

**Latham “Bum” Dennis & Larry Dennis  
Bum’s Restaurant - Ayden, NC**

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Interviewer: Rien T. Fertel

Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs

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Project: Southern BBQ Trail - North Carolina

**[Begin Latham “Bum” Dennis & Larry Dennis — Bum’s Restaurant]**

**00:00:00**

**Rien Fertel:** All right; this is Rien Fertel for the Southern Foodways Alliance. I’m continuing into our fourth week on the Southern BBQ Trail throughout North Carolina. It’s the fifth of December 2011, almost nine in the a.m., and I’m at Bum’s Restaurant in Ayden, North Carolina. I’m going to have two gentlemen introduce themselves.

**00:00:24**

**Latham Bum Dennis:** My name is Latham Dennis. I am the owner/operator of Bum’s Restaurant in Ayden. Bum is a nickname and that is the name of my barbecue restaurant—Bum’s —B-U-M-apostrophe-S; my last name is Dennis—D-E-N-N-I-S. I am seventy-four years old; I was born June 12, 1937 about five miles from here.

**00:00:51**

**RF:** Thank you, sir.

**00:00:51**

**Larry Dennis:** My name is Larry Dennis and I’m Bum’s son. I work for him. My birthday is June 5, 1963. I was born about a mile from here.

**00:01:01**

**RF:** So we’re going to get a lot of history here. I’m interested in history; y’all have a lot of history, specifically with this town. How far back do your family’s roots go in this area?

**00:01:16**

**LD:** Well the—the first—the furtherest back person that I have ever heard of being a Dennis was in the early 1800s, Otter Dennis, which people say he was a criminal, an outlaw or something or other, set up camp about a mile from down—where downtown Ayden is now. And they called it Otter Town. Its nickname was *A Den*—a den of thieves, a den of crooks, a den of criminals; whatever you wanted to call it, but that was about a mile from where it is now.

**00:01:47**

When the railroad came through 1870 or something like that, I don't know the exact date, they moved the town from where it was to where it is now, laid off streets and started it—started a new town. That was late 1800s, early 1900s. At that time, they—when they built the Town Hall they had a Farmers Market next door to the Town Hall and all the Dennises cooked barbecue, brought it up there to the Town Hall, sold it, just like people would today with their vegetables or whatever. Of course they—I mean that's not all they sold. They—some of them I've heard them say they killed wild game, birds, whatever, gardening, fruit, vegetables—whatever. You know, they brought it up here and sold it.

**00:02:37**

A lot of people will ask me, you know, "How did they cook it back then and how did they do this and how did they do that?" Well they cooked it with wood because there weren't no other way to cook it. There weren't no electricity; there weren't no gas. You know, that was it. You know, my ancestors cooked with wood. Yours did. Everybody's did; you know, back—back then there weren't no other way to cook anything. And it went about like that until 1930.

**00:03:04**

In 1930, Emmitt Dennis, John Bill Dennis, and his brothers—I’ll give you a list of their names a little later on, they went down the street where we just went and looked at and built a 6,000 square foot grocery store and restaurant. And at that time, the recipes were standardized, the sauce that we use today, that’s when it was come up with, and the slaw that we use today; that’s when all that was come about.

**00:03:30**

Before that time slaw was made with just vinegar, salt, and cabbage. The reason we know this is because salad dressing hadn't been invented yet. Mayonnaise weren't imported to this country until the 1900s and it really couldn't—there weren't no way to transport it around until they got the train coming through and then they got systems and that’s when everything the way that we do it—that’s when—that’s when we started doing it the way we do it now.

**00:04:00**

**RF:** I want to ask your father—back up a bit and ask him a few questions.

**00:04:04**

**LD:** Yeah; that would be fine.

**00:04:06**

**RF:** What would Otter Dennis be to you? Would he be great, great—?

**00:04:12**

**LBD:** We have no idea. We have no idea. As far—as far as I can go back is just my granddaddy.

I have no idea.

