

BILLY REYNOLDS
Bartender - Check's Café – Louisville, KY

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Location: Check's Café
Interviewer: Amy Evans
Length: 43 minutes
Project: Louisville Barroom Culture

[Begin Billy Reynolds Interview]

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Amy Evans: This is Amy Evans on Thursday, January 17, 2008 in Louisville, Kentucky, for the Southern Foodways Alliance, and I am in Germantown at Check's Café with Billy Reynolds, the bartender here. And here comes Mr. Tinker, Schnitzelburg's Number One Citizen.

00:00:19

Billy Reynolds: [To Bill Tinker] Not yet. I think we're supposed to go one at a time, Tink.

00:00:22

AE: That's okay. Let me pause this for one second. All right. So Mr. Tinker got himself a beer and went in the dining room, and I'm still here with Billy Reynolds. And Billy, would you say your name and your birth date for the record, please?

00:00:32

BR: Billy Reynolds and it's October 18, 1959; I'm old—fat and old. It's sad.

00:00:40

AE: Are you a native of Louisville?

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BR: Yep, whole life, born and bred in the neighborhood. The first place I remember living was by the fairgrounds. It used to be the Twilight Drive-In, but I can vividly remember that; and I've lived around the airport pretty much my whole life, but right here from Louisville.

00:00:53

AE: So when was the first time you darkened the door of Check's?

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BR: Funny story—I was eighteen year old and I—I was a pretty good ball player but—I played on the Check's Softball Team—but at eighteen, you couldn't drink. So the guys brought me in; they were a little older than me. And we sat at the bar, and the guy that made the place famous, a man named Joe Murrow, and he always remembered—he could remember names like nobody I've ever seen in my life. So my buddies ordered a pitcher of beer and this was, you know—this—this was a while ago; this is [nineteen]'75—he brings, they bring the beer over. He walks over and he said, “Are you old enough to drink?” And I went, “No, sir.” I was trying to be a good boy, you know, I'm eighteen, fresh-faced and honest little young man. He looks at the guys with me and he goes, “Well don't let him get drunk.” The funny part of that is, I came back in right when I was twenty-one-and-a-half. He looks up there from the bar and goes, “Billy?” And I went, “Yeah.” And he goes, “Man, you've gotten fat.” *[Laughs]* Now that's wild because it's been three years before I came back but that—that was the first time, and then I—you know, once a year. Maybe. Until I came in one Friday night and there was a sign that said “Bartender needed.” And I thought, “Well, you know, I've done this for a long, long time; this seems like a nice quiet place.” And it was almost fourteen years ago, and here I am now. *[Laughs]*

00:02:07

AE: Uh-hmm. So tell me a little bit more about the history of Check's. Do I have it right that Mr. Murrow was not the original owner; that he took it over at some point?

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BR: Yeah. Tinker knows the whole spiel, but the parts of the story I know is that the first guy was named Check [Sumpter] that owned it, okay. And they made him sell it because—this is the rumor, the legend that, you know, people spread—some guy broke in, neighborhood guy broke in so Check shot him with something called buckshot or salt pepper or something. Well the police got on him for shooting a gun in the city limits. The guy broke in the next week, and he was waiting for him again because he did it every night through the same window; and he shot him in the ass again with the shotgun, and they told him he had to sell the place. So he sold half interest to Joe [Murrow], and that’s the way I get the story and that was—I think Joe bought it in [nineteen] ’50-something but that was ’37 or ’44 somewhere in there. But Tinker knows more of the actual history than I do. I just know the stories.

00:03:00

AE: Yeah. So you say Joe made it famous—Joe Murrow. What do you mean by that?

00:03:05

BR: He’s—he was—he was the guy that knew everybody and met them—like I said, he never forgot a name, so people love to hear their name. So he—people would walk through and this place, in those days, there would be lines to the door. There would be fifty people in line with nowhere to sit, but he would stand up by the register, and I can remember this when I was just a littler kid—where he would—he would holler back at the people at the end of the line who looked like they were getting frustrated, “Oh, calm down Harry” or “Calm down Leon,” and everybody just loved to hear their name. Well, back in those days, they didn’t take your money

when you ordered your food. And it was just Joe that took the money. So you would order your stuff. There was a hole in the wall, basically. It wasn't a hole. It was like a—it used to be an entrance way and—and if you come in and ordered a brat [bratwurst]—you get the soup here [at the counter], but if you ordered brat and fries he just leaned back, hollered through the hole, “Brat and fry,” okay. And then when you left, you came back up and stood in line again to pay. And when you came up, you told him what you had, but you better tell him the truth because he never forgot. And you paid him then. It was—it's—and through the urban legend and the thing of the thing—but everybody that's come in has told the same story the whole time I've been here about how amazing it is, how no one ever skipped out. This was an innocent era—age in the world, I guess that's the word for it. But, like I said, that's how he operated. He—everything was in a cigar box or a bowl of money; there was no high-tech registers. There was nothing like this. You walked up and he said, “Oh, you owe me \$3.00” or “You owe me \$4.00” or “You owe me \$2.50,” and that's how it worked, but—. And he knew every politician in town, every—it was just an amazing place back in the day. But that little—that was pre-me; this is just me coming in when I was a kid and hearing my grandpa talking and hearing the old people here talk.

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AE: So tell me about the clientele here today and this being a neighborhood joint and who all comes in.

