

ED MITCHELL

Mitchell's Ribs, Bar-B-Q & Chicken [*Temporarily Closed*] – Wilson, NC

* * *

Date: September 5, 2007

Location: K & A Church Supply Store – Wilson, NC

Interviewer: Amy Evans

Length: 1 hour, 57 minutes, 9 seconds

Project: Southern BBQ Trail - North Carolina

[Begin Ed Mitchell Interview]

00:00:01

Amy Evans: This is Amy Evans on Wednesday, September 5, 2007. I'm in Wilson, North Carolina, with Mr. Ed Mitchell at his wife's Bible Store [K & A Church Supply Store] here in town. And Mr. Mitchell, would you mind saying your name and also—also your birth date for the record, please?

00:00:17

Ed Mitchell: Okay, my name is Ed Mitchell and my birth date is June 28, 1946.

00:00:25

AE: Are you a native of Wilson?

00:00:28

EM: I am.

00:00:30

AE: Can you tell me about growing up here?

00:00:32

EM: Very exciting—all my life, obviously, I lived in Wilson County. And I spent a lot of time with my grandparents [Lawyer and Beatrice Sanders] who had a little small farm. And then they moved into town and so all my history of barbecue sort of stemmed from that. I came from

grandparents that had, believe it or not, twenty-five siblings; and my mother [Duretha Sanders Mitchell] was, you might say, the last of their excited marriage. She was—she's what they call the knee-baby. And so every year, you know, Christmastime, holidays, etcetera, we would always do barbecue; and so barbecue has always been like a fabric of our lives. And most of the people here in North Carolina, especially during the fall of the year when the tobacco crops have been harvested—and getting ready to go to market—different farmers would celebrate by having what we call here a traditional pig-picking', yeah.

00:02:03

And so coming up with that, barbecue has just been—what can I say? It's just been just as natural as natural can get in my life. So then as I got older, obviously, I graduated in 1964 from Charles H. Darden High School and then from there I went off to college. I went to Fayetteville State University in Fayetteville, North Carolina. I went there for three years and then the Vietnam War broke out, and I was called to service; and I spent a tour of 18-months in Vietnam. I came back, was discharged and went back to Fayetteville State and got my undergraduate degree in 1972.

00:03:10

And then from there I was recruited by Ford Motor Company; they were looking for Junior NCOs and Officers to get involved in what they called their DD Program, which was a minority Dealer Development Program. And we—we were fortunate enough to be interviewed and we were selected to participate in that program and after graduation off to Dearborn, Michigan, I went and took, I don't know, maybe a year or so training. And then I had a brief stop in New York—White Plains—and then ended up in Boston, Massachusetts, where I spent about twelve years as a regional manager for Ford Motor Company Customer Service Division.

00:04:20

Then from there, after a period of time my father [Willie Mitchell] became ill. And I think this was during the latter part of the '80s and my father became ill, and my mother called me and I took a leave of absence from that job and came back to Wilson and sort of stayed around a while until we—it was determined that his illness was not serious. And, of course, at that time I took—I was taking some real estate courses up there in Boston that—on Brookline—Lee Institution in Brookline, Massachusetts. And so when I came to Wilson as that leave of absence to spend some time with my mom and my dad, I decided to take the state exam and I passed it; so I got my real estate license and then Mother encouraged me to sort of hang around a bit. So I decided I would, so I sent my resignation in and decided to stay back here in North Carolina. And again, this was probably about 1990 at that time.

00:05:49

And then unfortunately, my father's illness did take a turn for the worse, and he expired in June of 1990. So now during that time this is—this is kind of ironic because my mother and father all our years even growing up ran a mom and pop grocery store on the corner of Singletary and 301 Highway South [Mitchell's Groceries] and it—they were sort of like pillars of the community. They would get up, oh my goodness, four and five o'clock in the mornings to go down and—and open up the store and sell penny candy and cookies, two for a penny, to the kids that was getting on the school bus and that was a big thing to them. And so they did that for years until as I said earlier, my father expired in 1990. So at that time I was working then with the State of North Carolina as a Manager for the Employee Standard Division. So what—what transpired was after we funeral(ized) my father, a few months later my mother, she is the energetic one in the family, always have been—she decided that she was not going to sit home and retire after she lost her husband as part of the team from the running the grocery store. So she decided she wanted to go back into—into the grocery store business. So then I began to step

up to the plate and began to taking the role of my father and sort of escorting her down in the mornings and—and escorting her back home in the afternoon. So one day I went into the store to see her before I was going off to Raleigh for my job, and she seemed to be a little down. So I said, “Mother, what—what’s wrong?” She says, “Well I’ve been here all day, and I haven’t made but seventeen dollars and twelve dollars of that was in food-stamps. So we sort of chuckle at that, you know; it was like, you know, a joke because they—they made a living running the grocery store. But what I had explained to her was, you know, they—they were a team and people came by to see them to talk about their kids, you know. They’d talk about their kids and she would talk about her kids, and everybody had a chance to share some of the things that was important to them. But when one of the members of the team, you know, I guess, was lost, it wasn’t the same. And so people began to shy away for whatever reason, and she couldn’t understand that.

00:09:06

So anyway, I was trying to cheer her up so I says, “Hmm, Mother, what are you cooking?” And what she was cooking was back there—she was—back there she was cooking some greens that, basically, was part of their dinner because they got there in the mornings and they stayed there all day, and so she was like preparing this lunch. And—and she was still in the same routine as if he were still living. And so I said, “Mother, what are you cooking?” And she says, “I’m cooking some greens.” So I said, “Okay, what—what do you want to eat?” She said, “I don’t know. I’ve got a taste for some old-fashioned barbecue.” Well I knew what that meant because, as I said earlier, growing up all our lives on any celebration—it didn’t make any difference what the celebration was—if it—if it was significant enough to be recognized, it had to be accompanied by barbecue. And that was the way things were—good times were synonymous with—with family gathering and cooking of barbecue and just having a good time.

00:10:30

So I says, “Okay.” So I go down to the local meat market and picked up a little small guy. I got a little small pig about, oh maybe thirty-two—I think thirty-two or thirty-five pounds. The supermarket was named Super Duper. And I came back and—and stopped by the wood stand and then the guy was selling wood was back then—a lot of people were still using wood and coal, so I bought five dollars worth of oak wood to give it the flavor that I wanted. And I went back to the building and went in there and pulled out the old cooker and put the thing on. And so I said, “Well okay, I’ll be back shortly. Give it about three hours or so to cook.” So I came back and finished it up and chopped it up, and she seasoned it, and she and I were having a late lunch. And at that time I was sitting over in the corner enjoying the—the meal. And someone came in the grocery store and wanted to buy some hotdogs because I had convinced her that she was still buying too much of the product for the fresh meat market that they were doing just like it was when Dad was living and she needed to sort of—take some of that stuff and try to convert it into an edible product, rather than raw product. So she decided to take some franks and things that she was buying—buying and the—and the hamburger and started—and converted it into a little hamburger stand and a little hotdog stand.

00:12:26

So the person came in with the intentions of buying the hotdog or hamburger. So when mother got up to go back to the counter to service the guy, he saw the pail of barbecue that we had just finished chopping up. And I was in the corner of the store behind that bread rack and having lunch and so he said, “Oh, Mrs. Mitchell. Y’all got barbecue too?” And so she looked back at me for some sort of confirmation and it was so funny because, you know, I—I really—my mouth was full and I couldn’t speak, so all I did was nodded at her uh-hmm, yeah, uh-hmm for her to sell the guy some barbecue. **[Laughs]** Because the only thing that was important to me

was—was to make—help her make some money. And—but so she made a guy a couple of sandwiches and he went out the door. And we came back and finished the lunch. And then I went on back to work and—and came back that afternoon about seven o’clock to escort her home, you know, like I did—previously had done before, since dad had died. And when I got in, you know, she was all bubbly, packing up her little stuff, getting ready for to close up the store, and I said, “Hmm. It’s—I’m very glad to see you had a change of—of personality and glad to see you’re upbeat.” And she said, “Yep, sure am.” She said, “I made some money today.” I said, “Well that’s good.” She says, “But I sold all that barbecue.” I said, “Get out of here, Mom. You didn’t sell that barbecue.” I hadn’t been gone no more than maybe about four hours. Of course, it wasn’t that much; it was like about—I think the pig yielded about fifteen or twenty pounds. It didn’t yield that much but the fact that it—it got gone in that period of time just by somebody going out and telling it, well I guess was so amazing. So she said, “Yeah, yeah, I sold it.”

