

BILL MATHEOS
Bill's Greek Tavern - Jackson, MS

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Interviewer: Rien Fertel
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs
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[Begin Bill Matheos — Bill's Greek Tavern, Part 1]

00:00:00

Bill Matheos: If you don't love something, you're not success. I love to cook; that's why I'm success. You can be at twelve o'clock today here and see what happens, how many people are here—100. And, God bless America. Opa! *[Laughs]* Opa! God bless America!

00:00:22

Rien Fertel: So, I'm here with Mr. Bill Matheos. Am I saying your last name right?

00:00:28

BM: That's exactly. Bill Matheos—M-a-t-h-e-o-s.

00:00:33

RF: And you were just telling me that you've been here for forty-two years, is that right?

00:00:38

BM: Let me show you something. Let me show it to you, my license I get the place forty-two years: the same cook, same owner, same location, and same place, Jackson, Mississippi. Opa!

00:00:53

RF: What year was that that you opened?

00:00:55

BM: Seventy one—seventy one—seventy one.

00:01:01

RF: And how old are you now?

00:01:03

BM: I born in 1935. I'm exactly—it's no [?], I'm seventy-nine.

00:01:14

RF: What was your full—what's your full birth date? What day were you born?

00:01:19

BM: July—fifteenth July.

00:01:20

RF: I'm born July 17th.

00:01:22

BM: Fifteenth, my grandson, too.

00:01:23

RF: Oh, yeah?

00:01:26

BM: My grandson is fifteenth July too. I have one grandson who plays baseball.

00:01:33

RF: So we're sitting right by a map of Greece in your restaurant in the dining room.

00:01:42

BM: I used to work in ships and cook. See the ship there, the big ship? I used to work there and cook.

00:01:50

RF: Were these commercial ships or Navy?

00:01:53

BM: Navy ships, yeah. I used to cook there when—and I come to the United States in 1963 in Baltimore, the Navy ship. And I started to love the America. Then I'm stupid really. And I jumped the ship three times to get in this country.

00:02:15

RF: You—wait; say that again. You jumped off the ship three times?

00:02:18

BM: I jumped in the ship here, in Brooklyn, New York, New Jersey and the Immigration sent me back to Greece after six months.

00:02:29

RF: You were part of the Greek Navy?

00:02:29

BM: I used to work in a restaurant—Immigration get me; cops sent me back. And I tell Immigration, “Don’t send me back. I’ll be back.” And I’ll be back. And the day they killed Kennedy, I stopped in Baton Rouge in a ship another.

00:02:45

RF: You were in Baton Rouge?

00:02:47

BM: Yeah, and Immigration catch me again and sent me back to Greece.

00:02:50

RF: And that was the third time?

00:02:51

BM: The third time I’m in Galveston, Texas. Galveston, Texas!

00:03:00

RF: And what happened?

00:03:00

BM: They send me out of the country again. And I go to Salvador. And I go to Salvador; I do wrong. I fake passport in different name and come back tourist to the United States. I come to New Orleans and Bourbon Street. This time I come you say, “America citizen here? Green Card here? Tourist.” “I’m a tourist.” You say, “Mr. Matheos, you ever been to America?” I say, “No,

sir.” “You speak English?” “No.” “What do you speak?” “Greek and Spanish.” They let me pass and they gave me ninety days tourist in the United States. **[Laughs]** And I find America girl from Mississippi and married.

00:03:43

RF: So you—where did you meet the American girl? Who was she?

00:03:46

BM: Really it’s—I go to Houston, Texas, because that way the Customs, the Immigration, is where I like to find lawyers. So the time I go to America and I be on First[?] Street, four or five girls they are come from Mississippi, visit to Houston. I tell the girls, “I will take you out tonight to a party in Greek place, Parthenon, named Parthenon.” “Sure; say you Greek?” I say, “Yeah.” So I take you to a party and the little girls she say, “We’re leaving tomorrow. We go to McComb, Mississippi, for a Mister[?].” I say, “I’ll come too.” They take me with him to McComb. And I used to be thirty-four years now; this little girl seventeen, so I tell the little girl, “You’re beautiful. You have beautiful eyes. I like you blah, blah, blah.” And the girl said, “No; I don’t know you. I don’t know you. I’m not married to you.” “You don’t want to marry me because you don’t know me.”

00:04:52

She’s got an uncle lawyer who used to be government in New Orleans, McNeal. She dropped the lawyer and shake my hand. You tell this young lady, “Marry this man—is good person.” They said, “I don’t know. This man I never see. Maybe mafia.” He said, “No; there’s no mafia, good person. Marry this man.” She say, “I’m going to marry to Monteleone Hotel in New Orleans.” He married to me in Monteleone Hotel in New Orleans, this man. “I’ll pay for your

honeymoon. I'll pay everything because he's good person." I tell her Uncle Davey, "How you know me?" "I'm a lawyer many years. You good person. One day you'll be successful." And I got to Greece and stay six months and my lawyers fixed my papers and bring me back. And welcome to America. **[Singing.]** God bless—. I'm here.

00:05:50

RF: And what year was that?

00:05:52

BM: Nineteen sixty-eight.

00:05:59

RF: And so you married this woman?

00:06:00

BM: I still married forty-five years now.

00:06:02

RF: And what's her name?

00:06:03

BM: Judy Matheos.

00:06:06

RF: Judy—

00:06:07

BM: My name, my last name. Judy Matheos.

00:06:10

RF: And was she—is she Greek or Greek ethnic?

00:06:12

BM: No, a redneck. America.

00:06:14

RF: She's a redneck.

00:06:15

BM: No, no, no; America. [*Laughs*]

00:06:17

RF: What was her maiden name, her birth name?

