CLIFF COLLINS
Cliff's Meat Market – Carrboro, NC

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Date: May 31, 2007
Location: Cliff's Meat Market – Carrboro, NC
Interviewer: Amy Evans
Length: 1 hour, 6 minutes
Project: Chapel Hill Eats/TABASCO Guardians of the Tradition

[Begin Cliff Collins Interview]

00:00:00

Amy Evans: This is Amy Evans on Thursday, May 31, 2007 in Carrboro, North Carolina, and I'm at Cliff's Meat Market with Mr. Cliff Collins. And Cliff, would you say your name and also your birth date for the record please, sir?

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Cliff Collins: My name is Cliff Collins. My birth date is June 7, 1948.

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AE: And you're a native of the area, I understand—North Carolina?

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CC: Yes, I'm a native of the area yes—and my family—for 300 years.

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AE: Yeah? Your family has been here since the 1600s, and you've traced all of that back?

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CC: Yes. Yes, I had someone doing the family tree on the—on the family and it went back to 1674, when they got a land grant from England. So that's a pretty long time.

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AE: And do I remember right that you live on some of that same original parcel of land?

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CC: I don’t live on it right now; I own it. I own some of it, but we won't—do it later. I bought land away from the home place when I was in high school, and I’m still living on it. But I may sell and move back to the homeland, which is only two miles up the road.

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AE: So tell me how you got into the meat business.

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CC: It was a high school—it was a job after school in high school to get money to go through high school.

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AE: And where was that first job?

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CC: Andrews-Riggsbee Grocery.

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AE: And did you just kind of learn on the job, trial-by-fire kind of thing, or did someone teach you the—the art of the butchering?

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CC: I learned on the job by doing it.

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AE: Can you describe what that was like?

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CC: It was all right. It was the first job I ever had that was inside in the summertime where it was cool and outside—I mean inside in the wintertime when it was warm. I was warm when it was cold outside, so I said this all right. I never had a job like this. **[*Laughs*]** I always was—when I was cold and when it was hot, I was hot.

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AE: Uh-hmm.

00:01:48

CC: So the idea—we had air-condition[ing] inside, so I said this is all right. I think I'll stick with this a while because I like to. So—it had all the food. **[*Laughs*]** And all the pretty people coming in and being able to talk to them—that was pretty—that was all right. Even though it was over the meat case, I learned a lot about the people and it was—it was a different life—a different world and it kind of grew on me.

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AE: Did you seek that job out, or was it just kind of a happenstance that you ended up with that job?

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CC: It was just by chance. Someone come in—wanted me to come to work for them, and I said, "I'm busy here." And he said, "No, you need to come to work for me because this is job—we

need somebody and it's a good job and you'll have"—like I was just telling you—"it's warm in the winter and cool in the summer. And you have a lot of variety of things to learn. And also you learn how to cook, you learn how—what to buy and how to eat and what to eat and stuff like that. And I said, "Okay, I'll give it a try—at what you're doing."

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AE: So this was when you were in—when you were in high school?

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CC: Yes, high school.

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AE: And so—but you attended college for a time, did you not?

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CC: Yes. And I kept working in the meat market in the same place and attended college for a couple years and then took over manager of the market. And then a year or two later I bought this place [Cliff's Meat Market], and I'm still here.

00:03:01

AE: What did you study in college?

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CC: Maintenance—heating, air-conditioning, refrigeration, tooling, dying, and drafting and all that stuff, so that was all—it was all work stuff—on-hand stuff.

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AE: So you were looking for a trade after you got out of college, but then it ended up being that you were already in a trade?

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CC: Yes, in the trade, and I use all the skills I learned in college. I do my own refrigeration, which is not illegal. I do my own repairs, remodelings—whatever.

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AE: Did you know that going into college that you could use that—that knowledge in—in the butcher business or—or in the market business?

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CC: I knew I'd use it in life because life is mostly common sense. And a lot of the work is common sense, putting two and two together—not two and three; it don't get even numbers that way.

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AE: So tell me how you came to own this place and how—how you purchased it.

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CC: I've been renting here for a long time, and the guys that owned it come to sell. And I told them I'd be interested in buying it, but they wanted too much money. So I kept waiting until the price got right, and I bought it.

00:04:02

AE: What year was that?

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CC: Two thousand—two thousand, yeah.

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AE: Okay. So when you—when you came out on your own and had your own place, what made you decide that you wanted to be an entrepreneur and a—and a small business owner?

00:04:15

CC: I always wanted to be in my own business—my own business. I didn't know what. I was going to build houses when I was in high school, that was my intent—was to build houses and—and landscape and do all kinds of things like that with bulldozers and dump trucks. But I got into this and I said, "Let's keep on doing it." And every day I do it and every day—every day—every week—every month—every year, so I'm still doing it.

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AE: And when you worked at the other market, did you build a reputation and did people start to know you and—and your personality and then you came over here and used that name to open your own market?

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CC: Yes, that was about the best choice I had. I had gotten to know a lot of people, and they were my friends and they would call me up and place orders and come and get it and all knew me by name, and I would just come here—I just kept on doing the same thing. I said, "I don't want to mess up a good thing. I'll put my name on the door, and if it works, it works, and if it don't, I'll have to do something different."

00:05:11

AE: And what year was it that you started renting this place?

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CC: [Nineteen] seventy-three. The first day. Really, seventy-two, but I don't—officially say seventy-three. 1973.

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AE: And did I hear right that you sold a tractor and a car and all kinds of things to make the first payment?

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CC: Yeah, that's to get the money to pay the man to get here. In other words, to buy the merchandise in the store and a drink box, a cash register, a meat grinder and things like that, so I could get started. I sold my tractor and my motorcycle and my pickup truck, and all I had was an old car and—but by the end of the year, I had made enough money to buy a new car and a new pickup truck, another tractor, and a motorcycle. I bought the motorcycle back that I sold.

[*Laughs*]

00:05:56

AE: **[*Laughs*]** That's a pretty good deal. So did you—

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CC: A year later—a year later I wrecked it, so there's no more motorcycle—too dangerous.

00:06:05

AE: So when you opened this business, did you have suppliers and everything lined up already that were contacts from your other job, or how did that work?

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CC: Oh yes, I did, and they liked me well enough—I won't say my reputation was good enough because I didn't—I paid the bills, but with someone else's money when I was working for Andrews-Riggsbee. But they told me I could buy the product now and pay them next week. Well I would buy enough that I knew I was going—what I was going to sell this week, I'd get my money back; I'd get my money back over the weekend and write them a check and that's the way—it started that way. And I had so many companies back then—we helped Armor, Hormel, Wilson, Valley Dale, John Morrell and Valley Dale and everybody I was buying from. And I'd buy a little bit from each one, and I'd pay them next week, and I operated off their money, so to speak.

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AE: Are there—

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CC: They didn't mind doing that; they gave me the opportunity.

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AE: Are there any of those suppliers that you're still working with?

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CC: Yeah, some but mostly indirectly. All of them have gone to the—they either sold out or merged or something like that—most of them merged, or they don't do the delivery stuff anymore. They sit back and do the processing and sell it to another vendor to ship it to us. I bought a lot of beef out of Montana; it's all natural beef and that works good. And it's not as fatty and it tastes good, and the customers like it because it's all natural.

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AE: So in the early days, was your relationship with your suppliers—was it mainly based on your rapport with them or was there really—a high demand for quality at that time? And you were looking for that in who you worked with, or what drove that?

