Chip Stamey
Stamey's Barbecue - Greensboro, NC
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[Begin Chip Stamey — Stamey's Barbecue Interview]

00:00:01

Rien Fertel: All right; this is Rien Fertel with the Southern Foodways Alliance. I'm in Greensboro, North Carolina, continuing on the North Carolina BBQ Trail. It is the eighteenth of November, 2011, ten-thirty in the morning and I'm sitting in the dining room of Stamey's Barbecue with Mr. Chip Stamey and I'm going to have him introduce himself, please.

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Chip Stamey: Okay; I'm Chip Stamey. I am the third-generation owner of Stamey's Barbecue in Greensboro, North Carolina. I am, I guess, the President but really I'm just the cook and the dishwasher and the bill payer of this organization.

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RF: So you do a bit of everything.

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CS: Yeah; we do. **[*Laughs*]** When you're in the barbecue business you have to—you can't just stand and watch. You have to get involved.

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RF: And—and can we get your birth date for the record, please?

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CS: Sure; September 7, 1967.

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RF: And you go by Chip but you—what is your birth name?

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CS: Birth name is Charles Keith Stamey, Charles for my dad and Keith for my uncle.

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RF: Let's start there. Tell me about your father Charles. You said you were third generation so I'm guessing he was second. Tell me about his role in Stamey's Barbecue.

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CS: Well he—he did it most all his life. He grew up in Lexington. **[Aside: I do feel uncomfortable.]** He grew up in Lexington in—in his grandfather's business. He back in those days, you know, it was a smaller place on—it actually was Greensboro Avenue in downtown Lexington and their building is still there but it's not an operating restaurant. He would come in junior high and high school, he'd leave at lunchtime to work lunch in between school. He had a lot of opportunity to work back then.

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And back in those days barbecue restaurants stayed open late, so he worked many late nights, too for his grand—for his father Warner Stamey.

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RF: Why would—you just said that barbecue restaurants used to stay open later. Why was that?

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CS: I think mainly just because it was the only restaurant in town. It wasn't, you know, in those times there wasn't a restaurant on every corner. All you really had was there was a few road diner-type places. There was barbecue restaurants and especially in Lexington, which we were from, barbecues were even temporary establishments where they only served barbecue on the days that court were in session and because Lexington is the county seat of Davidson County.

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And so the early barbecuers were only barbecuing on days where the—more people were being around town because it was a small place and I guess they just—they did it temporarily. And then it evolved out of those tents. I have some pictures you can see—into covered tents and then they eventually put wood floors over the dirt and then they eventually went out into restaurants and grew from there.

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RF: Okay; and let's—let's—you're bringing us back a generation earlier, so let's talk about your grandfather, Mr. Warner Stamey. Tell me about his history, where he grew up.

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CS: Well, he was born in Cleveland County which is—the county seat is Shelby in a town called Lawndale and, which is just a tiny little place, you know, born in the—born in his house there like everybody was. He came—he was in a very large family. He had a lot of brothers and sisters

and he was the youngest. And so what his story essentially was that he—by the time he had got to high school age his parents both had passed because they were, you know, up in age. And so he was living with his sisters and sort of passed along between his sisters who were more like aunts. And one of his aunts or really sisters, older sisters lived in Lexington. And so I think, you know—I don't know exactly when but his junior year or—of high school or probably sophomore year he was in Lexington for that year and went to school in Lexington and he worked. And he worked in a barbecue—not a restaurant, because it wasn't, but he worked for a fellow named Jess Swicegood. And he essentially just did, you know, what you do, you know, did all the work of barbecue and—and got a taste for it.

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Now of course that was in the early—the late '20s and so when he—right in the middle of the Depression and so when he—he actually only did that for a little while and then he went back to Shelby to live. And then he had to decide, you know—he didn't go to college because people didn't do that and he had to have a job and there was no job, so he had to create his own. So he decided to bring to Shelby what he had learned in Lexington.

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And, you know, there's stories in our family; he essentially did the same thing. He went near the Courthouse Square. He built him a temporary food establishment is what we call it now. He would cook in the—you know, early in the morning and serve for lunch. He had to give it away, you know, at first, so people would even know what it was. And he built this—built a following and saved some money and I think in about seven years time he eventually decided to go back to Lexington. He had married his wife, my grandmother—

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RF: What was her name?

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CS: Her name was Linda Bridges Stamey and so they decided to go back to Lexington and then he actually took—the story goes, he took 300 dollars and bought the restaurant of Mr. Swicegood and the rest is history, right, so—.

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RF: Tell me what year was your grandfather born?

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CS: Uh, you know, I need to—I really don't know the answer to that. I've got to think about that. He was in his twenties so, you know, that would be in 19—early 1900s, 1910. I could—I could figure that out but I don't know exactly.

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My grandmother was—it's a shame she's not alive because she used to—she remembers all—I mean not just his birthday but, I mean, she knows barbecue up and down when—. She was a great resource. Too bad we didn't get to talk to her.

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But she—he went back to Lexington to work but then actually he sort of spawned off the people in Shelby because when he left he had a going business that his brother-in-law Austin Bridges, he went from there and then another fellow who still—well not, he's not around but the

—another business, Red Bridges Barbecue was a fellow who worked for him when he was in Shelby.

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RF: And so what year did your grandfather open his own establishment?

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CS: Nineteen thirty; it's even numbers, so.

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RF: So you're celebrating how many years now?

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CS: Well, I guess that's eighty-one years. We don't even—we don't know the exact month so we just—we—we actually act like it's his birthday.

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RF: Oh, okay.

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CS: It works for us and his birthday was July 12th. I know the day of it but I cannot think of the year of it. I'll find that out but it'll be too late when we talk about it.

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RF: And did both of your grandparents pass away before you were born and knew them?

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CS: My grandfather died early. He—he—when I was four; my grandmother was around much longer and, yeah, there's a lot of history there. I mean of course we went through a World War then and he was thirty-some and drafted, and my grandmother actually ran the business while he was gone for many years. And so she was a tough old lady. And she was a barbecue lady. And there's not many of them.

