

SOUTHERN FOODWAYS ALLIANCE

Center for the Study of Southern Culture Barnard Observatory University, MS 38677

Coordinates with ACCESSION #: _____

Interview Transcription:

Martha Starnes, STARNES CATFISH PLACE

July 22, 2004 @ 8:00am

Wal-Mart

Oxford, MS

Interviewed by Amy Evans

[Approx. 34 minutes]

NOTE: Various sounds occur throughout this interview. Rather than mention them individually and interrupt the flow of the conversation, they are noted here: the café staff can be heard in the background from time to time setting up for service, various voices can be heard in conversation, and announcements are made over the store public address system regularly. When the occurring sounds are an obvious interruption to the interview, they are noted in the transcript.



[Recording opens with the sound of the microphone being moved]

Amy Evans: This is Thursday, July [short pause]—

Martha Starnes: [Whispering] Twenty-second.

AE: --twenty-second, two thousand and four. And I'm at the Wal-Mart in Oxford, Mississippi, with Mrs. Martha Starnes [where she works as a greeter], and we're in the café here. And, Mrs. Starnes, if you wouldn't mind stating your full name and your birthdate also, if you don't mind, for the record please, ma'am.

MS: Yes. Martha Starnes. Four, three, forty-two. [April 3, 1942]

AE: All right. And I'm here to ask you about the old catfish place in Abbeville [Mississippi], called Starnes Catfish, correct?

MS: Starnes Catfish Place.

AE: And how did that open? And when?

MS: We first went in the business in nineteen sixty-four. We bought a small store. And just the little twenty by thirty-foot building, with two gas pumps. And business was so good. It kept growing, so we added a bait shop on one end. And then we built a house on the back—two-bedroom house. Well, people weren't satisfied; they wanted us to start cooking breakfast. So we started cooking breakfast. And it got so big, with all the bass clubs coming from all the other towns, that they started hollering, "Catfish! Start cooking catfish!" So we started cooking catfish in this little place that we'd built on the back of the bait shop. And I guess it would seat, uh [short pause] about eighty people. Well, the first night we opened, the--the air conditioner went out. And, uh, we started out there. And it got so big that we eventually had to close the bait shop part, make that into a restaurant. So we went like that for several years. And it was just so packed, we just finally had to close the store part and make the whole thing into a restaurant. And they were lined up out the door. You couldn't get a parking place for a half-mile up the road. And it was very, very good, if I do have to say so myself. My husband and I cooked in the kitchen with our daughter and his sister.

AE: What are all their names?

MS: Uh, my husband, Billy Starnes, who is now deceased—for three years. My daughter, Sherry Starnes, and his sister, Flora Dulin. And we made all the recipes ourselves. Did all the slaw, the hushpuppies, uh, used to call it "dago salad," but we had some complaints on the radio, so we now have to call it onion salad.

AE: You called it "dago salad" just because it was Italian-style--

MS: It was—

AE: --salad?

MS: Well, it [the recipe] was from the next door neighbor that we bought the store from, that's what he called it. And I don't see anything wrong with it. Uh, that was just an old-fashioned name, and that's what it was so—but we had to change it. And, uh [short pause] uh, they would, uh—I would—I eventually got out of the kitchen. We had this huge glass—just, you know, as big as this or bigger [Mrs. Stares points to a big plate-glass window in the Wal-Mart café that's about ten by twelve feet]. It was just a huge plate-glass, where they could look into the kitchen. And we were so proud of what we were doing, they'd all come stick their head in the door and, you know, say how much they enjoyed it, let us know they were there. And they could see us cooking, so everything had to just be kept spotless, and we always got a hundred percent on our [short pause] health report. She [the inspector] said she didn't even have to come check us because she knew we were doing right, and she didn't have to worry about us. And, uh, I would—I finally got up front and started seating people. And I would see them running across the parking lot, trying to get there before the people behind them—trying to get the last table. And, um, we ran that 'til—we started in nineteen seventy-nine on the catfish, I think I said, [Serving catfish, that is] and ran it 'til nineteen eighty-six, where we sold it.

AE: Where was it exactly in Abbeville?

MS: It was on Hurricane Landing Road, going towards Sardis Lake. Um, just an old store. If you'd drive up to it, you would never think it was a place to eat. I—

AE: Well, what—

MS: I hated that thing. It was so ugly, but the customers loved it.