00:14:23

So as—as she began gathering her things and—and getting ready to go out the door, someone came to the front door of the store. And of course we had the door locked because we were closing. And the guy said, “Hello, Mr. Mitchell?” So I put a little bass in my voice and said, “Yeah, who is it?” **[Laughs]** He said, “Oh, I just want to know if y’all got anymore of that barbecue.” And I said, “No, we don’t have no more today, but we’ll have some more tomorrow.” And that’s how we got into the barbecue business—I mean, commercially. **[Laughs]** Literally, just nothing but totally act of—grace of God, I guess, because that’s the only thing I can contribute it to.

But anyway, so we went on and, of course, I imagine a couple of weeks had gone by and Mother was still after me about cooking more barbecue because none of the grocery items were selling. And then she said, “You know, you—you go back to cooking this barbecue the old-

fashioned way like folks used to do it and you go starting adding some sides to that stuff like folks used to do it, some collard greens and some mustard greens, and some candied yams,” and she went on and on, “rutabaga.” And so—so I said, “Well, you know, why not? You know, let me—let me—.” Everything else weren’t working, so let me see if I can help generate some cash. So I went out and got another pig. And this time it was a little larger; I stepped it up a little bit—about sixty-five-ponder this time. So then I put him on and—and later on it was done obviously, and I chopped him up and seasoned it for her, and then she had that to sell. And lo and behold, now I’m curious now—so I come back the next day and—and just ask her, “Well how’s the barbecue?” She said, “I ain’t got none.” I said, “Get out of here, Mom.” She says, “I done told you.” So it didn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out that she was onto something.

00:16:41

And so we began [getting] more pigs; we began phasing out the grocery store and taking all the—the dry goods and pushing away and making room for little tables and—and places for people to sit down and eat, and you were subject to see anybody in there once the word got around that we had this old-fashioned barbecue. And these—these good nice—these good sides. And we had any—we had all sorts of dignitaries that come in—Judges and Ministers and all sorts of Councilmen and, you know, regular people, you know. They would come in the little spot and—and it was a small spot and everybody was crowded right around and everybody would sit down and eat, and it didn’t make any difference because they just—they wanted that barbecue, you know. *[Laughs]*

00:17:41

And as time went on, then, in 1992—so we played with this thing for about a year-and-a-half. So the latter part of ’92 and ’93 I decided to—let’s give it a run, okay. And so we—we did

that; we actually cancelled out all the grocery items and made it—at that time—Mitchell's Barbecue. And we went into it full steam ahead.

00:18:23

Now the story behind that—the—the pace of this thing got so outrageous that I couldn't keep up with it, because I was trying to work in Raleigh and trying to help her make barbecue because I was—I was the chef; I made the barbecue, and she did the sides, and she ran the other part. But the—but the biggest other thing was the barbecue, and it got to a point where I was literally driving from Raleigh to Wilson and changing clothes in the car, trying to get back that evening or afternoon and get the pig up and season the barbecue, so she'd have some more for the next day. So I was trying to work it into my system.

00:19:10

So it got to the point where as I said, "I need some help." So I began asking around the community from some of the older ones, okay, who—who is the best barbecue guy around here that's still living and would know—know the techniques of really how to build the pits and get it right and all that stuff now? Coming up as a kid, it was fun to follow my granddad around and my dad around to put on the—put on the pig and make barbecue when I was younger. But when it began—when it began to be a chore—a job—I did like most kids, you know. I hightailed it away you know—you got—you couldn't find me. So I didn't—I didn't hone all of the techniques that I needed to know to do what I knew it needed to have been done in order to produce the product. So I—I began to search around and try to find some old-timers that I remembered that was back in the day and still living that also cooked barbecue and—and knew how to do those things. And there were three guys that came to mind that I was told; one was a gentleman by the name of Bud Jenkins and one was by the name of Sam Morgan and the other

one was by the name of James Kirby. And the guys said they about the best that's still around. If you can get either one of them, you're okay.

00:20:52

Well I went and visited each one of them, and all of them, at the time, turned me down. They said, "No," you know, "I'm not going to let you mess up no pig. You don't want to cook no barbecue." And the reason they were saying those kinds of things is because those guys—it was—it was like competition back—really back in the day. If you could be tabbed as a good barbecue guy I mean—knew how to cook that whole hog, you were—you were valuable, so they say. And the guys wouldn't mess with you if you weren't really dedicated to the art of cooking it. So—and I guess they were old enough for—for my father, so I guess at this point in my life being polished I guess with a degree and all that, they didn't look at me as anybody that wanted to be bothered with barbecue. But I—you know but it—but it interested me and so I began to continue to, you know, play around with it. And finally, it was strange how I got one of them to—to help me. And this particular guy was Mr. James Kirby who is now my mentor and has passed, but we used to have what they called a Friday night poker game; and Mr. Kirby would attend and—along with the other guys and just a social thing. But this particular night, Mr. Kirby was down on his luck, and he was older than most of the guys around the poker table. So he was down on his luck and so he—he got—he got broke early in the game, you know. He got—he lost all his funds. And so it was kind of funny because it was about three guys sitting around or standing around, okay, waiting until a vacant seat was there. And since Mr. Kirby had lost all his money and he was an older guy, he wouldn't get up from the table. **[Laughs]** He—he was still sitting there. And every—everyone out of respect or afraid or—or whatever, they—they wouldn't ask him to get up. But anyway, so I was pretty good on my luck, and so I reached in my pile and tossed him over fifty dollars and—and in front of him because I saw he wasn't going to

get up, and the other guys was very antsy to get down, but nobody would dare ask Mr. Kirby to get up. He was sort of an ornery old guy. So anyway, the guy dealt the cards around two times, and Mr. Kirby never did pick up the money. [*Phone Rings*] But when the deal came around for the third time he anteed up, so he accepted the money that I gave him.

00:24:00

And so I played a while, and I was pretty good with mine, so I got up after he started winning a little bit—I got up so someone else could sit down. And standing over there and I had a beer or two and so—got ready to leave and Mr. Kirby says, “Wait a minute.” So he got up, came over there to me. H says, “You still want to learn about barbecue?” I said, “Yeah.” He said, “Well I’ll teach you. I’ll be down to your place tomorrow morning.” He talked with a real heavy voice. “I’ll be down,” real slow, “I’ll be down to your place tomorrow morning.” [*Imitating Mr. Kirby*] I said, “Okay, fine.” And so when I came down—when he came down the next day, I had already been out because at the time, neither one of those guys were going to do—would help me. So I went out and found a guy that had an electric cooker, you know, that cooked about three hogs at a time but using electricity as the main source. And I was getting ready to buy that cooker from him. So when Mr. Kirby came to the restaurant, and I said, “Well come on and go look at this cooker I’m getting ready to cook—I mean I’m getting ready to buy to cook these hogs.” So I went to the guy’s place, and his name was Herbert Woodard, and he was a good friend of Mr. Kirby’s. So I walked in and I said, “Mr. Woodard, okay, I come to look at the cook—pick up the cooker.” So he—Mr. Woodard says, “Okay, come on.” So I went over and looked at the cooker, and he was telling me how good the cooker could cook and how many hogs it could cook and the time and all of that. And I said, “Okay, good. I think I’ll take it.” And so I—I reached in my pocket to pull out the money, and Mr. Kirby was standing beside me, and when I got ready to pull out my money he was—he was tugging on my arm like [*Gestures*] and

so I couldn't figure out what he—what was going on because I thought he saw something wrong with the cooker. So I started up another conversation with Mr. Woodard trying to figure out **[Laughs]** what it was that he was trying to get my attention.

00:26:15

And so I started a little meaningless conversation. About two minutes later, you know, I started back in my pocket and slowly going to come up with the money again, and he tugged on my arm again. And so I says, "Excuse me a minute, Mr. Woodard. I'll be right back." So we walk out the door, and when I get outside the door I said, "What—what is it?" He says, "Do you really want to cook into the barbecue business?" I said, "Yeah, I want to get in the barbecue business." "Do you *really* want to get into the barbecue business?" **[Emphasis Added]** I said, "Yes; I want to get into the barbecue business." **[Emphasis Added]** He said, "Well, if you want to get into the barbecue business, I'll put you in the water, but it will be up to you to swim." **[Laughs]** I said, "You just put me in the water. I'll swim, don't worry about that." So he said, "Well don't buy that cooker. Come on." So I went back in there and told Mr. Woodard, "I'll be back later"—that I didn't have enough funds.

00:27:19

And so we went back to the restaurant, the mom and pop grocery store [Mitchell's Groceries], and in the back we had a shed that we stored all the old drink bottles and—and different items, you know that were—were pertaining to the store. And he says, "What you going to do with this—this shed here, the storage shed?" I said, "Nothing than what it is." He said, "Well let's take all of this stuff out." And so we began taking it all out, and once we got it all clear, then he got down on his knees, and he drew out my first pit. And then we got someone to lay the blocks and—and get it going. And so [in] about a couple of days I actually had a—a real authentic barbecue pit made out of the old shed we were storing, out of old supplies from the

grocery store. And that went on oh, right on up into the mid-'90s, and then things just go so hectic. I mean it really began to—I mean just snowball. And finally, I just had to work it full time, and Mr. Kirby worked it full time, and we worked it that way right on up to 1998. And at that time I said, “Well it looks like I’m going to have to make another—another move here, you know, if I’m going to—if I’m going to really try to get into it.” Because we had outgrown that capacity, and we had outgrown that little pit that he had built.