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RF: Tell me where—I'm interested in this; where was your grandfather stationed or where—during the War?

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CS: I believe that he—you know, he moved around but I believe he was in Italy some and I haven't heard the whole story on that. But he—I don't think he actually saw any like front-line duty but—because when you were thirty they didn't make you do that. But he did have to go, so —.

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RF: And did your grandmother, do you remember her telling any stories or have any stories passed down about those years when she ran the restaurant?

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CS: She never was specifically talking about it but she—I think those were hard times really because she also had young kids at the same time and I think it—it was a big formative time for her and—and, you know, she was always very good with running—running the household as much as running anything she did. She was a very—influence in all of our lives, yeah; she was good.

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RF: And what kinds of stories have your father and uncle and other people told you about your grandfather?

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CS: You know what's funny? He gets a lot of press for being the entrepreneur of barbecue and he really I guess—the stories I hear aren't as much from—I mean, I've heard some from my dad and from my uncle when he was alive, but we—we don't spend a lot of times around the fire talking about stuff like that. I think he was a very motivated folk. You know, he actually liked to just experiment and do different things. Barbecue was a vehicle of like I said, you know, he needed a job and so that's sort of like something he just got into. I don't—I don't think anybody —it wasn't romantic, you know. It was just like, "Hey, we're going to—this is some way I think I can do something."

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He was always trying to make it better; you know, he was—there's a story of right when he got back to Lexington into this, you know, newly purchased business he, the owner, the old

owner still was around some. And they were used to doing things, you know, the way they did it and, you know, they had a cigar box to stick the money in and that was as high-tech as it went.

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So my, you know, young entrepreneur Stamey decides he's going to have, you know, a written check. And before it was like they got to the register or came up to the front and said, "I had a sandwich and a Pepsi-Cola." "That will be whatever," you know, "thirty-cents." **[*Laughs*]** That's probably what it was. And he decided to keep some tracks, keep some numbers, you know. Of course the—he didn't—the old owner didn't like the idea of that and I think he was used to just, you know, putting it in his pocket at the end of the day. So essentially my grandfather decided to pay him not to work and—

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RF: That's Mr. Swicegood?

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CS: Mr. Swicegood, so—so he eventually, you know, retired early and my grandfather took on **[*Laughs*]** from that. But he did many things; he, you know, he tried another—he had actually another restaurant for instance, right near his other restaurant and it was called the Snack Shop and it was really popular. And it was, you know, make pimento cheese sandwiches and hamburgers and even a lot of certain things that are in barbecues now came out of that experiment. He had a lady that worked for him named Miss Dell Yarborough. She's sort of credited with making the slaw like we make it. Our slaw is unique in that it doesn't have

mayonnaise in it. It's a red-based, ketchup-based slaw. So he—you know, some of his enterprises have done that.

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He also, you know, that was—you got toward '45 or '50s that was like the diner craze. You know, everybody—the drive-in type time and so a lot of places had ice-cream or ice-cream machines and so he decided to—he wanted one of those machines but instead of just buying one he became the rep for ice-cream machines and in addition to being a restaurant guy he would go around and sell them—those machines to other people probably just so he could buy it for less money, you know. I don't know how many machines he actually sold **[*Laughs*]**, but that's just the kind of guy he was. He was also—he was also a little developer in his own little way. He'd—he was a great conversationalist. He would talk to people. He would hear about this piece of property. He would go buy it, you know, in another city with the idea of opening a restaurant and he was always moving and thinking.

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That was true in the restaurant; you know, he—I talked about the checks. He was always working towards making the process in a restaurant more streamlined, more efficient. You know, I think he—a lot of little things that people just do in—in the barbecue way now, were sort of—were some things that he thought of, you know—always with his employees. I mean it's not like he came up with all this on his own but it was a collaborative effort where they were just, "Hey, why don't we do it this way?" We're not—we don't just stand around, "Hey, do it the same way every day." We try to evolve and make things better all the time and I think he—that's the spirit that he gave us.

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Again I was four when he died, so I can just barely remember him. But I do remember hearing stories about him. And he—I think he maybe was a little manic depressive and so in his life he went through high periods and low periods. I mean there might be a time when he'd sit in the chair at home and couldn't even get up and go to work and other times, you know, he'd come back and say he bought a hotel. You know, like, **[*Laughs*]** so that would be—there's some stories like that too. And I think they're all true.

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RF: So he was a great entrepreneur. Did—do you think this came from his time when he was young working for Mr. Swicegood or was—what did his parents do? Do you know that?

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CS: I really—they were farmers and—and workers. They—the story there which I'm not real versed on but his—his mother died real young. I think she was actually injured in like a stove in her house burnt and not killed but, you know, maimed and so that was her fate, and then I believe, you know, his dad didn't last much longer after that. And so I think that was a time—you've heard the stories; I mean essentially the—it's no one was giving you anything. If you were going to get it you had to go make it happen. And so he was making it happen. **[*Laughs*]** And that's—and barbecue was the vehicle for that. Again just because—just because of his working when he was in high school that was one of the things he learned; that's where he learned the trade and then he just took it from there.

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RF: And so he opened up Stamey's Barbecue in 1930 in Lexington and then he had another place called the—

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CS: Well, actually 1930; I'm sorry 1930 is when he opened in Shelby. His very first place was in Shelby. He came back after he made a little bit of money, you know, a little bit I mean 300 bucks, which wasn't—I mean it wasn't nothing to sneeze at but it was not—it wasn't the Vanderbilt either. And he came back to Lexington and went from there, so—.

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RF: And what year did he move to Lexington?

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CS: That was I think 1937.

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RF: Okay; so '37 in Lexington and then he—in Lexington he also had a place called the Snack Shop.

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CS: Snack Shop and I don't know the—I don't know the times on that but that's probably around—that was more '40s and '50s.

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RF: And as I understand there have been other locations in Lexington.

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CS: Right.

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RF: When did—did he open those or did your father?