AE: [Laughs]

MS: And I just thought it was so [sighs]—I don't know. But uh—

AE: Well, what was your inspiration for starting a restaurant? Had you had a—

MS: My husband was a fisherman.

AE: --restaurant before? Okay.

MS: He fished, along with [having] the store. Uh, he caught catfish and, well, everything out there. And, uh, for the first two years, we served his fish. And it was *wonderful*. All—anything wild has a better taste. All the commercial fish has—one bite tastes like another.

AE: Did he fish out at—

MS: It all tastes the same.

AE: Did he fish out at Sardis [Lake]?

MS: Yes. And it got so big, we had to start buying fish. And, uh, he just--we were so careful and so ticky, everything—and we watched every plate that went out of the kitchen. Had some wonderful help. And, um, [short pause] I would, of course—making our own recipes, everything that was made, we would taste. Most of them, they just make it up and send it out regardless, so, uh—And we sold it in nineteen eighty-six? And I stayed on for, uh, four more years, running the cash register and helping seat people to keep the business—to keep the people coming in because they would come every weekend. And it was so good, and they [the customers] were so loyal, if they were going out of town for a vacation, they would call and tell us that they wouldn't be out that weekend.

AE: [Small laugh]

MS: They never missed a weekend. Some of them would come in twice a week. And, um— **[COUNTER: 05:53]**

AE: And you'd just open on the weekends?

MS: Uh, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday.

AE: Okay.

MS: And, uh, Sunday was a wonderful day, too. Nobody else was open. And it was just wonderful. Made a lot of money.

AE: [Laughs]

MS: Back then you could make money. You know, a profit. Now you don't make any profit hardly. You take in a lot of money, but you don't have much left over. Um—

AE: Can you maybe share how y'all prepared your catfish? How you cooked it?

MS: It's very simple. It's very simple. Uh, it would come in ice-packed frozen. I mean, fresh. On—packed in ice. And we would cut it. And, uh, score it, which makes a little cut down the center so the grease will get all the way through. We cooked it on, uh, three hundred and fifty degrees. And it took exactly ten minutes per batch. You could just about time it. And, uh, if the fish was frozen, it took eight minutes. Doesn't take as long to cook frozen fish. And, uh, we just, uh, bagged it up in ice bags. Punched holes in there so it'd drain well, and then when we got it out, we'd spread it this a pan with a—tray with a [short pause] thing in the bottom. And, uh, the fish had to be pretty well dry. And we just used, uh, self-rising Sunflower [corn] meal. Had to be Sunflower.

AE: Um-hmm.

MS: And a little bit of flour. And salt and pepper. And that was it. Uh, you don't want any heavy breading on it. So, it was just wonderful. And, uh, we had whole fish. That was a favorite too. And they liked—we had this one guy that came in one night, and—the [fried catfish] tail was so good. It's real crunchy. And he ordered a plate of whole fish. He ate the tails and sent the fish back.

AE: [Quiet laugh]

MS: We had some funny people. But if that's what he wanted, that's what he got! And they *were* good. Uh, had a lot of college kids as it got along. And, uh, they were good and they [sound of ice machine being used in the background] were bad. One night we had a reservation for thirty-five, and guess how many showed up? Seventy-five.

AE: Oh, my! [Laughing]

MS: They ran every customer out of there—our regular customers. Because every one of them had a bottle [of alcohol. Starnes was a bring-your-own establishment]--

AE: Um-hmm.

MS: Oh, it was wild. And we had one table one night of ten [people] that they started throwing food. So I just politely go up and tap one of them on the head, and I whisper in his ear that if they didn't behave, I was fixing to chunk them out of there. So they were better. There were some wonderful times. Anyway, we sold it, and I stayed on for four more years. Kept the business going.

AE: Who'd you sell it to?

MS: And then, uh--Susie and Steve McCollum from Alabama. They did real good while I was there. And, uh, I guess after four years I retired. And then, uh, my husband was always—he did everything—he had a reason for everything. And [his plan] was to buy [the restaurant] and get it built up and make money. So I think in two more years, we opened another one. It's called Abbeville Catfish. And it was a blast. It was so big. It had so many people, the—I—you won't believe this. [Slaps hand on table] The first night we was open the transformer blew.

