

MERLINE HERBERT
Owner, Creole Lunch House - Lafayette, LA

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Interviewer: Rien T. Fertel, Southern Foodways Alliance
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs
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Project: Plate Lunch Trail - Louisiana

[Begin Merline Herbert Interview]

00:00:00

Rien Fertel: Okay; this is Rien Fertel with the Southern Foodways Alliance. I am on the Plate Lunch trail in Lafayette, Louisiana. It is just after 1:30 in the afternoon and I'm at the Creole Lunch House with Merline Herbert and I'm going to have her introduce herself and give us her birth date for the record please.

00:00:28

Merline Herbert: Hi; my name is Merline Herbert, and I was born January 5, 1941.

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RF: Okay; thank you very much. And to start off, can you just please tell me what your role is here at the Creole Lunch House?

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MH: My role--I do a little bit of everything. My favorite thing is collecting.

00:00:47

RF: What do you mean by that?

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MH: Collecting the money.

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RF: [*Laughs*] So collecting the money; so I'm guessing you're the owner of this restaurant.

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MH: Yes; I am. I am the owner; yes.

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RF: Okay; and do you do some cooking, too?

00:01:03

MH: I do some cooking and I do some serving, collecting of money; I just do a little bit of everything.

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RF: Okay; a little bit of everything. How old is the Creole Lunch House? When was it established?

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MH: We started business June 23, 1983--was our first day opening.

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RF: Okay; what do you remember about June 23, 1983? What kind of day was it; do you remember any stories from that day?

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MH: We had customers coming in, and that was the longest day of my life. [*Laughs*] I thought the first day of school was long; this was really unreal. It was like okay; what do you do? You know this was my first experience and we had customers coming and they come in and you go, “Uh, hi. May I help you?” And then okay; what’s next you know? But it was really nice and it was great that we had people coming in. That was important.

00:02:02

RF: How did people--well let me ask first; that original--when you opened in 1983 was it in the same location we’re in now?

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MH: It was on the corner but we were in a smaller building in the back yard.

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RF: Oh, okay.

00:02:16

MH: In the little building but on this corner.

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RF: On this corner.

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MH: So we've been on this corner for--it'll be 28 years June 23rd.

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RF: Okay; wow--wow.

00:02:26

MH: Yes.

00:02:28

RF: What--so it was a busy day that June 23rd?

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MH: Yes; I--I don't know how people you know--I mean we--they saw us doing construction.

They knew we were opening and we told some that we were going to open on that day but you

know you don't think that people are going to you know--because we didn't have any big

opening, you know no--no signs or--or really some advertisement because we wanted a soft

opening so we could kind of find out what we were doing, how we were going to handle things

'cause we didn't know what we were doing, yeah.

00:03:02

RF: And why did you decide to open the Creole Lunch House when you did?

00:03:06

MH: Well I always did enjoy cooking and feeding and being the oldest girl in the family. I always did do a lot of cooking with my mom, and I'd help her. And then being the oldest girl in the family, very often I would fix dinner for the whole family to come over. And, you know, they would always tell me, "Oh girl; you cook real good. This was good." And I said, "You know maybe I could make some money doing that since everybody thinks I'm so good. Maybe I need to try that."

00:03:34

And low and behold I had 22 years in the school system; therefore I was eligible for retirement. And I figured; I said, okay, maybe I could retire and I'll--I would still have my--my benefits from the School Board and I could try it, see how it worked. If it worked, I could stay on and if it didn't well, go back to teaching, go back to the school system. And low and behold, we've gone forward and I've never looked back and never had to; thank God, yeah.

00:04:06

RF: Great; that--I think that opens up a lot of questions. When did you start cooking at home for your family?

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MH: Well, I was a little girl. My dad was a furniture mover and he would go out and work and my mom was a stay-at-home mom. And she would cook dinner every day for my dad. And sometimes like during the summertime she had to run some errands and she would let me start dinner and she'd always--she always showed me how to cook and how to help--and I'd always

help her prepare and I always did enjoy cooking. I mean I could sit down and read a cookbook like people read a novel and--and just, you know, do things.

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And one thing that really encouraged me to continue my skills in cooking was that my husband, he--he enjoyed eating and I don't care what I fixed, he would eat it. And if it was good he'd say "Hmm; that was good. You need to do that again." And if it wasn't good, he'd say "Well, it was all right, but you don't have to do that again. Let's do something else next time." I said, "Okay."

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So, you know, that was nice. You know, some people you let them try something and they just--they sneer at it and say, Uh-uh; I ain't eating that. I ain't putting that in my mouth." But him, anything I put in front of him he would taste it, yeah. And my children were like that also, believe it or not. They would--they would try--they had a lot of confidence in my cooking, yeah; and I said "Well, if we can do that at home maybe I can do that on the street and we can make some money." And believe it or not, it has worked; it has worked very well, yeah.

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RF: And tell me about when you first started cooking with your family were you cooking for siblings?

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MH: Yeah; my mom and my dad and for my brothers. I have three brothers and one sister, yes.

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RF: Okay; and what were your parents' names?

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MH: Alex Lewis and Celeste Lewis.

00:05:56

RF: Okay; and--and what kind of cook was your mom? What do you remember you know; what--what did she cook, how often?

00:06:04

MH: Believe it or not, my dad taught her how to cook. She didn't know how to cook. When she grew--when she was coming up, her mom died when she was five, so she was kind of raised by the older sisters or an aunt and--. So she--she didn't really learn how to cook, so my daddy taught her how to cook. And, you know, and in turn, you know, I worked--I cooked with her and along with reading cookbooks; that's how I developed my skills in cooking.

