

BRAD REEVES
Brent's Drugs - Jackson, MS

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[Begin Brad Reeves — Brent's Drugs]

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Rien Fertel: Okay; this is Rien Fertel with the Southern Foodways Alliance. It is March the 6th, 2014, Thursday morning 8:05 a.m. I'm here with Brad Reeves at Brent's Drugs in the Fondren District of Jackson, Mississippi. I'm going to have him introduce himself; so your full name and your birth date, please.

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Brad Reeves: All right; yeah it's Bradley Mason Reeves, Brad Reeves and my birth date is 12/12/78, December 12, 1978.

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RF: And what is your role at Brent's here?

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BR: Well, I bought Brent's I guess in July of 2009, so just lived in the neighborhood and lived in the Fondren area and had gotten word through a friend that, you know, Brent's might be for sale. And at the time, you know, it was a retail pharmacy, so I was thinking, well, "I don't know the first thing about running a pharmacy and I don't know that I want to learn." But just based on that and some conversations and then we found out that the pharmacy was going to be moving out. And so there was the opportunity that it was either going to close or could be run, you know, as a soda fountain/diner. So I was single at the time and I said, you know, I talked to the employees and they wanted to hang around and so we started having some serious talks with the

owners. And at first I said, “Hey I’ll help you find some people to buy it.” And we looked around and everybody said, “We don’t want to see Brent’s close,” but nobody had the interest of being the investor.

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So after a few weeks of talking, the next thing I know I was the owner, so I’ve owned it since, you know, July of 2009.

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RF: So at that point it was a pharmacy-slash-hamburger soda shop, all that?

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BR: Yeah; it was and then CVS actually bought out the pharmacy and built a brand new CVS down the street. And so they moved, you know, all of the pharmacy inventory and the pharmacist to the, yeah, to the CVS down the street.

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RF: So how far back does this business go? What was the founding of it?

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BR: Yeah; Brent’s opened in October of 1946, so actually Woodland Hill Shopping Center that we’re in, it was Morgan Center at the time is what they called it, was the first shopping center in the state. So Mr. Morgan, his developer, the story I’ve heard is that he went to California and saw a shopping center and was just amazed which is something that, you know, kind of surprises me. I would think that strip centers would not have been that original, but apparently that was a

big deal in the day I guess to have one owner that had multiple stores in it and just the convenience of having multiple stores right there together, like you'd have kind of in a small town, I guess.

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So he came back from California and he built the strip center and it's really neat. We have the old blueprints so we can see what the original businesses were in 1946. And Brent's is the only one that's been continuously operating since '46. We've got a grocery store next door; it was Jitney Jungle for years, and now it's McDade's but it's neat to see. A lot of them have been similar things. You know, we've had a few clothing stores and few hair salons and all that come and go. But yeah I've been here since '46. It did originally connect to the grocery store too. There was a passage through and then just think through theft and some other issues they decided, over the years, to close up the door between the grocery store and the pharmacy.

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But as far as, you know, the pharmacy itself it really hasn't changed that much over the years. You know, doing a lot of hamburgers and shakes and soda fountain-type drinks and desserts, and that's kind of what we've tried—to add a few more things to the menu and just play up, you know, a little more on doing some research what would—certain things that would have been served around that time, you know, in the soda fountain era.

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RF: So one question on Mr. Morgan; he was he a real estate developer and a businessman of the time? What was his—?

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BR: Yes; he was. As I understand it he was and there was another development down the street about a mile away in the Belle Haven area. I think it was called like Morgan Tower or something. It was like a six-story residential condo, which again was the place to live back in the day. So apparently Mr. Morgan I guess he had money and was a real estate developer.

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RF: So who was Brent? How did the establishment get its name?

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BR: Yeah; Dr. Brent was a Pharmacist, and Alvin Brent is his name. And it's really interesting learning about him. He had been at a pharmacy downtown and decided that, you know, he wanted to open up his own place. So, he came over here and, at the time, the Fondren area was outside the Jackson city limits. So we were actually a suburb of Jackson which is part of the reason I think that Jackson—or I want to say Fondren has that kind of downtown feel—is that we were a suburb and so it kind of grew because everything outside the city of Jackson, you had a post office and, you know, a hair salon and kind of all that together. It just kind of created a little small hub right outside the city limits.

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And he came out here, you know, I think it was north of town and people saw this as kind of maybe the future—the direction Jackson was heading right off of State Street, which was the direct route into downtown. And so he ends up opening up Brent's Drugs and then within a few years actually opened up a shopping center, you know, within a quarter of a mile of here that has the hardware store and grocery store and everything else.

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So and one other thing: he opened up Beemon—it used to be called Beemon & Brent's Drugs and it still exists today. It's really the local pharmacy; it's now Beemon's Drugs but he was 50-percent owner. So he was, I would say, obviously a businessman and had good vision that in the sense when another pharmacy was opening up he owned fifty-percent. So they didn't come to Brent's Drugs they went to Beemon & Brent's and he was going to get half of the business, so again it wasn't like he just opened this place. He kind of had a vision both for, you know, Fondren and Jackson area that he was very progressive in this thinking and very aggressive in his business tactics of opening up stuff around here.

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RF: And from the beginning was it a dual purpose establishment, pharmacy and food?

