

CHAFIK CHAMOUN
Owner, Chamoun's Rest Haven – Clarksdale, MS

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Date: August 16, 2010
Location: Chamoun's Rest Haven – Clarksdale, MS
Interviewer: Amy Evans Streeter
Length: 1 hour, 40 minutes
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs
Project: Delta Lebanese

[Begin Chafik Chamoun (Delta Lebanese)]

00:00:02

Amy Evans Streeter: This is Amy Evans Streeter for the Southern Foodways Alliance on Monday, August 16, 2010. I’m in Clarksdale, Mississippi, at Chamoun’s Rest Haven Restaurant with Chafik Chamoun. And, Mr. Chamoun, if I could get you to state your name and your occupation for the record, please?

00:00:19

Chafik Chamoun: Chafik Chamoun and restaurant operator, Rest Haven Restaurant.

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AES: May I get you to also share your birth date for the record?

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CC: February 12, 1932.

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AES: Okay. And we’re here to talk about the Lebanese community in the Delta with a focus on food. But if we could get a little bit of your family’s background—I understand your grandfather came to the Mississippi Delta in the late 1800s?

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CC: Yeah, my grandfather came here in—in late—in the late 1800s—1880, 1890, and he—he came from Lebanon through Ellis Island, and then he came to this Delta, to Clarksdale, Mississippi. And he went back and married my grandmother and brought her back, and they have ten children. All of them were born and raised in Clarksdale. One of them was born—one of them was born in Lebanon. Well, really, two was born in Lebanon. Eight were born here in Clarksdale.

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AES: So is this your mother's family?

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CC: My mother—my mother was born in Lebanon, and she stayed behind. And then I—she have another sister; she was born over there. My grandmother brought her, and the reason my grandfather, when he came on the ship, he saw a woman with two children and she have a hard time taking care of them. So he told her to bring the youngest child, which was my aunt—and leave the oldest child, who is my mother, with her grandmother—with—with his mother. And they said, you know, they told about bringing her later on.

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Then my mother stayed behind in Lebanon, and then the War [World War II] started. And my mother didn't see—or knew her mother or father, only her sister since she was forty-five years old. So she came here in 1951 or '52 for two or three months—it was six-month visit, and then she went back to Lebanon. And then she came back two or three times since.

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AES: If—if I could get your grandparents' names and also your mother's name.

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CC: My—my grandfather his name was Joe Gattas—G-a-t-t-a-s—and my grandmother was—
her name was Eva—E-v-a.

00:02:57

AES: And your mother?

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CC: My mother is N-a-z-h-a, Nazha. N-a-z-h-a—Nazha. And she—she—she lived till she was
103 years old, and she just passed away about three months ago.

00:03:13

AES: Oh my goodness gracious, what a life. And she lived here in Clarksdale when she passed?

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CC: No, no, no, she was in Lebanon. I got two sisters over there, and she was staying in
Lebanon, and, you know, they saw after her. My mother came for a visit in 1951, and then we
brought her here, her and my father, in 1961, and then we brought her back in 1988, so they've
been here three times. But they came here for a visit.

00:03:45

AES: And I understand you, in the past, have made a lot of trips to Lebanon, so when would have been the last time you—you saw your mother?

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CC: Well I—I haven't been back since—really about ten years ago. And I was—I—I've been back about fifteen times—visited my mother, my father, my sister. But for the last ten years, since 9/11 and the hassle to go through this airport, I just didn't have the will and strength to do it, so I haven't been back. But I talk to them, you know, once a week at least, yeah.

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AES: So back to your—your grandfather and that era of your family's connection to the Mississippi Delta, what area of Lebanon did your father leave and—?

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CC: Well we—Lebanon is—it's—Beirut, located—it's—it's on the Mediterranean Sea, Tripoli on side. And this is the coast, you know. They are on the Mediterranean Sea. And then you take the mountain, the Cedar of Lebanon, it's in the mountain of Lebanon, this—this 10,000—11,000 feet elevation. Then you cross the mountain, and you go to the valley of—of Lebanon and they call it Beqaa [or Bekaa] Valley—Beqaa Valley and that's where we lived. We lived—we did live in a—in a village. We had some land over there. And it was half Muslim and half Christian. Everybody got along then we had—the Civil War started in 1977 and lasted about ten, fifteen years. And the—the district—that Beqaa Valley is—most of it's Muslim, and the Christian—the Christian and the Muslim in the village, we got along pretty good, except we started getting some troublemakers, you know, from the Baalbek. Baalbek is about five miles—that's what Iran—

backing up these people and we started getting some—some troublemakers. So, most of the Christians, they left that village and they moved to Zahlé. That's where we—my mother was living till she died. We stayed at Zahlé about—stayed over there about—since 19—since the War, since about twenty-five, thirty years. Zahlé is—is in the valley of—Beqaa Valley and it is the largest Christian city in the Middle East. It is about 300,000 people. The majority of the Christians, they—Catholics, Roman Catholics, and then we got Greek Orthodox. We got, you know, a few Muslims and a few non-Catholics. And it is—it is—they got—got—it's a beautiful place to live. We have a resort area. If in the summertime, especially at night, you go and you have lots of restaurants. It's on the Bardaouni River. That's a river that goes through the city. And anybody being over there, they'd—they'd really be impressed. I met Danny Thomas one time over there and my uncle, and they have dinner in the place. And it is something to remember, yeah.

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AES: So, being from such a beautiful place, your—your grandfather would have left because of the religious persecution? Is that right?

00:07:31

CC: Well my—my—well it's got something to do with it but it was—what it was—that part—that part of the War that's in—you know, they called it—they used to call it Syria the Great [Greater Syria], and it was under the Ottoman Empire. And the Ottoman Empire nowadays, it's historical. And the Ottoman Empire, they ruled Lebanon; they ruled Syria; they ruled Palestine. They ruled lots of them. And they stayed over there—if not mistaken—for a long, long time.

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And the Christians have a hard time to go under the rules, because they are Muslims and the Christians—especially they—they suffered. They—they just gave them not enough food for them. You raise—well I'll give you an example. I remember when I was a young at ten, eleven years old, we have a—you—you get the wheat and you know you take the hay out of it and get the wheat clear. And they make you take two-thirds to—to give it to them and you keep one-third. That's the Turks. And they said if we could—if we keep them hungry, they won't fight us. That's what the—the philosophy—and this how—so when my grand—. Well to go back to your question, it is—it was Christian persecution and it was poverty and—and needs. That's why lots of people came here. They went to Australia. They traveled to South America, you know, because of—of the condition of the economy and because of the political system that would prevail over there, yeah.

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AES: So he arrived in the Delta, then. He had some fellow countrymen who were already here? Is that how he knew to come here?

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CC: My grandfather, like several other people, they came—they came to this country, and they must knew somebody here a long time ago. I couldn't—I couldn't—I—I don't know the reason that they came. Well some of them came to Hollandale [Mississippi]. Some of them came to Greenville. Some of them came to Leland, some Clarksdale. But some of them related. They just—. I believe the reason they came here—and some of them Belzoni, but lots of people, they came from the village we came from. They live in Belzoni. All of them bought some land over there and they—they really prospered.

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I think—I tell you what. The reason they—they didn't know how to read English or speak it or write it. They got to find a way to make a living. Some of them went to Detroit [Michigan] to where they worked in the factories over there. Some of them came here, and the only way they could make a living [was] to go to the countryside, you know—used to have lots of farming, sharecropper, so they got—they got bundle of clothes, different—different socks and stocking and whatever. And they put it in their bag, and they went to the country walking. And they went from house to house, and that's how they make living. For how long, I couldn't tell you, but it was for a long time. And they—then my grandfather, I'm talking about him; he finally bought him a grocery store. And it was in the black neighborhood on this side. And he run a grocery store probably for thirty-five, forty years. That's how he raised ten children, from a grocery store.

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They were hard-working people. You know, anybody that put bundles on his back and go to country and go from house to house and spend the night with these black people or whoever—or whoever lived in the country, you know, and then get up the next day and keep going. Then some of them, they—they bought a car like their own, or a wagon, or whatever, you know. But that's how my grandfather, when he came here, how we started, and that's how we made living. They lived—I was lucky and fortunate to see him; I came here in [19]54, and he was about seventy-seven [years old]. He lived about six months after I came here. And my grandmother, she was living. My uncles and my aunts—all of them living. Most of them settled in Memphis.

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AES: Do you remember some stories? Was he able to share with you some stories of his early peddling days that you remember?