00:06:31

RF: Where were your parents from?

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MH: They were from Lafayette. Yeah; uh-hm.

00:06:34

RF: Okay; and so you also were born in Lafayette?

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MH: Yes; I was born in Lafayette and went to school here in Lafayette, uh-hm.

00:06:41

RF: Okay; what's--what dishes were you cooking when you were young at home?

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MH: Oh we cooked rice and we smothered meat--cooked meat in a pot with onions and bell pepper and some beans. You always had meat, rice, and a vegetable, yeah--be it beans or greens or whatever, but you always had meat, rice, and vegetable. And we always had that for lunch. Now at night we ate sandwiches or we had cornbread with milk or maybe biscuits or cous-cous and milk. We never ate meat and rice at night when I was coming up. My daddy did not like eating heavy like that at night, yeah.

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And then, you know, when I got married that was the most interesting thing, and my--my sister and my brothers they would sometimes come over and eat at my house because when I got married my husband I, we worked during the day so in the evening when we got home I'd sometimes fix a hot meal for us. And they thought that was--ah; that was fantastic, some meat and rice at night, wow. So they would come over and eat with us sometimes. Yeah; that was special.

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RF: Okay; and--and were--were Sunday dinners bigger or more special, more people were involved?

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MH: Well my mom always did cook a big dinner on Sundays and we all sat down at the table and had dinner together. I mean she'd do stuff like a roast or fried chicken, make potato salad, rice, you know, vegetables--all of that, sweet peas or yams and all of that. She cooked big dinners every Sunday; that was--yeah that was special, yeah.

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RF: And so when did you start working for the Lafayette School Board?

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MH: I started teaching in 1962, yeah. I taught sixth graders at that time and then I taught fifth grade and then in 1970 I started working on USL Campus at the LAP [Louisiana Before and After School Program] School. I was a supervising teacher working with student teachers and having students from the University come and observe in my classroom. I did that for what--I think 10--10 or 11 years and then I was Principal at J. Wallace James when I retired. And after I retired from there that's when we started with the restaurant.

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What happened, I'll never forget; it was in April during the Easter holidays. I had fixed Easter dinner for my family and after everybody left I sat down and with a glass of tea. And that's when I decided hey, I'm going to do this. And my husband and I, we talked about it and so

from April to June we had gotten our little building up to regulations. We had done our research, got the building set-up, you know, and got our menu together, got supplies to get--and, low and behold, on June 23, 1983 we opened our restaurant on the first day. Yes; it was unreal.

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And you know I would always think boy, you know, they say when you do five years you got it made. Well five years passed and I missed it. And low and behold, 25 years has passed and, believe it or not, I missed that too. And here I am at 28; I wonder if I'm going to remember 30.

[Laughs] I don't know. But it has really been a wonderful experience being in business. We have met a lot of nice people. We've had a lot of people help us along the way. And we--after we opened the restaurant we got involved with our stuffed bread. That was our substitute for the hamburger. And we started doing that at the restaurant and then it--I mean it snowballed into something and people were all excited about it.

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And my husband said "Well, you know maybe we could set up a plant and we can produce that and we can wholesale it--sell it to other establishments." And low and behold, we were able to get ourselves organized. We did the research; we set up the little building and started producing our stuffed breads. We started in a 600-square foot building, the little building that was the restaurant. And now we have a 4,000-square foot building where we produce our stuffed breads for wholesaling and we do some--we do the Jazz Festival in New Orleans and we've been doing that for 21 years now. Yes; and we sell a lot of breads over there, yes.

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RF: First, explain to me what a stuffed bread is for those who might not know.

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MH: Oh, okay; a stuffed bread--it's fresh bread dough stuffed with meat, sausages, cheese, and a light sprinkle of jalapenos. And over the years we've developed on that's like a pizza. It's stuffed with Italian sausage, pepperoni, mozzarella cheese and pizza sauce. And our latest creation is our crawfish stuffed bread. It's bread dough stuffed with crawfish etouffée. So it's like a meal in a package. You got your--your crawfish etouffée, your rice, and the bread is like the dinner roll, all wrapped up, all in one nice neat little package, yes.

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RF: And do you serve them for lunch at the Creole Lunch House?

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MH: Yes; our--our crawfish breads, we usually market those during--during the Lenten season, yeah. We do it during that time, but the other two, we sell those year-round, yeah.

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RF: And when did you start selling these breads or start making them?

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MH: In--in 1985; yeah, in 1985, we started with the plant where we started producing them for wholesale. And we went out and did our own little sales talks with other companies and brought them samples. And I'll never forget the first time I went out and do a sales talk, I had gone to one of the local hospitals and had spoken with the dietician and I told her about the bread. I brought

her a sample. She sat down; she ate it and she said, "Okay, I'll order 10 cases." And it was like uh, do what? [*Laughs*] You know, I mean--you know I expected her to tell me, "Well, okay; we'll give you a call and we'll place an order." Uh-uh; she ordered right then and there and it was like [*Gasps*] okay, so--. Yes; it was like that. It was really surprising.

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RF: And do you still sell them wholesale to other places?

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MH: Yes; oh yes. As a matter of fact, Lafayette General Hospital sells them every Wednesday in their cafeteria. Lady of Lourdes [Hospital] sells them one--sometimes twice a month in their cafeteria. Women and Children sell them in their cafeteria. Opelousas General Hospital and then we have a lot of convenience stores and other little restaurants that order them from our plant and we deliver to them, and then we have two wholesale companies that order from our plant and they in turn distribute the breads to their customers.

