

JOHN RUCKER

John's Restaurant – Jackson, Mississippi

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Location: John's Restaurant – Jackson, MS

Interviewer: Kimber Thomas

Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs

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Project: Jackson's Iconic Restaurants

[Begin John Rucker Interview]

00:00:02

Kimber Thomas: This is Kimber Thomas for the Southern Foodways Alliance. Today is Tuesday, September 24, 2013 and I’m here with Mr. John Rucker at John’s Restaurant in Jackson, Mississippi. Mr. John can I get you to state your name and your occupation for the record?

00:00:18

John Rucker: My name is John Rucker. My occupation is restaurant owner, rent Beauty and the Barber Shop, and—

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KT: And for the record can you tell me your birth date?

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JR: December 28, 1954.

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KT: All right; so let’s start out with you telling me a little bit about yourself, where you’re from, where you grew up.

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JR: I was born in Yazoo County and I moved to—spent most of my childhood life—well all of my childhood life in Yazoo City, Mississippi. And I graduated from Yazoo High School in 1974. And I moved away and went—went to school and—at a vocational school in Chicago, Illinois, William Dawson Vocational Center. And in 1980 I moved back to Jackson, Mississippi.

00:01:13

KT: And what did you study at the Vocational School?

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JR: I went to school for welding.

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KT: Okay; and so you moved back to Jackson and what happened from the time you moved back to Jackson until when you started the restaurant? What were you doing then?

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JR: I kind of like have always been in the food industry. While I was in Illinois I worked for a division of Hershey Food Company, which they made coffee pot percolators. And when I moved back to Jackson I started working for Frito-Lay. I worked for Frito-Lay for about 17 and a half years. And from then I bought this building here from a guy that was about to go in foreclosure so I bought the building and started the restaurant up from then.

00:02:13

KT: Okay; and you said you grew up in Yazoo County?

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JR: Uh-hm; in Yazoo City.

00:02:24

KT: Yazoo City, okay; Okay; talk a little bit about what it was like growing up there and what your relationship to food was like I guess.

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JR: It was just basic, you know your childhood life, you know you played baseball, went to school, played basketball, summertime we played baseball; we had a youth program that we worked when we was like 15—16 years-old. We had a youth program where we worked in the summertime. And it was you know during that time we just basically survived on whatever instinct that we had and you know—and the food industry came you know—came on later in my life.

00:03:10

KT: And so when you got this building here you automatically knew you wanted it to be a restaurant?

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JR: Not at the time. I thought it was a good investment at the time for future references in case things happened down in the future to—and in which it did when Frito-Lay closed their business.

They asked me to relocate in Jonesboro, Arkansas but I didn’t want to relocate so that’s when I decided to open up full-time you know open the restaurant up full-time.

00:03:43

KT: Okay; and what was it like when you first opened here? And before that what year did you open this restaurant?

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JR: I have to go back and check on that but it’s been a while. [*Laughs*] I don’t know the exact year.

00:03:58

KT: But you’ve been opened about 15—?

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JR: About 16—about 16 years; yes.

00:04:04

KT: Okay and talk a little bit about what it was like here when you first opened the restaurant.

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JR: Oh when I first opened the restaurant you know it was a little nervous, you know a little shaky. It was something that I hadn’t—I had not did before and it was—it was kind of slow you know at the time. And as time you know went on and peoples learned that I was here you know

doing business, you know the business came you know very profitable at that time under the Clinton Administration, which you know the economy was doing great. You know the housing industry was doing good. We had a lot of contractors you know coming through, you know and a lot of businesses were back in the area, you know. So the business did real good during that era.

00:04:50

KT: And so talk about the menu and some of the food that you serve here now.

00:04:54

JR: Well some of the food that we serve, you know your basic food, your hamburgers which is the best in town. We have hamburgers, cheeseburgers; we have fried chicken wings. We have grilled chicken. We have catfish. We have pan trout. We have shrimps. And we have Philly cheesesteaks and those you know your basic, you know food items. And all of the food is—is cooked as you order it, you know and nothing is pre-cooked. So if you have time we can fix it for you but if you don’t have time, you now you might need to go to Burger King or McDonalds.

00:05:37

KT: Okay; now when you first opened were you serving the same food? Has the menu stayed the same throughout the years?

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JR: Basically it—you know we didn’t have as much on the menu [*Phone Rings*]—

00:05:53

KT: Okay; we had to stop for a second but we were talking about how the food has changed over the years, how your menu has changed.

00:06:01

JR: Yeah; we started out you know with a couple of items on the menu and as the business grew you know we added more and more. And since then you know the menu hasn't changed a lot but every once in a while we'll you know we'll try something new and something different.

