looking like at all?

00:35:36

RM: No, I got it down pretty well. I know when they're—when they're done without—and I don't like to cut them, you know, to see if they're done. I'm pretty—I've done it so much, I'm pretty sure that they're done.

00:35:49

AE: Do you sell many whole slabs?

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RM: Yeah, we—we sell probably most of them in whole slabs. I'd rather sell them in plates, but a lot of people come in and just get a slab of ribs.

00:36:06

AE: So how many slabs do you cook in preparation for your Friday and Saturday of business?

00:36:11

RM: Okay, on—for Friday, I cook two boxes, which is eighteen slabs. And then, if I don't sell all of those, then I try to make out to eighteen on Saturday. I try to have eighteen slabs on Saturday and eighteen on Friday—Friday and Saturday.

00:36:32

AE: That's a lot of ribs.

00:36:34

RM: Yeah, but I would like to sell some more.

00:36:38

AE: Well do you—so like the ribs that you made yesterday—and I mean you made ribs this morning, if—if I knew your schedule, could I come in and—and request the ribs that came off the smoker today?

00:36:50

RM: Yeah, we'll do that. But we usually don't have to do that because I usually don't cook them before the day that I'm going to serve them. Yesterday was an exception. I usually cook everything that I'm going to serve, I usually cook it on that day. Except for the Boston butts, and I—I can't do that because it takes about four-and-a-half to five hours to cook them, and that's pretty quick for Boston butts because everybody else I know cooked them, you know, overnight or twelve hours or something like that. But pork is done at 173-degrees and so I—I cook a—make a hot enough fire that I can get to 173-degrees in four-and-a-half to five hours. But there again, I don't—I don't stop at 173-degrees; I go a little beyond that. Usually I try to take them off at 180-degrees or maybe a little bit higher.

00:38:00

AE: And can we talk a little bit about the sides that y'all serve that your sister seems mostly in charge of, but the things that she makes?

00:38:08

RM: Yeah, she does baked beans, potato salad, and coleslaw; we have three sides. And she—she handles that; I don't know how she does it. She does the peeling of the potatoes and the chopping of the cabbage and—and all of that. I don't—and the seasoning of the beans. And our beans are not sweet like most baked beans are. They are—well, they're simply not sweet; they have a different taste.

00:38:42

AE: And do you like all the sides that she came up with for y'all's business here?

00:38:45

RM: Yeah. And but what happened, when we began, we were only going to have beans and slaw, and we have a friend up at the funeral home, Larry Reese, and he came to The Sparerib while we were still up at Skate Palace, and he said, "Why don't y'all have potato salad?" And so from that we started to making some potato salad and it's—it's real popular. The potato salad is real popular.

00:39:22

AE: I tasted it this morning when it was fresh, and I sure liked it. And then your sister was talking about she used to make—bake a special different cake every week for dessert, but y'all quit doing that.

00:39:33

RM: Yeah, we—she would make caramel cake or chocolate cake. I think that—and red velvet cake and Philadelphia cream cake. But what happened is we ate more of them than we sold, so we decided that was not good, so we stopped having desserts.

00:40:00

AE: Do you have many people come and eat in, or do most people take out their—their lunch?

00:40:06

RM: Mostly this is take out; mostly they come and get it to go.

00:40:11

AE: And what hours are y'all open?

00:40:13

RM: We're open from eleven [in the morning] to seven [at night], Friday and Saturday. But we tell our customers that if we're in here, to come on in, and if we got what they want, we'll let them have it. So we're not really stuck to those hours, you know. We—we want to serve people whenever they want to be served, so after seven o'clock we have people come in, and while we're cleaning up, and we'll just stop and serve them until we run out of customers.

00:40:48

AE: And some folks that were—I was talking to yesterday, some folks in Winfield didn't even realize y'all were down here and I—the folks who came in today were all white folks, if we can talk about that for a second. So are y'all serving—servicing—at the Skate Palace, was your clientele different and then it changed when you came on the Highway?