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CC: Myself? Well it was—I was similar, really similar to them, but I didn't have the hardship like they did have. When I came here in 1954, I was going to school in Lebanon, and I knew how to—to read English. I knew how to write. I know the alphabet. The only—the only thing, really, it was hard on me to speak every day the language, you know. It—you speak the everyday language—not like when you write it, you know. And I finally get used to it. And when I came here in 1954, I work in a grocery store my uncle owned. And I was getting plastic bags and putting the beans in it, you know. That's how they said it. Not like now, every—packer—and sweep the floor and—what else I done? Anything. You know, give them a drink, you know, like a bottle, open it. And black people was—most of us were black traders, where the Blues is famous, now that's where black people used to go, over there. We had a grocery store, and they come on Friday and Saturday, and my aunt had a theater on the same street. They called it the Roxy Theater. And on Friday and Saturday—Saturday you can't walk. It's just like Broadway. I mean so many people. You know, everybody comes down here to shop. They get paid, and they you know—and two families probably share one car or whatever.

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But this—they used to come to the grocery store, and they want orange drink and say, “Orange drink.” “Oh, you want orange drink?” *[Heavy accent]* And somebody wants buttermilk, and I tell them, “Oh, you want buttermilk?” *[Heavy accent]* My uncle cussed me, and he said, “If you are not going to quit that pronunciation, you're not going to be here long. ‘Buttermilk or orange.’” *[Without accent]* And I said, “Okay, buttermilk, orange. *[Without accent]* Okay, no

more, water, [wah-ter] not water [vah-ter].” So anyway, but every—everything I learned the hard way, to be honest with you. And then I stayed over there about four or five months.

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This butcher was there. He was in charge of the store. And he—and he was Italian, and I got to know him, you know. He said—he looked at me one afternoon, and he said, you know, “You’re not happy here.” I told him, “No.” See, I was in Lebanon, and I was going to school. I’ve got money in my pocket, you know, and—and I said, “What in the world I’m doing here in this, then? I want to go back.” If my wife will come with me, and she was seventeen, and I was nineteen, and I said—and my wife was with child, and I said, “If—myself, I’ll go back, but that little boy, you know, already have—.” He was born here a few months after we came here.

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Anyway, but I really wanted to go back. It was not—it was not really easy. But anyway, he said, “Your people done good. Why don’t you go peddle stuff out on the country or here in town? Your people done good peddling. You could do the same thing.” The same day, I came to the house, I told my grandmother, “Do you have a suitcase?” She said, “Yeah, go to the attic and you will find a black suitcase.” And I go to the attic and get suitcase, that big metal suitcase; it weighed three tons. So I got it, and now I got to have some stuff to sell. It—my grandfather called a place here in town, and he told them to give me \$40 worth. So I went and got—he said he had done business with them. I bought a few things—ladies’ stuff—and then I went—of course, the railroad—we lived in South Clarksdale about five minutes walk, and then I got to the black neighborhood. And I knocked on this door—door-to-door and sold them pairs of stocking, probably another handkerchief—whatever. And then my wife saw an ad in the paper about Raleigh products. Well the man was living just one block from where we lived. I went and talked to him, what—the Raleigh is—Raleigh and Watkins—I don’t know if you—it’s just like Avon

products. It is—but it is people could use like vanilla flavor or lemon flavor, liniment, pie filling (you could make a pie out of what's in the can), hog medicine, garden dust, fly spray in the gallon.

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Well another place in Memphis, the W. T. Raleigh Company, the man took me with him and I bought \$300-worth of merchandise. And I started to go into the country, and I bought me a car, about a \$600 car. My—my uncle gave me \$300; my grandfather gave me \$300. And I started going from house to house. I got the stuff in the truck—in the trunk and I got me a retail list and the wholesale list. But I don't know what I'm selling, you know, I just—. So the people been buying the stuff for a long time. They know the merchandise. So I just opened the trunk; they tell me what they want. They look at it. They know what—it's some liniment, white liniment. It had been for arthritis, you know. And then I got some salt—Epsom salt—Alka Seltzer or something like that. It's for indigestion. And then I got some—all kinds of perfume.

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Okay. So, man, that's good. That's easy. They find it. They get it. I look at the retail price and I—you know, they—they didn't pay me. They charge it. And I go back every other week, and they paid me. They never gave me no penny. I just have—it took me a while to remember, you know, which way I go. Those days, they give you protected area. I was going to Tallahatchie County and—and I have lots of stories about Tallahatchie County. But—but anyway—.

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AES: Would you share one?

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CC: Yeah, I—I—I don't mind telling you. My grandfather, when I started the first week, like I told you, they gave me Tallahatchie County—not East—it was West Tallahatchie County. Swan Lake River, that's East. West Tallahatchie on this side. My grandfather told me, you know, "When you see a nice home painted and everything, this means the people have been over there for a long time. You just go stop by, and they'll buy from you." I told him, "Okay."

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So this was my fourth day when I got the car. I was proud of it. And I go on 49 Highway, and I took 49 West, and then I saw lots of homes on my right. And I said, "I bet the people will buy some stuff from me." So I take my right off the highway, and then I stop and there is a gate. And then I saw some dogs. I didn't know nothing about this country in those days. Then I saw some men with uniforms on. He said, "Where are you going?" Well I'm proud of myself. I told him I'm the Raleigh man." I told him—I showed—well I open the trunk and I told him, "That's what I sell." He started laughing. He said, "You can't go over there." And then I look and I saw a gun, and I saw some German Shepherd dogs. It was Parchman [Penitentiary] and—and I came back straight. I was scared to death. I go to my grandfather; he wasn't there. My grandmother said, "What happened?" I told them, "I don't want this job." *[Laughs]* He said, "What's the matter?" I told him I went to this place, and they got policemen, they got guns, and they got German dogs and—and I was scared to death. He started telling me, he said, "You went to Parchman, didn't you?" And I told him—I didn't even know what Parchman is. But that's one of them, anyway.

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But you learn the hard way, and that's the best way to do it, you know. You—and then you appreciate the good things in life. That's why I appreciate this restaurant. I used to go out winter and—and in the wintertime and get to—find the muddy road, you know, to go to these

people because, you know, you have a gravel road, but when you go to the—to the plantation, you know, it's all of it mud. And I used to have Jeep. That's how the fellow, the one who—who told me about the job he have, so I—he said, “The Jeep will take you where nobody else could go, and, you know, you could go and collect your money, whatever.” So I bought a Jeep, and my grandfather signed with me. I think it was about \$2,500 those days, Jeep was. And you know I started—I started adding to the—you know, started selling a few extra things, like dry goods, with me in the car.

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Then I finally—after I was for a while—I got me a van, and I have it full of stuff, mail order products, sheets, all kinds of dry goods, blankets, and actually on the job for thirty-some—about thirty years. And I sold—I stayed in it, really, thirty years. I make a living out of it. Besides, we find a grocery store, and we bought it in 1966. And this was my wife's store. I helped her, you know, when I—then I sold cars for eleven years locally and this—and the guy saw me, and he said, “Why don't you come sell some cars?” He was selling Volkswagen. He's still in business now. He bought part of Lander's business, Lander in Memphis. And they used to have seven, eight dealer—Pontiac, Buick, Volkswagen, different—and then they built Cadillac. They've got a dealership—Cadillac and they have a place in Helena [Arkansas] and a place here.

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I told him, “Man, I don't know nothing about cars.” He said, “Don't worry, I'll teach you. I—I want somebody where I could train. I'd rather have somebody like you. I'll train you the way I want.” I tell him, “Well, if you have faith in me, you know, I—I'll come and you know—.” I started with him—sold cars for eleven years. And I made—I made more money in—in the [19]70s—\$30,000—\$40,000, selling cars. I sold cars more than anybody in that place. And one day I worked from—from the morning, I stayed to nine o'clock. I was by myself. I sold nine cars.

And he couldn't believe I sold that many cars. I got the paperwork done. I got them okayed, you know, credit-wise or whatever. I got the down payment. He couldn't believe it. He was in Memphis, and he came back the second day. He said, "You—." He said, "You done great except one thing." "What?" He said, "You forgot to lock the cars." "But," he said, "don't worry about it. Nobody stole anything."

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But anyway—and I done that. I—I had three jobs at one time. I was—I was selling cars, selling the Raleigh products, and I help one relative at night in some—he have a café, bar or whatever, you know, but I didn't stay long in it. But I always—I—I—and selling cars, to be honest with you, I don't believe I missed a day in eleven years. I'm always there, you know, unless it's emergency for something to go do something. But we—we sold cars, and we had four or five salesmen. And I was good at closing when it come to selling cars. And, you know, sometimes it takes common sense. You could be—you could—you could take people—that's what I tell my children and people—I didn't have—I was—I have high school—I didn't even get a diploma. I left when I was in high school, and I came to this country. But it—to be—not to use this word—to be able to survive on your own, it don't take a PhD, and it don't take a really high degree of education. It's really—I would say fifty-percent of our life is common sense. And God, I thank Him; he gave me good common sense. I could—nobody told me—you can't tell—you can't teach salesmanship. It's got to be in you. That's for me or anybody else.

