

RON KOTTEMANN
Roman Chewing Candy – New Orleans, LA
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Interviewer: Sara Roahen
Southern Foodways Alliance
Project: New Orleans Eats/Guardians of Tradition

00:00:00

Sara Roahen: This is Sara Roahen for the Southern Foodways Alliance. It is Monday, September 18th. We're in New Orleans, Louisiana on Jefferson Avenue at the home of Poppy Tooker, who is here participating in the oral history interview of the Roman Candy Man. So if I could get you to state your name and your birth date, and what you do for a living.

00:00:26

Ron Kottemann: My name is Ron Kottemann. I was born July 28th 1949. And I'm the Roman Candy Man, which basically is a vending operation. I sell and make candy from a horse-drawn wagon.

00:00:42

SR: All right, and how long has that been going on? How long has that business been in existence?

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RK: Ninety-one years.

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SR: Really?

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RK: Uh-hm, yeah, it was started in 1915 by my grandfather.

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SR: And what was his name?

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RK: Sam Cortese. He was—actually, the candy itself dates back to Sicily probably three or four generations, because I know—we know for sure his mother made the candy, and maybe even before then. And they were in the confection business in Sicily and so, you know, we don't know exactly how far back it goes but it goes back a pretty good ways.

00:01:36

SR: Do you know what town they were in—in Sicily?

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RK: I can't remember the name right offhand. It's a little four-letter word, a little small town in Palermo which is—Palermo is not only a town; it's also a province in Sicily. I could show you on a map if I had one.

00:01:58

SR: I don't have a map of Italy. And so I'll just say for the record that we're eating boiled crabs [*Laughs*]*—*If you hear some pounding and cracking. And so who—which generation came here to this country? Did your grandfather's parents come here or—?

00:02:19

RK: Yeah, and—and the way that worked was my great-grandfather, my grandfather's dad—my grandfather's name was Sam Cortese; his dad was Anthony Cortese. He came to the United States—he made like three or four trips, which evidently was something that some people did back in those days. And what he would do, is he would come from Sicily to the United States and make some money here and then go back with the money, and he made two or three trips like that. And on the last trip he took his family back with him. For whatever reason—and—and nobody seems to know why—he always came to New Orleans until the last trip. They went up to Louisville, Kentucky, and I guess he had some business up there. I don't know what was going on in Louisville, but that's where my grandfather was born: in Louisville, Kentucky. He's the first generation, you know, America.

00:03:29

SR: Do you know what your great-grandfather did when he would come here? Was he in farming or—?

00:03:36

RK: He always—he was always a vendor as far as know. He sold fruit and vegetables. Although—that, you know—he may have made candy up in—in Louisville, you know, because they do sell a lot of taffy up that way and that's basically what—what I sell, and he knew how to make it. So it was a possibility, you know; nobody knows for sure exactly. There's not a whole lot that anybody knows from that—.

00:04:13

SR: Hmm, that's interesting though that they have that up—that tradition up there.

00:04:19

RK: Yeah, I always wanted to look into where—when exactly that started and how [*Laughs*] and where.

00:04:24

Poppy Tooker: What kind of taffy is up there? Is it similar to yours? Is it in a stick?

00:04:30

RK: It's taffy. I mean, taffy is found all over the world. From what I've been able to read, taffy was in most of the seacoast towns in the world and—and taffy was made actually on ships first—probably the Venetians started it years—you know, way back when. But the toothbrush wasn't invented and they needed something to clean their teeth with. So in the galley they would make the sticky candy, the taffy, so that after you ate you would eat the taffy, you know, to get the particles out of your teeth. And that's—that's why it was invented as near as anybody can tell.

00:05:18

Poppy: Love that.

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RK: And of course Sicily is, you know, an island. I mean you know so anyplace—you can go anywhere in the world—any seacoast town and you can find taffy in that town.

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Poppy: But you see, most of the time it's saltwater taffy; that's—

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RK: Saltwater is just a name; it's not—

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Poppy: I thought it was made with salt—

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RK: No.

00:05:40

Poppy: No.

00:05:42

RK: Well some of them put salt in it and some of them put water in it; I don't put either one in mine, but you know, I mean I figure—I figure saltwater taffy probably came from the East Coast, from you know New Jersey or something on the boardwalk, and they needed a name for it. That's what they came up with.

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SR: So it's not called saltwater because there is saltwater in it?

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RK: No.

00:06:04

SR: It's because of where it's sold?

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RK: As near as I can tell, yeah.

00:06:10

SR: That is so interesting. Huh. And so when your—when you were growing up, what did—what did your grandparents call it? Did they call it Roman Candy, or did they call it taffy, or did they just call it candy or—?

00:06:31

RK: They just called it candy. But the name *Roman Candy* was what my grandfather gave it and he—you know, it was Italian candy and he was in New Orleans trying to sell it. Well, you know, if he was in the Irish Channel it was mostly Irish people, you know, you had different ethnic neighborhoods and they were stuck together around the city and so he called—if he called it

Italian, he figured nobody else was going to buy it except Italians; so he called it *Roman* instead.

And that's where the name came from.

00:07:08

SR: And was it in the—so can you describe the shape of it?

00:07:15

RK: Well it comes in a stick about a foot-long, about the diameter of a dime I guess. Years ago it used to be a little bigger around—about a nickel or so, the shape of a nickel, but it was always the same length. It was just bigger around.

00:07:37

SR: And how come it changed?

00:07:39

RK: Because the cost of ingredients have gone up. **[Laughs]**

00:07:44

SR: Okay, so it's not a customer preference?

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RK: My grandfather—my grandfather started out selling candy a nickel a stick, okay in 1915. He died in 1969 and it was still a nickel a stick. Okay, so he sold candy for a nickel for 54 years.

Well you can't—you can't keep the size and have it at the same price. You've either got to go up in the price or cut down the size—you know, basic economics.

00:08:11

SR: Uh-hm. So I want to—

00:08:13

RK: Now once we got into the '70s, the stick was the size and that was it. I wasn't going to go any smaller than that, so the price started going up. [*Laughs*]

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SR: And what is it now, 50-cents?

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RK: Seventy-five cents.

00:08:26

SR: Seventy-five cents a stick. Do you—have there—has there ever been anybody else of Italian or Sicilian heritage here that makes that kind of candy that you know of?

00:08:38

RK: No, we're the only family who ever did that.

00:08:45

SR: And so I've heard the story of how it started happening, but can you tell the story of your grandfather and how he—?

00:08:55

RK: Well he was a—a street vendor, not necessarily by choice but that's the way it turned out. He—he was involved in a streetcar accident when he was like 10 or 12 years old and got his legs cut off below the knee. And so it was a miracle that he survived that without antibiotics, and it just so happened that there was a guy there who was with—he was in the Spanish American War, and he knew a little bit about amputees and he put tourniquets on—on Grandpa and saved his life. He was in Touro for a while, and I think the bill was \$500. *[Laughs]*

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Poppy: Oh wow, that was a big bill. That was a huge bill.

00:09:46

RK: But once he—once he overcame that, then he went back to school but he had to be carried around. His—his dad made him a little cart and he had a team of goats that he used to drive the cart around. And so he used to go to school in the cart, and then once he got to school people would have to carry him, you know, into class and whatever. Well kids being what they are, they would go out and—and let the goats out and, you know, run them through the school and all. So the principal got mad at that—aggravated, so he just kicked him out of school.

