ALLAN BENTON

Benton's Smoky Mountain Country Hams – Madisonville, TN

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Speaking to Fred Sauceman's Foodways of Appalachia class
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Project: Member Contributions

[Begin Allan Benton: Track 1]

[0:00:00]

Allan Benton: I once had aspirations of becoming a college professor. This is as close as I'll ever get. ***[Laughs]*** It is about relationships. I would have to agree. I've been very fortunate and very blessed, and this is a great opportunity for us. My wife [Sharon Benton] reminded me a few minutes ago, our wedding anniversary was September 7th. This was the first time that we've had a chance to eat dinner together since that night. ***[Laughs]*** I get home, I work long hours. I typically get home around seven to eight-thirty at night this time of year. And later in the year it's much longer.

But I was born in Scott County, Virginia. Some of you may not know where that it, but it's about fifty miles from here, where I was born. A section known as England Valley there in Scott County. It was so far back in the hills that you literally have to look straight up nearly to see daylight. If you're familiar with that region, you know I've not stretched it at all. But the hills come down very sharp, and you have to look up to see the sun at noon. That's about the only time you see it.

My grandparents lived a mile apart there. And I tell folks that it's not by accident that my parents got married because you had to court somebody within walking distance. ***[Laughs]*** That eliminated a lot of folks in this world.

But we would go home to Virginia on Wednesday night before Thanksgiving, from my earliest memories as a young child, all the way through high school. And we would spend all day Thanksgiving Day butchering hogs for both sides of the family. It

was literally a way of life. My grandparents lived about as isolated and about as primitive a lifestyle as anybody could live in this country in the [nineteen] forties, fifties, and sixties. They raised everything they ate: vegetables, meat. They ate very little beef, quite a bit of chicken and lots of pork. And the fatter they could get those hogs the better because they didn't have Wesson oil in those days. They used the lard from those animals for seasoning and shortening. And we would get up way before daylight. We would have the water hot. And at the first break of day, my grandfather would hook and old—hitch an old horse or mule to his sled—didn't own a wagon. It was too rough, and he couldn't use a wagon on that place. ***[Clears throat]*** And he would hitch his sled up to the horse or mule, go over to the hog pen and shoot the first hog. And we would haul them one at a time because the hogs were so heavy. About one would be all you'd want to put on there at a time. They would be six, seven hundred pounds. ***[Clears throat]*** And we would typically spend pretty much all day Thursday, Friday, and Saturday working up all that meat for both sides of the family. Again, they only lived a mile apart.

And—I want to scoot this back and prop up if—no, it's okay. No, it's fine, it's fine, if that's okay.

[0:03:12]

And they would typically spend all that time—they would kiln the sausage, they would put the hams and the bacon in cure, and we would spend quite a bit of time salting the meat, then make our trip back to Madisonville, where we resided. And that was pretty much the routine all the way through high school. In fact, I never ate a turkey in my life—until I was grown—on Thanksgiving Day. We had fresh pork. We ate everything on that hog that could be consumed except the chitlins [*or chitterlings*]. My folks didn't

use the chitlins as most folks here in this upper east Tennessee area didn't. And I think it depended on what part of Europe those residents came from that settled this region that dictated their use of those things. But they didn't use a natural casing to stuff their sausage, and they didn't use chitlins. And, other than that, we ate the tail, the tongue, the ears, the brains, the feet, everything on that hog. We ate the lungs. I didn't particularly like those. They—they—the old folks called them the lights. And they were a spongy sweet meat that I didn't really care for. But they ate every bit of that hog.

[0:04:19]

About the time I got out of high school, my grandparents were getting some age on the, And they were to the point that they were getting infirm, and they had begun to quit raising those hogs. So we started purchasing hams from a man there in our community, who had a place in his backyard and he sold—he sold those hams and bacon from his little smokehouse behind his house. His name was Albert Hicks.

And when I went to the school at UT [University of Tennessee], the baby boomers had hit. It was 1967. I actually went the first two years of school to a little community college there in my hometown. I came to East Tennessee State [University] one-quarter: the fall quarter of 1967. And I've lamented—as we came in this building—it's the worst mistake I made in college. I chose to go to UT [University of Tennessee] for winter quarter because I wanted to see big-time basketball and football. Well it's a great environment to watch ball, but it was a horrible environment for me to go to school. I didn't enjoy one day at the University of Tennessee. I just didn't like it. It was too big, there was no parking, it wasn't pretty like East Tennessee State, and I'm sure I would have been much happier, if I'd have graduated right here. But I chose to go there. We

couldn't get on a meal place, couldn't get in a dorm. Well, a country boy from Madisonville—we didn't have fast-food restaurants in those days, and we ate out very little. And the first quarter I was there, I thought that hamburgers were gourmet food. And I ate hamburgers two, three times a day for that quarter. But somehow, by the end of the quarter, they weren't tasting so well anymore. ***[Laughs]*** And to this day, I'm not a real connoisseur of hamburgers. But I started taking a hot plate up, and we were doing a little bit of cooking, and I would fry some country ham. And we would go over to this man that started this business, whose name was Albert Hicks, and buy hams.

