

**LORETTA TACKER**  
**Shake Shack – Marion, Arkansas**

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Date: August 8, 2013  
Location: Shake Shack  
Interviewer: Sherri Sheu  
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs  
Length: 00:27  
Project: Arkansas Pie

**[Begin Shake Shack]**

**00:00:01**

**Sherri Sheu:** All right; let's try this again. I think that should work and I'm hearing myself-- excellent. And one more time—*[kitchen noises]*

**00:00:16**

**Loretta Tacker:** Toast and some orange juice; I kind of did away with the biscuits and gravy today. *[Laughs]* I'll have that tomorrow.

**00:00:24**

**SS:** Excellent; well let's begin our oral history. Okay; good afternoon. This is August 8, 2013. My name is Sherri Sheu. I'm with the Southern Foodways Alliance. I am at the Shake Shack in Marion, Arkansas. It's roughly I would say about 4 o'clock in the afternoon and I am sitting here with Ms. Loretta Tacker and Ms. Tacker, can you introduce yourself?

**00:00:52**

**LT:** I'm Loretta Tacker and I own the Shake Shack here in Marion and I've been here 36 years.

**00:01:00**

**SS:** Okay; very good. What—and if you don't mind for the record—your birth date?

**00:01:05**

**LT:** I'm sorry?

**00:01:05**

**SS:** Your birth date?

**00:01:06**

**LT:** Oh I'm sorry. It's May 1, 1948.

**00:01:09**

**SS:** All right; you definitely don't look it. You look fantastic. And just to give a sense of where we are can you tell me how you—about the history of the Shake Shack?

**00:01:22**

**LT:** My husband and I were married in Searcy, Arkansas and we moved to Memphis and then later we moved on up North and finally in 1975 we came back to the Mid-South and I was teaching kindergarten at Westminster Christian and he was running a bread route. And this Tastee Freeze came up for sale, so we decided that might be something we would check into. And so we bought it the same year that Elvis died, 1977, and I have pictures of Elvis all over my walls and everybody says, "did he come here?" And I said no; he didn't make it to the Shake Shack, but it's been a wonderful 36 years.

**00:02:03**

**SS:** And was it originally called the Shake Shack? I saw that there was a sign that says Big John's Restaurant also.

**00:02:10**

**LT:** It was originally called—it originally was the Tastee Freeze but when we bought it we changed it to the Shake Shack. Later my Big John, my John turned into Big John [*Laughs*], all of his burgers and everything and so he liked to call it Big John’s Shake Shack, but everybody knew Big John. He was an icon around this area and everybody loved him. I still have people come in and ask—where is Big John because they had met him once and remembered him and wanted to see him again.

**00:02:43**

**SS:** And how did y'all decide to get into the restaurant business? Was this something that was already in your background or something that y'all decided to do?

**00:02:51**

**LT:** No background history for either one of us, except his sister had the Shake Shack at Tyronza, Arkansas, and so when we decided to drop the franchise with the Tastee Freeze they--he and his sister Sherry decided to name them--name it the Shake Shack and so we ordered cups that said “Shake Shack Marion” and then on the other side was the “Shake Shack in Tyronza”. Later she sold her place, so we’ve got--we’ve got the Shake Shack now. [*Laughs*]

**00:03:23**

**SS:** And when you started the restaurant where did you learn how to prepare all the foods that you were serving? Was cooking something that y'all were already doing pretty seriously?

**00:03:37**

**LT:** Neither one of us, except that I had grown up in a large family with seven kids in my family and so I had learned to cook obviously; you do that when you're from a big family. The lady that sold it to us stayed with us for a week and we just kept the same menu and we've added since then and come up with some of the things on our own. But yeah; she--she kind of trained us and then later my husband invented the Big John burger which is a half-pound burger and so that's kind of what we're known for right now is the Big John combo.

**00:04:12**

**SS:** And what other foods did y'all invent back here?

**00:04:17**

**LT:** We have everything from pizza burgers to country-fried steaks to ham sandwiches, turkey sandwiches, barbeques; we have catfish dinners. We have chicken fillet dinners. We have just about everything. At one time we sold pizza but when the new pizza guy came to town, small town, we decided to let him have that business, so--. But we--we do very well with our catfish.

**00:04:48**

**SS:** And when did pies make their way into the mix? They're not typically something that we think of with Shake Shack type places of roadside diners.