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BR: Yeah; it's—you know, we've got the original plans and so there was a soda fountain when it opened. And one thing just to add, it's really interesting, reading on the history of pharmacy and soda fountain pharmacies, really, and a few people have written books, you know, over the years about him. And one of the reasons you end up having soda fountains was kind of two-fold, I say originally it started off so that you could mix the medicines that taste very well. They could create some type of formula, because back in the day they were still compounding and they were making the drugs from scratch whereas unlike today where, you know, a lot of them are just counting pills or handing you a box they actually were creating, you know, this medicine and it might not taste very well. So they could have a soda fountain and they could mix in some soda water and maybe some simple syrup or sugar that would all the sudden take it and maybe it tasted a little better. Or maybe, for kids they could make it red, you know, so that a kid would be

willing to drink it. So that's part of the reason you have in the pharmacy; the second part is that you have to stand around while they're compounding. So that's why you see a lot of pharmacies as well have a gift section in a lot of small towns. You're stuck there for thirty minutes, you know, let's say fifteen—thirty minutes while you're waiting on them to make your medicine or your pharmacy goods, so while you're there you might as well shop.

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So again it was a, "Hey, while I'm here I can get something to drink or get something to eat," and also do—you know, knock out some birthday gifts.

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RF: All right; that all makes sense. So do you remember your first visit here? First, did you grow up in Jackson and in what area of Jackson?

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BR: Yeah; I did. I grew up in the northeast area of Jackson, which is really kind of where we are, about two or three miles from here and actually went to a daycare program when I was a child at Woodland Hills Baptist Church, it was right across the street. So I would come over here as a kid and I do remember my mom picking me up and I guess it was one of those things that if you were well-behaved or maybe it might have to do more if my mom was hungry, I don't know, but that we would come by here and, you know, get ice-cream or, you know, a milkshake or something like that. So I remember coming here over the years. And then I went off to college and to grad school and I remember moving back to Jackson and it was kind of one of those things. There was something unique about Brent's so we'd go, you know, a few times a year and just always when you're coming here it's kind of that timeless atmosphere that you could just sit

and take your time and really enjoy and take it in. So I would come a lot of Saturdays and just come get a milkshake or eat and get a milkshake and then just chat with people up here. It's kind of that community feel that, you know, you weren't in any hurry to get in and get out; just come in and hang out and talk to people.

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RF: And has it always looked the same? Do you remember it looking the same as when you were a kid, or it sounds like you've done some research in the soda fountains and the history of the Fondren—are the details of the place where we're sitting the same, the booths, the lights?

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BR: Yeah; it's for the most part it's the same way. Actually we have taken a few things and made them maybe a little more authentic—that there was some renovations over the years; when I bought it we had florescent lighting on the ceiling and we went back with, you know, a more-period appropriate, you know, schoolhouse-type light. And then actually the soda fountain itself and I think, maybe in the '60s or '70s, they had actually taken off the original laminate and put like a faux marble look to it. But the good news, there was one place in the soda fountain, or let me say one place in the building, where you had the original laminate, so we knew what it looked like and actually still made it. So I guess about three years ago—and also we were able to pull off the faux laminate, I mean the faux marble—and under there was the original and we were actually able to order that exact pattern. And we now have that aqua boomerang pattern on the soda fountain and throughout so we're going back to how it originally was in '46.

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And one interesting thing: it was really kind of a kit that you ordered, this soda fountain; a lot of companies, you know, you would—there was a company that made it, all the—you know, and you could order the soda fountain and there was different versions. So that's why a lot of them are pretty similar too, if you go around the country. Typically a lot of the different soda fountains have a similar look and it's because there were only so many companies that built them. And then when they did they weren't necessarily custom-built. They were, "Hey what size do you need," and all that? And they may have a crew come in and build it or deliver to you, so—.

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RF: Have you met any—since you've owned the place, five years now almost, have you met any customers or have any, I don't know, older people who have come in and told you stories about the old place? Have you heard stories about the old Brent's Drugs—that go back to the, you know, '40s, '50s, '60s?

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BR: Yeah; we've—it's really neat. And I think that's kind of the unique thing about, you know, an establishment that's been open for sixty-plus years. We've got two customers that come in about once a month that were here the day Brent's opened in '46. So, you know, we've heard stories from them about how they gave out free ice-cream and stuff like that. And so we had, just a few years ago, we had the sixty-fifth anniversary and we invited them back and former employees. And that's again something else that's unique; you've had lots of employees, people that worked here in the '50s or '60s, they come back to this day and being very close to the

Medical School as well and the Pharmacy School, a lot of times you'll have people that did kind of an internship here at a different point.

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And so people of all ages that lived throughout the southeast will drop through and say, “Hey, I worked here maybe just for a week,” or maybe a summer, but they just kind of have maybe a personal relationship with Brent's, and so they want to come in and bring their kids and grandkids. And just to add that was one of the things that was really neat with the sixty-fifth birthday; it gave us a reason to bring everybody back. And two of the soda jerks were two twins named Ed and Ned, and this was in the mid to late '50s, and the thing that was significant, they were soda jerks, African American at the time, and you still had a segregated police force. Well, let me just say, it was not integrated at the time and I think about ten to fifteen years later and I don't know the exact year, but they ended up integrating the police force and Ed and Ned were actually—Dr. Brent kind of spoke on their behalf and said I've got two people that would do a great job. And I believe Ed maybe joined the Hinds County Sheriff's Department and Ned was with the Jackson Police Department. And they were the first African-American police officers in the state.