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After I graduated, I took a job teaching school in Brevard Country School near Cape Canaveral. And again, being away from Tennessee, I was craving that country food that I was missing, and I would have my father mail me a ham. I lived in apartments in those days, and people would smell it cooking. And they'd say, "Say, what is that?" And they'd try some and say, "Where do you get this?" And I'd tell them. And well, "When can you get me one?" So I had my father mail several hams, of course, that year down there to people that wanted them, the people that I worked with.

Then I came back from spring break my—after my first year there in Florida. Everybody from here was going down there. I wanted to come back to Tennessee for spring break. But I ran into the superintendent of schools, while I was up here. And he talked to me on the street, said, "What are you doing?" And I said, "Well, I'm teaching school down in Brevard County. And he said, "Well," he said, "come back up here. I've got a job for you." And I said, "Well, I can't afford to take the pay cut. You don't pay as much here in Tennessee. And he said, "Well," he said, "you think about it. He said, "I've

got a job for you. Come see me." Well I—twenty-two years old—and, you know, that kind of inflated my ego that someone was interested in me, so I went to see him the next morning. And he offered me a job as a high school guidance counselor. And I said, "Well, I'm not certified." And he said, "That doesn't matter." He said, "You can get certified." And I said, "Well, okay." And he offered me a job, and I took it. And I enrolled at Middle Tennessee State University, during the summers to work on my masters and get certified in guidance. And I earned an MA in psychology, which I'm not proud of. ***[Laughs]*** And got certified in guidance.

I came back at the end of that summer that I graduated, and I looked at the pay scale, and I thought, I simply have made a poor career choice. I can't live on this. So I went home, and I told my father that I was quitting my job. And my dad being a prudent man, he said, "Well that's great, but what are you doing." I said, "Well, I don't know." And he said, "Son, that's not a good thing to quit your job with nothing in your sights." He said, "Back off and think about it."

[0:08:10]

In about a week or so, my dad came to me and he said, "What would you think about curing country hams for a living?" And I said, "Well, Dad, I would probably starve to death. I can't make a living doing that." And he said, "Well, Albert Hicks has quit." I said, "Well in that case, maybe I'll go talk to him."

So I went over and talked to Albert Hicks. We sat down under some maple trees in his yard. And he was the stereotypical Southern gentleman. Tall and erect, always wore a hat, as many old men in that ay did, and he didn't smoke a cigar as much as he just wallowed one around in his mouth all the time. But he sat down under those trees and

listened to what I had to say, and he shoved that hat back, and he wallowed that cigar around a few minutes and he said, "Well," he said, "I'll just lease it to you." Said, "I believe you might make it." And I leased that old building behind his house.

Now that business that I'm running, it was pretty much started by accident by Albert Hicks. He was a dairy farmer in our county, milking about thirty-five or forty hogs—or cows, rather. I'm in the hog business; you'll have to excuse that. ***[Laughs]*** And he—he—that would be hard to do. ***[Laughs]*** He—he was milking those cattle and just barely making a living. And a fellow came to visit from New York City. He was a relative of Albert's wife. And he stayed there for a couple of weeks. And when he got ready to go back to New York, he inquired as to what kind of meat he was having for breakfast every morning. And Albert explained to him that it was just dry-cured meat from his smokehouse. The fellow asked a lot of questions and finally inquired where he might buy hams like that. Well in 1946 you couldn't really buy hams like that in the grocery store much. And Albert told him that wasn't a problem, that he had some up in his smokehouse that he'd be glad to let him have some. And Albert said, "How many do you think you want?" And the fellow said, "Well, at least a hundred." And Albert said, "Oh, Lord, I've never had that many hogs." Well they talked on for a few minutes, and Albert finally told that gentleman that, if he was serious, he would go out and purchase hog—or hams from people when they butchered their hogs in the community, and he would cure them for him. If he'd come back in a year, he would have them ready. Well that fellow agreed to do that. So, true to his word, when hog killing weather came along, Albert went out in the community and started trying to purchase fresh hams. Well as we say out there in that part of the country, word sort of norated around in the community that he was doing that.