00:29:14

And so I convinced Mom to allow me to expand the existing building into a larger one. So I began buying and accumulating land around the area and making plans for the new addition. So in 1990—so in 2000—I’m sorry, 2001 we opened up the new addition. And we had just opened it real good and—and the first sign of anyone really getting really, I mean, just fanatic about the history of barbecue was a historian by the name of David Cecelski. He was a historian out of Harvard University, who wrote the first article about Ed Mitchell and barbecue. He wanted to know the—how did it fit into our lives and the history of it, and who did this, and who did what. And then, of course, you know, that was my first encounter of anyone really wanting to find out a lot about the—the history of it.

And then of course in 2002—early part of 2002, that’s when the Southern Food[ways] Alliance, I guess, John T. [Edge] and his organization had dispatched, I guess, food tasters or judges around the country as it relates to the barbecue belts, and they came into North Carolina and—unknowingly to me, of course, and others and—and tasted the barbecue. And so one day we got a call from Bob Garner, who, by the way had been down several times and had did a lot of taping during that period of time, previously before the Southern Food Alliance, called him and said, “Listen, Ed.” I said, “What?” “Guess what?” he said. I said, “What?” “You’ve been named the best barbecue guy in North Carolina.” I said, “Oh, yeah?” He said, “Yeah,” he says.

And I got to go down and speak, but there's one stipulation. I said, "What? I said, "What is that?" He said, "Well they—they want you to come down and—and receive your honorary recognition." And I says, "Okay, I can do that." So in 2002 we went down to Oxford, Mississippi, and met everybody and realized then that this thing was—was a lot bigger than just Wilson, North Carolina, you know. I mean it was a national movement going on about barbecue and different facets of it, different things—I mean different interests as relates to different regions and what they cooked and how they cooked it and what they specialized in and so forth.

00:32:33

So it was exciting and, as I said before, the symposium was very informative to me because I didn't realize how much of a—of a contributing factor that the African American played as it related to barbecue, and so that was very exciting, and also it made me feel very good. So anyway, at the end of the day John stepped to the plate, because I think it was about four of us there. He says, "Now that we got all you guys here, you guys mind entering into a little contest here, and we're going to let all the food writers here, you know, taste your product and let them see who—you know, what they think." So we said no, we didn't mind. Each—I think it was Bob Gibson and some Blackjack somebody and Ed Mitchell and—anyway, it was about five of us. And but the thing about that—well here's the funny thing about that now, which was a historical moment for me: that morning when we were to cook the product, get going, my truck that was bringing my stuff down there was late. He made a wrong turn and—and I heard jokes about this town, you know, from Richard Pryor, Tupelo, Mississippi but I didn't never think it was an actual city or town called Tupelo. **[Laughs]** So—so when he—when he called me and said, "I made a wrong turn at Tupelo, Mississippi," I said, "Get out of here, man. You're trying to be funny." **[Laughs]** He said, "No, no, no, seriously." And it was my cousin, Melvin Lewis. He said, "No, no; I made a wrong turn at Tupelo, Mississippi." So I said, "Okay." He

said, “I’m going to be about two hours late.” I said, “All right.” And so that morning everybody got down there and everybody got started early.

00:34:53

So actually, I was walking around—me and my brother and one other fellow that we had with us, Mr. Robert Morris, who is now deceased. So we were walking around and just fascinated at—at the different kinds of cookers that they were using, you know. We had some with canopies and some with shining lacquer and all of this stuff you know, and I’m trying to figure is this—what—I mean I had never seen anything but just an old—just an old rack—a pig cooker, you know. I had never seen all—these guys had invested I mean hundreds of thousands of dollars in these things and I—it was—it was just a showpiece for me, right. And so I was, you know, just amazed. And so everybody was just saying to Ed, says, “Okay, you’re from North Carolina?” I said, “Yeah.” They says, “Okay,” you know, “where is your stuff?” I said, “Well he’s—he’s running a little late and,” I said, “but he’ll be here shortly.” So in about two-and-half hours, sure enough, my truck pulled up—top of the hill. All right. And everybody—it was announced to me, “Ed Mitchell’s—Ed Mitchell’s truck is here. His equipment is here.” And so everyone just stopped and paused, you know, and—and because I had this big eighteen-wheeler, right—tractor and trailer—and I guess their imagination in their minds thought that I must have had something similar to what they had, but I had just three old barrel cookers, right? **[Laughs]** So I opened—they opened up the door and—and I rolled out my equipment, and they literally laughed at it because it was just like oh, what a disappointment, you know. I wasn’t expecting this.

00:36:36

So but that’s all I needed, you know. I didn’t need anything. I mean I never cooked on anything fancy anyway, so we pulled out the cookers and—and got the fires going and got them

started. And then the interesting thing, to me, we had the writer—the Editor in Chief from Chapel Hill, he came up to me and he says, “Are you aware of what’s going on?” I said, “Yeah, I—I—I think I’m aware of what’s going on.” He said, “Well I’ll tell you—.” Because my equipment wasn’t looking impressive, and I wasn’t looking impressive—not compared to what was there. He said, “I heard you got good barbecue,” you know. Because I’m a latecomer, you know. Even though I’ve cooked barbecue all my life we never did it commercially until the change of events that sort of—how can I say, got us into the—into the—into the game, so to say. So he says, “I—I know about three or four barbecue guys that I would rather see here right now other than you.” He said, “But since you’re here representing North Carolina—.” I think his name was Perry, the Editor in Chief for the Chapel Hill paper. Anyway he gave me his card—but anyway I got it—anyway, he said, “Here’s what I’m going to do.” He says, “I’m going to write for the sake of all the guys that you’re representing back in North Carolina.” He says, “I’m going to write that you did good, whether you drop dead or come in last. **[Laughs]** I’m going to write that you did good.” I mean these people were so serious about something that I took literally for granted. I mean it weren’t no big deal to me, so I looked him square in his eyes and said—I said, “No, you’re not. You’re going to write the truth. If you’re going to write anything about Ed Mitchell is number one is I didn’t drop dead and number two is if I’m going—my product is going to win.”

00:39:03

So at the end of the day when the—when everybody was—were tapering off and getting ready to—for their product to be tried and we were still running about thirty minutes behind, so rather than they starting with us, they started on the other side of the—of the field with the other guys, and there was a herd of people that started out that way and kind of tasted their product. And then when we got some of ours ready, then some of them sort of drifted over here. And so I

had done chopped up the meat and had it in a big pile, I mean about the size of this thing here *[gestures to show the size of the table in front of him, which is about four feet square]* and then—but I hadn't finished it and they thought I had finished it, but what I had to do next was I took the skin and I put it back on the grill to make what we call skin and chop it up and put it into the barbecue. So I threw the skin up there, and the skin was crispy and getting all crunchy and everything, and so the barbecue was good as it was; but then when I got the skin ready, and I chopped it all up into real fine pieces, then I tossed it on the mound of the—of the meat and I mixed it all up again. And then I—then I—I didn't use the coleslaw that the culinary kids made. I went down to the grocery store and made my own slaw, the original coleslaw, the Caroline—the Carolinians use and I made my own coleslaw and I put it out there. And lo and behold, then people started eating it and they started talking and running and—and after a while everybody just left from over there, and everybody was bombarding me. **[Laughs]** So at the end of the day, you know, I guess, because they said so, that we were favored. And so we left there, you know, having to come up with the non-impressive equipment but walked away with the—the most tastiest product.

00:41:11

And then from there, old Ed Mitchell's have been spiraling ever since upward. And so, you know, we were very glad to—to accomplish that and very glad to bring those kinds of recognitions to the state and the product and—and Bob Garner we eloquently wrote it the next day as the—I didn't know anything about any of these guys who were writers and food critics and experts, and they said a lot of nice things about me and a lot of nice things about the product and—but to me, it was just an everyday touch—work. I mean it wasn't anything out of the norm, but I'm very pleased that it turned out all right and that everybody, you know, was enjoying it.