AE: [Quiet laugh]

MS: It was packed! So most of the people that night got their food free. We, uh—they went out, and they shined their lights through the windows, so we could see how to get people out and everything. And, oh! You talk about a mess. We thought somebody had shot the transformer out! [Laughs]

AE: [Laughing]

MS: But it did real good. And, uh, we ran it 'til—food was the same. We started off two years with the plates, and then we went to a buffet. And it was really, really good. We kept on with the—

AE: Is that the place now that's on Highway seven?

MS: Yes, uh-huh.

AE: Okay.

MS: We sold it. We ran it for four years, got it built up, sold it to Butch Scott—Harvey Scott. And he kept it going, but his was mostly college people.

AE: Um-hmm.

MS: And, uh, most of the old customers fell by the wayside—the ones that we had. So I got the restaurant back in January of [short pause] two-o-four [2004], sold it again in March to Pat Patterson, and [short pause] so we're back up there again. All the old customers came back. For twenty-four years now.

AE: Wow.

MS: They come every weekend. And it's just getting bigger every week. Been open about three months, with very, very little advertising. We like the word of mouth.
[COUNTER: 10:41]

AE: Yeah.

MS: And it's done got the old recipes. No buffet. And I just hope it continues to go. Uh, my daughter's in the kitchen doing the recipes, and I'm out front seating and greeting. They told me all I had to do was smile. [Laughs]

AE: [Laughs]

MS: Talk to people and smile. And I just hope it continues to do good.

AE: Um, what is Angelo Mistilis's involvement over there? I—

MS: Okay, he's been in the restaurant business all his life too. I'm sure he told you. And he is kind of a manager—overseer—just like—He said that he and I didn't want to work. [Laughs]

AE: [Laughs]

MS: We were—we just wanted to be there and make sure it went right.

AE: Yeah.

MS: Everything was like it's supposed to be. He brought his famous hamburger steak up there.

AE: Okay.

MS: And, uh, of course, all these college kids grew up on it, and they're coming back to eat more now. And it is very good. And, um, he's a good man.

AE: Can we talk a little bit more about the menu and what you served? I mean, describe—

MS: In the old place?

AE: Yeah. Describe the “dago” salad and what's in it and what other sides you served.

MS: Oh, yeah. Of course, we had the fillet and the whole catfish. We had butterfly shrimp. Chicken tenders. [Short pause] We didn't have an extended, uh, menu in the old

place because most of them wanted fish. Oh, we had steak. We had a ribeye steak. Uh [crashing sound in the background], grilled chicken breast. [Short pause] But in the—oh, and the hushpuppies—we don't measure anything. Now, that's what's a problem [short pause] is they said they had to have us up there—they wanted to name the new restaurant Starnes, and I said no. Well, they wanted me to run it, and I said no. And the hushpuppies consist of self-rising Sunflower meal and self-rising flour, sugar, onion, eggs, buttermilk and water. [Short pause] And we just don't measure anything. And, uh, we know what's right, which is hard to tell anyone. And the onion salad is, uh, simply a cheap red vinegar, onions and tomato. You can either used canned tomatoes--you could pour the juice out--or fresh tomatoes. And you just cover is in the red vinegar---not apple cider [vinegar]. And then you start adding sugar, stirring it until it quits making you pucker up, and it's ready. And it is *so* wonderful. And the slaw, we start off with, uh, Miracle Whip [salad dressing]—start off with a gallon. You take half of that out and put in, uh, quite a bit of sugar, a little salt and a good bit of pepper. And you fill it the rest of the way up with water. And you whisk it together, and then you take it, and you shake it, and it is *so* fine. And, of course, you make two gallons out of one. And it lasts, um—that's about all.

[Short pause]

AE: Was it hard to get used to cooking in those big quantities?

MS: No. Uh, I think, um, we don't know exactly what--still not what to do at the new place. Because we don't know who's coming and, uh, how many and—but at the old place we had it down. And, uh, my husband is so careful and so ticky—such a perfectionist. He took good care of everything. That fish had to be stored just right and like, we'd open on Wednesday. Well, Wednesday morning he'd lay that fish that we had left from the week before—he'd put it in the ice bad, he'd mash it down, and he'd bring it out Wednesday morning, and we cooked it that night. And everything just always stayed—we never had any problems. We never had anything returned. [Short pause] So—

AE: You mentioned you didn't really like the way the place looked. Can you—

MS: Oh, I just—

AE: describe what it looked like?

MS: It was just an old [cinder] block store. Uh, concrete floors. Um, had them painted gray.

AE: Did you have a sign out front?

