

ELZY W. MAYO

Mayo's Fried Pies & Mahalia Jackson's Chicken—Nashville, TN

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Location: Mayo's Fried Pies—Nashville, TN

Interviewer: Mary Beth Lasseter

Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs

Length: 30 minutes, 30 seconds

Project: Nashville Eats

[Begin E W Mayo]

00:00:00

Mary Beth Lasseter: I'm going to put this on record.

00:00:02

EW Mayo: Okay.

00:00:04

MBL: All right, this is Mary Beth Lasseter and I am here interviewing Mr. E W Mayo today at his restaurant in Nashville. Mr. Mayo, could you give us your name for the record?

00:00:14

EWM: Say what now?

00:00:14

MBL: Can you give me your name? Can you tell me your name into the recorder?

00:00:18

EWM: My name? My name is Elzy W Mayo, E-l-z-y—W Mayo, but I use EW as the initial name.

00:00:28

MBL: And how old are you Mr. Mayo?

00:00:30

EWM: Presently I'm 88 years old. [*Laughs*]

00:00:35

MBL: And do you work every day?

00:00:35

EWM: Every day—every day from Monday through Saturday. [*Laughs*]

00:00:40

MBL: Tell me about your restaurant.

00:00:42

EWM: Well I've been in the restaurant business for many, many years. This restaurant here—this is developed—now this is a carry-out on the good works of, really, Mayo Mahalia Jackson. Mahalia Jackson is—was known as being the world's greatest lyric singer. So I—the—the—an organization had this company and Minnie Pearl and Mahalia Jackson were in a restaurant business at one time, but they went down. They went into bankruptcy and lost out. I did not want to see Miss Mahalia Jackson go down, so I went out to—to keep it alive. And that was about the year of 1971.

So what happened—I contacted the company that was in Memphis, the—the Mahalia Jackson Chicken Corporation in Memphis, Tennessee. And was—the gentleman that had the corporation along with Mr. John J. Hooker, a lawyer here—was named Judge Ben—Benjamin Hooks. He was formerly one time the President—the Secretary for the NAACP and I think he was then at the time that he had this organization. But it went down under them; after going down, as I say, I started out renting the situation and the man that rented to me after a one-month deal on the damn property he said if he could have got in touch with me one month earlier this would have saved the system with it.

00:03:02

MBL: Oh.

00:03:03

EWM: So evidently that might have—must have been true because today—and that was more than 15 years ago that—that was happening—today we still got the Mahalia Jackson—. Of course it's combined with my name, Mayo-Mahalia Jackson Chicken—we have it alive and we're doing a very good business with it.

00:03:33

MBL: Is this the original location?

00:03:35

EWM: Say what now?

00:03:36

MBL: Is this the original location for the restaurant?

00:03:39

EWB: No, it was located where the Wendy's is over here on 28th and Jefferson [in Nashville]. I sold that property to Wendy's and they—they—they bought it from me because—because the business—building was dilapidated that was in that. It was beginning to depreciate so bad, so I wasn't able to buy the adjacent lot and extend it out and build or rebuild it. So the chicken place that's down there, they wanted it, so I sold it to them. Then I purchased—well I had a business, another business, a little small business going on Clay Street here in Nashville, so I stayed in that for a little while. And then this place come up for sale down here and I—and I bought this one and—and extended it and built it to what it is now and then I put the headquarters in there.

00:04:52

MBL: Okay.

00:04:52

EWB: The—the headquarters—when I say the headquarters, the headquarters—it being in here was because we have—I have built back what I call an outlet—not a franchise—but an outlet has been well approved to put—to operate with it, so that outlet is—is a part of this business here, built in a little spot. So we hope hopefully one day to expand that in several places.

00:05:28

MBL: So you are willing to let people run the restaurant under its name in different locations?

00:05:37

EWM: In different locations and they can—well first, those outlets are worked out to be sold to them instead of buying a franchise—I didn't want a franchise, because this one had gone down under a franchise—the Mahalia Jackson Chicken and it was a little trouble behind that franchise, so I didn't want to be connected with that anymore. So I've clarified that by putting mine as an outlet instead of a franchise; that's why I use the franchise—that's what it's all about.

00:06:12

MBL: Well how does somebody go about—?

00:06:14

EWM: Huh?

00:06:17

MBL: How would somebody open an outlet?