00:10:25

SR: Oh.

00:10:25

RK: [*Laughs*] So he only got a third-grade education. And that was it, you know. He—first he used the goat cart and he'd go out selling fruit and vegetables every day. He started out being a vendor at, you know, 14—15 years old. And you know, the family would still make candy for family get-togethers, you know like—you know, Christmas and whatever; you know, Saint Joseph's Day, they would make candy. Well sometimes if they had candy left over, they'd put it on the cart with him. Well by this time he was—he was grown. At age 19 or 20 they fitted him for a pair of legs and he got the false legs, which was not—not many people realize it, but New Orleans was the place in this hemisphere to get artificial limbs because after the Civil War and after the Spanish American War, there was so many people in the South that—that had missing limbs, it was incredible. So the—so that—that whole business was pretty much generated down here. I mean it was—it was incredible. And so he was fitted—

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Poppy: I've never heard that before.

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SR: I've heard that; I don't remember who told me that.

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RK: Oh yeah, after the Civil War—if you survived the Civil War, you usually had something missing you know. That was a brutal war, especially for the South. You know down here if—if you went into the war and came out whole, you were the exception. And then—and then by the 1890s, we were involved in the Spanish American War, so that—so they had to do something with that. And so they had a hospital down here and started making artificial limbs. Anyway, he was one of the first to get a working pair of legs.

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SR: Wow.

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RK: And it would only work because his legs were cut off below the knee, so the knee could fit into the—they could make a—what they did was, the top of it was made out of leather and—and you laced it on, and it had some hinges—iron hinges—on either side of the knee. And the rest of it was wood, but they grooved the—the wood out so that the nub that was below the knee would fit into the—into that groove. And then you just strapped it on and learned how to keep your balance and walk, you know.

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SR: So was he—when he walked was he—did it look normal?

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RK: He wobbled—he wobbled some, but I mean if you didn't know that he didn't have any legs you wouldn't suspect it.

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Poppy: Isn't that something?

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SR: And could he like get up into the—the cart by himself and stuff?

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RK: Yeah, yeah. But anyway, the way he got into the business—by that time, like I said, he had legs and he also had a stone coal and firewood business, which was a vending business. He—he would go every morning in the wintertime and go to a coal yard, and they would shovel coal into your wagon and then you'd go out on the street and, you know, yell and make whatever noise you made and—and sell the coal, which was a brutal business because a bushel of coal was a nickel.

00:14:07

SR: Really? Wow.

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RK: Yeah. And what you had to do was, somebody stops you know and they need coal, so you got to get out of the wagon and shovel coal into the—into a basket. Usually they would get two

bushels at a time, so you'd shovel two bushels of coal and then you'd put one on each shoulder, and then you'd go bring it into their house. And every house had these, you know, little short fireplaces, you know that's a coal-burning fireplace. That's what they are; that's what they had in New Orleans. Stone coal is like baseball-sized coal. Anyway, then you've got to bring it in the house and then empty it into their coal basket, which was usually right next to the—the fireplace. For that, get a nickel or dime. This is New Orleans, and most houses had steps, and you had to go up the steps. **[Laughs]**

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SR: Plus he had artificial legs.

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Poppy: I know, that's incredible.

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RK: Right, so anyway, so that's what he did in the wintertime—sold stone coal and firewood. And in the summer he was selling fruit and vegetables, like I said. Every now and then they'd put candy on the wagon, if they had it leftover, and the candy sold really well. People started asking for it. So in—in the spring of 1915, he decided to try to sell just candy and get out of the fruits and vegetables and see if the candy would make a go of it. The problem was finding a way to make candy as you roll down the street, because you know, before his mother was making the candy, and if she had some left over, well fine, you know; she—he could take it with him. Well she had other kids; she couldn't be at home just making candy every day. She had a lot of other

obligations, and so—so he went to a bunch of wheelwrights and told them what he was trying to do and what he was going to need in the wagon to do it, and all of them but one said *No, it's impossible; you can't do it—it can't be done*. Now he talked to one named Tom Brinker, who had a shop on Washington Avenue and Claiborne, and he said yeah, he could do it. And so they—they sat down and designed the wagon, the same wagon we use today. He wanted windows all around, which is unusual for anything except a hearse. And he wanted to—wanted to be able to drive it from the inside, okay, which was very unusual for a wagon. Most wagons have a perch on the outside where somebody sits, and they're either in the weather, out in the weather, or they might have an overhang over the top of them, you know, but they're outside; they're not inside driving. Well he wanted to be inside and he—he wanted hot and cold running water in there, marble tables; had to have a hook made, you know, to pull the candy on. And so and the guy was able to do it all.

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SR: How do you get hot and cold running water in there?

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RK: He had two containers made; they held about a gallon and a half—two gallons—of water each, and then they were on a platform. One was for hot water and one was for cold water. He had pipes that came down to the sink, where you had faucets—you know, one hooked to the hot and one hooked to the cold. He had one sink, and all you had to do was fill it up—fill them up with water, you know, in the morning or whatever. On the one of them they had a platform, and he just had a little—a little burner, and then he—you know, to heat it up.

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Poppy: And what year was this again?

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RK: This was 1915. Yeah, this was before they had—before they had regulations on it.

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SR: And how do you have it now? Is it the same setup?

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RK: No. The—the Health Department has changed that to the point where you have to have 40 gallons of hot and cold running water now, and you have to have four sinks, and more bullshit than you could ever imagine. *[Laughs]*

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SR: *[Laughs]* You have to have how many sinks?

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RK: Four.

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SR: Four? *[Emphasis Added]*

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RK: You have to have one sink for washing, one sink for rinsing, one sink for sterilizing, and one sink to wash your hands with.

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SR: And of course you use all of them that way?

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RK: Oh sure—absolutely.

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SR: But you have four sinks in there?

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RK: Uh-hm. They're not big, but they're big enough.

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Poppy: Wow, that's amazing. I didn't know you had those. And what year did you have to get those sinks?

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RK: Grandpa had the—the two-sink system, because they made him have two sinks at some point and—and that was still in the wagon when I came out of the Army in '71. And then I tried to get re-permitted, and that's when they said *Well you—you've got to adjust this* and changed all the regulations. The city at that point was trying to get vendors off the street.

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Poppy: How many vendors do you think were on the street back then, when you started?

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RK: When I started or when my grandfather started?

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Poppy: When you started. When your grandfather started, I'm sure there was tons of them, but in '71 how many were left?

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RK: There wasn't—there wasn't very many. You know, I mean there was the ice-cream trucks and stuff like that, but as far as a vendor that was doing something out of the ordinary or special, there weren't very many of them left.

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Poppy: Was there a waffle man?

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RK: Yeah, they had—

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Poppy: Do you know about the waffle man?

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SR: I heard about it on the pod-cast.

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RK: Yeah, they had a couple of families that sold waffles and they were—they were sold out of horse-drawn wagons. And they—one was the Dekemel family; he's the most famous one, although there were three brothers—three Dekemel brothers—and they all had wagons on the street at one time or another. The guy they called Buglin' Sam was the most famous 'cause he went down the street playing a bugle.