MS: Um-hmm. Had a blinking sign [one of the large portable arrow signs with lights].

AE: [Short laugh] Yeah?

MS: And people can't read either.

AE: [Laughing]

MS: [Laughs] We had on there "Open at, uh, five." And this lady came in and she wanted the special. And I said, "Well ma'am, we don't have a special." "Well, I know you do! I saw it on the sign out front." I said, "ma'am, we don't have a special." "I know you do!" [Laughs] And she went on. It was five o'clock, and she thought it was five dollars.

AE: Oh. [Laughs]

MS: So, it's just unreal.

AE: Well, what were your prices back at the old place.

MS: Oh, cheap!

AE: Yeah?

MS: Oh, my gosh. Cheap. I think a filet plate was probably six ninety-five, a child's plate was three ninety-five, um, steak [was] seven ninety-five or eight ninety-five. And now it's like fourteen dollars. Um, chicken tenders [were] five ninety-five. We had an all you can eat [dinner] for, I would say, eight [short pause] ninety-five or nine ninety-five. And if you wanted to eat all night, that's what you got. And we kept it—you know, most places you'll go and you get all you can eat. Well, they'll bring you this fish, but then when you order more, they try to wait you out 'til you get full. Well we always made sure they got it just right away. But, uh—and if people came up early (we opened at five), they were there at four thirty, we let them in. We'd give them a drink and make them comfortable. And you try to get in any place—anywhere else a minute before five—

AE: Oh, I know. [Laughs] [COUNTER: 16:29]

MS: We—you just—you know, the customer comes first. They always come first. And I'll tell all the help that. They come before any—like here [at Wal-Mart, where Mrs. Starnes is a greeter], the customer comes first. That's all.

AE: In, um, that old place, who were your—your servers? Were they college kids or local kids or--?

MS: Oh no, they were, uh—one was my sister, Dorothy Bratton.

AE: Okay.

MS: Uh, we had two sisters [short pause] one was Deloris Mitchell and [short pause]—gosh, she was in here the other day. Let me think a minute. [Short pause] Dawn—Dawn

and Deloris Mitchell. Uh, we had Lynn Smith, who eventually—which other restaurant’s you going to get? [Laughs]

AE: [Laughs]

MS: She eventually—when she left, she took hr recipes with her, and they opened the Old Cedars—I mean, Cedar’s.

AE: Oh, okay. Yeah. [The Cedar’s Family Restaurant was on College Hill at Airport, where Mistilis’s was before and Aden’s Grill is now]

MS: Okay. Yeah. And it was good, but it still wasn’t quite as good as ours. But, uh, she worked for us. Oh, Jackie. I know, the one that was there forever was Jackie Wheeler. She was a card! Wild as a March hare, but she was good. And they’d line those plates up their arm—

AE: [Quiet laugh]

MS: Now they carry them on trays. But she’d line those things up her arm, and she’d have two over here [in her other hand] and there she’d go. And also my niece, Kay Leamond. She was wild too. They belonged to a motorcycle gang. Anyway [quiet laugh]—but they were good help. And she worked—she was a little tomboy—she worked for us all those years. [Short pause] So, uh—of course, Billy’s sister [Sherry]. Oh, and we had the—the people that lived on the road—our black friends that were our store customers—we went through all those families. We’d start off with the children—well, the kids when they got about fourteen or fifteen, and we’d start them. Well, when they got too old to work, and they wanted to be partying and dating, we’d go to the next child down. And they would work so good! They never called in; they were there every day. And they’re always just smile—all they do is smile. We went through several families. And still doing it! Uh, had some good help. I know one morning we was cooking breakfast—we had this lady that just lived right—a quarter mile up the road. She’d come in at four o’clock, and we’d cook because we had bait—we had the bait shop—bass clubs coming in. We had three coming in that morning. Guess what? She called in at four o’clock, “Well, I can’t come. I’ve got my grandchildren here.” There I was. And you know the only thing that saved me is they had a roadblock up, and they came in just gradually. If they’d all hit me at one time, I don’t know what I’d done. It’d just been a mess.

AE: [Laughs]

MS: And they were grabbing each other’s plates. I’d put their name on their ticket [short pause] and my daughter and my husband was in there trying to help me and run the bait shop at the same time. And I’d put like, “Jack,” So I’d call out, “Jack.” Well, they’d come up and get their plates, and their name wasn’t Jack!

