Rudy Cobb
Jack Cobb & Son Barbecue Place - Farmville, NC
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Interviewer: Rien T. Fertel
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs
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[Begin Rudy Cobb-Jack Cobb & Son Barbecue Place]

00:00:02

Rien Fertel: All right; this is Rien Fertel with the Southern Foodways Alliance. It's just after eleven o'clock in the morning, November 30, 2011. And I'm in Farmville, North Carolina continuing on the North Carolina BBQ Trail that we've been at for the past—over two weeks. I'm at Jack Cobb & Son Barbecue Place with Mr. Rudy Cobb. And I'm going to have him introduce himself.

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Rudy Cobb: Yes; my name is Rudy Cobb. I am the son of Jack Cobb & Son Barbecue Place. Now I'm the principal owner and I was born in September '41.

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RF: September '41, and the exact day?

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RC: September 9, 1941.

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RF: September 9, 1941. How long has this barbecue establishment been around?

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RC: Oh, probably sixty—seventy years. We've been at this location forty years but we had a smaller place years before.

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RF: So, going back to the '40s even or—?

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RC: Yeah; before—uh-hm, before then we used to sell in a car. We didn't sell—didn't have a place; we sold in a car for years.

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RF: And "we" is you and your father?

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RC: Uh-hm; my father sold in the car.

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RF: Let's talk about your father. Where was he born?

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RC: He was born in Edgecombe County and he moved to Pitt County when he was a boy. And he lived on the farm and then he worked with AC Monk & Company contracting tobacco of

theirs and he did that for probably—I want to say he did that for fifty years and he did barbecue on the side.

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RF: So he would make tobacco barrels?

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RC: Yes; uh-hm, make tobacco barrels. He contracted them—he had—with the company.

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RF: And he would do barbecue on the side? How often would he make barbecue? How did he carry two jobs at once?

00:02:02

RC: Well, barbecue and when they first were like season—when—while the tobacco season is going he only did barbecue on Saturdays, and because he used to leave and go to Kentucky and make them out there too—Shelbyville, Kentucky.

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RF: Shelbyville, Kentucky, and who—so he'd only sell barbecue on Saturdays originally and where would he—or who would he sell this barbecue to?

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RC: Well, when he first started selling it he used to sell it to the tobacco factory, when they first started, in the tobacco factory in the warehouse. Then in—in the early ’60s he got a place, a smaller place he opened up on Saturday.

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RF: And is that this place where we are now?

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RC: No; it was on another street—Walnut Street. This is Main Street.

00:02:57

RF: But Walnut Street in Farmville?

00:03:04

RC: Yes.

00:03:04

RF: What do you remember about that original location?

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RC: Well it was smaller, probably about six-feet wide and about twelve-feet long, but I remember a lot. That’s where we started selling and then eventually said we were going to go to more days and that’s when we built this place.

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RF: Had—did your father ever tell you stories about those early days cooking or making barbecue on Saturdays?

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RC: Well I was there. I was helping dad.

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RF: Oh, tell me about those early days.

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RC: Well, he was—I was—after school, you know, he would be making—working to the factory and I'd get out of school—that was my job. They watched the pig until he come home, so I started cooking pigs like—and early—well middle '50s.

00:04:10

RF: And this would be whole hog barbecue?

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RC: Yeah; always—always cooked whole—whole hogs.

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RF: Where did he get these pigs? Where did the two of you acquire them?

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RC: At the time there was a slaughterhouse maybe hmm, about five or six miles from here, but they're closed now. But—and sometimes he used to go get them on the farm at—at that time because a lot of farmers they raised hogs. But now it's not that many because our waste material started running, and they started putting out so many fines, $100,000 for waste materials and a lot of people went out of business—local. So basically now you have to go to a meat packing company.

00:04:52

RF: And who do you get your hogs from now?

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RC: I get mine from Brewer Meat Packing Company out of Wilson.

00:04:57

RF: When did that start to change from kind of local small slaughterhouses to big corporate slaughterhouses?

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RC: Maybe—I'll say like anyway twenty years it really, really changed, like twenty years. And like I said, most of them contract to Smithfield Packing Company, you know. They're large and they're the big hogs—very, no small people now really raise hogs like they used to.

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RF: Are hogs different now than they were in the ’50s?

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RC: Yeah; they don’t taste the same. They’re raising—they raise everything fast. They give a hog a shot and two or three months you got a top hog where it used to take a longer—a longer time before they started putting those chemicals in them.