People began to go over there and knock on the door and say, “Will you sell us one of those hams that you’re fixing for that gentleman from New York?” And, being an enterprising fellow, Albert stuck to his word, and he kept those hams for that fellow, but that year he went to Fletcher Brothers Packing Company in Lenoir City and bought either two hundred or three hundred fresh hams to cure to sell. And that’s how he eased into the country ham business. **[0:11:08]**

He ran in very successfully from his back yard, until 1973. Albert was sixty-eight years old, and he had just lost about thirty-thousand dollars worth of fresh hams that he had to haul and put in tankage due to spoilage. He didn’t know why he lost them. He just did. And that’s when this crazy kid of a guidance counselor goes over there and says, “Lease me the building. I want to try it.”

Well Albert, he tried his best to instill in me all of his knowledge about curing meats. I had enough education under my best, so I wanted to learn more, so I wrote to every university in the South. I wrote to Georgia, Alabama, South Carolina, North Carolina, Kentucky, Mississippi—any place that I thought be able to shed light on what I was doing and share information with me. And I soon figured out that the folks at the University of Tennessee there in Knoxville had about all the expertise that I could absorb up here. So I began to let them work with me in that operation. Now I wasn’t government inspected. He was just running that out of his backyard in not much more than an old barn. And the first five years I was in business I was just as guilty as one of these moonshiners up in these hollows, selling illegal hooch. I had to look over my shoulder every time I sold a ham because I thought USDA was on my case every day.

[0:12:30]

After about four years of that, I had worked hard and business was limited where I was. I was out on this man's farm with no visibility. And I made my mind up, if I was going to do this, I needed to get kosher and do it right and get USDA inspected. So I contacted USDA, told them what I wanted to do, and started to get my approval on the building and started to work on the building. And, as you can imagine, a high school guidance counselor didn't make enough money to save much, so I had to borrow everything. We were doing a lot of work on the building ourselves, and it took about a year to do it.

About three or four months before I got the building done, I had a gentleman walk into my ham house in a three-piece suit and an attaché case. And he introduced himself as a compliance officer with the United States Department of Agriculture [USDA]. In those days, I was going to do a Harvest Sale for Miller's on Henley Street—a department store there in Knoxville—every year. They had what they called a Harvest Sale, usually about this time of the year [*October*]. And they would invite local farmers to sell stuff on the sidewalk outside their building. It really was a big day of sales for the farmers but especially big for Miller's—one of the biggest of the year for them. Brought in lots of folks. Well they had called me—Miller's had—along about November, I guess, and wanted to buy about thirty hams. Well I'm thinking they must be going to give them to their better employees or something. So I took my uninspected hams up there and delivered them, and they hung them right in the middle of that fancy department store. Well one of my competitors there in Knoxville saw it and turned me in to USDA. ***[Laughs]*** And he came in and he asked me, he said, "Did you sell some hams to miller's Department Store?" And I said, "Yes, I did." He said, "Well, were they government

inspected?" I said, "Well now, I carry some inspected hams." I was having to buy some hams from North Carolina to service some restaurant accounts because I couldn't cure enough in that old building. And he said, "Well, is that what they were?" And I said, "Well, I didn't say that's what they were," I said, "I carry some." He said—he kept on trying to get me to lie. And I wouldn't lie to him. I never did lie to him. And he finally said, "Young man," he said, "if I catch you doing this again," he said, "I'm going to fine you up to $10,000 and give you up to three years in the penitentiary." Well I was young and full of vinegar, and I looked at him, and I said, "Mister," I said, "you can't find a jury in this county that will fine me ten dollars and give me three days for what I'm doing." He said, "Young man, I'm not going to take you over to the courthouse here in Madisonville." He said, "I'm going to take you to Federal Court in Knoxville." He said, "Do you have any pull up there?" ***[Laughs]*** Well when he said that I opened my voice to s—my mouth to speak but a squeaky little sound is all that came out. ***[Laughs]*** He got my attention. ***[Laughs]*** But he later laughed about that many times. His name was Charles Marlette. He never came to east Tennessee again, I don't think, that he didn't come by to see me. He helped me every way he could. Helped me redesign the racks that I cure my meat on. He became a real ally. He died not too many years after I moved into my new facility, where I've been since 1978.

[0:15:44]

We are very fortunate that we are still in business because I know people who are smarter than I am and who work a lot harder, that have not made it in the country ham business. And we look up every night and say thank you for what we have. We feel truly blessed. I made a decision earl on in my country ham business that I would try to not

make *more* hams; I would try to make *better* hams. And I think that's been my salvation because I—I kept thinking that these guys who cure these hams in eighty or ninety days were going to put me out of business. And I made a decision that I needed to try a batch to quick-cure because—I told my father, I said, "They can sell them for a dollar a pound less than I can, and I've got to do something to compete."