00:41:10

RM: No, it's basically the same. And I'm glad you asked that question because ninety, ninety-five-percent of our customers are white. I don't know what the reason for that is but that's— that's reality.

00:41:28

AE: Is there a large black community here in Winfield?

00:41:31

RM: Well there is a large black community in my hometown [of Fayette], which is about seven minutes away, and they come to Winfield. I see them passing. But they don't stop; I think everybody has high blood pressure or high cholesterol—something like that.

00:41:52

AE: Would you have an idea of your customer base if—what ratio of local customers and what ratio of people who are just passing and see you as they're driving down?

00:42:04

RM: I would say—I would say ninety-five-percent are local. And we, you know, we do get some people passing by. And you mentioned an interesting thing about some of the people that you already talked to that they didn't know about this place. We have been here—this is going on nine years and that's—you know, I ran into that—last—last week, I went in the bank, and I went to one teller, and while she was, you know, helping me, another one of the tellers came down and—and told me, she said, “Those were the best ribs I've ever had in my mouth.” And I asked her, I said, “Was that the first time that you had my ribs?” And she said it was. Of course, and that happens a lot, you know; we have people that come in almost every week—we have

somebody new that comes in, and they say, “I’ve been passing here and passing here, and I decided today that I’m going to stop.” And in fairness to the lady in the bank, her husband eats here regularly, but what he had been eating was he had been eating the chopped pork. And this was on a Saturday—ballgame day—and so they called on the phone and ordered a barbecue plate and a rib plate—a half a slab of ribs—and so that was what she was talking about when she came and told me that she—those were the best ribs she’s ever had in her mouth.

00:43:50

AE: Well and y’all are pretty hard to miss out here. I mean when I passed by yesterday, you’re out here on the side of the road and nothing is around you, smoke is coming out of that smokehouse, and you can smell it a mile away, for sure.

00:44:03

RM: Yeah, I can't figure it out. You know, I see people I know passing, you know, and—and I’ve—there have been people that I know that’s come in and, you know, and I’ve seen them pass but they ask me—they say, “How long have you been here? I didn’t know you were here.” And I get the idea that if they knew who I was, you know, maybe they would stop, but evidently they don’t recognize me from the road.

00:44:31

AE: [*Laughs*] Well and your sign up there that says “Barbecue” [*the sign actually reads “BBQ”*] did you install that or have that installed?

00:44:38

RM: Yeah, I had that installed. That was already here when it was a gas station, and what we decided to do was we had a fellow that cut out that BBQ and put it up there.

00:44:55

AE: And did you build the smokehouse that holds your smoker out there?

00:44:58

RM: Yeah. Well I had somebody to build it because it wasn't there, you see, and there was no way that I could, you know, cook. I had to be inside. So I had to build that, and I got a friend of mine to build that for me, and that's the—the second one. The first one burned down. I had cooked some ribs one day and I was—I brought them inside and I had built my fire back up, and I stayed in here too long. And a fellow came in off the street who was passing by and he said, "Your building is on fire." And when I looked out, smoke—I mean fire was coming out of the top of it, and it burned all the way down to, you know, to the ground. And then I—we started building it back the next day, though, and—and in a week we had it back ready to go.

00:46:01

AE: So did the smoker survive that fire then?

00:46:03

RM: Oh, yeah, yeah. It—it didn't hurt it at all.

00:46:10

AE: You think it seasoned it a little bit?

00:46:11

RM: Well I know it did. It seasoned it on the outside; it was already seasoned on the inside.

[Laughs]

00:46:21

AE: Do y'all do any catering at all?

00:46:24

RM: We have done some, but we've kind of decided not to do very much of that. We did—we did our school reunion; we did that about three times. But usually, all of those reunions are on days that we're open, and we just choose to go ahead and do what we do here.

00:46:50

AE: Is your girlfriend who was involved as your partner, is she still involved in the restaurant?

