

**ALLAN BENTON**  
**Benton's Smoky Mountain Country Hams, Madisonville, Tennessee**

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Location: Benton's Smoky Mountain Country Hams, Madisonville, TN

Interviewer: Sara Wood

Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs

Length: One hour, four minutes

Project: Cured South

*[Interviewer's Note: Mr. Benton began telling stories as soon as I turned on the tape recorder. I officially mark the tape with an introduction at 22:41 because I did not want to stop or interrupt his story.]*

00:00:00

**Allan Benton:** He wanted me to smoke some—he wanted me to smoke some grain for him, you know in my smokehouse and—

00:00:08

**Sara Wood:** Oh wow.

00:00:09

**AB:** And I told him I could do it, so I actually built a frame and it cost me a couple—\$300 to build that frame to smoke that beer but I put it in there and smoked it and was glad to get to do it. And that's something I'll get to brag about the rest of my life. And later I got to meet Garrett Oliver and he's everything that I thought he was and more. As we say here in the South if you're—if you're really fond of somebody and you're a real character, some people would call him a sport, yes, ma'am.

00:00:41

**SW:** Is it okay if I sit here? Usually I—I sit right next to people so that I can mic them.

00:00:45

**AB:** Yeah. Absolutely, absolutely.

00:00:45

**SW:** I just want you to be comfortable.

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**AB:** I want to make sure you're comfortable. But I—I got to meet him later. And he's certainly a sport. He—the guy is fabulous. He's very passionate about what he does and I still believe there's not a Brew Master in America better than Garrett Oliver. He is incredible. His knowledge is unbelievable. And he's an extremely nice man, and how lucky I was to get to meet him and I got to—I got to do a pairing of my products with his beer. So that—

00:01:16

**SW:** Oh that sounds like fun.

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**AB:** —it was incredible. I loved him and he just mesmerized me. I mean he really did. He was incredible. But I was—like I was said, I was just getting a little bit smart on the telephone. I was a little bit coy about it 'cause I thought it was—knew he was one of those guys, but that's—I've done some crazy stuff like that but I enjoy it. I smoke cheese. I got a fellow next—

00:01:36

**SW:** Smoke cheese?

**00:01:38**

**AB:** Yeah; there's a fellow over here that makes cheese. And he does—he does a great job. Tim C. [Tim Clark], Valley Cheese and John Harrison. Most of his cheeses are these funky cheeses like flavored cheeses and that kind of thing. But I smoked some cheddar for them, the first cheese of his cheese that got smoked was smoked in my smokehouse just to see if it—what it was like and what he was doing but he did a great job.

**00:02:04**

**SW:** That's so—that's so neat.

**00:02:06**

**AB:** Well, it's fun.

**00:02:07**

**SW:** You kind of get to collect all these stories too through having these relationships with people and doing what you do and there's—there's sort of a collaboration going on and there's two stories that intersect. I think that's neat.

**00:02:22**

**AB:** Well—

**00:02:22**

**SW:** With the beer and the cheese, you get to—all over.

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**AB:** I'll tell you what. I suspect, Sara, that I wouldn't have gotten to do any of this had my path taken me a way that I didn't get to meet John T. Edge and become involved in Southern Foodways Alliance, because first off, I was struggling, barely surviving in the business. And I didn't really—didn't really think I had a market with—I never—even entertained the thought that I had a market with fine dining restaurants.

00:02:56

Like I said, when I started selling to Blackberry Farm when I first started selling to them I thought they were just a greasy spoon restaurant in the Smokies [mountains]. I had no idea what they were. And when Bob Carter left after a couple of years to go to Charleston to Peninsula Grill and John Fler came, John had been Mary Tyler Moore's personal chef right out of culinary school. And that's all he had done, but he was a native of North Carolina and wanted to get back to this part of the world.

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And he took the position at Blackberry Farm and he had been there for maybe a few months and people kept saying, "You might want to order some of this and that from this guy down in Madisonville," and he finally placed an order. And we took it to him and about a month goes by. And I got a phone call and he told me he was John Fler of Blackberry Farms and he wanted to talk to me about the product I had brought up earlier. Well the first thing that popped in my mind is, *oh good lord; what's wrong? I thought he's had it for a month. It's probably got mold on it and he's worried about that.*

**00:04:04**

Well he said he first wanted to thank me for bringing it up there and secondly he wanted to tell me that he thought it was an incredible product. The quality was amazing and he hung up. Well Sara I had never had a phone call like that. About another month goes by and I get another phone call and he told me it was John Fleer of Blackberry Farms and wanted to talk to me some more about that product. Well this time I think I actually said, "Oh gosh if you've had it this long it's probably got some mold on it right?" He said, "No, no," he said, "I've actually had it in the freezer. There's no mold on it." He said, "I've just been playing around with it."

**00:04:44**

And he told me that he loved the quality and that he wanted to develop a menu at Blackberry Farm largely around my products. And he asked me if it was okay to put my name on the menu. Well, Sara, nobody had ever put my name on a menu. And I was trying to think on the phone why I probably shouldn't let him do that but I couldn't think of a reason. And I finally told him I guess that was all right. And I had no idea what in the world he was doing for me by doing that because of course they get incredible chefs from across the country there at Blackberry Farms and John shared my products with these people.

**00:05:27**

And he singlehandedly started putting my—my products in restaurants in other parts of the country. And then he got me invited to the Southern Foodways Alliance to a Country Ham Tasting about, oh I don't know, ten or eleven years ago maybe. And John T. called me. Invited me down there and told me a little bit about the organization. And I told him, I said, "Well you know," I said, "that sounds like something I'd like—I'd love to support." And he said, "Well it

was in October.” I said, “Whoa, whoa, whoa,” I said, “if it’s in October I can't come,” because at that time I was selling most of my product in Gatlinburg and Pigeon Forge that old touristy area here in the Smokies and mostly greasy spoon restaurants and—and he said, “Well,” he said, “you know,” he said, “we’re going to have a lot of people here.” And he said, “I’d really like for you to come.” I said, “Well I just can't come. I appreciate you offering.”

**00:06:26**

Well he talked to me a little more, you know John T. and how persuasive he is. And I finally told him, I said, “Well I’ll tell you what.” I said, “I support what you’re doing,” and I said, “I’ll donate whatever meat you think you need to feed these people.” He said, “Well I’m trying to feed about 400 people—300 or 400 people.” I said, “Well how many hams—I’ll send them to you.” I said, “I’ll send you twenty or whatever you think you need to feed ‘em and it will be okay, I’ll do it.”