**00:04:20**

**RF:** Okay; and what was—as far back as you can go what is your granddaddy's name?

**00:04:23**

**LBD:** My granddaddy was named John Dennis.

**00:04:26**

**RF:** John Dennis and he was involved in barbecue?

**00:04:28**

**LBD:** No; he was involved in—he was involved in farming.

**00:04:31**

**RF:** Oh, in farming. And his sons were—?

**00:04:34**

**LBD:** No; none of his sons was in the barbecue business.

**00:04:37**

**RF:** Okay; well who were—who were Emmitt and John Bill? How were they related to you or how—?

**00:04:40**

**LBD:** They were first cousins to my daddy.

**00:04:44**

**RF:** I see. Otter Dennis, you said he—he might have been an outlaw. Where did he come from? Have you heard that?

**00:04:50**

**LD:** No. He is more of a legend than anything else. I—I could—the town history has a little article written about him and I can—I can show you the article so you could read about him, but the—the legend is that he was like a squatter, came, set up camp, and eventually had to leave to keep from being locked up.

**00:05:12**

**RF:** Have you heard any other stories about him or the generations after him immediately following him?

**00:05:17**

**LD:** Just basic information like what—what did you want to know, what—?

**00:05:21**

**RF:** Oh, just—just any sort of stories that come to mind, any interesting stories, kind of—  
whether it's family lore or local lore about who he was, maybe how he got his name?

**00:05:33**

**LD:** No; I don't have—. They—wouldn't nobody know that. It—it would just be a guess.

**00:05:38**

**RF:** How did the town of Ayden get its name, do you know?

**00:05:41**

**LD:** Yeah; it—because it was Otter Town when it was a mile from here and its nickname was  
Ayden, a den of criminals or outlaws.

**00:05:52**

**RF:** *A Den.*

**00:05:53**

**LD:** That's right. Okay; then when they moved it up here the majority of the land that—that was  
—that this town was on was—came from a man named—his last name was Harris. That's all I  
remember was Harris.

**00:06:07**

**LBD:** Well, Harris was the man that laid out all the—

00:06:08

**LD:** Laid out all the streets.

00:06:09

**LBD:** —yeah.

00:06:09

**LD:** And so they called it Harrisville for about a year but they—they couldn’t never get the name to stick. So when it came down to—time to register it as a town or whatever, incorporate it, they decided to go back to calling it Ayden because that’s what everybody was calling it anyway but they added a *Y* in it so it would look kind of fancy.

00:06:30

**LBD:** Right; I like that. That’s great. [*Laughs*]

00:06:31

**LD:** So that’s the way that story goes.

00:06:32

**RF:** All right; so City Café was opened by the family in 1930?

00:06:38

**LD:** That’s right.

00:06:38

**RF:** What are your earliest memories of being there?

00:06:42

**LBD:** At the—the City Café my earliest remembrance is when I was in high school. I'd just come by there and just—

00:06:51

**LD:** He—Daddy worked here. Daddy worked at this restaurant for Emmitt's brother.

00:06:55

**RF:** Okay; and tell me about that. How old were you when you started working here and what did you do?

00:06:59

**LBD:** Okay; I started working here in 1960. I graduated high school in '56, stayed in the Navy four years, and when I came back I went to work with John Bill Dennis here at this restaurant. And we were—at that time we were engaged in—he had a—he was farming and we also opened a small grocery store here and I—I basically cooked barbecue, worked on the farm, worked in the meat market—whatever—whatever John Bill wanted me to do that's what I did. And I was working here when I got married in 1962. And—and I stayed—I stayed here and worked from him until—until '63 and that's when I went and opened up City Café.

**00:07:44**

**RF:** Oh I see; okay. And so, John Bill, tell me a bit about him. What do you remember about him, how did he look, what was his voice like?

**00:07:51**

**LBD:** Well John Bill when he was—when he was younger he was a big man. He was well over six-foot and—and well over 200 pounds. But he—as he got older he was a diabetic and he—and he lost a lot of weight. But he was still a long, rangy man, hard-working man and he would—he'd always keep you busy. He had something for you to do all the time.

**00:08:13**

**RF:** Well did—and did he teach you the barbecue business hands-on or did you learn by just watching him?

**00:08:18**

**LBD:** He—he taught me—he taught me the barbecue business. He—John Bill was very frugal with everything he did. He—he—he always fired the pigs exactly when he needed to. He didn't waste any coals. He didn't burn up any wood. He—he didn't believe in—he didn't believe in letting his coals go to waste and he wanted you to stay there and tend to that barbecue. And yeah; he was—he was a good barbecue man. He—he taught you all the shortcuts and the way to take care of things.