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CS: My father never—it was all my grandfather in Lexington. He had a—there was a downtown Stamey's Barbecue and then that sort of evolved and got—you know, they added onto it and built pits and did different things. Then he—south of town he owned another barbecue place and then he built another place called the Old Hickory Barbecue. And it was more—it—more of his ideas of doing—he had a to-go counter, he had the ice-cream, milk shakes, things like that, things he had done—ideas to change things, again giving it a different name. It was his totally. And then there's a whole history of that but, you know, the people who had worked there or worked at his —are sort of the people in Lexington that now exist today. But, you know, need to talk to my dad for those. I'm not going to make it up.

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But so, he did some of that and then he had—he—there's another—that's another city that's on the way sort of to Greensboro called High Point sort of the furniture capital of the United States. He had a—land there and built a restaurant there. He called that Stamey's Junior and it was more again sort of moving towards not fast-food but—but a different way of having a

barbecue place, which is really more like what it is now, you know, where barbecues now are a lot take-out and a lot of sit-down, most of them. And our business is like that. We're probably fifty-percent to-go and fifty-percent eating in. And that's—that's an offshoot of sort of his—some of his early ideas and my dad's ideas really.

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My dad is probably, I mean he worked the business I don't—you know, thirty-three years or so. And he—he just took a lot of the things he learned from his father, but I think he's been more apt to take things away than to put things in understanding, you know—keeping it simple and you can do a better job if you do less things. And then so that's sort of the mantra of Stamey's now.

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RF: What has your dad tried to—or what did he try to take away?

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CS: Well, like we don't—you know, they used to do, all drive-ins had to have like ice-cream sundaes and, you know, they had everything. They had the cherries and the nuts and the, you know—so that's gone because that just slows you down. You know, if he had his way he wouldn't have desserts. But he didn't always get his way, you know. We—we always make—customers get to win out sometimes. But the evolvement of that he did that; we used to—at one time back in those days they had hamburgers. They called them Bread Burgers and what a Bread Burger was—it had chili on it, had slaw on it, and they would mix bread with the meat, really just to make it go farther and it was very expensive. And they would cook them ahead and leave

them in the steam table. So that was something that he took—you know, we—we got out of the hamburger business because, you know, we saw McDonald's and we didn't—we didn't need to be selling—we needed to get onto the thing that focused, you know, and that's—he was really good about—and still today when we talk, you know, it's like he keeps me grounded. When I decide I want to start doing something extra then he says, "Well," you know, "Why?" **[*Laughs*]** And so we—we say that and then we don't do it **[*Laughs*]** right.

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RF: Well, let me ask you—I want to ask about that. There's a—you roast your own coffee here which is really interesting.

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CS: Right.

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RF: What did he say about that?

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CS: Well, he likes coffee. **[*Laughs*]** Yeah; my dad—you know, I don't know, just because we like drinking it but I get it honest from him. I don't know; my grandfather must have liked—everybody drank coffee at one time. But, you know, coffee was something you drank. No one thought about how it was made in any way and there was not any quality situations. But through our whole history we've always bought the best coffee that you could get and—and in my dad's

reign that was like we called it "hotel coffee." But there were different roasters and they always were affiliated with big hotels because big hotels had big restaurants in them and they needed their own coffee. So we would always buy the best we could get. You know, there were no micro-roasters or they were the roasters of the day. And so he did that and we would—we got it honest where he would—you know, if you're working here and you got to—and you're here all day you sort of just always have a coffee cup in your hand if you're not, you know, working. So—so I got that honest from him and then so it just came along that I could get these roasting machines.

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I sort of thought that it marries well with the way we cook. In other words, we're taking—we're taking pork shoulders. We're cooking them ten hours over hardwood coals. You know, why—why not roast coffee? It's we're roasting pork; we can roast coffee. **[*Laughs*]** I don't know anybody else that's doing it but I'm—I'm getting better at it and I—I think if this doesn't work out maybe we can go in the coffee business. **[*Laughs*]**

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RF: I think this is working out.

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CS: I hope so.

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RF: Tell me when did the move to Greensboro occur?

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CS: My grandfather was involved in that—in that he had—I told you bought a place in High Point and started it. He actually bought the land in High Point and actually didn't start it but he had bought this land in Greensboro on High Point Road right across from the Fair Grounds. Right now we're right across from the Greensboro Coliseum, which is the big entertainment complex. Back then it was a field where the Fair came to town, you know, twice a year.

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And so there were streets—there were houses up and down the street. It was outside of—this is outside of town. This was not in the city limits of Greensboro even though you can—you could throw a Frisbee maybe and hit downtown from here if you were really, really strong. And he—he came over here and he started it and it was sort of—that was the '50s and that was the drive-in era, so it was a barbecue restaurant but with car-hop service. They didn't have drive-thrus but the new—they called them service phones and it was like a big bank of—you could essentially stand inside and you could take the orders of the people in the cars through a speaker system, again sort of a technology thing that he, you know—a new way to serve more people and to go fast and to—and to do a good business. And my grandfather, again, and my dad was involved in that.

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So it was going maybe just a few years and then my dad was in the Navy because everybody had to serve. That was the Cold War really and so everybody had to do service then. And he was into that and did his two and a half years and then he's back and he actually moved to Greensboro to run the place here, so he—he—the very early years were all my dad here but not the very first days here in Greensboro. But he—he—we had places in Lexington and in

Greensboro at the time but then through—I don't know the timing but eventually we either—the history of how we worked—many times we've opened restaurants and ran them. A lot of times we were ready to stop and we would sell the restaurant or the business to the—a manager that was working there.

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And so that's sort of how the pied piper aspect of it came just because people were working in our restaurants and learning and knowing and they just went on out on their own to do it.

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RF: And—and your grandfather lived out his years in Lexington?

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CS: He did. He did. Their house was always there. My—my grandmother eventually moved to Greensboro in—the very last year of life—life. He ended up dying of throat cancer—was in Greensboro just because my family was here and to look after him.

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RF: And so where did you grow up?