00:06:20

BM: She name Judy Harison—H-a-r-i-s-o-n. That's the last name before married to me.

00:06:29

RF: So Judy Harison and she was from McComb?

00:06:31

BM: Yes. And she's got one brother named Neal. My brother-in-law named Neal.

00:06:39

RF: All right; so let's back up a bit. Where were you born in Greece?

00:06:42

BM: My brother-in-law loved me more than anybody in the world. He say, "You're a special person." And I'm still married to the same woman; she's beautiful.

00:06:55

RF: How many kids do you have?

00:06:56

BM: Two kids.

00:06:58

RF: Two kids?

00:06:58

BM: One doctor and one working at the Trustmark Bank, twenty-two, twenty-three years. She's a big boss.

00:07:06

RF: Wow.

00:07:06

BM: Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars a year at the bank.

00:07:09

RF: And you—

00:07:10

BM: And the other, he makes \$2,000 a day doctor.

00:07:14

RF: Yeah.

00:07:17

BM: And they make me still cook here.

00:07:18

RF: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

00:07:18

BM: I'm going to be 140 [*Laughs*]; I got sixty more to go. I love it.

00:07:27

RF: So—

00:07:28

BM: Any time you work, your mind works, your hands work. Everything. If you don't work you're dead. Dead. What was your father doing?

00:07:39

RF: My father?

00:07:39

BM: Uh-hmm.

00:07:40

RF: Oh he owns a company, you know, an alarm company.

00:07:43

BM: Yeah; but who—how old is your daddy?

00:07:46

RF: How old is my father? He—that's tough; he's sixty-five.

00:07:51

BM: Well he's a baby, rookie. Rookie baby!

00:07:55

RF: So what are you doing right now? You're chopping lemons. What are you chopping lemons for?

00:07:57

BM: This is for [?]; we put that in fish. Chop—cut the lemons and put on the fish. You know, every place fish I put two lemons. And I go cut tomatoes for the salads after.

00:08:11

RF: For the salads?

00:08:13

BM: Yeah, I put three tomatoes in every salad.

00:08:17

RF: So where did you learn to cook? Who taught you how to cook?

00:08:18

BM: Oh, God, all my life I do this stuff. I used to do it in ships—blind; I don't have to look. You know, I do it all my life. I cook really—*[Laughs]* fifty-eight years I cook, my whole life, whole life, you know, all my life I cooked, sure.

00:08:43

RF: Who cooked in your family before? Was your mom a cook or your father?

00:08:46

BM: My mama cooked in the home. Village, small village, about 1600 people, one thousand, six hundred. Small town, called Thasos.

00:08:59

RF: That's the name of the island and the town, Thasos?

00:09:01

BM: But we draw hundred-thousand tourists a day. That's a beautiful island, beautiful, yeah.

00:09:07

RF: Yeah, I was just looking at pictures of Thasos online. Can you describe Thasos, what it looks like?

00:09:13

BM: Beautiful. The water—I'll show you something. I'll bring you something.

00:09:18

RF: Okay.

00:09:22

BM: Beautiful island. [**Aside.**] Look up here for this—yes.

00:09:48

Employee: You want me to take these out?

00:09:51

BM: I take care of it; don't worry. I'll look everywhere—speak seven languages.

00:09:55

RF: Okay, so we're looking at a photo album from 2012 when you took your family back to Thasos, is that right?

00:10:00

BM: Yes. This is my sister. This is my sister.

00:10:18

RF: And she still lives there?

00:10:20

BM: She still lives there. Look at her.

00:10:21

RF: What is her name?

00:10:22

BM: She is eighty-four. Named Tasula—Sula.

00:10:30

RF: S-u-l-a, or how do you spell her name?

00:10:31

BM: T-a-s-u-l—Tasula.

00:10:35

RF: Oh, Tasula.

00:10:35

BM: Yeah, which is—Tasula, which is the—my daughter, my grandson, and me. Now I'll show you the hometown. That's my hometown, here in Limenaria.

00:10:51

RF: So it's L-i-m-e-m-a-r-i-a?

00:10:54

BM: Yeah, Limenaria, very beautiful. Look at that.

00:10:56

RF: And is it on the water?

00:10:57

BM: Woo! On the water. God bless America, this is water. Look there; look there. This is my family.

00:11:09

RF: So what kind of food did you grow up eating on Thasos?

00:11:11

BM: We eat beans, potatoes, string beans, potatoes, salad, Greek lettuce, tomatoes. They don't put lettuce in Greek—they put tomatoes, cucumbers, and onions—season all of this—bell peppers. That's where—and we have lot of lamb.

00:11:33

RF: Lamb?

00:11:32

BM: You know, outside my home we used to have lambs about six—seven.

00:11:36

RF: Were you in the hills or the mountains?

00:11:37

BM: Yeah; and we have chickens. You know we put about twenty chickens outside to make the eggs. The eggs will make—in the morning scrambled, boiled eggs; you know, making the pastas from the eggs. And we could make a lot of [?] baklava all from the eggs and everything. And we have a lot of walnuts, making sweet and sell. And we have honey—making honey balls and sell, you know. We catch a lot of fish and sell snapper, red fish, grouper, all of these things. That's the way we do it. Really my father used a big boat fishing.

00:12:19

RF: Oh, so he was a fisherman?

00:12:21

BM: My father, not me.

00:12:22

RF: Okay; your father? What was his name?

00:12:24

BM: Name Kostas Matheos—K-o-s-t-a-s.

00:12:30

RF: And did he grow up a fisherman his whole life?