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When I got some people come to the lot and, you know, the main thing is—is not be able to convince them which car they buy. The main thing is to qualify them if they could buy that car or not, you know, especially with the people I was dealing with. I'm not talking about somebody looking at the Cadillac, you know. I'm talking about somebody looking at a \$2,000, \$3,000 or a

\$4,000 car. And I qualified them out of the lot, and I know who they are, where they work, you know how, long they've been at their job, how much down-payment, how could—how much you could afford. But I always was honest with them. I never did over sell them. I'd rather make \$20 commission than—and sell them something that they could pay for and not lose it, then suddenly I could make \$50 commission, and then they'd lose it in two months because that would be unjust for them and—and I don't want that kind of money.

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And lots—the people worked with me, they go over—outside and they talk to somebody. Sometimes it would take them half a day talking to one person. And after they saw me selling that many cars in a short time, you know, one fellow, he talked too much. I told him, “James, you've got—you—shut-up. When they say they want a car, just write it down. Don't talk too much because, by the time you—you sell them a car and you keep talking and they forgot—.” You know, I got lots of people in there. I got some people, not deceiving them or nothing, but, you know, with my language and my accent—and the man looked at his son, and they were talking to me about an hour about a car and we—we're closing. And the man looked at the son, and he told him, “Son, which car did we by? *[Laughs]* I didn't even know which one we bought.” He told—he told the boy he, “We bought that green car.” Whatever it was, you know.

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But I got one woman came that's proof to what I'm telling you about, if you're honest with people. She have a job, \$700 a month. She looking at a \$11,000 car. She got five children. I show her a car for \$4,500. I forgot what her name—I told her, you know, “I'm—I'll sell you whatever you want. You could have this car for \$4,500. If you pay \$1,000 you've got \$3,500. You could finish paying it in 18 months—\$200. You're looking at the car. It's about \$8,500—got sun roof.” I told her, “You got to pay your light, your gas and—.” To make this sort of short,

we called the bank, and she said—well, you know, I could finance it for her, but that’s really more than she could chew. I told her that. I told her—and I asked the boss, and he said, “Sell her the other car, the big car.” Okay. She bought the car. Three months later, she brought that car back. She lost her down payment. She didn't have no car, and she had the sunroof stripped in a knife—the seats, so she—she was oversold and it was not—. We lost. The dealership lost because they could do nothing with that car, and she lost her down payment, you know.

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So my point is, you just look at the customer’s benefit, and your benefit will come to you, you know. And that’s the reason I feel like I’ve been successful even in this business here. You know, we—we try to give people their money’s worth.

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Now we make mistakes sometimes. I do make mistakes, you know. Sometimes I make mistakes adding something, but it will never be on purpose. Sometimes I give some in mistake, too, you know. But anyway—.

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AES: Well, if I may interrupt you, that makes me think of something my friend and colleague, Jimmy Thomas, emailed you.

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CC: Say it again.

00:30:45

AES: My friend, Jimmy Thomas, emailed—I mean, I'm sorry—interviewed you a few years ago and—

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CC: Danny Thomas?

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AES: Jimmy Thomas. I'm sorry, no, not Danny Thomas. James Thomas at the University of Mississippi.

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CC: Okay. Yeah, yeah, yeah, he came here. Yeah, right.

00:31:00

AES: Yeah. And you mentioned to him, when y'all were speaking, about making your living selling to African Americans and how sometimes you felt bad, them spending money they didn't have with you, when you were peddling. Can you speak to that?

00:31:16

CC: Let's see. Repeat that—repeat—repeat it.

00:31:20

AES: That when you were peddling—that when you—you were selling to—to sharecroppers and they didn't have a lot of disposable income, and so you felt a little guilty about selling them things that they couldn't necessarily afford.

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CC: Oh, yeah. Okay. Yeah. Yeah, well you got—you got good memory. Well, I'll tell you, he—he—it is that what you're saying, it is the truth. I'm going to be honest with you. Even though I need the dollars in those days, but you know, you have conscience. I've got conscience. All of us have conscience. And if you're going to live just for the dollar, that's not really living. I think—I think you've got to look at the life at a bigger picture. And if we're Christians and we remember one thing in the Bible, and it really is worth a lot when it says, "Do unto others like you want them do unto you."

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When I came here and I started going out selling the merchandise, I go on 49 Highway, a little town Mattson and Dublin and the other one by the flower—Roy Flower, old man, Roy Flower [of Flower Plantation in Mattson, Mississippi], someway somehow in those days everybody was living there. He owned 16,000 acres. And his houses is the most rundown house, you know, for the people. And it's lots of chopping cotton in those days. You know, not like now they put that poison or chemical or whatever. And I don't see these people at daytime, you know. They're working. Of course that's a good way for the man to tell me, "Don't come back." So I usually go in—at lunch. I usually go at eleven o'clock or 12:00 or 1:30 or 2 o'clock at their lunch break. I see, let's see, half of them, and then the other half I go see them after 6 o'clock.

00:33:12

Okay. Well these people, they were getting paid \$3.00 an hour from 6 o'clock to 6 o'clock. And what I was selling—some deodorant, you know, the stick deodorant and some powder. And I didn't—my volume was small. You've got to make enough profit of—of what you're selling, you know, to be able to come out. You—you know it's not like selling gas. And I always tell them the price, and, you know, "It's up to you to buy or not to buy." But if I—if they owe it for six years, it won't be spending more. It will be the same things. If I do otherwise, then I'm cheating them.

00:34:06

Well this woman comes and she wanted to buy a stick of deodorant. It was \$2.00. Or she wanted to buy a pair of stockings. And I look, she got five, six children on her porch, half-naked. And, you know, it bothered me. And I said—I talked to my cousin. He's a priest. He was—he was a Roman [Catholic]. He said, "Let me tell you this." He said, "You be honest with these people." I told him, "Well, I'm honest with them, but, you know, it bothers me." He said, "If they didn't buy it from you, they—they're going to buy it from your competitor." There is—there is a Watkins man that was on the same route that I was on. He sell(ed) the same thing I'm selling. He's selling pepper; I sell pepper. I sell flavor; he sells, you know—but that's what I think my friend, Mr. Thomas, is talking about.

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And it—it really did bother me. But then, you know, like the priest told me, he said, "You just be honest with them and tell them what—what your price is, you know." And just probably the woman needed the powder or what—whatever it was, you know. But I felt—I felt sorry for them because she worked all day long for \$3.00 and he—you know, they were underpaid, and I don't blame these people for really having a grudge now about lots of things. They were—they

were underpaid, and they were enslaved, you know, and—and the trouble is everybody uses everybody. And now things is different, you know. I’m glad it is.

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But, you know, they’re worth more than \$3.00 all day long. You know, you can even buy—I tell you what, I want—another interesting story. I used to go near Lula—you know, Lula, take my left and I’d go close—close to—not to the levy, but there is actually like a store, lots of people around. Well, I used to get a sub in this store, you know I’d get a piece of cheese or sand—little salami, crackers. I stopped down this place one time. See, it don’t hit you, these things, until later on.

00:36:26

This woman, black woman from the field, she bought fifty cents of bologna. Fifty-cents of bologna, you could get this page [of news]paper and wrap it in it. Fifty cents is nothing but two or three slices. And this man gave her—he got the butcher paper, I’m honest with you, it was that big. [*Gestures*] Well even though I was young and I did not speak English, but I got common sense. And I asked him, I—I asked him—I told him, “Why you give her that much paper?” You want to take a guess of what he answered me?

00:37:12

AES: So it would look like she bought more?

00:37:12

CC: Huh?

00:37:13

AES: So it would look like she bought more?

00:37:18

CC: See, he was weighing the—he was weighing the bologna on the scale. He look at me. He said, “The paper is a whole lot cheaper than the bologna.” In other words, the bigger the paper is, the more he going to make a profit. And, you know, I will never forget it as long as I’m living. Until now, I remember it—how cheap and dishonest. Now you know, I’m not judging him. I hope he’s in Heaven, but anybody that thinks about these things and takes advantage of a poor woman buying probably a half pound of bologna to feed her children and to get a half pound paper to weigh with that meat, just because the paper is cheaper than the bologna—. But you know it—it just—as long as I’m living, I remember it. I don’t know why. Few things in life, you know, you’ll never forget.

00:38:16

AES: Do you feel like part of your success in peddling was due to—to the black community trusting you and that they would—

00:38:24

CC: Yeah.

00:38:25

AES: —buy from you just because of that?

00:38:26

CC: Oh, yes, 100 percent. You know that people met me—I never did get out of the car. They—I'd blow the horn if—in the wintertime. They came out, snowing or raining, because I couldn't carry the stuff inside. So they'd come out to see what I got in the wagon. If they need something else. Lots of them, they buy just to help me. I mean you're 100-percent right. I don't know how you answer the—the—you answer. They—they were always—they want to help me. They want me to come back. Well, at first, they needed my merchandise. And I was nice to them. And they knew I was treating them and they knew I was not overcharging them, because their price—I mean they might be—a poor woman. She doesn't know how to read and write, but she had enough sense to ask the other man how much his flavor[ing] is. You know, it don't take no education to shop from two people for the same products, okay. So you know, they—they—they bought from me all the time, and they gave me the repeat business. And I see them every—every two weeks, you know. I got twelve routes. I got 600 customers those days.