**00:08:47**

**RF:** And when did he pass?

00:08:49

**LBD:** I do not know.

00:08:54

**LD:** I was eighteen; '63 plus eighteen would be—that's what it would be whatever that is.

00:08:59

**RF:** So '71, right, '71—'72?

00:09:00

**LD:** No; let's see, '63, '73 is ten—'78 is—

00:09:07

**RF:** Oh '81; that's what I meant to say—'81—'82.

00:09:07

**LD:** Yeah; '81, '81—'82, yeah.

00:09:09

**RF:** And—and—

00:09:12

**LBD:** I bought this place from him in—in 1966 and he—he had told me that if—that if I would come here and when I was working with him, he had told me that—that he would make it—

where I—he said, "I can't give you the place." He said, "But I'll make it so you can buy it from me." So what he did, he sold it to me for—he sold it to me for \$30,000 and I paid him \$5,000 down and he financed it at eight-percent interest declining and I paid him \$1,000 a year until I got it paid for. And he died—he died before I finished paying him and I finished paying his widow.

**00:09:49**

**RF:** And did—when you bought it from him did he get out of the business? Did he stick around?

**00:09:54**

**LBD:** No; he—he—when—when I bought it—when I bought it from him he got out of the business.

**00:09:59**

**RF:** And did he ever tell you stories about when he first opened the business about the old times?

**00:10:04**

**LBD:** No; very, very seldom. We didn't talk about much about—about when he first went in business.

**00:10:11**

**RF:** Okay; and—and so let’s—so he—you said he taught you a lot of the barbecue process.

Let’s talk about that, the cooking process; what is exactly the barbecue you do here, who wants to answer that, the—the process? How would you define your barbecue?

**00:10:28**

**LBD:** Okay; basically what—what we—what we do is just like we—just like we’ve always done it for years, we—we salt our pigs before we put them on, rub salt on the skin and we put them on and just start firing them slow, build a fire and start—start firing them slow. And cook them about six—eight hours and basically—basically get them—when they’re just about done we turn them over and brown the skin, basically the way we’ve always done it for years.

**00:10:54**

**RF:** And your son was telling me about the—the age of the—of the pits and something special about the pit house. Can you tell me that again?

**00:11:00**

**LD:** Yeah; the—the cook house it was the first cookhouse that was ever built in Ayden. The first restaurant, the—the cookers were attached; the cooking house was attached—was part of the building. But this was—that cook house back there and as you saw that—that part is gone now. But that cook house back there was the first standalone cookhouse that was ever built in Ayden and it was built in 1941.

00:11:23

**RF:** Hmm; and you were telling me it’s never really burned. It’s had fires but never burned to the ground?

00:11:29

**LD:** Yeah; it’s caught on fire a lot. You know, that’s a common thing with a cookhouse but it’s—

00:11:33

**LBD:** It’s nothing—there’s actually nothing in that cook house—just wood—except the—the top, so the top rafter would be the only thing and they get real dry and they’ll sort of char and get burned slow but then you can put them out, you know.

00:11:48

**RF:** So y'all still—Bum’s still does wood pit-cooked barbecue?

00:11:53

**LD:** That’s right. Yeah; just like we’ve been doing—. See—see when Daddy started cooking barbecue there weren't no other—nobody knew of no other way to cook barbecue. And we just ain't never—never changed from it. You know, people—people ask me a lot, you know, “How long y'all been cooking with wood? How—you know, how long has your family been cooking with wood?” Well we—history shows if you go back and—and check it out, 500,000 years ago men started cooking with wood and we just didn't never stop.

**00:12:21**

**LBD:** There was no other way to cook barbecue. You know, when people started cooking it, people say charcoal or gas cookers—there was no charcoal and there was no gas cookers or electric cookers. Everybody just—everybody just—when you assumed—when you cooked barbecue you cooked it with wood. It was just—that’s the way you did it.

**00:12:37**

**RF:** And so we’ve visited a lot of places in the State over the past month and a lot of places have made some sort of switch, technological. Why have you not done that?

**00:12:47**

**LD:** Well, we—this is working well for us. You know, I don’t—I don’t know why to change.

**00:12:53**

**RF:** And so it’s that simple. But—but do you consider that other style of barbecue—is it still barbecue? What is that if it’s no longer cooked on a wood pit?

**00:13:02**

**LD:** They can call it anything they want to I reckon; you know, fine with me. You know, I—to be honest with you, I ain’t never eat none of it. I don’t even know what it tastes like. I don’t have no idea.

**00:13:14**

**LBD:** I really think our barbecue and the way we do things by us being a small town and we— we don’t have any tourists so we—we—we depend on local trade and we pull a lot of business from Greenville having the kind of food that we have, pit-cooked barbecue and collards and home-style meals and things. We pull a lot of business from Greenville. And people like our catering, our barbecue, and fried chicken.

