

LEROY “SPOONEY” KENTER

Owner, Spooney’s Bar-Be-Que
Spooney’s Bar-Be-Que — Greenwood, MS

* * *

Date: August 9, 2003

Location: Spooney’s Bar-Be-Que – 112 E. Johnson, Greenwood, MS

Interviewer: Amy Evans

Length: 30 minutes

Format: Analog Cassette

Project: Greenwood Restaurants

Amy Evans: I have to do this [to Mr. Kenter]. It's Saturday, June—no, August ninth, two thousand three. And I'm with, uh, Spooney Kenter, here on Johnson Street in Greenwood, Mississippi. And a train's going by [beep of motion sensor on front door in background. The motion of the train set it off], and he was nice enough to meet me here this morning. It's about ten o'clock. And, Mr. Kenter, if you wouldn't mind saying your name and your age for –

Leroy Kenter: My name is Leroy Kenter, Junior. Uh, [beep of motion sensor on front door in background. The beep continues throughout the entire interview] age of fifty-three. I'm a native of Greenwood, Mississippi.

AE: And [short pause] how long did you live in Greenwood? You grew up in Greenwood?

LK: I was born and raised in Greenwood. [Short pause]I left here in nineteen seventy-five. Moved to Kansas City and I stayed there approximately—about twenty years.

AE: Kansas City, *Kansas*.

LK: Kansas City, *Kansas*.

AE: *[Laughs]* And what took you out there?

LK: Well, basically I just needed to make a move out of Ka—outta Greenwood. So, I had a cousin living in Kansas, and I went to visit him and decided to stay.

AE: And you liked it out there?

LK: [Faint automobile horn, then the beep] Well it took awhile to get used to the weather.

AE: Um-hmm.

LK: 'Cause Kansas City has that flexible weather. They got a saying there, "If you don't like the weather, stick around. It gonna change."

AE: *[Laughs]*

LK: *[Laughs]*

AE: So what'd you do when you went out there?

LK: Well, basically I'd worked various jobs and eventually, I got into food business. Started working for different franchises, and from there as time went on [short pause] I decided to come on back to Greenwood for a while. And once I got here, I decided to

stick around and spend some time with my mother and my parents, rather. And I ended up openin' up my own little bidness here.

AE: So how'd you learn to cook?

LK: Basically, I already knew how to cook. But now, when you get to the volume, it—it—I learned that during the process of just workin' for them different franchises in Kansas City. And, as time went on, one day the cook—and I said the boss had a little misunderstanding, and the cook decided that he wasn't gonna work anymore, and he asked me could I cook? So I spoke to him and told him, "Well, I can cook but I never cooked at a volume like that," so he tried me out. And from then on, as time progressed, I got better. And then I decided to be the main cook.

AE: What kind of food were you cooking out there?

LK: At that time I was cooking [short pause] ribs, rib tips, [short pause], turkey loaf, ham loaf, sausage, [short pause] chicken, [short pause] hot wings. [Short pause] Those are basic foods that I was cooking. And also briskets. We cooked a lot of briskets cause we did a lot of combo sandwiches there.

AE: Uh-huh.

LK: Uh, turkey and ham, beef and ham, uh, [short pause] mixture.

AE: And what year did you come back to Greenwood?

LK: I came back to Greenwood in 1994.

AE: And you decided right then that you wanted to open your own place?

LK: Well, at the time when I got here, I decided to go back to college and finish to get my degree. I had went to Jackson State back in the sixties. Matter of fact, sixty-nine. I left there in seventy-three, so I came back and decided to go back and get my degree at Valley State, so I went back to Valley, and taking on that [short pause]—that course, I'll say. And from there, Greenwood still had a little more extra time on my hands, so I decided to try to do something constructive. So that's when I decided to start cooking out of my mom's kitchen. And from there I decided to open up a little—a little place right in front of it, my mom's house. And it wasn't generating the type of business that I wanted, so I decided to come on mid-way. So that's when I came down on Johnson Street to see could I expand the build—the business, rather. And [short pause] generate more money for one thing. That's the name of the game.

