

BOBBY GRANT

Bertha's Kitchen – Charleston, South Carolina

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Interviewer: Sara Wood

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Sara Wood: So my name is Sara Wood and I’m with the Southern Foodways Alliance. And I’m sitting here with Mr. Bobby Grant. He’s the son of Bertha Grant. And we’re sitting in Bertha’s Kitchen here on Meeting Street Road in North Charleston. And I’m wondering Mr. Grant if you would please introduce yourself and tell me who you are and where we are right now.

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Bobby Grant: Okay; my name is Bobby Grant. I’m the eldest child of Bertha Grant. I’m fifty-nine years old. I’m a contractor and a construction worker and it’s basically me.

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SW: And for the record will you tell me your birth date Mr. Grant?

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BG: September 7, 1954.

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SW: So you have a birthday coming up in a couple months?

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BG: Yeah; I’ll be fifty-nine in September, yes.

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SW: So Mr. Grant I’m wondering if you could start by telling me a little bit about your mother. Who was she? Can you tell me some of your earliest memories of her? What kind of person was she like?

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BG: She was a sweet girl. I can call her a girl ‘cause me and my mom had that kind of relationship. But she was pretty—she was a good cook. She always cooked her—her mom was a real good cook and I guess she learned it from her mom. So I mean, my earliest memories I guess I might have been three or four and I can remember when we moved in with her father-in-law which is my granddaddy and after his wife died, and they moved us in the house ‘cause she cooked for him. So that’s you know my earliest memories of her.

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She always worked. She worked other places. She—she worked at Manhattan Shirt Factory for years making shirts. I think she did the collars, collars or the cuffs, one out of the two. And I know—

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SW: And where was Manhattan Shirt Factory?

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BG: It was in North Charleston located on the corner of Leeds Avenue and Azalea Drive. And before that I think when I was first born she used to work at Charleston House Wrecking Company pulling nails out of boards. Yeah; that’s what she did in her earliest years after she—she—after I was born that’s what she did, her earliest years. That was her first job; she told me

that’s what she did after I was born because I was born out of wedlock, so you know I’m the oldest child and she had to go to work. And that’s what she did; she pulled nails out of boards for Charleston House Wrecking Company.

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In fact that—that company is still alive today. I’ve got a step uncle that works for that company still.

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SW: Do you know how long she did that for?

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BG: Oh, I think she told me she did it for a year or so. And I don’t know what she did after that. I can’t remember that but I—the next job I remember her having was Manhattan Shirt Factory so what she did in between that time I couldn’t tell you.

00:02:52

SW: So she was working during the day and then she would—would she come home and—and cook these meals that you know?

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BG: Cook for the family; you know she—she wasn’t in business then. She was just cooking for the family; you know that’s how it was back then. You worked a job and you come home and you still had to cook. You know that—that’s how my father was. You had to cook that dinner. He had to have his dinner when he get home, so—. [*Laughs*] That’s how that worked.

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SW: And I’m wondering if you were allowed in there at the time; what was it like in your mother’s kitchen or what was the dinner like? Can you kind of describe that?

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BG: Well you know we come from very humble beginnings, you know very humble beginnings. You know this area that we live in is you know one of the oldest black areas in Charleston, North Charleston. And we didn’t have much. You know I mean we ate things like chicken feet, you know all our grocery shopping was done at the local store. You know so I mean our dinners were—were basically—we did a lot of vegetables you know greens and beans and stuff like that. But it was very humble, you know but—and that’s the same thing that basically she sell(ed) that—that brought her into this business today, those same meals a lot of them, uh-hm.

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SW: And I’m going to ask you about that in just a second but before I forget, could you tell me what was your father’s name?

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BG: David Grant.

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SW: And then your grandparents’ names?

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BG: Reverend William Grant and Anne Marie Grant. Now her parents’ names were Arthur Middleton and Elizabeth Middleton.

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SW: Were they all from here in Charleston?

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BG: Her mother and father was from an area called Forty-One up on the north side of Moncks Corner near Bonneau, South Carolina. In fact that’s where she is buried at up there. So and I don’t know when they moved down here, but they—she used to live in the city and then they moved from the City of Charleston to presently in North Charleston here.

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SW: And I’m wondering, I mean did your mother—was there something; I mean you talked about some of these jobs she had before the restaurant started and I’ll ask you about that in a second but did she really love to cook, like was that her first love kind of thing?

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BG: Yeah; she always cooked. That’s her way of—when folks came that was her gift. That’s—that’s what she gave. You know somebody came to visit she cooked for them, you know and that was like a—like a Christmas present. That’s what she loved to do and everybody loved her cooking. So that’s what she did.