**00:13:40**

**RF:** So talking about the clientele, what do you wood pit-cooked barbecue means to your customers that come here every day or every week? If—if you made a switch what would happen or what does that mean to them—that taste?

**00:13:54**

**LD:** I really don’t know. I hadn’t never really thought about it. I hadn’t never really thought about changing. Every—everything that we do here, everything on our menu is customer approved. You know, we have a constant dialogue with our customers. They’re our friends. We’ve know them all their lives, probably their daddy, their granddaddy ate here; you know, we know all these people. They know what—everything is supposed to taste like. If I change something, you know, I’ll—our customers know that day. You know, they know that day that something has been changed and if it’s a positive thing they’ll say, “Yeah, this is a lot better. How did you—what”—you know, “whatever.” Or, “Man, this mess ain’t fit to eat; throw it out the back door.” You know, so that—every—everything that we do is customer input. You know, if—if I was going to consider cooking pigs another way the first thing I would do, you know—

I’d talk to my customers. You know, I’d say, “What do y’all think,” you know, this or that and the other, you know? “What do y’all think about it,” before I even—even thought about it?

**00:14:53**

But being that I ain’t never really thought about changing I ain’t never really talked to them about it so I don’t know what they would think.

**00:15:00**

**RF:** And tell me about your customer base. I mean do you see some of the same people every day?

**00:15:04**

**LD:** Absolutely; yeah. Our—our customer—our customer base is ninety-eight-percent repeat business, you know. Most—most of our customers, we serve sixteen meals a week; most of our customers probably get all sixteen. Then there’s—then there’s some customers that only come at the mornings or some that only come at lunch or some that only come on certain days of the week or—but yeah; our—our customer base is almost as—as close as you can get to 100-percent repeat. And we fed their daddies and their mamas and their grandmamas and their granddaddies, you know, this—

**00:15:51**

**LBD:** You’re talking about customer base, our opinion—the customers’ opinion of food it would be like your mama’s table. If you had six—seven children and all of the sudden one day she

would change something, all the [Unintelligible]—“Mama this ain't good. [Laughs] Or mama, I like this,” you know, so—.

**00:16:06**

**LD:** Same thing; that’s right it’s the same thing—same thing.

**00:16:07**

**RF:** And you—you change your hours in—in—seasonally to fit your customers what they do. Can you tell me about that?

**00:16:14**

**LD:** Well we used to change our hours; we opened at four or five depending on the time of the year because of hunting and farming. But now pretty much we stay about four-thirty in the morning. Other—other than that it’s—our hours are pretty much constant. But if—if there was a group of people that started coming in like I say, the place opened up across the street and they opened up at—at four-thirty and they had some people that wanted to eat breakfast then we would change, you know, accordingly to—to service them.

**00:16:51**

I have—I have one guy that three times a week he goes on dialysis so I come a few minutes early so I can feed him on his way, you know.

**00:17:03**

**RF:** And do y'all get to hunt yourselves?

**00:17:04**

**LD:** Well we—both of us used to hunt but I ain't been hunting in about fifteen years and do you hunt?

**00:17:11**

**LBD:** I’ve always bird hunted, but bird hunting is—the bird—the bird population has about gone away so I don’t hunt like I did—like I did.

**00:17:18**

**RF:** Right; and—and so we were talking about the barbecue. What size hogs do you get? Where do you get your hogs?

**00:17:25**

**LD:** We get them from a local place called Barbecue Pigs Incorporated. That’s what they do is sell barbecue pigs and they range somewhere between 125 to 150 pounds. He picks out the kind of pigs that I like; he knows the—the kind of pigs that I prefer and he picks them out especially for me.

**00:17:45**

**RF:** And it’s whole-hog barbecue you do here?

**00:17:49**

**LD:** Yeah; absolutely.

00:17:50

**RF:** And do you—do you split them? Do you put them on whole?

00:17:52

**LD:** Yes; they'll be—they'll be split almost in half and laid out whole.

00:17:58

**LBD:** You lay them on with the—you put them on with the rib side down, you know.

00:18:03

**RF:** And what is the importance of whole-hog barbecue in this part of North Carolina, in the east?

00:18:08

**LD:** Well, there again that's the only way I've ever cooked it so, you know, I feel like barbecue—the ham ain't really all that good because if you don't have the shoulder to mix with it and— and same, vice-versa. I ain't never tried it no other way, but for—for my taste it ain't—it ain't really what it's supposed to be until you get every little part mixed in with it.