00:06:18

EWM: How would they open it? Well they—if—really I have it set up with them to buy it. They buy—they pay for a building—one. Now here's one, I'm going to just give you a little example of what happens. See a franchise which most businesses now, you know they—they're

\$200,000 or \$300,000. Well mine, in the largest size, we have figured it out can be purchased for \$269,000. The large outfit—one big enough to accommodate everything under their cover, and the combination of everything under that cover would—would include them making their own pies, doing all the work right within that place and that's what it's all about then. That's what they would plan for. That's what we've set it up for. And things are looking mighty good in that direction—mighty good.

00:07:22

MBL: Well good.

00:07:25

EWM: Mighty good; so that's where we stand right there.

00:07:28

MBL: How long have you been in the food business?

00:07:30

EWM: Whoa—**[Laughs]**—well I've—it will go back—look here, this pie I'm making now, the recipe of this pie is—is a pie that was produced by my momma. My mother done this pie and then—then again, I learned to do it when I was in high school because I had to go home after school and had to carry food with me and I had the necessary equipment and materials to make pies with. So I would have to make them myself or else I didn't have nothing to eat at home.

[Laughs] That's what I done—and cooked my own food, so that's when I learned to do business,

the food business, right there when I was in high school. And then because after all that of going to school at that time—then after that, I eventually wanted to begin doing business for myself and—and that—and of course that's what put me into the stream of—of line of doing what—of renting places, opening up restaurants. I've opened up two or three little operations before I come into this, so I've been in the food business for many, many years. I'd say back—it will go back 50 or 60 years; that's right.

00:08:56

MBL: Tell me about your pies.

00:08:58

EWM: The pies—the pies is—is a recipe of my momma's.

00:09:03

MBL: Now they're not regular pies?

00:09:05

EWM: Huh?

00:09:06

MBL: They're not regular pies; their fried pies, right?

00:09:09

EWM: They—they are turnover fried pies. They're turnovers and that's—the turnover is the one that—well now if we. We make them, we cook our fruit, we—we season our fruit to the stage that we want it. We—we make our—we make our crust with—with more than one flour—with soft shortening in it and whip it up and then make a—turn the crust out of that. That's where we come up with that kind of crust.

00:09:47

MBL: What kind of pies do you serve?

00:09:49

EWM: Peach, apple, and sweet potato and then again I have even developed that to a sugarless pie, one that the diabetics can eat. So there'll go and we have that kind too and—and we have a great demand for these pies—you'd just be surprised. I have an order for tomorrow for 24 at one time.

00:10:17

MBL: Wow.

00:10:19

EWM: For twenty-four and then it's nothing—I have sold orders of fifty, seventy-five, and eighty and 100 at a time; I've sold many orders like that.

00:10:29

MBL: How many pies do you serve on a day at the restaurant?

00:10:34

EWM: Well I would say—I would say actually 150 to 200 pies. Actually.

00:10:41

MBL: And how much does a pie cost?

00:10:43

EWM: How much does it cost? You mean as to what I sell them for?

00:10:46

MBL: Uh-hm.

00:10:49

EWM: They're \$1.10 each plus the tax, so \$1.20; that's the total—\$1.20 is what it sells for.

00:10:58

MBL: That's a great deal.

00:10:59

EWM: That's right and that's it okay, all right.

00:11:03

MBL: So this restaurant serves Mayo's pies—

00:11:05

EWM: That's right.

00:11:06

MBL: —but it serves Mahalia Jackson's chicken?

00:11:10

EWM: Mahalia Jackson's chicken farm—more or less, you know.

00:11:14

MBL: What other—what other food is on your menu?

00:11:17

EWM: Well we only have pies—we have a beef tripe and that beef tripe is a part of a cow that we call the chitterling of a hog—the same thing; that's right. That's what that means—that's a beef tripe. We serve it and it's—it's a tremendous thing.

00:11:36

MBL: How do you prepare it?

00:11:38

EWM: Well par-boil it and then have—I have a—a what you would call a batter type—where I dip it in and then put it in the—the deep—the—the frying—you know the frying pan. And then I sink it in that and it comes up and it's just brown—I cook the brown out of it and that's where—and then after that we put—we put mustard, onion and pickle on it and that's it. That's it.

00:12:19

MBL: And what else do you serve?

00:12:22

EWM: We have—most put it on light bread you know; that's right. Now it comes with French fries and slaw. That's it.

00:12:30

MBL: Do you have a secret slaw recipe?

00:12:33

EWM: No; where I have mine from the Slaw Company—I buy their slaw already prepared. That's right—from the Slaw Company.

00:12:42

MBL: What else do you have on your menu?

00:12:44

EWM: Now I've said the pies haven't I? And the chicken. Well I have now a chicken hash.

00:12:54

MBL: What is that?