AE: [Laughs]

MS: Biggest mess you ever saw. And one morning I was serving the plates, and I went out, and I had these plates, and as I went to set my--set his plate down, he came up, and I caught him right there [Mrs. Starnes makes a motion to the bridge of her nose to illustrate where she hit this man with the plate]. And it drew blood. And he still talks about that. I saw him a few years back.

AE: [Laughs]

MS: He'll never let me forget that. I cut his nose.

AE: [Laughing]

MS: But, uh, it was just wonderful.

AE: Were you a big cook at home, or are you still?

MS: Yes. I couldn't cook at all when I was married. There was eight children of us. We had a wonderful time growing up, but Mama didn't make us do anything. I guess she wanted us outside. [announcement over the store's intercom] I couldn't cut a chicken up for the first year [of marriage]. My husband cut it up. He used to watch—his father was a bad drinker, and so Billy would stay in the kitchen and watch his mother cook. Oh, he could cook anything. And he taught me how to cook. It's a wonder he hadn't starved to death.

AE: [Laughs] And where—are you all both from Abbeville originally or Lafayette—

MS: No, we moved—

AE: --County?

MS: --there when, uh—we have one daughter, Sherry. Uh, she's forty-four [years old]. [Short pause] We were—I lived—we moved to Lafayette County when I was six. Started the first year at College Hill. And then we got closer and closer to town [Oxford]. We finally wound up a block from the square. And went to University High. And we walked. It was good. And, uh, we'd go uptown barefooted and [Laughs]—shucks! We did those—back in those days. And, um, where were we?

AE: What was downtown Oxford like when you were growing up?

MS: Oh! It was, uh, they had screen doors, you know, it's—uh, was it Wendy's? Where they sold the hamb—Yeah, Wendy's. The door stayed open all the time. Just had the screen doors. They had hot dogs and hamburgers. That's where I met my husband. I picked him up on the street.

AE: Uh-oh. [Laughs]

MS: Out front. I love to say that [short pause] because he was so cute! He had on his leather jacket and his duck tail [Mrs. Starnes moves her left hand along the back of her head]. [Announcement over store's intercom] And, uh, so we started talking. He took me to school that day in a—I don't know where his car was—in a taxi. And, uh, he gave me a little kiss. And, of course, the girls that was with us, she told everybody in school that day.

AE: How old were you?

MS: Oh, I was, uh—almost sixteen.

AE: [Quiet laugh]

MS: Of course, my mother didn't know it. I snuck around with Billy for two years. I'd go off with my sister and her boyfriend. And, of course, I was innocent. I was just along, you know, and we'd go to the square and pick my husband up—my boyfriend up-- and, uh, we went together for two years, and no one knew it.

AE: [Laughs]

MS: Mama and Daddy didn't, anyway. They thought he was wild. Oh, gosh! He drank beer, and he smoked cigarettes. Nobody ever drank or smoked in the family. And, uh, they were always staying in church. They thought he was the devil. But he turned out to be a good man. Good businessman. Oh, we bought another business, too, that was a bait shop. Well, he--no, well he *built* it. Against my wishes, but he was right again because he bought it for five thousand dollars--the land. I think it was two acres [crash heard in background]. And it had trailers on it that you rent. And he built a bait shop. And when he sold it a few years later, he got a hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars for it.

AE: Oh, my. That's quite a return.

MS: So he knew what he was doing. He had about, uh, eight rental trailers. And, of course, the bait shop. The bait shop's still there, but it's closed because the lady that we sold it to—eventually, she died of cancer. An, uh, I think it was mixed up in the will with her husband and his kids and her kids. So it's just sitting there, going to pot. But it had a good business too. I had—and I insisted I didn't want this last restaurant [Abbeville Catfish]. I'd say, "No," he'd say, "Yes." And I said, "No. No way." [And then he said,] "I am going to have a restaurant with or without you." And again, he knew what he was doing. We built it. Paid cash. And then re-sold it. Made a lot of money. [Laughs]

AE: Yeah? [COUNTER: 23:58]

MS: What else? That's my life.

AE: What year did your husband pass?

MS: Uh, in, uh, two-o-one [2001].

AE: Okay.

MS: Yeah.

[Short pause]

AE: Well, the catfish business has been good to you all.

MS: Yes, it has. It has. And, of course, he was fishing all the time too.

AE: Yeah.