**00:06:49**

He said, “No, I want you to come.” I said, “Well I can't come.” Well the next day he called me back and of course anybody that knows John T. he could talk an Eskimo into buying a refrigerator. He—he told me, he said, “Look you don’t know what you’re saying no to.” He said, “I’m going to have chefs from all over the country here. Gonna have food writers.” He said, “You simply have to come down here.” I said, “Okay. I’ll come.”

**00:07:15**

And then two or three weeks before I was to go down there, Sara, I get a phone call from him and told him, “Yeah I was still planning to come.” He said, “Well I wanted to ask you how

you're planning on preparing this." I said, "What do you mean how I'm planning on preparing it?" He said, "Well you're going to serve it to these chefs and people that are here." I said, "But I can't do that." I said, "I'm just a hillbilly making ham and bacon." Well he said, "But I've already told people you're going to do that." And I said, "Well you better write them a letter and tell them that you can't—that I'm not going to do it 'cause I can't do that." I said, "I don't know how to do that."

**00:07:50**

He said, "Well don't you use it at your own house?" And I said, "Yes, I do." And he said, "Well how do you do it?" I said, "Well, I've already told that you I'm a hillbilly." I said, "We make biscuits, serve ham biscuits or we make fried—sauté it in a pan and serve it with gravy and—." He said, "How else do you use it?" I said, "Well we slice a lot of it real thin and use it like prosciutto." He said, "You use your ham like prosciutto?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Can you serve it to the guests down here that way?" I said, "Well I can, Mr. Edge," but I said, "they're not going to like it." I said, "This is just a Southern staple for—it was—it's just, you know, sustenance food." He said, "Well that's what I'd like for you to do if you'll come down here."

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So I said, "Okay, I'll do it." Well, my wife and I packed up and I took—I probably took twenty or twenty-five hams down there to feed those people and I sliced—I remembered slicing forty-something pounds into prosciutto. And I sliced 200 or 300 pounds up to sauté in a pan and—and I took extra hams 'cause I thought if I didn't take enough I'd have more to slice when I got there. And people seemed to really like it. They kept coming up all night long and chefs were asking me, "Can I buy this for my restaurant? Can you sell me this?"

00:09:04

Well, Sara, even a country boy the light bulb goes off. And on the way back I mean I thought about it coming back out of there. I thought *you know, I thought I was going to embarrass myself*. My wife and I—I had a lump in my belly as big as a softball. I thought *we're going down there and serve this to sophisticated people and we're going to make fools of ourselves. They're not going to like this*. Well, when in fact they did like it, it took me totally by surprise. And during that drive back I made a conscious decision, and I came in here on Monday morning and I had—I had a tractor trailer backed up out there at my loading dock with fresh pork. And I had three employees. And I told them, I said, “Fellas, we got to have a team meeting.” When I got ready to go down there I sliced up eighteen to twenty-month hams to take down there.

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And they—none of my employees liked the aged hams that I took down there. They were trying to talk me into taking young hams down there. And I said, “No,” I said, “to me this is what country ham is supposed to be and that's what I'm going to take.” And I remember one of 'em saying, “Well they won't eat it.” I said, “Well if they don't they can just go hungry 'cause it's what I'm taking.” And I sat them down and told 'em, I said, “Fellas, we're going to increase production on our aged hams by 500 percent annually starting this morning.” Well they thought I had lost my marbles, Sara. But I thought to myself, *I think I've seen the Promised Land*. Who knew there was a market with fine dining restaurants? I didn't have a clue.

**00:10:41**

And they thought I had flipped out. Only one employee, the big tall fella you'll see in there looked at me and he said, "If you believe we can tap into that market," he said, "I believe we can too." I said, "Well fellas, I believe good ole boys in America can make something as good as our European cousins." I've always believed that. In fact, when I got into this business more than forty years ago I—I wrote to every university in the South trying to learn more about what I was doing and I even wrote to a couple of places in Europe and I wanted to try to learn about what I was getting myself into. I knew how to make ham and bacon. We had done it at home. But I wanted to do it as well as anybody was doing it if I was going to do it.

**00:11:24**

Well, Sara, forty years ago honestly when you talked to somebody about the quality—of course I wasn't talking to fine dining restaurants but when I talked to my retail customers or to anybody else—restaurants, they could care less about what I had to say about quality. I was selling twelve to fifteen-month old hams for the same price that my competitors were selling eighty-day old hams. And all they cared was *how cheaply can you sell it to me?*

**00:11:55**

Well I doggone near starved to death those first years. It was tough. I remember about five years in business I told my father one day, I said, "I think, Dad, I may have to start quick curing these hams, sell 'em in eighty or ninety days because," I said, "I just can't compete. I'm starving to death." And my father looked at me, Sara, after a few moments in silence and he said, "Son," he said, "first off, if you play the other guy's game you always lose." And he said, "Secondly stay with quality." He said, "Sooner or later quality will sustain you in this business."

He said, "In fact, if there's a way to make it better in any way no matter what it costs," he said, "do it because," he said, "the quality will justify it."

**00:12:47**

And from that day forward I lived on his philosophy and thank goodness I hung my hat on it because I know that if I had tried to quick cure those hams and just had another so-so ham out there I would have starved to death. And it was the quality that kept me here. And I think it started with my grandparents. We always had outstanding pork. Like I told you I was born over the edge of Virginia and it was a very primitive lifestyle. Those—

**00:13:19**

**SW:** Where in Virginia?

**00:13:20**

**AB:** Scott County just across the Tennessee line and it was twenty-five miles from the nearest town. The County Seat was Gate City, Virginia which is very close to Kingsport. But I was born about twenty-five miles from Gate City back down in the—in the hills. And it was an isolated lifestyle. Neither side of the family owned a car, truck, or tractor. My grandparents lived a mile apart. And they farmed with horses and mules. They walked everywhere they went or rode in a wagon literally like people would have lived 100 years before them. And but they were desperately poor and had no cash raised everything they ate. But that old saying a blind hog gets an acorn every now and then. Being poor they would run out of stuff to feed their—their hogs or their pigs along about August every year. When the gardens—the extra produce in the gardens

starting playing out they didn't have as much available they would turn their hogs loose in the forest to forage for acorns or whatever they could find.

