

**LARRY LEE**  
**Employee, Hot Tamale Heaven**  
**Greenville, MS**

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Date: June 22, 2005  
Location: Hot Tamale Heaven Cart located at Bing's Country Market  
Greenville, MS  
Length: 19 minutes, 5 seconds  
Interviewer: Amy Evans  
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: since this particular cart is located in the entrance area of a grocery store, customers can be heard walking in and out, getting shopping carts, et cetera. When the occurring sounds are an obvious interruption to the interview, they are noted in the transcript.*

**[Begin Larry Lee.mp3]**

0:00:00.2

**Amy Evans:** This is Amy Evans for the Southern Foodways Alliance. It's Wednesday, June twenty-second, 2005. And I am with Larry Lee at his tamale stand for Hot Tamale Heaven in Greenville, Mississippi. Mr. Lee, would you mind saying your name for the record here?

0:00:24.7

**Larry Lee:** Okay, for the record my name is Larry Lee. I'm a resident of Greenville, Mississippi, and currently I'm a tamale salesman.

0:00:34.7

**AE:** Uh-hmm. Are you from Greenville, originally?

0:00:36.3

**LL:** Yes, ma'am.

0:00:38.2

**AE:** Okay. And how long have you been working this stand here?

0:00:40.7

**LL:** Oh, a little over seven months.

0:00:45.8

**AE:** And we're at the County--the County Store?

0:00:49.2

**LL:** Yeah, the County Market, which is originally Bing's Food Store, which has been the local establishment in Greenville, oh, I know for at least over thirty years. So it's been here a while.

0:01:05.4

**AE:** Do you know how long Hot Tamale Heaven has had a stand out here?

0:01:09.0

**LL:** Roughly, I think, over three years, but like I said, the tamale and the Delta, you know, it just goes hand in hand, you know, because that's it.

0:01:18.4

**AE:** Can you talk about that a little bit?

0:01:21.0

**LL:** Well basically, the best way I can sum it up is [that] you're not from the Delta if you know nothing of the tamales. It's--it's just that simple; it's just like the--the levee and hot tamales. What can I tell you? Certain things have a flavor or, you know, you go to a regional part of the country and every--every place you go has the signature something, you know. And for the Delta, it's the blues, it's the tamale, it's--it's the Delta.

0:02:03.4

**AE:** Do you have any idea how that came to be?

0:02:04.4

**LL:** Hmm, like I say, well, you know--like I say, a lot of the people that settled here are, you know, [from] out of town. You know a lot of people—basically, the Delta was built up on a lot of people who were just travelers, you know what I mean, going from one destination to another. And, you know, it sounds like a joke, but a lady told me the other day that she just stopped here to get some gas and ended up--fifty years later she was still here, you know. So like I said, on that note there just imagine, you know. That's how the people melted here like a melting pot, you know. And from that, you know, you get all kinds of cultures and ideas and, you know, you share with me, I share with you. And before long, well what can I tell you? Something came out of it and, you know, the tamale was one of those things. Like I said, I've traveled a lot of places, you know, all over the United States, and it's just tradition right here, you know. I've been a lot of places--big cities--and you can find tamale, but you can't find a Delta tamale, you know.

0:03:26.1

**AE:** So you know how to make them yourself?

0:03:29.7

**LL:** Me myself—no. But, you know, when I got into the business now, starting at ground zero looking to rise, you know--not to take over but just my fair share, you know, and I'm willing to learn, you know. I got--like I said, I got a basic idea, but like I said, just--just to say I have it all and I could just do it on my own it's--it's a little more complicated than that than by it being family-owned or whatever [Hot Tamale Heaven is owned by the Harmons, Willie and his son

Aaron]. Everything dealing with it is a labor of love, you know. The tamales are hand-rolled, you know; it's not no machine or nothing doing it. So you know it's--you know human error, you know. People going to make mistakes, you know. But through trial and error and basically keeping it simple, you know. It's--it's you know by them keeping it simple, I guess just--just trying to hold onto the tradition for, you know--unless you go big business, you know the TLC and the love involved is taken away, you know--mass production and everything. So, you know. It's just--it's basically a labor of love, you know.

0:04:43.1

**AE:** So would you say maybe that's what sets Hot Tamale Heaven apart from other places?

0:04:48.3

**LL:** Yeah, and--and like I said to grow in the business, you know what I mean? A lot of people get in the business, and it's about the right amount of profits, you know. And I don't care what you do, you're going to have slow and busy days and whatever. Some days people's preference might not--you know, might not shine over you. So you got to be able, you know, to withstand the highs and the lows, but to understand why your product is still out there, you know--it's still out there because basically it's a good product, you know, appetizer or filler or--or for somebody, you know, who's--who's not the average of four or eight-course meal person, you know. It's--it's a delicacy; that's what it really is, you know. And I consider Harmon's hot tamales to be the caviar of hot tamales, and I'm not just saying that because I'm an employee there. Like the Hair

Club for Men; I was a client before I was anything, so don't get mad if I end up being the President of the company! So don't get mad! [*Laughs*] Yes, ma'am.

