

BLAKE McMILLAN & TOMMY KENT
Cherokee Drive Inn - Jackson, MS

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Interviewer: Rien Fertel

Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs

Length: 30 minutes

Project: Jackson's Iconic Restaurants

[Begin Blake McMillan & Tommy Kent — Cherokee Drive Inn]

00:00:00

Rien Fertel: All right; this is Rien Fertel with the Southern Foodways Alliance, March 5th, a Wednesday evening. It's just after 6:30. I am in Jackson and I'm here at the Cherokee Drive-Inn and I'm going to have Blake McMillan introduce herself.

00:00:15

Blake McMillan: I'm Pendleton Blake Scarbrough McMillan and my birthday is December 29th.

00:00:20

RF: Can you—your maiden name can you spell it?

00:00:24

BM: S-c-a-r-b-r-o-u-g-h.

00:00:27

RF: Okay; we like to get everything down. So you are the owner/manager of the Cherokee?

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BM: Yes; yes.

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RF: Since when?

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BM: October 1st of 2006.

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RF: Okay; so October 2006, so you're going on what eight years now. How have those eight years been, how have they run?

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BM: Well, it's the restaurant industry so great but crazy, all in the same breath, because it's the restaurant industry. Good though; we've had a really good following. We've continued to have the people that have always come to the Cherokee, continue to be here and support us and spend a lot of time here. We've added a liquor license, which has kind of changed things up a little bit. It used to just be beer. And we've added music and we do, like, special events, as far as like a crawfish boil, and actually coming up we're trying something new and having comedians come in, so we're just, you know, it's basically the Cherokee and what it has always been but with a couple of new things added on, so—

00:01:36

RF: Okay; so I've been doing some reading about the Cherokee and I know it has this long history and it has—seems like a lot of owners over this long period, several locations—

00:01:46

BM: It will be ninety years next year.

00:01:49

RF: Okay, so ninety years next year. Before I go into the history do you have anything planned for the ninetieth?

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BM: Not—no; not yet. **[Laughs]**

00:01:57

RF: What do you want to do? I mean that's huge. I mean there's not many restaurants in America that have been around that long.

00:02:03

BM: Ninety years, I'm sure we'll have—do a big celebration and we'll—because I can't remember what the date is; it's in March at some point. But we'll probably include that with our crawfish boil and just focus on that, you know, and I'm sure we'll do specials and different things like that, but—

00:02:21

RF: So you can't remember it right now but y'all actually know the exact date that it opened that the right month?

00:02:27

BM: I have been told, you know, but everything is kind of hearsay. I do know that it supposedly opened in 1925, so it's been around for quite a long time.

00:02:43

RF: Okay; so do you know the name of the original owner or where the original location was?

00:02:48

BM: It was, gosh, what was his name; I think it was—was it Sikes Cherokee? Oh you might—we can ask—I've got Tommy here that has been coming to the Cherokee for years and years and years. I can ask him.

00:03:02

RF: Is he—he's a—is he one of the gentlemen at the bar?

00:03:05

BM: Yeah; he's one of the regulars.

00:03:07

RF: Oh, we could grab him. That would be fun. Actually I think he was the guy, he just fixed a cooler and it was an amazing thing. And there was an ice cooler making a lot of noise and he pulled some—. **[Laughs]**

00:03:19

BM: Huh; okay. **[Laughs]**

00:03:19

RF: It was an amazing thing to see that **[Laughs]**—to see one of the patrons; he just walked behind the bar and he figured it out with the flashlight.

00:03:28

BM: That happens around here probably quite a bit. And that's because we have so many people that have been coming here for years and years and years. And I just, you know, people that they're not just patrons; they're friends, they're family, you know, it's kind of a special thing.

00:03:43

RF: Yeah; okay, yeah, I saw you walk in the bar and I wanted to ask you—I saw you walk in the bar and immediately you're in the front of the restaurant and immediately a customer asked you about the woman I guess he took her on a date recently—

00:03:56

BM: No, not me; he took her on a date.