AE: *[Laughs]*

LK: *[Laughs]*

AE: And so your mom's house is over in Baptist Town?

LK: Yes it is.

AE: And you were selling out of her house or another place across from there?

LK: No, at the time I—like—doing a little light catering. Someone needs something, I'd cook it for them and whatever, but then I decided I'd just go business wise. That's when I had to go and go through the routine.

AE: Um-hmm.

LK: You know, get licensed and whatever, to do it the proper way.

[Counter: 48]

AE: And so you opened over here in ninety-six?

LK: I came down here approximately ninety-six. [Short pause] Yeah.

AE: And you're open every day?

LK: At the time, I was open nearly every day. Bidness was going pretty good, you know, we had s—uh, several factories around here at the time. But due to the economy, some reason they decided to depart from Greenwood. So now I basically work—open up—

especially weekends, but mostly I start on Thursday and go up until Saturday. But this particular year I'm a go for something different. I'm gonna open up everyday due to my situation on my other job, I think I'd be able to open up Monday through Saturday. Yeah

AE: And your other job is working at Valley?

LK: Yes, uh-huh.

AE: You're a hard working man. *[Laughs]*

LK: Get tired sometime. *[Laughs]*

AE: *[Laughs]* But I know you like *this* business.

LK: Well, this bid—this bidness here, it's—it give me peace of mind, and it's something I enjoy doing, and I put pride in doing it.

AE: Um-hmm.

LK: And, [short pause] I got a cousin who spoke to me, and he said sometime he come down here from St. Louis, and he see me back there working. He say I be at ease.

AE: Um-hmm.

LK: Uh, say he been watching me several times, he done seen me like basting turkeys and he say, "Now, he alright now."

AE: Uh-huh

LK: You know, so. I—I—I enjoy it, and—and what I get—what I like most about it, when I get that smile off my customers face.

AE: Um-hmm.

LK: Uh, that joy that they have and—they be happy and, uh, I likes that.

AE: [Short laugh]

LK: I got—I—I—that's when I get my reward. Uh, you know money is—is he—is the *biggest* reward, but you know, everybody's put here for a reason, and [pause] some reason, I feel to understand my reason is food, so. That's where I get my pleasure from. Yeah.

AE: Now let me ask you this: Kansas City's got a long-standing history of barbecuing that's different from Mississippi barbecue. So do you do somethin' different that was inspired a little bit by Kansas City or your own thing or—

LK: Well, basically you know, believe it or not [short pause] most peoples from Greenwood, I'll say the southern tip, they—they migrated to the North, Midwest, and so when you really look at it you get the same cooking there, its just different people use different spices, and everybody have their own little technique. I'll use me for an example. [short pause] It—it's two things that you do with it: you look and you keep your ears open. And put those two together and you'll come up with your own thing. So basically that's what I done, and as—the more you cook, the better you get. Uh, and I got a sayin'—I always keep my ears open 'cause I'm g—I'm always willing for a suggestion. Not saying that I would use 'em, but I definitely will listen.

AE: *[Laughs]*

LK: *[Laughs]*

AE: Fair enough.

LK: [Laughing]

AE: So you told me before—I don't know if you wanna tell it again—about your sauce.

LK: Uh-huh.

AE: When you came up with your sauce recipe?

LK: Well, that sauce recipe is something serious.

AE: *[Laughs]*

LK: But I won't get into details what you put into the details. [On a previous visit to Spooney's Bar-Be-Que, Mr. Kenter told me the story of how he came up with the recipe for his barbecue sauce. Here, I am trying to get him to retell it.]

AE: [Laughing]

LK: *[Laughs]* But, um—

AE: It's a good story!

[Counter: 81]

LK: Yeah, it's—it's—it's—it's—it's—it's—it's for real.

AE: Um-hmm!

