

DAVID SWETT JR.
Swett's - Nashville, TN

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Interviewer: John Egerton

Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs

Length: 45 minutes

Project: Nashville Eats

[Begin David Swett, Jr.]

[Begin 1001]

00:00:00

JE: We're ready. Okay, it's July 17th 2006 and we're at the Nashville Public Library and I'm John Egerton here to interview David Swett, Junior, Nashville, Tennessee. How are you David?

00:00:15

DS: Doing wonderful; how about you?

00:00:16

JE: Great, great.

00:00:17

DS: Good.

00:00:18

JE: I've known—I've known your family restaurant for almost 40 years; that's about how long I've lived in Nashville. I—I tend to find these places pretty soon when I'm in a town. I still love to eat out there; it's—it's a great tradition. I wonder if you would go back to tell us the story about how your grandfather started and when and fill in the story about when he got it going.

00:00:50

DS: Okay, absolutely; well my grandfather, Walter Swett, and my grandmother, Susie Swett—

00:00:58

JE: And we'll get that spelling—S-w-e-t-t?

00:01:00

DS: Correct—actually started the restaurant September 11, 1954, but to take you back a little before that—my grandfather came to Nashville from Dickson County, Ashland City area. He said he walked in and he had a dollar and a mule when he walked from Ashland City to Nashville. [*Laughs*] He said he got to downtown Nashville and the first thing he had ever been out of the country and seen anything like downtown Nashville—

00:01:33

JE: And about when do you think this was—what year was that?

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DS: It was 1920.

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JE: Nineteen-twenty?

00:01:38

DS: Yes, uh-hm. And he said he had a dollar and he got downtown and the first thing he had ever seen hotdogs, they were selling—had a guy, a hotdog vendor selling hotdogs downtown and they were a nickel a piece and he said he sat there and bought twenty of them, so he was broke the day after he got there. Instead of having a dollar he only had a mule, so—but he—watching that guy and selling things I think it sparked his interest as a young person to want to sell and eventually get in the business for himself and he first went to Chicago where he worked for the railroad systems and moved back to Nashville in the—in the '30s and started the vending machine—a vending type of place at Hadley Park which was one of Nashville's Black parks where—where the—where it was a segregated park where—where Black patrons could come and bring their family and he had an ice-cream shop, hotdogs, chips, and drinks, and cookies and things of that nature and began selling—

00:02:45

JE: Right there on the corner of 28th and Centennial?

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DS: Right there on the corner selling food in the park and eventually he went into the grocery store business right on the corner, right there off Albion, right across from the park. He—he had a house and a grocery store with a grocery store front there and—and him and my uncles and aunts lived there and they all worked the store and lived there and went to school. And he also was in the taxi-cab business, so he did several businesses and then he decided to open up a tavern on 28th and Clifton—2725 Clifton Avenue and he sold beer and sandwiches, little light sandwiches and things of that nature. And he had a large family; there's 10 of them—10

children; there were nine brothers and sisters and he adopted one which was his niece, so it was a total of 10 and it was five boys and five girls. And my dad, David Swett was the baby of the—of the group. But anyway they would—at the bar, they were very family-oriented; they would get the family together after school and have dinner kind of in the corner and my grandmother and grandfather worked there together and they would cook stuff from the store and bring it over and cook and have dinner for everybody—set up the bar. Well a lot of patrons saw some of this food sitting out and started inquiring about purchasing some of that and I don't think my grandfather ever set out to be in the restaurant business but he was a very astute businessman, so he—

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JE: Did he put his name on that bar?

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DS: Yes.

00:04:28

JE: So it was called Swett?

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DS: It was called Swett but it wasn't a restaurant at first and he had no intentions of going into the restaurant business. And people started inquiring about food and the food that they were eating, so then he—knowing him and he was very, a very bright businessman. He went into the

restaurant business and scrapped the bar. *[Laughs]* And here we are today 52 years later in the restaurant business.

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JE: And was the first restaurant where it is now?

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DS: It's the exact same location; it was on the corner there in a little small—

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[End 1001; Begin 1002]

00:00:00

DS: —building, we built—

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JE: Right close to the street?