00:03:57

RF: No, no, right; no, no, he took her. No, right; no, he asked you what you thought about the woman he took on the date and that if he could introduce her to his father. Do you get a lot like that? It seemed very cozy and family-like.

00:04:09

BM: Yes; that's exactly how it is and that's, you know, and that's what's so amazing about this place is that it is kind of I guess it was Cheers before Cheers was cool, you know. It's, you know, everybody knows everybody; everybody, you know, cares about each other and, you know, takes care of each other. It's nice; it really is nice. Like Mr. Tommy—my husband actually he was—I don't know if I should say this or not but I will, he was diagnosed with prostate cancer and had—and it's all gone now; he's perfectly fine.

00:04:41

RF: Your husband?

00:04:42

BM: No; Mr. Tommy, and Hayes took him to all of his doctor's appointments so, you know, it's kind of that kind of vibe around here.

00:04:51

RF: Well—

00:04:51

BM: We have employees that have been here for years and years and years. Miss Delores started in April of '71 and I was born in December of '71. So she's been here longer than I've been alive, which is pretty amazing.

00:05:06

RF: Now what's her name again?

00:05:07

BM: Her name is Delores Bennett.

00:05:09

RF: Delores Bennett. And what is her position here?

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BM: She actually—I'm sure she's had several, several positions but basically she's kind of part-time now and comes in and makes our comeback dressing, which we're known for.

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RF: Okay; let's ask about the comeback dressing. What is comeback dressing for someone—it's completely foreign to me; what is it?

00:05:34

BM: Well, from Louisiana and I would say that it is a version of a remoulade, kind of, but it's a little tangier, there's, you know, it's got a lot of—not a lot, I don't mean to say that, but it's got a garlic flavor, pickle flavor; it's just kind of like a remoulade is the best way that I can explain it.

00:05:57

RF: And what—I've seen a couple versions recently. They all have a different shade or tint, color, what color—how would you describe the color of the comeback sauce here?

00:06:07

BM: I would say that it is probably a little darker and this is going to sound weird, but being a food person, I would say that it is a little darker than the color of smoked salmon.

00:06:21

RF: Okay.

00:06:21

BM: That's a good way to describe it I would think. And you might see a pickle or something in there. **[Laughs]** But that's—

00:06:28

RF: So what do people do with comeback sauce here?

00:06:30

BM: They put it on their crackers. They put it on their salads. They put it on their French fries, their onion rings, their pickles; it's kind of, you know, whether it's used as a salad dressing and it's also used kind of like a condiment, so—

00:06:44

RF: And so you're not from here but have you heard any stories about comeback sauce: why it's named that, where it comes from, why it is what it is?

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BM: I don't know why it's called comeback sauce. I don't really know why that it is. I'm not really sure where it originated but I do know that it's—one of the things that we're known for and I don't—you know, it's just it's a very Southern thing and it's a very Mississippi thing. I come from Alabama so we didn't have. you know. we never had—I've never seen comeback before I had come here, so—.

00:07:18

RF: Okay.

00:07:19

BM: I think it's really a Mississippi thing.

00:07:21

RF: And does Miss Bennett, Delores Bennett does she only come here and make the comeback sauce?

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BM: Well. she makes all of our dressings or us, but basically yes. That's what she does now, just because she's older and semi-retired and helping us out a little bit, so—. **[Laughs]**

00:07:38

RF: How often does she have to come in and make the sauces?

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BM: About two days a week.

00:07:41

RF: Okay, and do you—or does she, maybe I should ask, does she trust the sauce with anyone else to make it?

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BM: Nobody does; nobody does right now. I mean I know the recipe and I know how to make it and I could if I needed to. But no; she would much rather come in and do that and, you know, it gives her something to do and she gets to see everybody—you know, her family that she's known here at the Cherokee for years and years and years, so—. It's kind of good for all of us.

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RF: So you said you were from Alabama, where at?

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BM: I'm from Jasper, Alabama but I've lived in a lot of different places, so—.

00:08:17

RF: Okay; and you opened—or, you know, you didn't open. You bought the Cherokee with your husband in what year?

00:08:23

BM: 2006.

