

DALE PETTIT
Owner, Top Hat Barbecue – Blount Springs, AL

* * *

Date: October 4, 2006
Location: Top Hat Barbecue – Blount Springs, AL
Interviewer: Amy Evans
Length: 41 minutes
Project: Southern BBQ Trail - Alabama

[Begin Dale Pettit]

00:00:00

Amy Evans: This is Amy Evans on Wednesday, October 4th 2006, and I'm in Blount Springs, Alabama, at Top Hat Barbecue with Mr. Dale Pettit. And sir, would you please state your name and also your birth date for the record?

00:00:15

Dale Pettit: My name is Dale Pettit. I was born July 4th 1949.

00:00:21

AE: All right. And I understand that your father was a deliveryman for Tip Top Bread Company, is that right?

00:00:27

DP: He worked for Tip Top Bread for forty-nine years, and it went out of business; and when it went out of business, then he bought this business.

00:00:34

AE: And I also understand that he delivered bread or was employed by Tip Top at the same time that Bob Sykes was? [*Maxine Sykes mentions in her interview that her husband, Bob Sykes, worked for Tip Top Bread Company until it closed.*]

00:00:41

DP: Bob Sykes worked for a different company; he got out of the bread business about ten years before my dad did. That's why they're ten years ahead of us when we're always advertising. We

were forty years [in the barbecue business] and they were fifty years [in the barbecue business], so they—they've been out—they've been in business ten years longer than we have.

00:00:56

AE: Did they know each other, though?

00:00:57

DP: Oh yeah, they were great friends. And were up until the time Mr. Sykes died [in 1992]. He used to come up here often and see us.

00:01:04

AE: And can you state your parents'—both your parents' names?

00:01:07

DP: My father's name was Wilbur and my mother's name was Ruth.

00:01:12

AE: Are they originally from this area or Birmingham proper?

00:01:15

DP: No, in and around Blount County. They were born—both of them born in Blount County and—and raised in and around Blount County. Both of them were—their families were sharecroppers, so they moved around quite a lot but in and around Cullman and Blount County.

00:01:28

AE: And so when your father left Tip Top when it—when it closed and he was looking for more work, did he always want to be in the restaurant business, or how did that come about?

00:01:37

DP: No, he—it was the year between my junior and senior year in high school—that summer and so he and I bummed around that summer and just did odd jobs, while he was trying to decide what he wanted to do. He had several offers to do several things, but he really didn't want to. And the lady then, Miss Arilla Simmons, who owned the business who—Dad sold bread to her. She was looking to retire and a lot of people wanted her business, but she thought so much of my father, she called him up and asked him if he would like to have it. And he and my mother talked about it, and they bought it from her.

00:02:09

AE: So she just had a trust in your father as a person that he would take care of the business as she saw that it needed to be taken care of?

00:02:17

DP: Yeah, she had known him for several years, and trust is a word that you could use very easily with my father, yeah.

00:02:26

AE: So how far—how long had she had the business before she turned it over?

00:02:30

DP: I'm not really sure, probably about five years. She hadn't been here too long and it was just—it had grown—she didn't have very much help and—and it had grown beyond what she was able to do by herself, and so she was at a time when she could retire, so she did.

00:02:47

AE: Did she start the business on her own?

00:02:48

DP: No, she was the second owner. The first owner began in 1952, and we bought it from Mrs. Simmons in '67, so there was two owners between '52 and '67.

00:02:59

AE: Has it always been named Top Hat?

00:03:00

DP: When we purchased it, it was called the Top Hat Inn, but we changed it to Top Hat Barbecue.

00:03:07

AE: So when your father got a hold of the place, was there a learning curve in working with the pit and smoking meat and—and working with food?

00:03:12

DP: Neither one of them knew anything about barbequing or working with food or anything and had to sort of learn as they—as they went along. But they had two ladies here who are—worked

with Mrs. Simmons for several years, and they knew the ropes. And they actually taught Mother and Dad in the very beginning. Of course, they changed as time went by to suit them, but those two ladies—in fact, I saw one of them today. The other has passed on. But they became great friends—great friends up until today, and both of them worked for us for almost thirty years before they retired.

00:03:49

AE: May I ask you to state their names, if you don't mind?

00:03:51

DP: One of them is Betty Dooley and the other one is Catherine Hooper.

00:03:57

AE: And so when—how did you get—become involved in the business? You were young when your father took it over, yes?

00:04:04

DP: I joined the Navy in October and my dad bought the business in September [of 1967]. So I was only here about a month when it first opened. And I left to go in the Navy, and I was gone for four years. And then once I got out of the Navy, Dad retired about a year later, and I had it from then on.

00:04:23

AE: And what did you think about being in the restaurant business—barbecue, specifically?