00:00:02

DS: Right close to the street, right. If you know where—notice the sign that we have that's where the building was. We built behind there; there was the grocery store that was on the side of it, so we just got out of the grocery store business and built the restaurant behind it and then—

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JE: When I first knew about it I—I'm not sure when your grandfather passed, but your brother—I mean your father and your Uncle Morris were the principals then.

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DS: Yes.

00:00:33

JE: Had your grandfather passed by then?

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DS: No, my grandfather passed in—my—my father, let's start from the beginning—worked at—was in Detroit and worked for Ford Company and hated it and my grandparents wanted to—always wanted to go to Jerusalem to go back to the Holy Land. We're very spiritual people and so they needed to have someone to come relieve while they went to—to Jerusalem. So he—he moved back here and learned the business and then they eventually—he worked—he transferred; actually he was working at the Ford Glass plant here. So he decided to leave there and come to help my grandparents while they left to go to Jerusalem and he never left. So that was 1969; so he eventually stayed.

00:01:22

JE: And did your grandparents in fact go to Jerusalem?

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DS: They—yes, they went to Jerusalem.

00:01:27

JE: And went to the Holy Land?

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DS: Went to the Holy Land and—

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JE: That was the whole idea right?

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DS: That was their lifelong dream to do and they did that and stayed over there—I want to say stayed a couple—at least a couple weeks maybe a month—I'm not sure about that detail.

00:01:40

JE: In '69?

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DS: Nineteen sixty-nine and so my—my Uncle Morris came on in '78 and that's when my grandfather retired—in 1978, so—

00:01:56

JE: Your Uncle Morris was older than your dad?

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DS: My Uncle Morris was older, yes.

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JE: But he wasn't the first one into the business? It was your dad?

00:02:02

DS: It was my dad, right.

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JE: So what was Morris doing during that time?

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DS: Morris was in the insurance business; he was an insurance salesman and when my grandfather was ready to retire my dad you know talked to him and convinced him you know to come in and help with the business. And then—and that was in 1978 and my grandfather retired; he sold the business to my—my dad and my uncle and what's funny was he didn't—he was very old-school, so he didn't—wouldn't allow them to write him a check, so they had to pay him cash

every month—at the end of every month and probably collected through the ‘90s. And one day he walked up there and he said—he was—he was like well I think y’all paid me enough and—.

00:02:49

JE: But it was always a cash transaction?

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DS: It had to be a cash—yeah.

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JE: Wouldn’t even walk down to the—to the—the bank down on Jefferson Street and cash a check?

00:02:57

DS: Yes; uh-hmm, he wanted them to pay him in cash, and—and he was—. So he died—my uncle actually passed away 11 years ago in April—this past April and my grandfather passed away I want to say the year previous—’93. So he lived to be 90—yeah ‘93 or ‘94. He lived to be 90—90 years old and was very sharp all the way up until—

00:03:30

JE: Was he really? Did he still come down to the restaurant?

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DS: Yeah, just about every day. *[Laughs]*

00:03:35

JE: Almost every day?

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DS: Yeah, just about every day—he was—you know he was one of the most amazing people I will ever have the opportunity to meet. I'd say that he was one of the more influential people on my life and because of his determination and his will and his ability not to allow any obstacles stand in his way. He probably—I think he graduated you know—or didn't graduate but had an eighth grade education and went right into work, but he is one of the smartest people that I was ever around. He was the most—the most honest person that I ever—I mean if he told you something it was it. There was just no question about it and he meant what he said and said what he meant. He was very stern; he was one of the first—he was one of the first African American men to be able to legally carry a gun in Davidson County. And you know he went through a lot of trouble during that time of—in the times that he was starting his businesses—with the whole issues of racism and people trying to put him out of business and cops harassing him and things of that nature but he never—he pretty much I think after a while got left alone because people respected him so much because of who he was and—and what he stood for and he always did what he said he was going to do.

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JE: He was still the head person in charge there running that restaurant when—when segregation—

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[End 1002; Begin 1003]

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JE: —was legally outlawed wasn't he?

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DS: Correct.

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JE: And—and do you have any stories to tell around that—that particular change? Do you—anybody talk about it?