00:12:54

EWM: Well that's some—it's the chicken we use—in essence we have a little leftover chicken and we'll chop that up and we'll cut it up and then put iced potatoes in it and then we have a—a mixture of a seasoning we put in it and that's it. We serve that, so that's—that's a very good little seller too. You know that—that's—uh-hm.

00:13:24

MBL: Did I see gizzards on your menu?

00:13:27

EWM: Gizzards? Oh yeah; livers and gizzards—chicken livers and gizzards that's right; that's—that's part—chicken livers and gizzards and chicken and then the pies—and French fries and slaw; that's it.

00:13:45

MBL: Okay.

00:13:46

EWM: I've told you about everything right there; uh-hm.

00:13:48

MBL: How many people work here with you?

00:13:50

EWM: Well regularly I have one person that kind of works with me now. And we're planning to increase that and got a few—testing them out now to try to see if we can get the best jobs—when we—we've got a little expansion coming up with this business. We've got improvements. But I have two that's working with me and another one and we take care of it when—that's my daughter there; she's just here with me right now. But now she's—I'm responsible for her in a way see and then of course she's not on a salary basis. So that's it. **[Laughs]**

00:14:33

MBL: What is a typical day like for you?

00:14:35

EWM: What day?

00:14:36

MBL: What is a typical day?

00:14:40

EWM: Oh—oh?

00:14:41

MBL: No, a day here at the restaurant—how does it go?

00:14:45

EWM: How many days?

00:14:46

MBL: Well, what is a typical day like for you at the restaurant? What time do you come in?

00:14:51

EWM: Oh, well, I come in about 7:30 or 8 o'clock in the morning. I go home at 6 o'clock in the evening, and that's it.

00:15:03

MBL: How many meals do you think you make in that time?

00:15:06

EWM: Meals?

00:15:08

MBL: Yeah.

00:15:09

EWM: Well I would say quite a few but there's room for improvement now. [*Laughs*] And that's what we're working on now is the improvement. We—we just kind of are handling it in the perimeters of what we can handle you know—pretty well satisfied at that right now, but we're looking forward to a better day. But now the reason why that I keep it that way...because I know we're going to put out the type of food that is—that is good. And I don't want to be able to put out kind of a bad name of food, so we just have—we're really close strict on that help situation. We don't have a lot of help coming in and those that we do have trying to come in we want to give them a good basic training before they're gainfully employed. That's where we stand.

00:16:02

MBL: Now do you train the people who cook for you?

00:16:05

EWM: Do I what now—train them? That's right.

00:16:07

MBL: Are you—

00:16:09

EWM: That's right; that's—that's what—the most important thing is they have to have our training—mine or his or either one. Mr. Ledbetter or his—mine, one or the other and that would be—would have to be their trainer for the field.

00:16:24

MBL: Who is Mr. Ledbetter?

00:16:26

EWM: He is a buddy of mine. He's been with me for about 11 years in all, and this place is about 11 years old now. That's what he's been with me—that long—where he's out now working on another project indirectly connected with this company here, see. So that's where we stand. *[Laughs]*

00:16:49

MBL: Did you grow up in Nashville? Are you from here originally?

00:16:53

EWM: No, ma'am; no, no—no, no; I'm—I am—well my county seat is Paris, Tennessee. I'm more or less a Parisian but I was born out in the county, in the little county or village of Cottage Grove, and then I grew up there for several years and then finally moved into the city and that's where I began—I was going to high school and all like that. And then grade school I went in—in the county. I—I was raised on a farm more or less, so that—that's what the situation was.

00:17:38

MBL: What did you do when you got out of high school? What other jobs did you have?

00:17:42

EWM: Well now—well now I worked for individuals for a short while and then after that—well I'd say about—well I—I made—well I worked with Atlanta Life—for the longest, about 13 years—Atlanta Life Insurance Company and other than that I've been concerned about little businesses and—and eventually little larger businesses and so forth and so on, so I tacked on the businesses from there. And that's—and I'm still in business today. That's that. [*Laughs*]

00:18:23

MBL: Now is your family here in Nashville?

00:18:26

EWM: Yes, my son and daughter—I just lost my wife in October.

00:18:31

MBL: I'm sorry.

00:18:33

EWM: Just lost her in October. She's a little older than me; she was 95. [*Laughs*]

00:18:38

MBL: Oh my.

00:18:40

EWM: And I'm 88, so that's what the situation was

00:18:44

MBL: She liked younger men, huh?

00:18:45

EWM: What's that?

00:18:45

MBL: She liked younger men.

00:18:48

EWM: That's right, that's right; that's it, that's it—that's right, that's right and that's—okay.