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SW: And from what I understand, so there’s six of you but I think I read somewhere, I think you might have—someone might have asked you this that the—you know it wasn’t just you guys coming over and sitting down at the table. You know if someone was having a hard time they’d come over and eat and she’d feed them? Is that—?

00:05:37

BG: Yeah; yeah, well you know she did what she could do for her community. You know she always loved her community. Anybody hungry would come around you know and we didn’t have much but you know whatever we had she would share you know and that was just her heart. She had a real sweet heart, a real sweet heart—too sweet. But yeah; she had a real sweet heart, real kind, you know. She was a soft lady; you know I won't say they don't make them like that no more but you know I might be a little bias ‘cause she was my mother but she was a real sweet lady.

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SW: So how did she start? So she worked at the—the Manhattan Shirt Factory and she was pulling nails for the Charleston Wrecking Company and how did this restaurant start and how were you involved in it?

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BG: I left here—to talk about this restaurant I have to talk about me. It’s not about me, but this is how the restaurant started. This is the true history of the restaurant. I left to go to college I

guess in '72 [1972]. I think I got married and came back and didn't finish school. I got married and came back here around '78. And I had a little—you know back then they didn't have—you know blacks couldn't go to all the motels and so you know we had the little black motels everywhere. And they had one in the community right here, right up on this corner here about three blocks down. And it was in disrepair.

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So I did this kind of work all my life with my grandfather and my father. So I got a deal on the place, you know but I had to remodel it. So after I remodeled it I used to tell her all the time, this is even before the hotel when I was in high school I used to tell her I'd say, "Girl you can sell your food." You know she'd say, "Oh you're just a son, like your mama's cooking." I said, "No," I said, "Everybody likes your cooking." I said, "All my friends." I said, "Everybody likes your cooking."

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So anyway after I opened the motel I started thinking about it and I was sitting out with some buddies one night and I said, "You know what? I'm going to take these first two front rooms up here and I'm going to make a little kitchen for my mama." She didn't have any plans on going in the business. She never talked about her going in the business beside me saying that she could sell her food. So I just went on and—and remodeled the place and hooked it up and put a simple regular little house stove in there, refrigerator, had some old booths that I got from a guy and I covered up—recovered and put on one side for dining and they had the stove and refrigerator. That's basically all she had for a kitchen on the other side.

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And I went to the house and I got her and I said, "Look; I want you to look at something." She said, "Boy what you want?" I said, "Come and go with me. I want you to see

something.” So I took her out there and I showed her and she kind of freaked out. You know and I said, “Well, now you can sell that food you know.” And she said, “Well, okay.” She said, “Well, what are we going to call it?” And I said, “We’re going to call it Bertha’s Kitchen.” And that’s how it was named, just like that.

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And she started in there and she started in there with my oldest sister [Sharon Grant Coakley]. She was back home from my college, my oldest sister moved back home from college and they started in there together, the two of them.

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SW: Her and Sharon?

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BG: Her and Sharon and in fact, Sharon had a little girl, baby girl, and we always called her the grease baby ‘cause she was raised up under the counter. You know she—every day she was in the little—not bassinette but whatever you call it up under the counter. And the two of them started together and she started right there. And it just went from there. I think she stayed in that motel maybe four or five years and then she moved to this location. And this was just a—a storefront with three apartments, two bedroom apartment here and two bedroom apartment back there and two bedroom apartment where they’re cooking at now.

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And I used to come in and you know I started changing it around and remodeling it and that’s basically the history. She just went with it from there. And like she always said, her lima beans is—is what made her, you know and that was her signature dish. You know she cooked

that lima beans and it was—all the rest was her. I never—I never cooked in here or anything like that. I just do the repair work and the remodeling and you know her and the girls did the rest. So she had two sisters that came in eventually and worked with her for years, my Aunt Charlene [James] and my Aunt Louise [Oliver]. And my baby sister Julie [Grant] came on in and then my sister Linda [Pinckney], so eventually they—at one point it was three sisters and three sisters, you know my mama and her two sisters and my sisters you know so—. And it just kind of grew from there you know.

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SW: I have a couple questions to back up and ask you. What was the name of the hotel or the motel that you—?

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BG: It used to be Simmons Motel, yeah Simmons Motel and I don’t know what year they opened but they were closed. Like I said it was in disrepair and it basically—they let me have it for really little to nothing just for me to remodel it, so—. And that’s—that’s where she started right in that motel, uh-hm.

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SW: Now do was she—she at the kitchen—you made her the kitchen downstairs. Were there people that still like rented the rooms?