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CC: All tied together, it was. They knew me well, so they'd sell to me. But I would buy the—if Armor had the best product—beef this week—even though the price might be a little more, I'd buy their beef. If somebody would pick it out for me or—Swift did a lot and Swift had their own pork they would pick out for me, and I'd get their pork. And maybe Valley Dale would have the best bologna or bacon or something like that. I'd get that from—from them and other items. I knew which worked best—who had the best bologna, the best ham, the best price, who had the best country hams, who had the best beef, who had the best veal, lamb, and I would switch

around and do it that way. That's what a meat-cutter—a buyer is supposed to do is, you buy for the—you make more money in buying than you can selling, if that tells you anything. So that's what I had to do. That's running the business; that's part of it, and it's still true today. The big businesses do it now. They go—they're so big now they tell the people what they will pay them, but then those prices—especially the poultry. I tell the poultry people, "You sell me for that price, and I'll pick it up at the plant, and you won't have to deliver it, so you save the delivery charge and I can compete. If you don't, I'm not going to buy from you at all because I can't compete." So we get this in the fax machine every Monday; we get five or six companies that fax the prices, and then I buy from them. That's the ones that don't enhance their stuff. If they enhance it, they can keep it. If they put 12-percent water in it, the price should be 12-percent less when you buy it, and then I can sell it 12-percent less to the customers. But they don't want to do that, so I don't buy from them. I let them keep their product and sell it to somebody like—like Wal-Mart. **[*Laughs*]** They do enhance theirs.

00:09:21

AE: So when you started your business here, were there other similar markets in the Carrboro and Chapel Hill area that were your competitors, or were you kind of one-of-a-kind over here?

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CC: No, we had Fowler's down the street in Chapel Hill. We had Andrews-Riggsbee Grocery across the street. We had up the street—we had—I can't think of the name of it; it's where the—anyway, we had another one right up the street, and it was two across the street: Andrews-Riggsbee Grocery and Hearne's Grocery. And the Country Market was up the street and Fowler's down the street in Chapel Hill—Main Street Chapel Hill. And that was that many

markets here when I come here. And then A&P was just up the street, but I still made it, so it was all right.

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AE: How can you explain that you made it this long? That you stood out from the pack?

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CC: I've done a lot of the work myself and I stay—I stay here and run it myself and been doing the work myself. I didn't have to pay someone else, and everything was hands-on with the customers and the meat. And I knew the people, so they would come to see me and we'd talk and they'd buy a little meat, and we'd talk about life in general. And I didn't spend much money; I didn't blow any. If I did spend it, I spent it on something that would be worth something tomorrow like real estate in this area. So that's all right.

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AE: Do you have any customers or did you for a while—30 years is a long time—but that you had original to the job that you had in high school that still come here today that you've had for those decades?

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CC: I have a lot of them, sure do; I have a lot of them. I've got a lot of them's grandchildren that come in here and I got one—one lady in particular I met before I went in business here, and she was not married. She got married; she got pregnant and had two girls. And I told her one day, "You need one more—you need a little boy." And she had the little boy, and now their children have children, and the little boy is grown. The baby—her baby is grown now; he's probably

thirty years old. That's how long I've been cutting meat here. And after I started in business, people would come to me and say, "Hey, you know, we're cousins." I said, "I wonder why"—to myself, I didn't tell them—"I wonder why we wasn't cousins yesterday." **[*Laughs*]** "It's cousins now." And I'd ask my mother; I'd write their name down because my mother was from here; she—her mother was a Rigsby. I'd say, "Hey mother, you know this one guy? He says we're cousins." She said, "Yeah, his daddy and—and my—and me are first cousins or second cousins or whatever." I said, "Okay, so his daddy and—and my daddy was—my mother and his daddy were first cousins." I said, "Okay." So all kinds of things like that went on too; it was fun. And then I found out I was kin to half the people in Carrboro and didn't know that. I was kin to the people I bought the building from; I didn't know that 'til I bought the building. And I didn't know it 'til last year, and the lady come told me. She says we're cousins. I went back and checked. I said, "Nobody told me that I was kin to the Andrewses." She said, "Yes, you are." She said, "You're kin to the Lloyds, too, and the Blackwoods." I knew I was kin to the Blackwoods—so about everybody in town.

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AE: Did you always want to stay in this area?

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CC: No, no, I almost moved to Atlanta twice and had a job at Winn Dixie. They wanted me to come to work for them, and they offered me a lot more money than I was making, but I had already bought land here then by that time and—and I wanted to farm, and I had my eyes on a farm and I got it, so I stayed. So I didn't farm very much—I tree farm now. **[*Laughs*]** Growing

up trees and make timber. Because I got pasture for cows but no time—no time for the cows, so I rent it out to someone else that has cows that has time.

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AE: So you're pretty diversified, then. You've got the pastureland and the tree farm and the market here and the rental apartments adjacent to the market and other real estate, I guess.

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CC: Yes, yes, I got other houses I rent. I got thirty places I rent. But I can't keep them up; it's too much trouble. **[*Laughs*]** Day and night, day and night. When I leave here at night, I go to the hardware store and buy hardware for tomorrow to finish a job we're working on—a remodeling job. And when I get through with that, I'll start another house next week. And we're going to put vinyl siding on that house because we're going to have a family reunion there, and I want it to look good. **[*Laughs*]**

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AE: So tell me about what it is to be a meat cutter and what kind of skills it requires and—and that kind of thing.

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CC: I think the biggest skill it requires is to—be devoted to your job. You can't walk off and leave it; you can't do it in 40 hours a week. You can't take off every time something jumps off and take off and go do that; it don't work that way, especially if you own your own business. You stay with it and you run it or sell it and get rid of it, one way or the other. That's what makes it work. That's what made it work.

00:14:04

AE: What about the meat? What kind of relationship do you have to the product that you sell?

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CC: You need to know what you're selling. You sell what they call cow beef. We call them gully jumpers. That meat is tough. It—the only thing it works for is ground beef, I guess, but you need to have some good quality. Good quality and good prices and taking care of your customers and keeping the meat cold; the temperature is a big, big thing. I watch my refrigerators like a hawk. Even on Sundays when I'm closed I come here and check my refrigerators and keep everything cold and don't let it get warm. If you keep it cold—especially poultry—all through the process as you're doing it, when the customer gets it, they have usually no problems with it. And I do a lot of wholesale so—with the restaurants—so I've got to keep it right so that when they get it, they can keep it a day or two or three or four or five and not have problems and—and their customers will be happy, too. So the restaurant's customers are really indirectly my customers too, so sometimes I have double customers. When you eat at the restaurant up the street and you buy from me too, you're a double customer. **[*Laughs*]**

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AE: Tell me about some of those restaurant relationships because I talked to Bill Smith yesterday and he spoke fondly of you.

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CC: Oh, you talked to Bill?

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AE: Uh-hmm.

00:15:14

CC: Bill is a good one. Bill gives me a lot of business and his—his credit is good. I do him monthly, but he likes to pay me COD a lot of times. But I've got a lot of them that pay me monthly or close by it that are close friends and then restaurants I've been serving since some of them opened in like '78 and '82 and times like that. They've been with me all that time—the whole time, and they—they're big customers. And every month we bill them, and they'll send me a check.

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AE: Do you have a gauge on what it means from—for them to buy locally?

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CC: I don't know. I guess they like buying locally. If they consider me locally—and a lot of the product I get is local, except the beef from Montana and some I get—the midwestern beef and sometimes I get pork. I like to get the pork as close by as possible and the poultry, yes, really close—as fresh as possible. And I do get some good and all natural poultry out of Georgia, but most of my stuff comes out of Chatham County, which is the county I live in—the next county down—and I think that's good, local stuff. We want to help the people outside the area, but we want to help ourselves too. So that's what we're doing.

00:16:24

AE: So how has the meat cutting industry changed since you started 30 years ago and where you are today?