**00:04:59**

**LT:** We had gone to Memphis to visit a friend, Buster and Jeannie [Oher] and Jeannie had made a pie, the—the hot fudge pie. And she gave me the recipe that night and I came home and immediately started making them. This has probably been 25 years ago, at least, and that's my

number one selling pie. Fox 13 News had it on the TV with Andy Wise and said I was nominated in the Mid-South for the top five desserts in the Memphis surrounding area. And so I was very proud of my hot fudge pie. And thank you Jeannie.

**00:05:34**

**SS:** And that's usually served with ice-cream?

**00:05:37**

**LT:** Yes; I sell many, many hot fudge pies every day. I have many, many other pies. Did you want me to name them now? Well I have apple pie, a cherry pie, the lemon ice-box pie, pecan pie, Tang pie, cherry cheesecake, and then I've got all the fried pies, which I have five flavors that I keep on all the time and then I do do others. But I have chocolate, apple, cherry, peach, and caramel apple on the fried pies.

**00:06:10**

**SS:** That's a big selection of—of pies. And where did you learn how to make the pies? Was this something that you had learned as a child or did you pick--pick it up later?

**00:06:21**

**LT:** I usually do the lattice on my apple and cherry pies and I watched my grandmother many, many years make her pies. And so each time I make one I'm thinking of my grandmother. On the fried pies, a friend of mine, Butch Pike had asked me—told me that I should start making fried pies and that's probably been in the last 15 years I'd say and—and so we started making the fried

pies and they've just taken off. Everybody loves them. People come and buy dozens of them at a time. And it's been a good business with fried pies. Thank you Butch. **[Laughs]**

**00:06:56**

**SS:** Tell me some more about your grandmother making pies. It seems like it's a very strong memory for you. What sorts of occasions would she make pies for?

**00:07:06**

**LT:** Well mainly just for our family for our get-togethers, for Thanksgiving and—and Christmas. But she would make the mincemeat and—and pumpkin and of course the apple and cherry. I've also—I also do have a raisin pie. I forgot to mention that and coconut and then just a chocolate pie with meringue. I make those mainly on special occasions for people ordering, but just watching my grandmother and learning how.

**00:07:33**

**SS:** And with the fried pies was the--how hard was it for you to learn and make? Was it something that took some time for you to learn or did you pick it up pretty quickly?

**00:07:42**

**LT:** No; I picked it up pretty quickly. I just—I said hey; I—I can do this. And when they first started selling they were just like taking off. So yeah; I—I have my own recipe for my ingredients and—and they're good. **[Laughs]**

**00:07:59**

**SS:** And I sort of see from your--from your hedging there that you don't give away your--your recipes for them. **[Laughs]** Tell me about sort of the typical day for you. What's—how early do you get started on these pies and how late do you go?

**00:08:15**

**LT:** Well we start in the morning and we fill up our pie bin with the fried pies. And those are usually done first because people will come early to buy some fried pies and—and they could be a snack between breakfast and lunch for some people. Then we—we'll make the other pies and if it's later in the evening say from—because we close at 7:00—8 o'clock on Friday nights, if it's like 5:30 or 6:00 I may go ahead and make it and put it in the refrigerator and then my daughter will--when she gets here in the morning at 7:30 she'll stick it in the oven. So we'll always have fresh hot pies.

**00:08:57**

**SS:** And are you teaching your daughter how to take over the pies or is this something that she wants to learn?

**00:09:04**

**LT:** She has learned it, just working with me and she can make them as well. We—we are the only two here that do make the pies, uh-hm.

**00:09:11**

**SS:** And where do you source the ingredients for the different pies that you make?

00:09:17

**LT:** Where do I buy--?

00:09:19

**SS:** Where do you buy the ingredients?

00:09:19r

**LT:** Buy the ingredients? Well like the cherry pie filling and apple pie filling we get them through like Sysco. And then we doctor them up and fix them up special. [*Laughs*]

00:09:29

**SS:** Add some magic to them.

00:09:30

**LT:** Yeah.

00:09:32

**SS:** And for--since you sell both fried pies and sort of what we typically think of as just more of a normal pie, the open-faced pies is there I guess—are breakfast—for breakfast do you see more of the fried pies getting sold versus seeing the other pies as a dinner item?

00:09:52

**LT:** Yes; that's right. Also I forgot to mention my pecan pie. I pick up every pecan and crack them and I've never bought a pecan in my life. But I keep pecan pies around the—around the

clock here at the Shake Shack and I tell everybody they're fresh pecans right here from Arkansas.