00:08:25

RF: Okay and how did that come about?

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BM: Well we've—I went to culinary school. I've worked in the industry for years and years and years. I've waited tables. I've worked for Sysco. I've been a pastry chef for Frank Stitt. I've worked for Tom Catherall. I mean, I've done a lot of different things. And Hayes had a restaurant and hotel management degree, and so when we met it was kind of a given that that's what we would do. And we bought Roly Polys and we owned those for probably three years and found out the Cherokee was for sale. And so we just felt like it was a win-win situation and had a great reputation and it was an institution in Jackson. And so we decided to sell the Roly Polys and buy the Cherokee.

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RF: And who was the owner of the Cherokee at that time?

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BM: Chip Angelo.

00:09:16

RF: And he had owned it for how long?

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BM: He owned it for eighteen years.

00:09:22

RF: So a long time and he moved it to the present location. Can you say something about that move or the present location?

00:09:27

BM: Well, at the time, when I met my husband, we used to go do the Cherokee. It was probably like our second date, was at the Cherokee, that was on State Street. And it was great; it was very quaint and very you know I mean what the Cherokee is. It's a dive bar but it's a very quaint dive bar and it's cozy.

00:09:45

It just has a really good vibe about it; it's very laid back. And from what I understand he was renting the building and the landlord wanted to go up on the rent of the building and the building was pretty much falling down because that's just what it was. It was kind of a juke joint. And so he decided to buy over in northeast Jackson just because, you know, it's a little safer over here, not much, but it is. **[Laughs]** And so he moved it over here; it used to be a salon. And he came in and gutted the place to make it look like the Cherokee.

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RF: So did he get to keep any original features or—?

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BM: All of the pendants that we have above the bar are original to the old Cherokee and probably original to the Cherokee before that that was on Stage Street, but farther south, over by like the old McCray's, in that area. And so, like the pendants and all the lights; I'm sure these people used to be in the old Cherokee, all the games, you know, so yeah. He made it—he did a great job recreating what it used to be over on the other location.

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RF: Okay, and there's—the—what about the neon sign, which I think is a very distinctive feature?

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BM: Yeah; that came from the old location as well and I'm sure the location before that too.

00:11:17

RF: Okay; is the neon sign—it's just—?

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BM: It's hung up on the other side.

00:11:19

RF: And the neon sign is lit up at night, right?

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BM: It is.

00:11:22

RF: Okay; what was I going to say? Oh, where did you and your husband meet in a restaurant or in the restaurant business?

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BM: Through friends.

00:11:36

RF: Oh, okay.

00:11:37

BM: Yes; no, not in the restaurant industry.

00:11:39

RF: Where did you go to culinary school?

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BM: I went to culinary school at the Culinary School of Art in Atlanta.

00:11:44

RF: And was it—so Roly Polys that is a sandwich kind of franchise shop. Was it tough moving from that to taking over this institution that's been around, then, for over seventy-five years? How was that? Did you feel like you were dealing with something delicate because it had so much history or something important because it had so much history? How did you feel about taking over, you know, from a sandwich shop that are all over the country to this maybe one of the oldest establishments in Jackson?

00:12:17

BM: Well, we were very excited, you know, in the beginning, and we're still very excited now. But we were very excited and, you know, you learn so much when you get into this and yes, we did know that it was an institution but we kind of saw that as a positive. I mean, well, of course it is a positive but, you know, you are right in the sense that it is a great responsibility to maintain and take care of something that is as precious as the Cherokee. And I know that kind of sounds weird, but many people come here. Many families have grown up here. We have, you know, it goes back five generations, you know, to people in this town.

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My father-in-law grew up coming here. His parents came here. You know, so it's kind of a place where you come and you just kind of grow up here. And we have children that are babies come here and, you know, now they're coming in and showing us their IDs to drink beer. You know, and that's—and then their grandparents are coming in and eating lunch, you know, so it's a nice thing; it really is.

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RF: Have you heard any stories about Cherokee in the past you know that really stick out?

