PAT DAVIS, SR.

Owner, Abe's Bar-B-Que – Clarksdale, MS

* * *

Date: July 26, 2010
Location: Chamoun's Rest Haven – Clarksdale, MS
Interviewer: Amy Evans Streeter
Length: 1 hour, 12 minutes
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs
Project: Delta Lebanese

[Begin Pat Davis-1 Interview]

00:00:02

Amy Evans Streeter: This is Amy Evans Streeter for the Southern Foodways Alliance on Tuesday, July 26, 2010. I'm in Clarksdale, Mississippi, at Chamoun's Rest Haven with Mr. Pat Davis, Sr.. And Mr. Davis, if I could get you to state your name and your connection to Abe's Restaurant for the record.

00:00:23

Pat Davis: All right. I'm really George Patrick Davis. Everybody calls me Pat. I was born September 3, 1937, and I own Abe's Barbecue, which my father started in 1924, and I took over in 1960.

00:00:39

AES: All right. And we're—we're here today—we've spoken before about tamales and Abe's Restaurant and the tamale tradition in the Delta, which I hope we touch on a little bit again today, but we're here to speak about your Lebanese heritage and the Lebanese community here in Clarksdale and the Delta at large. So I wonder if you could give us some of your family's background and—and tell us how your parents ended up in Clarksdale.

00:01:01

PD: All right. My father was born in Zahlé, Lebanon, and—when he was around thirteen years old. And he had two siblings, Joe Davis and Martha Davis, his sister and brother, and they were younger than he, and their mother and father heard about America and the opportunities that

were here. So the father sent the—his mother, his wife here and she went to New York and began to work in a factory and was—was doing well. So she wrote back to her husband and said, you know, "Come to America. Bring the children. It's a great place, and we're making money and we've got a place to stay, and there's a lot of Lebanese families here that, you know, we can meet with and enjoy the company and all."

00:01:49

And he wrote back and said, "I'll send the children, but I'm not coming to America because the soothsayer here in the village said that I'm going to be killed by a big block of iron, and there ain't no big block of iron here in Lebanon, **[*Laughs*]** so I'm not going. But I will send the children." So he put my father and—and his brother and sister on a—on a boat, third or fourth class, and he sent them to America. My daddy said that he and his brother would climb up to the second and third class, and people would give them food and they would take it back down to his—his sister to eat.

00:02:28

But anyway, they arrived at Ellis Island, and when they did they were going through the lines and asking them their names. And my daddy's name was Dawood—D-a-w-o-o-d, which means David, and he said, "My name is Abraham Dawood." And apparently they couldn't spell Dawood, and they put "Abraham Davis." And that's how we got the Davis name.

00:02:52

They met with their mother and stayed in New York for a while. And then they heard there was some families in Brookhaven, Mississippi, that were peddling clothes out to the farmers—workers, back then. And apparently the work there in New York was too strenuous on them, so they moved to Brookhaven with some other Lebanese families there who were doing some peddling going out into the country.

00:03:15

And from there, they moved to Clarksdale. They had a big flood I think in [19]32 or '33, and they moved to Clarksdale, Mississippi. And they began to—to peddle clothes. My daddy bought him—they said he had the prettiest wagon and prettiest horse, and he would go out into the country. And he said he would find a big tree, and he'd just sit up under the tree all day because he didn't know how to—he wasn't a salesman. So he began to think, what does he need to do, and he finally decided to come to town and work for someone.

00:03:50

Well, in the meantime, the mother convinces her husband to come to America. And he did come to America. And when he was supposed to exchange trains in Memphis, he got off on the wrong side, and another train came and killed him. So the soothsayer, you know—better listen to him.

00:04:11

Well anyway, he began to work for this Greek person that had a restaurant—restaurant on Issequena [Avenue], and he felt like he—that was his niche. He enjoyed cooking and concocting new foods and all that. So in 1924 he—he stepped out on his own, and he built a little restaurant on Fourth Street, which is now Martin Luther King Boulevard. And there, he began to do barbecue. He made a pit and began to cook barbecue over hickory wood and pecan wood. And the word got around, you know, that they got the best barbecue and his concoction of the sauce that he came up with and the—the slaw that we use even today. It's just a great combination with—with pork, you know. And it used to be the hangout for all the teenagers.

00:05:01

Well, after several years, the city decided to make Fourth Street a main entrance into Clarksdale, and they were going to pave it. So when they closed the street down to pave it, he

was almost out of business. So he luckily—and with God's help because he was a very religious man—he moved to Highway 61, which used to be called Sycamore Street, and it was Sycamore because there were a bunch of sycamore trees on the street. And he built a little restaurant there and began to cook there and all. And the Gulf Oil Company came in and wanted to lease the property next to him that he had bought, and he gave them a twenty-year lease. And they leased the building there, which is now the donut shop.

00:05:49

And he prospered and did well there, and he would always come up with new—new ideas and he began to cook—make hot tamales. And that was my dread **[*Laughs*]** because it was a chore. You'd first—you'd have to boil the meat. He would boil pork shoulders, and then we would debone the—the meat off the bone and then he would grind it up and put it in the refrigerator to cool. And then he would get shucks, boil the shucks, and make them—we'd go out into the country and pick corn **[*Laughs*]** from the fields or get the shucks from the farmers that—you know, around here, and—and we would take them and boil them and cut them where they could be used to put the cornmeal on. Then he would take the meat back out of the refrigerator and break it back down with warm water and then add his special seasoning to it, which we use today. And he would mix that in. And he was smart because he—a lot of people back then that were making hot tamales would just put cornmeal and season it with just salt and chili powder. But he would use the same ingredients he put into the tamale into the meal. So then we would make the meal.

00:07:04

And I would remember as a young person about twelve to fifteen years old, I'd be sitting at the end of the counter, and that was my job to put the meal on the shuck. So I'd get the shuck and have a spatula and put a thin coat of meal on it and hand him—put that down and he would

pick it up and put the meat in between it and roll it up. And it—we'd always have a contest, you know, whether—whether I could stack it, you know, before he could roll them. But anyway, I hated it every time he said, "We're going to make hot tamales," because, you know, making back then twelve to fifteen dozen at one time was a chore, and especially for a young person like me.

00:07:39

Well he—he really—what was so funny. He really loved what he did. And he's been admired. People brag upon his food and all. So one day this guy came in from up North. And he saw the sign that said *Hot Tamales* and he asked my dad, he said, "What is a hot tamale?" My dad: "You ain't—you don't know what a hot tamale is?" He said, "No." He said—well, I could see he's getting real proud. He said, "I'll tell you what, I'm going to give you three and we—."

[Recording stops due to a technical issue. A new recording begins.]

[End Pat Davis-1 Interview; Begin Pat Davis-2 Interview]

00:00:00

AES: All right. We're back.

00:00:03

PD: So this gentleman ate the hot tamales, and my daddy is watching every bite that the man took. And then my daddy says with his head thrown back, he said, "Well how did you like them?" And the guy said, "Well, if you like cornbread, it's okay." **[*Laughs*]** And it had a letdown.

00:00:20

But anyway, he became famous, I think, because he had a good product, and he was a good person and people got to like him and trust him and—and his business began to flourish.

00:00:35

Getting back to the Lebanese culture, as a young person, I remember even to this day how most of our families lived right within the same block from each other. And we all—all of the young kids grew up together and all. Well what was so great about it, the—the parents of all of us decided to build a club and call it the Lebanese American Club—or American Lebanese Club. And that was the beautiful part of my growth because we—every Sunday we would all come together and some would bring fried chicken, some would bring cabbage rolls, grape leaves, *kibbe* [balls or patties of bulgur and ground meat that are baked or fried], watermelons. And the kids would, you know, dance or play games. And then after we've eaten it all, we would make a big circle with chairs around it. And my daddy played an instrument called a *mijwiz* [an instrument made of two, short bamboo reed pipes], which he made himself.