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Poppy: Hah, oh yeah.

00:20:52

RK: And so that was his noisemaker. We always had a bell. Anyway, and then there was an Italian named Gandolini, and he was the last one. He finally retired in the mid-'60s, I think—'65 or something.

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SR: What kind of waffles were they? Were they Belgian waffles, like the really dense fat kind?

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RK: No, they were—the way they—the way they did it was they had—had a fire—they had a stove in there, and they would—they had irons that were made. I don't know who made them, but I'm sure they were handmade irons, you know, that looked like a waffle and maybe a little smaller. They were like three—three and a half inches, you know, square maybe. And you know, they would make up the batter and have—you know, grease down the irons and throw the batter on there and—and bake them right there in the wagon as they went along. Then they put—they put powdered sugar on them like they do beignets. And that's what he sold; they were sold three per whatever—I don't know what—three for a dime or whatever the price was. I don't know, but they were sold three at a time just like beignets, only as a waffle.

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SR: I wonder where those irons went.

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Poppy: Wouldn't that be something to have?

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RK: Well Gandolini brought the irons to the house ‘cause I was there that day, and he wanted my grandfather to buy them. My grandfather didn’t want them; he was too old by that time. He was already in his 70s and he said *I’m not starting over with something new*. And so I don’t know what happened to Gandolini’s irons. I don’t know.

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SR: Hmm. Did you—is that when you started—when you took over is 1971?

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RK: Yeah.

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SR: And so how old was your grandfather at that point?

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RK: He died in ‘69.

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SR: Oh okay. And did he—was he a vendor until then or—?

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RK: Yeah, he worked until two or three months before he died.

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Poppy: So there was two years, right, when there was no Roman taffy candy in the streets of New Orleans—or was it longer than that?

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RK: Yeah, it was just two years. I got drafted; that's why it was a two-year gap.

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SR: Did he know that you were interested?

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RK: Yeah.

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SR: Was he—did you get trained by him or anything?

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RK: Yeah. I mean, I worked—I started making candy when I was 14 years old. And you know, my brothers and I—I'm one of 11 kids—

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SR: Wow.

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RK: —well the first five of us were all boys, okay. Well by the time we got to be teenagers, you know, mom and dad needed some help. I mean they couldn't make enough money to [Laughs]—for—for a family of 13 it was a little tough, you know. So Grandpa set us up in the truck; we had a—a truck that we sold—sold cotton candy and popcorn and peanuts and Roman Candy. And the five of us worked that truck, you know. I worked—I started working in the eighth grade, I think, when I first started. I worked all the way through high school and then—so I was—I was making candy by the time I was 14. And then—and you know, and then when I wasn't working in the truck during the summer, sometimes I would work with Grandpa on the wagon, you know, 'cause he was—he was getting up in age and he needed some help, you know. So that's how—it was like an apprenticeship type of deal, I guess.

00:24:42

SR: Did any of your other siblings want to take over the cart?

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RK: No, no, I was the only one who liked it. It's hard work; it's hot in the summer. [Laughs]

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SR: So you don't have air—you have four sinks but no air-conditioning?

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RK: No, there's no air-conditioning.

00:25:01

Poppy: Do you have a little trucker fan in there?

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RK: Elaine got me a fan like a year ago, a battery operated fan that I use sometimes, but you know—. You know it's—it works when it's dead calm and you have no breeze. You know, you'll use the fan; other than that, you know, you open the windows on all four sides. I mean, if you've got a breeze coming from any kind of direction.

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Poppy: You're up high.

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RK: You know you will be all right.

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SR: Did you always know that you wanted to do that for a living?

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RK: Yeah. I mean, I was about 19 or so when I decided that's what I wanted to do. I wanted to give it a shot and see if I could, you know—if it would work.

00:26:00

SR: What was your grandfather like? What was his personality like?

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RK: I don't know. He liked to tease people. *[Laughs]* He had a lot of fun doing that, but he had a strong will. I mean, you know—knew what he wanted and he wasn't going to stop 'til he got it. You know, one of those kinds of people; he did everything he ever wanted to do, you know. He used to—he used to hunt, fish, which was you know pretty amazing for the physical limitations that he had, but anything he wanted to do he did. The only thing he didn't do—and I don't guess he ever wanted to or he probably would have done that too—is he never went swimming.

[Laughs] But other than that, he did whatever he wanted, you know.

00:26:57

SR: Wow.

00:26:58

RK: He used to go—he used to go hunting in the pirogue, hunting ducks. Now you know if a pirogue flips over you're done, 'cause he couldn't swim. He didn't care. *[Laughs]*

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Poppy: He must have been something else.

00:27:17

SR: Yeah. Did he have a memory of that accident?

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RK: Oh yeah, uh-hm.

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Poppy: He was 10, right?

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RK: Yeah, yeah. He was—he was coming home from school and him and a bunch of other kids were just being kids, you know. They had an ice-wagon going down the street, and they were trying to hop onto the ice-wagon to get a ride, and the guy kept trying to shoo them off the ice-wagon. Well they got to—I think the accident happened on Napoleon and—and Magazine, and they were crossing the railroad tracks, and—and—You know, the guy was yelling at them and whatever, and they all jumped off the ice-wagon and he slipped because it was wet, you know. That's why: it was wet.

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SR: But it was a streetcar?

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RK: Yeah.

00:28:21

SR: The ice-wagon wasn't a streetcar?

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RK: No, he was going over the tracks when he—when he fell off.

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SR: Oh, so there was a streetcar on Napoleon—?

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Poppy: Oh Sara, there was a streetcar that went down—

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RK: Streetcars everywhere.

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Poppy: —every street in the city.

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RK: Every—every two streets had a streetcar line. You couldn't—if you—no matter where you lived in the city, you didn't have to walk more than two blocks to get to a streetcar.

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SR: We need that again. *[Laughs]*

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Poppy: Don't you—I think it's on your street where you see where the streetcar tracks were?

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SR: Yeah, not—they have that on Annunciation.

00:28:57

Poppy: Okay.

00:28:57

RK: What street are you on?

00:28:57

SR: Constance.

00:28:59

Poppy: Well there you go.

00:29:02

SR: And maybe they have it on Constance too, but they—

00:29:02

RK: No, they didn't have a line going down Constance. They had a line on Magazine and they had a line on Laurel.

00:29:07

SR: Oh Laurel—it must be Laurel.

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RK: If you go down Laurel, you can see the middle of the street is different from the sides of the street because they had—they had two tracks. They had one going and one coming up—up Laurel, so if you were on Magazine—I mean if you were on Constance, you either went to Magazine to catch a line or—or Laurel. You were never more than two blocks from a streetcar anywhere in the city.

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SR: When you were growing up, was that the case?

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RK: No, streetcars were gone by the time I was—.

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Poppy: Yeah, they took the streetcars out in the '50s or the late '40s—something like that.

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RK: Something like that; I don't know exactly.

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Poppy: You know, Ford; you know, the buses—what they did to the whole country.

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RK: Well they went to—they went to electric buses first. Remember the electric buses?

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Poppy: Uh-hm, oh yeah.

00:29:52

RK: It worked like a streetcar, and they had a line above the street and they had to pull—you know how they have on the streetcar, only it was a bus and it had rubber tires. And that's the way they were.

00:30:06

SR: Where did your grandfather live?