00:39:38

And 99-percent of them, I didn't even know their names. They gave me their name. The way I hear it, I wrote it down. But I—I never—did not—and they never did know my name, either.

00:39:50

AES: They knew your car.

00:39:50

CC: They knew my car, and they knew what I sell. And I got one woman—but to answer your question, they were really nice to me as much as I was nice to them. They really were. I mean, you know, some people, they just want to buy from me if they need it or not sometimes. But

anyway, I go to this big house near—near—I used to go the way about five miles from where—near Glendora, and I used to go to this big house. And that woman got ten children, big house, big porch on the front. And I select the house and when I go to the field they see me. And when the children see me, they call—they call me a name. They said, “Thread here.” Well, I never questioned her. I never questioned them what they called me. As long as they pay me and as long as, you know, I got what they need, I’m not worried about what they call me.

00:40:53

So one day she came out. I thought, “I need to ask you something. What do your children call me?” She said, “They call you Thread—T-h-r-e-a-d.” She said, “You’re thin. Because you are thin, they call you Thread.” She said—and I had some people call me the Hog Medicine Man. Whatever the mama buys, that’s what I’m—I’m known by. Or, “The Flavor Man come,” or “The Garden Dust Man come.” I mean it was—it was a fun business. And, you know, I’ll tell you, when I left that route, as much as I hated the dust and the heat this time of year and the wintertime, I miss these people. It took me a while to—to forget them because they get to be your friend, like part of you—89-years-old woman, you know. And—but that’s what—.

00:41:52

AES: I wonder, just to segue, maybe, into talking about food and traditional Lebanese food now—but before we get to that, what was the, like, most popular grocery or dry goods item that you would sell in your peddling days?

00:42:02

CC: Our place here?

00:42:03

AES: No, when you were peddling. What would you sell mostly, flavoring or flour or—?

00:42:07

CC: Yeah, our—the flavor. The company was known by good flavor, you know. Yeah, flavor and pie filling—they got some pie—powder in a box. And they know how to fix it like we make, you know, the pie here. You know, those days any—if you have a sweet and anything you mix it with is good enough, you know. But as a flavoring and the pie filling and the food line, that's—I sold—I sold lots of women's perfume and men's shaving lotion, and I'm thinking about something that happened, but I wouldn't tell it to you because it is funny.

00:42:55

Anyway I'll tell you. It was fun that—that—that—. **[Interruption]** May I help you?

[Recording paused for approximately five minutes.]

00:43:06

AES: I want to ask you, too, about your days peddling, what you would take for lunch, if you would be gone all day? Would you take *kibbe* or grape—?

00:43:12

CC: Well, I'll tell you. I'll tell you what I took for lunch. I would say, once or twice a week—I still eat it now, even though I was—I didn't got no money, but I always loved to go to the store and buy, not the ten-cent sardines, I'd buy the King Oscar [brand]. And I still do it now probably once—once a week. I go and I get me a can of King Oscar. In the old country, we didn't have it. We buy it here. And I take me a sheet of bread from what my wife used to make and onion and

lemon and little tomato and sit on the bank of where I'm used to be or under the tree, and this is the best meal I ever ate in my life. Well, of course, most of the time I stopped at the grocery store, but I'd probably buy Vienna sausage or—but I never took nothing with me to eat because always—you know, you could always stop in the store. But the sardines, that was my—my favorite, to get King Oscar sardine and—. You ever ate King Oscar sardine? You ever eat any sardines? If you—well this is the best they make. The others, the ten-cent stuff or the cheap stuff, I don't eat it. It's too fishy—smell. But that King Oscar sardine with olive oil, it is good. I eat it now, and my grandchildren eat it. They sure do; they saw me eating it.

00:44:43

[To his grandson, who is sitting across the room] Hey Chris, what kind of sardine you and Matthew eat?

Chris: The King Oscar.

CC: Okay. *[Laughs]* Yeah, anyway.

00:44:53

AES: When you were traveling your route and you say you were to stop at these grocery stores to get something to eat, was there—was there a network of Lebanese-owned stores that you would—?

00:45:01

CC: Oh no, no, no. It's no Lebanese, uh-uh. All of it—all of it—most of it—or 99-percent of it American and some Chinese. You—in fact in like [the towns of] Webb and Sumner,

Jonestown—Jonestown used to be a great city—two or three. You've got some Chinese, and then you've got some American people, you know, and some black people. It was divided. You know, but no, they didn't bother me where I stopped, as long as I see the—the, you know, the meat box is clean, I—I buy, you know—. But I never bought—I never bought something which is spoiled, like I never bought no ham, you know. I—cheese, most of the time, you know, and—but they used to have lots of nice grocery stores in all these small towns, Chinese and some black people own some stores, you know, and some—they own cafés, you know. But I never ate in there because I don't—I don't—I never did go for the soul food, whatever it is, you know. But—but times are changed now. There is nobody—no—no more grocery store. You talk probably one, you know—everything—everybody—everybody gone now. The reason grocery stores existed in those days, people don't have no cars, no transportation, so they go to the neighborhood store, you know.

00:46:30

AES: Well, tell me, when you got here in the [19]50s, what the Lebanese community in Clarksdale was like and how you would gather as family.

00:46:37

CC: Yeah, the—it was really beautiful when I came here. I was—first, I was lucky to see the—meet all the old people like my grandfather and then his brother. And then I did have two aunts were here from my father's side. Then I got four or five aunts on my mother's side. Got five uncles. And we have, I would say, about fifty Lebanese families living in this town. They used to have a club, the Cedar Club they called it. They meet once a month, and they, you know, they fix

Lebanese food and they—you know, they get together and eat it and have dancing and singing and everything.

00:47:28

It was—it was—it was really great. Where they used to live in south of Clarksdale, it changed. They used to keep up beautiful homes, clean, you know. Greek—we have—we've got several Greeks that were living on whatever that street over there, too. They have beautiful yards, flowers. But then in the [19]60s and '70s things changed. The white people moved out because of the school system—district or whatever. The black people took over. Some homes are nice; some homes they are not so nice, but it's just a completely different neighborhood now.

00:48:13

AES: Is that the Riverton neighborhood, or is that something else?

00:48:15

CC: The what?

00:48:17

AES: Riverton neighborhood?

00:48:17

CC: No, Riverton is—no, we never lived in Riverton. It was—of course, they rode on the other side. That's where my grandfather and most of the Lebanese people lived, after you cross the bridge. That—Sunflower—after you cross Sunflower River, most—several—several streets and blocks, it was Italian, Lebanese, Greek.

00:48:39

AES: Would this have been—because the—your old grocery is out there on Friar's Point Road? Is that the area you're talking about?

00:48:46

CC: Yeah, it was. Yeah, it was our grocery store. It was—it was run by a white fellow, and we did have some black people, and we had some white people. It was a small grocery store. We—we didn't do much in it. That's the reason we changed it. We put some picnic tables, and we started selling some food, you know, like the *kibbe* sandwich and the cabbage rolls, but dinner we have—I mean lunch. But the only problem was it was not built for a café. It was a grocery store. We changed it to put four or five picnic tables. And William Faulkner, too, used to come over there. And the *USA Today*? We have several really important things happened in the grocery, but people liked the atmosphere. And most of all, they liked the food, the home-cooking food. They—they didn't have much money to choose from, but whatever we have it was—my wife fixed it right. And we stayed in the grocery store for thirty years.

00:49:43

But answering your question, it was—the store it—it was not in a black neighborhood. It was like a country, you know, Friars Point, you go to community college, go to Friars Point, you go to the country club, you know. But—but it was small volume, just lunch, and then your utility is running day and night. And that's why, thank God, we got this place and, you know, we're doing all right in it.

00:50:16

AES: So about what year would it have been that you started selling food at the grocery?

00:50:22

CC: What year—what?

00:50:24

AES: What year did you start selling food at the grocery store?

00:50:26

CC: Nineteen—1968, we got that store. I was passing by out of—and this man said, “Do you want to buy this store?” I told him, “Man—.” I didn't have no money. He said—let's see, what did he tell me? He said, “I tell you what you do. All that I want—\$2,400 and you got a \$10,000 loan on it financed through a finance company.” I imagine—I remember Bailey— Bailey — Bailey the name of that finance company, whatever: Bailey-Marcus. He said, “You take over the payments—\$100—and I went—I went ahead and some way, somehow I got \$2,400 from somebody. I forgot who. And that's how we got the grocery store. I still own the building, and I got it rented and it's rented for a Christian—as a Christian store. People take their—what they don't need, clothes, and they sell it and they give it to charity. And I have it rented for \$300, which don't pay the tax, but it's for a good—for a good reason. I don't even go in the—I just spend \$6,000 to renovate the floor. I thought it was going to take me three years to get it back, but that's all right. She said, “I should thank you.” Don't go out—. I told her, “No.” But you know, they're doing all right in it, and they help people. They get paid, and people take everything over there—clothes, tables, mattress, clothes, you know. What is it—well, the reason it is—it fit them because it's easy to park and easy to get in and out, you know. You don't have

to worry about the street, and they put whatever they want out and nobody will bother them, yeah.