00:01:33

I remember him telling me one day, he said, "Pat, I want you to go down the street and there's a—some canes growing, and I want you to cut me two canes, you know, about half an inch, you know, wide and bring it to me." So I brought them, and then he cut off about two pieces of cane about twelve-inches long, and he wrapped them with string together. And then he told me to go to the church, and I was Catholic, and we had candles burning all the time and wax dropping off it, and—"Bring me the burnt wax, the beeswax." And he would take the beeswax after he had tied these canes together and then melt the wax to hold them together better. And then he had a steel. You know what a steel is—you sharpen your knife on? He would heat it real hot on the fire, and then he would burn six holes, three holes—four holes in each one of those canes. And then he would send me down to get some small cane, about a quarter of an inch. And

I would bring that, and he would clean that out, and then he would split it about halfway and then tie a string around that, and that was the reed that made the—the music. And he made that instrument.

00:02:50

And anyway, when we got together to do you know the Sundays and all, he would get out in the middle of the floor with his *mijwiz,* and he had another friend of ours, Abraham family, and their daddy had a *mijwiz,* and they would start playing. And we had a couple of men that had the *durbakkes*, which are big drums, you know, and tambourines, and they would play and they would sing songs, you know, about Lebanon. Some of the songs they sang were called—were called like—I'm trying to think. It was sort of like the blues, you know, just a remembrance, you know, the older people remember, you know, because most of them came from Lebanon at that time. And they would sing—and oh, another song they would sing was "Athebee" and that—those are the sad songs, the blues songs of what they missed and so forth. And after singing that for a while, then he would get out in the middle and start playing the *durbakkes*, which is the—or *Dabke* [a traditional folk dance], and that's when two of the men would be the leaders and about eight or ten, or whoever wanted to join, would hold hands and do the dance together, which is called the *Dabke*, and it's a three or four-step dance, you know.

00:04:05

But the two men would sort of do some extra little dancing and twirling around, and they would have a handkerchief, you know, one of them, and—and it was just beautiful. And after they did the *Dabke* then they—they would sit down and then they would play some more music with the *mijwiz* and the drum and—and some of the ladies, you know, one or two, would get up and dance. And then they would go and choose someone from the seating area to come and dance.

00:04:27

And if they chose you, you had to get up. And, man, we dreaded it. As young kids, we dreaded being pulled up. But anyway, we—we would get up and we'd—we'd imitate what they were doing and all. But it was just a—a great heritage and a culture that was handed down to us and somehow or another as we grew and—and became more Americanized we sort of lost that. But there's still a bunch of Lebanese—the convention goes on where you can go and hear the—the Lebanese music. But the music, the Lebanese music today is completely different.

00:05:01

Theirs were sort of based on what was happening to them, you know, sort of like the—the blues, like the African American blues, you know. And the new music is sort of updated and more fancy and all. But those are the—the times that I remembered, you know, that really were very meaningful to me as a young person. And somehow or another I took up the *durbakke* and—and my group, you know, we had a club called—we called it the 21 Club. You had to be 21 years old, and we did that for many years, you know. We'd get together in people's houses and entertain and do a *Dabke* and—and I'd always—. I didn't—I don't know how to sing. I don't know how to speak Lebanese, but I used to fake some words and all and they all loved it and we had—we had a ball, really.

00:05:51

And I don't know—anything else you'd like to ask me that can help bring back memories? Getting back to the café, my father he—he would cut the cabbage up himself to make the slaw. And I remember one day a guy came in and said, "Mr. Abe," he said, "I see you always sitting there cutting that slaw." He said, "I got a machine here that can cut the slaw, and man, just take away a lot of your work." And he said, "I'll tell you what I'll do." So he handed me—this guy a head of cabbage and my daddy got him a head of cabbage. He said, "Okay, now plug up

your machine and—and cut it up." So by the time the guy plugged it up and set it up and started grinding that cabbage, Daddy done cut that whole piece of cabbage up. **[*Laughs*]** And when they finished, he looked at my daddy and said, "I don't think you need this machine." **[*Laughs*]**

00:06:40

Another time, Governor [Theodore] Bilbo back then—it was way back, and I wasn't around back in then, but Governor Bilbo had came through Mississippi, and he stopped at Abe's Barbecue. It wasn't about three restaurants on—on the highway back then. And he stopped in with his entourage and they came in and they—the barbecue—and back then we called it—we sold it cold—warmed the bun, cold meat, coleslaw and—and sauce, you know. And he ate a barbecue and—and he told my daddy he needed another one. Anyway, Governor Bilbo ate one barbecue and then ordered another one, and he said, "Mr. Abe," he said, "you need to call this sauce the comeback sauce." And that's how the—we got that going, the comeback sauce, because he said it. And really back then, you know, if you ate one you, had to come back for another.

00:07:33

All right, something about my experience. You know, I'm a very religious person, as well, and I—I trust our Lord, you know, to look after me and our business and our family, which has prospered for many years. And one day we heard McDonald's was coming to town. And I got a little anxious about it, because, you know, we never had any fast-food places in Clarksdale. That was the first one to come. And when they came to town, they had—I mean I've never seen so many people in my life that wanted to eat. And I said, "Man, where were they, you know, before?" And for about a week or two or three weeks, I didn't get a customer. And word got around, you know, "Pat is going to go bankrupt," and, "All he knows is barbecue." And I remember asking our Lord, you know, "What am I to do," you know? And he said, "Well it's

your wife's birthday coming up. Go buy her an expensive ring." And I went and bought her an emerald ring, which I couldn't afford, but I trusted God. And all of the sudden, one day about three weeks later, this guy drives up and man, we're waiting on him. He comes in and everybody, you know, is catering towards him and he ordered a barbecue and we fixed it. And—and he said, you know, "I'll never go back to McDonald's." Boy, that made me feel good. At least I—you know. And I said, "Why?" He said, "Because I drove around for thirty minutes and couldn't find a park." **[*Laughs*]** And that broke my heart.

00:08:56

But eventually people came to Clark—came back to us. But I went and ate a Big Abe—not a Big Abe—that's where we got our Big Abe is from the Big Mac. I ate a Big Mac, and it was the best sandwich I've ever eaten. It was delicious. And I have never eaten another one. It's a good sandwich, you know. I'm not knocking it. But I eat a barbecue with slaw and sauce, cold meat, every day except Sunday. I crave it. I go every morning to the café **[*Laughs*]** and sit there when nobody is looking and make me a sandwich. But it does have that comeback appeal to it, really.

00:09:37

I'm trying to think of some more incidents that—.

00:09:40

AES: Well if—since you're kind of at a stopping point in your narrative to think, I wonder if we could go back to your grandparents and—and talk about them a little more, and first, if I could get their names?

00:09:52

PD: Okay. My grandparents' names—well, my father's name was Abraham Davis and his mother was Sadie Davis and her husband was Deeb Davis. On my mother's side, my grandmother was named Sara Chamoun—C-h-a-m-o-u-n—and his name was Joseph Chamoun. And most of them were peddlers. You know, back then and they would go out into the country and to—to make a living and go to the plantations and—and sell, you know, the—the goods and all because most of the plantation workers didn't leave the plantation, you know, and they needed, you know, clothes or stockings or whatever.