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KT: And you mentioned earlier that those hamburgers are the best in town. I haven't tasted them yet but can you tell me what is it that makes your hamburgers stand out from the rest?

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JR: Because it's a very unique hamburger and the way that I fix it, I can't tell you my secret but you know it's the way that I fix it and I have a lot of compliments and people's—I haven't—have not had one complaint about the hamburgers since I've been in business.

00:06:47

KT: So I'm guessing that the hamburger is the most popular food here?

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JR: It's one of the most popular foods besides the—the catfish. And at one time the catfish was the most popular food and people would come all the way from Byron, they would come from

Canton—to get the catfish. And some of them would come just to get the chicken wings.

[Laughs]

00:07:12

KT: You know that’s what I come for. Okay; so let’s switch gears a little bit and talk about being a black restaurant owner in Jackson. So I guess just to start out what is it like to be a black restaurant owner in Jackson, because you know there are not that many, so—.

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JR: Well it’s—it’s different; you know you have to be very, very diligent in what you do. You have to be here. You know a lot of times you might not want to be here but you have to be here. So I learned over the years that you know you have to put aside everything else and when—you know and swing the doors open when you don’t want to be open. And the business, you know it’s not as good as it used to be with the downfall of the economy but you know it still—you know do okay on certain days.

00:08:08

KT: And so you said you were born in the ‘50s—’54?

00:08:13

JR: Yeah; 1954.

00:08:15

KT: Okay; so do you remember when restaurants were desegregated?

00:08:19

JR: Yes; I have a good you know idea about you know when they became segregated [Interviewer’s note: John meant desegregated] because I—you know growing up I grew up in the era as of coming out of Yazoo City that you know we had separate entities for blacks and whites. We had whites only, blacks only; the movie theater was—you know was separate and I have a good idea about all of that because I kind of like lived it you know, you know coming up in—you know during that time.

00:09:01

And over the time you know a lot of things changed over the years and you know it’s when they came up and we started going to you know—interchanging in the school system; I remember that because I was one of the first to get bused to, you know to the white schools. And so I have a good concept about you know how that was.

00:09:32

KT: And do you remember eating at any black restaurants in Yazoo City?

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JR: Most of them was like your mom and pop type you know restaurant. They would—it was real small and most of them—a lot of them you know cooked out of their houses and that’s basically you know what we had growing up. We didn’t have yet—we wouldn’t have your McDonalds and your Burger King you know and then when we did have them, you know we—there wasn’t a lot of money. So we kind of like had to make do with what we had.

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KT: And do you remember specifically when the restaurants were desegregated?

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JR: Hmm, I remember; you know it’s been a—it’s been a long time but—but I do remember.

[Laughs]

00:10:23

KT: And you—do you have any like any specific moments that you can recall?

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JR: Yeah; I have some specific moments. I was with my—my father’s cousin and we went to a restaurant and they kind of like still had the same concept that they had before—you know they still had the whites only and blacks only. And I remember one time that you know they had closed down the black only part and they refused to serve him from the white side. But you know at that time we was growing—like I say growing up in Yazoo City the people just kind of like did what they wanted to do or how they wanted to do it. They didn’t—they didn’t have a lot of pressure on them about you know you—like the Federal laws stated that you know you needed to do this and you needed to do that. And they just kind of like pretty much did what they wanted to do. And he demanded that he get served, and he got served.

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KT: Wow; *[Laughs]* and so living through that and witnessing that and then 50 years later owning your own restaurant, what is that like?

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JR: Well it’s got its ups and downs, you know. Like—like I say, for the first five years that I was in business you know it was—you know it was like building the business. And after then you know the business was you know it was you know real profitable. You know I was able to pay for the building. I was able to purchase some land and have my own home built, you know out in the country. I bought 10 acres of land and—and built a house, so it was you know very profitable.

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KT: Okay; and you know the food here I guess we would kind of characterize it as soul food.

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JR: I guess you could kind of like you know it’s like soul food and you know which, you know you don’t have your black-eyed peas and your collard greens but you still got your fried chicken.

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KT: Okay; so let’s talk a little bit more about your food. So who taught you how to cook?

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JR: Believe it or not growing up you know my father got killed when I was—on a hunting accident when I was young, and so we were from a very large family. It was—it was nine of us I had; there was five boys and four girls. And we usually kind of like hung around the kitchen and watched mom cook and—and then my cousin, bless his soul—he’s deceased now—and he and I

actually kind of like started the business and his name was Clifton Taylor. And he and I, you know we started out cooking for peoples doing picnics and that’s how we really got started you know where people would call us up to cook for picnics.