00:05:00

BR: Well, when they worked—like we still have them now, all afternoon long we get older people, retirees. It's a German—Germantown it's called but it's—it's more a Catholic—it's a Catholic neighborhood, so we got a church across the street. It used to be a bakery across the

street. We have an older clientele, but at lunch we got businesspeople from downtown that have come here since their older businesspeople brought them down, so lunchtime it's a suit and tie crowd. They leave and then the—the factories start to let go, which ones are left, and their people come in after they get off work. Well we've had guys, as long as I've been here, that show up everyday between 4:00 and 5:00. They sit and have a beer, some of them have a shot; they watch the news. Everybody talks about the news, and then at 6:30 or 7 o'clock they all teeter off into the night and go on home. And this is just the way it's always been here. Now we do have people that stay later at night to—to watch the ballgames or hang out, but as a general rule of thumb for—what's considered a bar—I call it a restaurant, but for what's considered a bar and a restaurant we're closed 11 o'clock every night of the week, if you was to average I out. We have a liquor license 'til 4:00 but, to the best of my knowledge, it's only been used three times. It's just what we do, but it's just you come in, you have, you know, beer, shot, and then you watch the news and talk about the news and then teeter on home to the wife and the kids, and this is the way it's been here as long as I can remember.

Now the downside of Check's—I know this is a happy interview but you—you cut this; the downside of this is, I guess, forty and fifty years ago that was an acceptable way of doing things. What we have now in Check's is you met since you've been here is now the newer older guys. Newer older guys. Because I'm forty-eight, but the newer older guys are stunned and shocked that their wives, you know—and it's not always funny—they're shocked that they're getting divorced now because they worked their whole lives and, evidently, their idea of retirement was, “Now I get to be here at 3:00 and stay 'til 7:00,” where I'm sure their little wives that was sitting at home all this time aren't thrilled with that. So in my fourteen years here, that's been the number one thing I—that I have seen. It—and no matter how you try to explain it to

them, they're still totally right because I'm sure this is how their dad worked. This is how their dad's dad worked, so they saw it when they were a kid because this is a—Check's you see whole generations come through. I mean there are kids that come in here and point at pictures on the wall and say, "That's my great-grandpa; I never met him," because our pictures on the wall are that old, which is a neat thing; but the world changes, and Check's, it is a changing and you know, so the old-timers are kind of fighting that. So that's kind of our thing now at Check's. But to me, it's still the funnest place I know, but that's the downside of Check's, sorry.

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AE: And so what kind of schedule have you maintained over these fourteen years that you've been here, and tell me about your other job that you had before all this.

00:07:58

BR: All right. Well the real job, I'm a butcher in a grocery store. I've been a butcher in a grocery store for thirty years this year, so not the proudest moment. I'm always one of those people that—I went to college to be a writer, and then life sort of happens to you: married, kids. Married without kids is a lot of fun. You can do a lot of things. You get to run around like—and then you accidentally have kids. That's how everyone has kids now, and then suddenly you have responsibility, so now you got to work. So that's how I—that's my real job, and why I've stayed at my real job so long. I'm pretty sure I'm like everybody's story. Life happens to you. None of us actually start off being the astronaut or the ballerina we wanted to be when we were kids but the bartending thing—at Check's it's always been Friday nights are mine, so I love that because—. But Monday, Wednesday, and Friday has been most—most of the time I've been here. It's been every Wednesday and Friday for fourteen years; it's—it's really kind of funny,

though. I say this kind of modestly: they're the two busiest nights of the week because—I'm entertaining, but I'll stay to watch the ballgames. And, you know, everybody likes to watch the ballgames, so they come and watch the news, and we watch the ballgames and normally speaking the teams in our neighborhood okay, UK [University of Kentucky], U of L [University of Louisville]—they play Wednesday night, so Wednesday night and Friday night, which is high school night, but it's the day before—you know, Saturday, duh—but that—so everybody comes in to talk about the game. So this thing revolves—my part of it has always revolved around sports because I'm a sports junky. So the guys come in, and we shoot the breeze about the game and fuss and argue because some like U of L and some like Kentucky; very few like Indiana here but, you know, we just—everybody talks about this, talks about that, and—but mine has always been three nights a week and started doing it—extra money, you know. The—had little kids and the wife wasn't going to work. We was going to have that American dream. Well then when the—all the American dream blew up, then you worked to pay child support, but all the way through I just—I liked this better. It—I'm the—the oxymoron of life: I love being a bartender more than I like my real job because I like people, I like shooting the breeze. I like doing this. Throughout my life I've heard, you should have been a salesman, you should have been a politician, you should have been this, should have been that, but you got to have a real job. I'm a bartender that doesn't like to work late at night, and how insane is that? You know, to have this kind of life, this kind of thing, but that's pretty much the way it's been for me.

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AE: Well what about all the relationships that you've cultivated in this job and, specifically, Mr. Tinker out there? I mean do y'all hang out after working hours? Like today, y'all are going to a game. Tell me about that.