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BG: Yeah; uh-hm. It was a sixteen-room motel and she had two of them and the other fourteen rooms I rented out, uh-hm.

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SW: And you said that—that her—she—that the lima beans started there or she made them at home I’m sure?

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BG: Uh-hm; yeah, the lima beans that was her signature dish, lima beans and—and fish, you know. She sold a lot of fish back then and chicken, yeah, and a lot of my buddies used to come and—and buy from her. You know they’d come and see me and I would say, “Hey, look; you got to go in there and buy something from my mama,” you know. They’d say, “Well you ain’t springing that on us; we’re going to buy something anyway,” so—yeah.

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SW: Now back at that time was there a need to feed the community? I mean were there many restaurants around here?

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BG: No, no; there weren’t. There weren’t. The only home-cooking restaurant what I would call, I think—I don’t know if Ernie’s was opened then or not. But really didn’t have hardly any black home-cooking restaurants. You know she was one of the firsts so it’s been like thirty-one years since they been in business. It was the latter part of ’81 [1981], first part of ’82 [1982] when she started, so it’s—it’s been here a while.

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SW: And then Mr. Grant, just—I think you already told me, but just—I just want to make sure I have it for the tape; how long was it between when she started at the hotel to when she—you—?

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BG: She was—she was in the motel I think five years, so I think it was about ’86 or ’87 I think when she moved into this spot you know. And like I said, when she moved in here it was just—just a little front part of the—the kitchen was right on that wall right there. And it stopped right there; that was the entire restaurant right where that beam is right there. [*Gestures*] That was the entire restaurant.

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SW: And so how—how did you decide—you built it a little—you kind of like expanded little-by-little?

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BG: Yeah; the first thing I did was I came in and I took the walls out and I opened up the back end and that’s when we put the kitchen back there. And then a couple of years later I decided to come in and she—she used to lease the apartments out upstairs; it was two apartments. And I took the apartments out and I made this upstairs here for them to go up in so like I said, I do most of the maintenance and the painting and stuff. But it was all her—her and her spoon.

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SW: And what were her two sisters’ names?

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BG: Charlene James and Louise Oliver.

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SW: Mr. Grant I’m wondering if you—I mean you—you built all this for her. What—how did that change her? What changes did you see in your mother after she got this business going?

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BG: Oh man this was—this was the pride of her life. You know ‘cause she was a real simple lady. You know she never did anything out of the ordinary. She never went anywhere. She was always just a housewife and a mother. And this business, man when it—it was just her, you know it really—she was already a flower but she even blossomed even more, you know and she lived for this business. Yeah; even when she got to the point where she couldn’t work—work it like she wanted with the arthritis and stuff she would come out here and just sit in that chair that you see there turned backwards. She would just sit and watch you know to make sure things were being done the way she wanted it done. So yeah; this business really changed her. You know she—it made her independent. You know she—she never you know done anything on her own like that you know, so—she had a lot of opportunities come her way after she started—became successful but she was still a little leery about moving on, you know. So she was just content with this, so—.

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Like they say you do one thing and you do one thing well? That’s what she believed in so she stuck with this. But you know the community, she—she loved the community. In fact, you know not to say well off, but she was pretty successful but she never would move out of this community. She wouldn’t move. She stayed on that corner ‘til the day she died. She wouldn’t go anywhere else. She could afford to live somewhere else but she stayed right on that corner. You know during when Hurricane Hugo came through she was feeding people through her backdoor. You know that’s just the type of person she was you know. Everything in her freezer, she was breaking it out and cooking it and feeding folks, you know.

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She let her church have it, like her church has the—they don’t open on the weekends, so once—one Saturday out of every year she lets her church come in and have—you know sell dinners you know. They still do it to this day and that’s one of their biggest fund-raisers for the church you know. So my sisters still let that go on and that was a big thing for her too, you know. But this business and her church that was it for her. You know that satisfied her.

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SW: What—what is the name of her church or—?

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BG: Francis Brown United Methodist Church.

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SW: How do you think she changed the neighborhood? Did she—did she—you know the whole time she had her business here or I guess it’s a two-part question; how did the neighborhood change and how do you think your mother impacted that change?

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BG: What did you say now?

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SW: How did the neighborhood change over the years and—?

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BG: Well I’m going to—to be honest about you it really hasn’t grown any, you know if anything I guess it’s—I would say it has decayed, you know because of the type area it is. But it’s still a lot of love in the area. You know the older folks in the neighborhood have basically died out and the—the younger folks, the ones that are educated went off, you know their parents worked all their lives to send them to school to get educated and you know they live elsewhere. So the homes that their parents have worked all their lives for these little shanties they just let go. They either let them go—lose them to taxes or they just fall into disrepair and the city tears them down.