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CS: I grew up in Greensboro. I was the only one in my whole family; I have two sisters, older sisters. They both were born in Lexington. But I was born in Greensboro and so I spent a lot of time in Lexington visiting my grandparents or grandmother. My—my mother's side is—is—

they're both Lexington families. My grandfather was a furniture maker and so we—we'd go over there a lot and he—he was there the whole time. But then my—my grandmother eventually moved over into Greensboro. And actually, you know, even I remember—I have memories of she would come in at lunch and work the cash register, you know, for a couple hours for many years. And she was always—and when she wasn't doing that she was here watching things, you know, sitting down and eating a barbecue sandwich and keeping an eye on things.

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RF: And did you—did you grow up in this restaurant at High Point?

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CS: I did; you know, you start out—there's—at least in our business and I'm sure it's like that in other businesses, you start out picking up trash in the parking lot and you might graduate to mowing the grass. I did, you know—it wasn't—we would do more of that thing, you know, our kids would do more of those things than we would get in the restaurant.

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My dad having to work, you know, at lunch during—during the—during school times never—he—he wanted me to have it better, so I didn't have to work—I worked after school though. I didn't have to work during school. So probably right around twelve is when you start and doing those kinds of odd jobs in the summer and then during the time off from school. When I got to sixteen you want to get a car and you want to drive, you know. You know, no one is going to give you a car; no one is going to buy you gas, so that's when you start working in the kitchen. And that's what I did, so I—I worked actually at our other store. It's on Battleground

Avenue throughout high school and then, you know, didn't work in college because I wasn't in town in college. And then I moved on to working in the corporate world for a little while and in the computer industry and then the opportunity came up to come back in the restaurant and here I am. In '97 I believe is when I started.

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RF: And did your father ask you; how did that come about?

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CS: He did—he did ask me; you know, he's working it of course. That was at the end of his reign and he had a manager actually who was going to go out on his own. And he—he was going to have to hire somebody and so he's like, "Well, I'm going to hire somebody else or you can come in and work it." And so then at that point it was my uncle, really, and my dad were partners in the business, and so I came to work with those guys.

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RF: And what kind of—I'm guessing some of the employees, you know, came over right and what kind of boss was your father and your uncle? You described them as, you know, they wanted to keep things simple and pare things down but what kind of managers were they?

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CS: Oh yeah; well they expected a lot of their employees but they were very fair, very, you know, they always—the people you talk to that—that worked for them were very positive about

them. My uncle was more of—he was more the business end. He—when he was in the Army he was like in the Human Resources or something so he—he actually probably was responsible for me getting into the computers. We probably were the only barbecue in the '70s that we had computers before there were personal computers. And he would—he would always run the office in a tip-top fashion. My dad was operations; you know, he was hands-on. I mean when the—when the cooks didn't show up, you know, he was cooking. When—when the dishwasher didn't show up he was dish-washing. When—when the meat chopper wasn't here he was chopping. You know, he was in the place and that's how you'd run the barbecue.

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My uncle was more back—back office kind of guy. I mean not to say that he wasn't around and I mean he—he saw things and he had his opinions and his—his mark in our business was interesting, at least I think it's interesting; right before he went in the Army he worked for Morrison's Cafeteria just maybe for a year. And he always liked cafeteria for some reason and back then that was sort of the—if you were in the restaurant business you sort of looked at a cafeteria and you said, "Hey, that's really cool," you know. "They serve all these people and they're very busy. This is the wave of the future." So my—my uncle I think had a decision. He had to work, you know, in his—the whole time but he—he went to work at Morrison's and what he learned there was baking. And so later on I don't know when but we went into making—or he with his direction making peach cobbler. And you'll notice a lot of barbecues around here will have peach cobbler. Not, you know, apple cobbler or cherry cobbler; it's peach. Well there's a reason for that. See, my—my—at least at Stamey's there's a reason for that. My people on the other side of the family were peach farmers in Morganton which is right above Shelby. And we will—if you go to see that and so my uncle and my father spent their summers like picking

peaches because they would, you know—you didn't go to summer camp. But it was an interesting idea to not have to stay in Lexington and probably work for their grandfather, so they got farmed out to—to go live with their cousins and get—sell peaches at a roadside stand. So they had a love for homemade peach pie.

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My uncle though learned how to make crusts and to bake. He always had a propensity to want to do that. So we—many—back—we had different desserts back then and we talked about ice-cream but they also had pies. There used to be a pie man back in the day, you know, in a truck and every day he'd show up and you've seen them in the diners where they would have chocolate pie and coconut cream pie, just pieces—slices of pie. Well, we said "Why—we're going to make the pie"; you know, we're not going to buy it from the guy. And so he started us into a—this really big deal for us now is making homemade peach cobbler and that came from my uncle.

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RF: Before—I want to ask—well I want to get to the food, to the barbecue but I want to ask one more question about history. You mentioned that you have cousins that run a place in—in Shelby and that a lot of the restaurants in Lexington were sold off. In—in a book [Holy Smoke], with an interview with you, you describe barbecue in this area as "inbred." Can you talk about that?

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CS: Uh-hm; well that just came out of my mouth but it just essentially means I like how the people of that book wrote it. They make it more like a family tree, you know, and they give my

grandfather—they make him a branch—I mean a root of the tree, and I—I can see that. And a lot of times it was either—it was either we saw the places through the manager that became now the owner or they just left and opened their place, too. It wasn't always that it was our restaurant or —but my grandfather would say and I mean I've—this was something that came out of his mouth was essentially "if—if somebody is not good enough to work for themselves they're not good enough to work for you."

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So he didn't like surrounding himself with people who had just listened to him and didn't do whatever. You know, he wanted somebody who was capable, you know, a good—a really good operator and I think he—he was good at identifying who those people were. With that, you know, they're not going to be satisfied for working for you forever so that's what happened is that those people went off and did their own thing. And so, I think that essentially is the inbred thing. You now it wasn't always family but the business was a family; you know, we don't do it hardly at all because kids just don't work like they used to. The parents don't want them to, don't make them, but back in those days, when you were in high school, if you wanted to have something you worked. And so my grandfather and my father and—and hopefully me, you know, they became sort of paternalistic people to people. In other words, there was a lot of people who only had one father, you know. Somebody—you know, the mother—different situations; those people who really needed to work, so they were young and in high school and working. And, I mean, if they were twelve, thirteen, or fourteen they were working, you know, not maybe full-time but part-time and so he became sort of a father figure for a lot of people because they worked—worked for him.