**00:14:20**

Well, they were doing it because they didn't have anything to feed them. But it turns out of course that—that made incredible quality pork. And I grew up eating incredible quality pork, and they were known for producing outstanding pork there in that area. Well, when I got into the business I tried to duplicate what they were doing and I was using our original family recipe but my pork wasn't as good as theirs. And all through the years I didn't know for sure if it was the breeding or if it was the diet. I didn't know what it was but I knew I couldn't replicate what they were doing. And my first time I ever got to New York John T. Edge took me and going with him is like traveling with Mick Jagger. It's the best experience of my life. I've never been around anybody – of course he's fun to be around anyway – but when you travel with him you're like—it's like literally traveling with Mick Jagger. And we got to do things I never would have gotten to do otherwise and—and sample foods that I never dreamed I'd have a chance to sample.

**00:15:25**

But he got me a position to sit on a panel at the Big Apple Blockbuster Barbecue Party and I can remember it was Ed Mitchell and myself and Pete Meehan the writer from the *New York Times* and Peter Kaminski who wrote the book *Pig Perfect*. Well, I was mesmerized just to be in the presence of those people. But Peter Kaminski talked about in the Iberian Peninsula how they fattened those black hogs on acorns. Well, he told about how the price could be as much as \$200 a pound on those hams. Of course this hillbilly's ears stuck straight up like a hound dog when he said that. And I couldn't imagine but the light bulb went off. I thought, *my goodness!*

*That's why my grandparents had such incredible pork and why I've not been able to duplicate it.*

They fattened those doggone hogs on acorns. And I'll tell you how lucky—how lucky I am that I made that trip because I came back from that trip bent on finding better pork.

**00:16:34**

I made it a mission. I mean the next day after I got back I was on the telephone at that time, not the computer, trying to chase down people that might raise better hogs. And I made phone calls all over the country and finally started searching the computer and making some contacts. And I tried to buy old breeds of pigs raised on pasture and no antibiotics in the feed. I thought I had a lead on some acorn fattened pork out in Iowa but don't think it's the quality I was looking for. I won't give you any names, but I backed out. I had agreed to pay a ridiculous price per pound for those hams and if I thought they were raised the way I wanted I would certainly pay it but I didn't think they were and talked to some fellows who knew the fella out there and they said the only way they would believe it is if they saw it. So I thought [**Laughs**] the hillbilly from Tennessee could end up getting suckered right there real easily. I backed out but I'm constantly looking for good pork.

**00:17:35**

And I buy from lots of small farmers. I told you earlier I think I've got my first Tennessee pork. I have a fella out in—he's actually—one of them grew up about twenty miles from here over in Loudon County. They bought a USDA-inspected slaughter operation out in West Tennessee and they've got farmers all over the state who are raising these old heritage breeds on pasture – no antibiotics in the feed – and I've committed to buy as many hams as they can supply me. I'll take whatever they bring or bellies as well. And they're supplying me pork

every week on a limited basis right now but I'm getting what they produce. And I've committed that if they grow it and they have 3,000 hogs available I'll buy 6,000 hams from them, whatever they've got. I think it will be a good quality pork and an easy marketing tool for me. I'm excited about it.

**00:18:28**

But I think going forward a lot of my competitors realized the same thing I did. The quality of pork is very important and I'm now in competition with several other good producers in this country as well as good chefs across the country who are after that same pork. So it's even harder today than when I first started to find that pork.

**00:18:53**

**SW:** And do you think that your work has had an influence on that because people could see what is possible in terms of quality, and they want to try to replicate that instead of being a huge commodity where, you know, you can produce hundreds of thousands of hams but the quality is poor.

**00:19:18**

**AB:** Sara, I think collectively with other small producers that we might have had an influence. I've noticed where even some of the—one of the fast food chains is now trying to source pork that's not raised in these cages where they can't roam around. They're trying to buy cage-free pork to sell. And I can't remember which one it was. But when I heard that I have to confess I smiled and I thought, *Well I know I didn't make a difference*, but I think that collectively me and lots of other small producers who are trying to produce quality may have had an impact and

actually swayed the big guys. I think that I've benefitted so much from this buy local, farm to table movement, all this and in the last few years you're keenly aware that quality has become important.

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And I think maybe as people have traveled to Europe and they're better traveled and more knowledgeable I think that when they've gone to Europe and eaten the prosciutto or they've got to Spain and eaten the Serrano they've come back here and they're thinking *Hmm. Sam Edwards in Virginia or Nancy Newsome in Kentucky or Allan Benton in Madisonville they got stuff that tastes about as good as what was found in Europe* you know. And I think they're realizing that it doesn't have to be made in Europe to be good. I had a place in Philadelphia I was selling to, to Bruno Brothers. And I'm told it's kind of upscale. I've never been there. But about the second or third time they purchased my product I got a phone call from the buyer. And he said, "I have to share this with you." He said, "We've had to learn how to sell your ham." He said, "We get this really sophisticated clientele, well-traveled in here, lots of New Yorkers," and he said, "I was trying to sell your ham. And I'd tell them about this great ham from Tennessee and they'd just throw their nose up in the air and say 'No. I want imported.'"

**00:21:21**

Well he said he figured out they'd come in and they'd ask, "I need something from you know a really high-quality ham." And he said, "Well, this is what you're ordering. Let me also let you taste this one." And they'd taste it and say, "Oh my! What is that? I love that ham." Only then would he tell them it was a ham from Tennessee. **[Laughs]** And he said he had to—he said, "Once they tried it, once they tasted it they were hooked," but if he told them beforehand they

didn't even want to taste it. They just assumed that the quality wasn't there. So I really believe, Sara, that especially chefs across the country they have learned that American producers can rival anything coming out of Europe quality-wise I think. And that's always been my set out. I mean my goal when I got into it, I realized that the Europeans set the standard forty years ago when I was researching it. And I thought to myself *I want to make it as good as they make it.* And that was my goal and I'm not going to be bold enough to say I've done that, but I can promise you that every day of my life in this business that's the goal I strive for. And I try to find people when I hire employees that will buy into what I'm doing and help do that. That's the goal.