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DS: My grandfather talked about it a lot. He was not a fan; let me say that. His view of segregation was quite different than what the world's view is today. He was very proud of Martin Luther King and what he stood for and who he was, but his vision was completely different. My grandfather believed that—everybody he knew—a lot of his friends were businessmen and had hotels, restaurants, movie theaters, the whole works—pharmacies, grocery stores, all the way down to any service that you could think of because services were—Blacks

had to go and use a service. They couldn't go anywhere else. So his opinion was if it had stayed the way it was—I mean he told me clearly—

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JE: We wouldn't have had all this trouble?

00:01:01

DS: Money—we [African Americans in Nashville] would have had [our] 18-percent share of the market and in time we would have owned 18-percent of all the businesses, so therefore we would have—there wouldn't have been anything for them to stop us—permitting him to do.

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JE: There were a lot of people—I mean you find this out in time don't you?

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DS: Right.

00:01:18

JE: A lot of people who sort of had those feelings.

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DS: So his belief was to become economically strong and then if you were at economic you could sit at the table and do anything that you want to do. So when—when the transition took

place and around the end of the '60s and the beginning of the '70s what you saw was most of his friends lost their business because there was a mass exodus of you know—for a year or two of going to the other side of seeing what it was like—going in those hotels and going in those restaurants and going in those stores.

00:01:47

JE: Right, lost their business?

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DS: Lost their business, so he was one of the few to survive and that really saddened him. That was you know—it really hurt him from the standpoint of seeing all these people who grew up with him and worked as hard as he worked and he—he always attributed himself as just being lucky to get through you know. He didn't think there was anything he did special or anything different than anybody else and he always had for whatever reason and I don't—I don't know that—why but he—we always had a mixed crowd. We never was—even in the '50s and the—the '60s we were always a diverse restaurant. It was never singly Black or singly White.

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JE: That—that's the part I want you to focus on.

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DS: Okay; sure.

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JE: Here for a minute because what you're really telling me and I—I know this to be true from my own experience is that segregation was to segregate Black people.

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DS: Correct.

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JE: It wasn't to segregate White people.

00:02:44

DS: That is correct.

00:02:44

JE: And if there were plenty of White people in town who were—who were just fine about going to North Nashville and eating or going to other establishments up there—

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DS: Absolutely.

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JE: —and they did this long before any of these changes—social changes were—were done; is that correct?

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DS: That is very correct, yes. It was only on one side of the street as you say; segregation was only one way. It wasn't two ways and there was, like you just stated, several businesses—restaurants, grocery stores, cabs—the service industry was held primarily by blacks. I mean when you think of cleaning services, maid services—different things of that nature, so there were a lot of companies that were used by both Black and Whites alike and our restaurant being one—I always tell people, you know and I've been around just every business in this City and I think today it's still the most diverse place in the City of Nashville. If you were to walk into our restaurant right now you'd find anything from the highest dignitary to the blue-collar worker sitting right in the same place, and it's been that way as long as I can remember it.

00:03:53

JE: The only democracy in America a lot of times?

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DS: Yes.

00:03:56

JE: Those very kinds of institutions where everybody—everybody is welcome.

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DS: Everybody is welcome; everybody feels comfortable. You know like I said there's you know—you can—you can find former Senators, Presidents sitting at the same table as guys who work hard every day for a living; so—

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JE: And you're saying that—that—as far as you know that goes back as far as the restaurant?

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DS: As far as the restaurant and that's probably why we survived because we wasn't dependent on one group of—group of people and you know—and I attribute that to my grandfather. He never—I mean we never have had conversations and never sat down and talked about—people coming up to us all the time saying you know what is it like being an African American business—and you know my grandfather would always say well we're business people; we just happen to be Black, you know. We think about it and go about it and do it like anyone else. We just happened to be born Black. We don't go about business in any different way or any different fashion than anybody else would and I think that's really what aided him—

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[End 1003; Begin 1004]

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DS: —because he always said when he went to the store and when he bought all of the stuff he needed it wasn't any different. He—he had to pay the same price as everybody else. **[Laughs]**

00:00:08

JE: That's right.

00:00:09

DS: So—so it wasn't—it was no point of viewing it as anything different than what anyone else had; so—.

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JE: How long did he stay actively involved in the—in the running of the business—almost to the end?

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DS: Well he was active from a decision-making process up until '78. He retired in '78. Now he came by there every day.

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JE: But he really—after he sold it to his two sons he pretty much left them alone?

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DS: He left them alone; I mean I'm sure they—they sought out advice and talked to him because he was there for them to do so, but he didn't make decisions about the restaurant. He left that to my dad and my uncle.