00:33:46

Those people sort of, you know, if they stay with us long enough they just—they heard his philosophy and did things and they just kept on learning from him and treating him like a father. So I think that—when I'm talking about, you know, they're like they're a part of our family and then they went out, you know. They—they kept on and they—they flew away and then they'd change things. And, you know, my grandfather certainly didn't invent the barbecue business. I have to think he put his mark on it.

00:34:14

RF: Does Stamey's serve—do you call it Western style, Lexington style, Piedmont style; what —what do you call it?

00:34:21

CS: If—if somebody—

00:34:23

RF: If anything.

00:34:23

CS: —if somebody pins me down I'll say it's Lexington style because that's where we—we came from, certainly. Even though I don't, you know, I just think of it as it's Stamey's Barbecue, you know, it's *us* but it certainly is Lexington style. Eastern in my mind is—and if you're talking to them they're going to stay it's—you normally a whole hog, whole—whole pig barbecue their sauce is more all vinegar with like some red pepper flakes, very little—they don't use any

ketchup, like a Lexington style sauce will have some ketchup in it. But really a—a true Lexington-style sauce or dip is what we call it has a tinge of it. It's very, very loose and very, very watery but that is a difference and so that's certainly—our—our recipes are from that time.

00:35:16

Our slaw is similar to other slaws. It has no mayonnaise in it. It's a red-based slaw which has—certainly there's ketchup, you know, spices, which are just red pepper, black pepper, sugar, and cabbage. You know, barbecue truly also has a roots to like a German heritage in my mind. A lot of the Germans that settled had a love for pork. And they had a love for *kraut*, so you got to look at it how it just changed essentially that way. Barbecue cooked with, you know—with a vinegar based sauce; it's pork because it's what they like, slaw, because it's sort of like sauerkraut.

00:36:04

There were a lot of them—butchers; a lot of time the barbecue was taking a piece—cheap piece of meat that no one else knew what to do with it and cooked the way they knew how which was over wood because they didn't have ovens that were electric. They cooked it for a long time because that's the only way you could make it to where you could eat it and make it tender and yummy. Since it was cooked in wood people got the—the taste for a smoked meat flavor and so people started to value that and enjoy that. It's hickory wood because that's the trees we had here. It's not mesquite; that's Texas. We don't ship—we didn't ship wood in. In other words, you used the things that are local to your area to do what you're going to do. So—so hickory wood cooked barbecue is because North Carolina, Piedmont has hickory trees. And it's the best wood that we have around because it's a hard—hardwood that cooks down to coals really well and has a high-heat content. You know, a pine log would just burn up. Many other trees would just impart

some kind of crazy flavor, like a red oak is terrible. It would—you could cook with it but it has a —a strange flavor. You can cook with white oak and we do but we—all these things are not happenstance. It happened for a reason but it wasn't—it was because it was what was around them.

00:37:37

Lexington came back later though, we weren't as much based in the farm like they were down east, where they were just like we're raising the pig; we're going to cook it. Usually that happened from when they were feeding the people who were working in the fields, like they'd get the crop in and they said, "Hey, we're going to have—we're going to cook—we're going to thank you for all this hard work you did. We're going to cook a whole pig" and then laid it out over the coals and that's what they did. And a lot of times in a tobacco barn in North Carolina they would do it. Lexington was a little bit after that and so those guys learned; they were farmers too but not as—they were more—they were less mainline farmers. They were more like gentlemen farmers. And so they would cook with the pork shoulders because "Hey," you know, "we're going—we're not going to waste the bacon and the ham. We can—that's—that has a use other than cooking barbecue." So we settled in on cooking the pork shoulders, really what they didn't know what to do with.

00:38:29

If you—if you went to sell meat, the least expensive part of the hog was the pork shoulder. And so people who were smart, you know, said, "Hey, well, we're going to cook that." People got used to eating it and really sort of like a brisket I think was similar in Texas barbecue whereas that—that was—you know, people wanted the filet mignon. They wanted steak. They didn't want the brisket. That was throwaway. Now the brisket is the most—one of the—is equally

expensive part of a cow. Well, the pork shoulder is too, so—. **[*Laughs*]** Just like ribs were throwaway and now that's definitely the most expensive part of a—of a pig, so it's evolved, but it's all—things always happen for a reason. Why does the slaw have ketchup in it? Well it's because we didn't have mayonnaise laying around. There's some good things about that; you know, now our slaw doesn't spoil if you don't keep it refrigerated, but essentially it's the components you had in the kitchen, and you made the slaw and it stuck. Barbecue business has been like that where it's just evolved over time out of necessity and out of good taste too I think, too.

00:39:44

RF: You mentioned the German heritage in the area. Is your family roots German?

00:39:50

CS: You know, far-removed Stamey I believe came out of that area but—I'm told. But I think there's the—but we don't have a direct line into that. But the Stamey, the Stamey is—there's not a lot of Stameys. You probably haven't heard that name as much. It's—it's not a common name but there was like two brothers I believe that came in from the north and settled sort of in this area. And the tell—the tell is that they was German at one point. And but as far as our immediate relation to being in the barbecue business it's—there's no relation for being German.

00:40:30

I think in barbecue in general and we have studied it, you know, I've noticed—you know, especially in Texas there's a number of renowned non-Dallas, non-Houston, non-San Antonio places that started from German roots. Their deal was, "Hey, we got this meat in the butcher shop

that's getting ready to go bad. I'm not going to throw it away, right. So what do we do?" **[*Laughs*]** "Well, let's cook it," and so that's what they did. And I think their love for smoked meats in those areas what you would call barbecue there came from that. And I think some of those farm traditions here came out of that too but here it was much more farm-related than it was, you know, butcher-related.

00:41:21

RF: Do you ever use barbecue as a verb and not just a noun?

