

RANDY LEPARD
Lep's BBQ & Ribs – Pontotoc, MS

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Location: Lep's BBQ & Ribs – Pontotoc, MS
Interviewer: Amy Evans Streeter
Length: 1 hour, 5 minutes
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs
Project: Southern BBQ Trail - Mississippi

[Begin Randy Lepard - Lep's BBQ Interview]

00:00:01

Amy Evans Streeter: This is Amy Evans Streeter for the Southern Foodways Alliance on Thursday, June 3, 2010. I'm with Randy Lepard of Lep's BBQ in Pontotoc, Mississippi, and we are in his backyard at his home. And Mr. Lepard, if you would please say your name and what you do for a living.

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Randy Lepard: Randy Lepard; I am a retired teacher and a barbecue restaurant owner.

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AES: And can I ask you to share your birth date for the record, please?

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RL: March 28, 1957. I'm 53.

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AES: All right. Are you a native of Pontotoc?

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RL: My—both of my parents are natives of Pontotoc. I was born in Louisville, Kentucky, and was there until I was an eleventh grader in school. Then I graduated from Pontotoc [High School] in [nineteen]’75.

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AES: May I ask what made your parents decide to move back here?

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RL: They were in business, and they just thought they needed to come—get back down here for some particular reason, so we moved.

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AES: What kind of business were they in?

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RL: My father was in the construction business, and he had a small company up there. And the economy turned or whatever else, and he just brought a lot of his equipment and everything else back down here and started his business down here.

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AES: Okay. And then did you go to State or are you just a State fan—Mississippi State?

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RL: I'm a State graduate. I went to Itawamba Community College over here for two—a couple years and then went to Mississippi State in Education and got a degree in Industrial Arts in the education area and taught school for twenty-five years, and to supplement my salary I opened up a barbecue business.

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AES: I know you to need supplement those state salaries. But could you tell us a little bit about your time in education, and was your first teaching job back here at home in Pontotoc?

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RL: No, it was in Lee County over in the Tupelo area. I was hired in Verona in [nineteen]’83, and one of my good friends was hired at the same time. He was the coach, so we coached together and—and taught together for probably eleven, twelve years, and then he moved to another school. And things changed around or whatever else, and I taught basic carpentry, I taught part of Industrial Arts, I taught some other courses—seventh, eighth, and ninth graders. So it’s changed. My last year it was—Career Discovery was the class. So it’s modified around and did this and that, but my love was doing the barbecue.

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AES: One more question before we get into barbecue. I know you’re anxious to get there. But what made you decide to go into education?

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RL: Well, actually, I was going into construction technology or civil engineering, and my last semester, I sort of got on probation [*Laughs*] after one degree. And you go back after another degree taking algebra and calculus and Fortran [programming language] and two or three other courses. Eighteen [credit] hours started kicking my butt, so I just fell back to the degree I had. And my wife at the time was finishing up, so we thought we’d go to work versus whatever.

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AES: And you said you coached for a while; what did you coach?

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RL: Junior high football and basketball and track.

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AES: All right. So what year did you start teaching, and what year did you open Lep's BBQ?

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RL: I taught school—I started teaching school in [nineteen]’83 and I opened up the restaurant business or the small barbecue takeout for—on weekends in the beginning in [nineteen]’96, Labor Day.

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AES: Labor Day of ’96. So was it something that you had—tell me what inspired you to open a barbecue place in addition to the fact that it would supplement your—your state salary.

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RL: Well we were—we were big baseball fans at Mississippi State, and they have a Left Field Lounge, and there’s about 150 to 200 grills around the outside of the fence [where people tailgate during baseball games]. And some of my friends and I grilled out every weekend they had a home game, and we got pretty good at it. And everybody said, well, “You need to go into

the restaurant business.” I said, “Sure, sure.” I said, “I need some partners. Come on, come on.” “Oh no, no.” Anyway, I was the only one that took it—took advantage of it and here I am today.

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AES: So would you say you learned what you know about barbecue tailgating at State?

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RL: Yes, at the Left Field Lounge.

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AES: So can you explain what that education was like?

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RL: It was—the education of barbecue? Oh it was just wonderful. You know, there’s so many things to cook down there, and we tried everything and experimented. I mean everything we could cook on the grill we did. We’d have people come by. We did barbecue, and we’d barbecue oysters when we had them. We’d do drunk chickens and different—mushrooms, vegetables, just everything that would grill.

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AES: Now was anybody taking a smoker down there at that time or was it strictly grilling?

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RL: It was pretty much—we saw some smokers, but it was mostly grilling.

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AES: And then at that time, too, when you were learning about barbecue, was there good barbecue in Starkville that was popular—and/or Pontotoc?

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RL: There was barbecue places here and there. You know, your standard side-of-the-road-type barbecue that was always—always excellent. I've never had any bad barbecue; it's always a little different, a little different sauce, a little different preparation, but it's all good. Just like mine. Mine is different from somebody else's.

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AES: But was there maybe like a standard that you had in your mind that you were trying to reach as you were getting going?

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RL: Well, Mr. [Don] Mallard, who I bought the cooker from, was a [Mississippi State] Bulldog, too, and he taught Ag[riculture] down in South Pontotoc. Mr. Don showed me and a couple of friends how to cook for a Bulldog gathering, alumni Bulldog Club function, and we would cook barbecue. And he showed us how to do it and—on his cooker—and we took it from there. We cooked numerous other times on that cooker, and then, after a while, I purchased it from him and started my business.

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AES: So tell me about “Old Faithful” back there, the first smoker that you started using and describe it as you were describing it to us a little while ago.

