

GENTLE LEE RAINEY
Owner, Delta Fast Food
Cleveland, MS

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Date: June 23, 2005
Location: Delta Fast Food - Cleveland, MS
Interviewer: Amy Evans
Length: 11 minutes
Project: MS Delta Hot Tamale Trail

NOTE: Various sounds occur throughout this interview. Rather than mention them individually and interrupt the flow of the conversation, they are noted here: the interview was conducted in the front area of the store, but a small group of men can be heard talking and playing pool in the adjacent room to the back of the store. When the occurring sounds are an obvious interruption to the interview, they are noted in the transcript.

[Begin Gentle Lee Rainey.mp3]

0:00:00.2

AE: This is Amy Evans, Thursday, June twenty-third, 2005 in Cleveland, Mississippi, at Delta Fast Food. [Short pause] All right. I'm here with Mr. Lee Rainey, owner of Delta Fast Food. Mr. Rainey, would you mind saying your name for the record?

0:00:26.3

GLR: Gentle Lee Rainey, owner of Delta Fast Food.

0:00:30.0

AE: All right. How long have y'all been open here?

0:00:30.6

GLR: We've been open since [nineteen] ninety-five; it's been ten years, I'd say. **[Laughs]**

0:00:36.9

AE: And you've been serving tamales all that time?

0:00:39.7

GLR: Been serving tamale all them years--when we started.

0:00:41.3

AE: And you make them here?

0:00:43.1

GLR: Yeah, we make them here at the store.

0:00:46.8

AE: Where did you learn to make hot tamales?

0:00:46.7

GLR: It's a family thing that come from my parents and we started from there and just made some for the house--stuff you know--people to eat, family folks, but other than that--that's it. I opened my business up and make them and sell them to the public.

0:01:01.5

AE: Is your family all from around the Cleveland area or from other parts of the Delta?

0:01:05.1

GLR: They're from--my mother stayed in Sunflower County in Ruleville, Mississippi, and we from--we from around in the Delta, though, but we was born right out there on Dockery [Farms, just east of town].

0:01:13.3

AE: Oh, okay, really?

0:01:15.0

GLR: Uh-hm, uh-hm.

0:01:15.4

AE: All right; well do you have any idea how your parents came to make hot tamales--where the recipe came from?

0:01:19.8

GLR: I never--never—just--I don't know why they got started. Through them or--my grandfather used to do it, and I guess didn't ask them about the recipe or nothing, you know, or how--why they started, but we used to raise hogs and chickens and everything else like that, so I don't even know how it got started, but we got to find out how they--how they do it.

0:01:41.5

AE: And you mentioned Dockery [Farms], was there tamale-making going on over there when you were coming up?

0:01:44.4

GLR: No, but different people used to make tamales out on Dockery, but I guess like it's the old household thing that I know of. They used to sell them on Saturday night in town, you know, in Ruleville over there on--on side of the street and stuff.

0:01:58.5

AE: Are there still any vendors or makers that you know of in Ruleville

0:02:02.0

GLR: No, not in--not in Ruleville We got a few over here in Cleveland that make tamales that I know of but I don't know anybody in Ruleville still making them. Um-hmm.

0:02:13.0

AE: And so when you were coming up, did you make them with your family on the weekends or were you helping?

0:02:16.8

GLR: Mostly did--yeah, we mostly did through the weekend and sold them Saturday night in town, uh-hmm.

0:02:22.5

AE: Do you remember how much they were selling for back when you were coming up?

0:02:25.5

GLR: No, I don't. That's been a long time ago. **[Laughs]** It's been a long time ago. I sure don't know how much they were. But it--it wasn't that much because everything was cheap back then in them days. So we used the corn shucks that we got out the field. So, you know--and most of them did that. And on the meal and then the meat, it was kind of reasonable. So I don't remember how much--exactly what it cost, uh-hmm.

0:02:47.8

AE: Do you make--and did you then make beef tamales?

0:02:50.8

GLR: Yeah, we make beef tamales. Actually, right now I'm making my tamales out of turkey because it holds the season better, and it lasts longer through the summertime, uh-hmm.

0:03:01.5

AE: Oh, okay. Well is there--besides that, is there anything different in the way that you make them now then your family did?

0:03:07.4

GLR: No; we use basically the same recipe that--that we used then--that we use now the same way. Nothing changed too much; as the seasoning--we use more seasoning now than we used to in there, but other than that--that's it.

0:03:19.2

AE: Why is that?

0:03:19.6

GLR: Different kind of seasoning. We added a little garlic to it, a different--a little sage, you know--something to the meat--the different--it will hold the taste--flavor longer; uh-hm.