00:04:28

DP: Well I had always hoped—like I said, that one summer my father and I just bummed around together doing odd jobs. I had always hoped that he and I could have a business where we could work together, so this worked out fine. Of course, he retired not long after I got out of the Navy, and we didn't work together than long, but yeah it was—it was a great opportunity.

00:04:46

AE: Before your dad purchased the business was the Top Hat—did it have a wide reputation for good barbecue in the area?

00:04:52

DP: Yes, it did. It had a very good reputation. That's another reason Mother and Dad considered buying it because Mrs. Simmons had a great reputation of serving good food. And when they moved in, they had the same employees and they just kept her standards. And hopefully, through the years, we've improved on it. The building would seat about forty people when they bought it, and we can seat about 265 now.

00:05:16

AE: When did that addition happen?

00:05:19

DP: We made four; we made four additions. And we'd outgrow that one and build another one and outgrow that one and build another one. But we—we can seat about 265 now.

00:05:30

AE: So was there much barbecue in the area early on, or was this like the only place for miles that was—you could count on for good barbecue?

00:05:39

DP: There was one in Cullman that's about thirty-five miles away, and then you had to go to North Birmingham, I think. And I don't believe there was one in Oneonta or Jasper at that time, I really don't know. But I do know there was one in Cullman and some in North Birmingham. But we were kind of the center of all that. And we did a lot of business, and we still do a lot of business.

00:06:06

AE: Was Highway 31 a main thoroughfare from Decatur to Birmingham, or has [Interstate] 65 pretty much been predominantly the main road?

00:06:14

DP: [Highway] 31 was the main road through the center of the state until they built the Interstate, which took a lot of the heavy traffic off of it, but there is a lot of people that live around here. We don't depend on people passing by. We—we depend on—we've had customers—we're into our fourth generation of people that's been coming here and eating now. And we've known families and saw them have children and their children have children, and now their children are coming, you know. So it's—we've known people a long time—made a lot of friends here.

00:06:43

AE: Is your dad still alive?

00:06:46

DP: No, dad passed away in 1990, and I lost my mother in 1997.

00:06:50

AE: Before they passed, what did they think about you carrying on the family business?

00:06:55

DP: Well that—that was the idea. The idea was for them to retire and me to operate the business and them draw a good salary and travel around, which is what they did. Which I had no problem with that; that was great. I hope to do that in my—with my daughters because they're in the business now. I hope to retire one day, and they'll pay me while I travel around. But I think—I think they were pleased with the way everything went; we never had a problem and never—never had a cross word the whole time we worked together. It—of course he was Dad, you know. *[Laughs]*

00:07:26

AE: Do you have any brothers and sisters?

00:07:28

DP: I have one sister; she's worked for me two or three times through the years and gone on to do other things. I have a brother in Colorado; he worked here in the summers while he was going to college. But other than that, he's never worked here.

00:07:44

AE: What are their names—your siblings?

00:07:45

DP: Joyce Eskew and Bryce Pettit.

00:07:50

AE: And your daughter's name?

00:07:51

DP: Heather is the manager here—Heather Phillips—and my other daughter is Roxanne, and she manages her antique store. It's next door.

00:08:00

AE: How long has the antique store been there?

00:08:03

DP: About seven years now—about seven years.

00:08:06

AE: And your daughters, who you say are in the business, have they always been in the business? Did they work when they were young and come up in the business?

00:08:12

DP: As—as soon as they were old enough [*Laughs*] they started, and it wasn't our idea; it was theirs. They wanted to start just as soon as they could. And we needed something for Roxanne to

do, and about the time she got ready to graduate high school, that's when we built the antique store and started that, so she could run that and the other daughter run this one.

00:08:30

AE: Okay, all right. Well when you started working with your father that one year before he retired, did you immediately start working with the meat or—or what did you do in those early days?

00:08:40

DP: When I got out of the Navy, I intended to take a couple of weeks—see friends and do around. And I got home on a Friday, and Dad woke me up at five the next morning and said, “It's time to go to work”. So that's all the time I got off after I got out of the Navy. And the first thing he did to me—put me to doing is cooking the meat. And he—we got it all on and got it cooking, and he went out and drunk coffee; and he came back in a little while and he said, “Your fire is not hot enough.” And I said, “Well I don't know it wasn't hot enough; I never did this before.” So he had to teach me, you know.

00:09:09

AE: Trial by fire. [*Laughs*]

00:09:10

DP: Right, started the next day.

00:09:12

AE: So had he been the pit master up until that time that he put you to work?

00:09:16

DP: Yeah. Mother cooked some of it in the beginning but as it—as we grew—to begin with, we had one pit that would hold about sixteen—so that’s all we could cook at a time. And now we cook eighty-three at a time, so it—as the pits got bigger it got way more than Mother could do and then Dad—then Dad took it over. And then I took it over from him and then—then I’ve added onto that. So basically every—from [nineteen] ’60—to ’71—I’ve been doing the cooking basically, since 1971.