**00:10:10**

**SS:** Do you have your own pecan tree then?

**00:10:12**

**LT:** I do; uh-hm, I do, several of them, yeah.

**00:10:16**

**SS:** Just in your yard?

**00:10:17**

**LT:** Right; and I stay up late at night working on them. [*Laughs*] I—I get—I pick them up and I have some bags in the freezer so I keep them on hand.

**00:10:27**

**SS:** Good and picking up pecans it's--it can--

**00:10:30**

**LT:** It's exercise.

**00:10:30**

**SS:** It's exercise and it can also--

00:10:31

**LT:** I love it.

00:10:33

**SS:** --be a little bit spikey.

00:10:33

**LT:** Right; I love it. That's my—that's my PE time. *[Laughs]*

00:10:38

**SS:** What's your favorite pie to make? I know we don't have visual on this but you are wearing a very nice apple pie shirt which I admire.

00:10:48

**LT:** Well thank you. My friend Brenda made this for me, this scrub top. It's got cherry pies and apple pies. Your question again; I'm sorry?

00:10:59

**SS:** What's your favorite pie to make?

00:11:00

**LT:** My favorite pie to make, okay; I guess it's the lattice because I can do that in my sleep. It's like one, two, three, flip, flop and you got it, you know but they're fun, uh-huh.

00:11:12

**SS:** What's been some of the reactions of people as they have come in and eaten both the menu at the Shake Shack and particularly those pies?

**00:11:22**

**LT:** Oh, they brag on them. It makes me feel good. Yeah; I've had people say—I haven't had a piece of pie like that since my grandmother, you know. My grandmother made pies and so they're—they're original from scratch you know. They're good.

**00:11:39**

**SS:** Because you roll out all the--you do the crust yourself here?

**00:11:42**

**LT:** Yes; I do, and so it's just a matter of putting it all together and getting it in the oven in time for the customers to come in.

**00:11:50**

**SS:** And how do you—how have you figured out the timing on those? Is it just from observation?

**00:11:55**

**LT:** Observation I'd say; that's right because if one person sees somebody with a piece of hot apple pie with ice-cream, I can sell almost a whole pie at the same table to the group of people that will be sitting there. If one person gets it the rest of them are going to grab one too.

**00:12:17**

**SS:** Apple pie with ice-cream is very hard to resist.

**00:12:21**

**LT:** Yeah.

**00:12:22**

**SS:** And is there a seasonality to the pies that you sell? Is there—are there some that you'll only sell during the fall and winter versus the summer?

**00:12:31**

**LT:** The pumpkin pies sell around Christmas time but that's basically it. I try to keep all the others at all times.

**00:12:40**

**SS:** Do you do special orders right around the holiday season?

**00:12:43**

**LT:** I sure do. Pies or cakes, either one; I make Italian cream cheese cakes, I make carrot cakes, strawberry cakes, and lots and lots of pies at that time—lots of pies.

**00:12:57**

**SS:** And with the restaurant business more broadly can you speak a little bit about the--sort of the challenges and also the rewards of running a restaurant?

**00:13:07**

**LT:** Someone asked me that just the other day. I say the biggest rewards are to hear the compliments from the people that have just eaten, the people that were here and have come back and say we—we couldn't wait to get back to the Shake Shack. Those are the most rewarding things, that keep me going, and all the publicity. Thank you Sherri. [*Laughs*]

**00:13:29**

**SS:** Lots of thanks in here.

**00:13:32**

**LT:** Yeah.

**00:13:33**

**SS:** And we were talking a little bit before the interview that your husband passed away a few years ago. How—before he passed away how did y'all split up the work? Did y'all work—both of you work in here?

**00:13:47**

**LT:** We both worked. I mainly was in the kitchen most of the time and he was the—he was the “PR man” he said. But and—and I worked the cash register a lot but he—he got to know all the customers and like I said, I'll have people from Chicago or somewhere that will come in and they'll say, “where is Big John?” because they had got to know him as—a s a great friend. And so you know I just tell them he's gone, but they remember him.

**00:14:10**

**SS:** And what was that transition like after he passed away for you to—for you to sort of have both roles, of being both in the kitchen and being outside?

**00:14:22**

**LT:** It was very tough because most people that would come in to ask about him right after he passed away would you know—I'd spend some great time talking to them about him and—and they would tell me all the memories they had of him which was—was really neat. So I—I did have to come to the front and my daughter came in to help us and so it's just—it was hard but we did it.