00:46:55

RM: No, we kind of parted ways, and she left.

00:46:59

AE: So how do you like being in business with your sister?

00:47:03

RM: It's fun. She's—she's a little devil. I call her a little devil. She's always got something going, you know. She just—I mean just always—she—she—I tell her even at church, she meddles with people, you know, and she meddles with me. I can be doing fine, but she'll come up with something that doesn't have anything to do with anything, and then it's on.

00:47:33

AE: Have y'all always been pretty close?

00:47:35

RM: Yeah. We were—we have always been real close. My daddy [Buford McCollum] always said, you know, that's your little sister; take care of her. And—and well, we lived out in the country so, you know, there was just me and her, you know, so we—we've always been—been close.

00:47:58

AE: So she's your only sister, then?

00:48:00

RM: Yeah. No, that's not true. I've got another sister that lives in Birmingham.

00:48:07

AE: And what's her name?

00:48:08

RM: Her name is Patricia Watson.

00:48:10

AE: And did you ever think that you'd be in business with your sister?

00:48:15

RM: No. She—when Odie Hallmark decided to get out of it, she volunteered and said, “We’re going to be your partners.” *[Laughs]*

00:48:25

AE: Did y’all teach in the same school or same area, you and Mary?

00:48:29

RM: No, she taught in the Winfield system, and I taught in the Fayette County system.

00:48:37

AE: Do you think that being in the educational system so long teaching, do you think that has helped you in owning a business in any way?

00:48:45

RM: It probably has, but I couldn’t put my finger on anything. Because I wasn’t prepared for business when I came here, and I had to learn, you know—well, everything. I didn’t—I didn’t even know about, you know, the taxes and—and things like that, you know, and the license and permits and all of that. I didn’t know about all that. We went—we went for a couple of years and didn’t have a business license for the City of Winfield and see, I just simply didn’t know that we have to have them, you know. We had a permit from the county, but I didn’t know about the city license. And they let me know that I didn’t have a license. I told them, I said, “Well I didn’t know,” you know.

00:49:43

AE: Well what’s your favorite thing about having The Sparerib?

00:49:47

RM: My favorite thing is—is meeting people and talking to people and—and the compliments, you know. The compliments that we get are as—well, they're worth money to me. You know, I can—I could try to have a bad day, but somebody will come in and tell me how good my food is well I'm—I'm high the rest of the day. Especially when they compare you to some of the well-known establishments. Like we have people that tell us that our stuff is better than Dreamland and, you know, some of the other places. We have had people that come from—that say they have been everywhere, you know—truck drivers—and they said they have never had any better.

00:50:40

AE: That's certainly good to hear.

00:50:43

RM: Yeah, that's worth money to me. I—I hear that and—

00:50:47

AE: Well and there are so many differences in the State of Alabama in barbecue and sauces that we were talking about that and stuff like that. Do you think that—do you have an opinion about Alabama barbecue being different from other states in the South?

00:51:00

RM: Well I really don't know about other states. I've only heard about, you know, like some places use dry rubs and things like that. I don't even know what that is. And I still don't know what the difference is between grilled and barbecue. I don't know what that is.

00:51:21

AE: Well in barbecue I think is all about the smoke.

00:51:24

RM: Okay, well we smoke it. [*Laughs*]

00:51:29

AE: Well how long do you think you'll be doing this?

00:51:33

RM: I don't know about that. Every once in a while I'll have, you know, a notion to retire again, and then I say, "No, I'm enjoying it too much." So I don't know. It's just—you know, one day I'll make up my mind, I'll want to do something else, and I'll just get out of it.

00:51:56

AE: And you have a niece who helps you out occasionally. What's her name?

00:52:01

RM: Adrienne McCollum. But she only helped a short while. She graduated in June from Tuscaloosa County High School and moved up here, and she didn't have a job, so I suggested that, you know, she could come and help us out on the days that she was not in school, which was Friday—was the only day. But she's got a job now, so she's probably not going to help us anymore.