00:12:32

BM: All the life used to have a boat and get up and go fishing. He used to have nets and go around and catch the fish. He used to go nighttime, before the moon coming, and fishing. It's professional fisherman. That's all he do from living. And he bring the fish and he—many years no used to have cars, used to have donkey; and he'd put the donkey in the back the fish and go in the little villages and sell the fish. You know, he stopped in the neighborhoods and say, "What you like, shrimp? You got it. You like smoked fish? You got it." He used to sell; he used to have one thing and now you go scale it, but, you know, he used to weigh it by the hand. Yeah; anyway he used to know exactly how much he give you, you see. Yeah; that's what he used to do it.

00:13:22

RF: And your mom would cook the fish?

00:13:23

BM: My mama cooked the fish three meals a day. And we—everybody would eat, you know. My brother is a tailor, makes shoes.

00:13:34

RF: Oh, he's a tailor?

00:13:35

BM: Tailor, he go to school. And my sister is teacher; teach the people, but, you know, she don't do nothing, she's old lady, she retired, you know, a very old lady. She calls me every day, nine o'clock in the morning, every day. Really me, I come because I love the United States. People tell me Greece is a great country and I say, "I don't care because I love this country."

00:14:03

RF: So you knew you wanted to come here from a young age?

00:14:04

BM: That's my plans and my dreams. I fight the court here years to go American citizen. I go four times to Biloxi and don't make me. I have Bill Waller the Governor with me. I have a picture there. I have all the—and they don't make me American citizen because I do a lot of jobs on ships and all this. And one day Christmas the man living in New Orleans named Mr. [D---?], I call and I said Mr. [D---?], "I wish you a good Christmas." And in 1981—but me I don't have. He said, "Why Bill?" I said, "Why you don't make me an American citizen? Man, I love this

country.” “You come tomorrow in Biloxi and I’ll make you an American citizen because you’re a good person.” And he make me an American citizen.

00:14:50

RF: What year?

00:14:51

BM: Nineteen eighty-one.

00:14:52

RF: Nineteen eighty-one.

00:14:53

BM: I used to be from 1969 to ’81, how many years? About twelve years, you know, I fight and never—because I like to be a citizen that’s all, you know. I like to have America passport, you know, I fight; I love the country.

00:15:13

My menus and everything say “God bless America,” you know—. See; everywhere—I don’t know if you say that. Everything you say God bless—God bless America, everything—my sign! My news! You can tell say I like to see where it says God bless America [?]. If the police stop you say, “God bless America, Bill.”

00:15:39

RF: So people tell you, “God bless America,” also?

00:15:41

BM: Everywhere—everywhere—everywhere; they know me. They know me, you know.

00:15:46

RF: Do you remember—when you were young do you remember the first time you heard about America? Was it a movie or a book or—?

00:15:53

BM: No; let me tell you what happened. One man in my hometown he bring Chevrolet Impala. You talk about I used to be maybe fourteen, fifteen years old, you know. I make it—something in the school talk. And this man drives this beautiful white car. And I said, “Where is this man from?” The people—donkeys are there—nothing, poor people. He said, “Man they live in America.” And after a couple of years this man built beautiful house, white, four story. “I said the American man built the—” I say, “One day I’m going there.” I liked him. Said my grandmother tell me, “No go, they’ll kill you. They have [?] in Texas and kill the people.” And I say, “No. I’m going there.” And I’m here.

00:16:40

RF: And so who was this man? He built a four-story house on your island.

00:16:45

BM: He used to be in the United States, because all these people are poor and don't have nothing. All this man have big house and car; the first car coming in the island: Impala, Chevrolet Impala.

00:16:57

RF: A Chevrolet Impala.

00:16:57

BM: Yeah; the first car.

00:16:58

RF: And it was a big white car and an American owned it.

00:17:01

BM: Oh beautiful car—white, beautiful and I asked my grandmother. I said grandmother, “Who is this man and how's he making that kind of money?” “America people—America people plenty money.” I said, “Grandmother, one day I will be there.”

00:17:16

RF: So is that why you joined the Navy because—?

00:17:18

BM: That's why—I have plans, all these plans. I'm making plans always. Number one I go to Israel; I go to Israel to get a ship to come to the United States. I do a lot of things to come to this

country. Number one, I can't go to Israel because you have to have passport from Greece to go to another country. I find people who play drums, music, and I tell the people, "Please take me with you. I'd like to be drum man." He said, "Sir, you can't." I say, "If you give me paper I'll get a passport. I'll go with you." They give me paper; I played in a band and give me passport and go to Israel and get a ship. The ship—a Japanese ship used to be Israel.

00:18:03

RF: And that was the first time?

00:18:04

BM: No; the third time. [*Laughs*]

00:18:06

RF: That was the third time?

00:18:07

BM: The third time. It used to be Israel because the Greeks don't give me a Japanese ship; I have records. You can put me on the ships.

00:18:19

RF: So how old were you when you joined the Navy?

00:18:20

BM: Twenty years.

00:18:22

RF: You were twenty years old, okay.

00:18:25

BM: I have thirty-six months in the Navy—three years; you make it three years, thirty-six months. See my uniform, white—I have a uniform, white. White uniform, look at that. Any time you're lazy you never make it—never. You got to work. [*Phone Rings. On Phone:*] God bless America, good morning; Bill's Greek Tavern. [*Aside to employee*] Cover the lemons and bring me a small thing of this—the white thing, clean the lemons, clean step it up and give me the white thing and give me the pistol, the gun—.

00:19:23

Now put more coffee me here and more coffee to my young friend come from Greece.
Yeah; be careful. He's got a gun too and he'll kill you. What you say?

00:19:39

RF: So what are we eating right here?

00:19:41

BM: Potatoes. Greek potatoes, umm. Cooked in olive oil, delicious.

00:19:47

RF: With olive oil?

00:19:49

BM: It's from [?]. No; they—okay, they man—no put nothing the man. Ask if you need Sweet Low.