00:10:35

BR: Well, since I've been doing this, my whole—I've been—I can truthfully say, you know, it's like your job, and the people you meet at your job are your friends. Well here at Check's, you know I—I've always hung out with guys that are older than me but here—I consider all these people my friends. And I'm going to use—I'm going to burn up your tape here, but I'm going to use this as an example. My house burned down, okay, and this was something—didn't have insurance; I was a goofy guy, you know, and everybody does their stupid thing but I—you know, rent—do all this but all my stuff got burned up. Well my favorite movie is *It's a Wonderful Life*; it's the goofiest shit in the world, I know. Every—I lived every cliché in that movie you can possibly imagine, from people coming up and saying, "Hey, do you need this, do you need that, this—this." You know a prideful guy, you always say, "Nah, nah; I'm good. No." Because you know they're your friends, but you don't like to take stuff from your friends. Everybody is this way. But the best example I give for this is the fact that I know all these people. I say hi; I've been to more funerals since I worked here than in my entire life. I grow attached to these people. I see them; I like them; I enjoy it more than you know. Well I, like all big sports junkies, I have lots of memorabilia: posters, magazines, pictures on the walls. I had my little Kentucky room, only it was a big Kentucky room. It was—it was like a running joke amongst my friends how much crap I had on the walls. You could tell a single guy lived there. Well, like at any big establishment, you've got lots of people that you know and talk to everyday, and then you've got people that you just see and they go, "Hey, how you doing?" They come in once a week; they shoot the breeze. I could not tell you their last name. Went to their funeral, still—I don't pay attention to names; I know their first names. The guy's first name was Ben. Ben shuffles up to the bar—he's an older gentleman—and he goes, "Hey, Bill," you know, "I heard about your

house. Sorry about that.” And I said, “Oh, that’s—you know, I appreciate it Ben.” He goes, “We’ll keep you in our prayers.” “Thank you, Ben.” They go to eat. They—he comes up later on and he goes, “Bill, all that stuff your friends are always up here bragging about, all your UK stuff, did all that get burned up?” I said, “Yeah, Ben, every bit of it, unfortunately.” I said, “But you know, I didn’t get burned up.” That’s a big miracle to me; that’s why you can stay in a good mood about this. He says, “Oh, that’s—that’s horrible.” Two or three weeks later they come back in; like I said, they were a very old couple. He shuffles up to the bar with a big stack of stuff, and he sets it on the bar. It’s all of these bags. And I go, “What you got there, Ben?” And he goes, “Well me and the wife were talking, and my kids are older, and they don’t really appreciate this kind of stuff the way I do and I’m—the way I’m sure you do. So here you go.” I started looking through it. He gave me better UK pictures, posters, magazines than I ever had. It was just truly an amazing thing. So, you know, I thanked him and I’m—you know, we talked about all the cool stuff he give me, and it’s all kind of cool. The guy dies a week later, but he got to do a good deed, and I got be a cool thing but—. That was just the—the best example of all the good things that happened to me from your house burning up. That’s kind of wild.

00:13:29

Now me and Tinker [longtime Check’s regular Bill Tinker] are doing things I’ve gone—used to go with—with all the—like me and the bartenders that I used to work with, we’d go out places and we’d do this and we’d do that. Well, you know, everybody—as you go through life you’ll kind of notice—because I like to go places and like to do things. Tinker won't hear this, will he? Okay, because this is—I don’t want to make him mad but how we started doing this—Tinker, it used to be when he was a young guy, got to go do stuff. Well he got old like all these old guys, and his friends died off. Well Tinker don’t walk too good, so he really can't go many places because he doesn’t walk too good. So anyway, he was in here one night, and I was talking

about going to the game or something, and I had an extra ticket. And he goes, “Well I wish I could go. But I can't get around good.” And I'm like, “Well, Tinker, hell you—we'll go, if you want to go.” This is how Check's works; this is the coolest part. This is how Check's works. These people were sitting out there who were regulars. They're every weekers. I talk to them about every—everybody in the area knows them. It's the Fisters. Everybody knows who they are; they're like the nicest people in Germantown. One of them walks up to the bar, and they said, “Well, Tinker, if you can't—you know, we know you don't walk too good but our mom—.” Miss Fister's mom passed away. She said “Well, we got a wheelchair in the garage. You can have it.” And I—and I go, “Well Tinker, they bring us up a wheelchair, hell, we'll go to the game tomorrow.” They walked it back up in the rain because they get couldn't fit it in their car—walked it up in the rain. It's four blocks. And dropped it off and me and Tinker have been going to the ballgames ever since. I bet we put 1,000 miles on this thing because, basically speaking, I hope when I get to be old and can't go around that somebody realizes I'm dying to go, but I can't quite get there. So that's how me and Tinker started running around. And the crazy part of it all is now it is just the most assumed thing in the world that me and Tinker are going. And everybody will say, “Oh man, can I go?” And it's really turned into the neatest thing humanly possible, and that's pretty much how I started—because you know, Bill is one of them guys you talk to at the bar but, you know—like you talk to everybody. But since we've been going to games, hell, I consider him to be one of my better friends now. It's—it's really wild. I'd have never dreamed it when I first started working here. I'd have never dreamed it would end up me and Tinker hanging out like this. But it's kind of a neat thing, so that's how me and Tinker started off. **[Laughs]**

00:15:40

AE: And you keep the wheelchair in the closet up here at Check's all the time?