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RK: He grew up down in the Irish Channel on Annunciation as a kid, and then he moved to Magazine Street—5429 Magazine, which was a—it had a shop in the front and, you know, the

living quarters in the back and upstairs too. And then when he got married he moved to Constance Street—5510 Constance.

00:30:35

Poppy: Where Ronnie lives.

00:30:37

RK: Right.

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SR: Really? You live in your grandfather's house?

00:30:42

RK: Yeah.

00:30:43

SR: I love that house. I love that house because the Roman Candy cart is there. **[Laughs]** And so what kind of store did they have?

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RK: Fruit and vegetables; you know, that's what—that's what they were always in, you know. Grandfather sold fruits and vegetables. I mean his dad, my great-grandfather, sold fruits and vegetables 'til he died, you know.

00:31:11

SR: I heard on—on that pod-cast that there weren't always flavors of the candy.

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RK: Right, originally the candy had no flavor. It was just a base candy that you cooked, and—and you pulled it and wrapped it—cut it and wrapped it. It wasn't until the 1940s that people started wanting flavors, you know. The consumer got, I don't know, sophisticated because everything else had flavors. You know and so he—he experimented with a bunch of flavors and settled on just the chocolate, vanilla, and strawberry, because it took people too long to make up their mind, you know, when he had seven or eight flavors—

00:32:04

Poppy: A nickel a stick—move on. [*Laughs*]

00:32:06

RK: Yeah, I mean the object is to make your sale and move. And you've got to move because you're not going to sell that much just sitting in one place, you know, so especially not back then. So he settled on three flavors to make people make up their minds and move on down the street, you know.

00:32:26

SR: What other flavors did he experiment with? Do you remember any of them?

00:32:30

RK: He tried spearmint and he tried an orange flavor, and I don't know what all else, but he tried several.

00:32:38

Poppy: It was amazing.

00:32:39

SR: And is there—is the recipe written down, or is it all in your head?

00:32:44

RK: No, it's not written down. My dad knows how to make the candy. Two—two or three of my brothers know how to make the candy. My brother-in-law, who worked for me for 10 or 11 years in the zoo until the storm—he knows how to make the candy. *[Laughs]* So—

00:33:07

SR: I never saw that. So was he making the candy at the zoo?

00:33:11

RK: Yeah. In—in 1983 I wanted to—I decided to try to put a wagon in the mall, you know, and I was trying to get into Lakeside and they wouldn't let me put one in there. I made a deal with the Clearview Mall out in Metairie; so—so I started building this wagon, and I got about three-

quarters of it finished—it was a replica of, you know, the wagon on the street. The only difference was I couldn't find the same fifth-wheel gear, so I had to change the front-end a little bit but not much. But anyway, I just about got the thing built; I was real close and they called me and said well *We gave your spot to somebody else*. I said *No, you can't give my spot to somebody else. Oh yeah, we just found somebody who was willing to pay them more rent for that space*, and so they—you know, they just shafted me. So that—that wagon, we finished it and one of my brothers worked it for a while out in Metairie—

00:34:22

SR: You mean driving it around?

00:34:24

RK: Yeah, not for long. I mean, he was on the street maybe six or eight months. It was during the World's Fair 'cause I had the original wagon inside the World's Fair at the Italian Village for those six months, and he was on the street with the other one. And after—after the fair was over, I went over to the zoo and talked to them and they liked the idea, so we put it in there and it's been in there ever since.

00:34:56

Poppy: It's a perfect marriage.

00:34:57

SR: It's in there now?

00:34:59

RK: Yeah, uh-hm.

00:35:00

SR: But does it stay still? I've never been in the zoo.

00:35:03

RK: Yeah, it doesn't—I move it from time to time for special events. I mean, you know, sometimes they don't want it in the spot that it's in and so we move it a little bit. We roll it and we move it around, but mostly it stays right where it is.

00:35:20

SR: Okay. And who's—who's working that now?

00:35:25

RK: Well, since Katrina I work there when I think there's enough people for me to be there.

Other than that, on weekends I have some high school girls that work it.

00:35:39

Poppy: You know that was Taffy Tooker's first job.

00:35:42

RK: That's right; she did that. Oh, that's where she got her name.

00:35:45

Poppy: That's her professional name: Taffy Tooker.

00:35:47

SR: Oh, so Poppy's daughter works there. *[Laughs]*

00:35:49

RK: This summer here was the first summer without Ola. I had—I had somebody in there every day, six days a week, you know.

00:36:01

SR: The first summer without what?

00:36:04

RK: Without Ola, my brother-in-law who used to work there.

00:36:07

SR: Oh, Ola.

00:36:08

RK: Which helped me out a lot. Yeah, that was his name: Ola.

00:36:12

SR: How do you spell that?

00:36:12

RK: O-l-a.

00:36:13

SR: Oh, okay. I don't know that name.

00:36:14

Poppy: And he's up in Mississippi now.

00:36:17

RK: He's in Alabama.

00:36:20

Poppy: Alabama.

00:36:21

RK: But you know, so right now there's nobody in the zoo during the week, and so I'm just working it on weekends now, you know. And probably next month some of the school groups will start coming in, you know, with their field trips, and so I'll probably have to go over there and I'll work that for a half-day, you know, 'til one or two o'clock, and then I'll come home and

hitch up the mule and go out and work the second half of the day out on the street—is what I’ll have to do.

00:36:54

SR: What is your—what are your routes like on the street? Where do you go?

00:36:59

RK: Well ain’t much of the city left right now. [*Laughs*]

00:37:06

Poppy: The route is smaller now. [*Laughs*]

00:37:08

RK: Yeah, so you know I’m uptown now. I’m going to build some new wheels pretty soon, and I’ll be able to move around a little bit better and go downtown and go, I guess, down in Bywater—what do they call it?

00:37:31

Poppy: Uh-hm, Bywater.

00:37:34

RK: Yeah. I mean, Grandpa worked everywhere—everywhere you could work in the entire city. His—his boundaries were Chalmette, over to Causeway Boulevard, and from the river—across the river; he used to get on the ferry and go to Algiers and—and Gretna. So he was—

00:37:55

Poppy: It was a weekly route, right. Did he—?

00:37:59

RK: Normally yeah. It would take him a week—sometimes more than that—a week and a half—to work every route. Now he would have two or three animals, you know. He never had just one—one horse or mule until he was old, and then he only had one, but he didn't work every day after that. When—when he worked every day, there would be one or two horses home resting while one was working, so every day he had a fresh animal to work with. And he used to go—he used to go everywhere. [*Phone Rings*]

00:38:32

SR: Well before Katrina, would you—did you go to like Lakeview and—?

00:38:38

RK: Yeah, yeah. We used to go to Lakeview and Gentilly and pretty much my—my outer boundary was the Industrial Canal. I couldn't get over that anymore, you know. 'Cause Grandpa used to take the ferry over the Industrial Canal, and there's no ferry anymore. You can't take the

bridge; it's got a grate on it, and the mule is not going to walk over the grate. That ain't going to happen.

00:39:05

SR: Really?

00:39:06

RK: Oh yeah. If she can see through it, it ain't safe, I can tell you. [*Laughs*]

00:39:12

SR: Ah, smart.