00:05:49

RF: But do they taste the same?

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RC: No; they don’t taste the same because they raise them so fast they don’t have the same taste.

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RF: Is it not as—as good or full of a taste?

00:06:02

RC: No; nothing is good. Chicken is not good. Hog is not good; cow—everything, not as—don’t taste as well as they did fifty years ago.

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RF: Do you miss that?

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RC: Yes, because that aroma that you had at that time, you know, will let everybody know for miles, you know, what you were really doing and—and it tasted a lot better.

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RF: So there would actually be a—a smell that you used to get out of them that you can't now?

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RC: You get—sometimes you get the smell now, but it's not as strong as it was I'd say fifty or forty years ago.

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RF: Well, what did it smell like? Was it the fat; was it the—the skin?

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RC: That's something that you—either you know it when you smell it. You know, nothing nobody can tell you how it smells; you just got to know that smell. You got to smell it for yourself. I can't tell you what it smells—because you still won't get the true feeling of it. You had to be—the ham just—just was different. When people cooked ham years ago you could just smell it and you know what they were cooking, so—but now they may be cooking a ham but you don't know it.

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RF: And in this day and age when—when we have some smaller farmers trying to reintroduce these old-time pigs and chickens have you ever run across that smell again recently?

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RC: No; because you don't have small farmers doing it now, because if you get caught raising a lot of hogs now it's a fine and nobody wants to pay—that's why they all went out of business because they started—the State started fining them, because of the waste material they said was running in the river, you know. And you wasn't—you was not raising hogs and pay that type of money out because you're not going to make anything if you got to be fined like that.

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RF: Do you have any older customers who talk to you about the taste of hogs back in the day who reminisce with you?

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RC: Every now and then you may have someone say, "I remember when they taste different, sometimes, you know, "when your father did it." But basically, you know, I use his same recipe, so—. They say—it's just some say, "It tastes the same but it's the quality of hogs that's not the same," so—.

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RF: And tell me how—so on those—when you cook—when you'd barbecue a hog back on those Saturdays or do a hog barbecue, what was the process? What exactly would you do?

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RC: The process is the same; you know, you just—you get—burn the wood down, put it in the wood—in your fireplace and then you transfer it and put it under the pig, you know. It's no different. It's still the same process when you cook with wood. I don't use gas.

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RF: What sort of wood do you use here?

00:09:01

RC: Oak wood, pecan wood, and hickory.

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RF: Do you use one more than the other or—?

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RC: Well, you can get more oak than you do—and you do hickory. Hickory is kind of scarce.

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RF: Is hickory—has hickory become scarcer over the years?

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RC: Oh, yeah; very few people—you don't see many hickory trees around.

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RF: Why is that?

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RC: That I can't answer. I guess it—it don't grow like—people don't plant it like they do oak, and oak just grows everywhere.

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RF: Do you have one supplier of wood or a couple individuals?

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RC: Well, basically I have like one supplier basically, but when a lot of storms come around like it's been, a lot of people going to give away wood; so, I get a lot of wood that way.

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RF: And so how—what's the process that you do here of cooking a hog? When do you put them on?

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RC: I just put them on in the evening time and start them cooking and—and at a certain time I bank the wood around it so it lights all night and I go home.

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RF: And does someone stay with the hogs here?

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RC: No. No one stays with the hogs.

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RF: So how long are the hogs on at night?

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RC: Well, they probably stay out there like twelve—twelve, fourteen hours cooking slow. You know you get slower and slower probably; the wood dies down as the night goes on. But I don't be here.

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RF: And do you put anything on the hogs before they go on or while they're on the grill?

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RC: Well basically you—you know, I always salt them down but you know you season after you take them up.

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RF: And what do you season with, without giving away any sort of secrets?

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RC: It's a vinegar based sauce and in Eastern North Carolina we use a vinegar based sauce. You know red pepper and vinegar mixed.

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RF: And is it the same sauce that your father used?

00:11:01

RC: Yes; the same one—the same recipe.

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RF: And why do you think vinegar is so prevalent in Eastern North Carolina? Why do you think your customers have always loved vinegar?

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RC: Basically that's what they are accustomed to it. Most everybody in Eastern North Carolina uses a vinegar base. In the Western part of the State they use ketchup and sugar base. So it's just different; everybody do it different. Nobody do it just alike.