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BM: Well, you hear so many stories and I've actually—I wouldn't mind writing a book about all the stories and different things that have happened here. Oh, I'm trying to think; what are some of—I mean they're all just kind of crazy and I don't know if one really stands out. I do know that lots of people have gone on their first dates here and have you know proposed here. Business deals have gone down here. I'm sure marriages have been broken up here. **[Laughs]** And, you know, it's just—there's so many different things that I'm sure people could tell us about the Cherokee, but I don't know. I've kind of enjoyed everything—moment that we've had while we've been here so—. It's all kind of—you know, positive and, you know, exciting and nothing really stands out.

00:14:20

RF: What do you think the Cherokee means to Jackson as the Jackson greater community?

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BM: I just think it's—I think it means well what the Cherokee means, I think that it—I think people see it as a place where they can go and they can let their hair down and they don't feel like they're being judged by anyone because there's so many different types of people from, you know, all different types of backgrounds that come here. And they just relax and their kids can play games. They can drink a beer. They can watch the football game. They can talk about Ole Miss and State or fight about Ole Miss and State and, you know, it's just comfortable. And I think that's what people like about it. I think that's why they like it so much and the burgers are really good.

00:15:04

RF: Okay; so let's talk about the menu. Tell us about the burgers.

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BM: Well, they're five-ounce pattied burgers that we patty out every day and cook on the grill to order. Everything is very fresh. Everything is cut, you know, by hand; the tomatoes, the lettuce, the onion. We don't get anything prepackaged or precooked. They're just really good and they're really, really, really a good substantial very tasty burger.

00:15:32

And we're really known for our roast beef, which is our Thursday lunch special, and it's roast beef, mashed potatoes and gravy, green beans, and a salad, with the comeback on it unless you request otherwise. But I think people come in droves to have that, so—.

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RF: And do they put the comeback directly on the roast beef?

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BM: No, on the salad; no. No on the salad; no. **[Laughs]**

00:15:56

RF: So people eat it on roast beef or would that be totally—?

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BM: I'm sure it's happened. **[Laughs]**

00:16:01

RF: So there's daily specials, I'm guessing?

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BM: Uh-hm; there are. On Mondays we do chicken and dumplings with a salad or a hamburger steak with cabbage, purple whole peas, and rice and gravy. And then on Tuesday it is meatloaf or beef tips with mashed potatoes or rice and gravy, lima beans, and okra. And then on Wednesday it's fried, baked, barbecued chicken—or barbecue chicken or beef livers with onions and gravy, mashed potatoes, black-eyed peas and turnip greens. And then Thursday, of course, roast beef, green beans, salad, and mashed potatoes. And then Friday we have country-fried steak, rice and gravy, corn, and crowder peas I think. And also the redneck taco—

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RF: What is that?

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BM: The redneck taco we take a piece of cornbread and slice it and present it open-faced with pulled pork that we've smoked on our smoker—we have a big smoker in the back that we do ribs on as well—that we smoked on the smoker for about I'd say twelve hours and then we top that with a homemade barbecue sauce and homemade coleslaw. So it's pretty good.

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RF: How many of the recipes on the menu, or how much of the food on the menu, comes from the previous owner?

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BM: I would say most of it; we did come in and, you know, we've added some things and taken away a couple of things. We've added the chicken and dumplings. We've added the redneck taco. Let's see what else have we added? We've brought back the catfish; we had actually taken catfish off the menu because of the whole catfish crisis. We've added ribs. We've added music, which I know is not food, but what else have we added? I think that's about it, because it's just such a good menu and it's, you know, the food is just a staple and, you know, I mean it's proven well in the past so we've tried not to change too much.

00:18:02

RF: How would you describe the menu kind of the whole thing?

00:18:07

BM: What do you mean?

00:18:09

RF: Well what does the menu try to do, like who does it try to serve or feed?

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BM: I would say families and it's—I mean, you know, we do have salads and our salads are excellent but we do specialize in French fries and fried pickles and fried mushrooms and things like that. But—and our pizzas are absolutely wonderful too. People don't know that our pizza is

really, really good. I mean people order them but they usually—you know, there's so much more on the menu so they don't really pay attention to that as much.