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RL: Oh, well, it’s a big, old eight-foot metal smoker. It’s—originally, it was probably an engine container. It’s about three-eighths of an inch thick. We welded two of them—Mr. Mallard welded two of them together, and he used to have a come along to raise the top off because it was so heavy to raise up. But it had a water pan in it, about a six-inch water pan that covered the whole surface of the grill. And it probably would cook forty or fifty butts.

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He used to use it to do different election gatherings. I think he said he had over 100 half-chickens on there at one time. There is a little second level, so you can see it’s large. And we’ve put a fire at both ends, and you regulate the doors to control the heat with a big thermostat gauge, and you put so much wood or so many coals or—to control the heat.

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AES: About how much do you think that thing weighs?

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RL: Oh, I don’t know—as much as a car. It’s—it’s a couple thousand pounds.

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AES: So was Mallard getting out of the business when you bought it?

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RL: No, he was a retired Ag[riculture] teacher at the time, and then he was not necessarily getting out of the business, but he wanted somebody to pass his cooker along to that would—would use it and would enjoy it, and he was getting of age where he didn't want to actually do it—do it very much anymore.

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AES: And did you know what you were getting into when you got a hold of that thing?

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RL: Uh, it took—it took several times to learn how to do it right. And on rainy days it's contrary like anything else. It takes longer to cook because of the temperature loss, so no, it's—it's—it was a big monster.

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AES: Did Mr. Mallard teach you some of the ropes of—of using that cooker before you took it home?

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RL: Oh, absolutely. He told me how to control the heat and put the water in the pan and check the temperature on it, periodically adjust the doors to control the temperature, shut the doors to smother and then open it up to make the fire hotter, how much wood to put into it. It was—and he used to use a spade or a shovel to retrieve the butts off of it because it's pretty good—and he's

a short man and it was hard for him to get them off, so he would sanitize his shovel in the fire in the coals before he'd take them off so—.

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AES: And once you started using it, did Mr. Mallard come and eat with you a lot?

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RL: Oh, absolutely. Always. Always. He's—he still comes by and eats, him and his son, so—. It's—it's a treat to see him come in, and we get to visit and he asks how the cooker is doing. And I tell him it's doing just fine—at that time.

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AES: So when you—when you got a hold of that giant cooker, that's when you had that first little shed. Can you tell us about where that stand was and how you came to build it there?

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RL: Well the stand was up to—towards the entrance of Wal-Mart. It was the—sort of a vacant lot and the cooker was stood out there in front of it. My building was only an eight-by-fourteen with a little door sideways in the building, small overhang, and you'd just unlock the door and flop it down, and I just used a can of spray paint to spray "open" on the front.

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Well then, eventually, I—to avoid insects and weather I put a screen door up and then—and then eventually Plexi-glass on there and had a little sliding window, where you'd see the customers come up to the window. So it's strictly takeout. Had a door at the end. And we would

prepare their food and—and then pass it out the window, or on rainy days the girls would want me to come bring it to their car for them so they wouldn't get wet. And I would be gladly—glad to do that.

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AES: So what made you want to open on Labor Day weekend, just you knew it was going to be big business?

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RL: Yeah, it's the beginning of fall and September football season and everything. That's usually a tailgate food that everybody enjoyed, and the fall is barbecue all the way through November, so—. Yeah, I just thought it would be good.

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AES: Had you told a bunch of folks that you were planning on doing this?

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RL: Oh, yeah. They all knew I was—the first weekend was huge. It was—and that was just a Friday and Saturday. **[Laughs]** Another story is, part of that—my opening weekend is the—the fruit stand, which is close to me, was opening a service station there next to my business. And, my opening weekend—that I was hoping to have a lot of folks there and every—everything, he was cooking barbecue and giving it away! So I said, "My gosh." I said—I said, "What are you doing?" I asked him, I said, "Kerry, what are you doing?" He said, "Hey, we're only going to do it for a couple of weeks. It's okay. It will be all right."

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Well his—his person cooking the meat or his philosophy of doing barbecue worked against him because when we take our Boston butt, we'll take the bone out and the skin off and—and try to get as much fat off of it as possible. And in his particular case, he pulled the skin off of the bone and chopped all that fat in there with the meat, which is great flavor, if you want to, but as you're serving it up it—it can get a little greasy and have a lot of fat and blubber in it. So when he was calling everybody to “come get you some barbecue plates out here,” and he was preparing them, he'd have stacks of plates ready to pass out to people as they came. Well, when they'd come and get them, a barbecue plate with some beans on it and some barbecue on a roll, when they'd open up the plate, there was a big old pile of grease in the bottom of the plate, which turned everybody off.

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So the next following weekend I had a great deal of business because they weren't going to eat his greasy barbecue. **[Laughs]** And then they found out that I had very—what do you call it—health-conscious barbecue, if you want to say it like that. They realized it wasn't fat and it wasn't—and it was all meat. And it was lean meat and they—then my business bloomed from there—word of mouth. I do very little advertising; it's just all word of the mouth.

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AES: Was there any other barbecue here in Pontotoc when you opened?

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RL: Not really. Some at different stores where they already bought it from like Sysco or a food service company, and it already had sauce already built into it or mixed into it. That's not the

same kind of barbecue some people are interested in. They want the barbecue and the sauce separate so that they—they can use my sauce or use their own sauce at home.

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AES: And now when you opened that original stand, were you just doing butts or were you doing a bunch of other stuff, too?

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RL: Our three things we did, we did smoked chickens, ribs, small-boned ribs, and the Boston butts.

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AES: Pork ribs?

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RL: Pork ribs, no beef at the time. This is Mississippi.

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AES: I know. I've got to ask. A lot of people like those beef ribs. And were you doing sides originally, too?

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RL: Baked beans, coleslaw, and potato salad and chips. That was it.