00:41:58

So we—we received the honorary recognition and came back to North Carolina. And then, of course, about a month later we got another call, and then that time we were asked to—come to New York to the Big Apple [Barbecue] Block Party. The first founders of that was Ed Mitchell and a guy from Salt Lake and [Chris] Lilly [from] Big Bob Gibson, and—and Blue Smoke—Kenny Callahan, the chef from Blue Smoke. And—and then we went there and lo and behold, I thought I would never stop working and cooking barbecue. I mean the people waited in line, and I think they got pictures of that; they waited in line for forty-five minutes, as fast as I could cook it. So—so we weren't—we weren't asked to cook but I think about five hogs the first time, but I ran out in probably about three hours of the event. I mean—and I didn't have anything to cook, so Ken came over and then shook his head, man. There was this waiting line that just soared me right up. But that was a good experience. And so then we ended up on the front page of the *New York Times* after the stuff down there, talking about the barbecue experience down in Oxford, Mississippi.

00:43:38

So we then got involved with Bill Niman [of Niman Ranch] I think then was on another dimension on all of this stuff, I think was working with the organization on trying to find out where is the best product? I mean to, you know, make the barbecue from—and that's how I got where I am now; that's what generated my interest now. All of what I was doing I was cooking—making barbecue out of pigs that are raised on today's methods, commercially confined. And we did a very good job using my family's 100-year recipe—probably older than because I'm sixty. Yeah, it's—it's probably about 150 years old, I imagine but—. Then we—we found out that he was involved with one of the writers, who was a very good person. I met a lot of good people on this—on this venture. I met a writer, Peter Kaminski [author of the book *Pig Perfect*] and Peter was—he was adamant about “let me find it.” It's almost like a carpenter: let

me find the best piece of wood for you to make this furniture out of. Or let me find the best piece of cloth for a seamstress to make this material, you know, for you to make this dress out of or whatever. So Peter was interested in finding the best pig that didn't have anything—I mean just natural, you know, and convert it into barbecue. So Peter was the one that told me there was a program going on at the—in North Carolina at the A&T State University—small—small farmers was involved in raising pigs naturally. And that—that may be something did I want to get involved in, because I could get an excellent piece of material or a product to produce a good product using the methods that I was still using that sort of correlated with that type of animal. And then so we were contacted by Bill Niman through the university correspondence there, Mr. Chuck Talbot, and said, “Listen, we want you to cook three of these things and see what you think about them.”

00:46:23

So I said, “Okay.” So I got a—the university sent me a couple and I cooked it, and I got to say, you know, it was the difference as in night and day in the quality and in the taste of the product. And I think solely because that particular animal had a little more fat in him; he had a little more moisture, and we realized that the marble actually is where the flavor is, even though people—a lot of people back in the day use—was raising what they call lard—lard hogs. They would get them fat, okay; then use the fat out of them to make lard, you know, for either making biscuits or even making soap, so I was familiar with—with what it was and how I knew it would change the taste. But I actually had forgotten, you know, how the original taste of it was until you actually have gone back and put them side-by-side and taste them. And there is a difference.

00:47:46

So I'm a guy that speaks his mind, all right and began speaking what I think and not realizing that maybe some people give me more credit than I deserve as being a—you know, an

authority on the subject or as it relates to what's—what's best and what's not best. But I can only speak from my childhood experiences and the experiences that I knew about coming up as—as a child—as a boy and having experienced it during those days that those methods that they're using now for raising pigs were not—were not used then. And if there is a difference, it had to start—had to have started at that time that the method has changed, so it really wasn't anything that I was saying negative about the product. I was just sort of calling it as it was. You know, it is what it is. But anyway, so then I—I wanted to get—I wanted to get really involved in this research, so I contacted the university, and they said to me, “Come up.” And so I went up, and I met with Dr. Thompson and—and some of his staff who is head of the Agriculture Department, and I began telling him, you know, some of the accomplishments that I had—had achieved and I wanted to get more involved in this product they had of raising these animals. And I wanted to buy some of these animals because I had—I had a thought. And this is where John T. [Edge] gets this from, okay? I had a crazy idea—a crazy idea thought that—that now there are two things that can happen—well actually, three things that can happen out of this crazy thought process. One is that, okay, because of the people now nationally that have gotten involved and studies of barbecue and people are learning more about barbecue and understanding, you know, that because of the different regions they're talking the same thing—barbecue but they're interchanging the true meaning of barbecue. Some—some actually mean going out there and putting hotdogs and hamburgers on the grill is barbecuing and, of course, that's because the—that terminology is basically interchangeable and you use a barbecue sauce on something and—and—and that's really not barbecuing. But—and then some have really taken away what the true—what I feel—what—what I understood it to be barbecuing and that is cooking the whole animal on a slow cooking technique, depending on the size of him, for a long period of time, as

much as twelve to fourteen hours, depending on how large he was, and utilizing all of the parts of the animal. Well as some different region even in North Carolina, you move westward(ly) well, for whatever reason people decided, well, I don't want to be bothered with the whole animal because it is—number one, it's labor intense and number two, it's time-consuming and number three, it's skillful because you really have to be able to cook the animal so that everything on him gets done at the same time because he's thicker in the shoulders and the hams than he is in the ribs. And you have to be able to manage the fires, especially if they weren't fires that were commercially used, such as gas but wood cinders or—or—or coal cinders from oak wood or mesquite wood or hickory wood; you had to know how to position those—those coals in order to make sure that—that whole thing gets done in the same time without burning. And so and that particular technique, as I said, was really what I was—learned as a boy and didn't have no earthly idea—none that in today's market that it would have any relevance at all, none whatsoever. But it—obviously it does—it has and so—so now what I saw was okay, now that's not—I mean that's not barbecuing, but it's okay. It's like, if you can remember, there used to be before everybody got to be a specialist just an old-time country doctor, you know—just an old practitioner—and he cured everything that you had—it made no different what it was, right? Okay, so that's what I'm saying; so now modern days times you got everybody is a specialist of the human body, you know, whether he's a heart surgeon or, you know, feet or ears and eyes and nose but you—you got what I'm saying. So that's what has happened to the pig. [*Phone Rings*]

00:53:12

People decided, well let me specialize in an area that I can master. But if you are a true master, in my opinion, and this is only Ed Mitchell, so I'm making sure I don't offend nobody that you know—you know, a little bit about all of it and you can—you know you can handle all of it. But I'm sure that those specialists are needed because as you go forward, you know, to

study different in-depth certain things is obviously probably needed now. But anyway, that's what I had envisioned has gone on now with the barbecue business. So when you can find an old-timer like me who still that's—sticks to the guns of the old way, I guess I'm sort of a rare bird you might want to say, and that's what makes things a little different.

00:54:01

So anyway, I wanted to get back and find out where those pigs were being raised and— and who was raising and how could I get some. And I found out that there are several farms here in North Carolina that was involved in the project, and I just had to get involved. So I found out and got involved and then John T. invited me down the following year to do a solo cook for everyone that, you know, that we were fortunate enough to beat out the following year. And so I asked John could I bring down some of those natural free-range pigs? I said, “I want—I want to bring three,” you know. “I want to bring a commercial one, and I want to bring one that was raised on barley and one raised on corn and soy.” And—because it just depends on the diet that you would give them, because I remember coming up we would give them things like sweet potato culls and things of that nature, which would change the flavor. So John said, “Yeah, that would be great.” So I made a deal with the university that if they let me take this thing—these three down there and let me see how the market is going to go, that I wanted to get fully involved in it. Because my idea was I wanted to be the guy that did two things—more importantly—one is I saw that as an avenue to give the consumer back the true original taste of barbecue and secondly, I saw that as being able to now give the little guy an opportunity to get back into the game because the commercial operations had—had basically kind of pushed them out, okay. And for—for good—not good reason but for obvious reasons because the—the demand had to be met by the supply and so there was—but I saw it as there's a space for this and there's a space for this one. But I really saw it being a very viable option and a probability because now

everybody universally is crazy about barbecue. So it was almost like the old days where they say well what's more American than baseball and—and apple pie and ice cream? So now that's the oldest thing I've had.

00:56:28

So that will do several things. That will give the—the farmer and especially in North Carolina he had lost his cash crop, which was the tobacco crop, and so it would have given him an idea or two—an opportunity to get back in the game with a product that he can grow slowly like he wanted to and more so he had—for the end-game they had me as a guy that was interested in turning it into barbecue. And my old techniques and slow process techniques would work perfectly because you know I could only cook so much, and when people knew I was out, I was just out so—so I had lined that up and that's what I was going to do. So I took the three pigs and took them down there. I didn't try to fool the crowd. I said, "Now listen, I will tell you that there are two here that are raised in a natural process and one that is not and there are two that I decide to feed them on different diets, one with barley and one with corn." I said, "But I'm going to allow your integrity, you the consumer, to make sure you tell me what you think, you know because you're the one that's really going—going to be the one that's going—going to be the one that's going to give the real true scorecard on it. I mean because, you know, you're the guys that's going to be buying it." And so, as I said before, and when you put them side-by-side if—you will see the difference. So when I did that, the whole—most of the folks there loved the barley and the corn, and they liked the commercial one, as well, but it was these two that had the better flavor. It didn't mean that this one was bad now; it just—just had a better flavor. So—so they all were—were winners because I, you know, seasoned them the same—used the same seasoning. They all was—were winners; it's just that this one tasted a little better than that one and this tasted a little better than that one so—. Anyway, at the end of the day—so then everyone

says, “Okay, Ed, well when—when are you going to start having these, and when are you going to get some of these, and when can I get some of these and when can I get some of this?” And one company, in particular, that I was fun and excited about an opportunity which was—had a chance to meet a young man by the name of Ari [Weinzweig], who owned Zingerman’s out of Ann Arbor, Michigan. So we had a plan, and the plan was I was going to start off with four farmers here in North Carolina that were going to supply me with these pigs, and I was going to turn them into barbecue. And if the folks around here didn’t like them, Ari said he would take every pound that I could muster up because he had—well, there were clients nationally that wanted it.