00:19:58

RF: No, thank you.

00:20:00

BM: Don't go close; he's got a pistol in his pocket. Clean the table here; hurry up now.

00:20:07

RF: So tell—

00:20:07

BM: That's my son. Sorry, so sorry, not my son. *[Laughs]* He says he loves me; I don't know. He maybe changes his mind.

00:20:26

RF: So tell me; you opened here in 1971?

00:20:29

BM: Nineteen seventy-one.

00:20:31

RF: Why did you want to open a restaurant?

00:20:33

BM: Oh, number one, all my life I used to do this. Working in every ship, cook; my mama cooked, helped together all my life. *[Aside:]* Waiter, clean the table here. All my life I love—that's what I used to love. I used to have seven restaurants. I used to have big restaurants here.

00:21:05

RF: You had seven—

00:21:06

BM: Whoa; I used to have a nightclub with 500 people a day called Zoli's in Lakeland Drive. I used to have cafeteria downtown, Belmont, 500 people it put. You know I—because I'm through all this, you know, I'm too old.

00:21:24

RF: But this was your first restaurant, where we are now?

00:21:25

BM: Oh yes.

00:21:27

RF: Okay.

00:21:27

BM: Not the first; that's my baby. That's my baby. And I'm going to keep the time it takes me to the God bless America—what's his name, where we sit—Jesus Christ. I'm going to keep it

longer I can work because I love it; that's all. If you love something that's how you do it, you know, that's all I know to do. See, I don't know nothing else.

00:21:53

RF: So when you opened here in 1971 what was on the first menu? What did you cook?

00:21:58

BM: I opened here and called it Bill's Burger House.

00:22:05

RF: Burgers, like hamburgers?

00:22:06

BM: Hamburgers I have; homemade and home-style, home-style hamburgers, chicken, fish baskets, chicken baskets, basket hamburgers, basket onion rings, French fries, ice-cream—vanilla, chocolate, strawberry. I used to have all of this—chili dogs, corn-dogs. And in 1981 I go to Florida and there I found a restaurant named Pappas, the beautiful place in the water.

00:22:40

RF: Where in Florida?

00:22:40

BM: In Tampa. Tampa, Florida.

00:22:42

RF: In Tampa Bay, okay.

00:22:44

BM: Man people were waiting in the street.

00:22:46

RF: It was a Greek restaurant?

00:22:47

BM: Greek; I tell the man, “I want to clean dishes. I’m a poor man and me I used to have four restaurants here.” He said, “You?” I said, “Yes. I need to make some money.” The man give me to clean dishes. I put apron and I stay in the Day’s Inn, and I watched what they were doing and write, everyday write to put it in my pocket to study. And after two weeks I left and come here and call the place, fish place, “Send these people over.” **[Laughs]** I told them, I said, “Send these people—.”

00:23:23

RF: And so you made this a Greek restaurant?

00:23:25

BM: Yes; this man used to have a Greek restaurant named Pappas.

00:23:30

RF: Huh; and so you changed everything?

00:23:31

BM: Everything. I come here and I bring employees from Florida here.

00:23:35

RF: Really?

00:23:37

BM: I used to have seven waitresses here, you know.

00:23:41

RF: So what was on that—what year was that again?

00:23:43

BM: It's—I changed the place from Bill's Burger House called Bill's Greek Tavern, seafood place.

00:23:49

RF: What year?

00:23:50

BM: Uh, I do hamburgers I think for six years and I'm—about forty-five years ago.

00:24:00

RF: So the late 1970s is when you—?

00:24:02

BM: Yeah; 1970s, yeah. I go to Florida and I'll never—I stayed there and worked, cleaned dishes. Cleaned dishes, thirty-seven years man. I don't ask [?]. You know, I hoped to, you know, yeah.

00:24:19

RF: So what did you put on the menu then when you changed it?

00:24:22

BM: I came here and put redfish, grouper, snapper, shrimp, lamb chops, shish-kabobs, rib-eyes, filet mignon, all these things, you know, baked potato, vegetables together. I saw—show me how you make it—make the Thousand dressing, making the Greek dressing I learned all there, very, very special the dressing. Number one, very special. I do it myself here, you know. That's when I came here and I changed everything. I get it two girls from Florida. I say, "I'll pay you." I say, "If you don't make \$1,000 a week I'll pay from my pocket. I want you to come open the place."

00:25:08

RF: And they were Greek?

00:25:09

BM: No.

00:25:09

RF: No; they were—they just knew how to cook?

00:25:11

BM: Yeah. [*Laughs*] See you got to do what you're supposed to do.

00:25:15

RF: Huh. So have you—the—is Pappas still around? Is it still open?

00:25:21

BM: Nah; they're still from grandkids now. You talk about years ago. These people—this time these people used to be sixty years there and forty now—they gone. They gone. I'm the oldest restaurant man In Jackson, Mississippi. All these people died, Primos died, Mayflower died; and [?] two, three [?]. Only me stay same owner. I don't know how long, because I'm not young but, you know, only me stayed the—in business.

00:25:57

RF: Well who takes over the place after you or does it—what happens?

00:26:01

BM: I'll be honest with you. I'm going to Greece this summer. I'm leaving here in two July and I'll be in Greece four weeks. And I try to get a boy from my hometown that's twenty-eight years old already working here and my lawyer to fix papers to bring here to take over the restaurant. Because my daughters—professionals, they don't like the restaurants. They said, "Daddy, what I don't need the restaurants." You know, so I'm trying to bring this man, and they have two kids

too, and bring the wife and the kids now—very hard, I don't know. My lawyer told me, "Very hard."

00:26:46

RF: Very hard; yeah. What's his name?

00:26:48

BM: Who the man?

00:26:49

RF: Yeah.