0:06:06.7

**AE:** So you said before we started recording that you've been a connoisseur of tamales for some thirty years.

0:06:10.4

**LL:** Thirty years.

0:06:11.8

**AE:** And you've always had the Harmon family tamales at Hot Tamale Heaven, and you think that's the best tamale.

0:06:17.3

**LL:** Yes.

0:06:17.7

**AE:** Can you tell me why?

0:06:19.4

**LL:** I think because it just--hmm, I guess it--it just has more zing for the buck, you know. I'm just saying a flavor, then the--the aroma, you know, and when--when the pot is really cranked up and the smoke is going, you know, it's enough to make you turn your head all the way around, you know. What can I tell you; I've seen people do it. I've seen people bump into the pole [that's right next to the cart]. I'm serious--just trying to figure out, you know--I've seen people come from that end [across the store] and literally bump into the drink machine, trying to figure out where that smell is coming from. So it's--it's a--a combination of flavor and aroma that's--that's--that's incomparable, you know--nothing else compares to that. And like I say, I consider it the caviar of hot tamales.

0:07:19.5

**AE:** Do you sell a lot? Being here at the market do you sell a lot of just snacks while people are shopping, or do people buy dozens to take home or--?

0:07:28.4

**LL:** Oh--oh, now we used to sell individuals and threes and stuff like that but over--over the course of time, you know--you understand that--what it's going to take to move what you trying

to move, so we basically here to sell just dozens and half dozens. In the course of the day, you know, like I said, you've got you know your basic customer that's just trying to feed themselves. And then you've got people coming here, like I say, for banquets and parties. And me, myself, I had to do--since I've been here, I have been selling, you know, about thirty-some dozen in one time to this one guy. You know, but like I say, you've got some people like they'll tell you they'll come home every so often and they don't hesitate. When they come they jump out the car already screaming what they want, "Give me five dozen, give me ten!" You know? And right now it's-- it's hard to say because like right now it's not busy. But I might go two hours, you know, and I might not see nobody, and then all the sudden in fifteen minutes, twenty minutes I can get wiped out, you know. And that could be one customer, a line of customers, you know, or just like I said--sometimes I don't even have them getting out of the car. Sometimes I walk them out to the car for them, just whatever. You don't want to move, all you got to do is let me know; I will bring it to you, no problem. No problem.

0:08:59.8

**AE:** What hours do you keep out here?

0:09:01.7

**LL:** Okay, my hours are from eleven-thirty—basically, lunchtime—until nine p.m. So I give them--like I say I'm--I'm here waiting for you. I'm willing to wait nine hours old, but understand,

life does go on. And then at the stroke nine-o-five, bad as I want to wait on you some more, I will be forced to leave, okay? **[Laughs]**

0:09:32.0

**AE:** **[Laughs]** So would you say that you sell more on the weekends than during the week or--?

0:09:37.1

**LL:** Yeah, yeah, on the weekends. Like I said a lot of people--like I said, basically it's--it's a get away food, you know. I don't want to put it in the category of a pizza because I think it's more filling than a pizza, even though I like pizza, too, you know. But it's like I say, you know, life is built up on variety and, you know, bad as we want to, nobody can live off just eating one thing. So, you know, you've got to have a little variety in your life. So you know it's--it's a good choice. I think so.

0:10:10.8

**AE:** Uh-hmm. How much does a dozen sell for?

0:10:14.7

**LL:** Okay, our prices are--the dozens are seven dollars—originally eight, you know, but we're trying to entice you to buy a dozen, so we're selling the dozen for seven dollars and a half-dozen for four dollars.

0:10:29.8

**AE:** Well let me ask you this: I know that Hot Tamale Heaven reaches out far and wide and I-- you know, I came through Leland [today], and some folks there told me that there's somebody from Hot Tamale Heaven up there on the north side of Broad Street there on Fridays and Saturdays. And then someone in Drew [Mississippi] says somebody comes through and--all over the place.

0:10:48.0

**LL:** Um-hmm. Yeah

0:10:48.5

**AE:** So how many vendors do you think they have in the Delta?

0:10:52.8

**LL:** Okay, I'm just basically--it's a family-owned business and all family members are involved. So that means, like I said, it might be family-wise, mom and dad and maybe five kids; everybody is into the business. So you certainly see a vending machine such as this in various locations in any little town within a forty to fifty-mile radius, you know. You certainly see that, you know, because they try to reach out, like I say, and then they have their own trucks or whatever and vending machines like this here, which will enable them to be at the places where we bring tamales to you; you don't really have to come to the tamales. But if you choose to, like I said, the--the main office or the--the restaurant is located on 814 North Theobald Street in Greenville, and be glad to see you and glad to have your business. *[Laughs]*

0:12:01.2

**AE:** So how did you get this location? Was it assigned to you?

0:12:04.8

**LL:** Oh, no. I think--in fact, you know I said to my boss man, Willie Harmon, one of his sons, he scouts out, you know, this part of the job, see, not just to sell them but scout out locations, talk to various managers and you know property owners and whatever just to try to get to where you can reach the people. And these kinds of markets, like I say, where to establish grocery stores and chains and a lot of people come here, so it's a chance for exposure and things like this. And like I say, some people have never eaten a tamale, you know, and sometimes I get to chit-chatting with people and influence, persuade, suggest, you know, but you take a chance. You

know, life is a chance. You know, you're going to live your whole life, and you never took a chance on anything? Take a chance on something, you know? It might not--you might like it but-