00:10:35

And my father had—it was five of us; my mother and father had five of us. And what was so good about prosperity is that a lot of families here began to move from Clarksdale and go towards Memphis and then to Jackson and to different areas, which we stayed here because—. My daddy wasn't the type of person that wanted to be a wealthy person. He just wanted to, you know, have his basic needs. But the Gattis family, who was here for many years, big family, and they lived over on Douglas Street, which is right next to—lived with—African Americans and Lebanese families lived in the same area together, and they had a little grocery store there. Well eventually they—some of the children there when they grew up, they—they moved to Memphis. And I think y'all might have heard of Fred P. Gattis. He had a store that sold jewelry and pots and pans and all that but eventually went out of business. His sons, now several of them have jewelry stores and all, but they did real well and—and Fred Gattis was real close to Danny Thomas who started, you know, St. Jude Hospital and all. And Danny Thomas is Lebanese.

00:11:55

True—true to back then, when we were—my family first came here, Lebanon was a part of Syria. And—and they would call themselves Syrians. Well, when Danny Thomas said he was Lebanese, then we realized, you know, we really are Lebanese, so we—we began to take on—

we'd tell these people well now we're—we're, you know, Lebanese instead of Syrians, which we truly are Lebanese. But it was part of Syria at one time, and that's how we started out as Syrians, you know.

00:12:26

AES: And so if I could, again, go back to your grandparents, and so it would be your grandmother, Sadie Davis, who came over first?

00:12:34

PD: Yes, ma'am.

00:12:35

AES: And was it unusual for a woman to come by herself at that time and travel to New York ahead of the family?

00:12:39

PD: It—it probably was. It probably—. The—it seemed like the women in all cultures are—are the stronger **[*Laughs*]**—are the ones that, you know, take on the new adventures, you know. Back then I guess her husband was like my daddy; he was laid back and, you know, he was just happy where he was, you know. But my daddy would always say, you know—I said, "Dad, you ever have a desire to go back to Lebanon?" He says, "No desire at all. America is my home." He loved America, really. **[*Phone Rings*]**

00:13:09

AES: Do you have an idea of how old your grandmother was when she first traveled to New York?

00:13:14

PD: My grandmother had to be probably about in [her] thirties—early thirties, you know, or late twenties, you know, because my father was—he was the oldest, and he was thirteen years old, so she must have been say sixteen or seventeen when she got married. So she might have been about in her late twenties, probably. But my mother who married my father, she was sixteen years old, and my dad was about ten years older than her. And they arranged the marriage; the families arranged the marriage here in Clarks—yeah. And my mother said, you know, at the time she was—didn't want to get married and she was scared and all that. But it turned out great, you know.

00:13:56

AES: So is your mother's family, the Chamoun family, are they related to Chafik Chamoun here with the restaurant?

00:14:00

PD: In a roundabout way we—we all are related, you know. Matter of fact, we're real close to the Chamoun family. And to be honest with you, I would say eighty percent of the people that came here from that area were Chamouns, but many of them changed their names to Gattis or, you know, different names, you know, Abraham, you know, and all. But they—we all are sort of interconnected, you know. As a matter of fact, he [Chafik Chamoun] has a family tree there [on

the wall of the dining room], but it's too big for me to read, if you want to take a picture of it.

[*Laughs*]

00:14:35

AES: Quite impressive. And so I wondered, too, early in the days when your family was here in Clarksdale, to—to maintain that Lebanese heritage and culture as they were living in the Mississippi Delta, what that took, for example, if we're talking about food and—and cabbage rolls and grave leaves and things, where they would have accessed those ingredients like the—the bulgur wheat and parsley and things like that.

00:14:58

PD: Well that's—that's a good question. I have no idea. But I know that they would grow their own grape leaves. Every one of them had a grapevine in the backyard. And the cabbage rolls, it was easy to get cabbage, and most of it is just meat, you know, and rice and seasoning. So that wouldn't be a problem, but the—the bulgur, the wheat, would, you know, probably someone from Memphis would go and buy a bunch of it and bring it down and—and sell it to those that wanted it all.

00:15:24

But we—my grandmother used to make *kibbe,* and she had what they called—with a *jorn*, which is a marble block about two-foot square with a big hole in it. And she would get an onion and chop it up and put it in there and then she would get a—a mallet and began to beat that onion until it was smushed. And then she would get the *kibbe* meat, which was ground twice, which is—which we used was the top-round, no fat, and put that in there, salt and pepper and—and beat that in and then add the—soak the wheat for about an hour. And then drain all the water

out and put that in there and beat that in that *jorn*. And I—I remember being little and she'd always come tell me to taste it and test it. And I would go in and test it and all.

00:16:12

And we—we have another and Chamoun's has it here, it's called *tabouli* [bulgur salad with parsley, tomatoes, lemon juice and olive oil]. We call it *suff soff* [?] but from all the older culture, which lived probably in—in Beirut, they called it *tabouli*, so we took on the word *tabouli*. But in Zahlé they call it *suff soff* [?], which is wheat and—and parsley chopped up with onions and seasonings with lemon juice. And we—we serve that with fresh grape leaves. And you talk about awesome.

00:16:41

And I remember, we would have a *tabouli* party. All of them would get together on one evening, you know, when they'd sit around and bring out chairs in somebody's backyard and pick the leaves off the tree and then wash them. And they'd come out with a big pan and everybody would get some of the—the *tabouli* and he would roll it into a little package and—and eat it and it was great. I still love it today, really.

00:17:06

AES: I wonder if your father ever talked about a moment where he kind of first experienced Southern food or how—if he was surprised about the food he found here or a struggled to make the traditional foods of his homeland.

00:17:20

PD: Well he began to—they enjoyed Southern food, you know. He came up with corned beef and cabbage. Now, if you've eaten corned beef and cabbage, you've eaten it, probably, with the cabbage and the corned beef cooked with seasoning or whatever. But he came up with it, and he would serve it at the café. He would heat corned beef and cabbage and add tomatoes to it, you know—a can of tomatoes—and serve that at the café and, man, they would—they would wear it out. And then he started making some stew. You know, but he always wanted to invent something. My—my father was way before his time. My dad was using the orange oil to clean the counters with, and that's back in 1940-something. And he would make me go buy some of them big seedless oranges, and we would get them and he would squeeze them—the orange and get the—that oil out of them.

00:18:14

Back then, our tables were like linoleum tops and, man, they would—I'd rub it with that **[*Laughs*]** and it would shine like a son of a gun. But he enjoyed American food as well, but basically he loved his *kibbe* and his cabbage rolls and grape leaves, and we at that every Sunday.

00:18:33

He would make corned beef and cabbage at the café, and he'd make spaghetti and put chili over to the café and—and he had—he always wanted to cook and—and do extra things, you know. But you got to realize, too, you know, I'm talking about being accepted. You know, we—my mother was telling me that she—we were able to go to the—to the white schools, you know, and the Chinese were able to go to the white schools back then, but African Americans, you know, they had their own school. And I think that probably was the reason for our problems today, you know. But anyway, we got a good education. And but they were always looked down at as second-grade citizens, you know. And mother used to tell me they—some of the girls and

boys would call her "dago," which is really Italian for—you know, a name for Italian. But they—they lived through that.