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BR: Oh, no, that was the new one. That's the—another funny story. Tinker can't pick—he can't even get the wheelchair out of the thing, you know. He's just—he's a little frail old man, so he can't even pick the wheelchair up; so I put it in the trunk of his car, and then the next time we're going to go somewhere, I take it out. Well the same family, the Fisters, came in and they saw us at a—we were talking about going to a game and they said, "Do you still have that same ratty wheelchair we gave you four years ago?" And Tinker goes, "Well, yeah; it's good—you know it still does good. The big boy gets me everywhere." We have been to Chicago to see the Cubs; we have been to Arkansas to see the Cats play road games; we've been everywhere. And they go, "Well for God sakes, we didn't know he was going to keep it forever. We've got a better one." And they went—hey, this is as fancy a wheelchair as you'll ever see and then they—now they give it to him now—they just give it to us—the first one. They give us the second one and apologized because they didn't realize we were going to keep it forever. They thought that we were just going to use it and get rid of it. They didn't know that—that we were still using it and they're apologizing that they—they had the Cadillac wheelchair but didn't give it to us. Once again, that's how cool the neighborhood is. But they are the nicest people. But yeah, they brought it up, but me and Tinker's schedule doesn't mesh, him not having a job and me having two. So that with—we couldn't get his chair donated to the Goodwill; somebody to take it out to put the new one in [the closet at Check's], and then while we're sitting at the bar last night, the kid with the White Castle [tattoo] thing—.

00:17:14

AE: Uh-hmm, Josh?

00:17:14

BR: We were talking about we got a new wheelchair and so he goes, “Well, my mom is really getting old and she—she doesn’t really move around that well. What are you going to do with the old one?” And that’s how we ended up doing it last night while you were here. Josh—Josh says his mom needs one and we had one, so—what’s that goofy movie, “Pass It On”? So he’ll—he’ll doctor it up for his mom, and off she’ll go because it’s still in good shape. But that’s kind of that.

00:17:37

AE: Well tell me about—I mean you have an obvious rapport with everyone here and a great personality, but what about like service behind the bar; because the nights that I’ve been in here, you know, like Donny comes in and he’s barely through the door and you’ve got his—you’re pouring his pitcher and putting his glass on the bar and handing me a club soda before I even sit down. And—and tell me about that kind of service that you do.

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BR: Well, like I said, I’ve been doing this a long time. What is the point of being a regular, if you have to say it every time? That’s the way we do it here. To be honest with you, I know—I know—I learned what people—I learn what people drink before I learn their name. I’m not like the Joe-guy; I don’t remember everybody’s name. I never forget a face, so I put a face with a drink, and then I know. But that’s just—that you know—I’m sorry. I see them—everybody likes that kind of personal stuff. What—what gets me is everyone kind of knows I’m bad with names.

But I never forget a face. Like I know them, and when I remember the name I'm really good. We got a guy that comes in here everyday; he drops his daughter off at gymnastic practice, and he comes in here everyday. Somehow or another I started calling him RJ, don't ask me why. But I was proud of myself because, like Donny and Coach Dave and all the guys, he walks through the door, I pour his beer. I got it waiting for him. And I say, "Here you go, RJ." This goes on for almost a year. And while he's standing there, somebody walks past him and goes, "What's up Junior?" "What's up JR?" And they call him these names when they walk past because we're crowded. I walk out and I go, "Your name is JR?" And he goes, "Yeah." I go, "Why have you let me call you RJ?" He goes, "I don't really get a chance to talk to you; you put the beer in front of me so fast that I just figured, hell, I'm getting a beer, why not?" There you go; that's the downside of putting people's stuff in front of them. **[Laughs]**

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AE: Well you're talking about something lasting for a year and you kind of being tricked into something; tell me about, again, when you interviewed and—and the guy that you interviewed said that if you ever had a problem, go to him.

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BR: All right. When I came here for the job, all right, I'm in here on a Friday night, and I'm going to go watch the ballgame down the street. We've got a—it's a big high school sports town, and we have one of the oldest, most historic fields down the street. So there's a sign on the door that says "Bartender Needed." So I go up to the bar and they're kind of busy, and I talked to the bartender that was working and I said, "Hey, about the bartender job, who do I talk to?" And he points at the end of the bar, and there's a little guy sitting there in a cowboy hat, and he says,

“Talk to Duke.” So I go down, and I said, “Hey, are you Duke?” He said, “Yeah.” I said, “Well I’d like the bartending job. How about I talk to you?” And he says, “Man, I’ve had a few beers tonight; come back in the morning. I’ll be here at 10 o’clock.” Ten o’clock Saturday morning I come in and I’m talking to this guy named Duke, and he’s telling me about the job. And this lady comes in named Jodi, and she comes out of the back. So she sits down with us, and they’re both telling me about the job and talking to me, and so I go, “Hey, that’s cool.” So Duke goes, “What do you think?” And Jodi goes, “I like him.” And she—and Duke goes, “I do too.” And they go, “All right, you—you get the job. We’ll start you tomorrow, if you want. When do you want to work?” So I said, “Well, Monday, Wednesday, Friday works out perfect for me.” And they said, “Well that’s fine, be here tomorrow.” So I start working, and every time I have a problem, the guy that’s teaching me how they do things here, which is caveman-ish compared to every—you did everything out of a cigar box, and you did it all in your head—every problem I had they said, “Talk to Duke.” So something broke; I talked to Duke. If something wasn’t where it was supposed to be and I couldn’t find it, I asked Duke, because Duke was always here. He was just always in the corner drinking with his friends, but he was always here.