00:18:33

**RF:** And I think y'all are equally famous for your vegetables. We've eaten a lot of barbecue. I think we missed vegetables. So it's refreshing to come here [*Laughs*] and see some vegetables. Tell me where those recipes come from; why you do have vegetables, which most barbecue houses don't?

**00:18:49**

**LD:** Well like I said, you know, we—we didn't—we didn't build our reputation on barbecue. We built—built our reputation from the very beginning being a full-service restaurant because, you know, this—that was the only restaurant in town, people had to eat, and barbecue weren't nothing special to nobody. You know, everybody could cook barbecue. Everybody could cook everything that's on that menu. In fact, at that time, when—when they came out with that menu that was everything that anybody knew how to cook. You know, didn't nobody know nothing about lasagna or spaghetti or—or whatever, you know. This is what people eat and that's what we serve because we had to serve those same people just like we're doing now three times a day. And they couldn't eat barbecue three times a day and we couldn't make a living off of just selling—selling barbecue the times that they wanted barbecue.

**00:19:45**

**RF:** And so which vegetables, which sides are you most—sell the best, are you most well known for?

**00:19:53**

**LD:** Slaw is—we have a good reputation for that; collards, Daddy grows his own collards. He always has. Boiled potatoes, those would be—and potato salad, those would be our top four and all—all our stuff is made from scratch with fresh ingredients. Those would be our top four. And everything else just falls just a little bit behind it. You know, if something ain't selling we—we wouldn't have it, you know.

00:20:22

**LBD:** We sell a lot of rutabagas and a lot of sweet potatoes.

00:20:27

**RF:** You do?

00:20:27

**LBD:** Yeah; we buy sweet potatoes local. Of course, you know, we had to buy—rutabagas we had to buy them from wholesalers but—

00:20:35

**LD:** It’s all fresh.

00:20:35

**LBD:** —it’s all fresh stuff.

00:20:37

**RF:** And tell me about the collards. You do grow your own?

00:20:39

**LBD:** We—we grow what we call a cabbage collard. They’re not—they’re not—they’re not as green as—as most collards you see. We—we like to think that it’s the soil in—in Pitt County that—that makes our collards a little bit different. They’re a little lighter color than most collards.

00:20:53

**LD:** That’s why Ayden has a Collard Festival. Ayden is known for its collards.

00:20:59

**RF:** Right; and I even saw on the sidewalk there’s collards planters on the—

00:21:01

**LD:** That’s right; yeah.

00:21:03

**LBD:** Yeah; I always sit—the little place out there where the railroad sign I always sit out a few collards out there.

00:21:10

**RF:** So who—you run the business now?

00:21:14

**LD:** Pretty much; yes, yes.

00:21:16

**RF:** And when did you—you’re not retired by any means—

00:21:18

**LBD:** No.

00:21:20

**RF:** —but when did you kind of semi-retire or—?

00:21:22

**LBD:** When?

00:21:22

**RF:** Yes; sir.

00:21:23

**LBD:** My wife got sick what three years ago?

00:21:27

**LD:** Yeah.

00:21:27

**LBD:** My wife got sick and had a brain aneurysm three years ago and I went to Duke and stayed with her for a month and then to Greenville for a month. And when we left Larry and his wife were—were helping us down here, and so when we came back we started helping them.

00:21:41

**RF:** Okay.

00:21:41

**LBD:** They moved—they moved—

00:21:43

**RF:** That's wonderful.

00:21:44

**LBD:** He laid around up there and got lazy and he didn't feel like doing all that work when he got back.

00:21:46

**RF:** And what is your wife's name?

00:21:49

**LBD:** Shirley, my wife's name is Shirley.

00:21:50

**RF:** Okay; and have you had other family members work here besides your sons?

00:21:52

**LD:** Always.

00:21:53

**LBD:** Always.

**00:21:54**

**LD:** Yeah; I got at least one of my daughters is out there now. All three of them work down here. All their boyfriends work down here. My wife works down here. My cousins, my aunts, and my —

**00:22:08**

**LBD:** My wife’s sister—everybody. My wife’s sisters work down here. Let’s see she had at least three sisters working down here at one time and, of course, all my children worked down here when they were growing up.