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And one of the stories I've been told is that Dr. Brent had paid their way to Jackson State, so it's kind of a neat history too in the history of Jackson, kind of a bigger picture that it wasn't just a, you know, a business, but maybe there was a little more to do with the—kind of the history of Jackson.

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RF: Now that's really an amazing story; two guys that worked here and then went on to become the first African-American police force. That's really good. Are there—have you heard any other stories from older employees or have other older employees—?

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BR: Yeah; we've got, you know, some of that have kind of come and gone. There was a lady named Fish; that was her name, and so the egg and olive sandwich you say Fish's Egg and Olive Sandwich on the menu. And we actually—not to take anything away from Fish but a lot of people came in and thought it was “fish eggs and olives” so we decided that we could honor Fish but we would take off the name Fish's Egg and Olive. But Fish has kind of come back and forth and again she was here a few years ago for the egg and olive—I mean for the sixty-fifth anniversary.

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But yeah; just add a lot of neat stories. We had at least, two or three times a year I'll say, you know, somebody will come in and tell us a story of when they worked here and some things that happened. I mean we've heard stories about, you know, when Elvis came through and stopped at a gas station here across the street. The Duling School is right across the street, which was a middle school at the time, and the people that went to middle school there spent obviously a lot of time at Brent's as well after school; but heard stories about the time Elvis dropped by and was pumping gas, and just kind of neat stories like that that involved Brent's.

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One of the things I read an article actually in a pharmacy magazine, and they done kind of a focus on different local pharmacies and did one on Brent's and said that actually when

Brent's opened they interviewed a guy that used to work here that Brent's didn't—we have glass on the front now and that actually was plywood, because in '46 you were post-War, so they were still rationing. And so apparently something you never think about but glass was, you know, a much needed item. And so they still couldn't get glass at the time. So apparently the **[Laughs]**—the doors the day that the doors opened there was plywood across the front and then I guess whatever, you know, the glass supply got to where it needed to be they were able to put the glass on the front. So there's a lot of little stories like that you hear different people tell and, you know, just share different memories of coming here, both when they worked here and then, you know, a lot of people say, “Oh yeah, then I've been bringing my kids for years.”

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We did have a guy too that ate here. He was a physician right around the corner, Dr. Boone, and he came here every Wednesday. Now he wasn't—didn't come in '46 but I think when he moved back from medical school but he came forty-two years, every Wednesday for forty-two years, and he just retired last year. So it's kind of one of those neat things. He would always sit at the soda fountain by himself. He didn't have a booth and be just this guy in a white coat. So, you know, it is neat to have people like that that's a fixture that's been coming for years and years, you know, just that want to see Brent's continue.

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RF: Have you met any members of the original Doctor's family, the Brent family?

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BR: Yeah; it's really neat too that Dr. Brent's son ended up being a local physician and he recently retired and spends a good bit of time in Jackson, and then he also has a home in

Alabama. But he comes in here at least once a month and it's really neat too that he brings his grandkids, and a lot of time they'll be either wearing their Brent's shirt or buy one because they're, you know, the Brents. So, you know, the tradition carries on too that they want to come through here and make sure it's, you know, living up to the standard.

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But they're very big supporters and we get a lot of people coming in saying, "Hey, the Brent's told us to come by."

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Interestingly enough too, the son's name is Alvin Brent as well, his sister Lottie Bogan is a local journalist. She writes part-time and has written a few articles in the *Northside Sun* and other magazines and newspapers here in Jackson, and written some stories about what it was like the day she remembers, you know, Brent's opening in '46 and she just thought it was going to be biggest bust and thought her dad was going to make her look foolish. And to her surprise she comes in and everybody is getting ice-cream and it was the new hotspot and how—. So all through middle school and high school, you know, it made her, you know, the—made her dad's place the cool place to go because, you know, they had ice-cream and stuff like that.

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So yeah; it's—their family still continues to be involved and Lottie does write an article here or there, probably once or twice a year, and it's always neat to see that just somebody telling a story firsthand of their experience with Brent's and putting it in print, so—.

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RF: You mentioned the two brothers. Was the workforce of Brent's integrated like from the very beginning, do you know?

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BR: You know, that's something I'm really not sure. Yeah; one of the two, I believe it's Ed is still living and was here for the sixty-fifth anniversary, and just talked briefly with him, but I did not ask him specifically that question. But I've got to think, you know, it was in the '50s; I don't know prior to that, at what point, you know, the workforce was integrated here.

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RF: Yeah; and just do you know was there often soda shops and, you know, hamburger stands, counters, stools became, you know, sites of protests. I was downtown yesterday and heard a bit about that from the Elite Restaurant? Was—do you know did this play any sort of—was there any importance here in the Civil Rights Movement? Was there any sort of—kind of, you know, integration movement here?

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BR: Not that we're aware of. I've done some research and really gone to History and Archives and just tried to pull up anything on Brent's, and Brent's kind of flew under the radar it seems like through a lot of things. I mean there's not really many articles, so at that point it makes me think that, you know, it was not a site for any protests or anything because I think it might have shown up in some of that.