**00:14:49**

**SS:** And now your daughter works here; do other members of your family work here?

**00:14:55**

**LT:** My grandchildren help through the summer time when they're out of school and they love to help and they've learned how to make all the milkshakes and one grandson loves to cook on the grill so he's—he's 17 but he thinks—he says that's something he may want to do later on, so-. You never know. *[Laughs]*

**00:15:18**

**SS:** That would be very cool to leave it within the family.

**00:15:22**

**LT:** Uh-hm to pass it on.

**00:15:25**

**SS:** Yeah; to pass--or to have--

**00:15:27**

**LT:** Pass it down.

**00:15:29**

**SS:** Pass it down and to have the third generation working in here. And we were talking a little bit earlier before we started recording about sort of the Shake Shack in the local community.

How does—I mean it does seem just from me sitting in here and I haven't been sitting here that long but it does seem to be sort of a center of the community that a lot of people come here and they've been coming for a long time. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

**00:15:55**

**LT:** Our mayor tells everybody this is the landmark in Marion. I am the oldest restaurant in Marion. And I was here long before McDonald's, Wendy's, Burger King, Captain D's, Colton's, Sonic, anybody else came—and several others. But I'm still going and all my local people, policemen, firemen—they all support me and just love it.

**00:16:24**

**SS:** And how has that been like in—as a restaurant trying to compete with the—sort of the big chains and franchises that are coming in?

**00:16:35**

**LT:** Well, my prices are still low. [*Laughs*] I've only raised my prices once since 2003 so I do need to go up just because everything has gone up on me, you know, but I like to keep it affordable for people. And you know we have as much fun in here as anything, so that means a lot too.

**00:16:56**

**SS:** And a lot—the employees are a lot of them high school students from around town?

**00:17:01**

**LT:** I've employed many students over the years. Now I'm seeing—in fact for employees and customers, I'm seeing the second generation of kids coming in. The—the elementary school is just down the street and they used to walk down and get their ice-cream cones. The teachers would reward them, and now their kids are coming down, and their kids are coming down, and I'm like an old grandma I say. But they always talk about oh yeah, the Shake Shack; they remember the Shake Shack.

**00:17:30**

**SS:** It seems like it's become sort of a rite of passage for people; that kids have to pass through in Marion.

**00:17:35**

**LT:** That's right; they love it. They love it.

**00:17:38**

**SS:** And can you—other than—other than locals who come in and who have been coming in for a long time, how do your other customers hear about you?

**00:17:50**

**LT:** Well, since the Hino Japanese plant came to Marion back in 2005—the year that my husband passed away—later that fall they came to build a Hino plant to build the Toyota Tundra for the trucks. And about 20 or 30 Japanese would eat with me every day. And so I got to know them and learn a little bit of communication with them. And, but the channel—TV stations in Memphis really picked up on—on all that and I was interviewed probably five or six different times, was on television in Memphis; newspapers. I don't know how everybody gets word. It's just word of mouth I guess, too, but people will say oh, we saw you on TV or we read about you in this book or something you know. Of course the *Southern Living* and I was in the *Southern Living Cookbook*, but I guess that's it, word of mouth. I don't do any big advertising on the interstate or anything, so--.

**00:18:54**

**SS:** And you get—y'all do have a location that's real close to the interstate—that it's basically right off the turnoff.

**00:19:00**

**LT:** About 500—800 feet or so and yeah we do get a lot of highway traffic, sure do. The franchises pull them off and they're looking for the mom and pop place and that's me—that's me.

**00:19:15**

**SS:** And with—with the interstate was that—that was here back when it was a Tastee Freeze right?

**00:19:21**

**LT:** Uh-hm; yes, yes. They put the interstate through I think in 1964 or something like that but it—it was built in—it had good access off of the roads for this restaurant, yes.

**00:19:39**

**SS:** And as I'm looking around there's a lot of Elvis items and a lot of John Wayne items. Can you talk a little bit more about what's going—what goes into sort of making a restaurant like this kind of look the way that we expect it to?

**00:20:10**

**LT:** A lot of the Elvis, it started with my tomato man, Mr. Bob had given me the big Elvis throw which is on the back wall, big blanket like and so that started the Elvis decorations and a lot of things have been given to me. A lot of Coke items, people will bring up and want me to display their Coke items. I guess my oldest piece of memorabilia is the Coca-Cola tray with Jane and Tarzan on it. And so I treasure that. It was given to me by a friend and just different—I've had some that have come in and brought pictures that maybe they were with Elvis or I also have a

picture of Gene Hackman in here. Gene Hackman came to Marion and it's a picture of him in here. But as far as celebrities I haven't had a whole lot come to Marion, Arkansas.