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RF: Wow.

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MH: Yes; so we have--we have grown some, yeah.

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RF: Okay; and does Lafayette have a stuffed bread culture or history or--?

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MH: I don't--

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RF: What was your first experience with stuffed bread or--?

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MH: Well it was a recipe that I had kind of collected and kind of tweaked with my own style. And really it used to be a big loaf, and as I said that was supposed to be our substitute for a hamburger. So when I would do it at home I'd make the big loaf. But then I thought about it; I says, "Well you know if I could make it like the size of a hamburger and a person can eat it for lunch." And, low and behold, this is what we did. And that's how it was created. And because the restaurant was named Creole Lunch House then the stuffed bread was Creole's Stuffed Bread. That's how it got its name--Creole's Stuffed Bread, yeah.

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RF: And how many stuffed breads do you make? Do you have numbers?

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MH: No; I just make--I make a lot of them. We sell them and I am happy about it. **[Laughs]** You know I really--you know numbers, that's something I've never really kept up with. You know, so often some people will, you know--when we first started they said "Well, how many plate lunches do you sell a day?" I said, "I don't know; I just know I'm making money and that's

good enough for me.” *[Laughs]* Or sometimes I tell them, “Well, you know once upon a time I could only buy an ice-cream cone. Now I can buy a sundae; life is getting good.” *[Laughs]* So we go from there.

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RF: And tell me about the relationship with the New Orleans Jazz Fest. How did that come about?

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MH: Believe it or not, there was a young man that came to my restaurant as a customer. And he told me about Jazz Festival. And he said, “Miss Merline,” he said, “you know that would go real good at the Jazz Festival.” I said, “Oh really?” I said, “What is the Jazz Festival?” because I really wasn’t familiar with it. So he told me a little bit about it and, low and behold, a couple years after that I decided to do a little research and find out about it.

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And, [I] did find out about it; talked with them over there and we had to do a taste test. So we made some; we brought it over there, did the taste test. They said, “Great, we’d love to have you along.” And, low and behold, they accepted our product and we’ve been there ever since. And you know, I’ve never seen that young man again. But he had moved--he told me he was moving to California but I’ve never seen him again to be able to tell him man, look at this, yes.

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RF: And who sells the stuffed breads at the booth at Jazz Fest?

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MH: I do.

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RF: Oh, you do?

00:16:45

MH: I sit at that window from opening to close and sell breads. It's--it's a seven-day event and I'm there every day at that window. And I have a lot of people, believe it or not, who come to see me, and they come to buy the breads. Some of them even call and order them after they've left Jazz Festival. But I'm there every day and they'll come and say "Ah, you're there!" I said, "I'm here; get your money." *[Laughs]* But it's--it's--I mean, it's like family. And the people around us, we've been blessed. We've been pretty much next door to the same people at the Jazz Festival over the years and it's been such a nice experience. I mean we look out for each other. They help me out.

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I can remember one year, we had gone and my husband was ill, and he could not come. And I mean they were--I mean they really--they were like State Farm, they put me in their hands and they helped us out and got--you know really, really nice; yeah.

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RF: And where is the booth located? Is it the same part every year?

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MH: It's in--we've been in the same place for 21 years in the same booth. We're in food area two and our booth number is 41. He's--yeah; 41, yeah. We're right next door to Crawfish Monica. We've been next door to them ever since we started at Jazz Festival.

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RF: Right.

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MH: They've been our neighbor; uh-hm.

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RF: And do you see some of the same people who come in for Jazz Festival?

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MH: Oh yes; oh yes. They come looking for us; yes. I mean they come year after year. Oh, I've been waiting for this, you know, and it's--it's really nice. It's a nice experience. And, like I said, I've been at that window the whole time. I'm always there; I've always been there. I sit at that window and collect money and sell breads, the whole time, the whole seven days, yeah.

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RF: So do you--you relocate to New Orleans for two weekends?

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MH: What we do, we stay there for the weekend. We stay at a hotel and we go on the grounds. We--we transport equipment and put it in the booth, and we stay at a hotel, one of the local hotels and for the whole weekend and then we come back here. We come back home and then we go back for the second weekend. And then we go back the next--the Monday and pick up all of our equipment and transport that back here to Lafayette. And that's until the following year; yes.

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RF: Well I just asked about your Jazz Fest customers. Tell me about your clientele here at the Creole Lunch House.

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MH: Oh, I tell you; let's see. They're like family; we've--we have people who come here and they've been coming here since we started business. Those are my oldie-goldies; that's what I call them. And every now and then we'll treat them to a lunch considering that they've, you know--they've followed us for so long.

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We have a--we have a very informal atmosphere here at the restaurant and really when we started the restaurant I wanted it to be a place where people could come and relax and feel like they were at grandma's for lunch. And, you know, believe it or not, I've had a few customers who come and, in talking with them, they say it's like going--it's like going to grandma's to eat. And I says, you know that was the idea behind what we were doing here.

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And that's why too as we serve our lunches, you know, it's a matter of being sure that the customer is getting what they like. You know we let them pick their vegetables. You know how some places you go to and they say, "Well you know the chicken comes with this vegetable and that vegetable." No, no, no, no; the chicken comes with the vegetable you want. You just tell me which ones you want and we'll put it on your plate. And I'll tell you what; if you need a little bit of another one, we throw that in too. Yeah; you know it's not that stiff atmosphere. We want them to feel comfortable, to be relaxed, you know.