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CC: **[*Laughs*]** It's changed so much, it's hard to explain all of it. It used to be I got the beef in and you'd put it on your shoulder and bring it in, and now it comes in in boxes, and it's already broken down in smaller—smaller portions. You buy rib-eyes now—you buy six rib-eyes in the case or five but used to, I'd buy the whole quarter beef and put it on my shoulder and bring it in and put it on the block and block it down and take the rib-eyes out and take the beef ribs out and take the short ribs out and take the trimmings and make ground chuck or ground beef and make the chuck roast, if they've got the bone in. Now you can hardly buy it that way—the bone in. You've got to special order it. It comes in boneless. I'm talking about the chuck. So a lot of stuff changed, and it took me ten years to get used to it because I was used to it my way, and I was used to giving the customer what they wanted. But now they've gotten used to me not doing it—it's not so bad. Most time, I don't have it. **[*Laughs*]** Now I have this, though, instead and they say, "Okay, give me that."

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AE: Can you list some of the things that you have? I know that your—your—what you offer is a laundry list of different kinds of meats and things but some of the—the specialty things and some of the everyday things?

00:17:31

CC: Well the everyday things—one is the main one is any—any cut of chicken and ground chuck. Ground chuck is a big, big seller. And now in here with the Spanish population coming in, the chorizo [*sausage*], the beefsteak, the pastor [*marinated pork*] and the lenguas [*tongue*] and the menudo [*tripe*] is everyday stuff. The ham, the bacon, pork chops, ribs, pork ribs, beef ribs, all the stuff like that, which is ordinary stuff now, which it always was. I can't get smoked beef tongues hardly anymore, but I've got smoked pork chops so that's—that's the change. A lot of stuff has changed, yes, it has. Wow, to go back and think about it and now to do what I'm doing the same—it's less work because I'm getting the rib-eye already cut out, and I don't have to spend five or ten minutes peeling it out and trimming everything down. It comes already trimmed. All those pieces are already trimmed out. The fat is not so much fat. I used to throw away 500-pounds of fat every other day—just too much fat. Now they keep the fat, and I get the lean. I get just enough fat to make it work.

00:18:37

AE: What do you do with the fat when you throw it out?

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CC: Well we recycle it. Now sometimes I give it to the customers for their dogs—some of it, not too much fat, but I don't know what they do with it at the plants—where they process. I'm sure they've got a reason to do something with it. Don't want to feed it back to the cows, though. **[*Laughs*]**

00:18:57

AE: So tell me about diversifying your product here and—and embracing the community's and customers' demands for new and different products like the chorizo and—and the Latino community here.

00:19:10

CC: You follow what it takes, and you change with the world. The world is changing everyday; this town changed a lot. Carrboro is a wonderful place to live, and so many people want to live in Carrboro, and we don't have enough housing for them, especially houses. They're begging for them. They—they see me on the map, they look on the Internet and they write me letters, "Do you have a piece of land I can buy to build a house on?" And maybe it's the store, and they don't realize it's on Main Street in Carrboro, and I can't sell it to build a house on. So that's the demand: they're wanting—from California and Oregon and Michigan—they're wanting to move here to live in Carrboro. Maybe they went to school here and now they want to come back to Carrboro. So Carrboro is a highly sought after place, and the people changing [it] is not only Hispanics. We've got people from England here; we've got people from Ecuador and everywhere. They're coming from France, Germany, and India, and they want to—the things they're used to having, so I work trying to say, "Well bring me a picture of it, and I can look at the meat and tell where it—mostly where it come from, especially if it's beef. And I say, "Oh yeah, that's special trim. That's no problem; I've got it right here." They say, "Oh, it does look like it now." **[*Laughs*]**

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AE: So you've come across things that people from different cultures are asking for when it's maybe named something else here?

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CC: Yeah. The same product may have ten names, and it's maybe cut a little different—cut a different angle. They've got one now they call a tri-tip. It's just the cap off the top of the sirloin. That's a big California thing, and now they come in here, and we end up buying the tri-tips by the case because the people—the California people moving here are asking for the tri-tip and they're teaching the other people how to cook it. It's similar to a flank steak, as far as you cut it and slice it thin and marinate it, and so it's a good piece of meat.

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AE: So has that been an interesting kind of learning experience for you to see—for you to have people—outsiders come in and kind of convey these new names and—and uses for these things that you've always worked with?

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CC: Oh, yes. And also it's—it's satisfying me to get what they want and to be able to tell them, "Oh yes, I can get that. I know what it is." And they say, "You really do?" They say, "Nobody else in town—I've been everywhere; they know—don't know what I'm talking about." I said, "That's the reason you need to come here." **[*Laughs*]** And I can probably tell them that—that, "I can get this for you. Now if you just give me a picture of it. I know the cow well enough after all the years that—I can tell you where it come from. I can tell you by the grain of the meat and what part of the cow it was in—most every time or the shape of it or the texture or the—just a view of how the muscle grows and tell them what they want.

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AE: Do you have a particular part of a cow that you like working with or a cut of meat that you like in particular?

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CC: No, not any one—not any better than the other. My favorite steak is sirloin because it's leaner, it don't cost as much, and it has a good flavor so—.

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AE: So with all the employees that you have here, do you—do you still cut quite a lot of meat [yourself], or what's your schedule like these days?

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CC: Not as much as I used to. I do more in the management part, running back and forth to the warehouse like I just done while ago. But no, they do—they do really great and—and these Spanish speaking guys, the—the American customers come in and now they're coming in and calling them by name, "Hey Juan, hey Gerardo, get me three rib-eyes, three inches—an inch thick." Or, "Get me two one-pounds of ground chuck and a chicken cut up like Cliff cuts it and a sirloin steak an inch-and-a-half thick." And they'll get it altogether and they're gone and they're happy, and they keep coming back, and I like that.

00:22:34

AE: So your employees have learned to do things the way you did them for your old long-term customers?

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CC: Oh, yeah. I trained them my way. I'd rather have them that don't know anything and train them my way than have them—they've been cutting meat before and they think they know it that way, but it don't work as well here—it works good here in this store. Every place, I could move down the street a mile and it would be different so—.

00:22:55

AE: What is—what is one of the key things that you try to teach them about meat cutting?

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CC: Please the customer and make sure everything is fresh and try not to make mistakes. Don't cheat the customer, but don't cheat us either. You've got to stay right on the line perfect, and you can do that with the machinery we've got. We can do that.

00:23:13

AE: Have they, in turn, brought other knowledge or techniques in meat cutting or—or different products that have taught you a thing or two or—?

00:23:23

CC: Yes, they have. A whole lot. We—we have the customers—a lot of times the customers come in and say, "Well, when I was in Mexico—" or "When I was in El Salvador, we got the chicken breast sliced thin." I said, "Okay, no problem." They say, "What do you mean, no problem?" I said, "Let's take the knife, and then I'll slice it thin. Is that thin enough?" They said, "Yeah, that's exactly right." And the next thing you know, I've got ten people waiting in line to get the same item. And the guy that's slicing the breast—not with a machine but with a hand knife—just slices it. And the customers like to see you do that. They don't want you to slice it

ahead of time; they want you to do it right then. And they come in to get the beefsteak, they want to watch you slice it, and they don't care if they've got to wait a minute or two. They'd rather see it sliced than take it out of the counter already sliced, and they come here so they can see that it's sliced and watch what we're doing. And I've—why I've got the market open—I've got the market open so the customers can see what's happening. I even bought scales so they would read on the customer's side and my side, so that they'll see what we're doing on the scales. So in other words, I don't try to hide anything from my customers. It won't pay off. They won't be happy with that.

00:24:31

AE: So what kind of different ratios of product do you—would you say you move in a day or a week, like your biggest sellers and kind of quantities?