0:03:30.8

AE: How about just from an ingredient standpoint, when you were coming up you talked about getting the corn husks from the field and stuff like that.

0:03:35.7

GLR: Right. Well actually, we used the cornhusks out of the cornfield that we used for shucks, you know. We call it a shuck--we used that and--and made--they used all ground beef back in that day, you know. Now we use different meat to do it with. I have made some out of chicken,

ground beef, and turkey, And to me the turkey tastes better and holds a better seasoning in hot tamales; uh-hm.

0:03:59.8

AE: And when you make them how often do you make them for the store?

0:04:02.2

GLR: Well we make them two or three days a week here at night-time or after we close. We make them--well we cook them during the day and just roll them at night and stuff like that. And then we do it after we close. So you know you can't constantly run and wait on customers and stuff like that, so we roll them at night; uh-hm.

0:04:19.6

AE: Yeah; and you have another job at night, which--

0:04:20.9

GLR: Yeah, also-- [*Laughs*]

0:04:27.6

AE: Can you talk about that? Just from a schedule--what you do?

0:04:30.4

GLR: Oh, I'm a Deputy Sheriff of Bolivar County, uh-hm.

0:04:32.9

AE: So you run this place during the day and make tamales at night, and then you're a deputy sheriff all on top of everything.

0:04:38.3

GLR: Right. *[Laughs]*

0:04:40.3

AE: So you have to have family and friends that come help you out with tamale making?

0:04:42.3

GLR: Yeah, I--my brother is also a co-owner of my place here, and he works night shift, and I run days and I come back in after--at night. When it's not too busy at times we'll roll during the night, just him. And I and we--we do pretty good sometimes.

0:04:59.0

AE: Yeah?

0:04:58.6

GLR: Yeah.

0:05:00.9

AE: Do you have children of your own?

0:05:01.3

GLR: Yeah, I have four boys. Uh-hmm, yeah, four boys.

0:05:05.4

AE: Do they help you out with the tamale making?

0:05:05.6

GLR: No, I got one son--he got his own business, working with air conditioning, and my other son is in Tennessee. I got one son at home, fifteen years old now, uh-hmm.

0:05:15.8

AE: Do you think that some of your sons will be interested in making hot tamales?

0:05:19.3

GLR: Probably later on in the future, but right now they not interested. [*Laughs*]

0:05:23.5

AE: Yeah?

0:05:24.1

GLR: Yeah.

0:05:24.7

AE: Because it is--I mean, just from what you're telling me, you know, and from the other stories I have gotten, it's a recipe that's passed down from generation.

0:05:29.0

GLR: Right. Well, they know how--they know how to do it, but like I said, my two sons I got in Tennessee there, they got other businesses and stuff. So--they had thought about opening up a place of their own, but they haven't did it yet. And my other son, like I say is working with air conditioning, so he ain't interested in cooking. He will always want to eat. **[Laughs]**

0:05:48.7

AE: Did you think before you opened this place that you always wanted to have a place that sold hot tamales, or did you think you'd be using that [family] recipe?

0:05:53.7

GLR: No, I--I didn't really think about it. When this idea came to me and the opportunity presented itself right there, my friend used to own this building--used to run this building at least, and when I was working somewhere else, and then he was going out of business, so I looked at doing it and then just took over the lease and we went--went then to a fast food and hot tamale making, yeah.

0:06:18.3

AE: And who did your artwork that's on the side of the building here? [The airbrushed lettering and pictures.]

0:06:22.2

GLR: It's a guy that--from Milwaukee did that art--a friend of mine--that he did the--the artwork and stuff out there. Yeah, on his vacation. So he's gone—he's back in Milwaukee at this time. I need it done over again now.

0:06:34.0

AE: Is he from down here or is he--?

0:06:36.0

GLR: Yeah, he's from--he's from, yeah; he's from the South. He's from Symonds [Mississippi] originally.

0:06:39.0

AE: Okay.

0:06:41.7

GLR: Yeah, that's where you're standing now in Milwaukee, uh-hm.

0:06:43.9

AE: Well, he did a good job.

0:06:45.5

GLR: Oh, yeah. Yeah

0:06:44.7

AE: You can always see it from the street coming by here.

0:06:46.5

GLR: Uh-huh, they did a well--well job. They used to make a lot of--lot of artwork around here in town while they was here.

0:06:54.3

AE: Okay. Yeah, there's some around town that looks like the same kind of style or something.