00:59:26

So I had—I was in a good position and—but I really began to talk about the—the realization of it and, personally, what I think I did is I—I obviously, as I said before, either offended someone, or someone got really a little jittery about the concept because I began to run into what I—what I personally believe was just orchestrated turbulence. And so first one thing led to another, and when we got back to North Carolina after the group of food writers and everyone suggested that this—this was a good product and [asking] when—when are you going to get started? So I had made plans to immediately start to—I had four farmers; I was immediately going to start changing over my buying of my commercial products to these products, and I immediately started doing that. And then, like as I said before, certain things began to happen to me that probably wouldn’t have happened because they really were minor things, but they were turning into large things. And one of the things was, after I had my press conference in Greensboro, John T. was going to come there to that one but he—his plane was late, so we had the press conference in Greensboro. And then we were going to come back to Wilson, North Carolina, and have a press conference here, which was a month later. And John

said, “Well I can make that one.” So John came, and we made that one. And he made that one and we—we announced then that—that in that following March of 2004 that Ed Mitchell was—was going to start selling barbecue made from free-range pigs.

01:01:21

And everybody applauded and we had invited some—some guests. And then at the end we had one guy who—two guys to get up and said to me that I was getting ready to start something. And I said, “No, no, I’m not. I’m not getting ready to start nothing.” “Oh, yes you are. You’re getting ready to start something. You’re getting ready to tell people not to buy my product, and that ain’t good.” So I had a real bad vibes about that, but I really didn’t put a lot of focus on it at the time because I didn’t—you know, I know people sometimes—people—you can’t win the favoritism of everybody on ideas that you got, so I thought he might have been some grumpy person. But I didn’t realize that, you know, maybe—and I don’t have any evidence of this—maybe that there was more to—than what he was saying than—than I gave credit to. Because what happened—what started happening to me later on then really became what I felt was—was an orchestrated situation.

The first thing that happened to me was the Local State Department came in and said they wanted to audit me, and I said, “Okay, fine. I don’t have a problem with that.” And so I—I didn’t—the management part of my business I—my son said when he saw me the first time, said when he finished ECU that he wanted to be the guy to—own the franchise—because he saw me when the first auditor came out in 2000 that Dr. Sosalski had written and he said—he was one of the guys down there said, “Hey, Ryan, your dad is in the paper.” So he called me and said, “Dad, you’re in the paper.” I said, “Oh, yeah?” He said, “Yeah.” He says, “What—we got to do something with this?” I said, “Okay, what are you going to do?” And I put—posed the question back to him because I felt at my age I really hadn’t planned on doing anything, and so he says,

“Man, I—I’d like to be the guy that owns the franchise—own a franchise.” And I said, “Okay, that sounds like a winner.” I said, “I’ll tell you what I’ll do. You change your major from—,” at the time I think it was Physical—Physical Education, “and you change your major and get—get me a degree in—in the field of business, and I will begin laying the groundwork. And so he did that; he changed his degree and got a degree in economics. And when he came out, he was young and a rookie, and maybe I put too much responsibility on him but anyway, I put him in charge of managing the operations—the day-to-day operations of the restaurant and dealing with certain things: filing, tax filings, all of that, even though I was the head of everything—I was the responsible person. But anyway, we—there were several months that we did not file and over a period of time it—no, several months that we did not pay—we—we always filed but several—for several months he did not pay; we did not send the money in. But that really shouldn’t have been a big deal because what—what could have easily happened was okay, here’s what it is you owe, and you pay me.

01:04:40

So when the young lady came down from Raleigh and says this has turned in—this is after this press conference—about a week later and she says, “We come down to audit you.” And she says and—and show her—showed me her badge and said, “This is—this has turned into an investigation.” I said, “An investigation? [*Emphasis Added*] Investigation of what?” You know? I knew I wasn’t doing anything. So she said, “We just going to audit you Mr. Mitchell and see what’s going on.” And so I said, “Be my guest.” So she proceeded to audit, and then she came back and she said—I said, “Whatever you find, let me know. I’ll take care of it.” And so she came back and—several times and I still don’t understand what was going on because they wanted to know what was I buying and—and all these kinds of things as if, you know, I had—

accumulating a massive amount of wealth from this but the—the bottom line was is that—when—when she got her numbers together, she would give me a call.

01:05:48

Well during that time, okay, I was working with my bank, and the bank was working with me and we had missed several payments, couple of times, and missed several payments on the new addition now, but we were gearing up and getting ready now to—because we had what I felt was a solution to my—my cash flow problem because if I could have turned that—those pigs into this barbecue, I knew I had outlets even if the people here didn't want them because I knew I had people on the circuit that I had met that wanted all that I could make, so I was in good shape, you know. I felt that I could really have—have a real thriving business.

01:06:36

So before I could get everything lined up when I—I said to the university that, well, I need to know if y'all are committed to this thing. So they gave me a five-year memorandum of understanding that they would take my business and help me market the product. They would do the interim work as far as the—the technical support on these—on these—raising these pigs getting these farmers trained, so I had it locked down and getting ready to blast off, you know. And lo and behold the bank called my note due. Craziest thing you ever want to see—called my note due. And so I said, “Wait, you guys can't be serious.” They said, “Yes, we are.” My note was about \$700,000 and called it due. And I says, “Well,” you know, “give me a little time,” I said, “because I got something working and,” I says, you know, “I'll go refinance it out, if anything else.” So I went and contacted another bank, and I had brought them to the—to the—the press conference and they saw my—my business plan and they were very interested in taking it over and so forth and—and so before I could get that done, the bank went in and actually initiated foreclosure procedures and literally in twenty-nine days they had sold my property and

got me out the door. And—unheard of. And so—and then when they did that move, then a week later here come the State Revenue people saying, “Mr. Mitchell, we’re going to charge you.” I said, “You’re going to charge me?” “Yes, we’re going to charge you.” I said, “Charge you—” I said, “Charge me with what?” And they said, “We’re going to charge you with embezzling.” “Embezzling? **[Emphasis Added]** **[Laughs]** Well embezzling what?” “We going to charge you with embezzling sales tax money.” **[01:08:52]** I said, “You—you’re joking aren't you? You—you can't be serious.” “No, we’re not. We’re serious. We’re going to give you three days to get you an attorney, and they want you to come to Raleigh and—and,” you know, “and have an arraignment.” I just—I was just totally breathless—just stunned.

Now in less than thirty days after my press conference, I had my business closed and was being charged with embezzling. And the word *embezzling*, you know, giving the connotation that I’ve been stealing something from somebody, I mean—and then I—they brought—had me come to Raleigh, charged me, put me on the state television and embezzling and all this stuff and just tried to just demoralize my character. But you know what? I’m a spiritual guy. And greater than He that’s in me than He that’s in the world; I knew right then and there that it was something going on here that weren’t right. And I knew my day would come. So I went through the procedures and finally, I hired attorneys. I went and paid the taxes that they said that I owed, so they had to breakdown the—the charge of embezzling and charge me with tax evasion. And the whole process of this thing was nothing but an orchestrated effort because I had become a viable spokesman of one product over the other. And you know that really galled me very badly. And I guess they thought I was going to go away and just hide and just die. But they didn’t know who I was. And they didn’t know that I would not let you determine who I am because I know who I am—nobody will do that to me. So I just continued to pray and family members continued to

pray. And my mother is a very spiritual person. I believe in her salvation, and she continued to pray, and she's living today, by the way. And so we were able to weather the storm. And things began to happen.