**00:22:36**

**SW:** Allan, I have a few more questions for you is that okay?

**00:22:39**

**AB:** Go right ahead.

**00:22:41**

**SW:** And before I forget I need to put this somewhere in the tape so that it's there that today is February 14, 2014. It's Valentine's Day and I'm sitting here with Mr. Allan Benton and we're in Madisonville, Tennessee. And I'm wondering if you wouldn't mind Allan just saying hi and introducing yourself and telling me who you are and where we are right now.

**00:23:02**

**AB:** Well, of course, I'm Allan Benton. We're sitting in my junked up office here in my business in Madisonville, Tennessee on Valentine's Day and I'm sure you've got better ways to

spend your time today, Sara. But I've been in the country ham business since 1973. Before that my family did it as a way of life, and I can't remember when I wasn't involved in hog killing and helping to put the hams and bacon in cure. It was—we did it religiously every year until about the time I got out of high school. I was born over in Scott County, Virginia just about three hours from where we're sitting here in Madisonville. The recipe that I use is basically unchanged from the log smokehouse behind the house I was born in. I don't know how many generations used that in my family but I'm assuming that it doesn't go back very far because I would think that prior to sometime in the early 1900s that sugar would have been really hard to come by. I'm assuming they probably would have had to use just salt up until sometime in that early 1900s timeframe. I don't have any way of tracing back how long the recipe has been used in my family.

**00:24:21**

But I was a high school guidance counselor before I got into this business. And the business itself I didn't start. There was a dairy farmer in our county here named Albert Hicks who started making ham and bacon almost by accident in 1946. He actually got into the business in '47. He had a visitor from the Northeast, a relative of his wife, Dorothy who came and stayed a couple of weeks. And when he got ready to leave he inquired about the kind of meat he had been eating every day. And Albert explained to him that it was just meat from his smokehouse and after some conversation the man inquired about buying some of those hams.

**00:25:13**

And Albert told him that he had some hams up in his smokehouse he could let him have. He said, "How many hams are you looking for?" And the fellow told Albert he wanted 100 of them. Well Albert said, "Oh my goodness, never would kill fifty hogs in a year," but he, after

some discussion, told this fellow that he would go out at hog killing time and buy fresh hams from his neighbors and cure them for him if he wanted to come back the following year and get them, and the man agreed to do that.

**00:25:42**

Well, Albert got out at hog killing time, Sara, and started making these hams. And as it happens in small rural counties everybody knows everything and word got out what Albert was doing. And people started going over there to his house and knocking on the door and saying, “Will you sell us one of those hams you’re curing for that fella?” Well, Albert kept the hams and the man came back and got them, but Albert thought, “Huh. There must be something to this. This might be worth something playing with.” And he went to a local packing house and bought either 200 or 300 – he couldn’t remember – fresh hams and started curing them in a little shack in his backyard.

**00:26:27**

About the time I got into college my grandparents were getting old on their farm and not wanting to fool with the hogs and we actually started buying some country ham from Albert Hicks, the man who started this business. And I never dreamed about getting into the country ham business. I remember I had just gotten my master’s degree and was working as a high school guidance counselor. School had just started and, Sara, they brought the salary schedule by. Well, I looked at that salary schedule and I had already been moonlighting trying to help myself sustain myself in that job and I thought *Huh. I’ll never be able to make a living doing this.* And within fifteen minutes I walked into my principal’s office who was a friend of mine and I resigned. And it took thirty minutes to convince him I was serious. **[Laughs]** And he

finally asked me, he said, “Well what are you going to do?” I said – his name was Gordon Sparks – I said, “Gordon I don’t know.” I said, “I can walk across the road to the service station and pump gas for a living and make as much as I’m making doing this.” At that time it wasn’t self-service, Sara, that’s before your time but—.

**00:27:38**

I was thinking about going to law school and I was just—it dawned on me after I had quit my job, I thought, *Well dang it. I’m going to have to sit out you know one or two years probably to get in. What am I going to do?* And I thought about it. Couldn’t think of anything that interested me. But a couple weeks after I quit I heard that Albert Hicks had quit making hams and bacon. He had been quit about five months or so. I went over and talked to him. And asked him if he would lease me that little shack in his backyard. It wasn’t government inspected. It was just a little shed basically. And he agreed to, and I started making hams and bacon. And that’s when I wrote to every university trying to learn more about what I was doing. And it’s just a miracle that I survived. And, Sara, there are so many people that helped me along the way. I mean, I owe so many people a debt of gratitude for helping me, the professors at the university. I got on a first-name basis with the people in the food and technology department real quickly.

**00:28:46**

The folks at Mississippi State, they have been so kind to help me. Any time I’ve had a problem—you got a fellow down there at Mississippi State. His name is Benji Michael and he’s probably one of the foremost experts on country ham. Well, without a doubt he’s one of the foremost in this country but he’s sharp as a tack. Any time I need help I can call him and he’ll still walk me through it. There’s so many people out there that I owe a debt of gratitude to. And

people in the country ham business itself. I can't tell you how kind they've been to me. Any time I've got a question I believe I could pick up the phone and call any of my peers and if I needed help I think I'd get a straightforward forthright honest answer from any of them. Most of them would bend over backwards to help you. I got a nice note from Sam Edwards [III] when I was— because my smokehouse caught on fire and burned last summer. And Sam, the phone was busy and he couldn't get through. He sat down and wrote me a letter. And at that time I had never gotten to meet Sam face-to-face. I had talked to him on the phone and knew his reputation.

**00:29:56**

He wanted to know what he could do to help me. *Could he smoke meat for me? Was there anything he could do?* Now that's the kind of people you got in the country ham business. Another friend of mine in the meat business about twenty miles from here called me that night about 9:30 on my cell phone. He had actually called another member of the family to get my cell phone number. That member of the family was in a meeting with our two U.S. Senators and our Governor. And he interrupted that meeting to get my cell phone. And he called and he said, "This is John Ed Wompler." He said, "I've got refrigerated trucks." He said, "I've got truck drivers on standby and all of the refrigeration you need. What can I do to help you?"

**00:30:40**

But that's the kind of people I've been fortunate to know, Sara, in the meat business. It's some of the most caring incredible people I've ever come in contact with. Just like the folks from the Southern Foodways Alliance. I've never been associated with a better element of humanity on this earth than that group.