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CC: Ratio from what—from before and now or—?

00:24:43

AE: No, I mean just during a typical day, you know, how much fish you maybe sell in relationship to the meat or—or chorizo in relation to rabbit or—?

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CC: The biggest ratio is everyday I sell more chicken. I sell more chicken than everything else together. All of it weighed together, I'll sell more—more weight in chicken. Poultry is a big thing here. But I sell a lot of lamb now; I used to not sell as much of. I sell goat; I used to not sell

any goat. We sell more pork than we used to sell. Pork had dropped off right much in the early '90s, but now it's picked back up and we're selling a lot of pork so—.

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AE: Do people come to you for whole hogs to do pig pickings and whatnot? Are you a resource for that?

00:25:28

CC: Oh yes, they call me. I said, "Let me know on Monday, and I'll get it for you." I have to order it on Monday for the whole week, so yes, we sell a lot of pigs for barbecue—lots of pigs. And people call for lots of other things, like the case of chickens. One order tomorrow is for 1,200 pounds of pork, half hams and half shoulders. It's a church, and we do a lot of stuff like that—lot of big orders. Like the restaurants—and it's called Hotel Restaurants and Institutions—HRI—with the FDA and I worked with the FDA to get that. I have to pass through them to keep operating and make them check me and make sure I'm doing the right thing. And we have to keep a record of a lot of that stuff because anything that's processed, I have to keep a record of it for the FDA for—that's wholesale, not for retail.

00:26:14

AE: Hmm. Have you always done the wholesale and retail?

00:26:18

CC: No, I started the wholesale in '76 and started the meat market in '73. But I saw the opportunity because the people in the restaurant were coming and buying ground beef from me, and they could buy it from the vendors but said they liked my ground beef better, and I was

cheaper. And I said okay, so then I started selling it and I sold it for years, but found out I wasn't supposed—I was supposed to get licensed through the FDA. And so the little guy come and checked me and I said, "Well how do I get a license through the FDA?" He says, "I'll do it for you." So he give me this form, and I filled it out and mailed it in; and they sent it back to me, and I was licensed. I had to pay a fee and then I—then that fee was—what it done, it got me on their records and now they know who is doing what, and they need to know things like that. So now they randomly come and check me and see if I'm doing all right. And they walk right in your coolers and walk right in everything they've got and check and ask you questions about this and questions about that. And I say—well, you know, sometimes my best answer is, "Here, take my invoices and look at them." "Where did the meat come from?" I say, "Here, check." They say, "No, we're not checking. You tell me." I say, "Okay, I bought it from Swift over in Wilson [North Carolina]. I bought it—just inspect the stuff." I sell nothing that's not inspected. I don't have any of my stores not inspected because it may be contaminated—and contaminate what I've already got here and then jeopardize me and my customers. I said, "I don't want to do that—." So if they got something like a country ham and it's cured at home, it may be perfect but I can't slice it; I can't touch it. I don't want it in the store. I let them leave it outside. I can't cut up deer—nothing that you kill; if you kill the cow at your house, I can't touch it. It's got to be killed in a laboratory that's licensed and inspected by the state, at least—the FDA. The Department of Agriculture has to okay it and put a stamp on it, and if it's got the stamp on it and I can see it, then I'll feel free to work with it, as long as it hadn't been adulterated. And what that means is—is if it's kept cold and protected and keep it below 43-degrees—because that is—because the flies can move over 43, 44, 45—they can move around, so you don't want that. So there's a lot to learn about the meat business and—and it—you learn something new every day—almost

everyday. If it's nothing—a cut, it's something about temperature, it's something about a disease, it's something to look out for—it's something to be aware of, and now it's more complicated than ever.

00:28:40

AE: Well and how about the—the demand for organic meats and that—that trend and what that's meant to your business?

00:28:49

CC: It's more in demand now than ever because people, you know—I guess the '50s and '60s and '70s they were not smart enough to realize that they were hurting themselves by giving them stuff they didn't need. And I grew up—we raised our own stuff—'til—I was old—we raised corn and gave it to the pigs and cows. We raised everything and gave it to them and it was all organic. But then they—they changed things around and wanted to go to this souped up stuff like steroids that—what do we need that for? He'll be—he'll be—it will taste better; he [the animal] might not be so big. If he gets too big, you can't handle him. **[*Laughs*]** On the farm that's what we talked about, "Hey, he's too big." He'll kill you, if he walked over top of you. I'm talking about the cows and pigs. So we'd raise them to what they needed to be, and we'd slaughter them and try not to make pets out of them first. But anyway, it was—I never dreamed that when I was a little kid that things like that would—that we feed animals that would hurt them because you know what the animals eat? We eat the animals—it's like we eat it almost the same. It's one—one step down from it, so we don't need that to break down our systems and make us not as healthy. So the organic is real popular right now. All natural is more popular because it's not so expensive, compared to a certified organic and certified organic versus natural—you can have

them both side-by-side and almost it would be the same thing. But if you've got a fencepost that's creosote, it's not organic; and if it's pressure treated, it's not organic because some of the pressure treated—pressure treated stuff maybe have arsenic in it, especially if it's ten years back—five years back. And they don't want the cow to get up against that, and then she won't be organic anymore. **[*Laughs*]** She gets around it. So things like that—the type of wire they're putting on the fences, the type of grass inside the pasture; maybe if you got a creek running down through it that's coming from a—a river or something that's coming up the stream that they used any organic stuff in, and then they'll drink the water and then they wouldn't be organic again. See, the water needs to be tested, too, because it's just like the food, the water is. If it's something in the water, it's going straight into the animal, so you need to test the water too to make sure this is all natural, you know, or organic. In other words, to be certified organic, the water—all the food including the water, everything in the surroundings had to be certified by the government before you can put that stamp on there that says *certified organic*.

00:31:03

AE: And do you have many products here that you move that are that far certified?

00:31:07

CC: I've got a lot of restaurants buying the certified organic poultry—quite a few. And they want that stamp on there because they're paying for it; they're paying more money for the product. They're paying a dollar more a pound for chicken; it's double in price almost so now I'd want it, too, if I was them. I wouldn't want to—you don't throw a curve to them; they're too smart. They'll catch it, and later on you'll be in trouble. Your reputation will be **[*gestures*]** down instead of up. It will be down. It'll cut you a flip overnight, so you can't do that.

00:31:35

AE: How many restaurants would you say that you service in the area?

00:31:39

CC: I don't know. With—with the fraternities and sororities, maybe 100.

00:31:45

AE: You're moving a lot of meat.

00:31:48

CC: Maybe—maybe 80. In the summertime, like now, the fraternities and sororities, they close down; that cuts us down by five-percent—by twenty-percent, a fifth. So it makes a big difference.

00:31:57

AE: Is there ever a time where you're not able to get anything that a customer is asking for?

00:32:03

CC: Yes, there is. Sometimes simple things, too, like pork liver—you have to get it in big large quantities. What do you want that for? That changes the subject, too. A lot of people coming to me now they want all natural stuff and organic stuff even for their dogs. They want the raw diet. [***Asking about the recording equipment***] Is it working?

00:32:22

AE: Yeah.

00:32:22

CC: They want a case of chicken necks; I get them for them. They want them ground; I grind them for them. And—and we bag it up for their dogs and their dogs are beautiful because a dog—if you don't cook the meat and give it to them raw, their system will dissolve all the bones. You know chicken bones are bad for them? Not if they're not cooked. Their system will dissolve all that stuff. It's an acid in their body that will make that chicken bone turn to liquid in a short amount of time; it won't hurt their stomachs. It will help them. Yes, all the proteins are right there; the enzymes they need is in that meat. But if you cook it, you kill that—you kill the enzymes and you ruin the bones, where the bones will stick in their system, so don't give them bones that you've already cooked. Don't eat your chicken and throw the dog the bone, no. Throw it in the trashcan where he can't get it.