**00:22:19**

**LD:** And that’s the way—that’s the way it was from the very first conception of having a restaurant in downtown Ayden. It was a total family thing—family run it. At that time everybody farmed or made cement blocks or had some other thing going along but the restaurant from day one any—any barbecue restaurant that’s ever been in Ayden is—is totally—and ain’t no other people that ever run—the Dennises is all I know but it’s totally family-oriented staff.

**00:22:53**

**LBD:** When—when I bought this business from John Bill he retired but his wife was named Miss Betty and she was sort of—she had always been in the restaurant business with John Bill. And so I worked—I worked for them basically. And then when I bought this place from her—from John Bill, Miss Betty continued to work for me for years after that.

**00:23:15**

**RF:** And the vegetable recipes were they John Bill’s or were they your—this side of the family?

**00:23:21**

**LD:** You can give anybody credit that you want to, but the—but the barbecue, the—the vegetables, everything we cook was the same way that everybody cooked it. You know, everybody cooked it the same way.

**00:23:36**

**LBD:** It was—actually the—the recipes at the Café was just an extension from people’s homes.

**00:23:42**

**LD:** That’s right.

**00:23:42**

**LBD:** Because that’s the way we ate. That’s the way—what people eat around here.

**00:23:46**

**RF:** And do you still see people cooking in their homes this way or are y'all the last left as a business establishment?

**00:23:53**

**LD:** Well if—if somebody was going to cook something in their homes chances are they would be cooking it the same way, the collards or ham or—everything that’s on our menu in this area,

every—anybody that would cook it would know how to cook it the—basically the same way we do.

00:24:11

**LBD:** We have—we have tried to discourage people from cooking collards at home. We tell them—we tell them we’ve got plenty of collards for them.

00:24:20

**RF:** Okay; I like it. [*Laughs*]

00:24:19

**LD:** We—and on our days off we go around and steal pig cookers and carrying them to the junkyard and stuff and—. [*Laughs*] People ain't got no business cooking at home. But yeah; see, when we started in business that’s—that’s who our competition was—was your mama, you know. We had to do just as good or better than—than what she was doing. And—and you couldn’t throw something out here all new, fancy new fangled thing, because people just wasn’t studding that, you know. They wanted the same thing that they’ve been eating, the same way they’ve been eating it and that’s the way it’s always been and still is.

00:24:56

**RF:** We’re in the middle of the holiday season right now. What are holidays like at your family’s house? Who does the cooking? What’s the spread like?

00:25:05

**LD:** At holidays at my house, Thanksgiving for instance I think I eat a peanut butter sandwich for lunch and lay on the couch all day and watched TV.

00:25:15

**RF:** Okay.

00:25:17

**LD:** [*Laughs*] We did—we did have a nice Thanksgiving Day style meal here the day before—turkey, dressing, collards, you know, full line stuff, so we celebrated a day before. We—one of the—one of the biggest days of our year is—is the day before Thanksgiving. People getting bulk vegetables and bulk barbecue and stuff to have for their families that night and the next day, so you—I didn’t—they don’t—none of us feel like cooking on Thanksgiving. We’re done.

00:25:47

**LBD:** We—on Christmas is our big day. We cook—my wife and I cook turkey and dressing and corned ham and collards and everything. We cook that on Christmas Day and we have all the family there—my son, my two daughters and my brother and my sister. They all come to my house for a while for Christmas dinner.

00:26:08

**RF:** Do you think the fact that so many family members work here contributes to the restaurant’s long success?

**00:26:17**

**LD:** Yes; absolutely because they’re more concerned, natural built-into it, you know, they’re more concerned about what it takes to make the restaurant a success, you know, obviously. And—and, you know, me and my wife or my youngins anytime that we’re together it won’t be but just for a minute we’ll be talking about the Café. That’s our whole life. You know, we don’t even—we don’t even know nothing else to talk about; that’s what we talk about.

**00:26:53**

**RF:** So what do you think—we talked about the customers bringing—you know, using the Café, the restaurant, to kind of cater their only family meals during the holidays—what does Bum’s mean to this community?

**00:27:07**

**LD:** Well, it’s a taste of home. You know, when—when they come to Ayden that’s what they—that’s what they’re looking for. They want us to be the same thing that we were the last time that they were here. And that’s what we’re going to be.

