

PAULA BYERS

**Longtime customer of Bowen's Island Restaurant and friend of
Robert Barber - Lives in James Island, SC**

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Date: January 18, 2007

Location: Ms. Byers's Home – James Island, SC

Interviewer: Amy Evans

Length: 50 minutes

Project: Bowen's Island Restaurant

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Southern Foodways Alliance

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[Begin Paula Byers Interview]

00:00:01

Amy Evans: This is Amy Evans on Thursday, January 18, 2007 and I'm just outside Charleston, South Carolina, with Paula Byers at her home. And Paula, would you please say your name and your birth date for the record, if you don't mind?

00:00:16

Paula Byers: Yes, Paula Byers, and I was born October 11, 1944.

00:00:21

AE: And what area are we in, specifically, neighborhood or island or—?

00:00:25

PB: We are on James Island, and we are actually in the town of James Island. But James Island is a large island across the river from the city of Charleston.

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AE: And we're here to talk about Bowen's Island Restaurant because as I heard from Robert Barber, you're a long time loyal good customer. But if we could first get some of your personal background, and you were telling me you were from Tennessee and when you came here and— and all that.

00:00:53

PB: I was born in Franklin, Tennessee, in a very small like eight-room hospital. And when I was in the second grade, I moved with my mother and stepfather to Daytona Beach, Florida. And I

graduated from the University of Florida, and when I graduated, my husband and I had a choice of Charleston or Tallahassee, and we chose Charleston because it was on the ocean and that was very important to us.

00:01:15

AE: May I ask what you did or still do for a living?

00:01:19

PB: I graduated and spent the primary years as a first grade teacher, and then I left that and went into legal sales for a very long time, selling law books and software to attorneys. And about ten years ago, when my brother with Downs Syndrome moved here to live with me when our mother died, I made a big switch and became the Marketing Development Director for Special Olympics.

00:01:44

AE: Okay. And so you've been here a handful of decades. And Bowen's Island has been here since the '40s. Can you remember your first—first hearing about Bowen's Island and then also your first visit to Bowen's Island?

00:01:59

PB: Actually, I can't remember either one of those; it's just like Bowen's Island was always there. But I think I didn't really have much contact with Bowen's Island until Robert Barber moved to Charleston, and he wanted to get in political office, and he knew that I'm a very loyal Democrat, which Charleston doesn't have a tremendous number of, although they're growing. And he called me, we had lunch, and we became friends. At that point I started going out to

Bowen's Island. I will tell you that Bowen's Island is not, for me, a food designation so much as it is an experience designation. But I think I can remember the first time I ate at Bowen's Island. I went out there with a group of friends and I—Mrs. Bowen, his grandmamma, was still alive at that time; as a matter of fact. Mrs. Bowen was the witness to my will. by the way. Robert's law firm was attached—that little block building [in the back of the restaurant], and he wrote my will and then he called his grandmamma over from the kitchen, and she witnessed that will. That's one reason I've never rewritten my will because I hate to do away with that. It seems like a piece of history. But a group went out to dinner, and I'm not much of a steamed oyster person. The restaurant was divided into the oyster room, where John or Steve—I think at that point it was Steve because the cooks out there become part of the family, too. I think Steve was doing the oysters then. And I wanted the shrimp. So when I ordered I said, "I'll have the fried shrimp." And Mrs. Bowen slammed my soda—those little short Cokes—Coke on the table and said, "Then you go in the other room," which meant that I had to choose between staying and not eating or going in the other room, so I just stayed and not ate. But she was very, very, very specific about where you ate what food.

And then later Robert started running for political office, and I helped him do a number of fundraisers, one here at my house, and two on Bowen's Island. At that point in time there was not—I'm sure there must have been a deck out there at one point in time because shrimp boats used to dock there. But I'm assuming that over time they had collapsed or gone away, so it was just the—the block building. And then they started to build the deck out there. So for one of his fundraisers, I went out. They were going to do it on the deck and they were way—there is not a sense of urgency on Bowen's Island. It's—things will get done as they get done. Things get thrown out on the ground sort of, and they'll get picked up eventually. And I don't mean to say

it's trashy. It's just that it's kind of eclectic in that way. So we had to get that deck done, so I went out there with a carpenter, Richard, and started helping to nail down decks—nail down boards. We didn't have a compressor gun; we were just nailing them. So the ones with the bent nails are probably mine. But eventually, we did get it finished, and we had the big fundraiser. And I think he was running for US Congress that particular election. Robert should have been elected every time he ran, but for some reason in this state we just weren't ready for someone who, while being a very traditionalist at heart, still has a huge heart and compassion for acceptance of people who are different. And I think, as I told you the other day, when I think of Bowen's Island—