**00:30:58**

**SW:** Allan, I'm wondering you know in terms of you talk about your family. You raised hogs and there were hog killings and they cured—was it just for the family or did they—I mean in a sense you're talking about people helping other people out, was it a community thing that they did? Did other—like did neighbors partake in it? How did that work?

**00:31:21**

**AB:** Sara, where I'm from in Virginia, Thanksgiving Day was traditionally hog killing day. And I never recall killing hogs that some of the neighbors around didn't come to help. But also my family helped them. It was a joint effort. It was primitive. We didn't even have a vat to dip the pigs in. They were poor. They would shoot the hogs in the hog lot and roll them onto a sled and take a horse or a mule and pull the sled over to a spring branch where we had water heated. And we would lay burlap sacks on those hogs and pour that hot water through it to soften the hair so we could scrape it and we'd scrape one little section and move that burlap bag over and pour hot water through it again and soften the hair and scrape that section. Very labor intense, just the depths of Southern Appalachian poverty quite honestly.

**00:32:12**

I once had somebody ask me if I was one of the Blue Bloods out of Virginia. I said, "Well let me explain it to you the best I know." Both of my families, my dad's family and my mother's family they homesteaded in adjoining sections in the mountains of Virginia. And if history relates it correctly the farther west you went you were—on the lower end of the socioeconomic scale, the Blue Bloods stayed around you know Williamsburg and that area and the farther west you moved the lower on the totem pole you were on the socioeconomic group.

**00:32:53**

My people got as far west as you could get in Virginia and still be in Virginia. *[Laughs]* So it was the depths of poverty. The lifestyle, I have to tell you, was incredible for a kid to grow up experiencing what I grew up because I remember when we put water in the houses of course. We got our water from a spring. We sat our—we used a spring house like a refrigerator. We set all the stuff in the spring to—to keep it cold. And it was an idyllic way for a young kid to grow up. I was born in '47 so I basically grew up and my memories are in the '50s and early '60s and tremendous—tremendous work ethic. They raised everything they ate. Like I said before, they had no money, no cash money, but there was tremendous pride in the quality of that pork. And people would come and try to buy their pork, the cured pork, and they occasionally would sell some of the hams.

**00:33:52**

And I remember—this must have been—this must have been early '60s, '61 or '62. My grandmother had sold one of the hams to a fellow the year before for fifty-cents a pound which she thought was an incredible price. And he came back and wanted to pay her a dollar a pound. And she said, “No, no, no,” she said. “They’re fifty-cents a pound.” He said, “But I want to pay a dollar a pound because,” he said, “that quality ham is worth it.” And he insisted and she really felt badly. She didn’t want to take it. She was almost embarrassed like she had done something wrong. And she just kept talking about it that he paid a dollar a pound for these hams.

**00:34:36**

And she just thought that was such a phenomenal price at that time. But like I said the quality of the pork was renowned and it was almost bragging rights in those mountains as to who

made the best pork. I've often wondered what my grandparents would think about what I'm doing. I hope that they would be proud of what I'm trying to do. I'm not sure they'd be proud of what I'm doing [*Laughs*] because this pork is not as good as what they raised. They had the old Heritage breeds and like I said that acorn-rich diet of course made such a difference.

00:35:09

**SW:** And what were your grandparents' names?

00:35:11

**AB:** Will Harvey Wright, W.H. Wright, Sr. he was known simply as Will, a large man about 6'3" or 4" weighed about 290 in his prime. Always wore bibbed overalls as most country folks back there did and just a giant of a man in that day. People weren't as big then so somebody that size was just a giant. Most people were fairly small at that time. Sally Benton was my maternal—or my paternal grandmother. My grandfather died – B.D. Benton, Sr. – he died in 1936 before I was ever born. I never knew him. But they took great pride in—like I said it was bragging rights. It was just simply bragging rights about who made the best sausage or the best ham or the best bacon and—and people were—they would often sell hams, seldom sold into the shoulders or what we call side meat, the bacon. They didn't tend to sell that. That wasn't in demand but the hams where they could turn it into cash and cash was so scarce.

00:36:21

In fact I remember about the time I started college in 1965 my grandmother was drawing thirty-six dollars and something social security and she lived on it. That's pretty amazing. She

made it last. She paid her electric bill. She bought what staples she had to have and she survived on it. They were pretty hardy folks.

**00:36:46**

**SW:** And your parents' names?

**00:36:49**

**AB:** B.D. Benton and Gerri Benton. Gerri stands for Geraldine. She was always known as Gerri. And my father he was always known as B.D. Benton. They called him B.D. from early childhood on I think.

**00:37:06**

**SW:** And Allan I know this is sort of a big question but I'm wondering if there's—you know you talk about this as a tradition, your family's tradition but I'm wondering if there's like one particular thing that has stuck with you way back from curing when you were younger with them while you're here today, if there is something that just resonates within these walls, something that you remember them doing growing up? I know you mentioned the cure is the same as your grandfather's but if there's something that you saw them do or something that they said or just a very visceral memory that you feel when you walk through this place today.

**00:37:48**

**AB:** I think of my grandparents still after these many years on a daily basis. But what I'm doing here I had to modify some from the way we did it in that old log smokehouse at home. Of course

we used ambient temperatures there, whatever—like I said we killed hogs on Thanksgiving Day and I don't ever recall them losing any of the pork.

**00:38:11**

I think the weather was different then. It was colder. It's—this year is one of the few years in recent years where you could have killed a hog on Thanksgiving Day and the meat would have kept. We've had the—a colder season than common here in Tennessee. And I think any time we—you could have killed a hog from Thanksgiving on you could have kept your pork in a smokehouse in a backyard.

**00:38:33**

Many, many times in recent years we've had temperatures that were not conducive to that. But any time when I tell people I'm using my family recipe I'm fully cognizant of the fact I didn't come up with that recipe. They did. And I certainly don't deserve credit. I've played around with lots of recipes over the years, Sara. But I've always come back to that original family recipe and I can't tell you it's better. I can just tell you that it works for me and I do have a sense of pride that my forefathers used it. And like I said, I hope they would be proud of what I'm trying to do. I think they would be a little suspect of the quality. Like I told you, I think they were—when you've got a—first off they raised their hogs to 500—600 pounds because they coveted that lard. They didn't go to the grocery store and buy canola oil. They had to have the lard for shortening and seasoning then. They would—I remember my Grandfather Wright he would brag about how many five-gallon buckets of lard he got from two or three or four hogs—whatever it was and was so proud of that.