00:52:40

AE: So it's just you and your sister?

00:52:42

RM: Yeah.

00:52:43

AE: And that's just fine?

00:52:44

RM: That's just fine. We—we get real tired by the time the weekend is over. Both of us are—are tired, you know. We go to church on Sunday, and she has a headache, and I have trouble staying awake, so we—it wears us out. You know, it's—a lot of people don't know how much work it is in this business and truthfully, I don't think I would have either, until I get into the business, you know. Cooking at home is different, you know; you don't cook as much and you don't get as tired, you know.

00:53:24

AE: How busy were y'all last weekend for [the] Mule Day [Festival]?

00:53:26

RM: We were pretty busy. But actually, for us, Mule Day was—it wasn't as good as it had been in the past.

00:53:40

AE: Ever have a booth or anything down there [in town], or you just stay on this end of town during the festivities?

00:53:44

RM: We used to go downtown every year for Mule Day, and we did do better downtown, but there was so much work in setting up and then taking down and then the requirements got—became more difficult, too. Now you're required to have both running and—both running hot and cold water and, you know, like you've got to cover the ground and you've got to have a top over you and all of those kinds of things. So it's a little bit tougher to meet the requirements, plus the work, and so we just decided we'd stay up here.

00:54:30

AE: Can you go over your prices in your menu real quick?

00:54:34

RM: Okay, all of our plates are seven dollars, and in those seven dollars is included the tax. The tax here is eight-and-a-quarter-percent, and we figured out what the taxes would be, and so we just include it in that seven dollars. And we put two sides on a plate, whatever meat you want—the ribs, chicken, or pork. We put two sides on with that and your bread and your sauce. And the sides again are baked beans, coleslaw, and potato salad. And we also sell that by the bulk. We sell the ribs by the slab, half-slab, plate, and we sell the pork by the pound, sandwich, plate—just whatever anybody would want. We sell the chicken in halves or—or we fix a plate.

00:55:40

AE: How much is a slab of ribs and a pound of the chopped pork?

00:55:44

RM: Okay, a slab of ribs is fourteen [dollars and] ninety-one cents. And a pound of pork is eight dollars. And a half-a-slab of ribs is eight dollars, and a half-a-pound of pork is four dollars.

00:55:57

AE: Do a lot of people come and get it in bulk and sauce on the side or one or the other?

00:56:02

RM: Yeah, we—we do all kinds of business. Some want it by the plate and some want it by the bulk, so whatever people want is what we do. I had one fellow to come in, and he wanted to buy one rib, so I sold him one rib. I had to figure out how much to charge him for it, but I sold him one rib. And then when he finished that he said, “I want one more.” **[Laughs]** So I sold him another one.

00:56:30

AE: And he stopped at two?

00:56:31

RM: Yeah, I think he was getting low on money. **[Laughs]**

00:56:37

AE: Well is there anything that I haven't asked you about barbecue and your business here that you want to add or talk about?

00:56:44

RM: Well it's been a good experience, you know. And things happen that I wouldn't have missed, you know, for anything. We had—we had a lady and her fiancée to come in here one day, and what they told us was that when they passed here, there was a train stopped [on the railroad tracks just below the restaurant]. And so she told him, she said, "Look, there's a train stopped at this barbecue place and," she said, "we're going to go back, because if it's good enough for a train to stop, we want some of the barbecue." And yeah and—and different people—we had a lady came in from Memphis and ate, and as I was passing by she said—she said, "They think in Memphis that they're the only ones that can cook barbecue." She said, "They're wrong." [*Laughs*]

00:57:46

AE: So does that happen often that the train track right behind your business here, they'll stop and come up and have lunch with you?

00:57:52

RM: It happens quite a lot, yea. It's not an every week thing, but it does happen.

00:57:58

AE: Is it the same conductor on the train or you have different—different drivers?