00:39:14

RK: So in some areas I just couldn't work anymore, you know. We used to make a lot of money down in the 9th Ward, but I ain't worked the 9th Ward since the '70s, you know.

00:39:25

SR: Because of safety?

00:39:27

RK: Oh yeah, you'll never get out. You can—you can make money, but you'll never get home with it, but you can make it. [*Laughs*] So you know—so I—my area was cut down. I worked actually less territory than my grandfather did 'cause I didn't have a choice. That's just the way it

is, you know; the interstate caused a lot of problems too. When they cut the interstate through, it cut right through the middle of the city, you know, and the only way to get on—on the other side of that was either to go on Carrollton Avenue or—or what is it Broad? Not Broad but Napoleon. No, it was Broad—by the time you go over the overpass it's Broad, isn't it? You either had to take an overpass or an underpass, was the only way to get—.

00:40:19

Poppy: That's hard; that's very hard.

00:40:21

SR: Well what about—would you go to Mid-City?

00:40:22

RK: Yeah, I worked Mid-City all the time.

00:40:24

SR: And would you, like, go up Carrollton that whole way where it gets real busy like that?

How would you get there?

00:40:28

RK: No, I wouldn't go up the whole way. I mean, from my house it was quicker to go up by Octavia Street; go straight up Octavia, and when you get to Washington Avenue or Palmetto—

whatever you want to call it—hen you would cut over to Carrollton, and then you'd go under the underpass and—.

00:40:47

SR: You would do that with a mule? It just always seems really hairy there in a car.

00:40:54

RK: Yeah, it is hairy. But, you know, that's life. *[Laughs]*

00:40:58

SR: Yeah. Have you ever had an accident?

00:41:02

RK: Yeah, well, there's been several people ding the wagon up, but only one that was bad. I mean, I had somebody knock the wagon over.

00:41:13

Poppy: Gosh *[Emphasis Added]*. Where was that?

00:41:16

RK: That was on Laurel Street. The day, it was a rainy kind of a day and I had been working...hmm, a few hours I had been out on the street. And so I pulled over 'cause it was raining hard, too hard. You know if it's just raining, a little bit usually it helps; you make more

money ‘cause people are in their house and they’re not going anywhere, so you ring the bell and they’ll come out with an umbrella and buy candy. Well when it starts really raining hard they— then that stops. So anyway, it was raining hard, so I pulled over and I was just making some candy on the side of the road. The rain had stopped and I was about to leave, and some guy just hit me. He was 86 years-old—85 years-old, legally blind. He was—

00:42:08

Poppy: Oh gosh. [*Laughs*]

00:42:10

RK: Two hundred over four hundred vision or something, and he just didn’t see it and plowed right into it; so that was that.

00:42:21

SR: But you were okay?

00:42:22

RK: I’m here.

00:42:23

Poppy: How about the animal?

00:42:25

RK: The mule was all right. She—her—her hind quarters were pretty sore because he ran right into the back of the wagon, and so that was—

00:42:35

Poppy: And she must have been compromised.

00:42:37

RK: Well it pushed it forward, and one of the things that happened was there was—on the fifth wheel gear, you know the front wheels that swivel, there's only one pin that holds that whole thing together. It's a king pin, which was you know, big around as a quarter; it's pretty big. But it—it broke. And once he popped out, the wagon was in two pieces, and so the back end flipped up and she went running down the street with the front-end of it. I had to get out and chase her.

00:43:12

Poppy: [*Laughs*]

00:43:14

SR: Aw.

00:43:14

RK: And go catch her.

00:43:17

SR: So I know that after Katrina, she was on the Northshore for awhile while you fixed up the stable.

00:43:22

RK: Yeah, yeah. She—well, it was just a mistake on my part. Normally what I do if I leave town, if I'm going on vacation or taking a trip, or for any reason whatsoever if I'm not going to be in town, I would take the mule and put her over at Cascade Stables at Audubon Park. Not a problem; I've been doing it for years. They never leave, no matter what; they will not leave. So it turned out they were renovating the whole place; they tore all the barns down and moved all the horses out, and so they were in the process of renovating their—their place. Well the storm is coming, so I'm starting—I start calling other places around town, you know, other stables. There is no place to keep a horse or a mule; they're all full because all these horses from Cascade—they have about 50 or 60 head of horses over there—all moved out and filled all the spaces up that were empty everywhere. And so that was it; I couldn't get a trailer and I couldn't put her anywhere. So the storm is coming and I'm thinking *All right, what the hell; it's like every other storm: two or three days, you know, and that will be it.* Well it didn't work out, but I gave her—I gave her enough food and water to last two or three days. Well luckily, I got in touch with some guy who stayed, and he lived on State Street. That was a miracle, just getting a phone call into the guy.

00:45:05

SR: Yeah.

00:45:05

RK: But he went over there and fed the mule, you know, and gave her water until the animal rescue people could get there and get her out of there. They took her to Gonzales, to Lamar Dixon.

00:45:21

Poppy: [*Laughs*] Is that where she went with the dogs and cats and everybody else?

00:45:25

RK: Uh-hm, and then from there, you know, we were able to pick her up and bring her out to my friend's place. I don't know; that's the way it went.

00:45:35

SR: And so what does she think of being back in city life?

00:45:39

RK: She likes it.

00:45:40

SR: She does?

00:45:42

Poppy: Oh good. [*Laughs*] Well that's unanimous.

00:45:45

RK: She's happy to be back.

00:45:45

Poppy: Everybody likes it—everybody likes it.

00:45:49

SR: I got two phone calls: *I just saw the mule!*

00:45:53

Poppy: Isn't that great? [*Laughs*]

00:45:53

RK: That is great.

00:45:58

SR: Yeah, it's fantastic. So your grandfather, I mean, was this—this is basically how he raised his family, huh, selling candy?

00:46:12

RK: Oh yeah.

00:46:13

SR: You can make a—raise a family on that kind of living?

00:46:19

RK: Well he only had one daughter, which is my mother, so he didn't have a big family. And it wasn't easy. I mean, he never made a lot of money; you know, made enough to survive.

00:46:33

SR: Nickel a stick. How many kids do you have?

00:46:35

RK: I have three. And the oldest one is a chemical engineer. He's grown; he's out on his own. *[Laughs]* Daniel, my second, is—he's in Denver right now. He says he wants to come back; got to find a job—.

00:46:56

Poppy: He's been there since the storm?

00:46:59

RK: No, he went before the storm.

00:47:00

Poppy: Oh.

00:47:03

RK: He went up there, I don't know, thinking he was going to make a fortune there. I don't know what's going to happen with that, but it doesn't look like he's going to make a fortune.

[Laughs] But anyway, he'll be back probably. And then my youngest is a girl, Ashley; she's up at LSU.

00:47:24

Poppy: You know what Leah Chase said? Of course it's slightly different because it's not a restaurant business, but it's still food. Leah says *You educate your children right out of the restaurant.* **[Laughs]**

00:47:39

RK: She's probably right.

00:47:40

SR: Do any of them know how to make the candy?

00:47:45

RK: I don't know if they can cook it from scratch—I don't know. They can do everything, you know; once it's cooked, they can make it. But, you know, this is not a normal life. **[Laughs]** It's hard; there's so much easier ways to make money than, you know—.

00:48:09

Poppy: It makes you a saint, though.