00:33:08

AE: So, talking about your relationship with your customers, I know you're so well known for that. I wonder if there's any kind of psychological thing that you've watched happen with—because you were talking how the—how the customer really must see the person physically cutting the meat. You can't pre-cut it. And so I wonder if you've ever thought about kind of what that relationship is kind of on a more, you know, psychological level and—and what kind of relationship people have with you and because of the meat that they get from you?

00:33:40

CC: First of all, it's so many shady things can be done in processing meat. And when it's all packaged up, they don't know what's been done there. When they see the whole piece of meat

and see us slice it and they see us weigh it and wrap it up, they see everything that is going on. When they go home, they know what they've seen in the store and they've got the same product. They don't know what's happened to that, and they know there's been nothing then—not last week but the week before last—and they don't know what was put on that meat after it was processed or even before, so that's a big thing now with the people—the customers. They want to see what's going on.

00:34:12

AE: So how do you think you stand out and are different from, you know, a meat cutter at Whole Foods [Market] or in a specialty grocery store here today?

00:34:20

CC: Well, in a Whole Foods most of them, they're working for the other man. I'm working for myself, so it's hard to explain that part. I mean easy but hard. I had to kind of think of myself and the guys that's worked for me—well they're doing it to please the customers, both—both parties. I think the guys here are proud to be doing what they're doing and they're proud to—when you see that customer and you've seen them last week—maybe it's somebody you grew up with and I have a lot of those you want to make sure you'll take care of them and give them something they want, compared with my prices are cheaper. **[*Laughs*]** And I'm proud to tell you that but you know, I don't tell everybody. Whole Foods, they charge more; they got to pay them—well they pay employees. They got a bigger building; they've got a fancy building.

00:35:08

AE: Let's talk about that because what would you say about the how the atmosphere where people come and visit and purchase—how that affects their relationship with you and your business?

00:35:16

CC: I think it has a big—makes a big difference. They had a brand new building—the big building and more parking—all that stuff. I'd be so busy, I couldn't handle it all, but they know the building is clean and they come tell that. That's a big—big factor; they can tell the market is clean, and that's a big factor. They can see the walls and see they're clean; they can see other things and tell they're clean. They can tell if you wash your hands, too, or if you're wearing gloves part-time. We don't but we steadily are washing our hands, so if we handle poultry, we don't turn around and handle beef, unless you know—this is not so bad in here because it's going to be cooked. It's not like a restaurant; in a restaurant you completely do one person and you do the poultry and you stop and wash your hands and go do the other stuff. And when you're prepping and you make sure you clean them—and a lot of times you go from one type of produce to another, you wash your hands because of where it come from—after you wash the produce. Wash it before you cut it, of course—even after you buy it and it's supposed to be clean, you still wash it. And a lot of my customers take the chicken and they'll take it home and go over it completely; they call it cleaning it. They'll trim off anything you don't see that's got pinfeathers or whatever—they'll take all that off before they cook it, and you'd be surprised some of the people that do that—the people you wouldn't think. So they just throw it on the grill and cook it, I say no. They're real picky. But that's the reason they come here. They say, "Cliff, your chicken is cleaner." I say, "What do you mean, cleaner?" I don't have as much problem. I can clean your chicken quicker and they want me to cut it up for them. And, of course, when I

cut it up for them, and I see what is a chunk of fat with four or five feathers in it, I whack that part off and throw it in the bone barrel; I don't give it to them. I don't want them to see it because I don't want to see it. **[*Laughs*]**

00:36:47

AE: Throw it in the what-barrel did you just say?

00:36:48

CC: The bone barrel; we call it the bone barrel. It's where the—where the trimmings go that you put in the dumpster.

00:36:57

AE: Is it literally a barrel or was it once?

00:36:58

CC: No, well it was a container—plastic container. They call it a bone barrel because in the big processing house, there's a big container—probably a barrel, now plastic; it used to be metal years ago, and now they don't use the metal because metal gets a little rusty and a little rough inside and there's a lot of bacteria that collects there. It's harder to clean it and then sanitize it; the—the plastic is smoother and easier to clean.

00:37:21

AE: Is there a reason that you don't wear plastic gloves when you're butchering?

00:37:24

CC: No, no reason why, unless we run out of gloves. Me, I tear them up because my hands are so large. But they don't last very long. But most of the time, the gloves will irritate my hands if I wear them all day. I'd rather just wash them ten times—twenty times a day. And then I feel good when I wash them. And if it's real hot, I wash them in cold water; if it's real cold, I wash them in warm water—most of the time warm water because the meat is cold, and it makes my hands feel better with the arthritis.

00:37:50

AE: Besides the working with sharp implements, of course, are there any hazards to the job of—of being a meat cutter, like is arthritis a problem in general or to you specifically?

00:38:00

CC: I think I would have had it anyway. I think I would have the problem—if you're working outside and it's cold, you'll get it the same way you would the meat. I think just time that makes that happen to you. It's hereditary more than anything else. Nah, I can't say that it's a hazard—no.

00:38:23

[*Interruption*]

00:38:25

AE: I'll pause this. [***Recording paused for approximately thirty seconds***] Okay.

00:38:30

CC: In the business, keeping up with employment is a big job. It's a big job. And whenever I have people working for me, I get attached to them; and when they leave, I'm sad. I had one that left last week; she only worked two-and-a-half months. She was a doll; she was so good. When product come in to be put on the shelf, she's running the register, she's running around and finding the price and putting the price on it and putting some on the shelf and stop and wait on the customers and go back to it—back and forth and in a little while she'd have it all put up—stuff like this [***points to the shelves filled with dry goods***]. She'd put it on the shelf and—and run the cash register too. And I'll say, "Nancy, don't you need me to help you?" "No, I got it." Just—just out of—high school girl, college. I didn't tell her to do that stuff; she just done it. And somebody else found out how good she was and hired her away from me. She's working as a—as a dental assistant. So she got a good job that's going to have a future to it more than this would have. But she's already called us and told us she missed us. She said she just started Tuesday and called us Wednesday and she said, "I really miss y'all." She said, "His place is boring."

00:39:25

AE: Well and it seems like you really establish a family atmosphere and—and who you welcome in and then who's—who's already here and the network of what is Cliff's Meat Market.

00:39:35

CC: Well being here, I have the opportunity to tell all the kids, "You need to go to college." I tell all the kids in high school, "Don't be playing around with drugs, and don't do the things that's going to get you in trouble." I said, "Think before you act, and please go to college for me,

for you, and for your mom and dad and for all the community. You go to get your—all the education you can. If you get a college education, you can still dig ditches like you would if you didn't have it. But your train of thought would be different. You'll be more creative in doing this—how to dig this ditch a certain size and how to do it the easiest way; by going to college you learn these things." And Jerri [Roberson] went to college and worked here.

00:40:14

AE: Now is Jerri your niece?