00:52:11

AES: So when you started selling food at the grocery, was it something that you—you thought you would be selling traditional Lebanese food to the Lebanese community? Were you taking a chance selling your traditional foods to the greater community?

00:52:23

CC: I was not looking for the Lebanese community. And I was not looking for Italian. I was—I was looking for people—Anglo Saxon. And I—we joke with them about redneck, saying, you know, they're the ones who—who supported me over there and here. The Lebanese people, they fix their food. You know and the Italian people, they got some—some—we sell some Italian, you know, not much, but the American people will keep us here—the surrounding area. And you know, this place been here fifty years, and the grandfather and a grandmother and the father and then the children, they been coming here eating the same food. See, my cousin used to fix the same thing we're fixing. You know, we—we got our recipe with us, but they already had the recipe. Like these pies, the famous ones, that's their recipe. When we bought the place, it came with it, you know. But of course you improve on it, you know.

00:53:22

AES: So your cousin owned and ran this restaurant prior to you selling Lebanese food?

00:53:28

CC: I’ll tell you the story.

00:53:29

AES: Okay. *[Laughs]*

00:53:30

CC: I’m going to tell you the story. And when you see me repeating too much, you could feel free to tell me, “Let’s go onto something else,” okay.

00:53:45

In 19—in 1990, my cousin died—eight, nine, ten years ago. The children took over. They—they build this room right here [the large dining room off of the main dining room]. It cost them too much money. They have a hard way to make it. So, I won’t go into detail. Somebody came and want to buy it from them. The real estate [person] called me, and I told my wife. She said, “No, I don’t want it.” “Why you don’t want it?” She said, “It’s too much work. The place is dirty and this and this.” I told her, you know, that soap was very cheap. “No, I don’t want it. If it’s any good, then the girl will stay in it.” I tell her—well, and—and then she said, “We’re getting up in age.” That’s twenty years ago.

00:54:48

So a real estate—a real estate man called me. He said, “Chafik, what you just—.” I told him, “My wife said we are—we’re getting up in age.” He laughed. He said, “Chafik, my mother, she’s eighty-nine years old. She’s in New York, shopping.” His mother got a store downtown. He said, “She’s in New York, shopping.” “But,” he said, “I don’t want to cause no trouble between you and your wife, but you’re making a mistake.” I hang the phone, and I knew it was the wrong answer to give him. Two, three days later, somebody bought the—bought the girl

[out]. And I was really mad because I should—I really want to buy it, to be honest with you, because I felt like I would do good.

00:55:47

Well, it was in my mind for—and I prayed. I said, “Well, if the Lord is willing or wants me to have it, he will find a way, but I don’t want the fellow who owns it to get hurt. I hope he succeeds.” And he got some other business. They were in vend-a-snack—vend-a-snack machines and that’s his family own it. I said—I said, “I hope they expand in their business.” So he get out of the business, so I could buy it. But I never wish him bad luck, God as my witness.

00:56:26

Well, he bought the place in—in February—February, March, April, May, June, July, August—six months. The real estate called me. He said, “You want to buy Rest Haven?” I told him, “You know I want—I want to buy it.” But to make the story short, him and his mother came to the store after he sold it the first time. That’s the lady who went to New York shopping. They came and ate. They—you know, I was sitting here. He was sitting here. His mother was sitting over there. And I told him, “Cal, I wish you—I wish you had twisted my arm a little bit.” He said, “Well—.” His mother looked at him and told him—and he’s the richest man—real estate man. He got—he got more sense in his head than lots of people. I mean he’s sharp and they own half the town, and they succeeded. And she told him, “He doesn’t know how to sell. Why didn’t you tell him to buy it? You are no salesman.” I laughed. I told her, “Miss Edlin, it’s not—it’s not his fault. It’s my fault.” He told her, “Well, I don’t want to cause trouble between him and Louise, and that’s the reason.”

00:57:44

To make the story short, he called me. I went to his office to visit. We agreed on the price. I wrote a sheet, a yellow pad. The man came and I read it to the fellow, and I gave them a

down payment and I bought it in—in two weeks. I didn't even come to see what they have—no inventory or nothing. I told him, “But I’ll tell you, whenever—whenever you sign the paper and you get the money, you give me the key. If anything you want, take it out before I get the key. If you come back the second day, and you said you want something, you are not going to get it. We’re going to do it business. Business.” And the man that really said—man, he was impressed with everything I put down, you know. But, like I said, you know, sometimes, you know, your common sense will tell you the right thing.

00:58:43

After—after I bought a place, two days he got some sheets he wanted to take home. And it’s two or three things. They were not here. Well, anyway, we—we fixed it to where he didn’t lose, and I didn’t lose. I got what’s coming to me, and he got what’s coming to him because we done it right to start with. And after I—after I—because that fellow, the real estate man, he knew what we could do with it. He knew the ability—you know, he didn't have to break our hand or our back. She [my wife, Louise,] was working harder at the store than she’s working here when we came, and I told her that. But she don’t—I couldn’t convince her, so I let it go. But, you know, we got four or five people in the kitchen all the time. She was the only one. She was cooking, washing dishes, sweeping, and everything. Well, they call it Louise’s Store. I think she’s got pride in it, you know, but sometimes the pride—and it don’t put the money in your pocket either. You know, we really—we really are just barely making, you know, chisel and eat out of stone. But anyway, so we—we been here twenty years in this September.

00:59:54

But anyway, we bought the place and it was—it was a good break for us.

01:00:01

AES: And your—your cousin was serving the same food that you serve now, basically?

01:00:06

CC: They were serving the same food. But I'll tell you what the problem was with them. They were—they were—they knew what cooks—what the cook is all about. They knew how to fix the food. But too many people were living out—of three, four families living out of it and paying—and, you know, taking it out, so you didn't have no money to operate. You can't do that, see. That's what the problem is. It's not—it's not really that they didn't know what they were doing. They worked hard, the poor girl, but they were—they were too much coming out of the register, and they owed too much money. They couldn't pay the notes or nothing, you know.

01:00:47

AES: So, could you—I'm a little confused about the timeline. Was this—was this place opened—when your cousin ran it, was it open before you started—? So basically, my question is: Were they selling Lebanese food here before you started selling it at the grocery store?

01:01:00

CC: Oh, yeah. They were here before us. Yeah, yeah, they were here before us. We—they were here—they were selling the Lebanese food at another location in 1947, and we didn't come here till 1954, so they were selling at another location, and they were selling it here. And then there's another two, three families—Lebanese families—that have—they were selling *kibbe* and cabbage rolls.

01:01:24

AES: So, well, what can you tell m about—about exposing the Clarksdale community to traditional Lebanese foods and how—how that got to be popular?

01:01:35

CC: Well, I'll tell you. I really believe—I'm going—I'm going to tell you a story, and this will answer your question, I think. You know Jerry Lee Lewis? Jerry Lee, the singer?

01:01:50

AES: Oh, yes.

01:01:50

CC: The one piano and all that stuff? He was doing concerts in California somewhere and, usually, you know, you have the audience—“Where you're from?” [Someone in the audience answers,] “Memphis.” “Where you're from?” “Clarksdale.” So he asked this guy, “Where are you from?” And this guy happened to be from Clarksdale, Mississippi. He told him, “I'm from Clarksdale, Mississippi.” And the guy told me the story, he said, “Jerry Lee Lewis dropped the microphone, and he said, ‘Rest Haven chili cheeseburger.’” He come here. Did you see his picture here? So you see that, I just give you an example. I—I probably will expose Clarksdale, besides the Blues Museum, and, of course, you know, Madidi [restaurant] just come out, but this place been here for fifty years, a whole lot—. I believe our place—and I couldn't think of any other place will expose Clarksdale better than—to be honest with you. That's my thinking. I could be wrong.

01:02:58

AES: So would you say that—that a cheeseburger will bring people in, but then eventually they'll try a *kibbe* sandwich?

01:03:03

CC: No, no, my point—my point was that this guy—every time he passed by here, he stopped by to eat a chili cheeseburger, and whenever you mention Clarksdale, he told about Clarksdale. And look at how many times when people eat our *kibbe* and cabbage rolls and grape leaves, you know. And they told it—they tell their friends, and they tell their friends of friends to stop by here and all this stuff. And—and you know—you know, your—your reputation, your food will expose you even—I don't advertise. Since I been here, I don't believe—I don't believe I spent—one time I spent \$300, and it was wasted money. I said, "I'll never do it again." Your best advertisement is the people, you know. We got lots of people that come buy ten dozen grape leaves or, you know, *kibbe* in the pound—the raw *kibbe*. So I think I answered your question. This is what—yeah.