00:09:49

AE: Do you remember your father ever telling you stories about when he was—he first started working with the meat and the—the learning curve there and what he learned and what mistakes he made?

00:09:59

DP: One of the biggest—funny now—it wasn’t funny then; they got—got the pit finished one night and they let the fire die down which you do as the day goes along. You let it get slower and slower. And it was closing time and they decided not to take it off but just leave it on the pit and in the morning they would just start a little fire under it to warm it up. And while they were gone that night it caught up and burned everything up on it and—so we learned a lesson. You never go off and leave the meat on the pit. Of course, I had never done that; I learned that from him. But no, there was not a lot of funny things that happened [*Laughs*]—just a lot of work. You have to split the wood and make kindling. We only use hickory wood. We don’t use any gas or anything

like that, and it's a lot of work. We use about a cord of wood a week. It's all got to be split and got to be shaped, and it takes a lot of work.

00:10:53

AE: And when you say shaped, can you talk about that?

00:10:56

DP: Well it has to be the correct size. You want a piece of wood that will almost burn up in a day's time; you don't want it so big that it won't burn, and you don't want it so small that it will burn up and go away to nothing, so you split them to the size that will burn all day long. And like I said, as the day goes by you, want the fire to get—slow down and slow down until the last couple of hours that they're cooking it's just a bed of coals and not really wood left. So you have to—you have to make them the right size. And if they're great big ones, you split them and split them down until you get them to the right size.

00:11:26

AE: Can you describe what the right size is?

00:11:28

DP: About eight inches in diameter—a piece about eight inches in diameter and twenty-four inches long will burn all day.

00:11:34

AE: Do you have a local vendor for your wood?

00:11:37

DP: They come out of Pelham; I buy some from local people. I have a—a friend who is in the logging business, and when he gets a tract of timber that has a lot of hickory on it, he'll bring me a whole 18-wheeler load at a time. But most of it I get from Pelham.

00:11:50

AE: And how often do you get deliveries?

00:11:53

DP: About every five weeks. I get a delivery about every five weeks. They bring about five cords about every—about every five weeks. It takes about a cord a week.

00:12:02

AE: And you were talking about when you expanded, when you got a bigger pit to work with, and you can do a lot more quantity—when did that happen and how did you come about making that decision really? I mean it's supply and demand of course but—.

00:12:17

DP: Well I was working—I was cooking seven days a week, and on Thursday I had to double. I'd come in at one o'clock on Thursday morning and cook two batches and get done about ten or eleven o'clock at that night, and had to be back at five o'clock the next morning. And I just couldn't cook enough. So I—I built a whole new building and whole new pits and everything, so I didn't have to do that anymore.

00:12:38

AE: Did you build it literally or did you have it built?

00:12:40

DP: No, I had it built. I was cooking barbecue in the old room while they were building the new one.

00:12:47

AE: So can you describe a little bit what your—your day is like when you get here at the crack of dawn and—and—and how you—how you work?

00:12:54

DP: We start at five o'clock; it takes about an hour to get everything ready. And our delivery truck normally gets here at six [in the morning], and we begin at six and then we start the fire. We put the fire out every night and start clean every morning with a fresh fire. And it takes—it takes about an hour to get all the meat [pork shoulders and ribs] prepared and the fire ready. And then we put it on at seven and hopefully by somewhere between two and four o'clock, depending on how big it is, it gets done and it's something that takes constant attention. You can never leave it; you don't want it to ever flame; you just want it to smolder and it's very work-intensive, but this is the only true way to do barbecue. Everybody does it in a rotisserie now—you turn the gas on and come back tomorrow—but this—this is the only way to cook barbecue.

00:13:44

AE: Can you explain why that is?

00:13:45

DP: Well you don't get the flavor. This—it's the different between cooking a hamburger on a gas grill and one on a charcoal grill. That's just the difference; the juices and the fat drip down into the fire and it burns and the smoke comes back up on the meat. It just gives it a better flavor. Plus the smoke gets, you know, all the way down into it, where if you're cooking with a rotisserie and you have a couple of logs that make a little smoke and it doesn't get into the meat. It just gets on the meat and not in it.

00:14:12

AE: Uh-hmm. Well I'm jumping ahead—ahead of myself a little bit, but can you speak to what you think the future of barbecue is with a lot of people changing over to gas and getting away from the really time that you need to dedicate to the process?