00:41:24

CS: **[*Laughs*]** Barbecue as a verb? We have picnics and cookouts; we do not have barbecues. So that is definitely true. But, you know, it's almost slipped into my vocabulary because so many people have moved into the South from the North and we have to retrain them when they get here to let them know that, you know, you're not inviting me over for a barbecue. You're inviting us up for a cookout. Yeah; so we—so we—barbecue is certainly a noun at Stamey's. **[*Laughs*]**

00:41:59

RF: Okay; so you say you cook shoulders here. Where do you get your shoulders from?

00:42:03

CS: We—we have a certain—we have less options now than we ever did because of the—the consolidation of the pork industry. But North Carolina is one of the higher producers of pork. I think it's number one now. It's gone between number one and number two between Iowa and

here I believe. And so we get North Carolina pork. It's all—that all happens down east. There's a town called Warsaw and a town called Smithfield and Clinton; there's the name—but they're all North Carolina towns. There's a big supplier now; Smithfield is very large, the biggest producer and so right now we're buying from them. Barbecue folks like a certain cut of meat and a certain cut—a certain way so back in the day you didn't have as many options but now with the production methods and all you—we can really dial into the way we want it cut and at what rib, you know, and how much fat—the meat content, things that we actually—we look for yield. We look for mainly just end-product.

00:43:19

And so, we honed in on those things. You know, if you're here working all the time you try to make it better every—every year, so we're always trying to work on it. What we don't change is the method of cooking. We don't change the recipes for the sauce. But what we do change is sort of "Hey, you know, are we—are we slipping? Are we cooking it too long? Are we cooking it done enough? Are we not overcooking it? Are we getting it to the restaurant and to the customer's plate in a—as quick a freshest way possible?" Those are things we work on day in and day out. And the pork has really changed over time too, and you may have heard some stories about that.

00:43:59

But when a farmer had a pig, you know, he ate everything. He was the garbage disposal of the—of the farm. Pigs had—you hear about cooking with fatback. Pigs looked like a camel almost. They had a huge fat on the back. Now if you see a commercial hog now there is very—it's super-lean compared to what the pigs of those days were. They're very more—they're like chickens in that they're more uniform. You know, they—they kill them at a certain rate, at a

certain weight and our shoulders look very similar. Back in the day, you know, one shoulder might be fifteen pounds. One might be twenty-three pounds. It could vary a lot and the fat was—there was more fat in it.

00:44:44

So that's changed; barbecue has gotten leaner over time. But in our method of cooking, we cook a lot. We cook it almost half down from weight, so, you know, I don't think the lack of fat has really killed the product. It's probably played into the people's dietary tastes now because they don't want to eat as much fat as they used to. But the pigs have the—the shoulders are local and they—and they've changed over time. The nice thing is I think that there's been a new wave. They've learned that they need to introduce a little bit more fat into it, and so they're not making them, you know, even over the last six or seven years we've seen a much more balanced animal and—and I think it's gotten better. The barbecue has gotten better because of that.

00:45:36

RF: And do you have—have you pushed your purveyors to do that?

00:45:39

CS: We talk to them about it. I don't know how much weight we have. We buy a lot but I think they—they learned that. They—they for a long time they were pushing the leaner, the leaner and they learned that wasn't working. So the market drove the fact the people wanted something that tasted good and so I think they're—they're swinging the other way now.

00:45:58

RF: Tell me; let's talk about the cooking process. What's the day in the life of a shoulder here at Stamey's?

00:46:03

CS: Oh, the day in the life. **[*Laughs*]** Well, you know, we talk about getting up early to start the fire. A day in the life here is we get up, get into work no later than 5:00. We light the fire; we load the furnace with wood. In our case, we're mostly all exclusively hickory—not that we couldn't use white oak. Some people will talk about mixing it, but just that's what we're getting and we prefer it. So while that fire is lighted and—and getting started then they'll go the cooler and they'll pull out the shoulders. One of the bigger jobs is just putting the meat on the pit because those things weigh twenty—twenty-five pounds to fifteen pounds. So you're picking that meat up; you're—you're setting twenty shoulders into a pit, you know, that night before and then the restaurants have called in and they've said, "I need so much for operations." So we know what we need to cook. It gets put out. Get to sit down and rest for a little bit while the fire is getting hot and the coals are creating and then maybe about thirty-five—forty minutes later then we stick a shovel in the—into the furnace and get a coal—shovel full of coal, hardwood fire coals and just sprinkle it manually under each pit.

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And then that goes on around every fifteen to twenty minutes for the rest of the day. In the middle of that you—you're turning the meat. Of course, you're always—a good pit man is looking in there and—and making sure that their process is going well. I mean part of it is being a fireman, you know. If you're inexperienced you can cause a big fire because the grease is like a —like gasoline. It can take off and go, so you can't just walk off and—and leave it to cook like

you're flipping a switch in the oven. So our guys are in there just monitoring; they can't—if they're going to the restroom they need to have somebody else in there watching, always being monitored and always looking. But it is sort of ebb and flow. You get—you get to go outside and you keep on loading wood in the furnace and keep the fire where it needs to be, keep the coals where they need to be, making sure that the temperature is where they need to be and then eventually you're going to take that—take that off and we bring it down to the restaurant and we serve it.

00:48:26

RF: And tell me; you gave us a tour of the pits an hour ago. Tell me about the two men who are working in there.

00:48:33

CS: Well, right now we have two fellows, two pit men. One is named Pon and one is named Bim. They're both in—come—come to us as immigrants from Cambodia and from Vietnam. One is actually a Montagnard which is an indigenous sort of like the Indian people of Vietnam. You know, my father actually taught Pon to cook barbecue; you know, we—when you do that that's—you don't just say, "Hey, go in there." I mean it probably was a year process working it hard and on the job training. When he came he didn't speak a lick of English. You know, we were just pointing and—and teaching and but now, you know, Pon, it's interesting enough. You know, he's—he's stayed with us. He's made a good life. He has a nice house. His children have gone to college. He, you know, he speaks, you know—I can understand him well. Not everybody can **[*Laughs*]** but he—he speaks very—very—very nice English in my—from where he came from.