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AES: And where did—where did all of this kind of passion for cooking and—and recipes and stuff just start—this business come from? Are you a big cook at home? Or your family, are they big cooks?

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RL: Well, I helped out in the kitchen. I did this and that. And me and the wife would tend to work together in cooking and so forth. I'd help my mama every once in a while at—at her house, but mostly it all came from the grilling out at—at Mississippi State.

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AES: Uh-hmm. So you just made what you liked?

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RL: Yeah, that's right.

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AES: So tell me about your business at the—originally at the stand. And were you getting a lot of drive-thru business, I mean people from out of town, or was it mostly locals?

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RL: Mostly locals. You would have some people drive through occasionally. Since we're so close to Tupelo, most of the people in Tupelo, there were several barbecue places in Tupelo that they picked their barbecue up. Didn't do very much catering at the time because the—the more familiar or the—the established barbecue restaurants did most of the catering, so mostly local,

friends of mine, and then people that saw the cooker and decided to come by. You know, you'd have an out-of-towner or somebody in the area that would stop and try you. And just the word of mouth passed along to everybody. People knew that I was open on the weekends, and they'd be making it a point to come by there and get something to eat.

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AES: Uh-hmm. And let's talk about that schedule of being open on the weekends. You originally were just opened on Friday and Saturday?

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RL: Just Friday and Saturday. I had somebody work—work for me during the daytime while I was going to school, and then I'd come in after school after picking up supplies and this and that—whatever and—and I'd run it until I closed at like 8:00 or 8:30 [at night].

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AES: Now did you decide early on that it was worth it—all this work to—to keep a barbecue restaurant? Was it helping pay the bills?

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RL: Well, it was slow at times, and it was hard work at times. It was hard to get up early in the morning before I went to my bus route to drive the school—school bus and to teach school. It was tough to do all that and not make very much money or—. But you got to wait for a business to take off. If you—you have to stay in business for more than a year to establish your clientele

of people, and then it just got more and more as I stayed in business. More and more people came—came and got it and talked about it. I advertised just a little bit, not a whole lot.

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AES: Were you also kind of in the back of your mind looking at the future about when you might retire from school and that you'd have something to do?

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RL: At the time I was thinking that, but it was a long way off. I was just really sort of trying to supplement my salary, since teaching school in Mississippi is sort of a—on a lower income. But yeah, I was thinking that I may have something to do. Later—later on in business, as I got closer to retirement, I knew for sure that's what I was going to do. So the last three or four years before I retired, yes, I was planning on opening a restaurant, and I have, and—and the steps—the procedure of going to there has—has really bloomed off and been rewarding.

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AES: And tell me the steps to the restaurant. After you had the stand, you got another building and another cooker.

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RL: Yeah, I stayed in the little stand probably six or seven years, and then I built the—a sixteen-by-twenty [foot] building—that spot where it was at before—so that people would be familiar. They'd see me building it as—as they're coming to get barbecue. And I was in that building, oh, it seemed like it was a monster, great big kitchen, little area to come in to get out of

the rain, and we could watch the ballgame on the TV. And the days I couldn't go to the ballgame, I could watch it on TV when I had to work on the weekends.

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And I tried to make it like a little bar setting in case I wanted to have a cold beer, I did outside on the picnic table. And we'd look through the door to see the TV because [*Laughs*] a lot of times it was hot in the building. But yeah, more and more business came to the other one. It's a cute little building but as—let's see, as I was getting closer to retirement—in fact, about a year—I built my new restaurant in [20]’07, summer of ’07, and didn’t just—built the building as I did the other one, so people would say, “Whoa, is that your restaurant over there? When are you moving over there?” [I’d say,] “I’m going to move over there in a year.” So I left it over there. It had the big sign on the front there, so people would drive by and say, “Yeah.” So I took my time, wasn’t in any hurry. Built the building—the restaurant, it’ll probably sit probably forty to fifty and air-conditioned, where my other one was air-conditioned but it—not really. People coming in and out was exchanging—would—would not let it get cold.

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But the—I opened it up in January. I didn’t want to interfere with my Christmas of [20]’08, and was opening the restaurant [*Phone Rings*]—.

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AES: I can pause it. *[Recording is paused for approximately two minutes]* All right. We’re back after Mr. Lepard took a phone call, and we were talking about you opening the new restaurant in early 2009.

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RL: Yeah, so we got it open. I helped build her. I had my carpenter come in, and it's a wood-frame building. We poured the concrete and put the wood frame up and then put metal on the outside. And it's a tin roof. It's one sloping building, but it's got tin on the inside of the roof or on the ceiling, tin on around the outside. I wanted it to be sort of like a sports bar where—just because we don't have beer in Pontotoc County doesn't mean that we can't enjoy the surroundings. A big screen TV on two different walls; I got the SEC flags, the Western Division on one side and the Eastern Division on the other. I got memorabilia across the—the front wall of—of good times I've had and friends that I've been around, competitions I've went to—barbecue competitions. But, I moved in there in January. I got everything in there, and I've been in there since.

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I actually taught school that spring we were open, and customers kept on coming over there, "Oh, this is so nice, so nice." And the business got bigger and bigger and more customers coming in. There were more of them sitting down and eating inside, and they just enjoyed the restaurant more. And the takeout was fine; they enjoyed that, but this was just another step of success that I moved towards. And it's really paid off, and it's really, really successful.

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AES: So did your—you have an awfully big menu now that I know kind of changes per day and per your mood, but—it seems, but did that—did you really expand the menu when you moved to the big place, and can you tell us what all is on it?