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But the neighborhood now is on a little revitalization and we got a group in here called LCAMC, Low Country Alliance for Model Communities so we’re about to put up a model block in here, so we’re trying to bring the area back. But you know like in a lot of black areas, where

there’s decay you know drugs and what have you but you know we basically got most of that stamped out now. So it’s—it’s on the rise, slowly but surely. You know it’s on the rise.

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SW: And do you live in the neighborhood Mr. Grant?

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BG: Yes; yes, in fact I—I lived in Atlanta most of the years. I moved back—well actually I didn’t move back until after she died. I promised her I would come back and help my sisters more, so I bought a little house right behind her house, a little 800-square foot house. It’s basically just a shell and I remodeled it and that’s where me and my wife live in there. So I live right here in the community; uh-hm.

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SW: And what is your wife’s name?

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BG: Patricia Grant.

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SW: Are you—you talked about the Alliance, the Low Country—

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BG: The Alliance for Model Communities—

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SW: Thank you; are you a part of that? I mean you’re a contractor so are you helping to build?

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BG: Yes; yes, I’m a part. I’m a part of my community. In fact, I serve on the citizen advisory council. I’m an elected member from this community so yeah I try to stay involved in it as much as I can. In fact, I want to rebuild my community. That’s my thing. I wanted to do it—I had these ideas before my mama died and she used to tell me, “Come on home now while I can help you, you know and you can get going.” But you know I had a kind of hard head and I said, “No; I got to do it my way with my money,” and you know so—. That’s just how I was. But I wish I did come back earlier than I did, but you know it’s still time.

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SW: And at the time I mean were there other like—your mother had her—her business, she got her business going. Were there other women around here who had businesses? Was that sort of a rare thing?

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BG: That was a rare thing. In fact, well you know we had a few beauty shops. That’s about the only business that women you know ran around here ‘cause even just with my mom, she couldn’t go to the beauty shop without you know like if she had a beauty appointment, they called them the beauty shops—the hair stylists now—if she had an appointment on Saturday the

beautician would call on Friday and say, “Bertha don’t come without bringing me a plate.” She had to bring her a plate you know when she came. So that’s how they felt about her food.

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SW: Were there other black-owned restaurants around here?

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BG: No; not another restaurant in the area. They had a barber shop, shoe shop, I’m trying to think what else; a couple of grocery stores, a few grocery stores, corner stores.

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SW: Do you remember any of the names of these places?

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BG: Oh uh, Nelson’s Grocery Store, um Fred’s Grocery Store, hmm Harry Rod’s Grocery Store; I’m trying to recall this other one. There was a few. I can’t rattle the names off right offhand but you know we had quite a few stores in this area. In fact, I guess we had—you know this area was so populated, you know the houses are built right next together. I used to say that you could lean out your window and lean into your neighbor’s window. You know ‘cause the lots were like thirty by fifty or fifty by one hundred. And everybody was stacked right next to each other.

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So I know at one point we probably had nine or ten stores in this—and this is only thirteen blocks this way and four blocks this way, this whole neighborhood. Nine or ten stores

and maybe fifteen or sixteen churches and I guess maybe about twelve or thirteen joints—juke joints you know. **[Laughs]** It was all concentrated in this area ‘cause that’s—you know that’s how it was then. But this was really a self-contained area ‘cause you know we had a movie theater here and all, Midway Movie Theater here, you know. So Union Heights was really a—a self-contained area. You didn’t have to go anywhere. You know we had a shoe cobbler, a—everything was just right in here you know.

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In fact, we just started a Union Heights reunion and this is the second year. And it’s Labor Day Weekend. The first one was last year and it was very successful so that’s what I’m saying; that’s why we’re trying to rebuild the area. So we’re trying to get everybody who came out of the area if they can offer any kind of help you know if—I mean like I said, if they’ve gotten educated and lived elsewhere or other cities and stuff, so anything they can offer, you know whatever contractors, architects—anything they can do to help rebuild the area that’s the main thing behind the reunion. So that’s what we’re trying to do here.

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SW: Do the ladies cook for the reunion?

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BG: My sisters and them are going to cook this year. Last year we tried to do it ourselves and it didn’t work out too good, so we decided to contract it to them ‘cause what we tried to do is use the businesses in the area for the reunion. So they’ve got the contract to do the cooking this year.

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SW: And I wanted to ask, well it was a good point; how long between when—when she moved from the—from the motel and then as you were remodeling and you kept expanding here, did the restaurant ever shut down or was it closed?