01:11:50

The first thing happened was that the—the bank [*Cell Phone Rings*]. No, I'm not getting it. The first thing that happened was the bank [*Sighs*] was found—we had a trial and the first thing that happened is the bank was found to have—after we went through the hearing the bank was—was found to have had dirty hands in their dealings. We had—we had a—we went through three levels, you know. The foreclosure procedure was challenged on the lower level with the Clerk of Courts, and he found that they were in violation in the way that they tried to foreclose me down because I had an investor that—that had a first mortgage on the property and—and the bank was—in our early beginning, the bank was going to give me a loan to wipe him out, and they never did do that because they were going to come back and do that—refinance the thing and that never happened. So his loan—his—his note was still there, so that was the first thing. And they knew that when they went and—and literally ran through the stoplights, just blew the stoplight to close me down. They knew when they checked all this stuff—they knew that but it was my belief that in August they—*Gourmet Magazine* was coming out with this huge article that John T. Edge wrote on redesigning the pig. Because you got to understand now, from March on through this process of 2004, Ed Mitchell became a strong advocate of the free-range pig, and this is what I was going to do. And then this article was coming—coming out in—in August so I kind of felt, you know, that here is something somebody felt that we needed to try to slow this down; we need to, you know, kill the horses in this race. We need to do something to try to distort you know this—this movement that's going on—as it relates to North Carolina, anyway.

01:13:46

So John called me when he heard about the charges and everything, and I explained it to him. And then he called *Gourmet*, and the people called me, and I told him they can check my record. I—I have never been in any trouble, you know—speeding tickets here, there, a few—few minor things but I ain't—I'm not—I'm you know—that's—that's not who I am. Now this thing about taxes was really a joke because you know had I—had—had they—they never came and asked me for the money because, if they asked me for the money, I could have paid them. But they didn't want to do that; they wanted to charge me.

And so that happened, but at the end of the day I ended up paying them and then they had to end up reducing the charges, but not before they smeared me across the front page of most papers and also in the—also in the—on TV and all of that stuff. But again, I stand for who I am; I don't—I don't have to hide because I don't—I don't do any—I don't have to hide because I know my integrity speaks for itself. So I began to fight this battle and, as I said earlier, the first sign that—that—that the Good Lord was with me was when the Clerk of Court ruled that they did not have the right to go in there and close me down like that, unless they took care of the note that was out there that my investor had. And my investor went over to pay, you know, for them not to do that—to pay the \$700—and they wouldn't take his money. So when I got to Court, they wanted to know, well, what—exactly what was being—you got a guy that's got the money and has offered to pay it, and you wouldn't take the money; what was this all about, you know? And that's when they were found to have unclean hands. And that has been recorded as official documentation by a Superior Court Judge, and it's up there.

01:15:52

The second thing is, you don't find the state folks going after sales tax all that much; what they were saying was like, okay, that I didn't send it in, and I was behind. Well you might

as well go lock up everybody else because, you know, if—if it's due on the twenty-fifth, and you wait until the first of the next month to send the money in for the twenty-fifth, which a lot of people do, then they have embezzled, you know. So it was bogus thing altogether, but it's okay, you know. I've gotten through it now, and it's no big deal, so enough of that.

But the thing now is—where we are now is that we've gone to court three times, and we have won all three times and now the—the last appeal that they did is in litigation now, as it relates to the restaurant here. So what Ed Mitchell decided to do, well, you know, I'll put that on the back burner and keep moving forward. So this is where I am up-to-date. So now I have gotten involved with a partner, who is going to open up a restaurant with me in Raleigh. And I continue to stay and pursue my idea of getting an opportunity for the little guy to get back into the game of raising pigs and develop a market for him all across this country because it's important that the little farmer still has something to do in order to—to stay in existence because that's the backbone of our country. **[01:17:38]** And it doesn't make any difference whether—whether he's in Mississippi, whether he's in South Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia—where—Pennsylvania—wherever he is, okay. What I—what I come up with is that, okay, since everybody in every area you name is crazy about barbecue, let's create a market of these pigs, especially for barbecue pigs, especially for barbecue. And let these little guys raise them, you know. So we—so now we got—we got us a plot. It's like the pied piper here. Okay, yeah, they can't raise but about 250, depending upon the land space that they have. But my God, you put 200 or 300 of them together and multiply that by 500, what they can possibly raise, you got a strong supply of products. And so I've gotten what I call a 2008 version of the little guy now, who have had sentiments about my plan and got involved with me, to try to make this happen, and that's exciting for me.

01:18:49

I've gotten a company that was once I reminded him that they was once a little farmer, and the person that's running the operation now is about a fifth—sixth generation of the family that owned the farm, and he understands and they understand that okay, he may be the newer version, but his granddad was the old version. And even though they were able to evolve themselves as time went on to get to this large commercial operation that they are now, they once had to start out back here and that you know—now, because of the demand of high-quality pork, this little guy over here he won't even scratch the surface, as far as interfering with what you are doing, you know. So there are sentiments now to begin to move to that thought process, and so that's what we're working on now.

And then John T. was able to put me in contact with some good people, and I had a conversation to talk with them—the Jim and Nick's Bar-B-Q, and I'm talking to Nick [Pihakis] and Nick is adamant about converting his whole operation into buying these products—these pigs—once we get them into play.

So that's what we're working on right now, so you came at a time whereas two things exciting is happening for me—is that I've gone on, I've—the Lord has allowed me to prove my position as it relates to what happened to me because we won three times in court, so we put that on the back-burner and let it work itself out. But now we're—we're moving to bigger and better things that's also—that is evolving around that old—my old restaurant. We're going to open up a restaurant in Raleigh—downtown Raleigh—and it's my understanding we're going to call it The Pit. And then I'm going to be the Master Chef there, and it's going to be the Mecca of all barbecue operations when you come to Raleigh. I've gotten a gentleman by the name of—of Greg Hatem, who is the—the developer for downtown Raleigh and all of what's going on now,

and he is adamant about restoring things. We got a nice building there, and so I'm excited about that.

01:21:25

And then we have the Bunton Farm, Pine Ridge Farm, who is involved with me and going back now and putting an infrastructure into—so we can put a protocol in to begin raising free range pigs and utilizing farmers all across the country; so that's exciting for me. And that's just about all that I can say about Ed Mitchell. *[Laughs]*

01:21:51

AE: Well, I'm telling you, you didn't say much.

01:21:54

EM: Yeah, that's—that's about the game.

01:21:59

AE: Well I have a few questions floating around in my head, and the first one after all that is—is to ask you if you hope or foresee opening a restaurant here in Wilson again.

01:22:10

EM: Oh, yeah. Yeah, we—we feel very strongly that the existing restaurant will come back to us. As a matter of fact, we had planned to use that as a training facility—a culinary school—and I was going—I'm going to cater out of that. And, you know, this is my home, so I will never leave Wilson. We plan to use that facility for the headquarters and move forward with the other ventures that we're doing, yes.

01:22:40

AE: So what has it meant these past few years not to have your—your business in operation here and for your—your customers to not have your barbecue?

01:22:49

EM: Well it was sort of sad in—in the beginning because I feel, you know, that before I really began to look at it differently and understood the divine intervention of this my—my grandmom used to say to me a lot of times, “Just because sometimes life deals you a lemon, you have to take it and you make lemonade out of it.” I saw this as an opportunity to work and refine my idea about what I wanted to do. I used that time, you know, to really put that—a lot of thought into what I was doing and wanted to do and was able to get it to the point where I am now. So it has been a plus for me, really, you know, and now I’m able to come back and—because I have been catering a little bit for special events. I’ve still be involved with going up every year and doing the Big Apple [Barbecue] Block Party, so people have still been able to get some of my barbecue. I just have not been able to have a location where the—the guy walking the street or whatever—the walk-in and buy. But if you wanted some barbecue and you had a special event, I would cater it for you, and I’ve been doing that.

01:24:06

AE: Well and let’s talk, too, about your restaurant when you were open and your pig picking’ bar that you had there.

01:24:12

EM: Yeah, that was a brainstorm that I had there—what I call a pig bar and what I—the way I came over that idea was there’s several parts there on the pig that—that maybe are not fancied by

everyone so we developed this bar sort of like an oyster bar or a seafood bar, where you've got all different kinds of seafood. So we will create this pig bar, so that when you come to the pig bar, if you are one of these guys or one of these ladies that weren't a finicky eater, right, then you have an opportunity to taste some of our delicacies like chitterlings and pig feet and pig ears and pig tails and snouts and things like that, as well as some of the barbecue and whatever. So that gave you a chance to sort of indulge yourself, so to say, in things, you know, that—parts of the animal that you did not sort of see them as being offensive. And that also allowed me not to display them on the regular bar—food bar—for people that might have found them offensive, so I sort of found a common ground for both worlds.

01:25:37

AE: And now that—you just—as—as an idea that is a great marketing tool, but was it also something that made you really popular that people would seek you out because of that?