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RL: Yeah, it's just, you know, from smoked chicken, ribs, and barbecue, which I do all the time now. I moved to sausage, polish sausage, smoked sausage. I added more sides from our slaw, potato salad and beans (we have more of a country-style), some type of pinto bean or a black-eyed pea, cabbage—boiled cabbage almost every day—macaroni and cheese, some type of a rice dish like jambalaya or dirty rice, corn on the cob. We try to have a dessert like a peach cobbler on a Thursday and a chocolate cobbler on Friday; banana pudding pretty regular. French fries—I had lots of calls for French fries before, but I tried to avoid any type of fried food when I was in the other business because—or in the other buildings because frying stuff is just—wasn't where I was at. If they wanted a hamburger, they had to go uptown. If they wanted French fries, they had to go uptown. I just had a short menu. I did just what I could do at the time, and now I'm able—capable of doing more and that's the reason I expanded the menu: for giving people more of a choice of what they wanted with their barbecue.

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AES: Do you find that's paid off?

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RL: Oh, yeah. Yeah. I still have to guess sometimes what people want. Sometimes they eat a lot of macaroni, sometimes they don't; sometimes they eat the cabbage and sometimes they don't. So, you know, that's just typical of people's tastes and what they want day to day.

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On Fridays we have a grill day where I will grill pork chops, which is another pork item, bologna; a lot of folks like smoked bologna, which is good. I'd grill the bologna because we did it at the baseball game at Starkville. We do hotdogs. Sometimes we do hamburgers, but I try not

to do hamburgers very much because they—it gets into another area—menu. I'm in the barbecue business and not necessarily in the hamburger business. But yeah, it's—it's spread out and the customers like it a lot, and they just really can't get that type of food anywhere else in town. So they flock to me on a Friday for grilled food.

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AES: And you have brisket on the menu now, right?

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RL: I do have brisket on there and—which is a beef and it sells very well but not—I have—I have certain customers that come in for the brisket and it's—and it's very good and—but it's—I don't get the big—that many calls for it, so I probably make about two. I cook about two briskets a week—weekend or week—for three days and a lot of times I have some left over.

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AES: Now let's talk about barbecue in Mississippi because I want to get your thoughts on what barbecue in Mississippi is and also your ideas about what you're doing because, you know, we're talking about pork being so [prevalent in] Mississippi and now beef, to me, is real Texas barbecue, and you were grilling some boudin [pork and rice sausage] the other day, and so there are all these other kinds of different regional items that are creeping on your menu, and I just would like to get your thoughts on that.

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RL: Well the boudin just happened to be on the grill the other day because a friend of mine came in from Louisiana and brought me some crawfish, and he always brings me a little boudin, so I was grilling it up for that special occasion. So it's usually not on there, and I usually don't buy it. But it was pretty tasty when I was snacking on the grill with it.

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But the expanded menu with beef and everything is just people sometimes don't like pork, or, as their doctor says, "Don't be eating the pork because it will run your pressure up," high blood pressure or whatever. And some people, it does. Some people—don't. And just beef is just a little different choice they have, so—.

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AES: Now what do you—if you had to say what Mississippi barbecue is, do you think that there's something that really signifies a state tradition of barbecue?

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RL: Hmm, Mississippi barbecue. Well, if you drive down the road and you see a black cooker out in front of a business smoking, ninety-nine times out of 100, they're smoking pork. They're smoking Boston butts or shoulders or something like that to make pork barbecue—pulled barbecue, chopped barbecue or something to that effect. And that—that basically is Mississippi barbecue, and it's pork. And it's just—I know Texas has their beef, and they try not to do much pork, and that's just a tradition they had. They have more cattle out there in the old times and Mississippi had more pigs, so not necessarily a pork-poor state but a different type of animal, so Mississippi barbecue would be pork.

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AES: Would you say that there are any similarities to any barbecue, say, in Alabama or—I know Memphis is its own kind of animal, but are there similarities in Mississippi barbecue and Memphis or anyplace else?

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RL: No, it's pretty much—it should be the same. It's all in how you prepare it, whether they use an open pit with hickory—hickory wood or some type of a hard oak wood, pecan wood. A lot of folks use fruit trees—apple wood—just to give it a different flavor. But mostly it's hickory. In Mississippi that's where the tree is abundant. Again, out in Texas, the—a lot of times they'll use the mesquite, which is—has a little more bite to it and gives it a different flavor also. So Tennessee, Tennessee barbecue, Alabama barbecue, supposedly it's all the same. Everybody should be able to cook a [pork] butt ten or eleven hours, and, whether they put seasoning on the butt or whether they smoke it black with a stronger smoked flavor to it, it's—it's all pretty similar. It all—I think it—I believe it all comes down to the barbecue sauce, how the sauce blends or marries into the—with the—the meat.

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AES: So you would say that the sauce is as important as—as the meat?

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RL: Absolutely. Absolutely. Some people like a hot sauce or we—I don't particularly make a hot—a hot sauce barbecue sauce. I have one kind of sauce. I'll use a Cattleman's Barbecue

Sauce and mix other things in with it and have some vinegar and some syrup to give it more of a tang-wang flavor and—.

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AES: What is a tang-wang flavor? **[Laughs]** You're going to have to describe that.

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RL: Well it's a—the vinegar gives it a—it has a sweet—it has slightly a sweet flavor to it because of the syrup, but then the vinegar gives it a bite and gives it like a wang. So, and it thins it down, so it's not real—not a thick barbecue sauce where you—like pasty or—or thick. But yeah, this—it all depends, you know. I put red pepper or Cajun seasoning in mine, black pepper in my sauce and lemon juice and hot sauce and—and vinegar, a portion of it and then—then I mix it up. And I don't cook my sauce. I just pour it in—into a container and mix it up, usually with the Cattleman's and different things and just shake it up good.

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Some people cook theirs down and that gives it more of a—more of a blend or whatever else. It's just never occurred to me to have to cook mine. People liked it just like it was, so I didn't want to float the—rock the boat any—with what was working. If they liked it, I didn't want to change it up.