MS: And selling—and we sold fish out of the house. He had a fish house. And, uh, they'd [customers] come up all during the day and night. They didn't care if you were in bed or not. And he'd get up [crash heard in the background] there and go wait on them. It was kind of scary but then again, nobody ever bothered u because they were scared of my husband. And, um, it, uh—sold a lot of fish. A lot of fish. Fresh buffalo, fresh catfish. He fished for thirty [short pause]—oh gosh, I guess forty years. We was married forty-three [years] when he passed away. He raised me.

AE: [Laughs]

MS: And it was so strange, uh, two doors down was his best friend. They had lived together when we first met, and they worked at Avent's Dairy. They were milkmen back when you took the milk to the house. And five months later—well, [my husband] didn't last but five months with his cancer. Five months later this guy next door drowns! He, uh, was coming into the landing. He's a commercial fisherman too. He was coming into the landing, but he had to—the guy was stalled in the place where you normally go up to the bank. So he goes around. First—it just—things like that happen—hit a stump, threw him out of the boat, and I think he hit his head. And he came back up once, and he went down. Five months. That is so strange. And they'd been together, what? Fifty years?

AE: Wow.

MS: But, uh—

[Long pause]

AE: Well, you started talking before we, um, were recording the interview, about going to The Mansion [Restaurant] when you were growing up and spending time downtown—

MS: Oh yeah, that's where all the kids hung out. That and, uh, the drugstore on the corner, which was—I had a crush on that boy in school. What was his name? [Short

pause] Blalock. Blalock Drug Store. They had soda fountains and all that back then. And, uh, [announcement heard over store intercom] that's where the hangout—and the [old] Kremer Cup. [Short pause] Those were the three hangouts.

AE: Can you, um, describe a little bit your experiences at The Mansion. What you used to eat there, what you and your friends would—

MS: Well, we didn't really eat much of anything.

AE: Yeah?

MS: Just went in and got something to drink. And talked and laughed and—just to be seen, I think.

AE: [Laughs]

MS: Um, it wasn't much eating going—we didn't have any money, really. You know. Um, of course, what, Cokes cost a dime and—I remember in the old store when they were a dime. With the green bottles? Oh, they were so good. And—when we went to [charging] fifteen cents, they liked to had a stroke! Had this one man, he lived next door. Of course, he built about everything that we had. We let him—we always just charged him a dime. If they were a dollar, we'd charge him a dime. But naw, they did eventually go to twenty-five cents.

AE: [Short laugh]

MS: But, uh—oh, he liked to had a fit!

AE: Um, and speaking of Cokes reminds me, for some reason, about, uh, desserts at Abbeville.

MS: Oh!

AE: What kind of desserts did y'all have?

MS: I made a fudge pie, homemade. We had, uh, cheesecake—blueberry and strawberry—at the old restaurant. My fudge pie was wonderful. We'd serve it warm. Uh, got the recipe from the lady at the--the cook at the Holiday Inn.

AE: Really?

MS: Oh, it was great. And, um, we'd serve it warm--like about twenty seconds [in the microwave]—with ice cream on top. We had this big family came—they owned Sunflower Grocery here in town—they were [short pause] Anyway, they were Oriental. And, uh, so they came out [to the restaurant], and she had her boyfriend sitting across from her. There was eight of them. He had on a long-sleeve white shirt. Her name was

Mary. And she ordered that hot fudge pie, and she took that first bite—and I realized it was hot—she spit that pie all over that guy’s shirt—

AE: [Laughs]

MS: --that was the funniest thing you ever saw.

AE: [Laughing]

MS: And, uh, [short pause] I think that’s all the desserts we had back then. And now we have all kinds of homemade desserts. We have a hummingbird cake.

AE: What is that?

MS: It’s *wonderful*. It’s a, uh, like a butter pecan? Oh, it’s good!

AE: Never heard of it.

MS: We have caramel. We have, uh, hot fudge pie. Pecan pie. Everything’s homemade. Uh, I think were fixing to have—start this week—banana pudding. I’ll have to stop—I’ll have to see if it’s as good as mine. [Jo Dale Mistilis makes the desserts for Abbeville Catfish these days].

AE: [Laughs]

MS: And we’re starting to have shrimp this week—boiled shrimp. And, uh—seemed like there as something else. [Short pause] I guess that’s it.

AE: Well, are you enjoying being back in the restaurant business again?