00:19:29

But my daddy was the type of person—he would not refuse anybody that came into the restaurant. And I remember one day, I was about fifteen years old, and had about three or four farmers sitting in the back, and they would eat barbecue and be drinking beer. You know, on a rainy day they couldn't do much, and they'd sit there really for several hours and eat and drink beer. And two black men from the northern area, I think Chicago, so they walked in and came and sat down on the stools. And Daddy waited on them. And then these guys began to make remarks to them. And my daddy went over to them and said, "Look, they come here to eat, just like y'all, so I do want to hear no more from y'all." And people respected Daddy back then because he had a sawed-off baseball bat that he—he **[*Laughs*]** trained with. When he said something, they listened. So they didn't say anything. So Daddy fed them and they paid, and they left without any incident. But when they left, you know—and I'm scared to death because I know that there's some animosity there, and they threatened Daddy that, you know, he could lose his business by serving black people.

00:20:34

But Daddy said, "If that's the way y'all feel, I don't need your business." And Daddy would never turn down anybody. A lot of our blacks who came to the café to eat would come to the back door and order, and we'd take it out to them. But if they were to come inside, he wouldn't hesitate to serve them. And because I think they sort of understood, you know, being a second-rate citizen, you know, what it felt like, you know. And even today, some of our people that came over from Italy and Lebanon and all say that, you know, the—we had the opportunity because we were able to go to the white schools and get the better education, and we've

neglected our other people here by not allowing them to have that same advantage. And now things are much better now, but we still—I think that it still weighs on a lot of people's minds, you know, the older people and—and the young people that came up with that kind of upbringing. But that's been years ago, and thank God most of us have forgotten, you know. And—but it's still a part of our history, you know. **[*Phone Rings*]**

00:21:46

AES: Yeah. I know that's something, I think, unique to the Lebanese community in the Delta is that they arrived as the merchant class and—and already, you know, established themselves in that level of—of culture here and have been able to navigate both the black and the white societies here in the Delta.

00:22:03

PD: And another incident. I had another **[*Laughs*]**—the Samaha family, Mitchell, he would always tell this story. He would—he was a peddler and he would go out and, you know, find a new plantation and sell stuff to some of the—the families there. And they enjoyed seeing him because he had a product that they needed. So one day he was there, and the farmer caught him there. And the farmer came up to him and pulled a gun on him and cursed him out and told him, "Don't be coming on his property." And he said, "Well,' you know, "I didn't know I was interfering," you know, "with anything." And the farmer opened up his suitcases. He had two of them. And he told his help to get what you want. And none of them picked up anything. So he closed the suitcases, and he took off running. **[*Laughs*]**

00:22:51

But anyway, it—it was a tough life for them, but thank God they—they managed to survive, you know.

00:22:57

AES: Do you know anything more about your father's horse and—and cart that he—when he was first trying to be a salesman that he carted around?

00:23:03

PD: All I can remember is everybody, all the Lebanese people, would always talk about he had the prettiest horse and the prettiest cart, you know. And I think he was about the first one to have a—a cart, too, you know, back then. And but he always had nice things, you know, and I don't know how he did it in that little business, because he said one day he took in a quarter. You know, and then he told me he went and gave it to his mama, **[*Laughs*]** which I wasn't sure about, unless he wasn't married at the time.

00:23:29

But no, it was tough on them, you know. They managed. They were a simple people, and they—they were able to live off of the basic things, you know. And—and they made most of their food really just from growing it, you know, and—and eating it, and they—we—we got something we call *labneh*, which is a—sort of like a—it's not—well it's not sour cream but it's that other—I can't think of the name of it. Anyway, I'll think of it in a minute, but you'd have to have a starter, and you would get a starter from another family. And you would boil the milk until it bubbled, and when it bubbles, you would take it out and let it cool until you can stick your finger in it, and it don't burn your finger. And then you would add that starter to it. You would mix the milk in there and add that starter and cover it up and let it sit for overnight or over

to the next day. And the bacteria would build up and it would get solid. And it was a delicious meal. You'd put it on rice. You could put it on fried *kibbe*. It just went with everything. Some people got it and put sugar with it and all.

00:24:42

AES: Was this like a yogurt?

00:24:42

PD: Yogurt, yeah. Just like yogurt, yeah. And—and as a matter of fact, you can take yogurt now and use that and—and mix it with the milk and you'd have yogurt, but it wouldn't have that twang to it. And then they would get that and dry it out. They'd put it in a bag and dry all the water out of it, and it was real—like a Philly [Philadelphia brand] cream cheese then. And we'd get the cracked wheat and then mix the cracked wheat with it into a ball about the size of a baseball. And then I would go out and climb on the roof and put a sheet out, and I would take the bucket up there with the little balls in it and lay them on the roof to dry out. And after they dried for about a week, **[*Laughs*]** and hopefully the birds didn't fly over them, I would go up and there and I would pick them and put them in a bucket and give them to my grandmother, and she would—the *jorn* that she made the *kibbe* with, she would put it in there and beat that up. And it's called *kishk* [a powdered bulgur cereal fermented with milk and yogurt], and they would fry meat with garlic. I mean you could use twenty or thirty pods of garlic, and they would put it in there. And then they would add this *kishk*, and then they would add water to it and make a gravy. And you could eat that with the Lebanese bread, and you won't even taste the garlic. It was—it's—we used to eat it for breakfast. It gives me indigestion now, so I haven't ate it lately **[*Laughs*]**. But you can buy it now, already made *kishk*, but they used to—to make the *kishk* that a way.

00:26:16

AES: And the Lebanese bread, did y'all have any ovens—specific ovens that you built for that back in the day?

00:26:22

PD: My grandmother made Lebanese bread every week. She had a stove with four eyes on it. And I don't know where she got it, but she got someone to build her a dome out of steel, or like a big pot, but she turned it upside down and would heat it up. Then she would get the flour and mix it with water and her seasoning and make like a—a biscuit, about five times the size of a biscuit and let it sit. She'd cover it with a—with wet towel and let it sit overnight. And then the next day she would get it, and I can see her now. She would mash it and sort of make it to the size of a pizza dough. And then she started whipping it over arms and whipping it over her arms until it was thin as a tissue paper. And then she would take it and lay it over that dome for about fifteen to twenty seconds, pick it off that dome and turn it over—fifteen to twenty seconds and it had brown spots in it where it burned, and she lay it over to the side, and she'd do another one. And she would do about twenty or thirty of them. And you talk about good with some butter on it when they're hot. Man, we used to love that—jelly and—but she made it every day—every—every week and we'd eat it all that week. We'd very seldom—would eat bread. You know it was—and that was our spoon, really. We would grab the grape leave with that and eat it with—and the *kibbe* and so forth, and so that was our spoon.

00:27:50

AES: Is the pita that Mrs. Chamoun makes here, is that reminiscent of what your grandmother—?

00:27:55

PD: Yeah, it's the same. It's not—it's not pita bread now. The pita bread, she would make that, too, but it—it stayed about—a little bit smaller than a—a pizza dough and then when you put it in the oven it would bake it and swell up and have a—a gap where you can open it up. But the thin bread is the one that you would flip and flop with the arms, and it was amazing. I mean they were professionals at it, too. **[*Laughs*]**

00:28:17

AES: And you mentioned that you would put butter and jelly on it, which I think is funny. And that reminds me to ask you about honey. Did anybody raise their own bees to get honey here?

00:28:27

PD: We had some friends that brought honey to us that lived out in the country. And we also—they used to bring us our milk. They—they had a cow, and they would bring us our milk. And the beautiful part of it, that milk they would bring us would have about three inches of cream on the top. And my daddy would find out that some of us would use that cream for our cereal, and he'd beat the heck out of us because he said, "You're supposed to shake it up and mix it in with the **[*Laughs*]** milk." But we used to love that cream with our cereal.