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AES: And what made you decide to use Cattleman's to use as a base—anything?

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RL: It's what Mr. Mallard used. He—he more or less used a cheap barbecue sauce and added stuff to it, and I started using Cattleman's because it was accessible to me. And Memphis in May [barbecue competition] always used it up there, and it was a chosen barbecue sauce for them. Even though Corky's [Bar-B-Que sauce] was up there, it was too sweet for me.

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AES: Okay. And so let's talk about—you were talking about wood a minute ago. So I wanted to go back, if we could, to your original cooker here. And you were using hickory when you were cooking with that?

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RL: I do—hickory. A lot of barbecue has—gets people indigestion. They have a little heartburn or whatever in their throat when they're eating their barbecue. Well that's mostly from your sap because your hickory is not dried out properly. You want to dry your hickory to at least—for at least six months. A lot of times I'll get hickory from the Amish down here, down below town here, and I got to let it sit for about six—six months for it to pull all the juice out of it. And but that's where that comes from for people that doesn't know any difference in putting a fresh hickory stick on a—a fire, definitely gives it—definitely a more stronger flavor and it will give you heartburn.

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With mine, it's the bark of the hickory that gives it the smoked flavor. The inner part of the hickory tree doesn't necessarily give it the bark; it just makes a nice hard wood coal. So a lot of folks use the pecan wood. Some people can use pecan shells when they're doing nuts or whatever else; you can just take a handful of pecan shells and put on a fire, and it will give it a

smoked effect, too, the same difference—just the bark is going to give it the flavor versus the wood part. I use some red oak occasionally and just because of—for a hard—for charcoal or a—it holds good coals, so I'll mix it up sometimes this and that. Sometimes if I get a fruit tree, I'll throw some fruit in there. Usually, it's just a mix, so all of mine taste about the same.

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AES: Are you seasoning your meat before you put it on?

00:35:33

RL: No, I don't season my meat. I just let the smoke do the flavoring for me, and then when I pull it and chop it off, chop it up—and another reason that I chop it up is some people will pull their barbecue. Well most of the time, if you've smoked the barbecue, your Boston butt or whatever you have, smoke is going to penetrate for about a half-inch. And you'll have that flavor or a smoke ring around your butt. When you start peeling it off, you'll see—be able to see the smoke ring.

00:36:08

Well, by pulling it the inner—the inner part of your butt doesn't have very much smoked flavor to it. It's just like a pork roast you put in the oven. So by chopping mine up, I chop the flavor into the meat so with every bite you get. On a jumbo sandwich you're getting a smoked flavor in your meat. By pulling it, a lot of times you might not have as much flavor on the inner parts of those muscle fibers and the meat part of it as you would on the outside of it.

00:36:46

AES: So can we go back and get a timeline of—you had the shed and then the building and then now the restaurant and then how those—how your different cookers were associated with each one of those businesses—parts of your business?

00:37:05

RL: Sure. In the first one, in my first building in '96 I had the—the big metal box that I smoked with, and, like I said, built two fires on both ends and it boiled. I had a water pan, and it boiled and basically smoked and steamed the butts, which worked great, and I established my business with it, and it had great flavor. I probably had that machine and worked on that machine probably for near nine or ten years.

I actually bought a business out that had gone out of business, another barbecue place, and bought chairs and tables, and he basically left. I bought everything cheap, and it included his old hickory rotisserie grill or smoker.

00:38:08

I actually had the smoker in my garage for probably a year before I decided to—that the gas and the—my all-wood cooker versus the gas cooker I sort of had negative—negative thoughts about a gas cooker. But after testing it when I was at my second building—I tested it with both cookers to compare for two weeks in a row. The butts looked the same, the same amount of wood, the same cooking time, flavor-wise. I did sort of a customer satisfaction thing or survey to see if they could tell the difference because I tried it, and I couldn't tell the difference. I wanted to make sure they had—was tasting it. So after two weeks I retired my old metal one and started using the other one because there—there wasn't any difference, except for a lot of extra time and trouble that I had used to use on the metal one of controlling the heat with the doors and taking longer to cook and the metal one was not insulated.

00:39:29

This wonderful rotisserie grill I have now, which is the same one, is insulated and has a thermostat on it. I can put my butts on it by about seven o'clock at night, and they're ready at seven o'clock the next morning. And I don't have to do anything to it. I put the wood in the wood pit and it gives a—a wonderful smoked flavor to it, and if I run out of wood in the middle of the night the gas will kick on and keep the temperature at a certain level so the temperature stays the same throughout the evening. And I just pull the butts off the next morning, and I get a full night's sleep.

00:40:10

AES: So it's less baby-sitting. Is it also more quantity that you can cook on the new one?

00:40:14

RL: Nah, I can cook—I can cook fifty butts on the other one but I can—I mean I can cook fifty butts. I cooked fifty butts last night on there, so—. About the same amount of food or ribs or whatever I can cook on there as I did the other one, but this is just so much more convenient and easy and—and the temperature is easy to control. And I don't use—I don't use near the wood I did on the other because of the temperature loss, and controlling the temperature is a big deal with your barbecue, whether it gets tough or not tough, a constant—constant temperature.

00:40:51

AES: And so what about—you were talking earlier about people—when you had the stand, people seeing your rig out there and your smoker and just pulling over because it's, you know, this roadside stand? Do you think—you know, you said you haven't lost any of the taste of your

barbecue, but what about that public perception? Do you think that that's been lost at all with this different kind of cooking?

00:41:13

RL: Well, being in the business as long as I have and, again, most of my customers come from local people that are familiar with me, and—and the way people talk and the advertising is not a whole lot, they see the building and they hear about my barbecue in the—in the region now—not necessarily just locally. And they know that there's barbecue over here, and they come by and get it.