01:04:01

AES: Do you get many people who come here and don't know what Lebanese food is?

01:04:05

CC: Yeah. Well we got—we got—we got some there on the menu, you know, like *kibbe* and cabbage roll. Let's see, *[looking at a menu]* like this one right here. Somebody—well, the most [popular] question is—is about *tabouli*, what *tabouli* is—or *kibbe*. This *kibbe* right here, you see, and cabbage rolls and, you know, this is the one they don't know nothing about. So when they read it, they got a pretty good idea, you know. And but, you know, before you could read it, but

you know, the only way you could find out is try it. And they try it, I promise you. And—and I tell them, “If you don’t like it, I’ll give you something else. You don’t have to pay for it.” And I—I didn’t have to give it to them, either, you know.

01:04:51

AES: So would you say that you sell and serve mostly Lebanese food, or do you sell a good amount of—like today’s lunch specials are meat loaf, salmon croquet and chicken Rotel?

01:05:00

CC: We sell—okay, what we have today that’s for lunch, we have it once a week. We have the same dinner, lunch every—every week. Next week you come here, you’re going to see the same thing on Monday. Now, tomorrow we have another. We got different meat for every day, Monday through Friday. Saturday we don’t fix no lunch. Saturday, whoever comes, they come. They buy mostly the *kibbe* and hamburger and spaghetti.

01:05:27

Now we sell lots of *kibbe* and lots of cabbage rolls, but we also sell lots of veal parmesan with spaghetti and spaghetti. We sell lots of hamburger steak, and we sell lots of cheeseburger and hamburger. And we sell—we sell some cheap food, you know, not—not too much, but I tell you, the price of lots of the things, you know, the—the seafood plate, you know, baked potato and salad is \$12.95. You could get one *kibbe* and one cabbage roll and salad for \$7.75, or you could get one *kibbe* and a salad for \$5.95. You know, sometimes you got to meet people’s demand, and some people, they don’t want to spend too much money, and I don’t blame them, you know. And—and they get full.

01:06:23

So we have some steaks. I don't care if we sell it or not. It is good steak. We put it in the charcoal. We got it for \$17.95 and \$19.95. But, to be honest with you, with our meat, you know, when it goes up, you know, you don't make nothing out of it, but that's all right. You—you know, if you accept one thing in business, if you can't make money on everything, let it go because another item will make it up for you. That's as simple as that. And that's why we—we change our menu once a year—once every year and a half—but it's lots of work to change it. You've got to pay for it, so, you know, especially the breakfast. Some stuff goes up; we still charge the same thing. But you can't change your prices unless you change your menu. So you know, we just—if we—if we—if we can make fifty percent, forty-five percent, we'll be all right. Or forty percent, you know.

01:07:23

AES: You mentioned the spaghetti and the veal parmesan, and on your sign it—Chamoun's Rest Haven is billed as Italian, American, and Lebanese cuisine.

01:07:31

CC: Right.

01:07:31

AES: Has that always been important, or where did that come from? Or is part of the Sicilian community in the Delta a part of that, or how does that work?

01:07:38

CC: I didn't—I didn't understand the question. Say it again.

01:07:41

AES: If—if the Italian population in the Delta inspired the Italian elements of your restaurant and—and how—where those recipes came from.

01:07:50

CC: Right. Okay, that's good—that's—that's a good—. We have—we—you know—.

[Interruption] Well the *kibbe* is our recipe, okay. Your question is about the spaghetti. The spaghetti, you know, there's nothing to it. The noodles you put in—the main thing is the sauce. That's what makes the spaghetti and the veal parmesan. Okay, we got the best meat. We didn't have to get nobody's recipe on it. With my wife's brain and her know-how, I ain't got no problem with—with anything she do. She get—we get the best meat, probably ten-percent fat and ninety-percent lean meat in it. And of course she puts all kinds of spices, whatever—I don't know what she puts. And she makes it in a big pan, you know, like—big and that high. And she keeps, you know, they work on it. You know, they don't leave it and let it boil.

01:08:54

And then when it's done, they get big couple spoons and take all the—that fat on the top. She takes—my—my wife don't believe in the fat. She takes all the fat out, you know, throw it away. And people love it. People love our spaghetti and—and some people tell me when they eat spaghetti, somebody complained to get sick. And he said our spaghetti don't make him sick. I told him, "I'll tell you why—because there's no fat in it because we take all the fat from the top, you know.

01:09:25

And well this is just one example. The same thing with our lunches. We—you—you eat our turnip greens, you won't see no ham hocks in it or—or ham. We don't do that. I got one fellow that used to come eat lunch, a good fellow. He was Anglo Saxon, redneck, whatever you want to call him, and he weighed 300 pounds. And he came and said, you know, “You need to tell your wife to start putting in ham hocks.” I told him, that “you're the last damn fellow—you don't want to eat that stuff.” “But it tastes good.” The poor fellow died in a heart attack about two months later, you know, high blood pressure.

01:10:09

But, you know, on the other hand, he got the salt that's—special salt. He could get his salt with ham. But he want to eat the—the fat stuff. You know, I—I told—after he passed away, I said, “God bless his soul.” You know, he was worried about a little salt, but here he wanted the ham hock and he wanted the fat and everything on that spaghetti, you know. But—but we don't—we don't—our—our lunches, you know, we—we try to keep the grease out of it as much as we can.

01:10:49

AES: So is your wife—.

01:10:50

CC: People know—and people know it.

01:10:53

AES: You're known for that, then?

01:10:53

CC: Yeah.

01:10:55

AES: Yeah. Is your wife, Louise, still doing most of the cooking, or has she shared recipes with some other staff here?

01:11:01

CC: Well, if somebody wants it, you know, we’ll tell them, but we’re not going through the hassle to write it down for them. If somebody wants to know how you make *kibbe*, you could get the cookbook and, you know, read it, you know. But we don’t give our pie recipe for nobody. Somebody wants it, you know, no, we don’t do that, you know. But *kibbe*, I’ll tell them how to fix it, you know. But I tell them, “You could go to, you know, you could get a—a cookbook and tell you all about spaghetti.” And it’s just like the other—now you could—you didn’t have to be smart no more. You could look at the Internet and find all the information you want to know about it. You know, times changed, you know.

01:11:43

AES: Does your wife bless the *kibbe* that comes out of the Rest Haven kitchen?

01:11:48

CC: Do what, now?

01:11:48

AES: Does your wife bless the *kibbe* that comes out of the kitchen here?

01:11:52

CC: She—she—she trained the people in the kitchen, and they make it as good as she makes it. She—they do it our way to be clean—the main thing. And [our daughter] Paula, you know, Paula, she's a dietician and professional. She knows about that stuff. Nothing will pass her. If it's not right, she's not going to serve it, yeah. Yeah. Oh, we—we got—that's the advantage when you have somebody stay with you for eight, nine, ten years. They—you know, you—you train them and, you know you tell them, "This is the way we want it," and they do it day in and day out. They didn't have to worry about the—they don't even measure stuff like no more. You know, my wife doesn't measure it; she knows how much to put here and how much to put here.

01:12:38

AES: And tell me about the *kibbe* sandwich. I understand it's your best seller?

01:12:43

CC: It is. That's my wife who is—my wife's trademark. I used to go to the store, you know, and—before we start even fixing it—and I'd make sandwiches, you know, wraps, and people see me eating it. And, "Well, let's try one." You know, we tried one. Another fellow wanted to try it, so we started selling it. It is our bestseller. You know, you got the *kibbe*, you got the pita bread and you make—put *kibbe* on it and then you put lettuce, tomato, little hot sauce and house dressing and fix it and eat it like a sandwich. And it is our bestseller. We got this from the store. They didn't know what—. You can't get it nowhere, you know. You know, it's nothing to it. If you could get the bread, you could—anybody could do it. But you see, it's not easy to start

selling something that never was sold before. See, you've got to start small and then you—. And when I was eating it, I wasn't trying to sell it or impress the people. That's what I wanted you know. But it's funny. And that's—that's how we started, yeah.

01:13:46

I mean we've been doing it—when I was in the old country, you know, with—you know, you could get yogurt, you could get—you could get tuna fish—anything you could—anything that taste good with that bread, you know. It didn't have to be *kibbe*. But anyway, that's what—you're right, you—you know about it pretty good, yeah—yeah.

01:14:05

AES: And is your wife still making the bread?

01:14:07

CC: No.

01:14:08

AES: No?

01:14:09

CC: No, that's too much work. We buy it all the way from Ohio. Yeah, we buy it. We get it once every other week: twenty-five, thirty dozen or something like this. And they—they ship it to us. We buy our wheat from them, you know, the grain wheat [bulgur] and our—our olive oil.

01:14:29

AES: And tell me about the name, Chamoun’s Rest Haven. Where—how did that come about?

01:14:33

CC: Well our name is Chamoun.