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But it's unique too that, you know, last year we were celebrating the—I guess fiftieth year of the Downtown Soda Fountain Protest and I'm good friends with someone that works in the President's Office at Tugaloo and we just—you know, one of the things we talked about and it just never really came together was hey we're willing—you know, if anybody wanted to do

anything kind of a, you know, a fifty-years of celebrating that or where—how far we've come kind of thing that, you know, we're still the only soda fountain now that's in operation. So, you know, she's somebody that comes here regularly and so she just kind of had mentioned that and we were talking about it. But as far as I know—I'm not sure, you know, there were any protests here and part of that too some of those soda fountains, you know, were in larger stores. And so at the end and it's unfortunate, but that's why they closed so many of the soda fountains. In the end the decision was made, you know, I don't know what happened exactly in Jackson but have read, you know, some of the places took up the stools and said, "Hey," you know, "instead of integrating we're just going to get rid of the schools or close the soda fountain."

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And so that's part of the reason that you lost so many soda fountains unfortunately in the South but, you know, at the same time, too being selfish we're glad that, you know, we're one of the few that remains open and, yeah.

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RF: I mean you also are one of the few in the South. I mean New Orleans sort of has one place like this. So I mean there's not many soda fountains, you know, elsewhere in the country really. Was there any—when you learned that this was on the market; was there a chance that it was going to be lost and that it was going to close up, that it was going to close its doors?

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BR: Yeah; I mean that's kind of how I guess you want to say got involved. The—I would have heard about it on a Monday night. A friend of mine said, "Hey, let's get together. I just want to chat with you about something." And I thought he, you know, wanted to talk about personal stuff. And so we get together for dinner and he just mentions, "Oh yeah, I hear Brent's is for sale." Well that was on Monday. On Wednesday there was an article in the *Clarion Ledger*, you know, it's a local paper here, saying that Brent's would probably be closing; that their lease, you know, ran a few more months but the current owners had no intention of operating it strictly as a, you know, soda fountain and diner.

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So that's kind of again when I got involved and kind of said, "Hey what can we do here?" And, you know, I think there is opportunity. Hopefully somebody else may have jumped in, you know, if we didn't but there—you know, it was reality because it typically it had always just been a pharmacy that happened to have a soda fountain it. So because of that, you know, it was owned by a pharmacist and if the pharmacist wasn't going to be practicing pharmacy here I guess he really didn't have any idea of keeping it open. It wasn't necessarily a profit center; it was just kind of a service provided in the pharmacy to kind of keep people coming in and another reason to come here and support the local pharmacy, is that you could get a milkshake or Cherry Coke or something while you were getting your prescription filled.

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So, you know, I'm hoping that, you know, optimistic that somebody else would have taken it on but, yeah, there was the—you know, the reality there that, you know, pharmacy—pharmacists didn't want to take it on and hopefully somebody else would. But, you know, it easily could have closed and you've seen that in a lot of places, unfortunately, where the pharmacy closed or the pharmacy needs more space. And that's what happens a lot of time is you

get more and more retail over-the-counter items and people say, “Hey, we’re making a little bit of money off the soda fountain but you have to pay somebody to be here all day,” you have the food costs; obviously the fact that most of that food is perishable and if you don’t sell it in a few days it goes to waste. So over time a lot of places have kind of maybe just extended into the—what was the soda fountain area to include more inventory and that type of thing.

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RF: And your day job is not running this restaurant. Can you say a bit about what that—what you do and maybe the challenges or the pleasures of having a second business, a second profession?

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BR: Yeah; I’m an attorney by trade, so, you know, try and drop by here a few days a week whether it be at breakfast or lunch just to check on things. And then I usually end up—you know, if we have any type of events here or now with The Apothecary open usually swing by at night. But it certainly, you know, has its challenges as anybody in the restaurant or service industry knows. You’re pretty much on-call at any time that something can go wrong or something can break or have an issue. So it’s been good but I will say too, part of it is having that community buy-in with Brent’s. So many people want to see it do well.

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You know, a lot of times the community is willing take it on and, you know, we’ve had people here that are regulars and, you know, look up sometimes and they’ll be busing tables or, you know, bus their own table kind of thing. They kind of want to see Brent’s do well. So, yeah; it—you know, it takes some time but, you know, part of it is when I bought it, you know, Brent’s

was Brent's and so it kind of continues that way that again everybody, you know, supports it and wants to come up here.

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But, you know, the good thing is a lot of the staff, after I bought it stayed on and then we've actually, you know, increased staff because we added breakfast and, you know, we added more booths. So obviously the volume went up and we needed a larger staff and then actually one of the largest challenges I've faced is within six months of buying it the fire inspector was here just eating; wasn't here to do a fire inspection and said, "Hey, your hood above the grill; that's not, you know, not up to code anymore." And so I said, "Well, yeah; but it's the original one from '46." You know, I was kind of saying, "Look," this is—"it is what it is but it's Brent's," and they kind of gave us a hard time. And we made a phone call or two and couldn't get anything changed. So they actually required us to put in a modern hood, which ended up being a fourteen-foot hood with a fire suppression system. Well by the time you do that it kind of changes everything.