So I talked my USDA inspector into letting me try a batch as a trial run. And I just did a few, maybe twenty-five hams. I had a catering truck that came by my business every day and picked a ham up. And we're very blessed with customers, but this guy was a regular. And I knew I could sell him a ham and get rid of one of those. I cut the first one, and it looked okay, and we sold it to him. In about thirty minutes he called me. And he said, "Allan, I hate to complain," he said, "this ham is not bad." "But," he said, "it's just not the quality I'm used to getting." That was the last quick-cure ham I ever made. My dad looked at me, and he said, "Son," he said, "make the best product you know how to make, no matter what it costs you." He said, "Whatever you have to do, there will always be people who are looking for quality."

[0:17:34]

Two of the best pieces of advice my father ever gave me. The second one, he said, "Always do business with good people, whether you're selling to them or buying from them, it all works the same." And that's an axiom that's proved itself time and again for me. I have retail customers that have been doing business with me for thirty-three years. I actually have some commercial accounts that are still doing business with me after thirty-three years. And in my business, we desperately try to make the best product we know how to make. Hope that our customers will appreciate it and hope they'll enjoy it. I think

that one blessing for us in this business is probably the fact that some of these people I'm doing business with are just as stubborn as I am; they refuse to desert me after this many years. ***[Laughs]*** But if they call me at midnight, and they need hams, they get hams. I don't let them run out. We try to let nobody provide better service than what we give. That—that coupled with a good quality product, and we feel like that's part of our success. Others—I owe a great deal to people like Fred [Sauceman], who have kept my name out there. I couldn't begin to thank him and a lot of other folks.

[0:18:50]

We've attracted a lot of attention in the last five or ten years. We've been mentioned in several publications like *Food & Wine* and *Wine Spectator, Savuer, Connoisseur, Southern Living*—several newspaper articles. I'm too small to afford to advertise. We only make about twelve thousand hams a year. Our bacon we probably make five thousand bacon bellies a year or something like that. Maybe six thousand, I don't know. I don't ever figure; I don't keep a pencil. But somewhere in the five or six thousand bacon bellies and probably about twelve thousand hams a year. So I have four full-time employees. There's not a lot left for advertising. And I guess I'm a poor businessman. I probably would have made a lot more money, if I had just gone the other route and made lots of hams and tried to make two or three dollars a ham and not worry about it. My ego is big enough to want to think I can produce something that's as good as coming out of Europe or anywhere else. And that's what we continually strive to do. We feel like if we have just as good a raw product as they have, we feel like a bunch of Southern boys here in the United States can make something just as good as they make. And it's our goal, and we still continue to strive to improve, and if there's anything that

we can do to improve the quality of our product, whether the appearance, the flavor—anything about it—we want to do it. Because we feel like it's justified, no matter what it costs. It goes back, again: if you make it good enough, there will be somebody out there willing to buy it and take it off your hands. And that's the philosophy that we've used in our business all these years.

[0:20:34]

And the sample that I brought tonight I'm not especially proud of. It's just something that I had packed. We've been selling a lot of product. A fellow down in Mississippi, who wrote—he ate in a restaurant that I do business with. And—Fred probably knows this fellow, John Besh. John has a restaurant in New Orleans, and he uses my product. And another fellow, who's a chef, ate that product there about three weeks ago, I guess. On Monday morning as I walked in my door, the phone was ringing. And he introduced himself as Robert St. James—or St. John, rather. And he is a syndicated columnist there in Mississippi. I didn't realize that when he first started talking. He told me that he was a chef, that he had eaten this stuff, and he proclaimed the bacon the best he had ever had. And my bacon, you either love it, or you don't like it at all. There's no in between. It has an intense flavor—a very smoky flavor—and not everybody likes it. If you don't like smoke, you're certainly not going to like it. But this fellow flipped out over the bacon. And he hadn't tasted the ham at that time, but he told me that he had mentioned—his one paragraph—he did a story about John Besh's restaurant, visiting there after Hurricane Katrina. And he told me, he said, "I gave you one paragraph, and you may hear from it." Well, indeed, I did many, many, many times. He put something in there to the effect, "by the way, tasted the best bacon I've ever tasted

in my life. Hands down, flat out best bacon. If you take nothing else from this we—from this paper, go to this man's website and order his bacon. End of story." Well we got deluged with calls from Mississippi. But the next week he wrote an entire column about us, and we were completely deluged with calls from Mississippi.

We just got a website about a year ago, and Sharon and my daughter will tell you—Suzanne will tell you, I've struggled to get computer literate. I've avoided a computer like the plague. Didn't fell like I had time to mess with it. Didn't want to fool with it. Didn't want to learn. But I've had to to survive to some extent. We're getting all kinds of orders over the Internet now from things—things like that.