01:25:45

EM: Yeah, you know, because you got people that—that really got a—classmate of mine who is a famous Superior Court Judge, Milton F. Toby Fitch, who is also the captain of our football team, huge guy about 350 pounds and he loves some chitterlings, see. So it gave people like him an opportunity, who, let's say, he wasn't a finicky eater who had an opportunity to, you know—to come and sit down at that bar and—and just get what he wants—souse meat—so we just—we just had a variety of things, and it was a great hit for the Chefs Tour. Tony [Anthony] Bourdain came by and, quite frankly, that was an experience, too, because I really didn't know who he was when they—when he sought me out and said he wanted to come. And—and the business was new, too, and—and I didn't really understand candidly speaking that Tony was—so I ran a real

daring risk then. I think that might have put me over the top as people sort of really giving me validation that maybe—maybe I can do some of the things that a lot of people say that I can do because everyone knows that Tony is a staunch critic of—if it ain't good, he ain't going—that's why, I guess, you sign those waivers: “If ain't good, I'm going to say what it is, and that's it and you've got to accept it whatever—.” I watched that show [*No Reservations*], and I've seen him crush some people, so I really didn't—really—I watched it after the fact, but if I had known—if I had watched it before he came, I don't know whether or not I'd had him to come, quite frankly.

Yeah. [*Laughs*]

01:27:37

AE: So I wonder, too, when you—your business first started going and you were selling barbecue out of your parents' little grocery store, what was the barbecue scene elsewhere in Wilson like at that time?

01:27:50

EM: In the beginning, all the barbecue houses from the very beginning at one point was cooking that old-fashioned way, and everybody evolved into the more commercial methods of cooking because of the demand and—and the barbecue scene here is still strong. People just like barbecue; we got two strong barbecue producers here. We've got Parker's Barbecue, which is a traditional—and as well as Bill—Bill Ellis is a barbecue tradition; he's a spin-off of Parker's. I think he worked at Parker's for years before he went in the business independently, so they produce good barbecue. Yeah, they—they produce a good product. So again, it just depends on your style. What I mean by your style, I mean what are the sides that you offer, the techniques that you use to cook, and your ambitions. Are you—do you want a large operation or do you just

want to cook some and perfect it to the best of your ability and let those come and get it, and when it's gone it's gone. And of course we—we diversified a little bit because not only did we cook barbecue, we cooked ribs, you know, and we cooked barbecued chicken off the grill, and we cooked barbecue pork chops. So we had cut out our own market, a niche so to say, that was different from the regular barbecue operations that's in town now.

01:29:28

AE: And so I'm curious, then, with your talk about the—your family tradition that goes back more than—than 150 years with doing barbecue and the history and tradition of North Carolina barbecue and it kind of was popularized—some people, you know, are of the opinion that it was popularized by, you know, politics in North Carolina and the tent barbecues at the courthouse and that kind of thing and more of a white community bringing barbecue to the floor in North Carolina. And—and I wonder where what you consider your barbecue, if your barbecue is Eastern North Carolina barbecue or is it African American barbecue or is simply Ed Mitchell barbecue?

01:30:06

EM: Okay, let me approach that from, first, what I feel are the basics, and then from the basics we'll work up. Let's be very candid here; history tells us it is what it is. Most of the opportunity for African Americans in any area of the South, and I don't care where it is—South Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee, North Carolina, whatever—most of their jobs were filled in areas of domestic areas, either housekeeping, either field hands, or either people that worked in kitchens and did cooking. I mean they were the labor force. Now we didn't do a whole lot of organization, operational part of running the thing, but we did the laboring part and producing and perfecting

the thing. And so like I said before, it is what it is. So we brought something to the table and, of course, the—the white politicians brought something to the table. And, in my opinion, that happened to be if—if you were popular in running for an office, okay, and you were a large farmer or a plantation owner or whatever, your—your people prepared the product. And you threw the—you threw the feast. I mean you threw the event. So you were focused as the focusing person responsible for the event but you did not—I guarantee you—physically go back and do all of the labor intense. You orchestrated it, okay. Now the fact that Ed Mitchell happens to be an African American—so I can't take any claim outside of what history tells us. Okay, I had a lot of relatives and folks that worked behind-the-scenes in most of a lot of these well-known restaurants—barbecue restaurants—in the South and—and they were who they were because it was the lifestyle. So, you know, you go back and look at the—I always use the movie *Gone with the Wind* as an example, when they had this big shindig and everybody, you know, was dancing and—and dressed up and looking real pretty and everything with beautiful full-length dresses and the gentlemen, the Southern gentleman was in his flair that—that obviously told you that they didn't do any preparations of what that event stood for. Then you actually had a chance to get a glimpse of who actually did those kinds of things but that—that, to me, is nothing negative. That just to me was just the way things were; I mean it was the lifestyle. And I like to use the cliché it is what it is; you can't go back and change what it was factually now, as it relates to what it was then, if you want to get the true history of anything. It's no more than—than we can—can place claims against pasta, spaghetti, you know, where did it come from? It certainly didn't come from the—our Southern American heritage, you know. It's an Italian dish. And there are other dishes, okay, that sort of have ethnic heritage. So I just like to just—to be true—true to the cause, you know, and—and let it—let it stand for what it stands for. And it shouldn't

be any shame in the game, so they say, because that's what it was and that's what it is now.

[Phone Rings]

01:34:32

We didn't have—African Americans didn't have the management skills—a lot of them I should say—some of them—didn't have the management skills to—I like to say have the—handle the same paint job to run the operation. That is, the—the guy back there in the back that actually got down in the trenches that did the cooking and the—fixing and mixing the barbecue. You know when he went up front he—he changed to someone else, to actually manage and ran day-to-day operations, keeping up with the books, you know, that kind of thing. He—he wasn't skillful to do that part of it. And neither, basically, was the person that ran the management and operations part—care to do what was being done in the manual situation. So it is what it is.

01:35:31

AE: Well do you feel that you're carrying on a tradition of your family's tradition of cooking whole hogs and also a regional tradition of cooking whole hogs?

01:35:39

EM: Most certainly. I feel I'm carrying a tradition of how it started and a tradition of how lifestyles was accepted, and it was a good life. And again it's—it's authenticity; I mean I—I can't—if I did anything any different, I would be masquerading something that was not how it was; I wouldn't—I wouldn't be replicating as close to what I—what it was as—as it should be. That's why I'm saying, to me—and again I found out that I have to pick my words and be very, very skillful and choice(ful) of my words when I say what—things that I do say because barbecue now has—everyone wants to place claims on it and who did what and when, and so we

let everybody just draw their own conclusions. But again, I gave you the best illustration that I could when I gave you how did it all start. We didn't start cooking ribs; nobody went in there and got the raw ribs out of the pig and started cooking it and said barbecue. No one really went in there and—and got the shoulder off of the animal and threw the rest of them away and said barbecue. No, they cooked the whole animal when the process started, so that is—that's how it originated.

01:37:18

Now again, if it's a comfort zone for you to take a part of him and specialize in it, then I'm not going to say that that's not barbecue because it's part of the animal, and you're barbecuing that part, okay. But if you look at it in its totality, then you can define—you can draw your own conclusions as to what you think it means.

01:37:48

AE: Well, and speaking of that tradition, can you tell the story of the mural that's on your building that one of your employees did?

01:37:54

EM: Yeah. Again, what I've done is I captured the true essence of how barbecue and the lifestyle was when I was coming up, and it was synonymous to tobacco. Okay, tobacco was the cash crop in North Carolina. Wilson has been designated as the barbecue capital of the world. I mean, we had the industry; the economy was booming with several large tobacco houses that farmers brought their tobacco to market from all around certain areas. So having said that, normally, if you had a good crop—and here's the good thing about that—the most people that worked on the farm didn't own the farm, okay, and the person that owned the farm needed the

people to work on the farm. But there was a common bond there that we all felt that if we didn't put out—forth our best efforts that we all were going to lose. Because if the farmer—if the owner of the farm didn't have a good crop, okay, then certainly, we couldn't get paid. And when I say *we*, *we* is the African Americans that worked on farms and the—the—the people that worked on farms knew that when it was time to harvest a crop they best got it in on schedule, you know, and put forth efforts, long intensive hours if it need be, to get that crop in before whatever set in—bad weather or whatever—to make sure that it was secured because it was—it was a bond between both farmer and—and—and laborers who happened to be black and white—most of them—needed each other. And so when it was over, then it was a celebration. The farmer would always, you know, cook a pig, you know, in celebration of that. And everybody would just rejoice because they knew then that it was harvesting time, and everybody is going to benefit. And I think the need of each other was the most important element that makes things important. I don't know whether we feel that we need each other now but again, I'm not—not bringing a lot of spiritual stuff in it but—but that has a—a true meaning as it relates to the way we're taught as it relates to our religion and our spiritual religion—just love ye one another and—because we need each other. I mean whenever one of us gets to think that we can live independently of each other as—as man, okay, I think that's how most frightening to me—scary point of our lives because it—it wasn't designed that way by the master designer so you know, you can't perfect anything that's already perfect. **[Laughs]** And again, that's—that's my two cents worth on it.