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Well we have the old pharmacy area that was empty so basically we then started cooking in the pharmacy area, which worked out fine because we had that space empty. But it just—it kind of changed our timeline on doing some things and obviously within the first year I had to take on—but what I was going to say is that allowed us to actually have a larger kitchen. So it's allowed us to put out, you know, some different things that weren't, you know, always on the menu, you know, and it allowed us to kind of keep up with the volume as we go, and that's still one of the challenges. Knock on wood that, you know, we've had, you know, such good reception from the community and stuff that we're still looking at ways to, you know, get out food a little bit faster because, you know, especially on Fridays and Saturdays for instance, you

have a lot of people come in. Everybody comes kind of during that lunch rush; so they're able to get out food and milkshakes that—at the pace we'd like to, you know, we're always looking for ways to improve that.

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RF: Were you family and friends supportive of you taking this on? I grew up in a restaurant family, and I remember my mom telling me over and over, “Don't ever do this.” Don't ever open any sort of place or get involved, so were there any restaurants in your family or any kind of food service history?

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BR: I'd actually—I'd been the managing partner of a restaurant in north Mississippi before so I had a little bit of experience there. But I would say as far as my family and friends both everybody was very supportive of me. And the first probably two years we were here the manager had traditionally had one day off and it seemed like it always had been Monday. So my mom worked every Monday for the first two years, you know, and we didn't give her a paycheck. So I told her she was employee of the month every month until she asked for a paycheck. But, you know, she was willing to step in and do what she could and, you know, I'll say too it—if it was work and to speak on her behalf, you know, she enjoyed it too. She had a lot of—called a lot of her friends and they knew she was up here on Monday, so they could come up here and eat and hang out with her on Mondays.

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And my brother, you know, he does a lot of set and prop design for the theater industry in Austin, Texas, so he's really kind of helped. He does a lot of the historical research, as far as what stuff would have looked like in soda fountains in the '40s and stuff like that, and given us a

lot of ideas so that we can make sure if we have to make any changes or anything like that it is, you know, historically accurate and that we're not going the wrong direction or that if we have to incorporate some technology or do some things like that and make some changes that, you know, we're not getting too far away from our roots.

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RF: So let's talk about the menu; what does the menu kind of specialize in? Does it do the old soda fountain favorites?

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BR: Yeah; a lot of the menu is the same since I purchased it. And then again I mentioned the egg and olive earlier. That's—it's been something that apparently I've learned too just, you know, since I owned Brent's that a lot of little small-time delis and restaurants and then in the Deep South you'd have an egg and an olive sandwich. I was—

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RF: Is it a hardboiled egg?

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BR: Yes; a hardboiled egg and then actually, you know, green olives sliced up, so it's kind of like a pimento cheese or something like that and again pimento cheese is something we have. But a lot of these places would have an egg and olive, so we have egg and olive, tuna salad, chicken salad, pimento cheese sandwiches, which are something that are kind of the favorites. And I think part of that too is kind of just the light snack or, you know, a sandwich that you could come in, and again and while you're waiting to get your prescription filled, you know, you

could have—eat something that might not be a full meal. So I think that kind of goes back to part of that.

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And obviously other types of sandwiches, hamburgers, and then one of the things we kind of tried to do once I bought it was maybe get creative and say, okay, well we've got pimento cheese and we got a hamburger. And let's put pimento cheese on a hamburger. And kind of just mixed and matched the things that we've had and we've started doing breakfast. We have an omelet that has pimento cheese in it, you know, and stuff like that, hey, we've already got this stuff in-house; you know, what are we doing. You know, what can we do to kind of cross-sell the different items and then again, the soda fountain has been, you know, a lot of the history of Brent's. A lot of people that have come by over the years were getting, you know, stuff like milkshakes or ice-cream and, you know, there's different things like a phosphate, which was, you know, a soda fountain favorite, was on the menu; it's kind of come and gone. If we found some of the old menus—most of the time it was there and we always would make it but anyway bringing some of those things back and actually we're excited. In the next few weeks—our manager has been doing a lot of research. He and I talked about some books that talk about it and we're actually going to bring back a few more of the soda fountain drinks. And we don't know for sure if they sold at Brent's; haven't—we don't have—the menus don't go back really past about the '70s, the ones that we've found. But if they didn't sell them at Brent's they were seen at other soda fountains kind of throughout the country.

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So just trying to incorporate that and just show, you know, this generation, you know, what some of the old soda fountain-type drinks were, so—.

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RF: What were they? Can you name some of them?

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BR: Yeah; it's stuff like Lactart and phosphates, which were just—a lot of them again stared as—the pharmacist might make them. Sometime it might be kind of like a pharmacist assistant working the—that was kind of a soda jerk. And so again some of these you take, you know, kind of like a soda water and mix in different things, simple syrups and I mean it's kind of like Coca-Cola. You know, it was this mix of stuff that a lot of times came through a pharmacy or similar. So we're going to be adding some stuff like that and then just different desserts and a lot of times it was kind of—some type of dairy product and then mixed with some type of soda water or something like that. So again different things that, you know, people would order back then; I guess the best way to put it: a soda fountain is like today's, what I would say, coffee shop kind of thing. It was a place you might go and hang out and sometimes too, some of the things I've read about it was more I think of a soda fountain, you know, when I—before I bought this place is kids going there to get ice-cream.