00:28:56

We used to cook rice and then put milk on the rice and then put sugar and eat that as our cereal and called it *roze haleeb*, which is rice and milk, but we—we really enjoyed that as young kids. That was our—it looked like our dessert, I would say.

00:29:14

AES: And now tell me about *baklava* and other traditional desserts that were made in your home.

00:29:19

PD: What now?

00:29:20

AES: *Baklava*.

00:29:22

PD: *Baklava*. That's *baklawa*? That's something that my grandmother used to make and it—it took time to make that because she would have to roll that dough thinner than a tissue paper. And she'd—she'd lay it out on a—make a square out of it and then she'd cover it with butter and sweet—sweetening, which was made out of sugar and—and water boiled. And then she'd make another thin sheet and lay that on there, and then she'd get pecans, and crack pecans on that and then lay out another—. She had about fifteen to twenty sheets. And then she would cut them in diamond shapes after they—they baked them and covered them with that sweetness on top. And that was the *baklawa,* I think is what you're saying, *baklava*.

00:30:06

AES: And so the pecans would have been an ingredient that they would have found here that they wouldn't have had in Lebanon?

00:30:10

PD: And they made another thing, which was wrapped in pecans. It was just regular dough, thin dough, and they just wrapped that in pecans and baked that, too. And I forgot what they called that but they would make—that was an easier way to make it instead of doing all that other stuff. But that—those kinds of items were made on holidays, you know: Christmas, Easter, and stuff like that—they'd go out of their way to do the extra thing, you know.

00:30:33

AES: And so she made from scratch, obviously, her own pastry—phyllo pastry—thin sheets of that?

00:30:39

PD: Oh, yeah. We also stuffed squash, and I used to love the stuffed squash. We would core it out and then put meat and rice mixed with seasonings and crushed tomatoes in there and then stuff that squash with it and then cook that, and that was stuffed squash. And we also made a—another thing I loved was called *kibbe labanieh*. That's *kibbe* and *laban*. They would get a *kibbe*, a raw *kibbe* ball and stick their finger in it and make a hole inside the *kibbe* ball and put butter in it. And then they would seal it. And now they got water and that sour *laban* warming on the grill with some rice. And when the rice is about half-done, they'd put those *kibbe* balls in there. And

they would let them cook, you know, for about forty-five minutes or whatever. And then you'd take it out, and you could make a meal.

00:31:36

I used to love when it was cold and I would take and bite part of the *kibbe* ball off and then stuff the rice and the *labanieh* inside of it and eat it that way. **[*Laughs*]** But all of the food really that—and every Sunday you're going to get that, you know. You're going to get true Lebanese food, you know.

00:31:54

AES: Was it kind of a frustration, maybe, for your parents when—you were born in the [19]40s and as Clarksdale starting changing and more kind of mass-produced food products kind of started coming on the market and arriving in grocery stores, if that was something that you and your siblings craved, like you know sugar cereals and things like that—that your parents were really frustrated that the diet in the house was changing?

00:32:14

PD: No, I don't think so. They—they—we had cereal and all the kind of good foods and we—we'd—. It was like the string beans. I can't stand string beans. But the way we cook it, I loved it. We would cook it with meat and onions and tomatoes, and then we'd make rice on the side, which is called Lebanese rice. My mother would get a pot and put butter in it and get spaghetti and break it into about once-inch pieces and drop about maybe fifteen to twenty spaghetti things in there and brown them. And as soon as it gets brown, she'd add the rice and the water and let that cook together, and you would have spaghetti and rice together. And you would get that—and it has a different flavor, too. It's good. And you would get that, and you'd put it on your

plate and then you'd get the—the *lub-yeh*, which is string beans cooked with tomatoes and meat and put that over there and eat that. And that was really a good meal, too.

00:33:07

I cook that even today for my grandkids because they like beans and stuff. **[*Laughs*]** But I—I do a lot of cooking. I enjoy cooking. And I got the grandkids live next door to me, and my other daughter lives about a block or two behind me. And—and I'm good at making Italian food, too. I make Italian spaghetti, which is excellent. I made some last night, and I called my grandkids and my daughter to come over—I know she loves it—and we ate spaghetti.

00:33:36

But, my wife works in the yard—does all the manual labor—and I do all the cooking, so we **[*Laughs*]**—.

00:33:42

AES: Tell me about that—before we stared recording you were telling me about a catfish with onions that you like to make.

00:33:46

PD: Yeah. You just fry a catfish, you know, and then we have a slaw. I like our slaw, which is vinegar and oil, and then you get a raw onion and you take a bit of the catfish and then you take a bit of that onion, and then that slaw and it's just a great combination.

00:34:01

AES: What about olive oil in the—?

00:34:03

PD: We love—we live on olive oil. We—when we make our raw *kibbe,* we even put olive oil on our *kibbe* as we eat it raw, you know. It makes it go down better, too. But we cook with olive oil all the time.

00:34:13

AES: But how—how, for example, would your grandmother and your—your parents have gotten access to olive oil?

00:34:18

PD: I'm sure they would go to Memphis. You know, I think Memphis had everything we needed and—and buying it. I remember when it used to come in big cans, you know, and probably from the Italian heritage. You know, they would have that all available. And the olive is another thing. As a matter of fact there's a saying that ***[speaks in Arabic],*** and that's, "Bread and olives are the best thing you've ever eaten." And my daddy would say, "For breakfast, go eat four olives and two pieces of bread and go to school." **[*Laughs*]** And it was healthy and it was delicious, but the bread has got to be a good fresh bread, too, and—and that and a glass of milk is—is awesome, really.

00:34:56

AES: Was there much intersection between the Sicilian immigrants in the Delta and the Lebanese families and—?

00:35:05

PD: We were all kind of close, you know, but we—we did our own thing, and they did their own thing, you know. We were really a—a close group, really. And as a matter of fact, when I was in high school and my cousin started going around with an American boy, I got jealous, you know, because I thought he was supposed to be part of us, you know. But that was my mentality. We—we were family and we did everything together. We partied together. And, you know, and then I began to realize, **[*Laughs*]** you know, we got to move out from this little culture. And then finally, eventually that happened, you know.

00:35:37

AES: And tell me how that translates to, say, now your grandchildren. What—what kind of age are they, and how are they being introduced to their Lebanese heritage?

00:35:45

PD: Very little—very little. You know, I do sing some songs to them, you know, every now and then. And I tell them some stories of—you know, that I was told, you know, when I was little. And that's basically all, but they love the Lebanese food. And as a matter of fact, when they know I make *kibbe* for the girls next door—my daughter next door has got three little girls—and they love *kibbe.* And my wife gets the Syrian bread and she—they got—she got to make each one of them two of them. And she gets the *kibbe,* and she puts olive oil on it and then she sprinkles mint. They love the mint on top of it, and she rolls it up and makes them two little sandwiches. And they're in heaven. **[*Laughs*]**

00:36:20

AES: How old are they?

00:36:22

PD: Madison is about ten years old and Sara's is about eight and—and Ayden, got a little brother, he's about two and a half—three years old. And they're just as wild as they can be. **[*Laughs*]**

00:36:35

AES: Well then tell me, too, about handing down the—the cooking traditions and how important that is in your culture and how you learned to cook.