Bim came over maybe ten years later, worked in the restaurant and actually I just—we saw in him the—that I think he would be a good person to get up there. We're always looking to what—who is the second guy going to be and so he's sort of the apprentice. And he's—he's been here at least sixteen years. So he's—we have two sort of online barbecue cooks there. And I would stack them up against anybody as being great.

00:50:17

But they're—they're up there every day with a six-day a week job because we're closed on Sunday.

00:50:25

RF: And—and how many pits do they man and how many shoulders can they do maximum at one time?

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CS: You know, we have a high-capacity so we could cook for two days in a row or something like that but we never do. We always cook every day and so that can range, they might cook four pits is as low as it'll go which is like eighty shoulders roughly and then it can get up to ten and even to—you know, the holiday season we can go for multiple runs too, yeah; so do the math. But they—I'd say they normally are cooking 100 to 120 shoulders a day. And the meat as far as just raw meat purchased we probably go through about six to 8,000 pounds a week.

00:51:19

RF: And—and tell me; do you know how much slaw you go through?

00:51:25

CS: Um, I don't know in gallons of slaw but as far as in cabbage and—and heads of cabbage we probably—we actually have a cooler that's just cabbage. And we have one for meat and one for cabbage. We didn't show you that but that's—that's—and it's 120 bags, so 120 times fifty a week.

00:51:47

RF: And I want to quote you; when you were giving us a tour you said the hardest thing about the restaurant business or about this place is keeping things the same. Can you say something on that?

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CS: Well whenever you blink or you—you go and take Saturday off, you know, things can change. Over time recipes change; you know, so and so is making the slaw. Well he likes it sweeter, so he might say "Oh, let's put a little more sugar in there." Sauces change. Well you might buy, you know, red pepper but maybe the red pepper is different. It's not the same red pepper you bought before or—or just little things creep into the mix and so I spend—you know, we evaluate, not every day or every week but, you know, we are always trying to think of the standard and remember what the standard was and keep toward the standard. And that's what I meant by that essentially. You know, you can't—I think it's as much work to keep things the same as it is to innovate and change them. **[*Laughs*]**

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RF: But you were saying your—your dad still experiments with barbecue even though he's retired officially. What does he do?

00:53:00

CS: Right; right, well okay he's an experimenter and we've always—if you've ever actually sat ten hours cooking barbecue you would experiment. In other words, it's a hard job. It's—in our pits we got our one shot at it because we haven't rebuilt them; they were built in the '70s. Well that was what we thought they needed to be, but, you know, you can always improve something. And so he's always has the dream of having—we can fire it a different way. We could—you wouldn't have to bend into the pit and make your back hurt to get to the last row, you know, it could pull out. It could—in other words, he's always thinking of a different way not to change the end-product but to make it easier to still do it the old way.

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As you would if you were, you know, dreaming up something new again, but, you know, we see how other people do things. The one thing we don't give on is we don't say, "Hey, there's a way we can cook it in the electric oven." You know, we're not making that—we're not doing that study; we're just doing the study of how can we make wood-cooked barbecue better.

00:54:09

RF: You mentioned electric barbecue—you know, cooking barbecue, which is kind of a recent change over the past couple decades. What do you think about that and do you see barbecue evolving more?

00:54:22

CS: I do; many places, many successful places have made that switch. What they have to do is different than us in that they—they can get a decent product, but then they end up changing it with sauces and rubs and flavors, you know, that—apart from just the basic primal, "Hey, we're cooking it this old way."

00:54:51

And that's why I do see it changing just, you know—there's less and less people interested in the kind of job it takes to—to cook that way. It's a hard job; it's a dirty job. So I think it is evolving that way. I don't see it as much as some people will talk about well, you can't do this because there's rules about it and all that. I think that's more—I—I'm not—it's not my idea but things happen for economic reasons. As—as it becomes more and more difficult to—to build a pit complex, to go to the trouble of a process of cooking that takes ten hours, you know, people are going to keep on taking the short-cut, manning that—in other words, now you can stick it in the oven or the pit—whatever that thing is they call it, and you can flip a switch and you can go home. So that's pretty exciting to somebody who is, you know, looking at "Hey, well I'm not going to have to sit there and watch it. I can—it can cook while I'm sleeping"; so—so that's going to keep happening. But I think the customers—as long as there's a demand for what we do, you know, then I think there will be some people who are willing to do it.

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RF: Have customers' tastes changed over the past couple decades?

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CS: Oh, I think certainly. Great example of that is we have a—a—I'm looking at it right now; there's a bottle, a square bottle of hot sauce we call it. It's just—it's got vinegar; it's got a lot of pepper and red pepper in it, no sugar. That was called hot sauce. I would say a—I don't know what percentage, but a great percentage of our customers if they throw that on there they consider that mild sauce. In other words, people's tastes for hot foods have changed.

00:56:51

Just one example, people are much—you know, my parents, they didn't go eat Mexican food. They didn't go eat Asian food. They didn't go eat Thai food or any of the foods that so many people like and it's—and I like. So the ethnicities and—and all that is happening and that is certainly changing. People are branching out on flavor. You know, barbecue, too, and people won't admit it, you know—in the—at least in this region a barbecue restaurant is not just a place that cooks, slow-cooks barbecue over wood coals. It's also a quick service restaurant. In other words, barbecue is really the—in this region was the first fast-food. There wasn't a McDonald's. There wasn't a Wendy's. There wasn't—you could walk in and say give me a sandwich and you'd have it and, you know, it wouldn't be a minute. It would be less than a minute. And so I think people—people's—that's not going to change. In other words, people like a good fast meal.

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And so that's what we're banking on now and I think that's what our success has been too is that people appreciate the fact that we have a good consistent product and we appreciate the fact, you know, that we can still cook it the old way. But the newer generation they do expect you know with—I think also there's the Food Networkization of everything; you know, there's the foodies, there's the food as competition or sport. That's changing it too where people used to be

just they were eating. Now they're like, "How do you make that?" And they're—everybody is a chef now, so that's changing it too.