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And we've had some people bring their friends over and sometimes we fix them what we call the Rookie Plate where we try to give them a little taste of this, a little taste of that without disrupting another serving, so that way they get the full experience of the steam table, yeah. And that's exciting, and they--and they enjoy bringing their friends over. And sometimes I tell them, "Now you come back and see us now ya hear. And you can tell your friends and your enemies about me; I'll take care of them." **[Laughs]** You know really; you know just--just making them feel good, to me that's most important to get your customer to feel comfortable, feel relaxed and enjoy their eating experience because, you know, they've been at work and they're taking a break. They want to relax; they want to get away from all the stiff stuff. And so here, we just relax and have fun and just enjoy the experience, yeah.

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RF: And tell me about the neighborhood. Why did you locate in this neighborhood?

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MH: Well, we owned a little building, the little building where we started. That was our building. My husband and I had purchased that property at an auction and at first we thought we were going to build a house on this corner. And, low and behold, after a time, we decided no; we don't want to do that. And we wind up building a tutoring center to work with children, to help them with their homework. And what we did was, we built this building and we had all kind of teaching aids and we had teachers who would--who we could contact to come in and work with children in special areas.

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Well, low and behold, about a year or so after we opened the--the tutoring center they started giving the children S's [Satisfactory] and U's [Unsatisfactory], so, you know, I mean you had to be--I mean completely out to get a U. So parents didn't really see the need, the strong need for tutoring as they did when they were getting A, B, C, and D's, so that kind of fizzled out. So we closed the--the tutoring center, and the building was still there. We rented it out to two other patrons and, when we decided to do the restaurant, then we asked them to, you know, relocate because we had some--we had a project that we wanted to do in the building. And that's when we--we did some research to find out what you had to--what we had to do to prepare our building for a restaurant. So we did all of that; got it all set up and, low and behold, so became the birth of Creole Lunch House.

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RF: And was your husband all for the Creole Lunch House for you--?

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MH: Oh yeah; oh yeah; yeah. When we started, he had a janitorial service and then after we got in--deep into the restaurant business and then the janitorial service was kind of fading out because what was happening in '83, the oil business was going down. Things were really not going very well. And people started doing in-house maintenance; you know, they would use the people on the job--you know, on the job to help clean up to keep them in the business and--and not, you know, lose them.

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So his janitorial service kind of slowed down. So we both went, you know--worked at the restaurant and got it going; yes, uh-huh.

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RF: Okay; and let's talk about the food. Did--did the recipes carry over from when you were a home cook?

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MH: Some of them did; yes. That was most interesting. You know you start a restaurant and you say okay, what do I cook? And, you know, you--you think, well I have to cook something that everybody is going to want to eat. And we started, we've been doing the chicken fricassee and the red beans and sausage, and then we purchased the rotisserie and, believe it or not, we bought that when we first started. We paid \$3,600 for that piece of equipment and that was a lot of money at that time.

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Then we had trouble getting it in the building because the door wasn't wide enough. It was like wow; they had to--I mean maneuver to get it in. We got it in. And we used--we--we did barbecue ribs and chicken in that and then we also did just a baked chicken, rotisserie chicken. I call it baked chicken. You know it's an oven so you bake it, you know. And we did fried chicken. No; not fried chicken, fried pork chops. We never fried chicken.

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RF: Why is that?

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MH: You've got to go to Popeye's or Church's to get fried chicken. I don't fry chicken. I don't know; I just never did. And a lot of people come and say, "You don't have fried chicken?" I said, "Nope; you got to go to Church's or Popeye's or Kentucky Fried Chicken. We don't fry chicken."

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RF: Do you like it? Do you make it fried chicken at home?

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MH: No. No; no, I've never done a lot of chicken frying.

00:26:18

RF: Okay.

00:26:18

MH: Now my mom used to fry chicken every Sunday.

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RF: Oh yeah; okay.

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MH: Yeah; she would fry chicken every Sunday but I never did do much chicken frying, believe it or not. I don't know; that has not been something I've done. And too, when we first started in the little restaurant, you know, the steam table, the cooking, where they sit down and eat it was all one big room. So you were like eating in the kitchen. Yeah; and it used to get hot.

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But it never bothered, yeah.

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RF: How many seats were in that first building?

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MH: Oh, I think we had maybe six tables and we had benches. We didn't have chairs. They sat on a bench, yeah. We didn't get chairs 'til we moved in here; then we were big-time. **[Laughs]**

00:27:13

RF: So would--would people just eat the plate lunch on their lap?

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MH: They would--no, no, no; we had some tables. We had some little wooden tables, but they sat on a bench at the table.

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RF: I see; oh.

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MH: Yeah.

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RF: So it was communal style.

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MH: Boy I tell you; we were comfortable, yeah. You didn't lean back after you ate. You had to lean forward, all the way forward. **[Laughs]** Yeah; we had benches when we first started, yeah, which was rather interesting, but it didn't seem to bother people at all that they sat on a bench to eat, yeah.

00:27:46

RF: And--and do you have both daily specials and items that are served every day at the Creole Lunch House?

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MH: We have some--some items we serve every day. Some are served on certain days. For example, the red bean and sausage and rice, the chicken fricassee, and the stuffed breads--that's every day. Now our stuffed baked chicken, we do that twice a week on Tuesdays and Thursdays. The barbecue ribs we do once a week; that's Thursday. We do meatball fricassee on Monday and Wednesday. We cook meatballs in a brown gravy and we serve it over rice with vegetables and then we also do the meatballs and spaghetti on Monday, yeah.

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Uh-hm; now during the season for okra, we do a smothered okra with chicken and sausage and, I tell you what; oh, they love that. I mean people come just for that on Wednesday, and when I run out they are upset with me. [*Emphasis Added*]

00:28:45

RF: And what season is that; when is that?