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This goes on for six months and for six months, you know, I’m introducing Duke to my friends when they come in to see where I work now. And I don’t say it in front of Duke, but I’m telling my friends, “Yeah that’s Duke, man. He owns the place.” And they’re all like, “Man, that’s kind of wild. I thought a doctor [Joe Murrow Jr.] owned this place.” I’m here six months before someone finally clues me in: Duke is the guy that mops the floors in the morning, and he just stays here; he just knows where everything is. It’s actually the Jodi lady that’s the waitress I’m working with every night who owns the place, only I don’t know it. **[Laughs]** And that’s how Check’s is. Ninety-nine percent of the people who walk through this door think I own it

because I'm the face they've seen the most, which, once again, I don't quite get, but that's kind of the way it works and—so that's—that's—that's how I started here. **[Laughs]**

00:21:46

AE: And so today Joe Murrow's [Sr.'s] grandson, John, runs the place?

00:21:51

BR: Right. Yep, so it's—Doc—Doc [Joe Murrow Jr.] is actually a doctor in town, an internist. He's—he has a big practice; he has a big following and his wife, she's big in community stuff, so this is just—Jodi is—there used to be three that owned it. Doc had sold some of it, I'm assuming. I don't really know the ins and outs to some of the members of his family. Well, as they got older and wanted to retire, they sold it back to Doc. Well Doc let one of his sons run it; they—they hired a guy to run it for a while and he did a good job, and then they figured that Tommy had learned. Well Tommy didn't. Tommy—Tommy is the next son down. He kind of screwed it up. So then it became John's turn, and John has kind of run with it. John does good but still has to have everything go through Doc. But yeah, John does good; he's just like all of them, you know. He—he—the problem with putting a younger person in charge of Check's is they—they—they look to the future, you know, and I guess every business, if you don't grow, you die. Well that's not true here; you want things to stay the same. You want these guys' kids to come here when they're old. It's more of a perpetual thing. So sometimes he'll get into this rush to try to get younger people in. And that doesn't work here, and John is starting to figure this out now. Like Tommy came in—we might have been the only bar in the world that put in a big screen TV and lost business because you come to Check's to talk; you come to Check's to shoot the shit, to hear the stuff, to talk about the news and they—we're the only bar in America that doesn't have a

jukebox. We used to have pinball machines, but then everybody smoked and some of Doc's friends said it looked kind of bad, so now we don't even have those. But that's been the biggest change since I worked at Check's. We took out the pinball; we finally smartened up and got rid of the big screen TV because the old people didn't care for it much. So we have TVs. We watch sports, but it's not this big looming thing in the corner. But yeah, that's the biggest change is that you don't need nothing—you don't need young people to make it successful. You need young people, if you just want to be busy two days a week, Friday and Saturday. **[Laughs]**

00:23:54

AE: So about how long ago was it that the pinball machines—machines disappeared?

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BR: Two years—right—right when John took over. Right when John took over they went with a—they moved them to the back room and the back room was not—the old people liked to get up off the bar, shuffle to the pinball machine because this was a big deal. The pinball machine was a big thing here. They would—we played the same stupid pinball machine for—it had probably been here twenty years; it was an Adams Family pinball machine, and being the champion was a big thing. Twice a year—I didn't play in it because I wasn't a good player, and I don't like pinball—there's probably thirty guys that played it everyday, and they would have tournaments once, twice a year. They would get together on a Sunday, and we opened at 1:00, and it would last until we closed at 11 o'clock. They had tournaments to—to play the damn pinball machine tournament but this—if you tilted it, you had to put in a quarter, and that's what they funded the six months of the thing with. But it—it—once again, it's one of the little quirky things that's left, but most of the old people that played it either passed on or they can't go. But

when I came here, it was nothing to see—to walk in—in the middle of the afternoon and see five guys in their 70s standing around the pinball machine cussing and bumping it and making fun of each other, which is there, once again, the fun part of Check's to me. But that was—that's one—it's probably been three or four years, but when most of the older clientele stopped playing and that—because there again that's—that's the danger with Check's is, I get attached to them and nobody lasts forever. And that's truly the way it is but—but that's what happened to the pinball machines. It just slowly got weaned out but it lasted—there's hardly an old picture you can see in this place, if you see around the bar, that doesn't have a pinball machine in the corner, until recently.

00:25:42

AE: Well and Check's has—I mean you sell mostly beer but you have a full bar also; do you sell many cocktails other than—than shots or anything like that?

00:25:50

BR: Friday—Fridays—Fridays we have—this is mostly guys off work, guys in to watch a ballgame, but Friday night is football night. And like I said we're big down the Street and Saint X [Saint Xavier] is the neighborhood team. It's the fifteen-time State Champion; it is one of those—we're lucky that they're down the street, but they play at the stadium down the street and they'll have 10,000 people for a high school football game, where in Kentucky a normal crowd for a football game is 1,000. But they'll have 10,000, and they all come here. So it's the night that you bring the wife out that—believe it or not, in Germantown that's considered a night out. You take them out, take them to the football game, take them to Check's to eat and drink, and you can actually get away with calling that *date night* when you're old and married in Check's,