00:58:54

RF: Do you eat your own barbecue every day and how do you order it if you do or when you do?

00:58:58

CS: Oh, well when you're working in the barbecue, you—whether you want to eat it or not you're going to eat because that's—it's what's there. But I—I eat barbecue four times, five times a week. I mean you got to eat it and see what it tastes like.

00:59:15

The people who work in the restaurant, you know, we—we're hard on them because, you know, our customers can choose to eat here once or twice a week. They eat in here—we provide meals for them so they make it interesting. You know, they'll try to make interesting combinations out of the things we sell. But I am a purist and I just eat a barbecue sandwich with slaw on it, you know, the—the old way. I don't—I don't eat sliced very much; it's usually always chopped. And that's what I like.

00:59:45

RF: And there's only two choices here—chopped and sliced, right? Why is that; tell me why the —yeah, why it's different from other places?

00:59:52

CS: I will tell you it's my dad—my father, Charles' philosophy was when you were a little place in Lexington, you know, people would order barbecue like it was—like it was a—an egg or a steak, you know, over-easy, scrambled, soft-scrambled. Think of how many ways there is to cook it, you know. That's not—that's not a great way in our—in the Stamey mind to sell barbecue because in a pork shoulder there's a—when you're cooking it there's skin of course and there's thing we call brown, which is the outside meat. It's very flavorful; it's got the salt on it when you put it on it. It's got smoked—more smoked flavor because it's on the outside.

01:00:41

Well, there's the—there's the inside to a pork shoulder too, where it's the muscle of the meat. And very good—good tasting too but it has less of the smoke and less of the yummy flavor. And so we've always decided that we're—we're going to cook—we're going—we sell a lot so we go through a lot of shoulder so we can cook—chop a shoulder at a time. And we—we dedicate a person to the block. And that's what they do is they—they don't work the line. They're just handling that meat and so they could chop a lot ahead if they wanted to because that would be neat because then they could go on the line and they could make sandwiches and plates. But we don't—we put the money in to say we're going to have a person who just handles that meat exclusively and go only chop what we need at the time.

01:01:29

But the offshoot is—is that if we can incorporate that brown and other to a consistent yummy chopped barbecue, Stamey-style barbecue some people have a taste for chunkier, some people like it fine; it's because they ask for it and they get it, you know. It's not—we just have decided that just because you're not educated in barbecue then you shouldn't suffer. Now the

people who want it the other way might not feel that way, but I think it—I think it is—it's become a good decision and I think it's actually fair to the whole public instead of just the ones who are educated in it.

01:02:11

The sliced is—is not always been but that's—that's come from there was—there were people who—that's a way of getting a leaner—. In my mind that's really why people do it is they—they just—they think of barbecue as not as healthy or has more fat than they want. And so I think sliced came from that, really. And that's—that's the deal with that. But, you know, I—we've done—we've done some analysis on it. I mean I haven't spoken out this out loud but it's amazing to me; you know, if you go to the doctor and you have high blood pressure they're going to tell you, "Hey, don't eat barbecue." At least that happens in the South. But we're getting a bum rap really because our barbecue you can stack it up against most any sandwiches that you would eat. It's—it's a natural, you know—it's not a processed; you know, like you get in many other places and it—it has a lot less fat in it than you'd think, you know, so—.

01:03:12

I'm not going to say it's health food **[*Laughs*]** but it—but it's real food; yeah.

01:03:19

RF: Maybe just one last question. Would you encourage your children or a young person to go into the restaurant and specifically the barbecue business?

01:03:29

CS: Well, we talked about the Food Channel and—and what's interesting to me is that the food arts, the—the restaurant business is getting romanticized. In my dad's time, I mean, when he went to school he was pre-med, you know, and he took biology. He was a chemist and he was a smart guy until he got into the lab and he cut the pig and he saw the blood, the fetal pig. **[*Laughs*]** And he decided, "Hey, this wasn't for me." And so in our family the barbecue business has always been woven throughout it and I think my kids see it that way too. And I'm not going —it's not a fallback, but yet it's just another option.

01:04:13

My hope and what my dad would always tell me, "Study hard." He really said, "Study hard, so you don't have to do this." **[*Laughs*]** And we always bellyache and act like it's terrible but it's not. It's a great business and it's—and I enjoy it and probably more than he did. And it's probably because he had—when he had gone through it he didn't—he had to work harder as a kid and he was burned out probably quicker than I—than I was. **[*Laughs*]** And he had created more of an operation where—and we evolved. And so I would think they would—I make sure that they work and they understand and they have already—not as much as I did and certainly I didn't as much as my father did—but they know compared to their peers what it's like to work and they can decide whether they want to be a doctor or they want to be a barbecue person. **[*Laughs*]**

01:05:08

RF: Well I think it's funny that your father cutting a pig actually sent him to cooking pigs.

01:05:14

CS: Never actually thought about that at all. But he's squeamish, you know. Luckily in the barbecue business we're not in the butchering business. We just get it and it's already—it's already happened. So—so we don't have to worry about being squeamish. But that is exactly—I never thought about that; that is really true is that—.

01:05:36

A lot of smart people are in this business and I think for my kids that's sort of neat. And maybe if we put on a chef's coats and—and have cooking shows maybe there will be a legitimate business to where they would be wanting to do it, but—. I think, you know, with the economy recently, you know, opportunity is not as plentiful. So I think that there would be a chance that they would want to come into the family business. I guess my goal is to not run it into the ground before they have to. **[*Laughs*]**

01:06:09

RF: All right; well I don't see that happening any time soon so I want to—

01:06:13

CS: Again, Stameys are pessimists. **[*Laughs*]** That comes out of the Depression talk. You talk about my grandfather; that—that—we—we always bellyache but most people think it's all right when they look out from the outside. **[*Laughs*]**

01:06:28

RF: All right; well I want to thank you for sitting down and congratulate you on your success.

01:06:30

CS: Thank you; it's been fun.

01:06:33

RF: I'm going to eat some barbecue now.

01:06:35

CS: Good.

[End Chip Stamey — Stamey's Barbecue Interview]