00:40:14

CC: Jerri is my niece, and she worked here all the way through high school and college and then stayed here, had the opportunity one time to go work for the Law School and she decided she'd rather stay here and work. And so I give her a raise—what they were paying her there so—to keep here because then—and since then, she's kind of taken over the—the manager. She does a lot of the work here: the ordering, the bookkeeping, the computer. If something happens in the computer, I don't mess with it; she fixes it. If something happens to the adding machine, she fixes it; she has all the tape for the adding machines and all the ink—all the—everything. She orders all this stuff and the drinks—everything, everything. I tell her, "I need bags, Jerri." "What kind of bags you need?" "I need plastic bags, 10-pound size." So she orders them. So she comes in in the morning, and she helps me coordinate the employment. She's got Katie—Katie's mother and her were best friends in high school and so, as a matter of fact, Katie is named after her—the little girl here. I didn't know that until today. And I said something about, "She is so attractive and so pretty—such a pretty little woman that I can't hardly believe that she's—her grandpa—I can't believe it's Lee Burgess's granddaughter. I can't believe her daddy comes in

here." But—. **[*Audio blank for twenty-five seconds, while microphone is covered, and Cliff makes a comment off the record*]** I tell all the kids go to school, do something, get a trade, do something right. Don't do everything wrong. If you do it wrong, when you get your mind idle—especially boys, they'll get in trouble. And if I see a strong point in one, I push him that way. I got one right now that's seven years old, and I stand back thirty or forty feet and throw him the football and nine times out of ten, he'll catch it and hold it. And he's very, very fast on his feet. So his daddy don't have a lot of money, but he's going to scholarship in school; I feel very strongly he'll—with a football scholarship or soccer or something. He's real heavy for seven years old; he's real strong. He can pickup fifty, sixty pounds already. So he's a little Hispanic guy, but he was born here; he's American. But I want to see people come here and do that. And the Spanish speaking people that's coming here, the immigrants I'm calling them, I don't care if they're from England or if they're El Salvador, if they're Venezuela, if they're Germany and they come here and they're going to stay, there's two different—there's two things: assets and liabilities. You'll be an asset; if you're a liability go home. That's the way I feel. And I tell them to their face, "You go home. You come here and get in a bunch of trouble get—you go back home. You come here—." I said, "If I go to—." Is that Mike, the police officer? [***Asking about someone who just passed by the window***.]

00:43:02

AE: No, it was a blonde gentleman.

00:43:04

CC: Okay, okay. I said, "If you're going—." If I go to another country, a lot of countries, like Australia, I believe it used to be a policy you had to pay so much money—so many thousands of

dollars to become a citizen of Australia and move there. I'm talking like maybe $200,000. And I said, "We don't have that policy in America." But they're adopting that policy now with the new reform, Immigration Reform, and there's something like $5,000 for each person, and they think that's high. No, that's cheap-cheap-cheap. That's very cheap. They're going to talk about raising it to $10,000 per person, and they give them ten years to pay it because it ain't but $1,000—less than $100 a month to become an American citizen. Hey that's a good deal. And stay out of trouble. So what do you think about that? You can't say; I can. **[*Laughs*]** I can. If anybody don't like it, that's too bad. But if they're going to be here, we need to do something. We've got no—no reform right now. All we got is something we're working on. And if we don't get some reform, it's going to get worse. It's not getting any better just sitting here, so—.

But anyway, I tell all the kids—the black, white, purple, pink, whatever—go to school. Go to school because school is the key to almost a lot of things. I really truly believe it's the key to almost everything we do—is education and from the religion to health of what they eat and what—they know what to eat. That's why in Chapel Hill and Carrboro, people are smart. They're not getting a lot of junk; they eat good stuff. Even the Spanish-speaking people, they're learning quick. They're going to school here. They're going to high school, and they're learning the computer, and they pull it up on the computer and they say, "Hey, this is—too much bacon is not good for you, too much oil—they call it *grasa* [grease]. **[*Laughs*]** Muchos grasa is too much so—.

00:44:44

AE: Well let me ask you about the physical space and how it's changed over the years. And that corner over there that's got those great bins next to that cooler door. What was this facility when you first rented it? Was it a market before?

00:45:00

CC: It was a little Hardee's Grocery, and he had a little one-counter, one-meat case. And I took the meat case out because it was all to pieces, and I bought another one and I put that—[***to an employee who just walked in***] Katie, you're back already? I put one there in the same place. And my meat market was there where the blue door is [in the back] and we lined up and—. You'd walk up to the counter here—you'd walk up right here to the counter.

00:45:33

AE: Where the candy bars are?

00:45:34

CC: Yeah, that hole was in the wall; this [half of the market, where there are more dry goods] was not. Around the—the customers walked here, and you can tell where this was. The customers walked here and went around the counter and back there where the hole in the floor—that was a fish market. You go back there and dress fish on Thursday and the customers—a lot of fish I sold. But on Friday and Saturday and Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday we cut up all the poultry and everything there. And then we cut—the meat market was here and we cut all—the meat blocks were right there. We cut everything else up here. Well I got the idea the meat counter—this floor was—when it was poured, it was poured wrong and it was flat and sloped that way to the wall, and water would go there and sit. And when I first come here, we used sawdust on the floor, which was okay; it soaked up everything. Sweep the sawdust and get rid of it everyday. But then things changed, and they didn't want me to use sawdust anymore, so I run into a problem. So I poured the floor with concrete and made it slope to this drain. Then after

years, the water would go underneath my meat cases, and it would make it smell all the time, and it was hard to get the smell of meat out of here and fish. So after deliberating a lot, I said—I went and bought—picked this counter out in Virginia and it took me almost a year to get it in here, but I figured out what to come and do. I measured everything. So I cut a hole here and a hole over there. And I had already done the other part I told you about over there, where I made the store bigger—and that whole section, there used to be a whole other—used to be a skateboard shop was over there. So I cut holes in the way and holes in the wall here and made the store bigger and put all the refrigeration over there and fixed it. We'd go back into it this way and then put this counter here, so I'd have more space because all I had was like this much—the whole store. And now I've got all this added to it more and that one, plus—so and I got more space it made a big difference. I can accommodate my customers, and I'll use this space. But now the big coolers we use for the meats, I'm going to convert it to the cooler for produce and fix it with a customer. I'm going to open a ramp, and the customer will walk right in and buy their produce in there. And I keep it like 45—50 degrees and they can go in there in the summertime and be cool. They can buy their produce and come on out and check out.

00:47:35

AE: Sounds good. So when you started here in this corner with the meat market, did you have a dry goods element to this store at all yet?

00:47:42

CC: You mean like candy and—?

00:47:43

AE: Yeah.

00:47:44

CC: Oh, yes, more of that than meats. It wasn't that much meats, but there was a meat man that come from across the street over here, and the first thing I done was line the counter up with meat, and the customers started coming right in. They found—we just—when I put my name on the building, the first week, they found me right quick. I didn't do it to hurt my neighbor because they'd become my neighbor, where I used to work, but I—the man I was working for was great but he had health—big health problems and I was afraid that if something would happen to him, I wouldn't have a job, so I moved here. He was a diabetic and an alcoholic, but he was a really good person, and he'd give the shirt off his back. But he would get problems that way and be gone for six, eight weeks, and I wouldn't even see him. So I was running his store for him. I felt like I was running it for myself and that's what I did—did that. So it worked out all right, and we were still friends right on. So anyway that's how I got started in 1973. I come here.

00:48:37

AE: And what year did you expand and—and—?

00:48:40

CC: I did this last year [in 2006].

00:48:40

AE: Last year?

00:48:41

CC: I did this part last year, but I've expanded every year I've been here. My business has grown. And I went into the wholesale in '76 and by '78 and '79 I was getting my foot in the door running an open-bed pickup truck every day. And then I got in the refrigerated trucks, and then I had five refrigerated trucks before I knew and I had two parked out back that I used but within—the property was sold that I thought belonged to this business, but it belonged to the church. The church was letting me use it, of course. And then when the town bought it, they told me I needed to move, so I went up the street and bought me another place. I was able to do that and opened up a warehouse just maybe one-half a mile from here, maybe half-a-mile or three-quarters a mile up the road I've got a warehouse. The tractor-trailers come there and unload with the loading dock, and I load out of that place—same place. I load my stuff out of there to carry to the restaurants. And we go—we cover the Research Triangle Park. We go to Raleigh-Durham, Kerry, Chapel Hill and Hillsboro and Carrboro, of course. So it keeps me busy.