which is, once again, one of the cooler parts of Check's. But the ladies like drinks, but there's nothing fancy here. It's always, you know, beer—beer, sometimes there's shots but—. A friend of mine came in—him and his wife—before she got married and she come up to the bar and ordered a daiquiri or something, and the old man that was bartending back in those days—I couldn't tell you who it was—it was way before me—looked over top of his glasses and said, "Can't do it." She ordered a different kind of drink, and he looked over his glasses again and said, "Can't do it." So the third time he pulls his glasses down the end of his nose and goes, "Honey, we sell beer and we sell bourbon; do you want beer or do you want bourbon?" The reason I tell this story is I met this guy; he come in here to watch the ballgame. So I go by his house, typically, somebody I ended up going to ballgames with. I go by his house, and I meet his wife. So I walk in the kitchen waiting for him to get ready and say hi to his kids because, you know, once again, I meet these people. They've got kids; I go watch their kids play Little League. I can go to the Little League down the street; I've not had—I've never had a kid play Germantown Little League. I know everybody. It's—it's a strange life I live. Anyway, she looks at me and she goes, "I went there before we got married. I don't like it." And I said, "Well you ought to come back." So here one Friday night they show up to go to the ballgame. She walks up to the bar and orders a drink, and I couldn't resist. I pulled my glasses down at the end of my nose and said, "We've got beer and we've got bourbon; what's it going to be?" She got madder than hell until she realized it was a joke. **[Laughs]** But nope, it's just mostly that. I may be the only person that works here that knows how to make a drink but—because I actually did work at different places before. But no, here it's something with a Coke in it or club soda and lime.

[Laughs] That's considered a mixed drink at Check's. **[Laughs]**

AE: What other places did you work bartending?

00:28:28

BR: I worked Phoenix Hill for a little bit, Gerstle's for a little bit; I've worked different places. I got a funny one for you. Well, this is more for you than it is your tape, but you'll enjoy this. One of the first jobs I had was at a strip club. I—there was—I had—I had been married very—I had been married a while. The kids were little and it—this guy—I met a guy playing ball and he says, “Oh man, I—I run the strip place.” He goes, “You'll make a fortune.” He said, “People don't think you make money at a strip joint but you do.” So I asked the ex-wife; she said, “Sure, go ahead.” So I started working at a strip joint. It was—it's one here in town. It used to be the Cheyenne Social Club like in the movie. So I'm working. Well, the first week I worked there it was pretty cool. Lot of naked girls; they're all pretty; they're all young. Next week—this goes on for like six weeks and I go up to Lilo and I said, “I have to quit.” He said, “You have to quit?” I said, “Yep, I have to quit.” I said, “Don't like it.” He said, “Bill, if it's the money, man, people love you. You should—you should stay. I'll give you more money,” you know. I thought you were making enough money. I said, “It's not the money, Lilo.” I said, “When I first started working here, it was great. You could walk in everyday and you see naked young girls.” I said, “I cannot make Lisa understand this how much this scares me—now pretty naked young girls will walk past me bitching about their family, and I will listen at them bitch about the boyfriend, the kids, the school—the whatever it is—not even notice they're naked.” I said, “That scares me Lilo. I do not want to be the kind of guy that can look at naked girls and not get excited.” He looks up from his desk, starts laughing, and goes, “Will you please call my wife and tell her this because she thinks I'm full of shit every time I tell her the same story?? But that's why I stopped doing it then. **[Laughs]** Bad as it is, that's the truth.

00:30:17

Customer: Oh, that's great; I wish I had a camera. You look so natural with a microphone.

00:30:22

BR: There you go. Oh yeah, I like to talk. *[Laughs]*

00:30:27

Customer: Yes, he does.

00:30:28

AE: Well there's no good segue to this, since we were just talking about strip clubs but back to date night—tell us about Bud and Laverne who come in on Friday night.

00:30:34

BR: Oh, they're the best. This is what we strive for in life. Everyone wants to be Bud and Laverne. Everyone. If not, then you—you should go—you should bat for the other team, as they say in [the television show] *Seinfeld*. Bud and Laverne have been married now seventy years. When I first started working here, they're some more of the people that you put the drinks up when you see them because, you know, they order the exact same thing.

00:31:01

AE: What do they have?

00:31:00

BR: When they—he has a draft beer, and she has the lightest bourbon and Sprite known to man because neither one of them are five-foot tall. Neither one of them can weigh 100 pounds. When I first started working here, they came in with an old couple, so it would be two old couples. And I always thought, man, that’s pretty cool: two old friends meeting up here. Then I found out that the couple they were with was their—their daughter and her husband. They’re both probably [in their] sixties when I met them, so—. But anyway, Bud and Laverne have been married seventy years. If—anybody that walks in the door says hi to them, but if nobody shows up, they’ll sit over there and talk to each other all night long and laugh and giggle and cut up. If all their friends show up, they’ll sit there and laugh and giggle and cut up all night long. But I want to, once again, point out the fact that, if nobody shows up, they will sit there and talk all night long after seventy years. I can't get anybody to listen to me straight for seventy minutes; Bud has found a woman to listen to him for seventy years. It’s the most amazing thing in the world. That is, to me, the American love story. That’s what you want; that’s what you got to have.