**00:27:20**

**RF:** And I just want to ask your dad a few questions and we’ll wrap up. What—what—how did you get your nickname?

**00:27:26**

**LBD:** It was a family friend of my mother’s. Of course I was—naturally that was 1937—I was born in 1937. I was born at home. And my—my mother, I think she thought I was going to be so

special, she wanted a real special name for me and so she kept procrastinating and her friend told her, said, “If you don’t hurry up and name, she said he’s going to be a little bum and grow up with no name.” So she started calling me Little Bum and that—Bum stuck. She was the only one that called me Little Bum, but she always called me Little Bum. But it—that—that’s been my nickname all my life.

**00:28:01**

**RF:** And I’m—Denny [the photographer] and I are of a generation—I’m thirty-one, he’s almost thirty—where men our age are trying to grow really great mustaches. And you have a great one.

**[Laughs]** Can you tell me the—the history of that and—and how you keep it?

**00:28:18**

**LBD:** We had—we had a skeet shooting club one time, and I think there was about twenty members out at the edge of town. And we just—you know, a bunch of guys, we just said, “Let’s everybody grow a mustache.” And of course some of them have died off and some of them shaved them off the mustache. I’m probably the only one that still kept the mustache but—

**00:28:38**

**LD:** Have you ever shaved yours?

**00:28:39**

**LBD:** No; I’ve never—I’ve had a mustache since—have you ever seen me? You’ve been moving out—

00:28:43

**LD:** I don't remember.

00:28:44

**RF:** How long have you kept it?

00:28:47

**LBD:** Huh?

00:28:47

**RF:** How long has it been?

00:28:48

**LBD:** Uh, how old are you son? *[Laughs]*

00:28:50

**LD:** Forty-eight.

00:28:51

**LBD:** He's forty-eight; he don't remember me without a mustache. *[Laughs]* It's been a long time.

00:28:57

**LD:** Forty years.

00:28:58

**RF:** So is there somebody next in line? What—how do you—?

00:29:01

**LD:** This is the end.

00:29:03

**RF:** What does that mean?

00:29:03

**LD:** That’s the end; after this there won’t be no more Bum’s Restaurant. There ain’t no more  
Dennises after this.

00:29:09

**RF:** So the restaurant closes?

00:29:11

**LD:** Yeah; that’s it. That’s the end.

00:29:14

**RF:** Like you’ve thought about this?

00:29:15

**LD:** There ain’t nowhere for it to go.

00:29:18

**RF:** Your children—?

00:29:18

**LD:** No; there weren't nobody—ain't nobody going to stay here and work for nothing. [*Laughs*]

00:29:23

**LBD:** [*Laughs*]

00:29:24

**LD:** I just—me and Daddy just do it because we ain't real smart. It's the only thing we know how to do. But we sent them to school, so they—they're educated, you know. They'll go off and make a good living.

00:29:32

**RF:** Okay; so you're encouraging them to get out of—?

00:29:34

**LD:** That's right, something with benefits, more money; yeah.

00:29:38

**LBD:** Hey; I encouraged him. I encouraged him to do something else. But he didn't want to.

**00:29:40**

**RF:** Well, what happens if one of them said, “Wait, well, this has been going on since the 1930s, I want to keep it going”? What would you—?

**00:29:47**

**LBD:** They’ll have to wait for us to be gone a few days and they can take over.

**00:29:50**

**RF:** Okay; so you—

**00:29:52**

**LD:** Leave your children a note to come by here and check and they can interview them then.

**[Laughs]**

**00:29:56**

**RF:** So you’ve settled this? It’s—when does that—do you—do you have—you don’t have a date do you?

**00:30:03**

**LD:** I can’t afford to retire, so whenever I drop that’s—that’ll probably be the end.

**00:30:09**

**LBD:** Yeah.

**00:30:11**

**RF:** And what do the family members think about this? What do the children—?

**00:30:13**

**LD:** They—I—I ain't never really asked them. I mean but they—I know that they—that’s their intention, you know—.

**00:30:21**

**RF:** And your dad agrees?

**00:30:22**

**LBD:** This is—this is sort of the way—the way our family has always operated. When—like I told you, when—when Shirley got sick and we went to the hospital when I—when I left that day I told Larry, like I said, I had—I had always been in charge and Larry to help me. When I left that day I told him, I said, “You go down there tomorrow morning and open up, do the best you can. If you get overwhelmed close the door and go home. We’ll do something when I come back.” And that’s what I meant and that’s what I mean today. If—if I can help him, we have never changed nothing financially; it’s still—everything is still in my name but it’s—. I’m looking out for him. We all look out for one another.