00:48:11

RK: No, I'm not a saint.

00:48:13

Poppy: Yeah, you're a New Orleans food saint. You are.

00:48:16

SR: Well what—when you were facing, you know, what you wanted to do for your career, why did you choose this?

00:48:26

RK: Well I liked what I was doing and I believed it would, you know, make me a good enough living to—to sustain a family, so that's why I did it.

00:48:40

Poppy: It made you happy.

00:48:42

RK: Yeah, I do like what I'm doing. It's not easy. It's not easy on Elaine at all 'cause it's not, *Okay you're going to get this paycheck every two weeks and you know exactly how much money you've got*; so it's—it's—it's difficult. You know, I probably do it for the same reason that, you know, a guy who farms oysters or shrimps for a living does what he does, okay. He don't know when he throws that net out whether he's going to catch any shrimp or not, you know. But he does it 'cause he's loving it and he thinks *Okay, I'm going to make enough*, you know. That's the way that works.

00:49:29

SR: So when—so you were named a *Guardian of the Tradition* last year by the Southern Foodways Alliance. What—what does that mean to you to be a *Guardian of the Tradition*?

00:49:42

RK: I don't know; I mean, that was—**[Laughs]**—I'm not very good at getting honored, okay.

[Laughs]

00:49:52

SR: Well I guess I'm wondering if, aside from the honor, aside from the award, do you—are you conscious that—of the fact that what you're doing makes people happy in that way—that—?

00:50:07

RK: No, absolutely not.

00:50:10

Poppy: I hope you to start to. I mean, ‘cause I know just what you mean about awards, you know. But I have never seen anything like it since the mule came back. It is one of these things that’s making the whole city turn the corner.

00:50:30

RK: Well you know, I had—I had nothing to do with that. It’s just like nostalgia, okay. People look at this thing and, you know, get all gaga. And it’s just a business, you know. I’m out there doing what I do, trying to make a living; that’s all I’m trying to do, you know.

00:50:49

Poppy: But it’s public service at the same time; whether you acknowledge it or do it for that reason, it is.

00:50:55

RK: Well you know, if people—if people want to think that and believe that, that’s fine.

00:51:00

Poppy: They should support you by buying your candy. [*Laughs*]

00:51:02

RK: Well if you don't buy my candy, I'm going to be out of business and I'm not going to be around, you know. That's what it comes down to. It doesn't come down to *Oh, we love you*. That doesn't put food on the table, okay. If you don't buy my product, I'm off the street; I'm done.

00:51:19

SR: But I wonder—I mean I—I definitely understand that and respect it and—but I wonder if in the beginning you didn't have a little bit of that nostalgia too. Like if—do you think there was a part of you that didn't want it to go away?

00:51:38

RK: Yeah, yeah. I mean it—it wasn't—that wasn't the deciding factor, whether I was going to you know start the business back up again, you know. I mean you know, I love my grandfather and—and you know, we were great friends and we got along really well and everything was—and I liked what I was doing. But if it wouldn't have made money, I wouldn't have stayed in the business either, you know. I mean you know—.

00:52:14

Poppy: What did it mean to you when your grandpa died when you were in the service? How was that? That must have been—.

00:52:21

RK: Well he died before I went in the service.

00:52:23

Poppy: Oh he did? Okay, I'm not clear on that chronologically.

00:52:27

RK: Yeah, he died in '69. I got drafted about nine or ten months later, and actually I was in the process because when—when my grandfather died I was—I was at UNO. And I finished up that semester, and then I told mom and dad I was going to go into the business, and they said *That's fine, but you have to go into the business, you know—we're not going to help you; you have to do it.* So—and I had no money, so I went to work for Coastal Log Sales, which it sold well logs, you know. I don't know if y'all know what a well log is. They make—when they drill a hole in the ground they make a—like an electronic diagram of what's down there, you know: the earth or whatever—I don't know. Anyway, they sell these things; they—it's in a long sheet that you fold it up and it gave the depths and what was at each depth. And geologists would look at it and try to figure out whether there was oil down there or not. **[Laughs]** So I went into that and—and I worked for them for nine months, and at that point I had enough money and at that point I also got my draft notice; so you know, you go—that's it. **[Laughs]** So that's what I did and I—after I came out of the Army, I saved all the money I made in the Army, which wasn't a lot of money but, you know, I had enough. I had a few thousand dollars—three or four—whatever—

00:54:10

Poppy: To get the business back started?

00:54:10

RK: And I got another mule—yeah, I got a mule and got the wagon up and running and I told mom I wanted to—I wanted to buy the house. She said *No, I want to give you the house*. I said *No, you ain't giving me nothing*. She said *I want*—she said *I want you to have the house 'cause you—you took over the business and no one—none of the other kids want it*. I said *When you're dead—with 11 kids, with in-laws and everything else—uh-uh, this ain't happening. I'm buying it. I buy the house or I don't have it—or I don't have it at all*. And so in 1971 the house was appraised on Constance Street. It was just a half shotgun; there was no upstairs. \$10,000 the house appraised for.

00:54:58

Poppy: Including the stable, 'cause I think it is the only house in New Orleans with a functioning stable in the back in the city proper.

00:55:07

RK: Probably now it is, yeah.

00:55:08

Poppy: Yeah, even before the storm I think.

00:55:12

RK: So I mean, I went and borrowed \$10,000 and paid Mom and Dad for the house, and I got it.

00:55:19

Poppy: That's great.

00:55:19

SR: And where did they move?

00:55:22

RK: Well they weren't living there. They were out in Metairie.

00:55:25

SR: I see. So you let—?

00:55:27

RK: Right, I mean that was just a half a shotgun house. We're talking about, you had a front room and then you had a—two rooms that were used as bedrooms, and then you had a kitchen and a bath and that was the whole house, you know.

00:55:42

Poppy: And the—but the stable was there then?

00:55:44

RK: There's always been a stable.

00:55:47

Poppy: Yeah, and so since—

00:55:48

RK: The house—I don't know—

00:55:50

Poppy: Well when did they move into that house—about when? I know you said they were on Magazine.

00:55:54

RK: Yeah. Well—well grandpa got married in 19—well, let's see—1919 I think, or 1920, and he bought the house then. The house was already there; it already had a stable behind it. You know, I don't know how old that house is. I always thought it was built in like the 1880s, but you know since Katrina they've having to renovate it. It's a barge board house initially, you know, and the people that are working on it are telling me it's older than that. [*Laughs*]

00:56:37

SR: Older than 1880, huh?

00:56:40

RK: Yeah, so I don't know how old the house is. I never did research it or anything, you know. I had the bill of sale from when Grandpa bought it, so I know—you know, I know I have a name at least on the guy who owned it before him, but I don't even know if you can go—I guess

there's a way to trace that stuff back; I don't know. That guy might not have been the original owner; it might have been somebody else. I don't know—I don't know how far back it goes.

00:57:08

SR: I want—I forgot to ask you about the ingredients.

00:57:13

RK: Of the candy?

00:57:13

SR: Can you tell us what's in the candy?

00:57:15

RK: Yeah. The candy—Roman candy is just basic taffy and it's made out of corn syrup and sugar and flavor.

00:57:21

SR: That's it?

00:57:23

RK: It's got a little bit of shortening in it—vegetable shortening—and that's it.