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RF: Have you had a chance to eat that Western barbecue or other barbecue?

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RC: Yes; I've ate some.

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RF: And what do you think about it?

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RC: Well I wasn't used to it, so I didn't like it.

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RF: What do you think about the fight that some people try to create between Western and Eastern North Carolina barbecue? Is it—is it a real fight or is it just kind of blown up out of nowhere?

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RC: Well, they said Lexington barbecue is the best and in the East they said vinegar based is the best, so you know.

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RF: Do you think it's—some people compare it to Duke versus UNC and I know you have a lot of—you seem to be a UNC fan. There's lot of North Carolina basketball photos. Do you think it as big as that rivalry?

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RC: I guess if you get around enough barbecue people from Lexington and there from the East they—they have the same problem, might be a little bigger.

00:12:20

RF: Do we need a break? Okay; uh-hm. So I want to ask you, how do you remember your father; what did he look like?

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RC: They say I favor my father you know but I know my father. My father—I was like forty-nine years old when my father died, so I know him very well.

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RF: What—do y'all have the same voice?

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RC: Now that I don't say that but—but they say I favor him, so—.

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RF: What was his voice like?

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RC: You know, his voice I guess he—I whine but I think he whined a little more than I did. **[*Laughs*]**

00:13:05

RF: And was your mother, his wife ever involved in the business in barbecue?

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RC: Yes; well my biological mother died when I was sixteen, and we didn't have a place at that time. We were selling in the car but my—my—my next mother, my stepmother, she—she went in the business. It's her recipe that we use for cooking hushpuppies.

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RF: And what was her name?

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RC: Her name was Lillian Blunt Cobb.

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RF: And how do you spell that?

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RC: What Cobb?

00:13:45

RF: Her first name?

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RC: Oh L-i-l-l-i-a-n.

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RF: Okay; and how—where did she get her hushpuppy recipe? Was she making them at home before?

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RC: Now that I don't know where—I guess she tried and came up with the—you know, she kept mixing and mixing and she tried and she came up with the taste and she said, "This is the one." So like trial and error I guess.

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RF: And before that there were no hushpuppies?

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RC: No; before hushpuppies they have like flat bread like just cornbread, old-time bread.

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RF: And when—on those Saturdays when you were—you and your father were serving at—at the tobacco plant, were you—was it just hog or did you have sides like coleslaw or bread?

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RC: We had coleslaw and bread and barbecue at that time. That's the only three things we had just coleslaw, bread, and barbecue—nothing else.

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RF: Would it be sandwiches or plates or both?

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RC: It would be a little—on trays, little trays.

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RF: How much was a tray originally, do you remember?

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RC: Yeah; 65-cents.

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RF: Sixty-five cents?

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RC: Uh-hm.

00:14:53

RF: And did you want to help him or did he push you into the business?

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RC: No; I—I just helped and, you know, it wasn't—it wasn't—well like making my spending change for school and after school, you know. Like most people worked on the farm. We didn't farm so he—sold barbecue.

00:15:17

RF: All right; we need to take a break. All right; so a gentleman, a customer, was just in and he was telling me about your father's store across the street. What—what was that store?

00:15:30

RC: It was still just named Jack Cobb's Barbecue but—

00:15:34

RF: Oh, that was the original location before this one; I see. And he was telling me that a line would stretch to the street from here.

00:15:41

RC: It might—it might didn't go quite that far but it was small so it couldn't but so many get in at one time so they had to stand on the outside.

00:15:49

RF: What kind of worker was your father? I mean he had a full-time job and he made barbecue; was he a tough man?

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RC: Yeah; he was **[*Laughs*]**. Yeah; he—believe me, he'll push you, to your limit anyway.

00:16:04

RF: Did—did the two of you get along when working?

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RC: Oh yeah; always got along well because I was the young one so I could do a lot of work, so I didn't have any problem with—with working.

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RF: Um, now Jack Cobb & Son Barbecue is only open three days a week—Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday. Why is that and has it always been that way?

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RC: Well those are the days that my father choosed to open because when you cook with wood you had to do so much preparing the day before.

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RF: What do you think your establishment means to the local community?

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RC: Well, you can count on good barbecue; they had to drive a long distance, you know, if you live out here in Farmville and want some good barbecue. We try to provide a well-tasting barbecue and try to keep it the same at all times and clean so—if not, you might have to drive, you know, sixteen—eighteen miles to try to find some barbecue.