LK: That's the bottom line and but the way I did come up with that [short pause] my ex wife and I, we had went on a separation there, and during the separation, um, I was at home one night all alone and [short pause] the walls got to starin' at me and got lonely

for one reason, and one thing led to another, so I decided to just start doing something constructive—try to occupy my mind, so I just happened to look in the cabinet. Found a—a bag of catsup. A plastic bag and—and I decided to pour it into the crock-pot. And I looked at other items in the cabinet and started putting various items in the catsup and—finally, I feel asleep. And I woke up the next morning, and the house was all smellin' and I was, "Oh, I done burnt that sauce up!" And when I went in the kitchen and looked at the sauce, it was smelling so good. It was looking—it had, shall I say, brewed all night long. And I taste it, and I said, "Mmm! I done hit a lick."

AE: *[Laughs]*

LK: So—and I've been usin' that sauce ever since. And [short pause] it done paid off. You know—you know, I get a lot compliments behind that sauce. It's not too hot. Uh, I—I'll put it like that. I think it's just right.

AE: Um-hmm.

LK: You know.

AE: Well, I know when I came over here day before yesterday, you were putting jalepenos in the sauce.

LK: Yeah, that's jalepeno.

AE: [Unintelligible phrase]

LK: It has—it has its little bite.

AE: Uh-huh.

LK: You know, some people can't stand, uh, too hot. But they want a *little* hot. So I—its just like a little in between. You don't loaded it up with jalepenos, you just put a little bit—just put a little bite in it.

AE: Um-hmm.

LK: You know.

AE: Well, I love that story. 'Cause that 's an illustration of the heart and soul that you put into your food.

LK: Yeah

AE: I think that's real important.

LK: Yeah

AE: So, I know you have on your menu ribs and chicken, and on your business card it says that ribs and chicken are your specialty, but what other kind of food you have here?

LK: Now, basically [clears throat] those are my—basically—food items, ribs, rib tips, chicken. I do the hot wings. But lately—I do the hot links. Eventually, once I move up in to a different area, shall I say, a larger building, I plan to bring in some more products that I know, I believe that would go in this area here that I haven't had the opportunity to present to the—to the public. But—I got this thing. It's this combo, which is dealing with beef, turkey and ham. Its—it's a good seller in the Midwest. Uh, and I plan to bring it through. And then there's that Italian sandwich that [short pause] I know how to do.

AE: Mm, Italian sandwich?

LK: Yeah, its— it's a good sandwich. Matter fact, I learned it in Jackson. I came to Jackson a while back and helped my brother open up a restaurant in Jackson. He had a club, rather, called 100 Duncan. Down off of Mills Street , and he had a little kitchen area, so I came from Kansas City and opened it up for him. And one of his friends taught me about this Italian dish. It's—it's—it's a good sandwich. It went well there in Jackson.

AE: Hmm.

LK: So those are some of the other items like that I plan to put on the menu. Add a little more variety there.

AE: Is your brother's place still there?

LK: No, he's a carpenter and [short pause] time just wouldn't allow him— he couldn't over-see his business properly.

AE: Um-hmm.

LK: You know, with him being a carpenter and—sometime you can't get the right help.

AE: Um-hmm.

LK: So, he decided to let it go.

AE: And this is a hard business.

LK: Yeah, it's—it's—it's a lot of work, long hours [short pause] slow hours sometimes, you know. You got to be patient.

AE: Um-hmm.

LK: And when it's coming, you need to be there because there gonna to be times it's not coming.

AE: Um-hmm.

LK: So the main thing is to keep your doors open. That's what I done learned through the process of being here. I been here [short pause] going to my seven year. Uh, this last year has been a rough year. But eventually, I think things gonna change. Through the grace of God.

AE: Um-hmm.

LK: He's the overseer of everything. So I keep my prayers goin' up, and other people's prayin' for me. And I'm still going to keep this slogan in mind. Well, no. I say a slogan. It's something that my mom called to tell me. Say, "Don't give up now, you done came to far." So, I'm gonna to keep that in the back of my mind, and those bad days I'm gonna think about the good days and [short pause] go from there.