00:58:03

RM: We have different drivers. They kind of pass the word on, you know—tell—one driver will tell a next one, you know, and they—they—and another one will stop, you know. And we actually had a friend that worked—that works on the railroad and that's how it began. He went to

school with us in high school, and so he stopped, and then he told others and then that's how it got started.

00:58:36

AE: Hmm. Can I ask you real quick about these photographs of Winston Churchill you have on the wall?

00:58:41

RM: Okay. Well what happened—when we got this place, our preacher, Bill Davis, we—we are members of the Church of Christ. Our preacher called himself a junk-ologist. All right, so he had all kinds of stuff that he had bought, you know, and then he—he resold it. So he told us—he said, “Y’all need some pictures on your wall.” And he said, “I’ll bring over my collection,” and he said, “you just pick out what you want.” And so he brought his pictures over here, and we looked through them, and we picked out what we wanted, and those two of Winston Churchill were, you know—we immediately wanted those and—.

00:59:26

AE: Why is that exactly?

00:59:28

RM: Well, you know, what he meant—has meant to the world and we read about it, you know, and taught about him. And—and a lot of people come in and ask who he is, you know, and we tell them and they say, “oh, that’s who we thought that was,” you know. And he kind of resembles the actor, Charles—I think his name was Charles Laughton or somebody and—and some people think that’s who it is, you know. But they ask, and we tell them who it is.

00:59:59

AE: It's a conversation starter. I would venture to guess you're the only barbecue restaurant with Winston Churchill on the wall. [*Laughs*]

01:00:06

RM: [*Laughs*] Okay, those—those pictures—well the other pictures, too, a lot of people come in and they want to see what's in those, you know. We got those from the preacher, too. His name was Bill Davis.

01:00:20

AE: Did it take a lot when you got this place to fill it up with tables and decorate it and all, or did that happen pretty quickly?

01:00:27

RM: Well it happened pretty quickly, but what we did is we went to a second time around store. And what happened is, each partner bought a table and some chairs; that's how we started off. And then this preacher, again, he—he brought us some chairs and tables and things and that sink right there, that three-compartment sink, he told us he wanted us to be top of the line, you know. And he went to Anniston, Alabama, and got that three-compartment sink.

01:01:03

AE: Tell me about that award that's hanging right there [by the door to the kitchen].

01:01:07

RM: Well that was the preacher, too, and that was kind of a joke, you know. He—he actually bought that plaque and then he had that changed, you know to say that about it being the best barbecue place [*Laughs*] around. He—he was quite a character.

01:01:28

AE: So he just did that for fun?

01:01:30

RM: Yeah.

01:01:32

AE: That's funny. [*Laughs*]

01:01:33

RM: Yeah.

01:01:33

AE: Well do y'all—do y'all rent this space or do you own it?

01:01:38

RM: We rent it, yeah.

01:01:39

AE: From the people who had the gas station? Are they still the original owners, or has it changed hands?

01:01:47

RM: No, the people that ran the gas stations, they leased it. The owner is—is Nash Nelson. He’s—he’s a former school teacher, too, and when the service station left, there was—there was a fitness place in here for just a short time. And then it left, and so the place was empty. And the day we came down here, Mr. Nelson was sitting here, and we talked to him about the place, you know, and—and he said he would let us have it, you know. And he’s been real good at—it doesn’t cost us a whole lot to rent it. He—he’s been a good landlord.

01:02:31

AE: Well it’s a great location. Y’all lucked out.

01:02:32

RM: Yeah, yeah. And he’s one of our good customers. He comes almost every week, yeah.

01:02:40

AE: Well, all right. Well, any final thoughts?

01:02:44

RM: No, I’m just glad that you came by. It was nice meeting you and hopefully, you’ll do good with your project.

01:02:53

AE: Well I am now because I’m here. I’m glad I found y’all. So thank you so much for sitting here with me. I appreciate it.

01:02:57

RM: You're welcome. Thank you.

[End Rudolph McCollum]