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JE: And before and after 1978 who did the cooking? Who—who really worked the kitchen?

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DS: We had a lady named Parthenia McElhaney.

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JE: Parthenia—P-a-r-t-h-e-n-i-a?

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DS: Yes; and then another—

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JE: What's her last name?

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DS: McElhaney

00:01:10

JE: McElhaney

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DS: Yes, and then we had Sue Hambrick.

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JE: Sue Hambrick?

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DS: Sue Hambrick—was our two principal cooks; they were there 37 and 38 years respectively—something like that. So there were there in the '50s and worked all the way through. They worked with me, so I had an opportunity to work with both of them and two people that I've never—you probably won't see those types of people ever—ever again. I mean—

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JE: Let's get their—let's get their names and make sure we get their names. Are either of them still living?

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DS: Miss—Yes, Miss McElhaney is still alive.

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JE: She is?

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DS: Miss Hambrick is no longer alive but—uh-hm.

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JE: M-c—?

00:01:52

DS: H-a-n—McElhaney.

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JE: M-c-l-e-h-a-n-e-y or something like that?

00:02:01

DS: I believe that's correct, yes, uh-hm.

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JE: Will—do you know where she lives now?

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DS: I'm sure I can find her. She's been retired for quite sometime now.

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JE: Somebody ought to recognize her.

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DS: I see her; she comes in the restaurant sometimes. I can find her; that wouldn't be a problem. I'm sure—yes.

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JE: That would be fabulous. I think that's something we—this organization would be interested in doing.

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DS: Yes; I could definitely find her.

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JE: And I assume that those two women what they didn't cook they supervised the cooking of so they made—they did the baking, they did the meats, they did the vegetables, they did the breads; they did everything?

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DS: They did everything, you know and they were just as much a part of our success as—as anything else. You know they were great people—honest, you just really—you don't find that anymore. I mean they worked—they came in and did the best job that they could do every day.

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JE: Which was always excellent?

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DS: Which was always excellent and you know I have them thank for that. I mean growing up as a child I always say I as born right there in the restaurant; so I watched them and watched my grandfather and everybody and—and I was lucky for that experience because it taught me a different—different way.

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JE: Did your father and Uncle Morris also cook? Did they—

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DS: Yes.

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JE: They got hands-on in there, too right?

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DS: It's always been a very hands-on business. I mean up until today it's still—you can find maybe one of us in the kitchen cooking at any—any time. I think that's something—I mean we just found out a couple of days ago we're going to be able to be in the airport—in the new airport so—

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JE: I saw that—that was in the plans.

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DS: Right; that's in the plans.

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JE: So now it's official?

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DS: It's official and we will—we're hoping to open up a third location here soon in the next year maybe.

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JE: You had a place at the Farmer's Market. Is that—is that ongoing?

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DS: That's still—we're still there.

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JE: I thought so, and so you've got the main place and the Farmer's Market and now you're going to have a place at the airport?

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DS: Yes.

00:04:05

JE: And you may open another?

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DS: May open another, right.

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JE: Wow; that's getting to be a big enterprise.

00:04:09

DS: It's getting to be a big enterprise and you know we've probably had the opportunities in the past to—to really open up several locations, but you know wanting to keep that same quality to figure out how to do it without losing quality has been something that's probably been the most biggest—most challenging for us and we're just constantly working on that and how to do—how to expand without losing what we're known for.

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JE: Because that's so crucial isn't it?

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DS: Yes, it's very important to me.

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JE: You see a lot of places that say we want to expand but they don't have the know-how to take that quality of food out there, but you know I've—so far I'd say so good because I've eaten down at the Farmer's Market and it's just as good as it is out on—on Clifton. And I'm sure at the airport—

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[End 1004; Begin 1005]

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JE: —the same standards will—

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DS: We're definitely going to try and keep that. I mean the way we go about it is very simple. We cook everyday as if we're cooking for our own family and that's just the way we'll—we'll go about it and we—we require that from the people who cook in the kitchen and if you cook like you're cooking for somebody you love, you—you always do a good job. The most amazing thing about the restaurant business—not single recipe is written down.

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JE: Nothing is written down?