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MH: During the--it's usually in--in June, the okra starts coming out, yeah. And what we do is we purchase a lot of it and we put it up and then all during the year we make it. You know we--we pull it out and--and fix it and, oh, they love that. And then we do an old-fashioned pork stew with Irish potatoes in it or an old-fashioned beef stew with Irish potatoes in it. That--that's popular also.

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RF: Okay; and what are those potatoes?

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MH: Irish potatoes.

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RF: Oh Irish potatoes?

00:29:18

MH: Yeah; yeah, Idaho.

00:29:21

RF: Right, right.

00:29:21

MH: We have them too. [*Laughs*]

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RF: Right; and when--do customers reserve specials or the okra?

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MH: Well with the okra they call in early and say Miss Merline; I'm coming. Save my okra; put it aside. I say okay. That--that--they call for and in advance and then we know they are coming. So I know, hey, put that aside. Oh, yes; because we only do a certain amount of it and then after that's gone that's it. Like I tell them; we cook so much--that's not no 30 minute meal, so like I

said you got to come and get it 'cause once it's gone--it's gone. And you know I always tell my customers, "I cook what I like because if y'all don't eat it I got to eat it, so hey, come along." Yes, I tease them with that.

00:30:13

RF: Tell me how do you decide which specials are served each day? Why is Monday spaghetti day? Why is Thursday ribs day? Or how do those fit in the place in the week?

00:30:23

MH: I don't know. It just happened that this is what we did on that particular day. I don't know. It was something to fix and we did that on this day and this on that day. It really wasn't--there wasn't no rhyme or reason for the sequence. It just that's what we did on those days. Yeah; because you can't have it all--all in one day, so hey, we--we did this. And like the sausage Creole, that's a Thursday; we do that only on Thursdays, yeah. But you know, it's just--yeah, well for sure the okra we did on Wednesday, 'cause Wednesday was kind of a slow day. But I tell you what; it revs up when we have okra. Oh yeah; they come in for that. They love that smothered okra with chicken and sausage.

00:31:13

But you know, it's--it's a meal that takes so much time. People don't do much of that anymore interestingly enough. Yeah; really, you know, the kind of cooking we do, it takes time. That's not--and a lot of people don't cook like that anymore 'cause it takes too long. They don't want to take the time to do it or they haven't learned how to do it, yeah.

00:31:36

RF: Can you say more about that? How has--you opened in 1983; how has food preparation both in restaurants and at home, how have you seen it changed or change over the past almost 30 years in Lafayette and Acadiana?

00:31:53

MH: I think people do a lot of fast food eating. I don't think mama's cooked--cook at home as much as mamas used to cook a long time ago. I--I don't think they're doing much of that anymore. There's more of that stopping at the fast food and picking up something to eat--that kind of thing.

00:32:18

RF: Okay; we're back. Oh, have you seen a change in--are there more or less plate lunch houses now than there were in the early 1980s?

00:32:29

MH: I don't know. No; there are more now. Yes; I've seen a lot of new restaurants come up as--and you know I've seen a lot of new ones come up and a lot of them close. So we are blessed. And you know it's interesting; considering we are in this neighborhood and people find their way here, which I thought was very interesting. And you know when you started the restaurant, we didn't even think about location. You know it was just--we had this building; it was available. So we were going to fix it. We're going to open and see what happens.

00:33:07

And never really gave much thought to--you know how some people when they start in businesses they're looking at, oh god, I got to see where I'm going to put this because I want to be sure they got a lot of people passing by and all--you know, no. We didn't--we didn't think about that at all and, low and behold, I mean we've been here almost 28 years and believe it or not we still have some people that say I didn't know y'all were here. Yeah; we're here and you come on back and see us now, hear? Yeah; uh-hm.

00:33:37

RF: And I want to ask you a question about rice. When I was eating here just an hour and a half ago I heard you say something to a customer that I thought was really lovely and I wanted--and I wrote it down. And it's about rice and I'm going to read it and I want you to comment on it.

00:33:50

But a customer came in and he got a plate and you said, "you've got to have rice, because it ain't lunch until you've had rice on your plate."

00:34:00

MH: That's it. It ain't lunch until you have some rice. You know, when we were coming up, like I said, my mama always did cook rice. And we had rice for lunch every day [*Emphasis Added*]. I mean my dad, I'll never forget; we went to Tennessee to see my brother who was in Medical School and they don't do rice. They did green salads; they did potatoes. We stayed there three days. My daddy said, "Mama next time we come here we going to bring the rice pot." Yeah.

00:34:30

RF: [*Laughs*]

00:34:31

MH: Yes; I mean it was like you haven't eaten. The same thing when we go on vacation on my way home we got to pick up something to cook because it's time for meat and rice. Oh yeah; I mean we were brought up eating that way and believe it or not, until you've had some meat and rice and vegetables you haven't had lunch, yeah.

00:34:55

And sometimes I tease my customers. I tell them we serve rice with everything except root beer and that's because it's too sweet. [*Laughs*] But it's--it's rice; they'll come and say you don't have no potatoes? I say uh-uh; we--this is rice country, yeah. Oh yes; you got to have some rice, oh yes.

00:35:14

RF: How did you cook--did you have a rice cooker growing up or how did you cook rice?