00:41:39

They just—since it's behind the building on given days they can still smell it. And of course on Fridays when I'm grilling they see me on the front porch, and it's just intoxicating when they come in the door.

00:42:00

AES: *[Laughs]* Because I know that, you know, when I'm just driving around and if I see a—a pile of wood and a plume of smoke, then I'm going to stop, you know, and I—I know that grilling does that same thing, but you're just—would you say mainly working on—on word of mouth and that's what's bringing people your way?

00:42:18

RL: Established business that I've had for—well let's see, this is 2010. That will be what—fourteen years—fourteen years of business and people I've met and people coming back and being satisfied is—is the being consistent with your barbecue. I'm sure I can't please everybody;

it's just a matter of—I get some complaints every once in a while. [*Laughs*] I remember when I was going on vacation, and the girl working for me had sold two slabs of ribs to the man, and he brought them back and said there were some—there were some type of little grub worms in his ribs. Well I was on vacation, and she was trying to explain it to me. I said, “Well, give him his money back or offer him to more slabs of ribs or whatever else.” But when I inspected the ribs it wasn’t grub worms; it was ligaments that run through small-bone ribs. They were—he just was confused on what he was seeing versus part of the meat itself. They were perfectly good. I ate them the next day. [*Laughs*]

00:43:31

AES: [*Laughs*] So how has it been adjusting to this new big restaurant with the dining room and everything, and how has that changed kind of your mindset about being a barbecue—in the barbecue business?

00:43:40

RL: Oh, it’s been wonderful having more customers, making more money. It’s just—and the—again, the barbecue is cooked the same way, so they’re coming inside enjoying the air-conditioning, and the lunch rush is huge. It’s—and since I’m only open three days a week, I’ll allow them to go anywhere else in town on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday to get anything else they want. They can go to Subway; they can go to Kentucky Fried Chicken; they can get a pizza. They can wherever they want to—other restaurants in town—but I almost guarantee that they’re on a schedule for barbecue either Thursday, Friday, or Saturday. And, if the wife works, she’s not going to cook on Friday or Saturday, so that—one of those days are going to be a barbecue night.

00:44:30

AES: And tell me—tell me about being the man behind Lep's and how that—we were talking earlier at the restaurant about people like to see the owner when they go to a place, and I know you're always there and you have a big personality and—and what about that you like and what about that people depend on.

00:44:47

RL: Any small business that they are—especially with—you're dealing with the public and starting as small, as I did, most customers want to come see the owner. They want to see Lep; they want—"Where's he at?" If I'm not there or I'm out giving an interview or something, and they come in they will—or if I'm cutting grass or I'm out of town—wherever, "Where is Lep? Why ain't he here working? He's working y'all girls too hard." They're going to give me hell if I'm not there, so—but they want to see me. They want to know that I'm there, and I have to be there to—to touch stuff to make sure it's done correctly the way I want it done. Sometimes, even though you have trained help that knows what they're supposed to do on any given day, they still might not do it exactly the way you do it.

00:45:48

So, again, I've thought about franchising and opening up another restaurant somewhere else, but, unless I can touch it at least once or twice a day and be there to be seen, a small business—the owner—people want to see the owner at a small business. That's just the way it is.

00:46:06

AES: True.

00:46:08

RL: And it's locally owned. It's not a franchise. We're—it's not a McDonald's, so, again, they want to see you out there. They want to complain to the owner if there is a complaint, or if they want to tell you that it was wonderful, you did a great job, they want to tell it to me, so you've got to be there. You've got to touch it. You've got to give your customers a hard time when they—you ain't seen them in two or three weeks. [*Laughs*]

00:46:36

AES: And what year did you retire from your teaching job?

00:46:38

RL: Two thousand eight.

00:46:43

AES: And would you say that there are any similarities between being in the barbecue business and education?

00:46:48

RL: Similarities?

00:46:53

AES: Uh-hmm.

00:46:55

RL: Well, I know I would have—I have to be at my business and have to touch it. When I was teaching, I knew I had to be there to be able to teach those students. My—my particular personality had to be able to reach some students that probably wouldn't—would be hard to reach any other way, so there's still a passion of having to be there and enjoy what you're doing. I enjoyed teaching the kids that wanted to learn. And the challenge of trying to teach the ones that didn't want to learn was always fun, too. The challenge of doing the barbecue is the same. Trying to make—make it as consistent as possible, trying to guess at the—well I'm doing—I'm doing a lot of catering now, so I try to get my barbecue out there to larger groups is a challenge also. So it's just—similarities, yes. No, it's all good fun.

00:48:06

AES: Yeah. Well what made me ask that was I—I guess I just think that, you know, you have an outgoing personality that's good for working with the public, and I think that would serve you both in teaching kids and teaching people who eat barbecue. [*Laughs*]

00:48:18

RL: Yeah. Yeah, I see that. Yeah, I'm sort of out forward—or outgoing and forward with what my thoughts are, and I don't mind telling you like it—what it is. I still correct children in Wal-Mart when they're misbehaving, whether they're my kids or not. But that's just part of me being a teacher.

00:48:40

AES: Now did your students call you Lep?

00:48:42

RL: Mr. Lepard. "What's your first name Mr. Lepard?" "Mister."

00:48:48

AES: So how long have you had the nickname Lep?

00:48:49

RL: Since college, I guess.

00:48:56

AES: And did you know immediately that when you opened a barbecue place you were going to call it Lep's?

00:48:59

RL: Of course. That would be familiar with everybody that knew me, so—.

00:49:04

AES: And tell me about your logo. You happen to be wearing a Lep's BBQ and Ribs shirt with this pink pig and underneath it says, "Who's your daddy?"