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DS: Nothing—never has been; I mean it's soul food in the tradition sense because if you start writing it down it really is not soul food. I mean it's something different and you have—every day it's literally cooked a little different I mean because there is no recipe, so it's left up to the cooks and to their interpretation of what we—now we train them and tell them what we want but still there's no recipe, so every day you're cooking it just a little different; uh-hm.

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JE: And you would—you would of course say one day if the green beans had too much salt in them you'd say just—just lighten the hand up a little bit tomorrow on those green beans?

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DS: No, we'd throw them out probably and start all over. I mean like I said, I don't sell anything that I won't serve to my own children, and if I won't serve it to them or to my own family or anybody than I won't sell it; so—.

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JE: To what extent is it possible for you to—to serve only fresh vegetables and fruits and to what extent do you have to concede on volume that you—you have to go to some things that are fruits prepared?

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DS: Sure, most items that we—we cook are fresh. We do green beans and we use a canned green bean and I think the reason why we do that is because we found that it's not a whole—the way we prepare them it's just not a whole lot different unless you're just super keen and can really tell. Most people can't tell; so—so we use green beans because of the way—the benefit in which it takes to pick green beans it really is difficult to cook for as many people that we—we cook for. But we still use fresh greens.

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JE: Turnip greens?

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DS: Turnip greens are fresh every day.

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JE: Wow.

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DS: Creamed potatoes are fresh, candied yams are fresh—

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JE: Just cleaning a couple bushels of turnip greens takes some time.

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DS: Yes; it takes some time and we do fresh every day, so those things really are the same. We cut all our own meat too today.

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JE: Yams, sweet potatoes?

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DS: Uh-hmm, we still cut all our own chicken; we cut all our own pork, all our own beef.

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JE: All your own—

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DS: Yeah; so we still have a full butcher shop going. I mean it's just like it was 50 years ago. It's just a lot bigger and a lot more [*Laughs*] intensive. So we really pay attention to detail and quality and what is—what is sent out on the dinner table. Someone took the time to really prepare it and—and prepare it—. Our desserts are something that you—you know today's standards of pre-prepared desserts—we have a lot of companies, a company called Mama [Turney's?] which is a local company; it's an African American owned company that makes—

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JE: What's the name of it?

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DS: Mama [Turney's?].

00:03:12

JE: Mama Turney's?

00:03:12

DS: Mama Turney's; you'll see them in Kroger's and things of that

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JE: T-u-r-n-e-y—Turney?

00:03:17

DS: Yes, uh-hmm, and they make chess pies and pecan pies and sweet potato pies and we get our pies from them—a lot of our pies and things of that nature. There's another local—It's a Piece of Cake.

00:03:29

JE: That's the name of it?

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DS: Yeah.

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JE: It's a Piece of Cake.

00:03:31

DS: That's what it's called—It's a Piece of Cake, so that's an American owned bakery that does a lot of our cakes and things of that nature. So we don't do as much baking as we used to because baking is really its own separate—especially when you're doing it for several hundred people; it's its own separate business and it's tough to do both and do both at a high quality without having a—a different kitchen. You know 30 years ago, 40 years ago we had you know—we—we'd feed 65 people a day and now we're serving several hundred people a day and it's really difficult to—to do desserts at a high quality and you just find that people—I mean the desserts now are stuff that are able—people are able to do at a very high quality.

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JE: Right, do you do some catering?

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DS: Yes, sir.

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JE: Off—off premises?

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DS: We do off—offsite catering and onsite catering. We do a lot of catering. We probably did more catering from '78—in the '70s till about—till about '90 when we opened up the new restaurant than we do today. We get more concert catering and things of that nature in the City. We still do a lot of—a lot of office parties and civic groups and—and—and things of that nature but we don't do as much concert catering as—as we used to.

00:04:57

JE: Do you think of catering as a—as a—

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[End 1005; Begin 1006]

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JE: —really different in terms of how you have to prepare and so forth than doing—doing it in the restaurant?

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DS: Yes, catering is very—I mean it's its own business and you really need to focus on that. If you want to do it full-time and I'm sure we could if we really focused on—on doing it. It's just its own animal; it's its own business. You need another staff for it; you need a whole different set of equipment and—and it's a very—it's a wonderful business. It's different hours. It—it gets down to you, you know how much do you want to be away from home, how much do you want to [*Laughs*] be involved in—in other things and—and then that's the challenge that we have in

the next 10 years is to—how do we take this and really spread it out more on a corporate level and have people who work there with—with the same pride that—that we have, and—and that's our challenge over the next 10 years.