00:26:49

BM: John, the boy named John, if I bring. But if come here I call "Bill."

00:26:56

RF: He has to change his name?

00:26:57

BM: Yeah; I'll call "Bill." To give the place the man, only come here drink coffee—I don't need the money. You know, I don't need the money. I don't need the money. I have condos in Florida, condominiums, apartments rent. I don't need the money. I draw Social Security too. I don't need it.

00:27:20

RF: Does this young man John, he lives on Thasos? He's from Thasos?

00:27:22

BM: Yeah; he lives on Thasos Island. My lawyer used to be government, very big I have the picture there, he says, "Bill, real hard; I don't know." He let me know no more one month if we get it. This man you have to go Greek Ambassador to prove his cooking Greek, to bring here. Now they go prove these papers there, if they prove—if you're a cook you don't bring here. In my restaurant you have to be four times in the newspapers in Jackson—if somebody needs to know a profession cook to cook Greek, I can't bring this man here. It's so many confused, but I'll try; I don't know.

00:28:06

RF: Where did you meet him?

00:28:08

BM: Oh, two years ago I'm in Greece, me and my family, and I know the boy worked in a restaurant. I eat there. Good man. And I tell him, I say, "I like to bring you to America." He said, "I want to come there." You know, but it's very hard, very hard; uh-hmm, very hard. I'll get him; I know I'll get him. For me to get in this country, I will get this man too.

00:28:42

RF: Huh; so the plan is to sell him the restaurant?

00:28:44

BM: No; I not sell, no. I give to the man.

00:28:49

RF: Oh, wow; okay.

00:28:50

BM: I don't sell. I don't need the money. I want the boy to keep the place that way and become here and my grandson. I'll put in the papers, to drink coffee, say this is my grandfather—.

[Emotional] This is part of my life. I love the place. This is part of my life; I love the place here. That's why I work because I love it. But I don't need the money; no. You do forty-two years here, you know. No, no; my grandson come here and say my grandfather's place.

00:29:36

RF: You must have customers that eat here everyday or every week.

00:29:40

BM: Oh, you come twelve o'clock today you come here I'll buy you a lunch and see what happen. People love me, God bless America. They come everywhere. People love to come here because I love the people too. If you don't love people you're not success. Come here because I love the people. I have meeting today, another group—black people interviewing me from Jackson State—same you; everybody—my name everybody know me everywhere. The “God bless America” man. And I make a mistake to tell, I have another girls coming now they're coming, eleven o'clock, and I'll tell them to call Jackson State to come five o'clock; don't come three o'clock because I'm not here. Sure; I go everywhere.

00:30:35

RF: So—

00:30:36

BM: Any time you—who you going to sell to—sell your life? This is my life. Why I need the money? I don't need the money. You know, me I come here because I love the place. I don't have to come here, no. Customers know, my friends know: I love the place. What I'm going to do at home? That's it. My kids—I got a—half-million condo in Florida, boat. Boat. Go there three days and I'm ready to come back.

00:31:09

RF: Yeah.

00:31:11

BM: You know, what am I going to do? Go to New Orleans boat—I'll stay in a hotel and two days I'm bored. Nothing to do, man.

00:31:17

RF: You love to work.

00:31:18

BM: Yeah; I love to work.

00:31:20

RF: Did your wife ever work here alongside you?

00:31:22

BM: No; I—you know, they have one place—what's his name in New Orleans? People wait in the street there—named Mama—

00:31:36

RF: Mother's—Mother's.

00:31:38

BM: Yeah; people—what's the name?

00:31:40

RF: Mother's?

00:31:40

BM: Yes; you know, I go all the time to eat there, you know, named Mother's, yeah, yeah.

People waiting in the street, man. I go. I go. You'll be bored; you know, I go cut the onions now and cut potatoes, you know, uh-hmm.

00:32:02

RF: What did you think about Jackson the first time you moved here with your wife?

00:32:06

BM: Huh?

00:32:06

RF: What did you think about Jackson, the city—?

00:32:07

BM: My wife—same thing, you know.

00:32:12

RF: So what did you think about the place?

00:32:14

BM: It's the capital of Mississippi: Jackson. My comments about, yeah, I don't know, small town. And so this lawyer tell me, "Bill," I already told you, "I'd like to open a restaurant." And he said, "Bill, don't open McComb, small town. Go to Jackson." You know, this man give me \$10,000 to me to open businesses. You know, this man, the lawyer; he liked me, he loved me. I give back, I pay. You know, he died, anyway. He died in New Orleans. I go to the funeral; yeah. He died; you know, anyway he used to be an old man and he died, you know. It's a—the man helped me, that's all; he liked me. That's all it takes in your life: if a person loves you, anywhere you go, if a person someday loves you, you make a success. Number one, you be honest in your life. You can see the people; you can't be crook. I do business forty-two years in Sysco Company. I call say, "Bill's Greek Tavern." I say, "God bless America." "What do you need?" I show you, yesterday—\$2,000—I bring you the paper, boom. Sign, go. I call Galveston, Texas, "Bill's Greek Tavern, I need—." Boom; no question. I call New Orleans—New Orleans; New

Orleans Seafood. “What you need Bill?” Boom. You be honest to the people, no cheat. If you try to cheat the people you lose.

00:33:54

RF: So when you opened did you do all the cooking?

00:33:59

BM: Huh?

00:34:01

RF: When you opened—when you reopened—?

00:34:02

BM: I cooked.

00:34:04

RF: You did the cooking?

00:34:04

BM: No; I don't need nobody. I love it; oh, man. I cook and sing too; I love it.

00:34:11

RF: And you still do the cooking today?

00:34:13

BM: Night and day, day and night; never stop.

00:34:18

RF: You cook the fish; you cook the shrimp?