A quick Bud and Laverne story. We had a going away party for a—the girl that worked here but we had it at the bar up the street. In Germantown there’s a bar—there’s eleven bars within a mile, so the best way to have a surprise party is to have it at another bar where you don’t normally go. So you know I—I put on a good going away party. It was a big surprise; it was the big—it was a big deal. So anyway, we got a crowd there and, you know, people put their money in their jukebox because they had one. So Bud goes out to dance with Angie, so I go over to Laverne and I said, “Laverne, would you like to dance?” And she says, “Yeah, Bill, I would.” She goes, “But I’ve not danced with anybody but Bud for probably fifty years.” I sat down instead of dancing with her. She said, “Aren't we going to dance?” And I said, “I’m not that good of dancer, Laverne. I can't handle that kind of pressure.” And I—she got mad because I wouldn’t

get up and dance with her, but I'm not going to break a fifty-year streak. She should dance with somebody that knows how to dance. **[Laughs]** But that's my Bud and Laverne. They are, without a doubt, my favorite couple that comes in here. Like in any bar, you've got the ones you can't stand, and you've got the ones that you look forward to seeing. That's—there again, the Bud and Laverne is one of those things where you grow attached to people.

00:33:18

They didn't show up for a couple weeks around Christmas. We had the all-points bulletin; we had people going everywhere searching for them. We come to find out Laverne had—had pneumonia so Bud didn't leave the house. But the only way we found this was one of the people that come in here went to their church on Sunday—on Saturday night Mass; they weren't there, went on Sunday night Mass and asked the Priest and the Priest knew. But I can put out quite the network to find out what's wrong with—where the people are at that I don't know. But that's—that's—that's—once again, that's my scary Bud and Laverne story because nobody lasts forever, and that will kill me, because I have bugged with them forever. I call her the rose amongst the thorns because we very rarely have another woman in the place when they come in, so she's the rose amongst the thorns at probably ninety-two years old. **[Laughs]**

00:34:10

AE: Well I feel like we should probably get [Bill] Tinker in here, but I want to make sure to ask you about the food here too—the bean soup and the chili and all that good stuff.

00:34:17

BR: Well, they make everything here, and they get together on Sundays. I think it's Sunday. But the little old ladies make the little old pouches of spices that go in, so we have *the best* chili in

town but they've all got their—but like the Colonel [Sanders of Kentucky Fried Chicken], we have our secret recipe. And we used to win the contest here in town, until they said you had to give them the recipe, and we wouldn't do it, and we dropped out. But the newspaper used to have *Best of Louisville*, and it would list where the best chili was. So they've got posters somewhere in here where we won ten or twelve years in a row, until they started making you do it. But they make everything here. The—the little old ladies come in in the morning. We've had the same ones doing it—well Miss Pat here, she's been doing it probably twenty years, and she didn't even dent the ones when I first started here. But we had the same crew—that's how your food is good. If you—if I owned a place, I would pay the people that cook more than I paid anybody else because if the food is exactly the same everyday, then you know what you're getting everyday. And I think that's—that's what makes us good because, like any bigger city you—you can get a hamburger down the street for cheaper than ours, and you can get a bowl of chili at Skyline, but you can't get it like ours because it's the same everyday. And, you know, every—everybody shoots the breeze, and it's that thing like I've always said: Give me a McDonald's franchise and let me sell a beer, it'll look like I invented money. Give me a McDonald's Playland, and I can put the kids there and serve the man a beer, it'll look like you invented money. But that's kind of what this place is. It's—the food is the best. I would like to say I was skinny when I started here and got fat working here, but that's kind of a lie too.

[Laughs] But yeah—.

00:35:51

AE: Well tell me what you were telling me last night about the rolled oysters in the neighborhood.

00:35:53

BR: Oh, we sell something called a rolled oyster and I don't—I don't know where it started, but there's parts of the country that don't even know what it is, but it's—it's a couple of oysters in batter. They roll it and deep fry it, and it comes out looking like a small baseball. Well when I was—we had—we—I didn't realize that only one person did it because, you know, I'm on the other end of this. Well, one week, two or three years ago, suddenly we did rolled oysters. Well this went on for two or three weeks, and people would order them and I'd say, "I'm sorry, we're out." So finally I asked the question. Well the guy that was working there said, "Well, she died. Nobody else knows how to do it." The whole neighborhood, I found out, was out of oysters for almost a year because no one knew how to do it and finally—we had a lady in the neighborhood, Carol—Carol Willet is her name. But she went somewhere to learn how to do it, and now she rolls oysters for the entire neighborhood. She comes in and rolls our oysters for us, makes them in their little ball with all the stuff. But, evidently, there's a trick to it. But I did not realize what a delicate bottom-to-top business the oyster business is, that one lady could die and put an entire corporation business of the oyster business in Germantown out of business, but we were out of oysters—the entire neighborhood—for almost a year, until somebody else learned how to do it. So there's—there's a story there. You don't see that at King Fish, and you don't see that at McDonald's.

00:37:18

AE: And you were out [of rolled oysters] last night. Were you just out, or had she not been making them?

00:37:20

BR: We're sort of scared Carol may have quit. We don't really know, but no one has seen her now for almost two weeks so—it might be another fond memory or waiting for some other old lady to learn how to do it because, like I said—who knows. But if we're out, the rest of the neighborhood is out and that—that's the crazy part of this because Carol—if you learn this business, you could freelance, so if I get tired of bartending, I may learn how to roll an oyster.

[Laughs]

00:37:46

AE: Well Billy, how long do you think you'll be bartending here at Check's? For the long haul?