[0:22:44]

We were anticipating this article in *Gourmet* magazine. They were—John T. Edge, who Fred is very well acquainted with, he wrote this article about me in *Gourmet* magazine, and we knew that was coming out. And we were building product, trying to accumulate product in anticipation of that, but we didn't anticipate the Robert St. John article. He wiped out every bit of inventory that I had accumulated for the *Gourmet* article. So we've been burning the candle at both ends at our place for the last few days. We're shipping lots of packages and trying to pack more and stay on top of the game.

We feel very fortunate that we've attracted this kind of attention. Not—I'm no entirely sure that it's warranted. I think one thing: I'm not sure that we make the best ham or the best bacon. I just think we've outlived a lot of the competition. There's not many people around now that do what we're doing. And I was very fortunate—John T. Edge from the Southern Foodways Alliance invited me down to Oxford [Mississippi] a few years ago. He called me to invite me. It was like, maybe, in June or July. And he told me

it was going to be in October. And I thanked him for the opportunity but told him that I would be really busy in October and wouldn't have time to come. Well he called me back the next day, and he said, "You know," he said, "I thought about this last night and," he said, "I just can't let you say no because you don't know what you're saying no to." He said, "You just have to come down here." And I said, "Well, again," I said, "I'm really busy but," I said, "I'll tell you what I'll do." I said, "I'll send you enough ham to feed the people you need to feed." He said, "About 400 people or 300 people." And I said, "Well I'll send you like twenty hams or whatever you think, but I just can't come. I'm too busy." And he said, "No." he said, "That's not what I want." He said, "I want you to come down here." Well something in his voice sold me on the idea. And I though, well, I've never done anything like this. He told me they were having a ham tasting.

Well the people at the University of Tennessee—Curtis Milton, who's been a longtime ally and a friend and a mentor in some respects, he's a food tech guy there and really knowledgeable. He'd been trying to get me to enter the Mid-South Fair in Memphis. He judged the country ham contest, and he told me many times, he said, "Your hams will win." He said, "I judge them." He said, "It's a blind—I don't know who brings them." He said, "But I'm telling you, these hams will win the contest." I just never did choose to do that. It didn't seem like something I was interested in, didn't want to do it, didn't feel like I had anything to prove, and didn't know what it would prove, even if I did do it. So I didn't do that. But I've never compared my hams to somebody else's.

[0:25:14]

Well they had this ham tasting and, again, he [John T. Edge] called me and he said, "How do you plan on serving this?" And I said, "Well, wait a minute." I said, "You

told me to furnish the hams." I said, "You've got five-star chefs there, ask them. They're the ones that are going to be serving it." He said, "No." He said, "No, we want you to serve the ham." I said, "Oh, gosh, not with five-star chefs there!" I said, "I can't do this." He said, "What do you do—how do you serve it at home?" I said," Well, I would—." He said, "Well what would you recommend?" I said, "Well I would recommend slicing some into prosciutto, really thin, and then serving some fried." I said, "That's the way I like to serve country ham." And he said," Well we want you to do it." And I said, "Well, okay. If you want me to do it, I'll do it." So I was really—I had trepidation, I can tell you. Because you start—with that—that clientele down there, I mean they're really into food and, you know, I'm thinking, oh, Lord, what am I getting myself into?

[0:26:06]

So we go down—Sharon and I go down, and they've got a tent set up. And they told us the tasting was at like six o'clock. And, probably, at four-thirty we go down, and we discover that the cooking situation is not ideal. They didn't have a stove like we were anticipating, and it was a—we had to—we had to some country boy engineering real quick to make it work but we got it going, started frying ham. About six o'clock the crowd was there, and we're thinking, you know, this may be a flop. We just didn't know if it would be a success or not, but people seemed to really like what we were doing, and that got us a lot of attention. And we fried ham that night, I think, until about—I think about eleven o'clock. And to this day, neither Sharon nor me really know if that ham was as good as they thought it was. Because Jack Daniels catered that affair. ***[Laughter]*** And it was flowing fairly freely as Fred might agrees. ***[Laughs]*** So we don't know if it was as

good as they thought it was or not, but it went over, anyway. But it got us a lot of attention and kind of got the ball rolling for our business.

We typically grind sausage there. We make a fresh pork sausage. We mix our own seasoning, much like my grandparents did. It's actually Albert Hicks's recipe; I can't credit. It was a recipe that he handed me, when I walked in the door of the business. And we mix our own sage, salt, black and red pepper; and I've never tampered with it much. I've added a little extra sage over the years but not a lot.