AE: Sounds good. So you have, you serve pork ribs and beef ribs regularly or just—

LK: I basically strive on pork ribs because this is what they call for in this area. Now, I don't have no problem with doing beef ribs, but [short pause] I tried it when I first started, and I ended up eatin' them most myself.

AE: *[Laughs]*

LK: Simply the reason 'cause people didn't want to pay for 'em, you know. Uh, beef ribs cost more than pork. But if someone come in here and want a special order, I have no problem with it – doing special orders for others.

[Counter: 139]

AE: Um-hmm.

LK: But, uh, it didn't work out that well. I got away from it. Uh, you know, you can't—you can't hold it long, now.

AE: Um-hmm.

LK: You've got to get it on out. So if you don't get it on out, then, you understand, its gonna go bad, so this is why I say I end up eatin' the—eatin' the beef ribs 'cause they didn't want to exceed the price. I say that what I had put on it, you know—not a bad price. Yeah. I was very competitive in the— as I travel around, you know, I check other menus out because this is a competitive world. So, you know, you got to stay around the figure there. And I—I think I—I got a fair price for my product.

AE: Um-hmm.

LK: Uh, and—I don't only out quality, I give out quantity too. Yeah, those two works together.

AE: Yeah. Because you did that special event for us the other night for fifty people, and that went over real well.

LK: Uh-huh.

AE: As we know.

LK: Yeah, and I appreciate that and , uh—

AE: And those pork ribs – mmm, they're good.

LK: Sounds good to me.

AE: They're so good.

LK: Yeah

AE: So how'd you get the nickname Spooney?

LK: Well, Spooney came up from [short pause]—my mother gave me that name indirectly. I'll say directly. Well, at the time when she was carrying me, you see [short pause] she told me there used to a song called "Wine Drinking Spooney Wooney." And when she was carrying me, she was kind of like be humming it all the time. So once I was born, they started calling me Wine Drinking Spooney Wooney. And as time went on, I decided to bring it away from Wine Drinking Spooney Wooney and just call myself Spooney.

AE: *[Laughs]*

LK: And that's—that's how I ended up with Spooney. And believe it or not I'm—most people know me *as* Spooney. Uh [short pause] say the professional name is Spooney, but my real name, as you know, they call me Kenter. [Faint voices heard outside] So, that's—that's—that's about it on that Spooney.

AE: Um-hmm.

LK: *[Laughs]*

AE: Well, and you named your place after yourself. Who made that sign out there that you have hangin'?

LK: Over at Valley I had a art student.

AE: Um-hmm.

LK: And I got him to do me a logo. And, matter of fact, he went on to Florida once he graduated. And he did a nice logo. It's bad to say, I've lost all my paper work during the process, but the only thing I have now is just my sign.

AE: Um-hmm.

LK: But, that's who did that sign. He got together came up with him a little idea, and as he was doin' it, he brought it to me and asked me was I was satisfied and—it looked much better *then*.

AE: Um-hmm.

LK: You know, it done went through seven years out there.

AE: Um-hmm. *[Laughs]*

LK: Of, like I say—of nature so, you know. But I need to—I keep fixing—I'm going get me a neon sign.

AE: Oh!

LK: Something that flashes.

AE: Yeah!

LK: You know, when you coming down you can—it kind of like be drawing you to it.

AE: Yeah.

LK: Yeah, that's my intention. But I want that done in—in my next building.

AE: Um-hmm.

LK: Just like I'm saying, hopefully with time, an opportunity will come.

AE: Um-hmm.

LK: When I can be seen better.

AE: Um-hmm.

LK: Be more professional, you know. You have these ideas to do things but understand, you know, when you make the money, you put some of the money back in the place.

AE: Um-hmm.

LK: So if, you know—but if the money's not circulating, then you have to make—deal with what you have. So, most of my business now is by word of mouth. And it has helped me plenty. Word of mouth goes a long way.

AE: Yes it does.

LK: Yeah, and—and then you get the real deal.

AE: Um-hmm.

LK: You know.

AE: Have you ever had anybody in here helping you? I know Matti, your wife, helps you out.