**00:39:46**

But I think those old Heritage breeds of hogs fattened the way they fattened their hogs was truly superior to the pork that I'm able to buy today. Outside of that I think they would approve of what I'm doing. But I think of them on a daily basis, the—the morals, and the values, the tremendous work ethic. I'm so proud of who I am and I wouldn't—if I could sell my childhood memories, for \$100 million I wouldn't sell them because that's how priceless they are to me. I have such fond memories of the time that I spent with my grandparents and the lessons I've learned from them.

**00:40:25**

**SW:** And Allan I wanted to ask you this because I've noticed that you refer to yourself as “this hillbilly” as we walked around. But I'm wondering what does that mean to you because you know there are stereotypes all over the place when it comes to the South but especially in Appalachia there's this stereotype of hillbilly. And I want to know, you know you refer to yourself as hillbilly. What does that mean to you as a person who grew up in this place and very much carry it with you and brought these traditions here today?

**00:40:59**

**AB:** Well Sara, when I use that I'm not using it in a derogatory manner. I guess I'm proud—I'm proud of my Appalachian heritage. I'm proud of my roots. Like I told you, I wouldn't sell those childhood memories for anything. How many kids had the real experience of riding to the store in a horse drawn wagon? Most of the time we walked. We didn't take the wagon but occasionally if they were going to buy something really heavy they would do it. Sometimes they would buy feed for their hogs and they'd buy 300 or 400 pounds and they'd take a wagon. If it

was only 100 pounds my Grandfather Wright would throw 100 pounds on each shoulder. He would carry 200 pounds two miles from the store and think nothing about it. I remember that. He was like I said, he was a large fellow, unbelievably strong.

00:41:51

I sure didn't get my size from him I can tell you that. *[Laughs]* I got my size from the Bentons. The Bentons were very small people. They were—most of them were *[Phone Rings]* 5'10" or less. No, no, Tommy will get that.

00:42:08

What else? Am I leaving anything out?

00:42:10

**SW:** You were talking about your grandfather carrying—

00:42:14

**AB:** Yeah. He was phenomenally strong but yeah that's all—that was all the part of the memories I have that. I mean that—that is who I am. And you're talking about the—the hillbilly image. I think any of us that grew up in Appalachia can relate. It's kind of like the people who grew up in South Louisiana. They'll call themselves Cajuns whether they are or not. I mean, that's just who they are and they're proud of their lifestyle. I'm certainly proud of my mountain lifestyle and my mountain heritage. Truly I couldn't be prouder of my family. Like I said they were certainly—they lived in the depths of Southern Appalachian poverty.

00:42:55

I can tell you that the poorest people in America today they have a luxurious lifestyle compared to what I remember my grandparents living. When we talk about poverty today you know if you've got color TV and you've got air-conditioning and the government furnishes you a cell phone you're not really poor. **[Laughs]** These people were really poor. They had nothing but they made it—they made a go of it. And I'm certainly proud of that.

00:43:23

**SW:** Were you an only child or did you have brothers and sisters?

00:43:25

**AB:** I am an only child. My mom and dad I guess when they saw me they couldn't bear the thoughts of having more. **[Laughs]**

00:43:35

**SW:** Allan do you have time for just a couple more questions?

00:43:39

**AB:** I've got all the time you need, Sara.

00:43:42

**SW:** I'm wondering well how do you think—I know it's hard to go back and imagine these situations but I'm wondering if you would have stuck with that guidance counselor job and never bought this place from Mr. Hicks, how do you think things would have turned out differently for you? I mean could you imagine your life without this business?

00:44:01

**AB:** Well Sara, I don't think I would have stayed with the guidance counselor business. I was already having second thoughts when I was in graduate school. And I didn't know what I wanted to do. And when I got into this business I have to confess: I got into it thinking I would just mark time until I could get admitted to law school. But after five or six months I found that I was really enjoying what I was doing. And I wasn't making any money, literally. I mean I—the first—I took inventory. I didn't pay myself anything. I went—started in September and I took inventory January 1<sup>st</sup> and I had been working probably eighty-hour days, I mean eighty-hour weeks I'm sorry. And I took inventory and I had made about \$300.

00:44:53

And I thought, *My goodness. I can't make it if I keep—you know I've got to do something.* But I just kept working and I kept working and even though I wasn't making any money I really enjoyed what I was doing. And I thought, *Well, I think I'm just going to stick with this 'cause I don't think it's going to last long anyway but as long as I'm liking it and I can make it I'm just going to stick with it.* And I can tell you that any schoolteacher in the county made more money than I did probably the first ten years I was in business. I mean it was a real struggle. And I was working long, hard hours. But I really enjoyed it. And now I'm retirement age I guess, but I enjoy what I do and have no desire to go sit down. I hope that I'm making ham and bacon when I'm eighty-five if I'm still alive. I just don't want to go retire. I think I would be miserable. I enjoy my customers, and I really enjoy my employees. And I enjoy making ham and bacon. And I figure I must be one of the lucky people in the country. I think if you sit down you start downhill mentally and physically. And I think I would be bored out of my mind. I can fish a little

and have a good time. I could play golf a little and have a good time, but a little is the part of that statement you need to pay attention to.

00:46:10

I fully realize at my age I need to back off and not work eighty hours a week. I still probably put in close to seventy hours a week I would think right now. But I'm also cognizant of the fact that I probably will start to back off and hopefully get down to somewhere in the forty-hour—forty-hour per week range some day and doing that would be like semi-retirement for me anyway, and I think I would enjoy being in business as long as I'm able to function. I hope I can stick with it. **[Laughs]**

00:46:41

**SW:** Well you know I was actually talking to somebody when I rented the car from Nashville and I told her I was going and she said, “Oh I don't eat bacon because it's not good for you.” So I think *well she just doesn't know what she's missing* but you know do you get a lot of people that still have—we were talking about stereotypes or stigma of ham. This thing that people don't think that ham is good for you or they don't want to eat it, do you have you had to deal a lot with that with customers?