00:34:20

BM: Everything, sir: shrimp, fish, potatoes, grouper, snapper, redfish, tilapia, crab cakes, oysters. Uh-hmm, everything; me, I do everything, me. That's the way I do it. I love it. You know, people don't like—if you love that you do it.

00:34:51

RF: I want to ask a question about a famous customer about—I know—I've read that this was Eudora Welty?

00:34:57

BM: She used to come; she's my baby.

00:34:59

RF: Her favorite restaurant, right?

00:34:59

BM: That's my baby. That woman go to England, to London, so, you know, that—because the lady big name, they take you to a big restaurant to eat, the limousines and everything, take you. And she tell—after she eats, they ask, “How's your meal?” The woman used to be that way

because she write years, hours. So she said, “Let me tell you something. I’m from Mississippi. I eat one place everyday called Bill’s Burger House and the man turned seafood place the best and the man don’t have a name outside. Man, the best restaurant in the United States of America called Bill’s.” **[Laughs]** You know, and the time comes, you know, one night—she used to bring me ten, twenty people right and she said, “Bill, I’ve been to London and I’ve been—nowhere you’re the best.” She started to be sick and I used to go pick up in a wheelchair and bring her here to eat.

00:36:00

RF: Oh, you’d pick her up?

00:36:01

BM: Man; uh-hmm.

00:36:04

RF: How often did she eat here?

00:36:06

BM: She come to [?] family after. My daughter married I bring her to the wedding and from—I have 1,100 people at the wedding of my daughter, 1,100 people signed the book. Greek man, American man. I have 1,100 people and her in a wheelchair.

00:36:21

RF: Oh, so she went to your daughter’s wedding?

00:36:23

BM: Yeah; I love it. She's a sweet lady. She loved me. Everywhere she talked about Bill. Sure; I love it. I used to go pick her up in a wheelchair to eat—Sundays, only Sundays.

00:36:37

RF: She'd eat here on Sundays; okay.

00:36:38

BM: No; I take another places—me.

00:36:42

RF: Oh, you'd take her to other restaurants?

00:36:43

BM: Other places; day time I bring her here and then other people to eat. I mean I pay from my pocket. I loved the lady.

00:36:52

RF: How far back did your friendship go?

00:36:54

BM: Many years, many years. I used to have this woman and one named [?] Senator from Meridian call—man, they bring me everything. Any time you have—here all the Senators they bring them to me all, and this woman, everywhere—this woman everywhere go because come

people from everywhere from this woman to see—Chicago, California, England, France, Italy—
“Let’s go to Bill’s.” She call me, “Bill, tonight fourteen people from England.” And I say,
“Okay, I have ready.” She’s sweet lady. She never married, never.

00:37:38

RF: No kids; no—

00:37:40

BM: The house they make it museum.

00:37:43

RF: Right; I went a couple months ago. Yeah; I had—yeah.

00:37:46

BM: She’s my friend, my best friend. God bless America. My best friend, good lady. I love it.

00:37:51

RF: What would she eat here when she came?

00:37:52

BM: Huh?

00:37:54

RF: What would she eat? What did she order?

00:37:55

BM: Fish and shrimp, redfish and five shrimps on the top, and baked potato, delicious salad together. They go together. All the—I used to know. She used to tell the workers, she said, “Bill know what I eat.” I know what she eats. I have a lot of people who say, “Bill know what I eat.” I had people who come yesterday—I had four people yesterday and another man yesterday come inside and he tells the worker said, “Bill know me; I’m from another town.” I know the man eats fish and scallops. You know, I know; I already—before I see them in the door I put fish and scallops.

00:38:29

RF: On the grill?

00:38:29

BM: Yeah; I know. This lady I used to know well she—and we used to make a spanakopita—Greek, spinach pie, that we put together because I know what she liked. She liked to have spinach pie too. She’s sweet lady; very sweet—sweet lady, uh-hmm, smart woman, very smart. She used to love me. I make plans to take her to Greece.

00:38:56

RF: And it never happened.

00:38:57

BM: She start to be old. She can't fly. He said, “No, I can't fly.” The doctor here, “We’ll go—we’ll go together.” He said, “You can't fly. You have to have oxygen.” You know, I don’t know

what he say and she can't fly. The doctor said, "No, Bill; can't fly." Because I like take him to my island. I love it.

00:39:22

RF: How often do you go back?

00:39:22

BM: Every year. Every year.

00:39:25

RF: Do people there know that you own a restaurant in—? Do people on Thasos, do they know that you own a restaurant in Jackson?

00:39:33

BM: Oh, yeah. I close every year one month.

00:39:36

RF: In July; yeah.

00:39:41

BM: And go with the family. The people know; they know exactly, they know. Any time you—they know you—you know what I'm doing, that's all. They know Sundays, I never open Sundays, you know, never on Sunday, they know. I don't open Saturday lunch, never, only nighttime. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday and Friday day and night. And Saturday I open only nighttime—five hours. I used to stay until twelve o'clock, one o'clock. Now nine

o'clock I come here 5:00 to 9:00—four hours, that's it. I can't do more. Something to do, that's all, you know, kill time; that's all. This is God bless America. I'm old man. How many people work seventy-nine years? Show me one. Show me one. You know, so—. Forty-two years in America here God bless America. Forty-two!

00:40:54

Willie? Clean the table and put the tomatoes in the back. Let's go now. Lilly? Lilly?

00:41:08

[End Bill Matheos — Bill's Greek Tavern, Part 1]

[Begin Bill Matheos — Bill's Greek Tavern, Part 2]

00:00:00

Bill Matheos: Work thirty years; I have girls, two, three girls who work thirty years with me.

00:00:05

Rien Fertel: Wow. Are they still here?