00:14:24

DP: When it gets to the point—I'm 57 [years old] and when it gets to the point that I can't split the wood anymore and work—work—I don't work as many hours as I used to; I just work 45—50 hours a week now. But when I get to where I can't do that, I may have to have a rotisserie. It's just too labor—and the last load of wood I got was \$1,300, so the wood costs a lot more than the gas, and it's a lot more expensive. And I have to have at least two helpers, and most of the time I need three. But it's—it's—it's very costly to cook it the way we do, but that's the only way to get the product. That's the only way to get the quality out. I hope I never do. Maybe—I have one daughter that is not married yet. Maybe she'll marry some guy that's six [feet] three [inches] and weighs 240 [pounds], and I'll put him to splitting the wood, and I'll do like my dad did, “Y'all write me a check, and I'll come by once in a while and pick it up.”

00:15:21

AE: Has there not been anybody that you've been working out with there thus far that would be an apprentice and would be interested in kind of following behind you?

00:15:29

DP: I've—I've had several that have been with me for a good long while, but for one reason or another they moved onto do something else. The last one I was training decided to go into the Navy and he's—he's in the Navy now in Hawaii. But I may be a little demanding—is—may be the problem. *[Laughs]*

00:15:45

AE: You think so, huh?

00:15:48

DP: Yeah. I made—I expect them to do what I do and—and it's hard to get people here at five o'clock in the morning. A lot of people don't want to get up and get to work that early.

00:15:57

AE: Well then tell me about your sauce, too, because I understand today is your sauce-making day.

00:16:01

DP: Right. I got a batch going now. When we bought the business, we had to buy the sauce recipes separate from the business. The original recipe, strangely enough, comes from the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York. I still have it. Now we've changed it somewhat from what

it was when we bought it—as when we bought the business we added a little of this and a little of that to it and we’ve changed it, but that’s where the original recipe comes from. I still have it.

00:16:31

AE: Hmm. And that was listed as a barbecue sauce?

00:16:33

DP: Yeah, it was a barbecue sauce from—whoever the chef was at that time at the Waldorf.

00:16:38

AE: And how did—how did it make its way down here?

00:16:40

DP: The original owner bought it from him; the lady we bought the business from bought it from him, and then we had to turn around and buy it from her. We had to buy it separate from the business.

00:16:50

AE: It must have been a good recipe.

00:16:52

DP: It was good; it’s better now. We’ve improved it.

00:16:55

AE: Do you have any memory of what the recipe cost when your father purchased the business?

00:16:59

DP: No, he bought that when I was in the—basically, when I was in the Navy. I was gone then and I don't know what he had to pay for it, but he had to buy it separate from the building.

00:17:07

AE: So how has the recipe changed over the years?

00:17:08

DP: We've—we've added one, two, three, really—three basic ingredients and some smaller stuff. But it's changed a good bit in the way that we cook it. We cook it now in a big steam kettle; I can cook ten gallons at a time, which makes it a lot easier. And you have to cook it—you put all your ingredients in it, and you never boil it. You just simmer it. If you boil it, it breaks the ingredients down; but if you just simmer, they just combine, which that may not sound like a big deal, but it is. It's—if you boil it, it has a totally different flavor than it does if you just let it simmer and the flavors combine rather than separate.

00:17:51

AE: Are you the only one who knows the sauce recipe now, or do you share it with your—some of your employees?

00:17:58

DP: My wife [Vickie Pettit] knows it, I know it, and we've got it written down in the safety deposit box for my daughter when she—when the time comes, in case I'm ever on an airplane and it goes down. But it's in our head and in the safety deposit box.

00:18:08

AE: Without giving too many secrets away, can you describe kind of the—the basic ingredients of your sauce and what kind of style it is and flavor it has to it?

00:18:18

DP: It's a tomato-based sauce; it's based on ketchup, and we add some stuff to it to make it sweet and some stuff to it to make it sour and some to it that makes it tart and some that makes it hot. **[Laughs]** There's—there's about twenty ingredients altogether.

00:18:35

AE: Can you describe how it compliments your barbecue?

00:18:39

DP: It does in the fact that the barbecue sauce stands alone. We—people want it—a cup of it and they dip chicken fingers in it and French fries and stuff like that. It's good enough to eat by itself with something else. We also use it on ribs; we use it on chicken; and it's—it's a—it's a sauce that, like I say, we have developed it and tweaked it over the years—a little of this and a little of that and take some of this away and add something else 'til when you add it and the barbecue together I think, well—I sent some to Germany here what—not—about three months ago and then about a month ago I sent some to Saudi Arabia. There's some of the troops over there—their mother comes by and she freezes it and puts it on an airplane; I've sent it pretty much all over the world.

00:19:29

AE: Do individuals come by and get like a quart or a gallon at a time?

00:19:33

DP: Yeah. We hardly ever sell the sauce by itself. We always sell the sauce and the meat together. But sometimes there are people who are cooking at home and they use ours; they come by and get our sauce, and when they're cooking ribs or whatever at home and they use it. But most of the time, when they sell sauce, they buy the meat and the sauce together.