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It was really more adults going to, you know, sit and get something to eat or drink and some of them even talked about that kids were not allowed at certain soda fountains. So it was really kind of a place to go get and maybe mid-day or some people would go in the mornings and just kind of little pick-me-up-type thing because you'd just tell the pharmacist or the soda jerk what you need and he'd kind of help your cure. There also were some kind of, for lack of a better term, *over-the-counter cures* that they may have something that again—we've heard different things for hangovers and just if your stomach was ailing there's certain mixtures that they could

make with different pharmacy ingredients but didn't necessarily have to be prescribed by a doctor.

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So you could drop by and if you had a weak stomach or something like that you might be regularly going by the pharmacy, you know, the soda fountain a few days a week. It even goes back so far as during prohibition they did serve, not alcoholic drinks as such, but because alcohol could be served by pharmacists, you know, we've heard stories that, you know, you read stuff that says pharmacists could serve alcohol. So you had that and then other what are now controlled substances, again could be served at soda fountains. So there's even people that were suggesting the pharmacist would try—be trying to get these people addicted so they'd come into the soda fountain, you know, regularly to try these different mixtures or whatnot.

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RF: And that's really interesting; I mean I've definitely, you know, just reading about food and drink and trends right now, phosphate is, you know, is being written about and it's kind of, you know, it's underground but people are playing with it again. That's really interesting because people are also, you know, cocktails are very popular right now. And you've kind of joined, you know, in that. Can you talk about that what's in the back of Brent's now?

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BR: Yeah; it's interesting you've kind of alluded to it but we opened The Apothecary in the back, which is the old drug storeroom. We had it—when I bought it we, you know, took on the pharmacy area but then also had this big room in the back that we really weren't using for anything. And what we've been, you know, kind of thinking, “What can we do with it?” And

didn't really know exactly but kind of been thinking the last few years and read a book called *Fix the Pumps* by a guy named Darcy O'Neil, who is a Canadian chemist. And he started doing research really into old soda fountain drinks as much as anything. And then about that same time, too he started kind of doing some research on cocktails and realized how much that they kind of crossed over. And one of the things his book—it's the first one that I'm aware of that really kind of touched on was how much the similarities, let me say, between soda fountains and cocktail bars. And really that goes back to the fact that what they were doing—they were making, you know, fresh drinks, you know, squeezing lemons and limes and that type of things into, you know, late 19th century, early 20th century. And I think the most interesting he talks about in the book is that during Prohibition basically these bartenders lost their profession basically, if you want to put it that way. They had been bartending for years and all of the sudden, overnight, you know, Prohibition kicks in and they can't serve alcohol at least not legally. So you had a large number of them that ended up working in soda fountains.

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Some went to Europe because again you could continue to mix drinks in Europe but a large number of them said, "What's the closest thing to this?" And it was working in a soda fountain. So they went and worked in soda fountains during the years of Prohibition. Mississippi was—we were the last state to come out of Prohibition so we didn't come out until 1966 but in a lot of places, you know, they came out of Prohibition again around I think '33 and so what—one of the things that Darcy O'Neil says in his book is he talks about how the post-Prohibition cocktails kind of took on a soda fountain feel. You ended up with a lot of these drinks that maybe had more stuff like simple syrups and eggs and other things of that nature, maybe chocolaty or fruity drinks because these bartenders, you know, for ten or fifteen years had been working in

soda fountains and now were familiar with, you know, playing with these dairy products or again dessert-type drinks that came out.

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So it's really interesting. The other thing is you just think about the physical layout of a bar versus a soda fountain and usually you have the stools and you have the soda jerk or bartender back there kind of mixing up drinks, so it's just very similar stuff. So after I, you know, I had read and *Fix the Pumps* and talked about John Shull now, who is my business partner at The Apothecary, we just had kind of said, "Hey, what could we do here?" And again it took us about two years to kind of pull the final plans together. But we just try to play off the two. I mean everything in—that we do in The Apothecary goes back to the most part trying to do, you know, pre-Prohibition cocktails but then also incorporate our take on kind of soda fountain favorites that, you know, might work at a bar.

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I mean we have a drink that's the Vanilla Argentina that's similar to kind of a Coke Float so, you know, different things like that. We also serve a few drinks that don't have alcohol that were soda fountain-type drinks. So, again, we wanted to make sure that we did that but we also didn't want to change Brent's and the atmosphere at Brent's, so we don't have any—we don't do—run any advertising. You just go through the back door. There's no sign for The Apothecary. You just kind of have to know about it word of mouth and then right now, you know, Brent's closes at 4:30 and The Apothecary opens at 5:00. So you basically just walk through Brent's past the restrooms and there's a door and that's where you are. So, you know, again being able to kind of separate the, you know, you might have that family atmosphere at

Brent's, where people feel like they can bring their kids that it doesn't really bother them that The Apothecary is open in the back, so—.

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RF: And can you say something about that room? I was there a few months ago and, you know, I hate to be subjective during an interview but I think it's one of the most kind of beautiful new cocktail bars I've ever seen. Can you talk about that space that it's built into?

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BR: Yeah; it—and I will say it was one of the challenges but also the really fun parts about doing it is that we wanted to make sure that we did it right, I guess is the best way to put it. And a lot of that too was making sure every little detail, you know, was looked into and considered. And being that it was going to be, you know, kind of off of a pharmacy and soda fountain we incorporated a lot of those things. For instance, the lights we have in there are actually called “pharmacist lamps” and they're not originals or reproductions but they were the lamps that pharmacists used to use so they could move them so they could count pills. And the focal point above the bar is an apothecary cabinet that we got from a pharmacy in Massachusetts. It's about 100 years old that we found and we had shipped down here by truck, because once we found it we said we have to have that piece.