00:47:11

**AB:** Well Sara, we're keenly aware that not everybody—in fact not everybody likes my bacon or my ham. They might like other bacon. That's okay too. I think that you know lots of people—several factors. When I got in this business there was the nitrate scare back in the '70s. I thought *Oh my goodness that's going to put me out of business*. I don't even use nitrates or nitrites at all

on the bacon. There's no nitrates in it and no nitrites, only salt and brown sugar. The USDA requires us to use some nitrite in the ham and we use the least amount of course permissible. I don't think it's really necessary the way I cure a ham and age these hams but I'm not sure about it.

**00:47:59**

I guess— one of my best friends is a vegetarian and I guess just felt like everybody has a right to their own opinion and their own taste and not everybody likes it and not everybody wants to eat it. But thank goodness there's enough people out there that like it to keep us in business and I've never had a goal of making a lot of ham or a lot of bacon. I just wanted to make truly exquisite quality ham and bacon. That was always my goal and it's still my goal. I don't particularly—it doesn't—if I could triple my production I'm not interested. I just want to make really high-quality stuff. That's what I want to focus on.

**00:48:41**

**SW:** And could you talk—before I forget to ask you this because this is very important. You were talking about it as we were walking around but could you just walk me through what your process is for the hams and for the bacon here and maybe some of the— we were talking about some of the more crazy things that you've had to do for people?

**00:48:59**

**AB:** Well—

00:49:00

**SW:** Let's start with the process here.

00:49:02

**AB:** The process, we'll do the hams first. The fresh hams when we get them in we unload them off a tractor-trailer and they come in huge boxes generally, sometimes smaller boxes depending on what supplier I'm getting them from. But we'll put the hams in cure, rub a mixture of salt, brown sugar, black and red pepper on them, and put them in cure usually about eight pounds per 100 pounds of meat, eight pounds of cure per 100 pounds of meat. And we put them in cure, leave them about a week, come back and rework the cure, and stack them up. And we leave them typically in there—the size hams that I make mostly twenty-three or twenty-four-pound hams I'll leave them in there for around fifty days. I take them out of cure and hang them on racks and move them into what we call an equalization cooler. The first cooler we try to run at about thirty-eight to forty degrees. The second cooler it can be anywhere from forty-two to fifty-two degrees. It's called equalization cooler.

00:50:06

And we're just letting—we're trying to mimic Mother Nature. When I—we butchered those hogs at Thanksgiving and when we took them up and hung them up it was still cold weather so we're wanting to keep them cold for a while longer. So we typically will keep our hams four to six weeks at equalization and sometimes maybe two months. Then we'll pull them out into the aging space at room temperature and let them age up to two years or more. It depends on how they're going to be used. But that's basically the process.

00:50:37

The bacon is much quicker, Sara. We bring the bacon bellies in and we rub a mixture of salt and brown sugar on them, stack them in curing bins, and leave them for about ten days. We pull them out, wash them, hang them on racks and let them hang in that equalization cooler for about ten days. Now the first cooler is about thirty-eight to forty degrees like the hams. After they've been in equalization for about ten days we like to roll them out into the aging space for somewhere between a week and ten days and let them dry and age a little bit, throw them in the smokehouse for about three days of intense smoke. And when they come out of the smokehouse and cool off they're ready to slice and package or to sell or whatever—ready to use.

00:51:22

Nothing fancy. There's no secrets. I was talking to one of my cohorts in the country ham business this morning. Nancy Newsom from Kentucky, and Nancy was—she and I were comparing notes. And I said, “Nancy,” I said, “you know there's no secrets in the business.” I said, “Everybody thinks we've all got a secret recipe,” and I said, “we all are doing basically the same thing.” And I said, “You know, if you want to find out what I'm doing I'll tell you.” **[Laughs]** And I said, “That's pretty much true.” And people don't realize how much hard work goes into doing what we do, Sara. Not everybody is willing—I pretty much work six to seven days a week. Not many people are really willing to do that because I want to stay on top of the quality and make sure that we're doing exactly what we need to be doing. And you got to—when you—I've got really good people that help me do this but even at that you need an air traffic controller. You need somebody pushing the buttons and making it happen. And I try to stay on top of it on a daily basis and to make sure the quality is there. And I hope that answers that question.

00:52:35

**SW:** Yeah. Absolutely. And how many employees do you have at this time?

00:52:38

**AB:** I think I've got sixteen employees right now—very, still a very small operation. It's very labor intense though. With sixteen employees if I did it the way some of the big guys operate I could probably cure six times as much product as what I'm making. But this—the way we do it is very labor intense and I wouldn't do it this way of course if I didn't think it was better. I think I can control the quality and make the kind of product that we want to make that we'll be proud of.

00:53:07

**SW:** And can you talk—you talked a lot about the chefs earlier and the people in other parts of the country who are doing very great things with your product but you know just walking in it felt like it was a—like it was a community meeting. There were so many people in here and you were mingling with everyone. I'm just wondering, could you talk just a little bit about your client base locally? Do you have people coming in and out of your—?

00:53:32

**AB:** Yeah, we do. Sara, I had a friend once and he told me, he said, "Benton," he said, "you need to shut that front sales area down, forget it, and just ship product to restaurants across the country." He said, "You'll make more clear money." And I looked at him and smiled and I said, "But I don't want to do that." I enjoy this eclectic slice of humanity that walks through my front door. I get the old farmers in their overalls and their work boots and I get the professionals in

their three-piece suits. And it's this wonderful slice of humanity and my place looks horrible, Sara. I know it's nothing to look at but I've had people walk in and they'll say, "Don't ever change anything. This is the only place that I go in that nothing ever changes." **[Laughs]** And that's pretty much the story.

**00:54:33**

That old chair and this desk have been with me since I started. Both of them were Army surplus stuff that were being thrown away that I picked up for a song. The rotary telephone I still use every day.

**00:54:46**

**SW:** I love that phone.

**00:54:47**

**AB:** Sticky notes all over the wall. I've got a computer and I've had to use it but I don't get away from the old ways. And we're lucky that people think that. My wife says she would never buy anything out of this place just because of the way it looks but my customers seem to love it. They like the fact that nothing does change. And we certainly haven't changed anything. I've not changed the process at all **[Phone Rings]** in over forty years.

**00:55:16**

**SW:** Allan, I have one more question for you and then if you want to add anything—. You've been very generous with your time.

00:55:21

**AB:** Oh no, any amount. Listen. You're the one that came a long way to see me, Sara. **[Laughs]**  
I'm delighted to get to talk to you.