The smoke house I built. My folks over in Scott County, Virginia, we still have my dad's old home place. It was built about 170 years ago. It's not log, but it's yellow poplar weatherboarding. It's much like chestnut, if you don't know what it's like. It just weathers away and lasts and lasts and lasts. There's never been a coat of paint on that house. The old smokehouse is log; it's yellow poplar logs. It still stands with a dirt floor right behind the house. And I'm very proud of it, as you can imagine. My mother's home was the log house. It was the first house that was even built in what is now Scott County, Virginia. When it burned, it was about 230-something years old. Arsonists burned it probably close to thirty years ago now. It broke everyone's heart in the family because it was a real treasure. But, I guess, the heritage that I bring into it makes me especially proud. I think my grandparents would be amazed to see me curing hams after going to college. They didn't anticipate me getting into that, as neither did I.

But it's been an enjoyable way to make a living—a very interesting way. I've gotten to meet a lot of very nice people. I enjoy the meat tremendously, as far as trying to improve it and make it good. I guess what I enjoy even more is the contacts with the people I've made. Now, when someone walks through the door, it's like an old lost friend

two-thirds of the time. It's somebody that's been doing business with me for ten to thirty years. And I always enjoy seeing them. We have a clientele out of what we call the flatlanders: Mississippi, Georgia, Alabama folks. A lot of those come up to the Smokies quite often—many of them this time of year. And we get a lot of tourist traffic on US 411. A direct route used to be—a very direct route from Knoxville to Atlanta—highway 11 and 411 ran parallel. And then they build I-75 about, oh, twenty-five years ago or thirty years ago. That took a lot of the traffic off 411. Now we still get a lot of folks traveling who want to get off the Interstate and see the back roads. We get a lot of those customers coming in to our business. We also have a large clientele of just, what we call, the regular country folks that live around there. We've got folks that come in there fr—with bibbed overalls on. We've got the three-piece suits out of Knoxville. It's a diverse clientele that I really enjoy. I can't say that I enjoy one more than the other, but it's all very interesting. I'm continually meeting somebody almost every week that I'm glad I was in business, I wouldn't have gotten to meet.

[0:30:17]

But it's been an ideal way to make a living. I feel very fortunate to have done it all these years. I'm fifty-nine years old. I don't know how many years I've got left. I don't think I can do it more than thirty or forty more years, probably, before I'll give up and go home but—. ***[Laughter]***

I'm just trying to bring a young man in now and teach him the business. I'm hoping at least sometime to find time to back off a little bit. It's not a difficult business. It's not rocket science, or I certainly couldn't do it. It's an easy way to make a living in one way; it's very much work in another way. My typical workweek is about, probably

seventy hours a week. I work six days a week, sometimes anywhere from two to four or five hours on Sundays is pretty typical. I guess it takes a lot of dedication to be in any kind of business. Most people who are in business are probably going to tell you the same thing I'm telling you.

Is there any questions about anything I've said so far?

[0:31:12]

Am I losing you or am I—.

Fred Sauceman: Can you take them through the curing process?

AB: Sure.

FS: And what happens to a ham and what you do to it?

AB: Absolutely. Absolutely. The fresh meat that I use now, we pull everything in from the Midwest. There's not a packinghouse left in the state of Tennessee. When I first went into business, first off, I had fifteen competitors curing country hams within a 250-mile radius of my plant. Today, there's only one that I can think of within 250 miles of me. Most of them have gone the way of the dinosaur. There was one in Glade Spring, over here in Virginia. One in Abingdon. One in Butler, Tennessee. I mean they were—they were just scattered all over the country. The demise of these packinghouses played some role in that. Now, to get delivery, you have to buy a large quantity of fresh meat to get delivery from these guys. Most of the hogs that I cure are raised on feedlots in the

Midwest. One—one advantage is it is grain-fed. That's one advantage to getting it out of the Midwest. I am getting a good grade of hogs from that area.

But it's—usually, I order out of Missouri or Iowa. It's probably killed on Thursday, cut on Friday, and shipped to my plant and I get it on Mondays. Typically. When we get those fresh hams in, I'll usually buy anywhere from four to six hundred fresh hams and x-number of bellies. When we get it in, we unload it and roll it into a cooler. We mix our cure, and we use salt and brown sugar and sodium nitrite to make our hams. I don't like using nitrite, but USDA, they require you to use nitrite, unless, if you don't use it, you have to have a salt content of ten percent or greater. Well ten percent would be so salty that you would never buy but one ham from me, and you would hate me forever over the one you bought. Because it would be so salty, nobody would ever buy it. We try to—we try to shoot for a salt content in the five to six percent range on our hams. That's—that's pretty standard for us.