00:49:11

RL: Well, that's just a special shirt. Usually it says "none better," but these were just special edition shirts we used to—we took to a barbecue competition, so we wanted to make sure the competition knew that we were the daddies and they were—we were putting—we were putting a little attitude on them.

00:49:32

But anyway, yeah, I have logos on my t-shirts. Everybody—a lot of folks—I sell them up at the store. They've gone through several traditions. I've got some jackets and pullovers and windbreakers. I've got new t-shirts—real pastel colors, bright, so that the—which is attractive to everybody here. Everybody likes them. I had a group of seniors here in Pontotoc, a lot of seniors get out at lunchtime and I—we saw them on a Thursday. They'll go around to every place in town and eat as a group after lunch. So they came out on a—on a Thursday to my place and usually they get—most of them they ate the barbecue nachos or large or small or whatever—they're on a budget. But there's like between eighteen and eleven—eleven to eighteen every—every Thursday, and of course they will—they won't carpool. They'll drive their own vehicle when they leave school, so my parking lot is full, but I still may have three or four tables available. Even though I look—I look very full, the high schoolers are in there. But I gave them all a t-shirt for their graduation present towards—you know, right before graduation. They came over there and all my regular ones, so that's probably fifteen of them, I made sure they had them a t-shirt. Most—a lot of them were pink, but I reassured the guys that it took a confident man to wear pink.

00:51:12

AES: And you also wear your logo on your arm.

00:51:15

RL: Oh, yeah. I went to Panama City to—with the daughter's—chaperoned the daughter's senior trip and she was going to get a tattoo, so I thought I would, too. So I just had my logo put

on my right arm, just the pig, so nothing—nothing that says anything on there, just—I don't have “Lep's BBQ & Ribs” or “Who's your daddy?” on it or nothing like that.

00:51:43

AES: Who drew your pig?

00:51:44

RL: Actually, one of my kids at school had a t-shirt on from one of the first Super Bulldog Weekends. And it was a bulldog sitting on a whole hog pig on top of a grill with this utensil and his hat on just sitting up there and the pig looked—. Anyway, I said, “That's going to be my logo.” So we took the bulldog and everything else off—off there, but the pig itself we enlarged and made larger and we cut it out. I had him go to the bathroom and take his t-shirt off and we traced it off and—and that's where I actually got the logo.

00:52:27

AES: Because I commented when we were back at the shed about how he looks like a suffering pig. You don't see a lot of—well he looks dead, to tell you the truth. **[Laughs]** But you see running pigs and happy pigs and—. You don't see a lot of dead pigs on barbecue logos.

00:52:41

RL: Yeah, well it was just—it caught my eye, and that's the one. It was different than any of the other ones I saw, so—.

00:52:52

AES: Pigs don't have a chance at Lep's, I bet.

00:52:53

RL: No, no. Actually, one of the guys came up here advertising for a brochure that goes in the insert in the paper. And he was going to put the—my logo on my little menu in this advertisement, and it was going to cost me seventy-five dollars. I said, well, I said, "As long as you get my pig on there." And he came back and he said, well, "I couldn't find [your] pig on my computer program. I just put this one on here and thought it would be all right." I said, "Uh, excuse me?" And I showed him my tattoo on my arm. And I said, "I—my logo is very serious to me. I'm not going to pay you." Ah, ah, ah; so there was 5,000 copies with a different kind of pig on my—that has my name on it. Unacceptable.

00:53:39

AES: No, I understand that. So we've kept you here for a while, but I have a few more questions, if you don't mind—if you don't need to rush back. But I wanted you to talk quickly about barbecue nachos and how you added those to your menu and how popular they are and how you treat your cheese.

00:53:53

RL: Oh, well my daughter was playing basketball at high school, and the local body shop guy is a barbecue guy, too. And he introduced me to the barbecue nachos. He gets—he got them at the Redbirds game in Memphis where he started them, and he was making them his—his own down here at his—his house and everything and—the first time I ever saw them.

00:54:22

Sometime after that, I noticed that Ole Miss was using the—a little tray with barbecue—using the barbecue nachos but using pulled barbecue across it which made it very—you know, and—plus a Corky's barbecue sauce, which is a sweeter-type barbecue sauce. Anyway, it was most difficult and a big waste of chips and everything else because you got a big old pile of chips with cheese on it, and then you've got your big old long pulled barbecue across the top of it with barbecue sauce on it. So I said it was almost impossible to eat it and not get it all over with you, which is fine, too, but—.

00:55:02

My barbecue nachos are similar to [Michael] Bishop's down here, the guy that showed me, just using regular nachos, round yellow nacho chips and canned processed cheese, nacho cheese you would get at the ballgame, really thick; but we thin ours down with water and jalapeno juice to make it more creamier, so it's easy for it to pour, for us to serve on a plate and dip out, and for the customer to have cheese on most of their chips. We have to strategically put our chips on a—in our plates or our serving dishes so that we can get the cheese—because a lot of times they'll still have a few chips on the bottom that are not cheesy or have barbecue sauce on them.

00:55:54

Anyway, after the cheese, we put on the chips and we put the barbecue straight out of the bowl onto their scattered out—and it's chopped, so we're hoping to get every chip will have a bite of barbecue on it and then we squirt it down with barbecue sauce. And where there's no cheese, we try to put barbecue sauce in it to just make it look really pretty. Jalapenos go on top or on the side, whichever way you'd rather have them but—or not at all—but it really makes—that green just makes the plate look wonderful. So when we shut the plate and take it out to the customers, I used to enjoy opening them up and they'll look—"Oh, that looks really good." You

know, it was just a quick reward for me to say, "Oh, that was—looks so good and they were." And the sauce—the barbecue sauce along with the cheese and the—everything, my combination—using my barbecue sauce was—was a hit. I hear people talking about other nachos that are not near as good as mine or, compared to the other people's, mine is their better choice. [Phone Rings]

[Recording is paused for approximately three minutes.]