00:37:50

BR: Yeah, I love it. I love it here. I like the people. I—I like the way I do things. They treat me like a king here. I know everybody. It's—it's great. You don't make a ton of money here, but you make enough to—it's not like working a place because you're not as busy as a real place and, there again, how many bartending jobs can you get where, honestly, if I came in at five o'clock in the afternoon and said, "I got a date tonight at 10:00," everyone that walks through the door would say, "Oh, great, Bill, man. We'll be out by 10:00." How crazy is that? I mean most places would pout and whine and cry. But my saving grace, I've never yelled *last call* here—never. If they want to sit here, I'll sit here. Our liquor license is until four o'clock. If they want to sit here, as long as there's more than one, they can sit here all night long. But I am absolutely and confident in the fact that if I walked in and said, "I really want to leave early," that everyone in the place would say, "All right, man. Can I help you clean up? Can I help you do anything like that?" Once again, there's very few places in the world where you could do that, but I guarantee you I could do it here. I could do it here on the busiest night of the week and just raise up when

the place is crowded and say, “Hey, y’all if y’all don’t mind, I kind of need to leave in an hour.” And they would finish up their stuff without complaint and clean their table and bring it to me. And I would never do it in a million years. It would take an act of God. But I like it that much and I—I think that they like me that much. And that—it’s pretty—with great respect comes great responsibility, so I’ll never let them—never let them down. If I don’t work—when I take vacation, it’s Armageddon. It is the biggest pout-fest you’ve ever seen. So I try never to miss my night. Well, you’ve been here a few nights, and I’m glad you’re here tonight. “Well are you working tomorrow?” Now I have not worked a Thursday night in this place in—well, I don’t think ever. But every Wednesday night when the guys get up and leave, they look at you with that look going, “Are you working tomorrow?” Like, “Oh, I hope so.” And—and it makes me feel good. And I’m—I’m sorry if that sounds kind of boastful, but it makes me feel good that they miss me when I’m gone. But that—that’s just—.

I used to make the expression to Cathy the lady that bartends in the daytime, she says—I don’t—I’m used to—I train people on how to do this so my big line to her was—I’m—I’m real professional about it. I make a list of exactly what you’re supposed to do before you leave. Well, she worked with me three or four nights, and she figured it out, and so she worked Saturday morning, where I closed Friday night. Well she come in, so I come in the next day and she goes, “You didn’t do any of those things that you make me do.” And I went, “No, I taught you how to do it the right way. I don’t do it the right way.” And she goes, “Well, how do you get away with it?” And I said—my big expression in the old days was, “I put asses in the seats. I can get away with murder.” It’s kind of been the running joke in the place, since I worked here, that I put asses in the seats; I can get away with murder. **[Laughs]** But ask Cathy if I do it her way and nope. I give them a long list of exactly—and boy I train good. I just don’t do it good. **[Laughs]**

00:40:56

AE: Do like I say—.

00:40:58

BR: But, yeah, like I said, I just—yeah, and there again it's just—I don't know. I'm spoiled rotten, and I love to play. I'll be here forever. I'll be here forever. I'll guarantee you that. I'll be one of these old farts that they point at the wall and say, "Man, you used to be fat," because I'm hoping to lose weight some day. **[Laughs]**

00:41:13

AE: Well I look forward to the next day that I come back, and I walk in the door and you hand me my club soda.

00:41:18

BR: I will remember that. That's the cool part; I'll remember that. I'll probably remember your name. I've actually talked to you a lot more than I've talked to most women around here—most women don't talk to me for sixty minutes. **[Laughs]** Like I said about Bud and Laverne.

[Laughs] But yeah, but that's—yeah, you'll come in one day and, like I said, we'll—we'll hand you a club soda and, hopefully, you'll still see [Bill] Tinker and some of the old farts around the bar but, once again, this is Check's. We cross our fingers and hope everyday that everybody makes it to the next one because our clientele is kind of old. Once again, getting to the dark part—that's what the—my brothers, when they come in here, that's what they always say. They say, "Good Lord," they say, "you—you just love old people, don't you?" And I went, "Yep, I do." I used to hang out with my grandpa when I was a kid, and I got all these grandpa old

sayings that I throw at people. But when I was a kid, that was the big thing, you know. And my grandpa picked me up—I was spoiled rotten, but I’ve always hung out with the old people. I just think they’re neat; they’re fun; they know a lot of stories. What the problem is, I know a lot about sports, and these old farts know it, but they will throw out names that are way before—way before my time, and you can just tell they love to burn me up because they’ll get that real self-satisfied smile. I’m sure your—your grandpa or mom and dad do it, too. It’s like my old aunts that always boss you around at family functions. My aunts fall back on one thing, “Boy, you’ve got to do what I say. I used to change your dirty diapers.” How in the world do you argue with that? You just automatically do what they say, and that’s the way it is. **[Laughs]**

00:42:41

AE: Well, Billy, thank you for sitting here with me, and thank you for making me feel like a regular here at Check’s. I appreciate it all.

00:42:47

BR: You’ve been here three nights in a row; you are a regular. Hell, you know they say I talk too much, I interrogate people, but if your husband listens to this: hey, we know you’re from Michigan, the cold part of the *L*. She does talk about you out of town. **[Laughs]**

00:43:00

[End Billy Reynolds Interview]