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We also actually have a few apothecary cabinets or drawers that were in Brent's, that were original to Brent's, and they're not much different than the apothecary cabinet we found in Massachusetts, so it's a little bit older. You just kind of can see that, you know, the cabinetry and those types of things that would be normal in a pharmacy at the time. So it was neat to kind of

incorporate all that. We also—the stools that we found that we really liked were called “soda fountain stools.” So again most people that probably walk in don’t think about that but it actually kind of plays off each other. And then on the bar itself we used a Carrera white marble, which is something you would, you know, see at older soda fountains. And we incorporated in the draft arm so that we have soda water. And so we can do, you know, a lot of drinks that, you know, incorporate the soda water. And then you have those draft arms, and it kind of gives you the feel of a soda fountain. So again we tried to play out the pharmacy and soda fountain as much as possible, and then also kind of keep it historically accurate. The walls are just cinderblocks that we painted and, you know, we thought about maybe going a little more ornate and doing some nice wood trim walls. But then we said it’s the, you know, drug storeroom and we wanted it to still have that feel. So it’s got the cinderblock walls in there that have been painted and the original concrete floor, again just so you can tell, hey, you know, it wasn’t anything fancy but it is what it is.

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I also alluded to the fact earlier; Mississippi came out of Prohibition in '66, the last, fiftieth State. Brent's has been open since '46 so we kind of jokingly say, you know, there were some speakeasies in Mississippi at the time. This is maybe what they would have maybe have looked like because for those first twenty years you couldn't serve alcohol, you know, when Brent's was open. So again it just kind of is a play-off of that and something we kind of found interesting when we delved into the history of soda fountains and then Prohibition in Mississippi and things like that.

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RF: Was it a challenge opening in a bar in this district or opening a new bar? Was that tough at all or opening a bar in a historic building?

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BR: We knew going in, and it was certainly one of my priorities, is that we, you know, didn't want to take away from Brent's Drugs and the atmosphere we had here, so I think our biggest challenge was making sure that was done in a way that, you know, people didn't say, "Oh, the atmosphere of Brent's has changed." So we wanted people that have been coming, you know, on a regular basis to say, "Hey, if I'm not going to go to The Apothecary at least it hasn't changed Brent's and the feel of Brent's."

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As far as the opening in the District, you know, we've been very lucky. This Fondren area has just seen so much, you know, revitalization and then just, you know, new businesses and new restaurants and new ideas over the last, gosh, probably ten or fifteen years, because it was an area that, you know, had done very well, like we talked about earlier, when it was right outside the City Limits of Jackson and once it got annexed into the City of Jackson, didn't necessarily hurt it, but then all of the sudden, you know, a lot of those businesses that kind of had survived on the outskirts of town. About that time too you had more automobiles so people could not drive downtown—so, or the next business over, so they kind of started slowly dying out. The old Fondren Grocery, which is kind of where Fondren got its name, closed up in the '50s just due to competition, that originally it had been kind of the general store for lack of a better term for the Fondren area.

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And just once again more people had automobiles and could go wherever they needed to they didn't necessarily have to just stay in this District. Well, the one thing that's really benefited

us recently is now you have this District, also where you can park your car and you can go eat at one place and maybe get dessert somewhere else and cocktails somewhere else. or, you can say, “Hey, I’m not sure where we’re going to eat but we know we’re going to go Fondren and once we get there we’ll see what we feel like, or our group may even break up and some people may go eat one place and some people may eat at another and we may meet up afterwards.”

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So we’ve certainly benefited from that and to answer your question because of that we really didn’t have any issues, you know, getting opened up as far as a cocktail lounge here, but it just really works out well. And, you know, we’re not trying to steal or capitalize on the dinner crowd. There’s enough great restaurants around here that we just kind of say, “Hey, we want you to go eat somewhere else and then, you know, come by here before or afterwards,” kind of thing.

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RF: And so on that subject of the revitalization of the Fondren District, what spearheaded that movement ten—fifteen years ago? Was it a city project? Was it local business leaders? Was it small-time businesses? Was it residents? Was it just gentrification of, you know, that we see all across America in urban areas? What is happening in this area?

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BR: I think it’s just kind of a combination of all those kind the re-urbanization like you’ve seen across the country, but I will say, too, the one thing that I think sets Fondren apart and that really made a difference was the local merchants and the leadership starting with Kemp Best, who is the first Executive Director of the Fondren Renaissance Foundation which is kind of the

neighborhood association that he was very progressive and just, you know, really said, “Hey, what can we do?”

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The one thing that kind of set Fondren apart from other business districts is that most of the businesses here are local, you know. Very few chains and so because of that, you know, the owner probably, you know, lives in the area and, you know, this is where they're making a living. So they've got, you know, a lot of in their business and they're willing to do—go above and beyond. And so it started, you know, with things like, you know, Fondren after Five and being open, Fondren Unwrapped, where special events for the businesses will be open after hours or have different types of entertainment in the District. And kind of through that as a few other new businesses came in you really just kind of started getting this for lack of a better term a buzz about the area and just kind of that synergy of people realizing it's truly a District. And so we've had restaurants like Nick's that's been open in Jackson for decades that was, you know, not too far down the road but decided to move into Fondren. And we had other places like Walker's which actually originally opened in 1946, the same year as Brent's and had been—it's Walker's Drive-In and been kind of more of a casual diner-type place that Derek Emerson bought it, you know, a little over ten years ago and made it fine dining. And he's, you know, been nominated for the James Beard Award.