00:57:15

AES: All right. We're back after another quick call for Lep here, and we were talking about the nachos. So those have been a really big seller for you, then?

00:57:22

RL: Absolutely, they're very addictive. Since I'm only open Thursday, Friday, and Saturday, they just can't get their fix until Thursday. They're waiting around Sunday, Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday to—they can't wait to get them. And on Thursdays it's usually a big nacho day. And on—usually late Friday nights—a big nacho time and on Saturday nights are a big nacho time because that's one of those—I mean it's a distinct flavor, and it's given thought. When you start thinking about barbecue and you want a barbecue and the people are not opened to satisfy that—that craving, you have you're going to continue that craving until you get one. The same thing with the nachos; they have to wait all week to come get them on Thursday or—or later that night. You know, it's just a quick—it's a quick—and it feeds several folks. It's huge. And it's cheap.

00:58:29

AES: So do you think there will ever be a day that you open anymore days a week or you have it good just doing three?

00:58:32

RL: Well you've got to remember, I'm retired. And a lot of folks well you should be open more often. I said well, "Yeah, I still have to go pick up my food at Sam's. I have to go get my meat on—that's on Tuesday usually. I have to go get my meat on Wednesday, or I have to prepare and cook." If I opened another day I'd have to cook another day, which I still—still cook—I cook once a week, but it's like part of the—part of the one day I'm open, so—.

00:59:08

I'd have to cook another time probably because I feel sure I'd run out. And I believe I'm working hard enough trying to gather supplies up and—. Since I'm not there all the time, I really can't get a truck that's going to deliver to me. Those people that's open six days a week and—and seven days a week, they—they're there at the store and their trucks can be delivered there. I like to make sure I get the product I want when I go get it because I don't know for sure—they may be out or backordered or this, that, and the other thing. I've got to make sure I have my stuff.

00:59:47

AES: May I ask where you're getting your meat?

00:59:48

RL: I get at the local place up here—or the wholesale, Mar-Dan north of Tupelo at Guntown. But this week I got it from Sav-A-Lot [grocery store] because it was thirteen-cents cheaper a

pound. Any time you can—this time of year they're pretty expensive. Pork is a high commodity between the middle of April to probably the middle of June or after the Fourth of July. And after that it goes—gets cheaper.

01:00:24

AES: So you're happy with your three days a week. What, then, is the future of Lep's BBQ?

01:00:32

RL: I get more new customers every week. I get one, two, three or there's a couple that come by and get barbecue. The future is just, well, I'm having fun right now. I'm—again, I'm not open six or seven days a week. I don't—I'm not getting burnt out. I still enjoy doing it. It's Thursday, Friday, and Saturday, so I usually just take off Saturday afternoon and either go to the ballgame or I go to the lake or—. Then I'm off a couple days. I'm enjoying my retirement. I'm making some money. I couldn't really—I wanted to barbecue earlier before I retired, but they always say in a small business don't quit your day job. So I didn't quit my day job. I suffered through the last few years of teaching to—hoping and getting prepared for this restaurant which I—I planned well and it's been—it's worked out real well for me.

01:01:39

AES: Now that you've been open what, fourteen, almost fifteen years now, do you feel like part of what you have now is a responsibility to the people of Pontotoc to keep it open?

01:01:50

RL: No, I couldn't shut it down. No, that's—that's—they would—they'd kill me. They'd have to go eat other people's barbecue. Uh-uh. You know, that's—that's—a friend of mine told me, William White, who had the department store uptown, he had a four-wheeler accident and is paralyzed, but he always told me when competition came to town, another barbecue place would open up or somebody would be selling barbecue on the side of the road or whatever, he says, "Lep, always welcome competition." He said, "Let me tell you why: because you have really good barbecue and it's—it's human nature for them to go try a different barbecue or something new and different. And when they go to that other barbecue place and try their barbecue they will say, 'Well that—that's pretty good, but it's not Lep's. It's not—it—it ain't the same flavor.'" And, he said, "And then, after that, every time they'd be driving down the road thinking about what they was going to get for supper they might see that competition on the side of the road and say, 'Hey, barbecue would be good tonight. Let's go to Lep's.'"

01:03:19

AES: Well we can wind this up, and that's a good note to end on, I think, unless there's something that I haven't asked that you want to talk about or something I wouldn't know to ask that you want to make sure to mention.

01:03:30

RL: I can't think of anything. I just—give—give some helpful thoughts to anybody opening—opening a business or whatever: just don't—don't start big in the beginning. Keep your overhead as low as possible and don't—don't burn yourself out. You need to enjoy what you're doing and like what you're doing and be happy going to the work and be patient. If you have good food, your customers will show up. They'll drive a long way.

01:04:13

What's another version? If you've got really good food, they will drive a good distance, so charge them whatever you want to. If your food is not good, you can charge half the price and they still won't come after it. So the whole key is to be consistent with your food.

01:04:41

AES: What's your favorite thing about being in the barbecue business?

01:04:43

RL: In my particular barbecue business, in my restaurant, the way I've got it set up, it's just wonderful for a party, enjoyable for a ballgame, I'm able to watch a big-screen TV, be around friends that enjoy the barbecue. It's just—it's an ongoing fun time.

01:05:12

AES: All right. Well I thank you for inviting us to your home and letting us sit and visit with you for a while. Thank you, Lep.

01:05:17

RL: Okay, thank you.

01:05:19

[End Randy Lepard-Lep's BBQ Interview]