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When we bring them in, we mix this cure up, and we apply it. We rub about two-thirds of the cure that we're going to use on that ham the first time we rub it. We usually use about eight pounds of cure, per hundred pounds of hams. So we take about two-thirds of that and rub it on the hams. We stack them in curing bins—just wooden racks that my father and I built on maple boards. And we use maple boards for a reason. First off, it's low in acid. Oak is high in acid, and it would turn my meat black. It would turn it dark. The maple is low in acid, and it's also very hard, very unlikely you're going to get any splintering or anything like that. It's a very hard, durable—durable piece of wood. So we use maple boards to salt our meat on. We stack them on that, and we leave them for about

a week. In about a week, we go back and rework the remaining one-third of that cure into those hams and restack them in curing bins. And they typically stay in that first stage of cure at thirty-eight to forty degrees for about two months—somewhere in the fifty-five to sixty day range.

Then we pull them out and hang them on wooden racks in stockingettes. We use the stockingette to make it shape up into a prettier ham. Remember, I told you that I'd do anything I could to enhance the appearance or the quality of the product I make. We hang those things shank down and roll them into another cooler called an equalization cooler. That cooler stays about forty-two to fifty degrees. We're trying to emulate Mother Nature. We butchered those hogs over in Scott County in November on Thanksgiving Day. They stayed there in cure for about six weeks. Then we would take them up and hang them up in those little smokehouses. And they would hang there on up until they were used up into the next fall. And we're emulating that in that cooler. We're trying to keep it about the same springtime conditions. Sometimes I have a problem with humidity in that cooler. And, again, that country boy engineering comes into place. We've rigged up 220 stacked heaters in there to make our refrigeration run more to pull that moisture out when we need to. And that pulls the humidity down to an acceptable level again. We leave them in that cooler, typically, at least two months—most of the time, three or four months. Then we take a long palette jack, lift those wooden racks up, and take them out into our aging space, where they finish out the aging process.

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The average country ham that I sell down there is about nine months old. And we have hams that are much longer that we cure. I use my original family recipe on part of

the hams that I make. That's the ones that we salted down in that old log smokehouse there on our old place in Virginia. It was salt, brown sugar, and black and red pepper. And those are the hams that we make into what I call the country prosciutto. We age those hams—the sample that I brought—I brought some for you guys to taste, if you'd like to taste it. We—we were slicing prosciutto this morning, and I just grabbed a handful of end pieces of the prosciutto, wrapped them up, and brought them up here so you might taste it, if you're interested.

We've had many—many times, we've taste-tested our product against Serrano ham or imported prosciutto or Westphalian ham. Knock on wood—where's something wood because I don't want to embarrass myself. ***[Laughs]*** We haven't embarrassed ourselves yet, but I know it's coming. I've never been fortunate enough to eat this ham from the Iberian Peninsula in Spain. They're supposed to be available sometime this fall in this country. It's been illegal to bring them into the country until now. I'm told it's going to sell for at least $125 per pound. Well, I'm not going to buy a hundred pounds of that stuff, I can tell you that. But I will buy enough to get a taste. ***[Laughs]*** I want to taste that product. It's supposed to be some of the finest ham that's ever been produced. And part of the secret **[short pause]** the hogs that they have in Europe are different from the hogs that we've gotten to know in this country.

Back when my—when we were killing those hogs in Virginia, my grandparents wanted the biggest, fattest, heaviest hogs they could get. In fact, my grandfather was a country gentleman. He couldn't read or write his own name. He never went to school but less than a week his entire life. He was raised isolated in those mountains. All the men knew was hard work. He was a large man, not like me. He was my mother's father. He

was about six [feet] four [inches] and weighed about 290 pounds. In his day, that was a giant. Today, it's common. But in those days, he was just a mountain man's mountain man, and he—if you went to visit him, you wouldn't have been there fifteen minutes until he wanted to take you to his hog lot to show you how fat his hogs were. That was bragging rights in those mountains of Virginia.

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Well the hogs that we're raising today are much different, as you all are probably aware. The breeding practices kept getting them leaner and leaner and leaner. And finally, we've gotten them so lean, it's a totally different product than I knew growing up. They're harder to keep today. When I first went into the country ham business, I would only lose about one ham in 2,000. Now Albert Hicks couldn't figure that out. I accomplished that while I was over in that old facility. He'd wallow that cigar around, and he'd say, "That's the darn luckiest boy I ever saw. I don't know how he does it." ***[Laughter]*** Well what I was ding, I listened a lot to what he told me, but I was also listening to those guys at the University of Tennessee. When Albert started having spoilage problems, instead of backing off and dragging it out and taking his time and figuring out what was wrong, he would try to speed it up and get rid of them, which amplified his problem. He could never understand what I was doing, but I listened exactly to what the fellows in the university were telling me. I was losing about one ham in 2,000 because I was getting these hams really close to home. As time has passed, all the packinghouses have gone out of business. I dealt with Lay in east Tennessee in those days—in Knoxville, Tennessee. When they went out of business, I started buying from Valley Dale in Bristol. When they went out of business, I went to Voss Brothers in