00:35:18

MH: No; we cooked rice on the stove. You had to wash it and then you put salt in it and you would put it on the stove and let it to start boiling, and once the water starts boiling real fast you turn the fire low, put the lid on it, and let it steam. I use the rice cooker now at home, but no, when--when I started cooking--and here, we cook on the stove, the old-fashioned way. We cook rice the old way. Oh yes; no rice cookers. We don't even have a microwave over here--don't

microwave nothing. You got to cook it on the stove. Oh yeah; it's that old-fashioned stuff. Oh yes; you cook it on the stove.

00:35:55

RF: And--and have you seen your customers' consumption of rice change over the years? Are--are people eating less rice or have they ever changed?

00:36:04

MH: They're eating rice. They enjoy the rice. Now we--you know, once in a while we have somebody say "Oh, I don't want no rice." Where you from? What's the matter with you? On no; child, you can't eat without no rice. It's not going to work. My meat is not going to stay on that plate. **[Laughs]** But very seldom will we get someone who doesn't want rice on their plate. Just like this fellow came; he said, "Well I want some rice for sure." And then he went on and selected whatever else, but he said put some rice in there first and then we'll talk about the rest. Yeah, they love that rice. But, you know, there aren't too many places where you can really go and get rice and old-fashioned gravy, meat--and meat cooked in gravy. You know, you'll get jambalaya, you know that kind of stuff, but to get--you know, the Oriental give you that fried rice. But that's not the same. It's that rice and gravy and some of them will come and say put me some gravy. I want a lot of gravy. I said okay, yeah.

00:37:08

RF: How would you describe your gravy?

00:37:11

MH: It's good. **[Laughs]** It's--it's a brown gravy that we make. We--we cook our meat in the gravy. It's not--you know how some people make a gravy on the side, the pour it over the meat and say okay, here's your--. No, no, no; our meat is cooked in the gravy. Yes; so you have the--the juices flowing in the gravy and hmm, hmm, yeah like that--yes.

00:37:41

RF: What is your favorite thing to eat whether it's here at the restaurant or at home?

00:37:48

MH: My favorite.

00:37:48

RF: I mean, is it rice?

00:37:49

MH: Definitely; definitely rice, but something to go along with it, yeah. I love--really what I cook is what I like. I like those things. I mean I could--and usually after we cook I'll eat some, taste some, and I'll put me a little bit of all kinds of things on my plate and sit down. And even after I've served my customers, I'll put me a little something to eat and sit down and they say, "Boy that's the kind of plate I want." I say, "You can have it--with money you can have the whole steam table." **[Laughs]** But you know, it's--it's a little bit of this and a little bit of that. And to me that's the joy of eating, being able to get a taste of different things. And you know, they get to see what they're getting; they get to see where it's coming from. That's another thing.

00:38:38

A lot of them will come in and look at the steam table and say “Oh, I want a little bit of everything.” I say, “You ain't got the time.” *[Laughs]* Oh goodness; yeah, but it makes for a nice experience, yeah, uh-hm.

00:38:55

RF: And--we're going to take--. Okay; I was just asking a few questions about change in Lafayette over the years. Where did you grow up in Lafayette?

00:39:08

MH: I grew up in an area they call the Four Corners. Yeah, over on Ike B Street and I went to school at St. Paul's School, a small Catholic school and I went to high school at Holy Rosary Institute. And I got my Bachelors Degree in Education from USL and I got my Masters Degree at Southern University in Baton Rouge. And then I got hours beyond a Masters by going to USL at intervals. I just had, you know--well I don't know, but being out of school you just get that urge to want to go back and just take a couple of classes. And I just started taking, you know, classes beyond the Masters Degree and I've--I've lived in Lafayette all my life. And then worked in the school system here; I had 22 years in the school system in Lafayette. And--and 28 years in restaurant and food-processing; can you believe?

00:40:12

RF: Did you ever think growing up that you'd own a restaurant? Did you ever have aspirations?

00:40:16

MH: No; having a restaurant was the furthest thing--it never even--I always wanted to be a teacher and the reason why I wanted to be a teacher was because my mom was a stay at home mom. She was always home. And there were a few times when she would maybe go take the--the nuns from school shopping or take them on some errands and she was not at home when we got home. And that was a terrible experience and I always said, I want to be home with my children as much as I can. So I figured if I was a teacher then I'd be home when they were home and I'd be at work when they were at school. So that's why I wanted to be a teacher, yes.

00:40:59

RF: And you mentioned that you've never lived anywhere but Lafayette. What do you love about Lafayette; what's special about Lafayette?

00:41:06

MH: Life is great here in Lafayette. The people are wonderful. It's--it's just--it's home. Yes; and it's always great to be home, yes.

00:41:19

RF: And to dive a bit into Lafayette culture, do you speak French?

00:41:24

MH: I do a little. I learned to talk French with my mom and I had an auntie that lived in Breaux Bridge. And I would play with the children and they only spoke French. So they would tell me something and I had to go in the house, tell my aunt, and she would tell me what to say. So it was

constantly going back and forth and sometimes just you know children communicate with sign language and we were able to communicate. But I learned some French, too, I took French in high school, and just kind of, you know, talked with my mom, and--and being the oldest girl in the family, my mom would tell me things that she didn't want my younger sister and brothers to know, like if she was going somewhere or she didn't want them to know she'd tell me in French. So I would know and, you know, so I always got in on the secrets 'cause I knew how to talk French.