01:14:34

AES: Right.

01:14:34

CC: And it was Rest Haven, and we just added the name on the top. But I mean, you know, I—my wife wants to let the public know that, you know, it changed hands and it changed names and everything because it did have a bad reputation for a while. The boy who bought it from the other people, he didn't do much good job. We didn't have much customer left when we came here, and we started to build it back, you know.

01:15:01

AES: Do you mind me asking what it was called before?

01:15:04

CC: It was Rest Haven. It’s been Rest Haven for fifty years.

01:15:07

AES: You just added the “Chamoun’s”?

01:15:08

CC: Just added the Chamoun's, yeah.

01:15:10

AES: And when I was here with Mr. [Pat] Davis [owner of Abe's Bar-B-Q in Clarksdale] a couple weeks ago, you were joking that everybody is a Chamoun.

01:15:16

CC: Well the—Davis is a Chamoun. What—what happened, when they came from Lebanon, they couldn't speak the language. If somebody [asked,] "What's your name?" "Joe Abraham, Chamoun or Sherman," whatever. Well, they took the easiest pronunciation like Abraham—your name is going to be Abraham. That's the immigration, and that's how we carried that name but his—his really name, the family name is not that—I would say ninety-percent of the people who came from Lebanon, they don't carry their family—their real family name. They carry either their father's name, or they carry their grandfather's name, which is all right.

01:16:11

But I mean I got some people that come here, and I got somebody from Oklahoma, and his name is Joseph—last name is Joseph. He said, "But you know that's not our name." I tell him, "What's your name?" He—he wrote it down Ferale—Ferale [?]. I even know the family in Lebanon, and I know where they live, you know. But he knows it, too. He said, "I know it's our family." And I wrote it to him in our Arabic, and he was tickled to death to see me writing, you know, his family name in Arabic.

01:16:42

But I took French when I was in school. I spoke—I spoke French better than I could speak English, but I didn't speak it in fifty years, you know. But Arabic, I could speak it and write it a lot better than English. I could make a speech in Arabic. But when Pat was here, we got—we got a half dozen families from our relatives—Farrises, they are Chamouns, but they went by their father's name. The Gattas name, it is Chamoun. Davis, it is Chamoun. Tony, another family in Lebanon, you know. Most of the people who came from the same village, they carry the same name: Chamoun. And everybody in Lebanon or here—Chamoun, they are related, probably back eight, nine generations, you know. It's not like the Smiths or the Jones here. In Lebanon, you're going to be Roman Catholic, Maronite, Christian, if you carry the name Chamoun. And it has been for probably—see, our—our people—our great-great-grandfather, they came somewhere near Turkey. That's a long time ago. That's about 250 years, probably.

01:18:12

And you know, I mentioned Maroun—Maronite, that's—you hear the name before? Well Maronite, you know how it was named after Maroun? It was named after one man. His name is Maroun—M-a-r-o-u-n—or—r-o-o-n—and he came from Turkey over there near Turkey near Arrat Mountain. Arrarat? He came during the persecution of the Christians in Lebanon, and he came to the Mount of Lebanon with his—the Christian—the heart of the Christian in Lebanon is the Mount of Lebanon, because you take the Beqaa Valley, where we come from, you take Sidon or—it's in the Bible, or Tripoli, that's on the coast—they're Muslim. Beirut is divided half and half, so, really, the Mount of Lebanon, that's where all the Christians lived. And this man came, and he saw how hard the Christians—they're having a hard time—starvation and everything, and he stayed with them. He tried to help them. And he organized them, and he done some miracle, anyway, That how—he sent Maroun—Maronite where if our—our name Maronite after St.

Maroun [St. Maron] because he done lots of good. He done lots of good.

01:19:47

And that—that country the Mount of Lebanon with the Christian—lots of monasteries, nuns, and priests—is lots of miracle happen over there, I mean real miracle. There's one man, I went to his monastery, the name—his name—Sharbel—S-h-a-r-b-e-l—St. Sharbel. I'm going to tell you the story about him, and then, if you want to end, it will be all right.

01:20:27

In 19—the last time I was in Lebanon, me and my wife went over there. They have this feast in July, so my sister said we're going to visit St. Sharbel Cathedral. And it's about a three-hour drive. It is not really too far, but the way the road in Lebanon, mountain—mountain, I mean mountain—you look down. So anyway, that man was a priest about 500 years ago—probably not that long. And he was—he was not living in the monastery. He was living in the cave. They called them—there is a name. I couldn't think of the English name for it—monk, monk, but it's Hermitage—Hermitage, they don't see nobody. They just pray and meditate, and they eat whatever they could grow.

01:21:41

So this man died. After he died, a few months later, this is the story now—it is not a story. It is a true story. They—they noticed at night some flashing lights on the grave just flashing. That's after so many years. They got permission from the government and permission from the Arch Diocese in Lebanon to dig his grave. They dug his grave. His body was like mine and yours: flesh, just like he never died. And they got doctors, everything documented, and he—he had lots of people to visit him. Some people went and have a cane or have some kind of disease, thousands of them were—were healed.

01:23:02

I'm going to tell you this story, and I'm going to end it now on this—we'll go get a cup of coffee. I'm going to tell you this story about this man. I don't call myself a religious person because I pray. I done something wrong, I ask God's forgiveness in the morning and the evening. You know, I pray for my fellow man and for my children. I was in this doctor's office one day, my doctor. I have a cold or something, and it's near the hospital. And I usually about 9:30—10 o'clock I get sleepy and I take a nap here for thirty minutes because I get up at five o'clock in the morning.

01:23:53

I was sitting on the couch of the doctor's office, and the sun was hitting me. It was so relaxing. And I was sleeping, but in the same time I look where the reception door is to the doctor's office. And I saw this man got hood on him wearing clothes, standing up against the wall. The doctor's name is Dr. Burke. I said to myself, "Huh, Dr. Burke, he must be doing some janitor work for him or he's poor, you know, he tried to check him out." This is in my dream. I'm still sleeping, but I could see him like I'm looking at you. And in the same time, I found myself in that monastery where this [Saint] Sharbel is. That—that fellow I saw, he looked like the picture, the way he dressed just like the saint. And I see myself landing on a monastery. That's in the dream. And I could remember the highway, and I remembered the road made of stones for the cars, and I said, "My God, it's [Saint] Sharbel." I didn't know him. He wanted me to know who he is. He brought me all the way here, and I woke up. And I told the doctor, I told him, "Doc, you got a holy ground here." And I told him the story. He was really touched.

01:25:42

But I'll tell you one thing, I would say this story is a miracle in my life. I mean these things happened just like I'm looking at you, and you're looking at me. It—it isn't a dream. I could see that man. I could see the holy dress, the brown—dark brown clothes there. Because,

you know, somebody like him probably—he never changed clothes. He—he had them forever, you know. And I felt sorry for him, but he wanted to let me know who that man is—he was no janitor, and he was no poor man. He was the Saint, and he took—he took me over there, and I said, “I’m going to show it to you.”

You want a cup of coffee?

01:26:22

AES: Sure; I would love a cup of coffee. *[Recording is paused for approximately five minutes.]* All right, we have some coffee now after taking a little break.

01:26:29

CC: Go ahead. Ask me whatever you want.

01:26:29

AES: Okay. Yeah, I just—I want to ask you because I know—you know, I’ve—I’ve met with Elaine Daho and Pat Davis, and I know that your restaurant is such a meeting place for the Lebanese community here in Clarksdale and what that means to you.

01:26:42

CC: Well I—I—I tell you, the best part of it is I have a chance to see everybody. I don’t have to go nowhere. You know, they don’t visit like they used to no more. And, you know, here, you know, I see the friends, and I see the kinfolks. It just—it makes me feel good. I really enjoy seeing them.

01:27:05

AES: And how does food factor into that? Because, like, I imagine when you came here that it was a lot more home-based traditional cooking, and now, to have food—traditional Lebanese food—be what brings the community back together, do you know what I mean?

01:27:19

CC: I—I think I missed—missed the sentence of the question.

01:27:32

AES: Just about traditional Lebanese food being from your restaurant, specifically, being a lot of what keeps the Lebanese community together here.

01:27:42

CC: Well no, I don't believe our—you know, they fix it home. You know each—each Lebanese family knows how to fix it. But, you know, when they don't feel like to do it, they come eat it here, which it makes me feel good. Like the raw *kibbe*, you know, I got lots of them. They don't bother with it, you know. Grape leaves is too much work. **[Off Mic Conversation]** Huh? I sent him a check. I sent him a check. I don't owe them nothing.

[Interview resumes]

01:28:13

And when they come here, you know, they usually come—you know, the Cedar Club, not—not every time they have meetings. They kind of go around, and when they come here, most of them eat our food because, you know, probably, you know, the *kibbe* takes lots of work to do it. The *tabouli*, the same thing. The grape leaves, cabbage rolls, you've got to get the rice,

you got to boil the cabbage. It's lots of work. It's not like spaghetti. You could get a few noodles and get, you know, tomato—you know the—the sauce on it and eat it, you know. I know how to fix spaghetti, no problem [*Laughs*], but I couldn't fix no—you know, because it takes lots of preparation, you know, yeah.