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JE: Your father and uncle opened a new place and had a fire.

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DS: Yes.

00:01:01

JE: Shortly thereafter—tell us about that.

00:01:02

DS: Okay; when we decided—and my dad and my uncle—to build a new restaurant, very challenging at first. It—it was amazing; we had been in business so long and never really had a problem, never—financially never had a problem and went and put a business plan together. I was very young; I was—I was I college at the time.

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JE: This was when—what year was this?

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DS: This was probably when the idea—when—when the groundwork had started it was '85—'86 and started pushing ideas and going to different banks to get the proper financing and—and things of that nature and nobody would—nobody would touch us. Could not find a bank that would give us the loan—even the bank they would have been using for sometimes.

00:01:46

JE: Even Citizens Savings wouldn't—

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DS: Wouldn't touch us.

00:01:48

JE: —wouldn't touch you?

00:01:49

DS: Uh-um; so and it was very disappointing to us, and I mean that took some—some going back and dusting yourself off and really [*Laughs*]*—*from a pride level picking yourself up and going out and really hitting the streets again. So we—you know there's some really good people in this City and I give credit to—I don't know if he'd want me to but I will—Ben Rechter, prominent businessman in this City—gave him a call, my dad, and told him what we were going through and what the—what the issues was. He made a couple calls and it was all taken care of.

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JE: What do you think was behind that David?

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DS: You know I'd hate to think—

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JE: I mean—

00:02:28

DS: —it was anything other than just you know—. [*Laughs*] I don't know to be quite honest. It was very interesting; like I said I mean we—you know never had problems, never—everybody always got paid, credit rating was high.

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JE: It would certainly be a temptation I guess to think well that's—that's got to be racism.

00:02:47

DS: Right.

00:02:48

JE: What else could it—could it be?

00:02:51

DS: I mean and the reason, you know a lot of banks said they just—restaurants are risky businesses. That's what they all wrote it off to—that we don't you know—95-percent of all new restaurants fail, but we wasn't a new restaurant. We had been there 25—30 years; so—

[Laughs] No, I don't know and I—and I leave it—and I'd rather leave it as saying that it just wasn't—we didn't have a good business plan, we—we—it was our first time going to a bank to try. I mean before then we—we were just working off what my grandfather had built and it was the first time we had to put a business plan together and go to the banks and I just think maybe we were ill prepared. I like to think that.

00:03:26

JE: But in any case, a couple phone calls and Ben Rechter had found a—a lender?

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DS: Yes; Ben Rechter found a lender and helped us out, went to the table with us, and sat down and pretty much said you know these guys—you don't have to worry. And you know—and I—we owe him a great deal of gratitude for doing that and—and so here we are. That was 19—we—we started the construction in '90—1987 after bumping our heads for a couple years to try to get—get it started and get it off the ground. It was completed in—in 1988 and it was the fall of '98—I mean '88. I'm trying to think of the exact month. I want to say it was around October—September, October. Twenty-nine days later it burned down.

00:04:15

JE: Just had been in there 29 days?

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DS: Uh-hmm, 29 days and we you know—that was probably the most devastating that I've ever seen.

00:04:26

JE: And for your dad and uncle—

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DS: For my dad—I mean the work that they had put in, the time, the hours to get this thing ready and it burned down 29 days later, so—.

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JE: Did you—did you ever know to your satisfaction why—why it burned?

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DS: It was found out years later—I mean after several years—we were investigated ourselves for arson and it was—and then come to find out it was electrical—bad—faulty wiring which led to—. It was also poor you know—we got some—

00:05:00

[End 1006; Begin 1007]

00:00:00

DS: —bad advice from our builder. I thought—we—we built the first building where we could have had steel and we used wood—wood in places we could have used steel, which they should have informed us that—that's what we should have done. But we learned that after the fire; I mean you know we paid—what I call stupid tax and—. [*Laughs*]

00:00:22

JE: You turned right around though and built it though and built it back?

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DS: Six months later we—we—I mean we went in there and just rolled our—our sleeves up and cleaned everything possible that we could, I mean physically lug—any equipment that we could save we scrubbed it clean from the fire, rebuilt it; rebuilt it the right way this time and today we're still here.