LK: Matti helps me occasionally. And I have had the—had someone come in and assist me at times when I might have a function going, or something of that nature. I have had volunteer help, you know. Peoples that I just know, you know what I mean, they'll say, "Yeah, yeah, let me help you," you know. "Things get a little tight, you know, call on

me," you know. And that's—that's good, you know. You need this in this world of today.

AE: Um-hmm.

LK: Sometimes, you know what I mean, you might not be able to pay that price, you know what I mean. So, if you got friends or whoever gonna to come in and help you out, that's good. And sometimes my kids come down, and they'll come in and assist me while they here. And cousins and whatever, so.

AE: How many kids do you have?

LK: I have three. Two boys and a daughter. And one granddaughter.

AE: Um-hmm.

LK: Yeah, so. They a treat, shall I say. And I miss them very much.

AE: Um-hmm

LK: Yeah

AE: Where are they?

LK: They in Kansas City, Kansas.

AE: Oh, okay.

LK: Um-hmm.

AE: So you have—when's your busiest time?

LK: Friday and Saturdays.

AE: Yeah?

LK: Yeah. But maybe, eventually, like I'm saying, Greenwood might tune back up, and everyday'll be busy.

AE: Um-hmm.

LK: But right now, you know, Friday and Saturday is the best days.

AE: Um-hmm.

LK: Some things, you know—on Fridays peoples—they like to eat fish during the day. For some reason. But later on in the afternoon they want that 'cue. So—now on Saturday, I think once they get up from last night—

AE: *[Laughs]*

LK: They get to roaming. Yeah. It all depends.

AE: Um-hmm.

LK: The weather plays a larger part, you know.

AE: Yeah.

[Counter: 196]

LK: The weather plays a part in how the business run, you know what I'm saying. Because, if its hot, people gonna try stay in and try stay cool. If it's raining, they don't want to get wet. So, you know, weather has a factor. It plays—it's a factor. Very much. But, now I have had rainy days – place be full.

AE: *[Laughs]*

LK: I guess they had that taste for it that day.

AE: *[Laughs]*

LK: *[Laughs]* And they be wanting some of Spooney's 'cue.

AE: Do most people come in and carry out, or do you have a lot of people sit in here with you?

LK: Most—most—most of my business carry out, you know. You know, which I have some seating capacity here, you know.

AE: Um-hmm.

LK: For people that want to take time and sit down and eat. But at the time, you know, when I decided to open this place, I basically just set on carry-out. But I also wanted to give the customers the opportunity if they didn't wan to carry-out, to be able *to* sit and enjoy they self – something more comfortable. You know what I'm saying?

AE: Um-hmm.

LK: That helps too. 'Cause a lot of times people just like to sit down and— just to see the environment, you know, check out whose cooking [Spooney slaps the counter to swat a fly]. Things of that nature. How is the business operated? You know what I mean? So that helps too.

AE: Yeah. It's a homey place in here.

LK: Yeah.

AE: It's a nice place to just sit and hang out for a while.

LK: Yeah, you—you—they be comfortable, but they cool, and they don't have the—that riff-raff running over them and, you know, and—and I think that—that goes a long way also, you know.

AE: Um-hmm. Well, what do know about some other barbecue places around town? Any places that you like or think do good barbecue?

LK: Well now, when I first came here, you know, I was buying Ba—uh, Bo's barbecue, you know. Bo Roach?

AE: Um-hmm.

LK: Uh-huh. At the time when I left and that's who own some rest—well, there's another place that had what—he had closed when I got here—he had closed—he had died. He had died, really. Back in the time there was place called Chicken Will. He used to be the man.

AE: I've heard about him.

LK: Yeah, Chicken Will, you know, that's—matter of fact, that's only somebody that *was* a man when I was coming up.

AE: Yeah.

LK: He used to do it out of his home.

AE: Um-hmm.

LK: Then, later on there's a place called Nizzers, used to be down on Broad but he—he passed. And then Bo Roach came after Nizzer, this is the way I'm thinking.

AE: Um-hmm.