0:06:57.5

GLR: Yeah, right. Yeah, he used--he used to do a lot. He stayed here about a--about a month--two months I believe, 'cause he wouldn't--didn't go back when he was supposed to go back. He had more jobs lined up, and when them jobs ran out then he went on back to Milwaukee. He still hollers when he come on his vacation, yeah. [*Laughs*]

0:07:13.1

AE: You'll keep him busy when he comes back next time, huh?

0:07:15.0

GLR: Yeah. [*Laughs*]

0:07:17.6

AE: Well, Mr. Rainey, do you have an idea about the history of hot tamales in the Delta? I mean, it's something that the African American community has held onto and is still doing and I wonder--?

0:07:25.6

GLR: I guess it's--I don't know; it's something that, like I say, was started way back through their families and stuff, and a lot of people used to make them and used to make them for their home and their family and stuff and all, and I think they started selling them about--I don't really know that much about the history. I didn't talk to my grandfather that much to really find out all about it at the time, uh-hmm.

0:07:46.8

AE: Did--was your grandfather the first family member you know that started making them?

0:07:51.7

GLR: Yeah. That I know started making them, yeah.

0:07:53.2

AE: When was he alive?

0:07:56.2

GLR: Ooh, like I say, that's been a long time ago. [*Laughs*] Yeah, he--he passed on in [nineteen] sixty-four, so—yeah, so.

0:08:03.8

AE: Because there are a lot of folks that say that during the big cotton harvest in the [nineteen] twenties and thirties that some Mexican labor came in to help with the cotton harvest, and they brought the tamale tradition and passed it on to--.

0:08:14.4

GLR: Probably, yeah--probably did. Like I say, I didn't know 'cause we were sharecroppers. We used to sharecrop out there, and then all kinds of people came through there and--and used to sell watermelons and hot tamales all that. I remember that's how--how it got started; so you know I really don't know.

0:08:29.4

AE: Do you hear about many more families that make hot tamales?

0:08:32.2

GLR: I know like I say about three or four people here in town. Robert Stewart, he makes hot tamales down there. The Delta Quick Shop, I think, is the name of his place. He makes hot tamales. We also got a John Williams here making--make hot tamales, yeah.

0:08:46.0

AE: Over there on South Street?

0:08:47.3

GLR: Yeah, on South Street right there--John Williams. But that's--that's the two people that I know here in town. I think there's another guy making them in his residence, but I don't know exactly whether he makes them or not, uh-hmm.

0:09:01.4

AE: And you sell a good number of them?

0:09:04.8

GLR: Yeah, we do--we do pretty good in hot tamales. We sell anywhere from fifty to one hundred dozen a week. Uh-hmm, yeah.

0:09:11.8

AE: Man. Do most people--or you yourself, do you like to have them on crackers or ketchup?

0:09:17.6

GLR: Me--I--you know, believe it or not, I taste them to make it, but I really don't like them.

0:09:23.1

AE: Oh, no!

0:09:24.2

GLR: I don't eat hot tamales. **[Laughs]** I guess the taste, I don't--I don't like, myself. Or I guess I reckon I just eat too much other junk food. **[Laughs]**

0:09:30.7

AE: Yeah? Have you ever liked tamales?

0:09:32.3

GLR: Yeah, I used to eat them, but I guess--I guess as I grew up better and whenever I ate them, like I just don't--doesn't acquire a taste for them now, yeah.

0:09:42.3

AE: Do a lot of people carry a few dozen home on the weekends or do other people--regulars that come by and get them--?

0:09:50.3

GLR: Yeah; they get anywhere from two to three to five dozen on the weekend, and if they got a party or something or a set during the week or something like, that they'll come and get them for them and all, you know other people to try. I do cater to a lot of banks around here on Fridays. They have a little dinner--little in-house parties and stuff like that right there, and I do cater out hot tamales to--to them.

0:10:17.7

AE: Okay, and can you talk about some of the other stuff that you have on your menu here?

0:10:21.4

GLR: Okay; we have old-fashioned cheeseburgers, polish sausage, rib tips, a few hot wings, and a few more items that--that we sell.

0:10:33.6

AE: Do you have hog maws? Did I see a hog maws sign up there?

0:10:33.6

GLR: I--I used to, but I don't have them anymore, because in the summertime they don't usually sell too much. You sell pig feet and all that but summertime they don't really sell that--that much. In the wintertime they do sell more; uh-hm.

0:10:48.3

AE: All right. Well, any final thoughts about hot tamales in the Delta?

0:10:51.1

GLR: Come try them. [They're] finger-lickin' good, the best in town.

0:10:53.9

AE: All right. I'm going to have some. Definitely. Right now.

0:10:57.5

GLR: Delta Fast Food. Okay. [*Laughs*]

0:10:59.8

[End Gentle Lee Rainey.mp3]