00:36:41

PD: Well I learned from my grandmother and my father. And back when I was working with my dad, my grandmother would cook. She knew that I loved grape leaves. She would cook grape leaves. And Daddy who didn't want to be outdone; he would cook grape leaves the same time that she would cook them. So I had two pots of grape leaves. But my daddy wanted to go that extra step and do something better, and he puts onions with it **[*Laughs*]** and it ruined it. It ruined the taste. You know, it didn't ruin it but it—. But they—they would—my—we lived with our grandmother for a long time. We moved out. My father and mother moved out and went to Fourth Street to live, and then my grandmother got where she couldn't get around that well, so they moved back in with her. So I had—I had a beautiful life. I had a beautiful grandmother. She'd sing in Lebanese all the time, you know, and just cried all the time, you know, and reminiscing, you know, about the old days and all.

00:37:35

And I'd come in from school and she'd be washing the dishes, and she'd be crying and singing the blues songs, you know. And I'd go up to her and I'd hug her, and I'd give her a dollar and she quit crying.

00:37:49

Anyway, I think I gave her quite a bit of money. **[*Laughs*]** But she was always—she was there to cook all the time. As a matter of fact, eventually, my father and mother moved to another house, and I stayed with her for several years. And I'd wake up to the smell of fried eggs with onions, green onions in it, and she'd come into my room to wake me up to go to school and she would sing, "Good morning, ya, good morning. How you doing this morning? Ya, good morning." And I can just hear her right now. Beautiful life—people that experience a grandmother in their life are the most blessed people in the world, really.

00:38:26

And my grandkids enjoyed my—my mother. My mother was—not an educated person, but was very outgoing, very—. As a matter of fact, she was the President of the Altar Society in our church and was even head of Jackson Deanery over the Altar Society. She—she was a very outgoing person really. But she taught—she—she worked with the little girls and the Brownies and the 4-H Club and all the little—my—my children grew up with her, you know. And they learned how to do all these things, you know, through—through her, really.

00:39:02

AES: What year did she pass?

00:39:04

PD: She passed away about ten years ago, probably 1997, I think.

00:39:12

AES: How old was she when she passed?

00:39:13

PD: She was—she was eighty-four years old. She was eighty-four years old. My dad died in 1966; he never got his check from Social Security. You know, he worked all his life, I mean all his life, really. And—but you know, the kids benefitted from that.

00:39:30

AES: And what year was he born? Was it 1900, do I remember from—?

00:39:33

PD: My dad was born in 1900. My mother, if she was eighty-four, she was born ten years after that, so she was born about 1910—in that area, yeah.

00:39:45

AES: And what year did your grandmother pass?

00:39:47

PD: Oh I can't—I can't remember—many years ago. She had diabetes, and they had to amputate one of her legs and she—she was a very cheerful person. She'd always say she's got one leg in the grave and another one on a banana peel, and—and she really did. **[*Laughs*]** But God bless her, she died in her sleep. You know, a beautiful part of my life.

00:40:11

We would play a game, a Lebanese game called *Basra*. You'd deal out six cards and you'd put four on the table, and if you got a king in your hand and a king on the board, you get to pick it up. And if you got a jack, you can pick up all the cards. And in her older days, that was her entertainment: me playing with her. And she would cheat and always win, but I didn't say nothing about it. **[*Laughs*]**

00:40:35

AES: Well now, tell me again, you mentioned the Lebanese American Club that y'all formed. When—what year was that formed?

00:40:41

PD: That was probably in [19]47. I was about ten, and it lasted all the way until I was about nineteen, twenty years old, you know, and all the families started leaving, you know, town and growing up and—and doing—and going to college. And it sort of just—all the young people just started going different ways and it sort of broke up. And it's still sitting there today and it's a—a black church now. It's over on Fourth Street, Martin Luther King Boulevard. As a matter of fact, it's right across the street from where my daddy's first restaurant was, Bungalow Inn, on that corner, and one block from there is where we lived on 1506 Fourth Street. So, and right next to that Lebanese Club was the Farris family, you know. So we all were in that same neighborhood. **[*Laughs*]** And the Brooks, who was married to a Lebanese lady, lived about a block from there. And across the street was two Lebanese families and well out on Alabama Street was a Lebanese family, you know, the Farrises and Chamouns and everybody. I can't think of all the names right now off-hand.

00:41:49

AES: And so then now today, y'all maintain the Cedars of Lebanon Club. Tell me about that.

00:41:55

PD: Elaine Daho is in charge—she's the President of it, and it's mostly a ladies' club. But they invite, you know, the men together and other Lebanese people, and we'll come here to Chafik's [restaurant, Chamoun's Rest Haven] and eat once—once a month or go to Abe's to eat or go somewhere—or go to the casino, you know, to eat together and just try to keep us together and—and—and most of them go to the conventions they have. You know Elaine and her husband all goes—to all of them. You know they really enjoy that. And I used to love that, too, but I don't have the opportunities to go now and you know—.

00:42:29

AES: Like a Lebanese Convention, you mean?

00:42:30

PD: Yeah. Yes, ma'am. [The Southern Federation of Lebanese Syrian Americans] They got all the music and all and the music is different, you know. Our music was from way back, and it was more like the blues, you know, but that's what we were raised on. But the new music, it's good, you know, but it doesn't—it doesn't bring back the memories, you know, that I had when my daddy was playing his instruments, you know.

00:42:49

He made another instrument called the *manjira* and—which I couldn't play either one of them. On the *mijwiz* you have to continue to blow, and I would note of his cheeks would just

blow up, and when he would get out of breath he would breathe through his nose and press with his jaws to keep that instrument going, and I never could develop that. And the *manjira,* he stuck it in between one of his teeth **[*Laughs*]** and he—and he stuck his tongue in it somehow or another and it came out a beautiful music and all. They don't—the music now doesn't have those instruments. You know I'm sure they still have the *durbakkes*, the drum, but most of them have *ouds*, you know, a banjo or guitar, the pianos, and all the other instruments now. But we was raised with that drum, the tambourines and the—the *mijwiz*, you know. And I wish I could have played it. It's just beautiful music, really.

00:43:43

AES: Did you ever have an occasion to record your father playing any of this music?

00:43:47

PD: I think my—we have a recording of Jerry Abraham's father and Sam Tony playing together and singing. And I can get that tape for you if you want it.

00:44:00

AES: Oh, yeah. I would love to hear it, definitely. And I—I wonder if you can explain how you—you were talking about how when the Lebanese American Club kind of disintegrated and people moved away and whatnot, but it sounds like your family is still so intact here. Did your siblings stay in Clarksdale and—?

00:44:17

PD: Most of them did, yeah. Yeah. As a matter of fact, all of them did, until my daughter got married, and my second oldest daughter got married, and she lives in Greenwood. But all of my family lives here, you know. I'm blessed you know. They're all—all around us and—and—and most of the other families, we were—the Gattas family, they—they ended up going different ways, but a couple of them stayed here, so we were still in contact with the siblings, you know, Joe and his brother Freddy and—and Thomas Davis, who is my first cousin, his family stayed here and all. But his daddy died at a young age of forty years old and then Thomas, God bless him, died at a young age. He was about forty-five, fifty.

00:45:04

But anyway, all of them—ain't nobody left but me and Chafik and—and some of the Farris family, David Lee Farris, and I got Jerry Abraham, you know. And really I don't have too many Lebanese in my age group, you know, that hung around together. And as much as they love Lebanese music, when we go into the casino together I try to sing it **[*Laughs*]**—.

00:45:31

AES: So you're—you're a Southerner and you're Lebanese and you're a Mississippian. Is there an order that you consider yourself those things, something that comes first?

00:45:39

PD: I think first of all I'm an American, and I'm proud to be an American. And I just hate to see some of the people that call themselves Americans and—and don't support our government and our way of life, but that's—that's part of the freedom we have, you know.