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Mike Espy [former football player, Secretary of the United States Department of Agriculture and U.S. Representative from Mississippi's 2nd Congressional District], we used to cook for him a lot and—and we used to cook for different peoples. And then I had access to this building and then we decided that we was going to start cooking because we started out just on weekends before—while I was working for Frito Lay. And we started out just opening on weekends, Friday—Fridays and Saturdays. And from then on then we—then after I left Frito Lay we decided to open full-time.

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KT: And are there any traditions that you associate with this restaurant like every Saturday you do this, every—?

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JR: No; I don’t think so.

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KT: And is there any specific event that happened here in the restaurant that stands out in your memory?

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JR: There was—there was some that you know I used to have a big party every year for my anniversary you know and so we would invite all of the customers and you know most of my—my good customers. And we would invite them in and we would come in and we would you know feed them. You know we would give them drinks and those are the most outstanding moments that we used to have. And then we used to do the adult Halloween party and but that’s when I was younger. *[Laughs]*

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KT: Okay.

00:15:11

JR: We don’t party like we used to. *[Laughs]*

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KT: Don’t party like you used to?

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JR: Don’t party. In short—

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KT: You didn’t want me to get that? *[Laughs]* Okay; and so talk about the food here. I see the sign over there—*we proudly serve US farm-raised catfish*. So where do you get your food from?

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JR: I—over the years I've gotten it from different suppliers. I always get it from a reputable supplier because that means a lot. And I always buy—try to buy the best quality of food that I can. You know you can buy other food that is a lot cheaper but it's not as good. And I dealt with Sysco Food Service; when I first started out I was dealing with Sysco. And I was—then I went to PFS, Professional Food Service, which Pilgrim Pride bought them out and I dealt with Pilgrim Pride for a number of years. And I now deal with Merchant Food Company and I've been with them for a number of years. And I left Merchant and went back to Sysco for a short period, probably about six months, and then I came back to Merchant. So then I've been with Merchant ever since.

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KT: All right; and what do you think makes John's stand out from other black-owned restaurant or just any other restaurants in Jackson?

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JR: Well consistency; you know you have to have consistency in your product because you know you can't have it this way this time and tasting that way next time. So consistency I would say you know pretty much stands out because I had a customer tell me; he said I don't care when I come in here, how often I come in here, the food always tastes the same. So I think it's consistency.

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KT: And do you have a—a cookbook or do you have the recipes stored up in your head?

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JR: Oh I got them in my head and I got a book I'll bring out [*Laughs*] because if it's something that somebody you know—and I used to do a lot of catering and that's when I used to use the cookbook a lot. And I kind of like have gotten away from catering because you know it's—it takes a lot of your time and it's really a—a hard job. And we used to do weddings, big events; I did a wedding for 200 peoples and I kind of like got—gotten away from that. Well actually when I got away from that the restaurant was doing great at the time and I didn't have a lot of time or the little time that I did have for myself I didn't want to be tied up you know catering.

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So I do have a cookbook and if it's somebody that comes in and orders something you know wanting me to cater something that I don't normally fix every day I'll pull it out and go to it and believe it or not, it always comes out pretty good. [*Laughs*]

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KT: And the cookbook is it your cookbook or is it somebody else's?

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JR: It's—it's a Bell's Best Cookbook. My wife works for AT&T which used to be Bell South and they—and they has a great cookbook. It's called Bell's Best and I—you know if you want a good cookbook I advise you, you know to get that. And it has a lot of different recipes, the same item you can fix it like four or five different ways. So I think it's a good cookbook.

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KT: And what are some of the most popular foods that you cook out of that cookbook?

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JR: Some of the most popular food that I used to cook out of it was the chicken tetrazzini. We did—we used to do the chicken and dumplings. People used to love that. And that's two of the most that I can think of right now off the top of my head that we used to do all the time.

00:19:05

KT: Now I know a lot of restaurant owners; some of them when they go home they'll fix a plate at the restaurant and go home and eat it. Some of them will cook different—so what do you do? Do you always fix you a chicken wing plate and then go home and eat?

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JR: Believe it or not, no. Sometimes I might fix a hamburger to take with me you know. But I guess you know being—doing the same thing every day with the same basic menu every day you know you kind of like, you know want something a little bit different. And I very seldom cook at home. My stove at home gets fired up maybe once a week. And that's for breakfast on Sunday.

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KT: Really? So do you eat at other restaurants like what else—what do you eat?

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JR: Yeah; yeah I do eat at other restaurants yeah, places like sometimes Piccadilly's, Applebee's, and sometimes you know we will go to a buffet you know. I can't think of the name of the place out there on—Golden Corral you know. You know we will go there because when

you’re off, you know you don’t want to cook all the time and you don’t be wanting to cook. And just like holidays, when holidays come around I’m going where the cooking is and not doing the cooking. *[Laughs]*

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KT: Okay; now I do want to backtrack a little bit. You have some very distinct memories of when restaurants were segregated. Is there anything else that you can think about that stands out in your memory or even during the Civil Rights Movement about black businesses, specifically black restaurants?