00:19:47

AE: And tell me about your menu and how that's changed. What was the menu like when your father first purchased the restaurant?

00:19:55

DP: Well you're asking me something that's forty years ago, so forgive me if I don't remember everything. But basically, we served barbecue plates, barbecued sandwiches, hamburgers and cheeseburgers, and that was about it. And now we serve about eight kinds of baked potatoes now, if that tells you anything; so our menu has greatly expanded since then.

00:20:15

AE: And you even have catfish and shrimp and things like that?

00:20:18

DP: Well our cat—we just about are being as well known for our catfish now, as we are barbecue. We—we use only pond-raised Alabama-grown catfish, and I think the—I know Mississippi is famous for growing catfish but I went—it took six months, I guess, to get the correct breading. We kept experimenting with that with different brands of cornmeal and what

we put in it and everything ‘til we finally got just the right one that will turn a golden brown, and it doesn’t get too dark. And I have some very good cooks; I have excellent cooks. And we sell oh, 500—600 pounds of cleaned fish a week now, and this is the slower time of the year—being in the fall.

00:21:02

AE: And tell me about your “Whole Hog” that’s on the menu.

00:21:05

DP: That’s something—that’s my daughter’s [Heather Phillips’] idea. She just started that; she—she comes up with all these things. It’s a pound of meat, a slab of ribs, and I don’t really remember now. It’s just started—it just started, in fact, last week. But it’s—I don’t know if we’ve had anybody eat it yet, but if you eat it, all it’s free. Obviously, if you eat the whole thing it’s free, but I don’t know if anybody is ever going to be able to eat that because it’s about four pounds of food.

00:21:34

AE: I was just looking at your menu, and I believe it has the pork, the ribs, the barbecue salad, and the barbecue potato [all for \$25.99]; and you get a t-shirt if you eat it all.

00:21:43

DP: Right. If you eat it all you get a t-shirt that says, *I ate the whole hog*.

00:21:48

AE: It’s a good marketing ploy; I like that. Do y’all advertise much?

00:21:52

DP: Not a lot. The best advertising in the world is word of mouth. And I've had some billboards up and some radio ads. I never had anything on television, but I've advertised a good bit on the radio and—and billboards and things like that. But the word of mouth is the best. If people come here and they like what they eat, they'll come back and tell somebody else.

00:22:16

AE: Now I'm here at ten-thirty in the morning on a Wednesday, and there's some folks already in the dining room. What kind of hours do y'all have and how many days are you open?

00:22:23

DP: We're open seven days a week—10:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. and our lunch crowd—well it should—it's eleven o'clock now, so it should start coming in about now. And lunch is from about eleven to two, and then it slows down in the afternoon, and then dinner picks up about five—and five 'til closing.

00:22:41

AE: So at ten o'clock are people coming in for barbecue or do y'all have some breakfast that you—?

00:22:45

DP: No, we don't serve breakfast anymore. We did for years, but they're eating barbecue at ten.

00:22:49

AE: When did you stop serving breakfast?

00:22:53

DP: Oh, twenty years ago, I guess—very labor intensive and—and very limited profit so it just wasn't worth it.

00:23:03

AE: So when you came into the business and you had the trial by fire and were working the pit and everything, and now all these years later you're still doing it and are a master of your craft, if I may say—is—is your passion for what you do about the barbecue or about it being a family business or about the reputation? Can you talk about that a little bit?

00:23:24

DP: I'd have to say a combination of all of them. My father and mother got into it late in life. And they were people of very modest means; we—we had everything we needed, but my mother and father never really any money in their life, and in the last eight or ten years of their life they did—once they got in the restaurant business. And that's why I say my dad used to come by and pick up a check and tell me everything I was doing wrong, you know, and then he'd go back home. But I bought the restaurant from them simply for that reason. I purchased it and—but I'm going to give it to my girls because we've been in it, you know, since [nineteen] '71 so I'm going to give it to my girls, so they won't have to purchase and they won't have to pay for it. But like I say, we're in our third generation, and we're known everywhere. Well there's a lot of things I can say. I've had people in here from governors to Hank Williams, Jr. to—you name them, you know. I've had everybody in the world in here. But yeah. we're known far and wide

and there is—there is some pride in being one of the last few people who actually cook barbecue the old way. You know, really nobody does that anymore simply because it's too much work. In the summer, July and August especially it's 110—115-degrees in there all day long, and it's tough. But there's no other way to produce that product.

00:24:56

AE: And we were talking before we started recording about that Alabama Public Television documentary *Holy Smoke Over Birmingham*; was that the one that you were in? Can you talk about that experience, what that was like?