00:45:58

But I'm American and—and I'm a Mississippian, and I guess in my heart I'm Lebanese. I love the music. As a matter of fact, I used to sit up under the Victrola, the record player, and play Lebanese songs and get drunk every now and then, back when I was young. I don't do that now. **[*Laughs*]** But I just love the music. It just—well, after my father died, anyway, I used to just love to hear the *mijwiz* and the *durbakkes* and—and the singing that goes along with it. And the men back then that sang the *Athebee*, you know, really the *blues* song about missing home and all that, it was—Danny Thomas—I had a tape of Danny Thomas. I don't know if I still got it, but he sang *Athebee,* and *Athebee* is just a—a beautiful way of just sitting back and just relaxing and just listening. And if you don't understand but one or two of the words, it still is just very meaningful to you, you know.

00:46:54

But I got two Lebanese tapes in my car that I—one of them is *Dances of Port Said* and *Port Said,* but both of them are from the Port Said area, but those are the songs that my father and them learned back when they were little and they brought to America with them, you know.

00:47:15

AES: And—and tell me quickly what Chamoun's Rest Haven, the restaurant here has meant to the Lebanese community.

00:47:19

PD: It's meant everything. I mean if—if you don't want to cook Lebanese **[*Laughs*]**—a lot of people don't like to cook. And this is where they—as a matter of fact, every Saturday night we come here because I don't—usually on Sundays I'll invite everybody but I do it just once in a while and make *kibbe* and grape leaves. And my grape leaves are better. But everybody has their

own little niche you know, but I love hers too now. I'll eat grape leaves and the cabbage rolls and fried *kibbe* mostly when I come here and *tabouli* and the *hummus* dip. *Hummus* dip is chickpeas made into a dip, you know, with lemon juice, olive oil, and—and garlic. And if you overdo the garlic or overdo the lemon juice, you can mess it up, so it's got—got to be the right taste and the right thickness and they make it excellent.

00:48:02

AES: Are there any traditional Lebanese drinks that have been maintained or that you can talk about?

00:48:08

PD: The only—the only one I can remember is Arak [an anise-flavored liquor], and it was white-looking, and it would knock you out. It's called—it's whiskey and it's called Arak. And I think they made it. They made it out of—God, I can't remember. They would make it either out of rice or corn, I'm not sure, but it had a milky look to it, sort of like sake. You know it had that—that look to it and it was strong, yeah. And we had our share of moonshine, you know.

00:48:42

AES: Well, we've visited quite a while here. I appreciate you sitting with me. Is there—we've talked about so many things, and you have so many great stories, I'm sure that I—I don't know to ask, but is there anything that I haven't asked or wouldn't know to ask that you want to make sure to add?

00:48:56

PD: I—I really can't think of anything else. But just to show you how—our little business back then we didn't seat but about twenty people, and customers would be standing and waiting in line to get a seat. And on Fridays, some of the Catholics would come in and they would order grilled cheese. And Daddy would hate to grill cheese because it took away the area of cooking the hamburgers and the barbecue and toasting the buns. So I'm on the grill. No, Daddy is on the grill. It was a two-man operation. He and I worked and I cleaned up. I'd hop the cars and blow the horn, and we worked great together **[*Laughs*]**. And Mike Farris, who is married to—he's Italian but he's married to my cousin, Mary Ann Davis, you know, so he'd come in. He worked at the factory with my brother, and he'd order grilled cheese. So I'm working and I'd get two pieces of bread, and I'd throw it to Daddy and they landed together on the grill. So he'd put some weight on it. He turns it over and toasts the other side and puts it on a plate, and we give it to him. He ate that whole sandwich without the cheese in it and didn't say a word, paid for it, and the next day he told me, "There wasn't no cheese in there." **[*Laughs*]** So Daddy thought I had put the cheese in there, too. But that's how much they respected, you know, what we did, I guess.

00:50:17

And eventually, I saw customers eating fast so other customers could sit down. And I said, "I've got to do something." So I enlarged and now I'm seeing that again, so I'm getting ready to enlarge again and pick up another fifteen to twenty seats, you know.

00:50:36

AES: Has there ever been anything Lebanese on the menu at Abe's?

00:50:38

PD: No. Daddy never fixed any—. I think he liked Lebanese food so well, when he'd make it, he would eat it, you know, **[*Laughs*]** and we—if we didn't beat him to it. But no, he never did. And corned beef and cabbage is all I can remember and the stew, you know, and hot tamales were the extra things he would make. And—and now we're using so many hot tamales and make so many we can't—there's no way. We'd have to have a whole factory to do it, and we found a—a place that could make our tamale for us, and they make it for us. And then we—when we cook it, we add our seasoning to it still, you know.

00:51:16

AES: Can I take a question from left field here and ask you how y'all do your barbecue quickly?

00:51:22

PD: Oh, it's simple. We just get—we use a Boston butt, and we cook it differently than Memphis barbecue. Memphis barbecue is slow-cooked twelve, fifteen hours; we cook ours on about 275 [degrees]. We get the Boston butt and we sprinkle it with salt and then we put them in the pit, and we use a piece of hickory or pecan for the flavor. And we cook it within six to seven hours. And that cooks all the grease and the fat out of it. So then we take it out of the pit, and we place it in a pan to cool. And when it gets cool, we place it in the refrigerator. And the next day we pull it out, and it's got about three to four inches of lard that came out of that meat. So we take it out of that lard and wipe that off, and then we slice it cold. And it is the leanest meat you can get. It is the most healthiest meat you can get. And we take that—slices and warm it on a grill a little and make a sandwich out of it. But if—if people realized how healthy that would—compare to the pulled barbecue that has all those juices that taste great and all—it's not as

healthy as ours, and ours even tastes better, you know. Like I say, I eat one every day except Sunday.

00:52:47

AES: How was your father cooking the barbecue back in the day?

00:52:49

PD: My father, like I said, was way before his time. He made a pit out of block-brick and he got a piece of stainless steel to cover the top of it, and he would put the wood right up under the meat. And I would have to stand there with a bucket of water, **[*Laughs*]** and when the meat catches on fire, I'd smolder the fire.

00:53:11

[End Pat Davis-2 Interview; Begin Pat Davis-3 Interview]

00:00:00

AES: Okay.

00:00:01

PD: So my brother David, who was three years older than me, was going to high school, and he was in Type-B Shop, which is Metal Shop. And dad said, "David, I want you to make me a pit." So David made a pit out of black iron that had a firebox under the—the meat and we used that for many years, and we still had to stay outside with a water hose so when that grease catches on

fire and the meat catches—we'd have to knock the fire down, and we'd use a lot of wood and all that.

00:00:34

So when I went to—made it to Type B Shop, Daddy said, "Pat, I want you to do something for me." "I said what's that, Daddy?" He said, "I want you to make me a pit." He said, "I'm tired of fighting that fire. I want you to make me a pit." Now this is in 1950—'51, '52. "I want you to make me a pit, and I want you to put the firebox on the side." So I designed the pit, and he helped me design it with a firebox on the side. And I built a big firebox, and I put bricks on it—and laid brick on top of it because I knew that's where the heat is going to be. And I insulated it—galvanized metal on the outside and black metal on the inside, and that was the jewel of our time. We could put that meat in that pit and start that fire and ain't got to worry about it catching on fire. And then all of the sudden, America caught onto that and you see that.