Well, here is another example. I got promoted to a Regional Manager with my company and—but there was a month's time in there where I didn't have to work. So I went out to Bowen's Island every day. I knew Steve, the oyster cooker and knew some of the ne'er do wells out—that were living out there because it was a lot—lots of old trailers. Most of that is gone now. I jokingly say, eventually they're going to gate it but—let's hope not—but people just coming running out there to you. And Steve was still living out there and the dock was finished, and I'd go out and climb up on the pilings. I couldn't do this now; this has been probably fifteen years ago. And we would dive off those tall pilings at the end of the—the dock and swim across the river. That was the only way you could be in the club, and it was kind of like Wendy and the Lost Boys. So we'd go out, and I'd have lunch or we'd cook lunch out there or something. So for about a month I swam off that dock almost everyday.

But there's just this real sense of, you know, a US Congressman, a Federal Court Judge would be treated no better, no worse than an alcoholic living in a trailer out there. The whole

island seems to have this acceptance of—and maybe it's Robert—of people who are down on their luck; they're just as worthy as everybody else. I guess that makes sense.

So when my daughter got married, we were looking for a place to have the rehearsal dinner. And Bowen's Island is not only funky, it's absolutely gorgeous. I mean it's got the most incredible view. And so we decided to have the dock out there. And there are two docks. One is a fishing dock, which is the honor system, I believe, that if you want to fish off that dock, there's a can you can put a dollar in or something. And then there's the big dock with the roof and all. So we had her wedding party there, and people came from all over the country to the wedding, and they were just enthralled with this place and the graffiti all over the walls. And there's still signatures from my daughter's wedding out there and—and we shot fireworks off from the other dark at the—at the end of the rehearsal dinner. We did have it catered. We didn't—**[Laughs]** Bowen's Island didn't provide the food.

But—I'm trying to think of what else about Bowen's Island. We talked the other day on the phone about just not memories but feelings, because I think sometimes there's a difference between a specific memory and how you feel about something. And I think—and I remember when I found out about the fire, I felt like I had lost a family—I get choked up talking about it because—and I know they're going to rebuild, but this was a place people went to—like I say, they went there for the experience, not necessarily the food. And there was a continuity about names on the walls and the stuff, and people could come back after being out of town 30 years and it was the same. And they could go find the signature they had written on the wall as a Citadel Cadet, like a lot of Cadets go out there. So I think that—that feeling of it provided a home, when maybe your own home was no longer there, because people are very transient now, and the home we grow up in is now somebody else's house they're living in. So I have this really

warm acceptance feeling about Bowen's Island. So yeah, the fire really hurt. And I went out there and—to a—Robert called a press conference the next day and all his friends went out there and—and everybody at first was saying this was kind of like a wake and Robert said, “No, we're going to make it as joyous an occasion—we're going to rebuild this restaurant. It's—it's not going to be different. We're going to salvage what we can.” And I haven't seen the restaurant since the fire; so—. What other questions can I answer?

00:09:28

AE: Well I have a lot.

00:09:31

PB: Ask the specific questions.

00:09:31

AE: When is—you mentioned the other day that your—that Robert married your—your daughter, and I want to hear about that and then also your daughter's experience at Bowen's Island and how old she was when she first started going out there.

00:09:42

PB: Well Robert was the Minister at my daughter's wedding, and that's another story, too. I told someone that Robert married my daughter and they say, “Oh my God, what happened to LaNelle?” [Robert's wife] I said, “No, he didn't marry my daughter [*Laughs*]. He was the—he was the Minister of my daughter's wedding.” We chose Robert because we're not very traditional churchgoers, so we didn't have a regular Minister, but I wanted someone who wasn't religious but spiritual. Now Robert is probably both, but I see him as a very spiritual person, and