**00:21:12**

**SS:** Are there any particularly memorable customers, non-celebrities?

**00:21:18**

**LT:** I'm sorry?

**00:21:18**

**SS:** Have you had many very memorable customers as you've—as you've been here?

**00:21:23**

**LT:** Well I'm trying to think of some. None that I really—I can think of besides Gene Hackman, yeah. The Governor—wait a minute; the governor of Arkansas, Mike Huckabee was—has eaten here. I have a picture of him on the wall. *[Laughs]*

**00:21:52**

**SS:** Was that before—I guess that was before he went on his anti--?

**00:22:00**

**LT:** Yeah; it was several years ago before he went on his diet. *[Laughs]* Yeah.

**00:22:07**

**SS:** It's interesting how many politicians will go to—that restaurants have really become this place where you meet locals for politics.

**00:22:17**

**LT:** Uh-hm. Yeah; I think there's some of the political meetings that may go on in here too. People from the courthouse come on down to eat every day and a bunch of lawyers come in every day, and doctors, dentists, so there's probably a lot of business carried on that I'm not even aware of. *[Laughs]*

**00:22:39**

**SS:** Yeah; you never know what's happening with the folks who are coming in day after day. And I guess for you, what's—what's your most enjoyable experience when you make these—when you make pies?

**00:22:56**

**LT:** I think when they come out of the oven and I may walk around and say, “save room for dessert. It just came out of the oven.” And they call me the devil but *[Laughs]* it sells pies; it does. I love to—love to show the pies that have just come out of the oven that are good and hot.

**00:23:13**

**SS:** And do your customers just jump on that?

**00:23:15**

**LT:** They do; they do. Like I say, if you have a table of six and one may say oh, I got to have a piece and you fix that and bring it to them and then you've sold everybody else at the table, too, so--once they taste it, uh-hm.

**00:23:29**

**SS:** And in terms of—in term of just the restaurant in general what's been your most memorable experience at the restaurant?

**00:23:42**

**LT:** I would say just serving great food and seeing the—the people respond with the compliments and everything they give, the friendships of the people; all my customers are good friends of mine. And I just got to know them real well and I love them.

**00:24:08**

**SS:** And is there—let's see; is there any—let me back up just a couple of seconds, excuse me. What do you see as the future of the Shake Shack?

**00:24:21**

**LT:** Well, like I said, I'm getting old [*Laughs*]. I just will probably stay here until—until I'm not able to work and then I'll make a decision then. So who knows.

**00:24:38**

**SS:** And is there—for the record is there anything else that you would like to add that I haven't asked?

00:24:46

**LT:** One other specialty that I have was the peanut brittle, homemade peanut brittle that my mother-in-law taught me how to make. And I was making it just at Christmas time and I have to keep my basket full. And so I make it and people come in just to buy 10 or 12 little bags of peanut brittle. And it's also very good.

00:25:08

**SS:** And was that a family recipe that your mother-in-law had?

00:25:12

**LT:** Yes it was uh-hm.

00:25:15

**SS:** And I also--we were talking earlier and it's your bread pudding that's in that kind of compilation that *Southern Living* did. How did they learn about your bread pudding?

00:25:25

**LT:** He came and also did all kinds of—talked to me about different pies and stuff but that was what he was—Morgan Murphy from *Southern Living*—was interested in was the bread pudding. And so that's the recipe he asked for, to put in the book, yeah. And I've sold many, many books. I have them on-hand and been real excited about that.

00:25:49

**SS:** And was your bread pudding a best seller before or was this something that he came in and realized, “man this bread pudding is amazing?”

**00:25:57**

**LT:** No; I had made the bread pudding for many years and everybody loves it, so he--he did also, uh-huh.

**00:26:06**

**SS:** Excellent; well is there anything else that you would like to add or?

**00:26:13**

**LT:** Not that I know of; I think we covered it.

**00:26:17**

**SS:** Fantastic; well, Loretta Tacker thank you so much for sharing your stories of pies and also your stories about Big John’s Shake Shack or just the Shake Shack with us today. Thank you so much for your time.

**00:26:32**

**LT:** Thank you --thank you.

**00:26:34**

**[End Shake Shack]**