00:57:27

SR: Oh.

00:57:28

RK: There's no preservatives.

00:57:29

SR: And so how much sugar do you go through a week or—?

00:57:36

RK: I don't know; it depends on the week—Mardi Gras week or just a regular week?

00:57:40

SR: Mardi Gras week. [*Laughs*]

00:57:41

Poppy: Jazz Fest—that's one of the big—huh?

00:57:47

RK: Jazz Fest is probably when I'm working the hardest—that and Mardi Gras. And I can make candy from before sunup until after sundown, and if you have somebody helping you wrap, you can produce about 2,000 sticks in a day. That's about the limit at this point. Without, you know, there's no machines.

00:58:12

SR: And so you're—you're at Jazz Fest during Jazz Fest?

00:58:15

RK: Uh-hm.

00:58:17

Poppy: The—the wrapping alone is a job.

00:58:20

SR: Really?

00:58:21

Poppy: Anybody can't just start wrapping. It takes some skill and some training, right?

00:58:28

RK: Yeah, it takes awhile. I never saw anybody just sit down and be able to do it the first time.

00:58:33

Poppy: Isn't that something?

00:58:33

RK: [*Laughs*]

00:58:34

SR: And how—what is it wrapped in, for the record?

00:58:36

RK: It's wrapped in a wax paper, but it's—it's—not like your normal, you know, wax paper that you buy at the grocery store. It's a—it's just different; it's—they call it 2131 White Wet Wax, is what it's called. And it's a special paper with a special wax on it, you know, 'cause it has to stand up, you know, in 90-plus degree weather.

00:59:06

Poppy: Okay, here comes the Slow Food question: so if it's made with corn syrup, when did the corn syrup go into the recipe? Is that part of what your grandfather was originally using, or how did the recipe change and—and about when did it evolve?

00:59:24

RK: Always used—always used corn syrup as far as I know.

00:59:28

Poppy: Wow.

00:59:29

SR: Yeah.

00:59:29

Poppy: ‘Cause I always—I always think of—don’t you think of corn syrup as being like an evil modern addition—‘cause that’s the—. Occasionally I’ve had to do this like little dance, and of course from the Pope—it just doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter; shut up. **[Laughs]** But, you know, once in a while they’ll like screw up their face and go *Well what’s in it?* you know and—
[Laughs]

00:59:57

SR: Yeah, I thought it was modern. Well I think it’s a modern sugar substitute, and I guess I never thought about how long it existed—

01:00:09

Poppy: As an ingredient.

01:00:10

SR: And why you might use that and sugar, like—I wonder what corn syrup does that sugar wouldn’t do.

01:00:18

RK: I don’t know.

01:00:18

SR: Texture maybe.

01:00:22

Poppy: I don't know; the man knows how to make it, that's for sure.

01:00:23

SR: What do you make it on? What kind of burner do you have in there?

01:00:28

RK: Well now we have propane, you know.

01:00:32

SR: And what kind of pot?

01:00:33

RK: Just a big aluminum pot.

01:00:38

Poppy: About what year did you switch from coal to propane? When did that switch out?

01:00:43

RK: Well originally Grandpa cooked the candy on a coal fire, which was probably pretty hard to do, and I can't imagine—

01:00:51

Poppy: Dangerous too.

01:00:53

RK: I can't imagine doing that, but I still actually have some of those old burners back there, and you just build the fire like—like a coal fire, just like you would you know a barbeque. How you survive the fumes, I don't know, but anyway—and then he did that for awhile, and then eventually he went to a Coleman burner, which were great burners. And the Coleman burner—I don't know if you've ever gone camping or not, but they're—you know, the little one that they make about this big around [*Gestures*] and put the fuel in it and you pump it up, you know, the air in it.

01:01:33

SR: Uh-hm.

01:01:33

RK: And then you light it and it has a little blue flame?

01:01:38

SR: Uh-hm.

01:01:37

RK: That's exactly what this was, only it was about two-feet—two and a half-feet tall. And underneath where you put the fuel—the liquid fuel—was big. I mean it was—it would hold a couple of gallons of fuel. And you'd pump it up, and I still got the pumps. I still got the burners. They don't work anymore. And you pump air into it, and that was—that thing would cook candy quicker than the propane does now. It was unbelievable. And we used that: Grandpa used that, and I was using it when I came out of the Army in '71. I was still—was still using, and I used them for two or three years out of the Army. And we had—we had two—Grandpa had two or three of them that he bought, and I was like scrounging pieces, parts, you know, as they would go out. The thing that would go out would be a regulator, you know, the thing that would regulate the flame. Those things would go—go bad every once in a while, and when I was a kid you could go around the corner on Magazine Street, walk into Clark-Roscher hardware store, and you could buy them you know. Well you know, by the '70s they were—they were all gone and so—. And the last one went out on me, and so I called the Coleman Company and I said *Look, I've got this burner and I need a regulator for it*, you know—parts for the regulator, whatever you know the inside of it—whatever, 'cause it came—it was in a tube, and then the knob was on the end of the tube. And I explained what I had and what I was doing, and he said well *Does it have a model number?* And I said *Yeah*. And he said *What is it?* I said *It's 103*. And there was this dead silence on the other end of the phone. He said *What? It's model number 103*. He said *You're kidding me?* I said *It's model number 103. Do you have the part that I need? We haven't made that burner in 25 years; we don't have any parts for that thing*.

01:03:54

Poppy: [*Laughs*] Oh.

01:03:54

RK: [*Laughs*]

01:03:57

SR: That is funny.

01:04:00

RK: So that's when I went to propane.

01:04:03

SR: Well that reminds me of something that I was going to ask earlier when you were talking about how you make—you make your own wheel or what—what do you do when you need to repair—when you need to repair? Do you do the repairs?

01:04:15

RK: I do the repairs nowadays. The last wheelwright in town was—died, I don't know eight or ten years ago, and I just had to do it myself—that's all.

01:04:29

SR: That's it—just make your own wheels. That's pretty—. [*Laughs*]

01:04:32

RK: Well it's not—it's not all that—it's not as difficult as it sounds. I'm not starting from scratch. I mean, I can order everything I need from Pennsylvania from the Amish people, so it comes down you know—it comes to me, you know, with spokes and the rim, and all that is all boxed up. I just got to assemble the thing and get a tire on it, and it's not—

01:04:57

Poppy: Thank God for the Amish.

01:04:59

SR: We have Amish wheels riding around.

01:04:59

RK: Yeah.

01:04:59

SR: You know what I was thinking too? I was thinking when we were talking, like, of my three favorite sugar treats in town, and they're all of Sicilian heritage. The Hansens—Mary Hansen was Sicilian also. And the Brocatos, and the Roman Candy.

01:05:20

RK: Uh-hm.

01:05:22

SR: It's interesting.

01:05:23

RK: Sicilians are good at that.

01:05:23

SR: Sicilian were into sugar.

01:05:25

Poppy: That was a happy, happy day yesterday. We were at the—Brocato's had a special little Slow Food party for the folks that baked the Cookies For A Cause. Yeah, I'll tell you what: next Saturday that's where you ought to go. You ought to go right on down Carrollton Avenue; it's going to be—there's going to be so many people who won't fit in the place. There will be such a line that you'll be doing a favor by selling them some candy just to keep them happy and hold them over.