00:42:20

And then here at the restaurant, we've had people from France, from Belgium, from Germany--from Canada that come here and I talk French with them. I tell them that, you know, "I can say all of our food in French." And sometimes they get to going too fast. And I go, "Oh, it's been a while--. *T'arrête, t'arrête, t'arrête; c'est trop vite, c'est trop vite* [Stop, stop, stop; it's too fast, it's too fast.] [*Laughs*]

00:42:45

But usually, you know, I could tell them all the foods that we're serving in French and they enjoy that, and it's so nice when they walk in. They walk in slowly and they look at me. And I don't know; sometimes it's just something about them where you can tell they're French. And I say, "*Bon jour, comment ça va?*" And their faces just light up when they realize, oh, she can talk French. "*Oh, vous parlez français?*" I said, "*Oui, mon parle français just un petit peu et petit bien doucement.*" So, they say all right, you know; and they'll come in and I'll tell them what we're serving and they'll order, like that. It's a nice experience for 'em; yeah.

00:43:22

RF: Did both your parents speak French fluently?

00:43:25

MH: Yes; yes, they did. Both of them spoke French, uh-huh, but they didn't do a lot of talking of French to us. Believe it or not, because I'm the--of my--we're five children. I'm the only one that really talked French. The others understand it some, but they don't speak, yeah.

00:43:45

RF: And did--this--this is called the Creole Lunch House. Do you identify as a Creole? Did your parents identify as Creoles, call themselves Creole, or what does the word Creole mean to you, I should say?

00:43:55

MH: Well how we got the name Creole Lunch House, you know, it's--somewhat back in history they talked about how the--in New Orleans the--the ships would come in and dock and they unloaded and they had the Creole ladies would do the cooking for the people coming in. And the Creole ladies did all the cooking. So they--and--and they were like brown skinned women. And I said well I'm brown skinned and I'm going to cook so I guess we'll call this Creole Lunch House. And that's how we got the name; we were Creole belles like they call them out in New Orleans and so hey, this is Creole Lunch House. And that's--that's how Creole Lunch House came to be, I mean no really--we cook; we just cook. We cook to make money. **[Laughs]**

00:44:56

RF: Do--have other family members worked here, children of yours?

00:44:59

MH: Oh yeah; my--my boys, they can cook.

00:45:02

RF: Oh really?

00:45:03

MH: Yeah; as a matter of fact, my oldest son, he had a restaurant out in Houston.

00:45:08

RF: Oh what was that called?

00:45:11

MH: Creole's Louisiana Cuisine that was the name of it. And he--he was open for I think 12 years, nine years, 12 years, and what happened, they started construction on the roads where he was--where his restaurant was and because people couldn't get there, it went down, so he--he had to close because he lost business and he couldn't continue like that.

00:45:39

RF: What is his name?

00:45:42

MH: Raymond Herbert, Jr.

00:45:44

RF: Okay; and did he learn cooking from you?

00:45:46

MH: Oh yeah, oh yeah, oh yeah. Both of my boys cook. They can fix everything that we serve at the restaurant. I always did tell them if you're going to go in business know how to do everything, because some day you may be called upon to do it. Yeah, so they know how to cook. They cook just like I do and they know our recipes and they can cook it, yes.

00:46:10

RF: And did you encourage your two sons? Do you still encourage them to go into the restaurant business?

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MH: Oh well they're taking over. Yeah; at the plant, as a matter of fact, my--my oldest son recently went to the--went to LSU for the Food Service Program so that he could learn the HACCP [Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points] Program which is needed for the plant. See, we are USDA approved, so therefore we have an inspector that goes there every day and inspects our records and sees what we're doing in the building, all of that. And there are certain rules and regulations that you have to follow because you are USDA approved.

00:46:52

Now my youngest son, he's been doing it, but the oldest one because he was in Houston with the restaurant he didn't get all that training. So now he went to LSU got the training and now he's working with his brother and they're developing their skills so that they can run the plant. They know how to do the restaurant. As a matter of fact, my youngest child, he was eight when we first went to Jazz Festival and he used to sell breads at the window as a little boy.

00:47:20

As a matter of fact, one year some of his classmates, one of the parents took the children and brought them to the Jazz Festival in New Orleans on a field trip so they could see him in his booth selling bread. Can you believe? And then believe it or not, a few years--let's see; about six years--no, more than that--eight years ago they let us open a second booth in the children's area and he ran that booth. And the money that he made in the booth was used for his education.

00:47:57

RF: How old was he at that--?

00:48:01

MH: He was 18--I think 15, somewhere around there and he put the money aside and used it for education and in his Roth IRA, uh-hm, yeah.

00:48:18

RF: And at what age did you encourage them to come work here?

00:48:22

MH: Well my baby was two years old when we started the restaurant so he's been hanging around since he--yeah. Now my oldest was 16; he was in high school and he would come to the restaurant and help out. Oh yeah; we always did work together. My grandson used to come and help us pack breads in the plant. Oh yeah; he still does that--my grandson. Yeah; and the little grandchildren, we show them how to put the labels on the box. Oh yeah; we get them involved in what we're doing. It's important to have respect for it and to appreciate what we're doing. Yes, oh yes, and--and hoping down the line they'll be able to carry on you know and make a living.

00:49:05

RF: Do you think--did--well did working in the school system for so long help you in any way in the restaurant business?

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MH: I think it helped me to be a people person because I worked with children all day, all the time. You learn to--I can remember when I was teaching, I had like 38 children in the classroom. Can you imagine 38 people that you had to get to follow you all day long, because I was--I had a self-contained classroom? I taught them all the subjects; they were with me all day long. I took them to lunch. I took them to the toilet. I took them **[Laughs]**--I took them outside to play and took them to the bus and sent them home.

00:49:53

But you know--you know, you're with people all the time, so I think I learned to be a people person and in dealing--if you can get children to respond to you in a positive way you will get adults to do the same because basically everybody wants to be loved. Everybody wants to be

cared for. Everybody wants to be respected. And hey, this is what it's about. You know, being kind; you know, being helpful, being courteous, being caring, you know, and genuine care--not that artificial stuff, you know. And to me that's important, yeah.