I see him as a very grounded person, so we asked Robert if he would be the Minister at Sandy's wedding. And he did. And halfway through the service he started talking about the seven-year itch, which kind of like everybody is stunned but—but the truth is, it really was well spoken because he talked about how marriage is a real commitment and how in this country 50-percent of marriages breakup, so marriage is not an easy thing to do. It has to be worked out every year, and everyone, at some point in time, might be tempted to stray from their marriage, but it's the commitment within the marriage that makes it—that makes us reject that and go back to the one that we chose. So he was the Minister, and she was married in an old plantation house in Hollywood, South Carolina, which is also gone now. And then Sandy and I—I don't—I think we just feel like Robert has always been kind of an extended part of the family. We've known him forever. He has a huge Cinco de Mayo party every year on Bowen's Island, which we've been going to for years. It started off as absolutely an enormous thing; the police were out there directing traffic. It would be interesting because everything from the cooks in the kitchen to Fritz Hollings, the US Senator, would be at this party together, and Sandy has always gone with me. And then when my grandson was born, he's gone with me. And Sandy and my grandson and I were in Robert's commercials for his—now they cut his out; you didn't see us on TV, but we were out there when they filmed the commercials [for his campaign for Lt. Governor of South Carolina] and one of the interesting things is a new show on the *Food Network* came out there. Do you know about that—the *Hungry Detective*? But he cut Bowen's Island out when he showed the show because—I don't know why they cut it out because one of the restaurants he showed in Charleston I never heard of in my life and—but it was after the fire, so maybe—maybe that's why he did it, figuring he couldn't recommend people to go there. But we did go, and he had some people out there eating and, you know, it's a place where I've gone in the afternoons just to

sit out on the dock and read a book. People can do that—to just go out and visit. And so I think Sandy would—Sandy is probably not as close to Robert as I am, but I think she would reiterate the fact that it just seems like—I hate to keep going back to family place, but I think that’s really what it evokes in people is kind of a family place to go to. And I think Robert’s grandmamma would be really proud of his continuing this tradition. My guess is the land is worth a whole lot more money than the amount of food he serves in that restaurant. I can't imagine he’s getting rich serving food in that restaurant. And the dock itself, I can't think of any non-profit that has asked Robert to let them use that dock for a fundraising event that he’s ever said no to. So everyone, there’s some kind of group out there having an oyster roast or something for—for their non-profit. So ask more questions. I’ve run out of things to say. Ask more questions. **[Laughs]**

00:13:29

AE: Well I want to know if—and I don’t know if you can put this into words or not—but Mrs. Bowen, being kind of the matriarch of Bowen’s Island and being this female head and kind of minding all these misfits on the island and oyster pickers and—and oyster cookers and whatnot—what—maybe her role as being kind of a mother to the island, then also you as a woman going there and—and being a regular and what kind of, you know, dynamic that creates—if it’s different or—.

00:14:02

PB: Well I—I didn’t know Mrs. Bowen very well, and from what I understand that she did allow a lot of misfits to come live on the island, and I’m sure that’s where Robert got it from. There’s a certain degree of sadness because I think that’s leaving the island, by the way. I mean and I love Robert’s family but his brother, Cas, has built a gorgeous home on the island—or I

guess Cas is his brother-in-law. But more and more really lovely homes are being built out there, so those kinds of misfits are not really present on Bowen's Island anymore. But I think she must have—I wish I had known her better because I think she must have been a very—what would be the right word, you know, businesswoman. I mean kind of what we look at as business woman today—at a time when there weren't a lot of business women. She obviously kept the place going, and from what I've read, it wasn't always easy. But she made the decision to keep it going, and I don't know how many kids she had, but I don't know—the second part of your question, how I feel as a female. I don't know that I even connect there or something. I don't think I go there so much as a—I don't know how to answer that. Okay. **[Laughs]**

00:15:28

AE: That's fine. That's fine. Can you talk about when you mentioned that there were trailers and things collected on the island and it had a different look and feel about it in the early days when you started going there? Can you talk about the changes that have happened over those years?

00:15:41

PB: Well at one point in time when you came onto the island the road went straight and then it made a loop, and at high tide you couldn't make the loop because the road was underwater. And the road if—if you envision Bowen's Island today where—where Robert Barber and his brothers' houses face out, there was actually a road in front of their house. And eventually, the road came straight down through the island as it is now. But at one point in time, 90-percent of the place was old trailers or mounds of oyster shells or a piece of equipment that got left somewhere and then never got moved again, and some of that is still there—a boat dock with

abandoned boats. I think mine was one of them one time, an old rowboat, and but people lived in these places. Steve lived in a little house with some kind of funky three-legged cat or something. A lot of these people had substance abuse problems I think; I mean I can't swear to that, but that would be my guess. And at one time—point in time he had to kind of ne'er do well Citadel Cadets that had a house out there, and they came and spent time in it on the weekends. And he had a woman named Susan who was one of the chefs—chefs—**[Laughs]** cooks in the restaurant, and I remember going to the doctor and Susan was in there, and Susan had fallen from the very top of the Morris Island Lighthouse down the stairs but she didn't remember it because, I guess, she was so inebriated at the time.