01:05:57

SR: Well they used to sell your candy there, didn't they? Yeah, I remember seeing some of that in there.

01:06:03

RK: Yeah, and they're going to do that again. Next Saturday I'm working—I'm working a deal. Harrah's is opening up a new hotel and it's going to be in there.

01:06:14

SR: Well good; well I'm glad they made a few smart business decisions.

01:06:18

Poppy: Harrah's? [*Laughs*]

01:06:20

SR: Getting you down there—that makes me like them a little more.

01:06:26

Poppy: Do you get much special event business? How does that go for you nowadays? Because they put you everywhere. Do you own the image, do you try—'cause it's like I've seen you on the front page of the phone book. I've seen you on the—you know—

01:06:40

RK: Yeah, and—and you know, years ago you know—30 years ago—I tried to get a piece of that, you know—just have people give me something, you know, for the image. Well I talked to lawyers and what they told me was that, although I own the wagon, the courts ruled that you don't own the view of the wagon. For instance, if you take a picture or you do an etch or a sketching of St. Louis Cathedral, the Catholic Church can't get a piece of that because, although they own the building, they don't own the view of the building. So that's always been the—been my understanding until about three weeks ago. I've talked to somebody who works for Tabasco,

and he said *They're screwing you*. Tabasco—anything that you see with the Tabasco image, they get money for it—anything. And he said no matter what it is, even if it's not—doesn't say Tabasco on it, if they—if an artist makes something and it's got a bottle sitting on the table that's the shape of the Tabasco bottle, they want money.

01:07:58

Poppy: Well maybe the law has changed a little in the last 30 years.

01:08:01

RK: [*Laughs*]

01:08:01

SR: They probably also have a staff of lawyers figuring all that out.

01:08:04

RK: Yeah, I'm sure they do. I'm sure they do.

01:08:07

Poppy: Yeah, but still—

01:08:09

SR: That is interesting, because like I have a beautiful photograph of you—of the wagon or the cart that Katherine Slingluff did, and you didn't get any money from that. [*Laughs*]

01:08:21

RK: No, I've never—I've never tried to get money from an artist. Now if somebody ever does something that's mass produced, I would—I would want some money.

01:08:34

SR: And so—and so—

01:08:35

RK: Now if an artist does an oil painting or a sketch or—and even if he wants to print it, you know, that's fine. He can make whatever money he wants to make; I don't care. But if you're going to do something like make a replica of the wagon, you know, and—and sell it, and you're going—you're going to go to China, and they have you know a half a million of them made, I want some money. **[Laughs]** Now that's a different deal.

01:09:03

Poppy: Yeah, I guess so. Like McDonald's action figures—how does it work for you with like corporate business? You must get a fair amount of inquiries and such from, like, convention planners. I've heard of people who, they've had you at their wedding, like—**[Laughs]**. What do you do about that and how do you—?

01:09:26

RK: I just charge a flat rate: so much an hour plus so much a stick for whatever candy I hand out. And you know, I've done a lot of those things. Eventually I'm going to stop doing them unless they're during the daytime, 'cause I'm tired of these night things. This thing at Harrah's—I'm not going to get home 'til 11:30—12 o'clock. I'm getting too old for that.

01:09:51

Poppy: You have the mule with you?

01:09:52

RK: Yeah, they want the mule.

01:09:55

Poppy: Yeah.

01:09:59

RK: So sometimes they pan out and sometimes they don't. This deal at Harrah's probably will pan out. You know, for the amount of time I'm going to be there and the amount of candy I'm going to hand out, it's a \$300 deal. Well, you know, I can't—I can't go out in the morning or even in the middle of the day and start working—'cause the mule is not going to be out there for, you know, 12 or 14 hours—so—so I'm not going to even be able to go out 'til later in the afternoon. So, but \$300 I'll make—if I can pick up another \$100 or so on the way down there and before I work the deal, it will work out all right.

01:10:42

SR: Wow.

01:10:43

RK: For less than that it wouldn't be worth my while. I might as well just go on the street and work and go home, you know. And a lot of them don't understand that, you know; they think *Well that's a lot of money just to sit there for a couple hours.* You don't understand; I'm losing a day's work to be at your event, you know—.

01:11:04

SR: And plus—

01:11:04

Poppy: Yeah, and what are you going to replace me with? [*Laughs*] Like what's your alternative act? [*Laughs*]

01:11:14

SR: That doesn't strike me as a lot of money considering. I mean, it's not like you're working for a company that you have like a 401K and a health insurance plan, and you know all that kind of stuff.

01:11:27

Poppy: Yeah, right.

01:11:29

RK: Yeah, well you know it's Harrah's. If you don't have the money, then guess what?

[Laughs] You know, I don't feel sorry for corporate people at all; they've got the money.

01:11:42

SR: Right.

01:11:43

RK: You know, now weddings—weddings is a fairly new thing, and—but it's—it's picking up; it's growing. People are beginning to use Roman Candy as favors, wedding favors.

01:11:54

Poppy: It's wonderful. That's what they're going to do with the—at the Slow Food Awards. It's going to be a favor; everybody is going to get Roman taffy candy as a present.

01:12:04

SR: That's great.

01:12:04

Poppy: Yeah.

01:12:05

RK: But I'm—and I'm doing—I don't do them all. I mean, the only—the only weddings that I actually show up with the wagon and mule are ones that are within range that I can get to, and there's not that many churches, you know, within range. So I don't have to work a lot of them, but you know every week people are calling and having weddings that are coming up and they want candy. Evidently having a New Orleans wedding it's a big deal now. And they have them all over: it's not like just New Orleans; they've got people from Michigan calling, you know.

01:12:38

Poppy: It's a destination. New Orleans is a destination place for a wedding now.

01:12:43

RK: If—if the bride or the groom is from New Orleans, no matter where they're getting married—anywhere in the country or in the world—they want—they want—

01:12:49

SR: Oh, they want your candy?

01:12:49

RK: —they want New Orleans stuff at their wedding. You know, it's not just me; it's—it's a lot of New Orleans stuff. King cakes they want, and all kinds—.

01:12:59

SR: Abita.

Poppy: Tabasco. Crystal—.

01:13:05

SR: Yeah, well why wouldn't you? Yeah. Well—

01:13:11

RK: So what else you got there?

01:13:12

Poppy: Have we worked him over sufficiently? *[Laughs]*

01:13:15

SR: I think so.

01:13:17

Poppy: Are you all done? *[Laughs]*

01:13:19

SR: I think I'm through with my questions, unless you can think of something I didn't think to ask.

01:13:27

RK: Oh I don't know; you're supposed to have the questions.

01:13:33

SR: Well I went through them. I think I'd really like to come and see you at work.

01:13:39

RK: All right; we can do that.

01:13:40

SR: And maybe, is it possible for me to look inside and kind of—get a little tour and get that audio? I think that will be cool. It won't take long.

01:13:52

RK: Yeah, we can do that.

01:13:54

SR: All right. Well I think this wraps it up then for now. Thank you.

01:13:59

Poppy: She won't take up much room in the cart, you know.

01:14:03

SR: Well thank you for—thank you for giving me the time, and thank you Poppy for having us over.

01:14:07

[End Ron Kottemann]