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I even have children, some of my students; as a matter of fact, I had one come--two of them came today to see me, and they were--they were both here at the same time. I says, "Look," you know, "I taught him in fourth grade and I taught you in sixth grade." They said, Oh wow; well how old are you?" [*Laughs*] I thought that was interesting, you know. But they come here; they bring their children for me to see them, yeah. It's just really, really special and it's nice to know that I touched their lives in a way that they want to still talk with me, be there with me, talk about the things that we did when they were in my classroom. And they still remember the things we did. That to me is very special, yes.

00:51:21

RF: And what do you think your younger self would say if you know you could see into the future and see yourself running a restaurant?

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MH: Oh, I don't know; I don't know. I didn't think that way. You know that's one thing since we've been in business, I've never really--you know, how some people are in business and they want to project and they write down this and they figure this out and I've got to do this by this time? We never looked at business that way. We enjoyed the moment. We were successful on this day; we made this much--good. Okay; let's see what we're going to do the next day. It's not, you

know, we didn't build a business on, oh you know, by this time I've got to have--I have to have been able to sell this many plate lunches or I got to be able to have done this. No; what I did and done is good. It's done; let's see what else we can do.

00:52:20

And it's--it's just been--just experiencing and enjoying it, not worrying about, you know oh, I got to do this or I got to do that. And we never grabbed at everything. It's, you know, hey, if we felt we wanted to do it, we did it. If we didn't want to we didn't do it. And, you know, when we started the business, financially we prepared ourselves for it. So in other words, we had gotten a lot of our bills out of the way. We didn't have any credit card debts--any of that. So you know, it gave us a chance to really relax and enjoy the experience. I was retired, so I got retirement money. My husband had--and plus we had our insurance from being retired. I carried my insurance with me, so you know, we had all that and my husband had his little business, and we lived with the money we made. And we just enjoyed the experience. So whatever happened--happened; it wasn't, you know, oh my god. We didn't make enough today. We're not going to be able to pay the bills tomorrow. No, no; that was never that problem. We financially positioned ourselves to be able to survive the way we were living and to be able to sustain ourselves until we could build it up and if not, then we knew we had an alternative. And I think that helped also. We knew that any time this didn't work, hey, we'll go back to where we came from. You know, I could go back into the school system any time and be okay, you know. So there wasn't that stress of, you know, if this doesn't work what am I going to do? You know, where am I going to go? Yeah; so we didn't have that problem, and I think that helped us a great deal. We were able to really relax and enjoy what we were doing, yeah.

00:54:08

RF: And why did you choose--what do you think the importance of plate lunches are to Lafayette and Acadiana?

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MH: Well people like eating meat and rice and gravy 'cause a lot of times this is what you come up with. But then, you know, nowadays parents are so busy, you know, they don't have as much time for cooking. So when you can get some this is great. You know, and too with the restaurant, we're only open five days a week and we only do lunch. We're closed for holidays. I tell my customers; I was a teacher. I don't work on holidays and I don't work on weekends either. And I told them, I said I thought about trying the summer, but I said I think that's too long. You're going to starve and I don't want you to starve, so I open during the summer. *[Laughs]*

00:55:02

But like for Christmas, we close between Christmas and New Year's. Yeah; I've always done that and my customers know that. Don't go over there because Merline ain't there.

[Laughs] They--I mean, you know, we've always done that. And Labor Day, I do not open on Labor Day because the first year I opened nobody came, not even my husband. That was serious.

[Laughs] Ever since then I said no more; I never open on Labor Day. Can you believe? I mean nobody came--nobody. I stayed in that restaurant all day by myself. Yeah; so no Labor Day, yeah.

00:55:43

RF: And what--maybe just one or two final questions; what makes a good plate lunch?

00:55:49

MH: Well we season our food and I think that makes a difference. It's not abusive seasoning; but it's--it's seasoned and I mean, you know, you take a bite and it really tickles the tongue and it excites the mouth and--and you know, it's just like wow. And it's so interesting to see people who come in here and they're new and they sit down and we have to take the salt and pepper shakers off the table because what was happening, they sit down, and you know they start--. We said, "Oh no; don't do that." I said, "We just put that on the table so it can look like a restaurant." But after that we had to stop making it look like a restaurant because we had to take it down because they were messing up their lunch.

00:56:34

So what we did, you know, it's interesting, like I was saying; to see them they'll sit down and they'll take a bite and go yum, and I go, "I've got it!" [*Laughs*] I got them. But you know, it's just so special and you know our food is different. Like I said, it's seasoned and, you know, there's something about the chemical reaction in food when you season it before you cook it. I don't know there's something--compared to just pouring salt on top. That's not the same; yeah it's not the same. But they enjoy the seasoning and, like I said, it's not abusive seasoning. It's just exciting, yeah.

00:57:20

RF: Well I think that might be a good place to end in case--unless you want to add anything else?

00:57:26

MH: No; I think you've asked some very good questions and I hope people listening to that will want to come over and visit. And we would welcome them.

00:57:36

RF: Great; and I'm going to see you at Jazz Fest in just six weeks. I'm going--

00:57:39

MH: All right; great, great we'll be there. Please do come to see me.

00:57:41

RF: Okay.

00:57:42

MH: Okay.

00:57:43

RF: Merline, I want to thank you very much.

00:57:44

MH: All right; you're welcome.

00:57:47

[End Merline Herbert Interview]