00:55:30

**SW:** Well I just appreciate your time. I know you're busy and seventy hours a week is a hectic week. So I'm just wondering what—it's a two-part question: what you like least about running this business and what you love the most about it?

00:55:44

**AB:** I guess what I like the least is the paperwork. **[Laughs]** What I like the most it's almost a toss-up. I really enjoy making the ham and bacon. I also enjoy the relationships I have with people. Like you said, the people that walk through the door out there I get them from all across the country. Lots of them from here in East Tennessee. Some of these customers will drive thirty, forty, fifty miles to get here—or more—I always enjoy the fraternization with my customers. But I've got good people, good employees. I enjoy that as well. I really enjoy what I do and that's one reason I'm not really—I guess if I didn't enjoy it, Sara, I'd want to retire and do something else. But I really enjoy it. I feel very blessed. I feel like one of the luckiest people in the country. I don't make a lot of money doing what I do but it's never been about the money for me.

00:56:43

I always make quality of my product, the bottom line here. If I can make truly outstanding product then I'm successful. I can make a million dollars but if my product was lousy I wouldn't enjoy it at all. It's all about the quality and I enjoy that. I also—I feel very lucky. I think—I've got professional friends and blue collar friends that hate every day that they go to work. I don't feel like that. I can't wait to get up and come out here and make it all happen again another day, so I feel like I'm very fortunate.

00:57:21

**SW:** And Allan is there anything else that you want to add that you think is important that I didn't ask you?

00:57:27

**AB:** Golly, Sara I don't know what kind of information you're looking for. I'll be glad to—like I said I'm pretty forthright. I won't hold back anything. Anything that you might be inclined to want to know I'd share with you. Like I said, I've struggled in the business and I owe an awful lot of people. I didn't do it alone.

00:57:49

When President Obama riled—he riled a lot of people across the country in small business when he said, “You guys in business, you didn't build that.” Well when I heard it I thought, *huh. It kind of struck me a little bit wrong.* But after about two minutes of thinking about it I thought, *Dang he's right. I didn't build it. I had an awful lot of people help me.*

**[Laughs]** I'm not sure I understood what he was saying about the role of government and knew

where he was coming from but in my case I didn't do it alone. I've got some great employees and I've had so many people help me across the country. I couldn't have done it on my own. If I hadn't gotten to know John Fler or John T. Edge and get to meet the folks with the Southern Foodways, I probably wouldn't even be in business. I probably would have starved out. I was barely surviving. And I certainly know that—how important that was that fate played a great hand in that and how lucky I am to have gotten to know so many of these people. And there's lots of people that I've been involved with in Southern Foodways Alliance, so many chefs that have used my products and people have done like you. They've come and interviewed me or written a story about it and how in the world could I repay that? I couldn't. I've been blessed.

**00:59:12**

**SW:** Well Allan I guess I only have one more question for you and it's—I don't mean to sound silly when I ask this but you know, everybody refers to how it smells so—wonderful in here. It smells smoky. Are you used to that smell? Like, can you still smell the smoke when you come in or is it something that you're so accustomed to it? I know that sounds silly but does it smell smoky in here when you walk in?

**00:59:38**

**AB:** What smell? Does that answer your question? **[Laughs]** I—I literally don't smell anything Sara. I've—I've been around this for forty years. I was gone once for I don't know a couple of weeks, and I came back in. And I smelled that incredible aroma for just a few seconds and then it was gone and I've never smelled it since. I don't smell anything when I come in here.

01:00:02

**SW:** Does that break your heart a little bit?

01:00:04

**AB:** Well, you know when I make a bank deposit they tell me that the vial smells like this place when I—when they carry **[Laughs]** the money in there. That's the truth. And of course when I can walk in a store in Knoxville and I've had people say, "I smell something like it's burning." And I say, "Well, that's me." **[Laughs]** And I explain what I do. It's—it's—you'll wear the perfume of this place for the rest of the day, Sara. I can tell you that. You'll have to clean your scarf.

01:00:32

**SW:** No, I wanna keep it! I'm honored to have it. I'm excited to walk in here for that reason. Allan I forgot to ask you this. We always ask people; could you tell me your date of birth for the record?

01:00:44

**AB:** I was born June 28, 1947.

01:00:48

**SW:** Thank you, sir. Well, I don't have any more questions for you. I just want to thank you for doing this because you're busy and you've been so generous so thank you for doing this.

01:00:56

**AB:** Sara, how exciting it is that you wanted to come here and how lucky I am. I honestly feel blessed that you wanted to come and I'm delighted to get to meet you. You're like most of the people in the Southern Foodways Alliance. They must hire the best people on earth. They hire—they have an incredible staff. So many of them—I mean I feel really—I have really fond feelings toward a lot of those people. I mean they're just an incredible element of humanity. And most of the people who are members of the SFA are an incredible element of humanity.

01:01:31

I've toiled long and hard in this business. And I've felt like just a voice in the wilderness. Nobody would listen. I mean they wasn't paying any attention. And the first time I went to SFA and was around people who were as fired up and inspired by good food and good drink as I was [*Phone Rings*], I couldn't believe it. I had never been around people like that before. I mean I felt—until then I felt like I was a round peg trying to fit in a square hole. Just—it just wasn't working. I mean I didn't—I never was around that element of humanity. But all of the sudden I thought *huh*. You know, I just felt like I belonged and when I went to the SFA I really didn't feel like I belonged because I felt like everybody there was almost somebody in the culinary world. I mean there were an incredible element of people I had never dreamed I'd get to meet. But they embraced even a good ole boy from Tennessee and my goodness, they couldn't have made Sharon and me feel more welcome, and how lucky I am that I got to be a part of that.

01:02:40

And still it's been a huge influence in my life and my business because if I get to talk to some of these people they just fire you up and you're enthused and you want to do it all over

again. And that's what it's all about. It would be easy. You know when—if you feel like you're interested in all this but nobody in the world is but you it's hard to keep your momentum and your enthusiasm. Well how important is that? *[Laughs]* I've been blessed.

**01:03:11**

**SW:** Thank you, Allan.

**01:03:14**

**AB:** Well Sara, I'm tickled to death that you came up here.

**01:03:17**

**[End Allan Benton 021414 Interview]**