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So you've had just a lot of places like that kind of everything came together about the right time. And I think other, you know, restaurateurs kind of saw the area and said that's the place I want to be. And then you've had other that were at one restaurant and then decided to kind of say, “Hey, well I'm going to go to another one or I want to open a restaurant in the Fondren area because I see that traffic over there.” And I think we're finally getting to that point,

you know, at night you kind of getting a walking feel of people kind of walking—can park their car and walk from one place to the next.

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RF: Just one or two more questions. Have you seen the demographics of your customer base change over the past five years, since you opened?

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BR: I will say when I bought it, it was, you know, it had a lot of regulars that some of them were older, but we actually have been lucky and we, you know, intentionally targeted some of this when I bought it. You know, you didn't have a Facebook page or a Twitter account or anything like that. And so by, you know, embracing those and trying to take advantage of those we certainly picked up a younger crowd. I mean we're right down the street from Millsaps College and Belhaven College which have been a source of employees for us as well. And so, you know, as, you know, those people start working here then their friends come in, but we have noticed, you know, kind of a younger generation but then we also, you know, haven't really lost our older generation too. And, you know, we're careful in trying to balance those that we're not targeting just, you know, one age or another. We kind of want to be universal where again if you want to bring your grandparents or if you want to bring your grandkids, either one you feel comfortable and, you know, can say, "Hey, this is kind of a neat, you know, timeless place." That you can see the, you know, stuff that dates back to '46, but also realize that, you know, we're not a, you know, trying to incorporate, you know, stuff that recently as well like the Facebook and Twitter that kind of stay up-to-date and let people know what types of events we're doing and those types of things.

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RF: So what do you feel is the importance of Brent's to Jackson and the greater area?

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BR: I think the one thing that Brent's has is just that sense of community. I mean it's the place that you can go again on a Saturday morning or any morning for that matter or at lunch and just, you know, drop in and just chat with people and whether it be talk about, you know, the local news or gossip and who is running for Mayor or something like that or, you know, just catch up with people. One of the unique things of having a soda fountain is some people come in, you know, by themselves because they know they can sit at the soda fountain as opposed to having to sit at a table by themselves. And we've kind of always laughed about that, you know, parties of one are welcome. You know, you can come in and just sit next to somebody and talk to them and again it kind of has that laid-back atmosphere where a lot of people come in and, you know, I've had people tell me, "The one thing I like about Brent's is I feel like," you know, "when I come in I always leave in a better mood." You know, they kind of feel like it's a happy place and, you know, they've gotten good food or, you know, gotten a milkshake and just enjoyed themselves and, you know, again had a place that's real laid back and to have a good place for conversation and catch up with friends and talk about, you know, what we can do to improve the community or, you know, just celebrate the things that are going on in Jackson.

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RF: So just I think this is the last question. There's a ton of memorabilia in the restaurant, a lot of display cases with old things. Do you have something favorite? Is there a favorite story behind anything in the display case?

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BR: Oh, tough question. Well a lot of the stuff, it's really neat. So much of it was in the back when I bought it so really it wasn't displayed until we found it and there were just boxes of, you know, old pharmacy paraphernalia and stuff like that. It was really fun for us when I first bought it just to dig through you know the old boxes and say, "Oh, wow!"

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We found for instance an old Coca-Cola bottle, a glass bottle, it was probably, you know, I don't know that they had done in liters back then. I think it might have been a gallon jar of Coke and it was the syrup. And so back then you would buy the syrup and then at the soda fountain you could mix up the syrup with the carbonated water. So we found some, you know, things like that were just really neat. You know, we got a picture of Dr. Brent that we found and a guy named Doc Noble and I will tell you one little story that kind of ties Brent's together with The Apothecary.

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Doc Noble, you know, worked at Brent's and he was a pharmacist here. And one of the stories we had heard different people say is that, you know, he had been known to maybe keep some whiskey in the back and he may pour himself a drink while he was working or whatnot. So when we opened The Apothecary we kind of said, "Oh, we need to do, you know, some type of throwback or, you know, mention Doc Noble." So one of our signature drinks here is called the Doc Noble.

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RF: I ordered that one. I'm putting it together; okay.

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BR: So it's neat because we still have Doc Noble's pharmacy license still hangs on the pharmacy wall. And then the other thing that when Dr. Alvin Brent, Dr. Brent's son, came in the first time we were just about to get opened and we already had the drink menu together and we had the Doc Noble, the name and the drink come together, and he said, you know, "If you haven't come up with the name for this place, you ought to name it after Dr. Noble." And we said, "Well, Dr. Brent," I said, "we didn't name it after him but one of our best drinks is named after him."

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So it was kind of neat too to kind of keep all that history together and kind of incorporate stuff that, you know, has gone back—Brent's history over the decades but kind of pull it all together.

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RF: All right; well I think that's a great place to stop. I want to thank you very much.

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BR: Thank you for your time.

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[End Brad Reeves — Brent's Drugs]