00:00:07

BM: Yeah; they be there.

00:00:08

RF: Oh, they'll be here at 11:00.

00:00:09

BM: They be 11:00, here; two. You know, this is a new girl I train now, new, because another girl with thirty years leaves Sunday and go to retire and go to Green Bay. She leaves and goes to Green Bay. Her mama and daddy live in Green Bay. And the mama and daddy very sick. I don't know; maybe I'll try to keep, you know, I'll see what they are doing and maybe I'll try to keep, because I like. I see what I'll do.

00:00:37

RF: What are your thoughts on Jackson? Do you love this city? How do you feel about it? Is it home?

00:00:40

BM: Number one. Let me tell you something. If you somewhere, say in New Orleans, man, there forty years place everybody know; the New Orleans people everybody know. Now, New Orleans is tourist people and sometimes too many people, but here it's more community here. My restaurant here you—me and you can't force to eat. The lawyers, doctors, insurance, bankers. You can't come to—fifteen dollars lunch and five dollars tips; you got to have twenty dollars to come in the door. We no have poor people here. We got special people to eat. Today I have twenty women coming; she [?] some [?]. They called me and will be there at twelve o'clock. That woman said, "Well, crabmeat salad and shrimp, nineteen dollars." You know, poor man, okay; number one the poor man is making \$7.50—if you come here all the days go. Man, I have good people. Nighttime, doctors, lawyers, everyone. I forgot to tell you: last night they gave out to every customer, ten dollars tips, ten dollar tips; every customer.

00:02:14

I have the number one Jackson people here. The governments, the—all these; they know me, everyone. Before coming they know me. I have people, all the insurance people—money. I know everyone. Forty—the people who used to be forty [?]. The people used to be fifty, ninety died, you know. All these people, you know—now I draw young people, you know, that's my job: to draw young people. You know, too keep going—

00:02:53

RF: Yeah; do you have younger people coming in now?

00:02:54

BM: That's my job. That's my job. That's my job.

00:03:00

RF: So I know Jackson has a history of Greek restaurants and a small Greek population. Are you part of that community? Are you friends with those—?

00:03:09

BM: Really I have met this oil man named Gary—Gary—Gary, name—Gary Reed, he's very rich. He told me, he said, "Bill I want to move this restaurant and put three million dollars and build. And I say, "No. [?] no need restaurants." I mean I'd like to stay here. Longer I live my eyes stay here. Now if I die I don't care what's going on. But I like here. I love it. It's my home. That's it. I know what I'm doing. That's all. I enjoy it. You know, I use—nobody know you; not a problem. [*Laughs*] Not a problem. Six people in the back cook and don't know what the hell they're doing. I don't lie to you; they don't know what the hell they're doing. They don't know. I

go there—my cafeteria and black woman picks up the lettuce from the—bring the lettuce coming—lettuce. I say, “What are you doing?” You say, “I cut the lettuce.” I say, “Honey, you got to wash this lettuce two, three times. It’s coming from the farm. It’s—the dogs pee-peed. There are animals. They spray. Man you go and kill the people.” You see that’s where they don’t know what they’re doing. Me, but my family—my wife, my kids, my friends, everything perfect; it’s got to be perfect.

00:04:45

Wherever the salad—ready everything from box. We make all the salads in the back and the front, every one. This salad goes with meal. You have lettuce, tomatoes, onions, cucumbers, and cheese. The time you come here buying salads—free. You see, anywhere you go you pay nine dollars only a salad.

00:05:16

RF: And what kind of dressing can you get on that salad?

00:05:19

BM: We have two dressings. The Thousand dressing and the Greek dressing. Greek dressing olive oil and vinegar.

00:05:24

RF: And what’s the other dressing, the first one?

00:05:28

BM: Thousand dressing. I’ll show you.

00:05:32

RF: Yeah; show me. Thousand Island—

00:05:45

BM: I make it, me.

00:05:47

RF: You make it; homemade right.

00:05:48

BM: Homemade this and homemade Thousand and homemade Greek dressing.

00:05:52

RF: But do you also have Comeback Dressing?

00:05:53

BM: Hmm?

00:05:55

RF: Do you also have Comeback Dressing or Comeback Sauce?

00:05:57

BM: That is Comeback—

00:05:57

RF: Oh, that's what you call—you're saying, oh, that's called Comeback, okay.

00:06:00

BM: Yeah.

00:06:00

RF: What is Comeback? Can you—I don't—I've never had it.

00:06:03

BM: I'm Greek; Comeback. You know, same you have a woman and you say, "Come back."

You come back, right. [*Laughs*]

00:06:13

RF: So how would you describe the taste of Comeback for someone who hadn't had it? How would you describe the taste of Comeback?

00:06:20

BM: Well, I have the recipe how I do it.

00:06:22

RF: Well without telling me—.

00:06:24

BM: The recipe I have there forty years. I can't give you the—where's the books. The recipe, the book from Florida are right here.

00:06:37

RF: Is it from—?

00:06:37

BM: I can't show it to you.

00:06:39

RF: It's from Pappas's restaurant?

00:06:40

BM: Yeah.

00:06:41

RF: So they did Comeback Dressing?

00:06:43

BM: Everything here.

00:06:45

RF: So Florida had Comeback Dressing?

00:06:46

BM: My recipes; this is how I make this. Look. You come to work for me and I put you my apron, I show you my recipe. *[Laughs]* I got to—.

00:07:01

RF: Well how would you—without telling me the ingredients how would you describe it, the taste of it?

00:07:05

BM: What would you say, Willie?

00:07:10

RF: So how would you, Willie, can you give me your whole name first?

00:07:12

Willie Robinson: My name's Willie Two, JSU, Jackson University; that's my name, yes, so my name's Willie Two, JSU. Willie Robinson.