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RF: What do you think your—you and your father's legacy is?

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RC: Well legacy is that he wants—I try to keep it going the way he did. I don't know if no one is going to follow me but I tried to keep it going.

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RF: Will anyone follow you?

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RC: That I don't know.

00:17:53

RF: How long do you plan on keep—keep barbecuing?

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RC: I don't even know that either. I can't answer that. Like I said, you start getting up in age you can't work but so long, and I don't know whether either one of my sons want it, so—. They like easier work.

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RF: Right; neither—you have sons and they don't want to work here?

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RC: They ain't selling at all. They want to do like you do—a whole lot easier work.

00:18:27

RF: Do—have they ever given it a try?

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RC: Well they have worked here. Yeah; both of them have worked here, you know, but they have their own—own personal job.

00:18:36

RF: Right; would you encourage young guys to go into the barbecue business?

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RC: Well, basically only if you—you got to have it in your heart; it got to be something you want to do and not just do it because somebody tells you. You got to want to do it. If you don't want to do it, I advise you not to do it.

00:18:55

RF: So was barbecue in your blood?

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RC: Yeah; it's been in my blood, you know, like I said I've been cooking since I was thirteen, so, you know, that's—that's the difference.

00:19:06

RF: I have—I have a history question because I'm a history teacher back in New Orleans. I study American History. We visited over two dozen barbecue places in the State over the past three weeks and they're all owned by white men. As an African American man have you had you know does race ever matter, has it mattered?

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RC: Not at the present time it doesn't matter.

00:19:37

RF: But in the—more racially volatile times in our nation's history, in the '50s, '60s, '70s?

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RC: Well in the early—in the '50s, early '60s, it wasn't a racist thing but a lot of times it—our business has been in a black community, a lot of white was afraid to come to it, you know. That's the biggest thing there. I used to carry it to their house when we first started but after it got to be so many I just told them you—you got to come get it. Won't nobody bother you. I'll be there.

00:20:10

RF: So you catered to—to white people's houses because they just had a hard time coming here?

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RC: No; that wasn't here. That was when it was the other place back in the '60s, early '60s. We used to deliver barbecue. I used to you know drive around and deliver for my father.

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RF: When did you start getting a true kind of white customer base?

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RC: Uh, well I'd say in the late '60s, when we were over there we started having a white business, you know. It used to be like a season business, just black basically to the tobacco—but after that, you know, we started—started getting after—I'd say '67, somewhere along there, '66, '67. That's when they started picking up.

00:21:05

RF: Do you remember there being more African American owned barbecue places in the past?

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RC: Yes; it used to be like two or three. It used to be—they were all—that's another one in Farmville now, African American. And then—in Douglas an African American on the Black Trail, Barbecue Trail, so but years and years ago you know everybody used to have a little place and they cooked barbecue in the back you know. But not—not for say now.

00:21:42

RF: Why is that? Why?

00:21:45

RC: Well, it's not many small restaurants like it used to be. It used to be a lot of small farmers maybe used to have like five, six, seven small restaurants in the black neighborhoods. And now it's probably—well I'm here on this side of town; one of them on the other end of Main Street and one on Pine Street is run by a black person but basically that's all, the only restaurants run by a black person in Farmville now.

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RF: So if—if Jack Cobb & Son closes, right, if no one continues your legacy and your father's legacy what—what does that mean historically for the community? What is lost?

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RC: Well, it's probably lost you know because right now basically I probably fix more barbecue than anyone in Farmville at the present time, so—. It will—hmm; they just have to go somewhere else to get their barbecue, you know.

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RF: And what do you think the future of whole hog is? We've heard over and over that whole hog is disappearing and not as many people cook it than in the past?

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RC: Well I guess a lot of folks don't use whole hog. I guess they say you get better turnout by cooking barbecue butts.

00:23:27

RF: Do you think there will be whole hog in the future—ten, twenty years from now?

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RC: It's hard to say. Things change so much; you know, you can't really predict that. But some people just like the whole hogs, you know. And I think several barbecue places in Parker in

Wilson, they still use whole hogs. B's Barbecue Place in Wilson—in Greenville they use whole hogs and Parker—and Greenville use whole hogs, so it's still a lot of people using whole hogs.

00:23:59

[End Rudy Cobb-Jack Cobb & Son Barbecue Place]