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JR: Ah I had—not about black restaurants but I can—about black business in general, I remember that you know during that time black-owned businesses, a lot of them like clothing you know. This guy, we wouldn’t go—they would bring clothes out to your house and you would get your clothes and get your shoes. The man used to own a—the black guy used to own a shoe—shoe factory in Yazoo City but this was before he opened up the shoe factory. You know they would—you know things were like door-to-door salesman, you know in black businesses.

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And then over the years as I became close to getting out of high school that’s when I started seeing a lot of blacks’ business, open up their own businesses like Dan Lindsay. He opened up a clothing store downtown. And now he was one of the ones that his uncle used to come around and sell clothes you know door-to-door; yeah.

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KT: Okay; and what do you think is most important for us to remember about this restaurant?

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JR: The most important thing to remember about this restaurant is you're always special. You're going to be treated special. And we're not perfect but we strive to be perfect and I always tell my customers if you're not satisfied, I can make it right.

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KT: And what do you think is most important for us to remember about black-owned restaurants in Jackson?

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JR: The most important thing is to always—it's good if the neighborhood deals with businesses in the neighborhood and not just this neighborhood, all of our neighborhoods. And you have to try to keep those dollars in your community. And if you can do that we will see more and more black businesses you know open up because at one time there—you know you could just about find two or three dry cleaners owned by blacks in the neighborhood. But now during this time, most of the businesses you know is leaving the black neighborhood. And you know they are taking the dollars out of the neighborhood, you know taking them to other communities, other you know like Madison and Rankin and they're taking the dollars out of the neighborhood. And that's the most important thing I think that if you keep it in your neighborhood you know your neighborhood can thrive.

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KT: And I see some pictures over here of young boys playing sports. What's your relationship to these young sports teams?

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JR: Those pictures of the young man up there that's my son. But I—for a number of years I coached baseball at Grove Park and I sponsored a baseball team in Grove Park for about 12 years. And so I always you know try to instill in youth and try to you know guide them and you know show them you know the right way to go. And you know I have some—some fond memories with a lot of those kids up there, you know and some of them will come in here now and they are—they're grown up now. And they still remember those days where I was over there coaching them and taking time coaching them at Grove Park. And I gave up the coaching when I decided to open up a business, when I decided to go in business full-time and I didn't have time. And that's when I gave up coaching.

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KT: And did you used to cater for a lot of those games, too?

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JR: Yeah; I would bring—I would do—at the end of the season I would bring the teams up here and do a banquet for them.

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KT: Okay; and you—before I started talking about the sports teams you were mentioning the community, the black community. Are most of your customers residents of these surrounding communities?

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JR: Now it's mostly kind of like close around but like I say when the economy was booming I had peoples coming from just about everywhere, you know Canton, and I had this one customer, she would come every Friday. She would come all the way from Terry and she would come and get her some catfish. And that was every Friday. She will call me sometimes now just to—just to talk and she'll say Mr. John I would come down and get some of that catfish but it's just too far to drive with the price of gas [*Laughs*]. But she—as a matter of fact she was in here just the other day and she came in. But she's going to come by you know from time to time but she don't come as much as she used to. And I can—she used to come like clockwork every Friday. She was going to come. And I had a customer from Canton and he would come down here every Friday or Saturday and get him some chicken wings. [*Laughs*]

00:25:49

KT: That's funny. Are there any other customers that stand out in your memory?

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JR: Yeah; I have a lot of great customers. You know just about—all my customers are great, but those are two that I can think of, you know off the top of my head right now. And I have a lot of them come from the Department of Human Service, you know. They're going to come every Friday but those are the two that most—that I know that would mostly you know come you

know a long ways. And there was some others that would come but those two was just like you know every Friday, you know you was going to see them. And—and that was on a regular basis.

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KT: All right; now I’m going to ask you to complete this sentence. So when you came to John’s you knew you would—

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JR: I knew I would be successful. [*Laughs*]

00:26:36

KT: Okay; and is there anything else you would like to add about the restaurant, about the desegregation of restaurants or just about black-owned restaurants in general?

00:26:46

JR: No; that pretty much sums it up. You know and I would like to say—just say that you know if we would you know continue—continue to deal with our you know our black-owned businesses and we would you know—we would profit a lot more.

00:27:00

KT: Thank you.

00:27:00

JR: All right; sure.

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KT: Great.

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[End John Rucker Interview]