00:00:43

JE: So that even at this stage you probably would look back and say some good came out of that. You wouldn't want to go through that again but you got a better building didn't you?

00:00:53

DS: Got a better building and we got a better education on insurance, we got a better education on how to build a restaurant to contain it in certain rooms if there is a fire—it's only contained to one area; it doesn't spread over the entire building.

00:01:11

JE: It's an expensive education.

00:01:12

DS: It was an expensive education but I'm glad one—one I think it made us stronger and it made us realize how much and important the business was to it. It was like losing a family member, I mean literally felt like losing a family member and watched everybody really—I mean our employees—

00:01:29

JE: Just devastated you?

00:01:30

DS: It just I mean you know you've got all these people that you just hired—all these new people and you've got people coming from the old restaurant you know and they're out of—out of work. We paid all our people that was there for—had been from the old restaurant and never—kept them on payroll, paid them, nearly went completely broke but—

00:01:50

JE: How many months was it?

00:01:51

DS: It took us—

00:01:54

JE: To get back open?

00:01:56

DS: To get back open it took right around nine months to get back open, yeah, and—and so we opened—reopened and started over and haven't—haven't had much of a problem since.

00:02:11

JE: Haven't looked back since?

00:02:13

DS: I remember a time in—I had just gotten out of college and I was working—working there. My dad wanted to take a vacation and he had been working for a couple years without really having an opportunity to take one and I was young and he—he had left—he went to South America for a couple weeks and we have a little room where we do some barbecuing and one of my guys had took some ashes out and—in the evening you take the ashes out of the barbecue and you're supposed to take them out there and it's like contained. And we let them sit outside. Well he left them inside the—the barbecue room. So I come in the next morning and opened up and I could smell smoke.

00:02:52

JE: Smoke?

00:02:54

DS: And I was like what the—you know but there was no physical fire and I'm looking around and I touched the barbecue door and opened it and it was just like—back; you know when that oxygen hit that room that room just went up. And that was one—*[Laughs]*—I—I stupidly grabbed the hose and—because I just did not want—I just said—I couldn't believe that—that this could happen and I definitely was like man, he left and he left me in control for the first time, so I didn't want to let that thing—. I was sitting there putting—trying to put this fire out—and with a hose. All my employees are telling me you know get out—get out of the restaurant and—and when—all of the sudden I just remember somebody coming in the back door and grabbing me and pulling me out of there. I guess I—you know I don't even really remember it much.

00:03:41

JE: You probably would have gone up with it.

00:03:42

DS: Right, and I laid and he pulled me and laid me down out—outside and he's like don't worry about it. And he runs back in. He says I'll help you. And then I—a few seconds later here comes the fire department and they—they put me on a stretcher and they were talking to me. I said wait a minute; hold on—hold on—hold on. I said I have to tell the guy thank you that helped me. I

said the guy that was in the restaurant when y'all came up and they said there was no guy in the restaurant. And I said yeah, I know there was a guy in the restaurant and they said no—there was nobody in the restaurant. So I call him my guardian angel; I don't know what happened. I can't say today what happened but somebody came and pulled me out of there.

00:04:15

JE: And you never knew who it was.

00:04:16

DS: Never knew who it was and never you know and—and they said it was nobody in there and that it was my imagination but somebody pulled me outside and laid me on the ground and when the fire department came which she's saying later, so—. So they put the fire out; it really stayed contained which was like I said one of the new designs; it stayed contained in that building and it wasn't a lot of damage—just little structure to the walls and stuff like that; but—.

00:04:40

JE: I bet you remember what your dad said when he first—.

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DS: [*Laughs*] Yeah.

00:04:47

JE: I bet it wasn't well I'm glad you're okay, son.

00:04:51

DS: Yeah, we had a long discussion about making sure everything was straight before we leave at night, so I learned that lesson. I walked around—

00:05:00

[End 1007; Begin 1008]

00:00:00

DS: —to check everything out before you actually close the door at night and don't leave it to chance that something is okay; so—

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JE: Well you've got a great restaurant, David.

00:00:11

DS: Yes; thank you.

00:00:13

JE: It's a wonderful place to go and it's—it's a Nashville institution now you know.