00:49:45

AE: So you were a one-man operation when you started then, is that right?

00:49:49

CC: Yes.

00:49:50

AE: And how many employees do you have now?

00:49:53

CC: Fourteen, I think. Something like that. Fourteen, counting the one that collects for me every other Tuesday, and one that sweeps up the yard and things like that. So it's, I think, fourteen.

00:50:06

AE: And Bill [Smith] was telling me last night that a lot of these Latino guys that you have working for you are from the same place in Mexico?

00:50:13

CC: They're from Celaya, Guanajuato [Mexico], a whole family of them. One—I started with one and I told him—he said, "I've got to go back to Mexico." And I said, "Well, what am I going to do when you're gone? You've already got started waiting on the Spanish speaking people, and we're going to need someone else to do that, so I'm holding you responsible to get me someone else." And I was laughing with him, and he did. He got me someone else. And then he worked a little while and then David come back and worked in his place, and they switched back and forth about a year that way and then—because they would go back home, work, and come back home and then they had the visas and everything, and they could go back and forth. They brought—when Carlos came and he started working with me, he was just out of high school, but he loved it. He never went back yet. He loves it here, and he talks to his mom all the time and sends her pictures. They might get his mother here, he said—just to visit. But anyway, it kept growing from that and then we got busier—more customers, more customers. They was lined up out the door on the weekends. And he said, "You need one more helper." And that's the one Carlos—Louis—he's looking for a job; he's my uncle. I said, "Was he—Carlos, is he a good man?" He says, "He's a good man. He's a good worker, too. You'll really like him." I said, "Okay, I'm going to see if you're telling me the truth." He's great; he's a good worker. This is six—seven years ago; he's still here, and he runs a truck. He runs all the Chapel Hill route, except Tuesday is his day off. And Saturday, Ruben runs it. But then a little later on we hired—one that was

working here, I hired his brother. One time I had three brothers working here from the same family. Well these other guys were their cousins and uncles and stuff like that. So then one of them's first cousins was a girl—a woman—whose husband, I hired him, and he's still here. So I've got seven. And then the—I hired one girl, and she worked about a week, and one of them says, "Yeah," says, "we—we grew up together." I said, "What?" He said, "Yeah, her daddy is our friend." And I'll tell her—and it was Jacqueline, so I said, "I'm not calling you Jacqueline. I'll call you Jackie." I said, "Jackie, where are you from?" She said, "Guanajuato. Celaya, Guanajuato." I said, "Oh, you're kidding me? You know all these guys?" She said, "Yeah." I said, "I was trying to introduce you. Why didn't you tell me? I was telling you what all of them's names are, and you knew better than me." **[*Laughs*]** Because she was just a little girl, and she's been here since she was a little girl. And I knew her daddy.

Well then I had one that I hired—the first girl I hired up for the front to run the register was this—this was the walkway here. And she walked in, and I was standing here and had—had a wall here and she walked by me and she said, "Hey, Cliff." I said hey, how are you doing?" And I looked at her. She looked like she was eighteen or twenty years old; she was only fifteen. And she went around and she ordered in Spanish, and I thought wow, we need a helper. That would be good to have a bilingual person. So I said, "Are you from Mexico?" She said, "Yeah." I said, "Would you like to come work for me part-time?" She said, "You'll have to ask my mom." And I said, "Okay." And I didn't say nothing. She went and checked out and she come walking back by to go back to through the back—most of my customers went through the back—didn't use a front door hardly any. And she says, "You know my mom, Patricia." And I looked at her and I said, "Patricia Rodriquez?" She said, "Yeah." I said, "Don't ask her nothing, just come on to work." I said, "Where is your mom?" She said, "Out there in the car." I said,

"She didn't come in here to see me?" Because I always flirt with her and pick with her. She's an attractive woman. So I go outside and I said, "Hey, I want Cindy to work for me part-time." She said, "Okay." So she's still here, and it's been going on six years now—over five years. I think it's over five years—maybe close to five, complete. She's in college. Both of my girls are in college that are working here except for the one I just hired—the American girl. She's not in college. She's—I won't tell you that. She's doing all right. But anyway, that was—that was Cindy and she's still with me five years, and she helps me get these other two girls I've had that become dental assistants—both of them—and we're fixing to get another one. And I told her, "Let's try Katie." So I like Katie. I think she'll be all right.

00:54:08

AE: Tell me about this sign I'm looking at [on top of the meat counter] for the—the taco stand that's here on the weekends in your parking lot.

00:54:15

CC: Tolo [nickname for Gerardo Martinez] is a really diligent worker. He's one of my best guys, but he wants to do more, and I know he does. I was in his shoes all my life. So he saw the opportunity to make more money by having a taco stand. See, we had talked about opening him a meat market, and I would help him run it in one of the other towns like Hillsboro or somewhere up there—Mebane. So he decided on the taco stand, and he bought the taco stand and—before he even told me and paid some big amount of money. I said, "Golly jeez, that thing is expensive." So I said, "Well Tolo, before we can put it on the property and sell tacos, we need to do the right thing." He said, "What's that?" He said, "Well I want you to help me." I said, "We need to go through the Health Department and see what we've got to do." Went to the Health Department

and they told us all the things we had to do, and we followed what they done, and it took three months to get everything going. And we got the okay—we got the okay—I met with the town twice to make sure it was all right; we met with the town, the Health Department, the county and set everything up with the tax—with the tax collecting—sales taxes to keep us out of trouble with the—with the government. And he's set up right out here. And I told him, "You got my permission to stay here every Saturday and every Sunday night." And I think he's doing real good with it. He's got a little change in his pocket. And he's got three babies to feed. And that's—the one—the babies, I'm telling you, I'm going to make sure they go to college or try—at least put their best foot forward. And the same with all the other kids, all the guys that work for me. "Kids," I said, "you need to go to college." And I tell the guys, "You've got to work because they've got to go to college. And then they can help you. If they don't go to college, you got to keep on helping them." But that might not be true, but that's the way I think.

00:55:51

AE: So does Tolo—how would you spell his name do you know?

00:55:54

CC: His name is Geraldo—Gerardo but his nickname is Tolo, since he's a baby—a little boy. And he grew up with one of the other guys here, his name is Lancho, but his real name is Juan Carlos. So we call them Tolo and Lancho. And the other guy's name is Maurizio, and we call him Nicho. And then they all have nicknames like big families. I'm from a big family, and we didn't have many nicknames, but I knew a lot of big families and I grew up in the South and half the family had nicknames—T-Boy and Donny Wayne and all kinds of names—funny names.

00:56:26

AE: So is Tolo using your meat, then, in the taco truck?

00:56:29

CC: He uses my products and we—he has to get it from me and take it to a restaurant—we can cut it up here, but it has to go to a restaurant to be cooked. It has to be cooked in the restaurant and ready to come to the taco stand. The produce has to be prepped in the restaurant under the supervision—where the Health Department grades, is what I'm saying, and that way he can do it legally, and if you have a problem, you've got somewhere to fall back on. So this was done here; it wasn't done over here. It was done legally; it was done upright in front, and most time you'll have less confusion that way.

00:57:02

AE: So how long has the truck been out there?