**00:31:01**

**RF:** And how were those first days? Were—had you worked here up until when your mom got sick?

**00:31:07**

**LD:** Yeah; this—this is about the only job that I’ve ever really had. Well, see it was like this here. When mama got sick me and Mama and Daddy, we were working down here fifty hours a week all three of us as—as hard as we could do. When Mama and Daddy got sick, well before that—before—before anything happened to them, you know, we all each had our responsibilities of things that we were looking after. I look after this, he looks after that; whatever it was, you know, you just fit into it like fitting into a piece of puzzle.

**00:31:40**

Well, when Mama got sick there weren't nobody to do her part. Daddy had to go up there and be with her. There weren't nobody to do his part, so that was two-thirds of our management force gone and two-thirds of our top labor force gone. So it was a big change. It was a big change. My wife, she had a job working somewhere else. My youngins they were—they were all in high school. They were young. They had other things that they had—had to be responsible for. It—it was a big hit. And, you know, I couldn’t even call my mother or my father and say, “Look, your piece of puzzle, how do you get it to fit in there?” You know, I couldn’t even ask them a question. It was a big hit. It was a big hit but somehow it worked out.

**00:32:28**

**RF:** So if and when Bum’s closes where is everyone going to eat?

**00:32:32**

**LD:** Hardee’s, I reckon. [*Laughs*]

00:32:37

**RF:** Do they know this?

00:32:38

**LD:** Well, I don’t reckon—no; they probably ain’t never really thought about it. But yeah; they just—there—there just ain’t nowhere for it to go from here. Not—not this style food and—and see, and every little town, look at all the—all the old, independent businesses that’s gone and that’s why they’re gone. You know, people was running an independent business; they were making a good living and their youngins started coming up. And—and they—the outside world had so much more to offer like—like my youngins for instance. I’ll tell you; every time that we get together this is what we talk about—the restaurant. See, you have to dedicate your whole life to this restaurant. It’s your wife, it’s your mama, it’s your daddy, it’s your hobby, it’s your way to make a living; it’s everything.

00:33:29

You know, if—if Daddy had—had dedicated his life to some corporation or something, you know, and give that much of himself to it I mean he’d be a multi-millionaire, retired—**[Laughs]**—retired thirty years ago, you know. Yet here is seventy-five years old still slugging it out every day, you know, here.

00:33:55

**LBD:** But what you got to do, in—in this type restaurant business what you got to do you got to love it and it’s a way of life. You just—you get up every morning and that’s what you do. Like—like Larry said, that—that’s your love and that’s your hobby; that’s what you do.

00:34:11

**RF:** So with these family restaurants closing will whole hog disappear too do you think in North Carolina in this area?

00:34:20

**LD:** No; it—it’s—it’ll probably never disappear because, you know, just like I was telling you, people have been cooking for 500,000 years, you know, and they started cooking with wood. There’ll always be somebody doing it. You know, there will always be somebody doing it. I don’t think it’ll never go away because it’s always going to be pigs. There’s always going to be wood. And there’s always somebody going to—going to eat it, you know.

00:34:46

It—country food, the whole menu like we got right now it—it’s going—it’s going to get harder and harder and harder to get that—the whole menu. The barbecue pigs will probably be around forever but going and sitting down in a place and eating that menu is—you’re going to get further and further and further and fewer and fewer.

00:35:07

**LBD:** Them people that just went by wanted—them people that just walked by, one is from Kinston and one is from Atlantic Beach. You’re liable to see anybody in Ayden on Monday morning. *[Laughs]*

**00:35:18**

**RF:** All right; so one last question. What do you think country food means to America, means to who we are as Americans, this food that y'all cook and serve and have been doing for a long time, almost 100 years?

**00:35:30**

**LD:** It’s just something to eat. You know, that’s—that’s what we—like I said, you know, when —when they went in the business, what was that—eighty years ago, that—that was everything that everybody knew how to cook. You know, that’s—that’s all they knew how to cook. The cornbread we cook, you know, the Indians cooked that cornbread the same way. Of course they cooked it with wood. We got gas now. But—what does it mean to us? I don’t know. Just like spaghetti to an Italian or something I reckon; I don’t know.

**00:36:00**

**RF:** All right; this was a wonderful interview. I want to thank y'all very much.

**00:36:02**

**LD:** All right, brother. I enjoyed it.

**00:36:04**

**LBD:** Thank you so much.

**00:36:07**

**RF:** Thank you, sir.

**00:36:10**

**[End Latham “Bum” Dennis & Larry Dennis — Bum’s Restaurant]**