00:18:53

MBL: Now do you think your children will work in the food business?

00:18:57

EWM: Well I don't think so—too much. I don't believe so. I have the potentialities of—of a real business man and bright minded young man that me and him is discussing and him taking it

over from me and—and operating in my place—is a nephew of mine and he's a very brilliant man. He's—he's real qualified to do the job. My son and daughter will—won't be that qualified. What actually happened was—was between me and them; their momma—their momma of and myself wasn't able to get along, so we divorced from each other and they was reared away from me in Chicago, Illinois. But they're back down here with me now, but in the meantime—we don't look at things alike altogether and especially when it comes to business—we're very different at that. And I—I don't want to be—I don't want to cripple the situation by putting him in here and he sell it overnight, you know and it's gone with the wind. I'm planning to—hopefully live on after [inaudible] and making plans for that now and that's that.

00:20:36

MBL: Well good—good.

00:20:38

EWM: That's that.

00:20:38

MBL: Who is working with you in the kitchen today?

00:20:41

EWM: Say what now?

00:20:43

MBL: Who is working with you in the kitchen today?

00:20:46

EWM: Well now the—the young man, he's just brand new and I—I can't recall his name—hey Bubba?

00:20:55

Bubba: Yes, sir.

00:20:55

EWM: Come here. I'll let him tell you his name. *[Laughs]* What's your name?

00:21:01

Bubba: Eddie McDaniel.

00:21:02

EWM: What's that?

00:21:02

Bubba: Eddie McDaniel.

00:21:05

EWM: Now he's just here today working—working with us for the time being right now. But me and him have a future deal coming. **[Laughs]** So that's it; so now that's it. Now you got his name.

00:21:20

MBL: I got his name.

00:21:21

EWM: Okay, all right; okay.

00:21:23

MBL: So are you a big Mahalia Jackson fan?

00:21:27

EWM: Big what now?

00:21:28

MBL: Were you a big Mahalia Jackson fan?

00:21:30

EWM: Oh yeah—fan?

00:21:31

MBL: Yeah.

00:21:32

EWM: I just loved it. I loved it because she had such a fine religious record, so I'm—I'm a believer of—of religion.

00:21:47

MBL: Okay, where do you go to church?

00:21:49

EWM: Lee Chapel—I belong to Lee Chapel AME Church—that's right, that's right.

00:21:53

MBL: How many years have you been a member?

00:21:56

EWM: Oh, my church, since '56—that church since '56 and I was in the Baptist Church in Clarksville, Tennessee, 10 years before that and then it goes back to Paris, Tennessee, and I was in a Baptist Church there for many years, so that's what happened. I've been—I've been a believer of—of the religion standpoint of view all my life now, more or less. My momma, she was a religious person for many years. My daddy eventually did become one too, but my momma was always one—many, many years every—as long as I remember her, she was the religious one.

00:22:45

MBL: Did they run a farm full-time?

00:22:46

EWM: Right, ran a little farm—a little farm; uh-hmm—many years. Then after that—after many years then my daddy moved into sharecropping with the bigger farmer and that meant that we grew up there—most of our time, up until probably high school years.

00:23:14

MBL: How many brothers and sisters do you have?

00:23:16

EWM: Eight—there's eight boys and two girls—seven brothers and two sisters and—and I'm the tenth one, but I'm about the middle child with the group and everyone is deceased—everyone is deceased but me. I'm the only one left living.

00:23:35

MBL: Okay.

00:23:37

00:23:53

MBL: Did any of them cook like you cook?

00:23:57

EWM: Not too much—not too much now—no, no; never did. I had some of them that dabbled in food a little bit but not as much as I did. I was kind of the leader in that part of it; that's right.

00:24:12

MBL: Tell me about the neighborhood for this restaurant; how did you decide to open here? Do you live in the area?

00:24:20

EWM: Here?

00:24:22

MBL: Uh-hm.

00:24:23

EWM: Well yes; I've always lived right here in North Nashville and—and of course I began to think of—working with the insurance company and then I decided to go into the [inaudible] business and I began to operate it right here in North Nashville, so I've been here every since.

00:24:44

MBL: So you live close to where you work then?

00:24:46

EWM: Oh Lordy, right—right—right.

00:24:51

MBL: Can you describe your food for me? Do you—

00:24:54

EWM: Say—?

00:24:55

MBL: Can you describe your food for me? Do you think it's southern food or do you—what would you—what would you call it?

00:25:01

EWM: Well it's good home cooked food; I'd put it that way—good home cooked food. I say we prepare everything we have here more or less—we prepare it, so that's the way my food is known. We've got—we're pretty well recipe(d)—

00:25:23

MBL: Did you create—

00:25:24

EWM: Beg your pardon?