00:00:19

DS: Right.

00:00:21

JE: I told Hap Townes who was hear earlier that of all the places in the—in the South and this is—that means the universe where you get a good meat and three—Nashville is the best meat and three town in the South, but that is the universe.

00:00:39

DS: I would agree with that.

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JE: There's a lot of good places here.

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DS: There's more meat and threes in Nashville probably than any place I've ever—ever been to in the South. I don't really know where that name comes from—came from, who—who—

00:00:52

JE: I'm not quite sure either.

00:00:52

DS: —who made that up or who coined it—a meat and three but yeah, this is one of the more unique areas as far as that is concerned.

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JE: And that's kind of the signature food of Nashville don't you think?

00:01:07

DS: It is really; there's no doubt that Nashville is the founder, I think—father of—of meat and threes. It's just—this City is just so—you know when it comes to the City man it's very hospitable. You come here; I think most people who visit this City go away feeling welcome.

00:01:26

JE: Like, yeah like—like coming here.

00:01:28

DS: It's a second home. You can go into a lot of places here in the City; I mean there's so many great places that you can go to and the service is just warm and welcome and you feel at home—a second home. You know so and it's just a couple things that for—you know about my grandfather that I want to say.

00:01:46

JE: All right.

00:01:48

DS: It's just—you know one of the more amazing things that I ever ran into—I was out of town myself; I was an engine maker and I will never forget. I was on a small boat, it was like a dinner

cruise in Jamaica and I'm sitting there and some guys are talking at a table across from me and this guy was talking about being in Nashville and going to school at Fisk and then going onto Meharry and he was just—he was just talking about this one place in Nashville and he couldn't think of the name and he kept going on. This place—and the guy—the guy who owned the place just—I couldn't have made it without him. He—I had no money; my parents didn't have any money and I was going to have to leave school and I couldn't eat and he just told me—just come up here and eat and he just didn't want me to make a big deal out of it and he never wanted me to say anything, just come eat and sit down. And—and he says I just wish I could think of his name. He said I just want to repay him so much. So I'm listening to the guy talk and when he was talking about Fisk and Meharry; so I just—I just said I'm not you know trying to be nosey, but I said would you be talking about Swett? And he said—just clapped his hands and said how do you know about that place? And I told him; I said well my name—I'm David Swett. My grandfather started it—Walter Swett, and he just reaches in his pocket and he's like I owe you so much money. Let me pay you; please let me take care of your dinner, let me do this for you, dah-dah-dah. I couldn't—you know he was like—he's a big-time doctor now. I just never would have been anywhere if it wasn't for Swett. I would have had to go back home and give up my education.

00:03:16

JE: That's a wonderful story.

00:03:17

DS: And it's so many people that I've talked to that—that was the case. I did an interview with a guy; it was something similar to this but it was about the Civil Rights Movement and he was just—he talked about that sign thing about how my grandfather fed them and took care of them and you know—but the thing he never wanted anybody to make a fuss. He was just like—just—just take it and—and go. And—and he was—you know just his—his work ethic and his—his ability to fight through all the—the confusion of the times was one of the things that I'm most proud of as his grandson; so—. Without him we wouldn't be anywhere.

00:04:02

JE: Well I'm sure he would be awfully proud of you—of his son and his—both his sons and—and of his grandson for what y'all have done with it because it's—it's—it probably exceeds even his—his greatest expectations.

00:04:23

DS: Well I hope so; I mean you know you just hope—you only hope but if—you know I just wish one day that there's another group—my three kids or some of my nieces and nephews that you know—that it continues on and it never stops.

00:04:38

JE: I feel sure it will be there a long time to come.

00:04:41

DS: That's the one thing about cities, they're just—they come and leave. You know you go to cities and there are just very few places that—you know everything is becoming corporate and that's just—. You know the one thing that's great about going to cities that you can find places like—

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JE: You want it to have that feel of home?

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DS: Yes—that feel of home, not just all—

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[End 1008; Begin 1009]

00:00:00

DS: —chain operations but some place where you can go eat and it really gives you the taste of the—of the city that you're in.

00:00:08

JE: David thanks very much.

00:00:09

DS: My pleasure.

00:00:11

JE: Really appreciate it very much.

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DS: Thank you very much.

00:00:13

[End 1009]

[End David Swett Interview]