LK: And, when I came back, both still was in operation. So, basically that's all I bought from when I was here. And [short pause]—once I came back here, rather.

AE: Um-hmm.

LK: That's the only ones I really bought barbecue from.

AE: What about that old Lucas barbecue that—I think closed in the sixties, I think. But when you were growing—

LK: Lucas, Lucas. Okay, now Lucas—Lucas used to do a good barbecue also. They used to do hot tamales and barbecue. *They* was good! Down on Avenue F.

AE: Yeah.

LK: Yeah, you're right there. Yeah, sure did. You're right there. But then, like I said, that was in my younger days. But those was the spots though. Matter fact, Lucas and Chicken Wills *were* the spot—spots. But I think [short pause] well, I don't know who did the most business, but both of them was doin' good.

AE: Um-hmm.

LK: Because it wasn't no bunch of competition too, you know. No—back that time there wasn't a bunch of barbecue places. Just one or two, you know. But that—you know, that plays a part too. If you don't have a bunch of competition then naturally they going to favor to *you*. If it's good, you know what I'm saying?

AE: Um-hmm.

LK: Now, it's the best man wins.

AE: *[Laughs]*

LK: You know what I mean? It's what you have offer, what brings them to you. Yeah.

AE: For sure.

LK: Yeah. No doubt!

AE: Yeah.

LK: Yeah.

AE: Well, do you have anything you might want to add that I haven't asked you?

LK: Well, it seems like we done covered the majority of everything and [short pause] I want to put—say thanks to all of my customers. For one thing. And I appreciate they business. And I hope—hope they continue to keep coming. And [short pause] in time, I h—I plan to have a free day. Say give something back to the community.

AE: All right!

LK: I think t hat's good for your business too.

AE: Um-hmm.

[Counter: 240]

LK: If—if, you know, if they support you, sometime you need to give something back.

AE: Um-hmm.

LK: You know, that's the way—that's the way God wanted it to be anyway. So, you know, even though this is a business, you can't give it away everyday. But there has been times that I have still—I still have to give sometime. Because you have customers sometimes who might be short. You customers sometimes just come through and say, "Spooney, give me something." And I'll use this for example: I had a litt—the young man come through yesterday, I was on the grill, he says, "Spooney, give me a piece of that rib." So, I looked at him. I say, "Come on in." So I come in, and I fixed him a— about five little—little rib tips and gave it to him. I said, "Now, you got five partners with you now, so each one of you got your own tip."

AE: Um-hmm.

LK: So he [short pause] went on. Ate his little tip, and I think that made him feel good. Made me feel good too.

AE: Um-hmm.

LK: Yeah.

AE: And he'll come back.

LK: Yeah.

AE: Yeah.

LK: You know, he's—he's – then that guy says, "You know him, Spooney?" I said, "Most all these young guy know me." You know what I'm saying. Look fellas, you know what I mean. You got to look at them too. If these—they going to be grown.

AE: Yeah.

LK: Then they pass the word on too.

AE: Yeah.

LK: Yeah. Yeah.

AE: I still think you need to have a little party out here across the way by the railroad tracks.

LK: You know, I thought about that when the Blues—when they brought the Blues car through here.

AE: Uh-huh.

LK: And I – that was a good idea because when they came and everybody was taking pictures, people started clustering around –

AE: Um-hmm.

LK: You know what I'm saying. And, so that did give me an idea and I think eventually I'm going to do that.

AE: Um-hmm.

LK: I think you—you done basically put it on the mind a little heavy.

AE: *[Laughs]*

LK: So hopefully, if you here, you understand, you gonna to be invited.

AE: All right! I'll be here!

LK: Yeah, and—

AE: You can count on it.

LK: That's right.

AE: All right.

LK: Okay?

AE: All right, then. Well, you've got some customers.

LK: Okay. Well this is my brother [Door slams shut]

Brother: Spooney, Spooney!

AE: Oh, hey!

LK: This is my brother and his wife Dianne.

AE: How you doing?

LK: Um-hmm.

[Counter: 263]

[End]