00:07:18

RF: And can you spell it?

00:07:21

BM: Willie—W-i-l-l-i-e, Number Two, JSU. Jackson State University. Opa!

00:07:27

RF: And your last name is Robinson?

00:07:27

WR: My last name's Robinson; yeah, R-o-b-i-n-s-o-n.

00:07:32

RF: Okay; so how would you describe what Comeback Dressing tastes like?

00:07:35

WR: Yummy; yummy, yummy, good for the tummy, yes. Opa! Yes, yes, yes, yes. That's about it.

00:07:50

BM: Willie? You have to remember from now on I don't pay you because you'll be everywhere. No check, no money—*[Laughs]*.

00:08:01

RF: So it looks—

00:08:05

BM: It's not normal. No, normal; he thinks I'm normal—gives me work, come on. *[Talking about a customer:]* My friend from Lebanon, he speak Greek in America.

00:08:20

WR: He being shy.

00:08:22

BM: Hey, Junior—

00:08:29

RF: What's it like when you and your sister get together? Are you both—?

00:08:33

BM: Who?

00:08:33

RF: You and your sister, in Greece?

00:08:35

BM: My sister is coming to America baptize my daughter.

00:08:40

RF: Okay; but what is it like when you get together? Are you both loud and—?

00:08:46

BM: Look; you want me to show you the picture? And, you know, what keeps me young and not tell everybody, don't put there. I love the woman, the [redacted]—.

00:09:00

RF: We'll redact that, okay.

00:09:02

BM: Oh, baby. [*Claps*] Thirty years making me young.

00:09:09

RF: So, how much—?

00:09:10

BM: They keep me young. I love this goddamn thing. [*Aside:*] He's my friend. They keep me young, man. I'm not dead; I'm alive. I'm alive.

00:09:19

RF: What do you—I want to do know what you—what do you eat and drink during the day?

You start off your day with coffee?

00:09:26

BM: What I do here?

00:09:28

RF: What do you eat and drink throughout the day, to keep you on your feet? You're almost eighty years old, yeah.

00:09:37

BM: Really the—I don't drink coffee so much.

00:09:41

RF: You don't; okay.

00:09:41

BM: I drink water. I eat every day with my employees eleven o'clock, before 11:00. I ask my employees, "What do you like to eat today?" And they tell me. You know: fish, shrimp, or they want salad together. We eat, before lunch, we eat. And we pray the Lord and we eat.

00:10:03

RF: Do you eat seafood everyday?

00:10:04

BM: Everyday. I eat free—no sauce. They going to mail me the check after thirty years, free.

00:10:13

RF: Do you think that keeps you healthy and young eating seafood or fresh fish every day?

00:10:17

BM: The woman is keeping me young.

00:10:21

RF: Okay; well—.

00:10:22

BM: Beautiful, man—there's nothing better than beautiful woman. I got a girlfriend in New Orleans, she call me all the time, "Bill, will you come to New Orleans?" She's thirty-one years old. Oh, baby. I'm joking.

00:10:39

RF: All right; so I want to ask one more question, one more—or a couple more questions. I just saw—I saw baklava on the menu. Do you make that here?

00:10:45

BM: Yes, sir; I make it, me.

00:10:47

RF: You make baklava?

00:10:49

BM: [?], baklava, fish, fish dip, grape leaves, me. Professional.

00:10:56

RF: I mean—

00:10:58

BM: Lilly, the new employee. Opa, Lilly!

00:11:02

RF: Baklava is a very difficult thing to make, right?

00:11:04

BM: You want me to fix you one. Fix a baklava my friend and bring here, no sauce; put the ticket, me. Don't make a ticket. They fix it for you. No; stay close to the man—he got a boyfriend. He got a boyfriend.

00:11:23

RF: How do you make your baklava?

00:11:25

BM: I make it in filo, walnuts, and sugar. You ground the walnuts and God bless America.

00:11:34

RF: And lots of honey?

00:11:35

BM: Delicious, professional. I'm from Greece. I love Thasos! Beautiful island, 100,000 tourists a day, many beautiful things. I build beautiful things.

00:11:55

RF: If I go to Greece, I've only been once, I should go to Thasos?

00:11:59

BM: Let me tell you something: if you go to Thasos, if you go to my hometown, everybody know me. I don't lie to you; every person in the world know me, say I meet one man—I met a guy—God bless America. They know me. I have beautiful name. How old are you, sir?

00:12:20

RF: I'm thirty-three.

00:12:21

BM: Anywhere you go, keep your beautiful name, be honest, no crook, no lie to the people, no steal,.and be good person. And the Lord with you. God bless America. Opa!

00:12:35

RF: Okay; I'm going to ask you one more question—

00:12:37

BM: If you don't be good person nobody love you.

00:12:39

RF: Can I have you just say your full name?

00:12:42

BM: My name? In Greek?

00:12:45

RF: Say it please first in Greek and then in English.

00:12:48

BM: Vasilios Kostantino Matheos. Bill K. Matheos.

00:12:54

RF: And your full birth date please?

00:12:57

BM: Fifteen, July, 1935.

00:13:02

RF: All right; thank you very much.

00:13:04

BM: And I live in America forty-five years—am I right? Forty-five, forty-six, and I have two daughters, one mafia—no, I'm sorry. **[Laughs]** One lives in Greece and one in America and my grandson, fourteen years old, man. He plays baseball—athlete.

00:13:28

RF: Good; all right ,well thank you very much.

00:13:30

BM: Big glass of water to the man too and put three scoops of ice—no, four in the water. You count one, two, three, because it's Greek. **[Laughs]** No, no more don't give me more—.

00:13:45

[End Bill Matheos – Bill's Greek Tavern, Part 2]