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0:13:03.9

**AE:** Can I ask you what you were doing before you started vending tamales?

0:13:06.9

**LL:** Okay, before I started doing this I was a--a cook for Church's Chicken. I had worked for them for a while, and I worked for the casinos, which wasn't bad except that, you know, it's casino life and stuff. I had a lot--lot of jobs; I did a lot of things. And like I say, I traveled. I have a couple years of college, you know. I have dabbled at a lot of things, but I have not said that I have made a career choice. But now I am seriously considering the tamale business for a career choice. It--it seems, you know--I don't care what you do, you have to look at the business end of things and on tamales as a business commodity or whatever, the future looks real bright. It looks real bright. I might have to say that I might have to invest some time in trying to grow in the tamale business, yes, ma'am.

0:14:22.0

**AE:** Grow a business of your own?

0:14:24.5

**LL:** Hopefully, hopefully, But like with any business you have to grow and not be afraid of a little apprenticeship and to give, you know, insight of somebody who had already been there, so you won't make the obvious mistakes that they probably made before. They can tell you not to do it, you know. So I'm just trying to get some tutelage before I step out in this, you know--sink or swim though--because this is--failure is a part of your life, so you can't be afraid to fail, you know. If you're afraid to fail, then that means you're never going to try anything s--.

0:14:58.3

**AE:** Well and I--I just got to town, and I definitely intend to speak to Mr. Aaron and Mr. Willie of the Harmon family, but I wonder if--anyway, I wonder if being a family business and all, if they tell you much about their own history in the business and how they--how they--?

0:15:33.8

**LL:** No more than I know for a fact. They've been in business over twenty-five years. I know that. I know it's family owned and operated.

0:15:41.6

**AE:** Do you have any idea where the recipe came from?

0:15:45.8

**LL:** No idea. No more than it originated with Mr. William and--how he accumulated it or why--  
or you know, it was passed down or whatever, I have no idea.

0:15:58.4

**AE:** How many tamales can you eat in one sitting?

0:16:02.5

**LL:** Me? I'm not going to go too much past a dozen, but I could eat two, easily.

0:16:09.5

**AE:** Two dozen?

0:16:10.0

**LL:** Yeah, I already know that, but I never test myself no more because, you know, like I'm getting older and my metabolism and all these things--easy to put in, hard to get out. So you know, I'm trying to stay fit and trim.

0:16:23.0

**AE:** [*Laughs*] I hear you. Do you like your tamales with crackers or hot sauce?

0:16:26.5

**LL:** Oh, yeah, I'm a cracker fan—crackers. And I'm not too crazy about hot sauce but do love the crackers--definitely got to—bread oriented, definitely. I could tell you this, a tamale is good summer, winter, spring or fall; there's no such thing as it's too hot to eat a tamale. All you have to do is cut the air on.

0:16:53.6

**AE:** Well, you know, sweating cools you off.

0:16:55.8

**LL:** Yeah, a lot of people come through and say, “Oh, it's too hot.” Five minutes later there's the same people, “Give me a half dozen.” Okay. [*Laughs*]

0:17:03.4

**AE:** You know, being here at the store, do you have mostly local folks, or do you have people that kind of stumble upon you coming through town?

0:17:10.7

**LL:** Yeah, but mostly it's like I say, word of mouth, you know. No matter what the blues said, the word of mouth is faster. And being, like I said, the average person--like I said, a lot of people have relatives or whatever and--and they keep their relatives informed. A lot of people, they come to town, they don't even stop at their hotel; they come and get their tamales first. And then a lot--a lot of people who have lived here or moved away, like [to] Memphis and places like that, they come home on the weekends. Some of them make specific trips just to come home *just* for the tamales. And then to tell me that I ought to move to Memphis. What can I say? **[Laughs]**

0:17:56.2

**AE:** Oh, my. Well do you have any idea how many other tamale carts that--or Hot Tamale Heaven has in Greenville alone?

0:18:07.5

**LL:** I know of--I'm--I'm going to say just--I'm going to say five but that's--that's counting like an interchangeable part. Just because you see it over here today doesn't mean it can't be over here tomorrow. So I'm just going to say that I know they probably--within the family--probably got five working stands and then three or four trucks, you know. So they--they enable them to go places like Drew, Shaw or you know--as long as you got your paperwork and you're up to code, you can do that, you know.

0:18:41.6

**AE:** Well any final words about eating and selling tamales in the Delta?

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**LL:** All I can say for the public, don't knock it 'til you try it. So come and try and then I know I'll be seeing you real soon.

0:19:00.3

**AE:** I'll be sending them your way, Larry.

0:19:00.2

**LL:** All right.

0:19:02.5

**AE:** Well thank you, sir.

0:19:03.7

**LL:** All right.

0:19:05.8

**[End Larry Lee.mp3]**