00:18:41

But I think anybody that just wants a really good meal and something substantial and filling and satisfying, is what I would say.

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RF: Okay; I was just reading online the poll by the newspaper, the *Clarion Herald*, right and—

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BM: You mean *Ledger*?

00:19:01

RF: The *Clarion Ledger*—*Clarion Ledger*, and you've won the award for best hangover food. Do you claim that? What do you—?

00:19:09

BM: Oh yeah, definitely I claim that but you know in today's society you're like, "I don't know if I should say fried." But yes; we have a lot of fried food. But it's very good fried food and, you know, I mean we cut our potatoes, we cut our fried green onions, we, you know, get fresh—or not—we get fresh frozen shrimp in but, you know, it's not like we get breaded shrimp.

Everything is breaded here. Our gravy is made on—you know, made here; we don't use a

powder. Everything is fresh. So it may not be—I guess you would—I would kind of call it down home cooking, you know.

00:19:43

RF: Are there any other women or men in the kitchen that have been here for some time?

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BM: Oh gosh; we have Linda Scott and I—you know, it's—you—the years start running together and you think, “God, I don't really know how long they've been here.” But I know over, I would say, over twenty years. Linda has been here over twenty years. Denise has probably been here about fifteen years. Angela has been here eight years. Cory has been here probably fourteen years. Miss Delores we know has been here blah, blah, blah years, because I'm not going to say that because **[Laughs]** of my age—I'm kidding, forty-two years.

00:20:21

Let's see; Shawn has been here forever. I mean we have people that have just really stayed here a long time which I think says a lot about the people that come here and everything. So it's nice.

00:20:35

RF: Can—wait; okay so I've just been joined by a patron here tonight and he is going to try to tell us some of the history of the Cherokee. Can we start by just having you give us your full name and your birthdate please?

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Tommy Kent: Tommy Kent and March 2, 1939.

00:20:56

RF: And that's Kent—K-e-n-t?

00:20:58

TK: It is.

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RF: Okay; so you were seated at the bar when I came in tonight. How long have you been coming here to the Cherokee either—any of the various locations?

00:21:07

TK: Since 1971, over on State Street.

00:21:11

RF: Okay; and is that when you moved to Jackson or is it—?

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TK: It is; I'm from Greenwood, originally up in the Delta, and I moved here in 1971.

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RF: Why did you move to Jackson?

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TK: I moved here because my mother was at the time sick in a nursing home here and it was no one else to take care of her. And that's when I moved to Jackson.

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RF: And so you went there, State Street—when it was on State Street, who was the owner then?

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TK: At that time the owner was—I think Sid Gunner was the original owner at the time when I first came here and I can't remember the gentleman's name that was in between Sid and Chip Angelo buying it—the whole place. Chip was working as a waiter there at the time and he went on and bought the Cherokee from—I don't know if it was Sid or one person maybe in between. I can't remember his name. But he wasn't there very long.

00:22:14

RF: Okay; so there's been at least four generations of owners since you've been coming?

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TK: Yes; it's been about four generations.

00:22:20

RF: Can you describe that State Street Cherokee as you remember it, kind of the décor, what it looked like, the atmosphere, and maybe how it differed from what it looks like today?

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TK: Yes; over there it was a very much smaller building and you had an upper area in the back where there was more tables like we have here, where people went to sit, and you had a smaller, much smaller bar in the actual front part of the Cherokee. And it was just a very small seating area in the bar, more seating in the back part of the Cherokee for people eating, you know. And had about much lower ceilings in that building—and I remember it was still a time when people could smoke **[Laughs]**. It was pretty rough in that building with the smoke. Someone like myself that didn't smoke—never have—and but it was low ceilings and the sound was, man, I mean you could hardly hear yourself think in there if they had the jukebox **[Laughs]** playing or something in there because it was so loud in there—due to the low ceilings unlike this place where you've got the high ceilings in the bar area.

00:23:39

RF: And who was the clientele who would frequent the old Cherokee?