MS: I am, I am. Uh, uh, ‘til it gets really, really hectic, and you don’t know –there’s always sometime every night you don’t know where you are or what you’re doing--

AE: Yeah.

MS: --there are so many people.

AE: What are your hours out there now?[Announcement on store intercom in background]

MS: Uh, five ‘til nine or just whatever [Thursday, Friday and Saturday]. Whenever they leave. But like I say, if they come up at four thirty, we let them in. And, uh, it’s doing real good.

AE: Okay.

MS: I enjoy—I love people. [Short pause] I don't—

AE: You'd have to, being a greeter at Wal-Mart and at a restaurant. [Short laugh]

MS: Yes, and that's why I am *the* best! [Laughs]

AE: [Laughs]

MS: Or they say I am, anyway.

AE: [Laughing]

MS: I love it. I don't ever meet a stranger. I'm like my father. So, uh—all in all, we've had a good life. My daughter, she—she's been around money so long that, uh, when we was in the store—it—it was just there, and it means nothing to her, and it doesn't mean anything to her today. Um, there'd be money laying on the floor. You know, like a five or ten dollar bill. She'd just walk right over it. And my poor little nieces, they'd come out—didn't have anything—and of course I'd, you know, give them junk to eat, and if I gave them a dollar or something, they were tickled to death. It's because they never got anything. Sherry, she could care less. I kind of messed her up. She's still like that.

AE: [Short laugh] And Sherry likes the restaurant business too, obviously?

MS: Mmm—

AE: [Laughs] Not s much?

MS: Well, she's good at it. She's very conscientious.

AE: Yeah.

MS: She, uh, we were on a vacation, um, week before last. And we're gone--usually stay gone a week. And she said, "Mama, let's just stay gone two or three days." Said, "I don't want to miss work." Because she knows they need her so bad. And she was going to a concert to see [the band] Heart in August, and she said she wasn't going because it's on a Friday night, which is the busiest night. I thought that was sweet. And late—oh! If she thought she was going to be late, she would have a fit!

AE: Well that's a good employee, to keep it in the family.

MS: It is. It is.

AE: [Short laugh]

MS: She's very conscientious. Very.

AE: Does she have a family of her own? [COUNTER: 31:00]

MS: Uh, no. She has a little—problem. She couldn't have any. We've got dogs. [Short laugh]

AE: Yeah?

MS: [Laughs]

AE: That's—

MS: We love our dogs. They're our grandchildren.

AE: Yeah.

MS: And, uh, she was the only one I had. I had a problem, so I was lucky to have her.

AE: Sure. Well, is there anything you'd like to add or final thoughts about the old place in Abbeville or being in the restaurant business?

MS: You have to love it to do it. It's hard work. Um, there's always something to do. You may be--just be open three days a week or whatever, but you're working seven. Something's always breaking down. People don't want to come to work. But when it runs smooth it's really nice.

AE: Well, I'll definitely be making a trip out there to visit y'all and eat up there.

MS: Yes. Good quality food and a clean place, friendly, good service. We've had one girl [who's] been up there thirteen years.

AE: Wow.

MS: And, uh, she came to work—uh, she came to eat the first year—well, it's a few weeks after we'd opened the new place. And I said, "You need a job." And she started work, and she's still there.

AE: [Short laugh]

MS: She's very good. Best one we got. [Whispering now] Don't tell anybody. [Laughs]

AE: What's her name?

MS: Augusta Hankins.

AE: Okay.

MS: She just got to go to New York. She won a trip from Whirlpool--

AE: Oh, really?

MS: --to go see Reba [McEntire].

AE: Really? [Laughs]

MS: Uh-huh. She was on the Today show—

AE: Oh my goodness, she's famous!

MS: And, uh, wen to her [Reba's] concert and, uh, they brought her—they picked her up at the airport in a limousine, brought her back in a limousine and—[sound of door being slammed in background] she was one of six, I believe, in Mississippi that got to go.

AE: Wow, that's a story to tell.

MS: Yeah, it was neat. In her pictures she didn't smile at all. I said, "You could have smiled some!"

AE: [Short laugh]

MS: She said, "I was so nervous!"

AE: [Laughing]

MS: But, uh—

AE: Well, Mrs. Starnes, I sure thank you for your time.

MS: You're welcome.

AE: And it's been a pleasure visiting with you.

MS: I enjoyed talking to you.

AE: Thank you.

[COUNTER: 32:56]

[END]