00:57:04

CC: Hmm, I think it started last fall before Thanksgiving because it was doing pretty good and then it got cold and didn't do as good and now it's getting warm, it's doing a lot better. And he goes to parties with it, too. He takes it to a party where they're having a party—a baby shower or something like that. They'll invite him to come there, and he'll sell tacos. Or maybe they'll pay for the whole thing and say, "You bring the taco stand and feed all the people, and I'll give you so many dollars," so he can make a little money that way. And he's learning what to charge—to be able to come out and pay for the fuel to drive there and pay for the help to help him. He has our helpers, too, and pays them, so you've got to make enough money to do that. Just like me in here. When I hire someone, I know that I've got to take out their Social Security, and then my

store has to match the Social Security. So if they're working here, they're paying 15.3-percent to the government—just self employment tax and Social Security together, which all goes—supposed to be the same pot, Social Security, so it's not much room to complain. For someone to complain about someone being here and not paying taxes—they're paying taxes. They better be. If someone is doing—if they're not paying taxes, the person who is hiring them is in violation. And most of times, that's Americans, so they're the ones in violation. So you learn a lot of these things about the law and—and the rules and regulations as you live. When you make a mistake, the IRS, the government inspectors, they'll correct those things. **[*Laughs*]**

00:58:36

AE: Yeah, they will. So you were saying earlier that your job anymore is pretty much being a manager of the employees in the market and—.

00:58:45

CC: Being a manager and—and a director. I'll tell the guys, "You need to go to this stop first [for a delivery] because they're needing the product, and it's on your way. Don't go to this restaurant two miles down the road and come back to this one. Hit this one and go that one and go your route that way—that's the direction," to my guys that's delivering the product, "and get it unloaded as quick as possible. Make sure the refrigerator is running, make sure the truck is running good." And I'm a mechanic, too, so that's hard trying to do that and this too and then get them back here, or tell them we got a new account and where to go to—to get it. Things like that. And working with Jerri and working with the computer and working with the dollars, the amount of money—what we pay and what we sell for—is a real task. And it's always—every few

minutes something jumps up in front of you [that] you wasn't expecting, so you just got to—you can't be prepared for it but you got to absorb it, or it will kill you.

00:59:34

AE: So is there ever a day, though, with you know, thirty-plus years of being a meat cutter, that you just want to get back behind that counter and—and handle some meat?

00:59:42

CC: I do it everyday. I don't have to get back there and do it; I just do it. And in the mornings when I come to work, sometimes I start putting the equipment together and now I've got—Nicho comes in and puts it together to start early. I don't come in at six o'clock in then morning and start cutting meat now. I'll come in and start quarter-of-eight in the books. I get all the numbers off the phone that's—people who have called in at night and say, "I want so-and-so tomorrow." Bill Smith calls and says, "Cliff, I want fifteen pounds of ground chuck, a country ham, a tenderized ham, and ten pounds of lard—pure lard," and whatever else he wants, and I put it all together on a—on a sheet under Crook's Corner [Restaurant]. And then we fill that out, and I know that goes on the Chapel Hill truck, so that sheet—it goes on that right sheet and the other sheet is the Durham truck or the Raleigh truck. I keep—I got them all—coordinate them and I get them all filled out, and I put the number of items that go, like how many cases of chicken breasts, how many cases of flank steaks and whatever, and I put that on the list. And we go by that when we load it, and it's called a load list. I make copies. I keep one and give my—my driver one so he'll know what to load and leave one here for Jerri on the computer to make the invoices. And she has the prices in the computer, so she does the pricing, too.

01:00:55

AE: So how has—how have prices changed over the years? Can you just give me a quick maybe idea of—of when it started and where you are now?

01:01:03

CC: Prices have changed. Like everything else, it's gone up. I saw a picture the other day, and I don't know how long I had been in business—maybe two or three years—and I had a special in the window: *sirloin steak - $1.49.* And now they're—of course, I only get it with bone-in; if you get boneless, it's $4.99 on special. When I started cutting meat, I remember the prices. T-bones were $1.19; club steak and—and—see, porterhouse was $1.19; t-bones and clubs were $1.15; rib-eyes were $1.99 and sirloin was $1.09—one-oh-nine. Cheese was 69-cents; it's $3.49 now. You could buy a whole pig for 32-cents a pound. Now they sell them for $1.39—the same pigs. Well, not the same ones but you know what I mean. **[*Laughs*]** So things change a lot right much. Oysters. Oysters, when I start back this fall, I probably will have to get $10.99—$11.99 per pint. They were $1.15 and $1.29 when I started selling—when I started working behind the meat case.

01:02:17

AE: Have the tools changed much at all?

01:02:19

CC: Yes, I've got a lot of updated tools. Like I have a big mixer grinder and it's the biggest—saves us a lot of time. When we're making sausage, we can do 200 pounds at one time and the machine will sit there and **[*gestures to show mixing of ingredients*]**—and makes—we used to do it by hand. It does a better job than us. And we can walk off and leave it and go to something else while it's mixing. Turn around, in the same container with chorizo [Mexican sausage], put the

funnel on front and stuff it right out. Now one of the guys that's working for me used to mix it by hand. I got this machine. He likes it so well he does it every week and never complains. He don't complain anyway; he's just a hard worker. His name is Antonio and he is—he was the brother-in-law of one of the other employees I had—a brother-in-law just out of high school come to America and I hired him, and he's doing real good. He had a hard time getting the papers to get here. By then it was getting harder, and now it's real hard. To get papers, it takes like eight years; they'll be twenty-five, thirty years old before they get their papers to come here. By then, most of them has got a family started at home, which is Mexico or El Salvador or—or Venezuela or Columbia or whatever. So maybe –a providence of Russia, there's a lot of people who are here; I can't tell you the names of them. Some of them are from Russia—still call it Russia, maybe Georgia—the town of Georgia, the city, so—.

01:03:46

AE: So Carrboro has changed a lot?

01:03:48

CC: Yes, the people have changed a lot. And we've always had good people here, though, and we still have good people here—a lot of good people.

01:03:56

AE: So what do you like best about what you do?

01:03:59

CC: The people—the very best people. Without that, I'd go home. I wouldn't need to do this; I could go home and relax and work on my houses and go on vacation. I don't take a vacation—not in fifteen years.

01:04:12

AE: Where did you go fifteen years ago?

01:04:14

CC: Pennsylvania—Dutch Country—to see all the people that live there, the—the people that have the horses and buggies and stuff. And I went to the chocolate factory and rode around up through Pennsylvania and up by the edge of New York and back down through Virginia and seen the life of other people, without reading about it or what the customer was telling me. It was kind of interesting. The—the life was slower for them, but they were still making it; they were making it pretty good.

01:04:42

AE: Well what do you think the future of Cliff's Meat Market is?

01:04:48

CC: I don't know. If I live, this will stay here. **[*Laughs*]** I'll keep it going; it will be all right. I think it will be fine. It's going to grow. I'll make it grow more.

01:04:57

AE: Do you see a day when you plan to retire, or are you just going to do it until you can't do it anymore?

01:05:02

CC: I don't know the answer to that question. I don't know. I don't know. I have mixed feelings about that. I got—some days I think maybe I should retire, and some days I say ah, what's the need? I've got everything I need here. I've got an office in the back. If I get a headache, I can go back there and lay down for a few minutes. I've got the people here, and I would miss them if I left. And if I were to sell the business to someone, I'd still work for them, so I could see the people. So it would be all right, I think.

01:05:32

AE: Well is there anything that I haven't asked you that you'd like to make sure to add?

01:05:35

CC: I don't know; **[*Laughs*]** I know—I can't think of anything now except I have my own little Coca Colas. You want one? I've got some good Coca Colas, the little ones.

01:05:43

AE: Sure, okay.

01:05:44

CC: They taste better.

01:05:44

AE: We'll celebrate the end of the interview with a Coca Cola. Thank you, Cliff, for your time. I very much appreciate it.

01:05:49

CC: You're welcome.

01:05:50

[End Cliff Collins Interview]