Nashville. When they went out of business, I went to Valley Dale—I meant to Real Foot [?] in west Tennessee. When they went out of business, there were no more in Tennessee, so I went to Louisville, Kentucky, Fisher Packing; that was the closest. When they went out of business, I could either go to eastern Carolina or the Midwest. And I tried the eastern Carolina pork about three or four times, and it was totally unsatisfactory for me. I just didn't like it. So we've been buying out of the Midwest ever since. I'm now beginning to buy some certified Berkshire pork. And this is what a lot of the top chefs in the country are really singing the praises. They really like the pork loins out of those certified Berkshires. I've cured hams. I put my first cert—my first certified Berkshire hams in cure in February. I used my original family recipe. So it's going to be at least next June before I can sample those hams to know what their like. I've made a lot of the certified Berkshire bacon. In fact, that maybe what I brought you. I just—I don't know—I've got Berkshire bacon in stock. I don't know if that's it. But honestly, I can't tell any difference in the Berkshire bacon and the other bacon bellies that I'm buying. I have no idea what breed of hogs I'm buying from these packers. But it's almost a ninety-eight percent guarantee that they're white hogs. Because that's mostly what we're raising in this country—raised in feedlots, very closely confined. Well the hogs that are coming out of the Iberian Peninsula in—in Europe, they're raised running wild, eating acorns in the woods, and that's why they're so highly prized. And that's why the price is so high. There's a limited availability, of course, and it's supposed to be better pork I've never had the privilege of looking at that pork, but I'm hopeful that I get to try it and find out.

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After those hams start the aging process, I keep the regular ham until it's nine months old. The prosciutto that I brought for you to sample tonight is out of a seventeen-month-old ham. My original family recipe, for some reason, when I'm mixing my original family recipe, I can never remember to put the nitrite in it. I'm getting old. ***[Laughter]*** It serves no purpose. If you were to buy prosciutto in Italy, it's salt only. They don't require nitrites. This—this ham coming out of the Iberian Peninsula in Spain, it won't have nitrites. I'm too little to fight the battle with USDA. The university tells me I could probably prove I don't need it. But I'm too small. It would cost me well into six figures to prove that I don't have to put that nitrite, and I just can't afford to take the time and effort to do that.

But when you're going to taste it, I've never made anybody sick yet. Suzanne can tell you; she's been eating it since she was this tall. The first time we had prosciutto, she and her brother and sister were in the backseat in car seats in my car. I kept having these Europeans come in and telling me that this is wonderful stuff; it's like prosciutto. Well, we went into a Fresh Market, and we bought a half-pound of prosciutto. And the butcher said, "Do you want domestic or imported?" I said, "I wouldn't know the difference." And he said, "Well, domestic is $12.99 and imported is $21.99." I said, "Well, I want domestic!" ***[Laugher]*** So he sliced me a half-pound, we went to take it out to the car. And Sharon hands it back and says, "Do you guys want a taste?" When they handed the paper back up, it was empty. So we did a u-turn in the parking lot, we laughed, I went back in, and I had watched that guy slice that ham. It looked like a quick-cured ham from North Carolina.

[To his wife, Sharon] Why don't you start frying this ham? Would you care to start cooking and let them see what you're doing? She's going to—she's going to—

FS: Which do you prefer, gas or electricity?

AB: Gas. Gas will work. We're cheating on this. When we fry ham at our house, I like to use—if I have a pot of coffee made, I will use about—depending on how much ham I'm frying—just two or three slices, I'll use about a fourth of a cup of coffee—brewed coffee, not grounds—brewed coffee in my frying pan and a heaping tablespoon of brown sugar I sprinkle in there. Lay my slices on top of that. What that does, the brown sugar helps to take away the saltiness of the ham. It also tends to caramelize on the bottom of your frying pan, making it real easy to brown that ham without overcooking it. She's going to cheat and use cola; we don't have coffee and brown sugar, but we'll substitute Coca-Cola—not Diet Coke. The kind with sugar in it. And she's just going to get some started and fry it and let you at least smell what's going on in here.

Student: Why do they require the nitrite? Why—what's the—

AB: I'm sure it's—I'm sure it's as a preservative. The regulations for country ham—we're not on USDA's radar screen. I'm USDA inspected, but there's such a miniscule number of hams produced the way we produce them that it's unbelievable. Most folks cure these hams today in probably eighty to ninety days. They probably need that nitrite,

first, for color. To make it look cured. Because it's not going to look cured without it. And they probably also need it as a preservative.

[0:44:22]

[End Allan Benton]