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TK: Well we had about the same afternoon crowd that comes in here. It was about five or six, eight of us that came every afternoon to the Cherokee and would stay, you know—we'd get off work at 6:00 or 5:30 or whatever. And stay to about 7:30—8:00, you know, and it was about the same afternoon crowd that comes in here about four or five of us still do here. Of course it's so many more places in Jackson now to go, but when I first came down here that was so close to the State Office Building and all downtown that that's where those guys came. I didn't know anything about Jackson, you know. We went to Memphis for everything from where I lived up in

the Delta. And so when I came down here I really didn't know any streets or anything about this area. Now I just some of the guys I work with invited me to go with them to the Cherokee and that was the first place I started going, as far as just going and meeting people at a bar.

00:24:43

RF: Where were you working then?

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TK: I was working for the State Department of Agriculture, at the time. That was my first job here.

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RF: And where do you work now? Are you retired?

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TK: I'm retired now and I farmed for about twenty-five years up in the Mississippi Delta and I still—we still have our land and all up there. It's leased out now.

00:25:01

RF: What did you farm then?

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TK: We had cotton, soybeans, corn; I had about 2,000 head of cattle and we had a feed lot where we fed them out and just we've got a big operation up there now and it's all leased out. It's about 10,000 acres.

00:25:19

RF: So do any memories stick out from the old State Street Cherokee, any special nights or strange things that happened or—?

00:25:29

TK: Well I really can't think of any strange things. We had a lot of fun; that's about all I can remember. **[Laughs]** I don't know of anything that would be of, you know, any real different strange things. We have the same fun here we had there, you know, those of us that used to go to the old Cherokee—

00:25:49

RF: Did you—have you heard any stories that dated to pre-1971 from maybe people that would come there, you know, before your time about the previous owners or anything about the previous location?

00:26:02

TK: The—I can tell you one thing. The previous owner, Sid Gunner, of the one that—of the era that I knew of the Cherokee, he went on to open another location similar to the Cherokee that

was called the Dutch Bar that was very, very famous for its day and time. It was not located close to the Cherokee. It was more close to kind of downtown in that area, but further south than where the Cherokee is. But Sid had it and then I just can't think of that boy's name that had it for a short period of time after that. And then you had the Recovery Room up there and at one point in time I think the guy that had the Cherokee in between Sid and Chip Angelo, he owned both the Cherokee and the Recovery Room, which was a very popular place back in the '70s, when I first came down here.

00:27:02

RF: So when the Cherokee moved to its present location was it a sad thing that happened?

00:27:09

TK: You know, no; it really wasn't. In fact it just gave us so much more room and they were just hammered when they first opened here because I think that brought more people in, because it's more seating for the people to eat and more privacy, like this area here, which we didn't have at the old Cherokee. And I think it just brought in a lot more patrons to the Cherokee itself. And of course Chip and them were so well known they brought the same cooks and everything over here and you know it just stayed the same just bigger.

00:27:48

RF: Do you eat at the Cherokee and what do you eat here?

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TK: Oh I—the lunches are very good here. It's just a blue plate special. Oh, yeah; I've eaten here ever since I came down here. When I was working we would come at least two or three days a week and eat lunch and—but they have the great—they have great hamburgers and cheeseburgers you know just the regular sandwiches.

00:28:10

RF: So last question; what do you think the Cherokee means to Jackson, or the greater Jackson area?

00:28:16

TK: Oh, I think it's just been around so long that there's so many people—and I tell you what I see a lot here; there's a lot of younger people than myself bringing their kids in here. And that's what's going to keep this establishment going because it is more room and it is—they have a lot of games here that they didn't have at the old Cherokee for kids that can play the games and keeps them entertained while the parents eat, you know, or do whatever with—meet their friends. And I just think it's going to be around a long time because of the youth that are coming in here now especially the college students, when they get out of school. They all come here because they came as kids to the old place, and they bring—as they get older and get married and have families they bring them in here.

00:29:03

RF: Okay; well I want to thank you very much.

00:29:05

TK: Yes, sir; thank you. All right; I hope that works out for you.

00:29:10

[End Blake McMillan & Tommy Kent — Cherokee Drive-Inn]