00:01:27

And as a matter of fact, the Ranchero [restaurant in Clarksdale], who was owned by Nelms Mitchell, at the time, was a Coca-Cola man. He would bring drinks to the café. And he came in one day and we had—I had built a brick pit then, you know, same firebox on the side, and Nelms came in and said, "Abe," he said, "I'm thinking about opening up a barbecue place. Would you help me?" My daddy said, "Whatever you need, you let me know." He said, "Mr. Abe, first of all, I need to build a pit." He said, "Tell your brick man to come here and look at my pit." And, to this day, Nelms Mitchell has a pit identical to the pit that we had and—which we have taken down now and we use the—the rotisserie now—the pit, which they don't—they barbecue but not as much as we do. They've got steaks and all those other things. But that—that was my daddy, you know. He would help anybody. I mean, a competitor!

00:02:17

You ask some people nowadays, you go into business with them and they don't want to talk to you. But Daddy was a person that trusted God and read the Bible every day and went to Mass every day. You know it's just amazing. My mother and grandmother, all of them—very religious people, you know. And thank God for that because my family and my wife, you know, we all believe in our Lord and—and trust in him and we've had some sad moments in our life. My son, Clint, committed suicide when he was thirty-six years old. He—he had got into drugs after an accident, and one of his friends got killed and—and he was such a loving person, like all of my family, really, that he—he couldn't get over the idea of his friend being killed. And he had begged the guy to go with him to the lake that day. Well, the accident wasn't his fault. He was hit from the rear. And he never got over that. As a matter of fact, many nights we'd go out to the cemetery, and he'd be out there.

00:03:17

And he was taking medication because he had a cracked spleen—not a spleen but pelvic—and take medicine for that and—the medicine for that, and I think he just got onto drugs and—and we sent him to several places and he just—he couldn't handle it. And he—he took his life, you know, and—and I thank God, you know, because I know that my son was in so much torment that he'd have peace. And I think God allowed him to have that peace now, you know, and that's how I can deal with that, you know, because I trust God, you know, to the point that I know my son is at peace now, you know.

00:03:55

AES: What church do you attend?

00:03:57

PD: St. Elizabeth Catholic Church. You know, my whole life was centered around my church. I was on the—President of the School Board and President of the Steering Committee for the fair, Eucharistic Minister, everything that my church offered, proclaimed, or you know, I was—wanted to be a part of it. That's how—and that's why I spent nineteen years with Habitat [for Humanity], you know. I love God and—and when I tell people—I'll never forget. I had a college professor from Delta State [University], and he came there and we were building houses. We built a dormitory for the volunteers to come here. And we were walking down the street, and the city had given us two blocks, you know, to build houses on, and we done built about seven or eight houses. And I was president at the time. And the professor came and he said, "Pat," he said, "let me ask you something. Why do you do what you do and don't get no pay for it?" And I said, "Because I love the Lord Jesus, and this is what he asked me to do." He looked at me, turned around and walked off like I was nuts, you know. And—and to this day, after nineteen years of serving with Habitat [for Humanity], I've seen that in a lot of people, but they're good people because they've come here to share. But they don't—many of them don't do it because of love for God. They do it for—because of love for people. And they're good humanitarians, but it's still that goodness of Christ that's in them that causes them to—to love and—and they don't understand that at this point.

00:05:34

And if—and that's fine, you know, and they can go prosper and—and do great, you know, without a god, but I need a God in my life. **[*Laughs*]** You know, there's too many things that I have to ask for, you know, that I can't do on my own. It has to be a spiritual power and—and that spiritual power has—has been—there are many miracles in my life. And I'm sure in your life and throughout the rest of your life you'll have a lot of miracles, too, and they can be miracles or they can be coincidence. It's whatever you want, you know.

00:06:08

AES: Well that might be a good note to end on, but I have—I have two questions, actually, that I'd—I'd like to really end on. And that would be, if you could name your favorite Lebanese dish and then your favorite Southern dish?

00:06:21

PD: I said my favorite Lebanese dish—is grape leaves. When I get depressed or get down and my wife can hear me in the kitchen, she knows I'm making grape leaves. And I can make them and be eating them within an hour. And that's a chore. You've got to wash the leaves and—we get them already in jars now, you know. We don't have fresh grape leaves, and I haven't—got used to the jar leaves, so I don't use the jar—nothing but the jar leaves. And my kids, when they know I'm making it, I add a lot of lemon and they—they flock to the house. You know, I'm making grape leaves. I'll make a big old pan, and we'll eat the whole pan. And if they don't come, I eat the whole pan. I could be full to here **[*Gestures*]** and still—.

00:07:01

I can remember my grandmother when she could make them and she would issue them out because we had a lot of—there was three families living in the house back when I was real young. And she would give us like three each, you know, and we had to eat it with bread to get full—regular bread. **[*Laughs*]** And I remember sneaking by and opening that pot without making a noise and getting one. And boy, they were just delicious, I guess because I was stealing it.

00:07:22

And the—the second thing you asked me, I didn't hear you, the—?

00:07:26

AES: If you could name your favorite Southern food, what would that be?

00:07:29

PD: My favorite Southern food besides the catfish would be fried chicken. Fried chicken and catfish, I—I love those. I don't cook them. I go buy them—Kentucky Fried Chicken and the Quality Seafood has the best fried catfish, and I usually get it from them. But we used to cook them all the time, but it's just me and my wife now. We just—it's easy to go buy it now and all. But if I'm going to make Lebanese food, you know, I'll make it myself. But I do come here to eat sometimes when I'm not in the mood to cook. But if my family is going to eat, I look forward to it. I look forward to all the holidays because then I make *kibbe*, grape leaves, and cabbage rolls and all.

00:08:14

My wife rolls the cabbage rolls real little about the size of my finger. I roll them about the size of my fist. **[*Laughs*]** It's just as good. And look, if you're in a hurry and you ain't got time to roll them, I put some water on them with lemon juice in it, throw the rice in there, get about ten leaves and wash them, cut them up in little pieces, throw that in there, throw the meat in there and stir it up, and I make that. And man, it's just as good, you know.

00:08:39

My dad always said, you know, "You can grind it up any way when you chew it," so—. **[*Laughs*]** But anyway anything else you want to ask me?

00:08:46

AES: We've covered so much and we could stay here all day, but I sure don't want to keep you all day, so I appreciate you sharing your family story with me.

00:08:51

PD: Can I tell you about a miracle? There's only two people I know of that walked on water and that's Jesus and St. Peter. Well, I walked on water. We were at Moon Lake back when I was about twenty-five, thirty years old, and we had a ski boat. And I was skiing, and I was new to Moon Lake. And I didn't know that there's an island called Texas Island, and when the water is low it ain't but about that deep. **[*Gestures*]** And I'm skiing. I'm skiing behind the boat, and I look up and I see the motor kicking up. So I—thank God, I let go of the rope and when I did, I just glided to a stop, and I'm standing in ankle feet of water. And I'm walking towards the boat, and my children said, "Look, Daddy is walking on water." And that's how I walked on water. **[*Laughs*]**

00:09:47

AES: Well, thank you for sharing that miracle. That's a great story.

00:09:51

PD: All right. Thank you, Amy, and I enjoyed the conversation and you've brought back a lot of memories, you know, sitting here talking with you. And I hope to see you again in October.

00:09:59

AES: You will definitely see me in October.

00:10:01

PD: What is the day, the—?

00:10:03

AES: The twenty-first [of October].

00:10:02

PD: Twenty-first, okay. And that's a—what a Thursday or—? Okay, and we're going to meet here? And you say fifty people? Are they young or old or a mixture or—?

00:10:15

AES: Well, it's a mixture and I'm—I'm going to turn this off and we'll talk about that in more detail off the record.

00:10:20

PD: All right.

00:10:20

AES: Thank you.

00:10:20

[End Pat Davis-3 Interview]