00:25:07

DP: They called me and wanted to include us in the Birmingham—the Birmingham part of the show, and I was glad to do it. They came up from Tuscaloosa and—they were based out of Tuscaloosa—and came up and spent the day with me. The guys were great; they—they filmed all day long. And we ended up with about five minutes in that hour program, but they had about eight hours worth of film. But they saw everything; I didn't hide anything or didn't add anything on. What they—what they filmed is what I do everyday; I didn't do anything any different.

00:25:40

AE: And have you seen any, you know, benefits of participating in that? Have you gotten a few more customers that you know of, or do you have any idea?

00:25:49

DP: Several people—I've had a few new ones. Mostly, it's our regular customers that said, you know, they saw us on—saw us on the TV. And I've had several people holler on me, “Hey, you

know, I saw you on the TV.” And I say, “Do you want an autograph?” “No, I don’t want an autograph.” I say, “Well I’ve been trying to give one away since I was on there and nobody wants one.” But any kind of exposure like that and it will play, you know, over and over—you know, about once a year they’ll probably play it, so I’ll continue to get that exposure as time goes by. I was very, very pleased to be included because there are a lot of barbecue places around here—some of them that’s been in business longer than I have that wasn’t—wasn’t included at all.

00:26:29

AE: Can you name some of those places? Do you mind?

00:26:32

DP: No, I’d rather not. *[Laughs]*

00:26:34

AE: *[Laughs]* How do you think the Top Hat got its name, do you know?

00:26:37

DP: I really don’t know. Like I say, it was called the Top Hat Inn and obviously, we’re not an inn but that—it goes back to what Blount Springs used to be; this used to be a town of about 2,000 people, which in the summertime grew to about 15,000. There’s some mineral springs here; they used to bottle and ship the water all over the world. There was clinics here, hospitals. And why they called it an inn, I don’t know, but like I said, there used to be a steady population of about 2,000 that lived right here in this little town. You can’t tell it now, but they did and

unless the inn part came from back then, I don't know where—where they got that name. But we changed it to Top Hat Barbecue when we bought it.

00:27:25

AE: About how many people live in the area now would you say?

00:27:28

DP: Seven—maybe eight. [*Laughs*] People don't—what happened, they moved the railroad. Where the highway is used to be the railroad; when the railroad moved across the mountain, Blount Springs died and they don't bottle that water and ship it around anymore; so it just—it just died out and dried up.

00:27:47

AE: Did—did you grow up in Blount Springs?

00:27:50

DP: No, I live in Garden City, which is about seven miles up the road. And I remember as a kid coming down here and eating on Sunday, you know. When we could we'd go out on Sunday and eat, and I remember coming down here and Mrs. Simmons always had—always had a full house.

00:28:06

AE: Did you have a taste for barbecue back then when you were a kid visiting the Top Hat Inn?

00:28:09

DP: No, she made the biggest greasiest cheeseburger you ever saw, and that's what I would always eat when we came down here.

00:28:17

AE: Well do you think that Alabama barbecue—do you have an opinion on how it's different from other barbecue throughout the South or not at all or anything along those lines?

00:28:28

DP: There's a lot of different ways to cook it. I've seen—especially up in Memphis; Memphis is supposed to be famous for their barbecue. And from what I've seen, they've got nothing special at all. But basically, it's a difference in their sauce. Some sauces are vinegar-based, some are mayonnaise-based, which I particularly don't care for either one of them. Most of the time they set them both on the table like you would ketchup and you just put it in—ours is heated and we keep it at a simmer all the time. It's hot when you put it on the meat, and I think that makes a difference. But I'd put ours up against anybody's. I don't—they have a barbecue cook-off every year—these people that run around and do this stuff professionally, and I always get invited to those things, but I just am really not interested in doing it. But I'd—I'd put our product up against anybody's.

00:29:19

AE: Do you ever get the chance to take a vacation or hit the road?

00:29:22

DP: Not in the last three years I haven't but normally, yeah. Yeah, we close down a week every year for vacation, but the last three years we—we worked on the building and remodeled or—or done something like that. We haven't had a chance to go anywhere in the last three years.

00:29:38

AE: What do you like best about what you do?

00:29:40

DP: Well, being my own boss, basically; there's a lot to be said for that. But when you're your own boss, you're also in charge, and we've got about twenty-five employees. I'm also responsible for what they do, you know. So it—it gets a little testy sometimes, but I get to work for myself. If I work hard and I make a profit, I get to keep the money, right. If I work hard for somebody else and make money, they get to keep the profit. So yeah, I like working for myself.

00:30:07

AE: And when I tried calling you last week a few times—you're here early in the morning and leave early when you're done—but one time I called and they said you were out feeding the deer up in the woods.