01:41:43

AE: And so that celebration time after the harvest inspired the mural?

01:41:46

EM: Yeah. Yeah, um-hmm. And—and the way of life. And I wanted to capture that, you know. I wanted to keep that. I wanted that to be—I wanted that history to always be known for generations to come, and I wanted it to be known to see how it was associated with barbecue because in that process has also took up hog killing and took up making of sausages, curing hams, and all kinds of things at that time.

01:42:15

AE: When you were coming up and you would experience the family hog roasts, did—was there like a—with your large family, was there a division of labor and kind of as you grew up you had a different role that you played?

01:42:29

EM: Okay, well now, as I earlier was talking about, my large family, most of them were uncles and aunts that I'm referring to. My immediate family, my mother, bless her soul, she decided that she did not want a large family like she came from, so she only had three boys [Ed, Aubrey, and Stevie Mitchell] and so—but I can remember when those times came that yes, different family members, relatives did different responsibilities as it relates to hog killing and things of that nature and—and duties and responsibilities. So but—but my family, my mother's kids, we didn't grow up on a farm, you know, and so we never experienced having to do that, per se. We were sort of on the tail end of—of that lifestyle, you know, and we were just products of changing of times.

01:43:44

AE: So how would you say, then, that you really learned how to cook a hog?

01:43:49

EM: Well I learned as a child, you know, from—from—from growing up and experiencing it with my grandparents but—but that was their lifestyle. Their—I mean, they lived that life, and I just experienced that life for a short period of time. And—and most of the people during that time lived that life. So I was fortunate enough to come in and live most of that life on most of my childhood life on that at the end of that era. And but I—as I got older and grown, obviously, it had faded—much faded away even—and farther than it had began to decline as a boy, you know. So but I was fortunate enough to have some of the—some of the good life, so they say.

01:44:47

AE: What do you think your grandparents would think about where you are now with barbecue?

01:44:54

EM: Again, I represent—that's—that's why it's so important to me, believe it or not, not only from my grandparents but historically. I represent so many generations of people that really—and mostly African Americans that really was involved in hard labor which—which was part of a lifestyle doing chores and doing different things as it relates to on a plantation or even on a farm, okay, that basically a lot of those duties were assigned to those people because those people were—were recruited as your labor force. So realizing that what they did then was just a way of life, and it really had no significant value, okay, until now it—it's—it's fulfilling to me because what they were doing and what they did were important. It may not have been perceived at that time as being important, but it was very important. It was their contribution to who we are as a people, and that's the exciting thing, you know. Man, I you know—now it's—it's a funny

thing; when they talk about, again, barbecuing and pig pickin' and a lot of things, now there was a different kind—just a little bit now—different kind of—of pig pickin' and barbecuing in the African American community than somewhat in the—in the white communities to some degree. And what I mean is we had a lot of things, like when the quarterly meeting at the churches—we had a lot of different items on the table that we grew up eating and consuming.

01:47:23

And there were other times when there were pig pickin's going on that you didn't have all of these things on the table. And that's why I was able to devise a—my famous pig bar because I remember having a family outing where they had everything you can name; they had pig feet and pig ears and chitterlings and sweet potato—call it candied sweets, as a lot of people call them—collard greens, and corn, and mustard greens and watermelon and everything. But—but it was very rare, okay, that we had coleslaw. Now we ate coleslaw with fish, okay. Now but as time went on, and we got involved with pig pickin's that involved a lot of white people the menu was totally different. Now the hog was there, don't get me wrong. The pig—the barbecue was there but that—that menu was made up of like Brunswick stew, coleslaw, boiled potatoes, okay—they didn't have all that other stuff that—that the African American had when he—when he threw his shindig. So you know it's—there's a lot of what I call [*Sighs*] sub-moments—sub-definitions of barbecuing that everyone has to take into consideration. But as my old Math teacher used to say, there was a common denominator that you could tie the two together and the common denominator was the pig. Okay, we—everybody had the hog, and everybody knew that there was a barbecue. And the common denominator also was the fact that it was normally introduced as part of a celebration occasion—of occasions and that has never changed even today. Functions—it doesn't make any difference what they are—birthday functions, Presidential nominations or events running for this or whatever—barbecuing is going to be done you know.

That event is going to take place and that, to me, is—is the foundation of who we are as a people and—and coming together and socializing for a common cause now, understanding that it's still transmitting that need. Because even when the politicians do it, they need the voter, and that's a means of bringing them together. It's a means of bringing folks together for whatever reason.

And so you can just again—just take your pick; I mean that's—that's what it was.

01:50:43

AE: Well bringing people together might be a good note to wind down on. Is there anything that you haven't mentioned or that I wouldn't know to ask you that you'd like to make sure people know about you and your barbecue?

01:50:57

EM: Well it's just that I'm no different than most barbecue lovers. I'm—I'm passionate about something that I love. And my mother says, you know, you have to put love in it to get love out of it. **[Laughs]** So that's a cliché. You know, if you love barbecue and you want to be one that produces it, then you have to love to produce it. Because if you don't love to produce it, and you just want to do it because it's fashionable, then you may have a problem, okay. Because that's why the old gentleman, my mentor, Mr. James Kirby, asked me when I recruited him to give me the final points of this thing and I said—he said to me—asked me several times, “Do you want to get in the barbecue business?” And I said, “Yeah,” kind of casually, “I want to get in the barbecue business.” But that wasn't a convincing enough answer for him. “Do you want to get into the barbecue business?” “Yeah, I want to get into the barbecue business.” “Well if you want to get into the barbecue business, I'll put you in the water, but it will be up to you to swim.” And that's exactly what I'm saying to everyone out here that's listening to this is that, if you want to

get into the barbecue business, you have to love the barbecue business; and it's an ongoing thing that you have to continue to put your best foot forward and perfect it. I mean you just can't leave anything out; you can't—you can't take too many shortcuts. If you take too many shortcuts, then you're taking away from what it represents and—and that's not the true meaning of the true taste or—of what it even represents of barbecue. And that's it.

01:53:02

AE: Well that brings another question to my mind is—is what do you think the future of barbecue is insofar as you're taking Wilson, North Carolina, to New York and Alabama and Texas or—you know, everybody is experiencing everybody's barbecue and people are kind of changing to meet different tastes? Do you think that barbecue, itself, will change very much in the future?

01:53:22

EM: No, I think people now can appreciate the difference of what it means as it relates to different styles of barbecue. I think they're now being able to identify based on what they're eating when they say barbecue. I think now they have a clear understanding that, if I'm in Texas and I'm saying, "I'm barbecuing," well I'm talking about, you know, maybe some sausages or some beef, you know. Or—if I'm in the eastern part of North Carolina, I'm talking about whole hog. If I'm down in Tennessee, you know, I'm talking about ribs, you know. And so now people are more educated about the meaning of barbecue and—and they're able to separate the two. What I like to make sure that I'm hammering home is—is that I'm the old keeper of the flame, and I don't want anyone to forget that you did not take sausage out of the hog and barbecue those sausages and call it barbecue; you did not take ribs out of that hog and barbecue ribs and call it

barbecue; you did not take shoulders out of that hog and call it barbecue. You first cooked the whole hog and everything derived from cooking the whole hog. So until you come down to my neck of the woods and do the whole hog, okay, then I'm like the old practitioner, okay. If you don't know a little bit about every part of the body, okay, then whether you're a doctor or not, I'll leave it to your imagination. You may be a good surgeon, but if you don't know what ails my pains and this and that, then maybe you need to learn a little bit about the whole body and how it works to be considered a doctor. So maybe you need to know about cooking the whole hog a little bit before you profess that you are a true barbecuer, you know, or a Pit Master. And back then they didn't call them Pit Master; they called them Pit Boys and the boys was synonymous for the meaning of who they were: African Americans and they weren't referred to as men; they were boys. But that's not here nor there, but I'm just putting the final touches of the true ethnical meaning of what it is. It is what it is and now I'll leave it at that.

01:56:03

AE: Do you have any young people who are wanting to apprentice under you or that you're teaching your trade?

01:56:07

EM: Yeah, you know, and that's why I am going to start this culinary school, specifically to teach that art—that—that skill of cooking the whole hog without commercial fuel—commercial fuel meaning gas, obviously. And even so to some degree charcoal because we used to burn wood in a barrel and take the wood cinders and strategically place them under the portions of the animal. So I like to—to get into that and I think I'm with people now that—that we're going to

be able to do that. I think I've partnered with some people that—that's adamant about the history and—and I think that's a good thing.

01:56:59

AE: Well thank you for the generous gift of your time today and congratulations on your upcoming opening in Raleigh.

01:57:04

EM: Thank you so kindly. It was a pleasure—always.

01:57:09

[End Ed Mitchell Interview]