00:25:25

MBL: Did you create all of your recipes?

00:25:26

EWM: I created them—created them myself; that's right—that's right. Well—well the—the Mahalia Jackson chicken, I didn't create that one, but all the other food around—excuse me—of that—I created food for that; that's right.

00:25:43

MBL: Now what is the Mahalia Jackson chicken?

00:25:47

EWM: What is it?

00:25:48

MBL: Well it's just ordinary chicken and they got a special—they got a special breading, flour, you know breading to mix it in—that's all.

00:25:59

EWM: And you fry it?

00:26:01

MBL: You fry it in deep fat and deep grease and vegetable oil at that.

00:26:04

MBL: Okay.

00:26:05

EWM: That's right.

00:26:06

MBL: How do you order it? Do you order—?

00:26:07

EWM: Well that—by—the people that supplies me with it just like the lady who was here, she supplies me with chicken and tripe, livers and gizzards, and then there's another place that will supply me with the other accessories that I have.

00:26:29

MBL: Okay, okay; if I were to order a piece of chicken from you would I order a whole chicken or would I order—?

00:26:34

EWM: Oh no, we just have the parts—wing, leg, breast, thigh or liver or gizzard; that's all parts of the chicken. *[Laughs]*

00:26:45

MBL: Okay, got it.

00:26:47

EWM: That's dealing with the chicken, okay?

00:26:51

MBL: What's your favorite part about your job?

00:26:54

EWM: My job?

00:26:56

MBL: What's your favorite part about it?

00:26:57

EWM: My favorite part—well I'll tell you—I'll tell you this; I just—I'm just kind of throwed up in all of it. Whatever comes to hand I take care of it right there and that's the fun of it. That's right; I don't separate any particular part of that; I just serve it all, be good with it; that's right.

00:27:19

MBL: Well without giving away any secret recipes—

00:27:24

EWM: That's right; I don't.

00:27:26

MBL: Tell me—tell me about your fried pies. Tell me how you make them.

00:27:32

EWM: How I make them? We put—we cook the peaches—dried peaches—

00:27:37

MBL: Dried peaches?

00:27:37

EWM: Dried apples or we cook regular sweet potatoes—just regular sweet potatoes—raw sweet potatoes, we cook that and we put our seasoning in it and then we put it in the refrigerator and get it cold. I mean we—we keep it cold in the refrigerator and then it's—it's in a—it's waterless. We don't have water in it; it's—it's damp but—it's—you can dip it with a spoon and put it in the pie—in the crust and then this crust is—this filling kind of remains humped—humped up. It's got a—a basic you know—a contact in it like that. And then we put the—we put

the—fasten it—pull the dough over and then that—it makes it a half-moon and then we crimp the edges of it to lock that filling in there.

00:28:46

MBL: You crimp it with a fork?

00:28:47

EWM: Fork—that's right; crimp it with a fork and then we—we—we're able to crimp ours where we won't have—out of 50 or 75 pies we won't have not a one of them to bust open.

00:29:04

MBL: Well good.

00:29:05

EWM: Now they're just that good.

00:29:08

MBL: And you deep-fry them?

00:29:09

EWM: Deep—deep-fry them.

00:29:10

MBL: In vegetable oil?

00:29:11

EWM: In vegetable oil—that's right, that's right.

00:29:14

MBL: And you serve them hot?

00:29:16

EWM: Serve them warm—whatever—warm, we keep them warm all—all the time and them people love them. *[Laughs]*

00:29:25

MBL: Okay, well it has been wonderful talking to you. Thank you so much.

00:29:29

EWM: Well I'm glad you've come by and I'm glad to sit down and talk with you about it because one day or another we may be able to come to your state.

00:29:41

MBL: Yeah, you might.

00:29:43

EWM: We are looking forward to increasing. And this is—this is coming up to the increase(ment) now—the combination of me and Mr. Ledbetter together. We're—we're going to try to see how far we can carry it; so that—. [*Laughs*]

00:30:01

MBL: Well thank you.

00:30:02

EWM: And thank you. And so I'm so happy to meet you.

00:30:06

MBL: Well it is a pleasure to meet you.

00:30:09

EWM: Huh?

00:30:10

MBL: You've got a customer. I've got to cut this off.

00:30:12

EWM: Okay; okay sweetheart and you come back and chat with us some other time—hear? And is this going into like a paper or something? Are you going to send me one—save me one?
[*Laughs*]

00:30:27

MBL: Sure.

00:30:28

[End E W Mayo]