01:29:00

AES: And I—I know you're here what amounts to probably eighteen, twenty hours a day. I wonder what you eat while you're working here at the restaurant.

01:29:08

CC: Well, I'll tell you what—what—whenever we make the raw *kibbe* fresh, I eat some of it. I eat—I eat grape leaves, cabbage rolls. You know, I try everything we have because, I'm going to be honest with you, everything we sell and we fix is good. Hamburger, they tell me our—we have the best hamburger, and the reason is you know hamburger is hamburger. It's the meat. If you don't cut on your quality you're going to have some good food. We've got the best meat you could buy, and, you know, you put lettuce and tomato on a hamburger, and if it's not burned and, you know, on a bun—it's brown or whatever. You know it's going to taste good—the meat. That's—that's the main thing.

01:29:55

And we sell so much of it. We don't keep it too long. You know, I order twice a week the ground beef. We order it Monday, and he's here today and another fellow comes Friday. So we—we—we—we—it don't get old. The same thing with the bacon, you know.

01:30:14

AES: Now is the beef you use for the *kibbe*, it’s different than the beef you use—?

01:30:17

CC: Oh, yeah. It’s a special cut.

01:30:19

AES: Can you explain that?

01:30:20

CC: See, you got the *kibbe*, the raw *kibbe*, you got to get the round and they trim all the fat and everything and then—sure, the machine clean, and they don’t give it to us when it’s clean. They grind it in the grinder twice. When you look at the meat, it’s as pretty as you could—you know, it is—it is—it is—you don’t seen no—no grain of fat in it, yeah. No, it is different. It—it’s a special cut.

01:30:52

AES: Do you sell a lot of raw *kibbe*?

01:30:53

CC: No, we don’t sell lots of it. Not too many people eat it. Some people eat it, but we don’t sell lots of it. To be honest with you, if it’s up to me, I don’t want to sell it. But they demanded it, and, you know, they want to buy it. That’s all right, yeah. I’ve been eating it since I was three years old. The health people look at it, you know, and they know what it is.

01:31:12

AES: Now when you say, “They demand it,” do you mean your Lebanese customers or do you have—?

01:31:16

CC: No. The American people, no. The people that never ate it, they know—they hear about it. They try it, and they want to eat it. And some people been eating it for—when they were young, yeah.

01:31:29

AES: And you're closed on Sundays, correct?

01:31:32

CC: We're closed on Sunday. We used to open on Sunday, and Sunday really was our best day, but Paula wants to go to church, and she wants to take the children and, you know, we need to be off. And we didn't miss the business. It didn't make any difference, really.

01:31:51

You know, I'm going to be honest with you. Me and my wife, she's 73 and I'm 75. We have six children; we got thirteen grandchildren. We've struggled all these years, and the Good Lord has been good to us. We could quit working now and our living is made, but I enjoy coming here, you know. All of them need some help, so what I make I give it to them. And I meet the people, you know, like you. You know, and I couldn't stay home. And, you know, you go travel—you get tired of traveling, you know. And here I—I come to work like in the morning. I'm here at 5:30—6 o'clock and before Paula comes, I have all of them served. I take the food to

them. I—they get the coffee. You know, we've got good people. They help themselves, you know.

01:32:46

But I enjoy meeting the people, and if you don't enjoy people, you're—don't go in that business. It's as simple as that.

01:32:54

AES: Well and I know everybody expects to see you when they come here. Tell me about the boss's table back there in the other dining room.

01:33:01

CC: Yeah, yeah, yeah, well I enjoy seeing them, and some people, you know—you know, when you are here twenty years in one place, people see you day in and day out, you—they come and they didn't see you—they wonder, you know. And lots of them say, "Well, we were worried about you. We didn't know what happened." I told them, "I'm still here. You are not going to get rid of me." And I hope I'll be here for a while, anyway, but, you know, just let the Good Lord take care of it.

01:33:29

AES: What do you eat on Sunday when you're not at the restaurant?

01:33:31

CC: Well, on Sunday we usually cook a steak at the house, or usually Paula brings us some. We don't go out—we don't go—. If we go to Memphis, we stop at Long Horn [Steakhouse] in

Southaven, and we eat good steak, me and her. And we—once in a while, we go to the casino, you know. We eat over there. But we take the drink on—she got a little wine, and we take a little wine, you know. We enjoy Monday and Tuesday. We go home a little earlier. You know, we go about 5:30 home. She'll usually take something, and she'll cook home and we sit down. It—it is nice. It is nice.

01:34:17

AES: So what's the future of the restaurant?

01:34:20

CC: Well, it's going to be—I don't—you know, when I'm dead and gone, I don't know what they're going to do. Paula is here. She knows all about it. And then I got another four or five more children, all of them got their own things to do. But I just hope and pray that they keep it going, you know. I—I think—and I—that's the way I feel about it. You don't drink from a well and throw a stone. That's an old Arabic saying, and I know you use it here. It's not—I got some—I'll tell you—answering your question, I got somebody that came here, and they wanted to buy it a few years ago. And I told them, "What you going to do with it?" They were going to put Mexican food.

01:35:07

This has been a Lebanese tradition for fifty years, and I said I wouldn't—I wouldn't let—no, not only Mexican—any—I wouldn't change the recipe for no money. And I hope the children will, you know, will accommodate these people who have been coming here day in and day out all these years and take care of them, because I think, somebody supports you all these years, you owe it to them. That's the way I look at it. It's not, "I made all the money I want and

the hell with you.” No, we—I don’t look at it this way. I hope they feel the same way, you know. And, if it’s possible, they keep it going, you know, and fix the—keep the good food, you know.

01:35:51

And listen, people are dying to find a job now to make a living. I mean, that’s a living and, you know, when you come here and I serve you a plate, the first thing, I appreciate your business as much as you appreciate my food. So it’s really a two-way street. I need you, and you need me. You know, when—when you start being independent, and you think you’re the only one counting and not everybody else here, no, that’s where you fail. You got to look at the people’s interest as much as you look at your own, okay.

01:36:33

AES: All right. Well that I think might be a good note to end on. You’ve been so generous with your time.

01:36:37

CC: Well, I appreciate you coming. And I enjoyed talking to you.

01:36:43

AES: Well, is there anything to add that I may not have asked?

01:36:45

CC: No, we covered—you—we covered everything. But I know one thing: we are—you and me and—we should count our blessings and thank God that we are in this United States. I’ve been in Europe. Me and my wife, we—we didn’t have no money but I told her while I’m able to

travel I want—we got \$3,000. We're going—we bought a ticket. We went to fifteen countries—not fifteen countries. We went fifteen days. Went to Germany, England, the Netherlands, France, Switzerland and Italy with fifty people. We were on a two—two-decker bus. Everything was paid. We paid for everything—the hotel and meal and everything. And I see what these people—and I've been in the Middle East where I come from.

01:37:45

I'll tell you, people go—when they come back, they will say, “Thank God for these United States.” You can't even get enough ice in the damn countries over there. They—everything, little bit thing. My ice machine would supply three hotels over there. And—and the meat, you know, they're so cheap. I mean they just give you a little bitty thing. And here we throw away, you know—so anybody that complains about this country, they need to get the hell out of here and go check some other places.

01:38:22

AES: So when you came in the [19]50s, even though you thought you wanted to go back, you're glad you stayed?

01:38:26

CC: Well, the reason I wanted to go back, you know, you've got to understand that when I came here, I didn't have—I ain't got nothing in common with what's taking place. And—and I was in school. I didn't know nothing about peddling in a suitcase, you know, and—and go to these poor people's houses and give credit and collect it. You know, I had it made over there. I was going to school. I was going to boarding school. And, you know, and I was young, you know, eighteen, nineteen years old, we—you know. But time will take care of things, you know.

01:39:11

I knew I could make it here; it was just a matter of time. But I think I was impatient, but you can't do—you can't do things overnight. It just takes time, you know. It just takes time. And we took our time and we gradually bought this—you know, I never piled debts on me. You know, we paid as we go, and I hope the children—but they don't do that now.

01:39:39

AES: Do you have any customers from your peddling days who are customers here at the restaurant?

01:39:42

CC: No, most of them are dead and gone. Once in a while, the children come—their children, you know. And they tell me, “We remember you used to call on our mama. We used to live here. We used to live there. And her name is so and so.” “Yeah, I remember you,” you know. And like they were glad to see me, you know. They probably were little bitty punks, you know, young, yeah.

01:39:59

AES: Well thank you, again, for your generosity. I appreciate it.

01:40:02

CC: Okay, I enjoyed meeting with you. Okay. All right.

01:40:03

[End Chafik Chamoun (Delta Lebanese)]