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BG: No; what they do is—they used to go on vacation. They close for a week in July every year and go on vacation. And that's usually when I came in to do the major work. But when I put that kitchen back there they ended up having to be closed for two weeks 'cause I thought I could have it done and it wasn't done so she had to close an extra week. She was a little upset but she didn't let me know that. You know but yeah, but now when they're closed they do two weeks now but they do it at different intervals; uh-hm. But that's the only time they close. And like I said they don't open weekends. It's Monday through Friday—that's it; you know 'cause they—they work real hard back there. You know everything is prepared like—like my grand-mama and them basically prepared it; you know you can see them where they're—even when they do the greens you know they—they take them individually and they wipe them with the rags first before they even wash them. You know so it's—it's a lot of hard work, a lot of home-cooking; you know a lot of home is—is put into it, you know. I'm proud of my sisters. They—you know they're carrying the torch and—and I know how it can be. And their daughters are carrying the torch. You know I think one of them has three daughters. Two of them have three daughters and one has two. All of them don't work in here 'cause you know the younger generation you know how that is, but they—they pitch in from time to time to give a helping hand.

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SW: And when you—I know when you expanded in the kitchen, the kitchen is open so you know you walk in and you see everything that's happening. How did—did—how did—did your mom like that?

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BG: Yeah; yeah that's the way I wanted it too. I wanted people to be able to see what they're getting you know. It's nothing behind the wall; you can see your food being prepared. And I think folks like that better. You know they can stand in line and see their chicken or whatever being dropped in the fryer you know and things like that. You know it's worked well for them. It's worked very well for them.

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SW: Have—have—has anything, since your—your mother passed away in 2007 has the—anything changed in terms of the food or anything since she's passed?

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BG: Well I can't say much has changed. I guess they do some things that she didn't do, some dishes that she didn't do. And they probably find a quicker way to do some things that she did, so you know—nothing is going to be completely original. You know everybody—she had her twist; you know I got three sisters in here and each one of them got their little twist, you know and everybody kind of specializes in something. You know I got one sister that's probably better with this than the other ones, so yeah it's probably some little changes—subtle changes and some different dishes, you know.

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But that's about it. You know it's still basically ran the same, you know. In fact, I get on them all the time. I say, "This ain't your mother's business no more. You got to take it to the next level." You know but they're content right where they're at, uh-hm, so I think it's a good thing.

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SW: If your mother was still here today what do you think she would say about seeing her daughters?

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BG: Oh she'd love it. She'd love it. I mean you know like I said, before she passed that's basically all she was able to do is just sit there and watch them. You know and you know she'll tell them little things and when she saw something she didn't like she would you know tell them. But other than that they—they got along fine—fine as mothers and daughters get along I think you know. She probably had to put her foot down a few times, but that's no more than natural you know 'cause this business was hers. You know this was her legacy. This was you know this did it for her. That's how she felt about it.

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SW: Mr. Grant do you think if you never built her the kitchen in the—in the Simmons Motel do you think she would have ever started her own business?

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BG: Well to be honest with you; no, no. She didn't—she was not that kind of person. But after she got into it, she realized that she had it in her, you know. But I used to tell her all the time,

“You can sell that food.” You know but she had no thing about going in the business. But I was always in the business doing something, you know so—. She stepped out there on faith and it worked for her. Yeah; it sure did.

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SW: That’s pretty incredible.

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BG: Yeah; it is, it is. I—I think about it all the time. I—and you know when she started she said, “Well what percentage you want? I said I don’t want anything. I just want to do something for my mama.” You know and that’s how it went. But she would do the—anything in the world for me, anything I need, you know my sisters the same way now; you know they still take care of me, if I need something, they’re there, you know. So you know it’s a part of me too; you know I—I hate to see anything go wrong and anything I can do to help out—you know in my business I’m here to do. If they need something they call me and I’m on the job, hey, this can wait; I’m going to take care of whatever they need to be done. This has been a family operation and it’s worked well that way.

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You know and I’m the oldest so you know they—they still give me a little respect, somewhat [*Laughs*] ‘cause I raised all of them. You know I was—you know I had to take care of them and baby-sit them you know when I was young, so—all of them, you know so we’re pretty good together, uh-hm.

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SW: Well Mr. Grant I don’t have any other questions for you. This has been really nice to sit with you. Is there anything else you want to add that you think is important for people to know?

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BG: No; just come to Bertha’s Kitchen. Your mother will be glad to know that you’re eating at Bertha’s. [*Laughs*] Outside of that that’s it.

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SW: Mr. Grant thank you so much for doing this. I appreciate your time.

00:28:01

BG: Thank you. All right; y’all take care. Nice meeting you, too.

00:28:04

[End Bobby Grant]