00:30:18

DP: *[Laughs]* We—we hunt on this mountain behind—me and the boys that work for me; we hunt on this mountain up here. And from time to time there's—there's some yellow acorns that you can put out—and that's the code word for corn—and you feed them up early in the year, and you get them coming in there. And then you have to quit before the season starts because you can't hunt over a spot that you put out corn until ten days after it's all gone. So you have to put it

out early in the year to get them coming around because if you don't, the game warden will catch you.

00:30:48

AE: And on your menu you have barbecue sandwiches, of course, and then ribs; can you talk about your ribs a little bit and what you look for when you're cooking ribs and describe that a little bit?

00:30:59

DP: Ribs are really a bigger secret than barbecue. I'll take you in the pit and show you how I do the barbecue, but the ribs are totally something else. Everybody has a way—they either skin them out, they rub them with salt, or they have a dried rub; everybody has a way that they do their own ribs, and we do ours in a way that they turn out extremely tender. They fall off the bone; you just pick the bone up, and they will fall apart. But that's one of those secrets, you know, I can tell you, but then you could leave Blount Springs again. You'd have to stay.

00:31:29

AE: Well is there anything about your place here and what you do and how you do it that I haven't asked you that would be worth adding?

00:31:37

DP: I always include this: I'm a Christian—a Deacon in the Baptist Church—and my wife is a Christian and my children are Christian and we run a Christian business. You can come here; people come here and bring their families, and they don't have to worry about hearing foul language or being treated, you know, in an untoward way at all. And we've always give God the

glory for all our success, and he's been faithful to us, and we're forty years here and still going wide open. So yeah, that's something else I'd like to include in this.

00:32:11

AE: Well and can you—I'm just thinking about the exterior of your building, and when I was driving up and on the website for [the documentary film] *Holy Smoke Over Birmingham* they say, you know, go towards Blount Springs and follow the smoke, and you'll find the Top Hat. And literally, you're here just on the side of the road, and the smoke is definitely the first thing you see. How do you think that factors into what you do?

00:32:33

DP: Well I've—hundreds of people over the years have stopped because they smelled the smoke when they went by. The way the winds travel down this valley, they travel up until noon—they travel south and it goes down the road and in the afternoon it travels—the wind changes and it goes north, so the smoke goes in both directions. But yeah, I've had a lot of people stop and stay just because they smelled it, you know, they wanted to stop and see what it was.

00:32:59

AE: And can I ask you quickly about some of the sides that you have like coleslaw and things of that nature?

00:33:04

DP: We make everything; we make our own coleslaw, potato salad—all these things. We make them fresh. I've found if you always use the best ingredients, even though it may be more

expensive—all natural stuff; we don't use any like imitation cheese or anything like that—use the very best ingredients that you have and your product will end up good, and that's what we do. We don't cut a corner anywhere; it's more expensive to do it that way, but you end up with a better product just like the barbecue.

00:33:33

AE: Can you talk about the style of your—your sides, like is the coleslaw a vinegar-y slaw or mayonnaise slaw?

00:33:37

DP: It's a mayonnaise base; it's our own recipe. Again, something through the years that we developed and we make it up and stir it up; I don't know—we make 30—40-pounds at a time but it's good. I mean I eat it myself; it's really good.

00:33:53

AE: Now I know that in your sauce and the secret recipe there, and that's really specific to hearing what you do, and obviously, you and the people behind what you do and the time and the care that you take—but as far as, you know, and other barbecue restaurants who are spending the time and—and using the hickory wood and fresh ingredients and stuff like that, how would you say yours stands out in the crowd?

00:34:18

DP: I have never ate at Bob Sykes' [in Bessemer, Alabama]. I have eat at Big Bob Gibson's in Decatur [Alabama]. Now that's the three of us as far as independents. There's a lot of chains around now that didn't used to be here, but as far as independent people, we're the three that

people talk about. Bob Gibson, they win the barbecue cooking contest every year, but I never have been, so you can take that for what it's worth. But Bob Sykes, he's—he's—I've never been down there. I've never—like I say, I knew Mr. Sykes very well, but I don't know his son [Van Sykes], but I've been tending—I think he and I both have been working on our careers for the last forty years, and that's the reason we never got together. But I'm sure they put out a very good product; they have a very good name, and they're known far and wide like we are, and I'm sure they put out a good product. But it's—but to put them side-by-side and judge, I couldn't do that because I really don't know.

00:35:15

AE: Well and those two places that you just mentioned—and then along with yours—the reputations are built on great barbecue but then also longevity and the family name.

00:35:23

DP: Right.

00:35:25

AE: And different people are doing different things with that. What do you think about the franchising of barbecue?

00:35:31

DP: I've had—I've had the opportunity to franchise, but at this point in my career I'm really not interested in that. I watch over everything we do, and if I had franchises, I couldn't watch over everything they do. So right now, I'm happy to just have our one place and—and make sure our

quality is up and our employees are dressed correctly and service is good and that kind of thing.
I'd rather just run one place, really.

00:36:01

AE: Uh-hmm. Do you have any kind of philosophy of barbecue, like anything that barbecue speaks to a greater good or—?

00:36:08

DP: *[Laughs]* Well there used to be a TV commercial—I forget the actor who it was who says they “serve no wine before it’s time.” Well we don’t take any barbecue off the pit ‘til it’s done. Barbecue gets done really a long time before it gets tender, and that’s the secret: cook it ‘til it gets tender. It gets done an hour or hour-and-a-half before it gets tender, but if you do it just right and then let it stay on there that other hour— hour-and-a-half, it gets tender—just fork-tender and it will just fall apart. But I have eaten barbecue other places that they cooked it ‘til it was done, but it wasn’t tender, so that—that’s one secret.

00:36:45

AE: Is there anything that you would want folks to know who haven’t been to the area and want to have them come over here to—to the Top Hat?

00:36:53

DP: Well it will be a dining experience you won't forget for the simple reason that you'll come back because you really never had barbecue like this before. Our catfish either, for that matter. Like I say, we—we sell hundreds of pounds of catfish a week now, and it’s attention to detail. And that’s—that’s the big thing: attention to detail.

00:37:14

AE: Can I ask you quickly about the—the front room there with the—the cypress poles in the middle?

00:37:22

DP: [*Laughs*] Those are cedar—cedar poles. The original building, that's what held the roof up. And the first expansion my father put on, rather than build a gable or anything, he decided to just build a beam down through the middle and put some more posts up down through the middle of it. There's two in the front that are original to the building in 1952, and the others are newer than that and we put those in. But people have—like I say, in the fourth generation children are telling me now, "I remember when I was little I'd come in there and put my hand on this post and go round and around and around." It's just something that's been here forever. It—the front of the building is basically the way it was when we bought it. Every time we start talking about doing something or modernizing or doing something different our customers—our old customers say, "Don't change anything." So it—it hasn't changed very much.

00:38:11

AE: Is that front counter where all the candy is and everything, is that pretty much original to the building?

00:38:15

DP: That's original. We still have the first five stools that used to sit there that they used to serve there. You sat there and they would serve you barbecue there, and you'd eat off that. But we keep it full of candy and stuff now. We don't do that anymore.

00:38:28

AE: Has there always been candy on the counter there or—and since they stopped serving at the counter, I guess?

00:38:34

DP: Yeah, we keep that full and we sell tons and tons of candy here. It's in a good place right by the cash register, and all the kids want it when they come by, you see.

00:38:43

AE: Would you say there's something you sell the most of? Is that barbecue?

00:38:46

DP: We sell more barbecue than anything else. Right now we're cooking about—well, almost two tons a week right now. But—and then we, like I say, 500 or 600-pounds of catfish but we—we sell a lot more barbecue than we do anything else—a lot of shrimp and a lot of chicken. We serve a lot of chicken. I've got ten cases of chicken in this morning; we sell a lot of chicken fingers. And—but barbecue is our number one thing; that's why people come here.

00:39:18

AE: And you made your name in barbecue, so was the—the catfish and all those additions, was that just an effort to diversify and kind of get a different kind of crowd in?

00:39:26

DP: Well if you have four people come and maybe all of them don't want barbecue; maybe they want something else. So we began to provide other things that people might want, if they didn't want barbecue. And not everybody likes barbecue. Baked potatoes, like I say, I think we've got about five or six different stuffed baked potatoes now, you know, and you can get them anywhere from plain to so much stuff on them you can't see the potato anymore. And there's things like that; we've just tried to change the menu as we go along to fit whatever people are eating at the time.

00:40:01

AE: Do you taste your barbecue every day?

00:40:03

DP: Not every day but I eat it at least once a week and while we're preparing it—while we're cutting it and getting it ready for supper, you're always getting a bit, you know.

00:40:14

AE: Is your wife involved in the business at all?

00:40:17

DP: She's retired to the point now that she keeps the books; that's all she does anymore. She and I started it together and for years and years it was just her—she—she and I and maybe one or two employees. And then as it grew, then the books got bigger and bigger and bigger, so we finally—we just retired her to the bookkeeping end of it.

00:40:38

AE: All right. Well, any other questions that we haven't covered, you think?

00:40:42

DP: No, I think that's pretty well covered it.

00:40:45

AE: Any final thoughts?

00:40:46

DP: When people like me stop barbequing the old way, it will die. And people that don't try it while they have the opportunity will be sorry because one day it won't be here anymore.

00:41:00

AE: You got that right. Well thank you for your time, sir. I really appreciate it.

00:41:05

DP: Thank you—appreciate it.

[End Dale Pettit]