So a lot of the people that have come through there—but you know that's just—that was just their lifestyle but those things are leaving now. When you go out there now, you know, there's three or four gorgeous homes on the left, and now they're building nice homes on the right and the trailers are disappearing and the dilapidated houses are disappearing, which, to me, is a little sad. I mean how can someone say, "Well it's sad to see an old dumpy trailer leaving?" But it's—it's like everywhere I go there is—we've built another beautiful generic looking home. They all kind of look the same to me, and everybody that lives in them is kind of like the same and we've just—. So as I told you a minute ago, I expect one day to go out there and the whole island is gated. **[Laughs]** I told them, I said, "Don't you ever gate"—which I'm just joking. I don't think they would ever do but there's—there's a huge change in the past couple—20 years at the way Bowen's Island looks. It looks much more like, you know, Kiawah-ish [*Kiawah Island, which is a high-end planned community not far from Charleston*], if that makes sense. Robert may not like me saying that, but it's—but it's very valuable land. I mean it's extremely

valuable land. Anything on the water in Charleston is extremely valuable land. So—other questions?

00:18:40

AE: What about the—the restaurant itself, the physical space? What kind of—

00:18:45

PB: What did it look like?

00:18:46

AE: What did it look like and what, maybe, did you contribute to the physical space, and maybe some favorite areas in there, whether they be the graffiti or objects or people.

00:18:55

PB: Well one of the biggest problems the restaurant always had was bathrooms but [*Laughs*] it was not a place you'd ever want to go to the bathroom, I can tell you that. And I think he's improved on that. But as you walked in the front door there was a painting on the wall of Steve and—Steve [Shroyer], Mrs. [May] Bowen, and John [Sanka], I think. I'm trying to visualize that; is that right?

00:19:15

AE: Mr. and Mrs. Bowen and John on the outside, and then Steve is by himself—.

00:19:18

PB: Okay, Steve—which I believe had been marred by graffiti, but I don't know. Did it burn in the fire? That's still there, right; that's what Robert told me. But then when you went in, you know, on the porch there's—there was lots of collected furniture, none of which would be found in a fine furniture store, you know. It was just whatever, like abandoned furniture and you opened—you opened the door and on the left-hand side—. You want me to hold that [microphone] for you; are you getting tired?

00:19:47

AE: I'm okay. Thank you, anyway.

00:19:48

PB: The left-hand side was where you ordered your food and—and you know, there's a counter and behind the counter is where they were cooking. And on the right-hand side, the front room was a, I guess, the room that you would eat your fried shrimp or fish on and lots of old jukeboxes and TVs and graffiti, where people had written on top of each other on every available space. And then behind that was the oyster room. And then I don't know how they cook oysters now, but what they did then is they, you know, would have a big open grate where they'd pour the oysters, and they'd put the like burlap bags and pour seawater over it and steam the oysters open. So now my brother, Jimmy, who lives across the street from me, he goes by James—I call him Jimmy—my brother with Downs Syndrome calls him Jimbo, but he loves to take people from out of town to Bowen's Island because it's so unique. So he had his picture taken with Mrs. Bowen, and it was on the wall, and we understand it burned in the fire. But he's got a copy of it, so he's going to take it back to Robert. And one thing I think that indicates people's commitment and loyalty to this place existing in the world is after the fire instead of just saying, "Well that's

too bad. Bowen's Island burned," people started bringing things to Bowen's Island—pictures or memorabilia to put back in the restaurant. And I know they're rebuilding it—to put back into the restaurant to rebuild and recapture this particular place. So—and there was lots of old political campaign stuff in there that I guess got burned, too, unfortunately.

00:21:35

AE: Did you have a favorite part of the restaurant or a place that you always sat or anything like that?

00:21:39

PB: Well I always sat outside. I mean I prefer to sit on the—the little outside dock and there's always been an outside place to sit because the view from this restaurant is just—it's just magnificent. You face out across the river there into the marsh, and then in a distance is Folly Beach. And, believe it or not, we live in a city with a zillion restaurants, very few of whom have any kind of gorgeous view of the water. So it's just a very—it's a very peaceful place just to go outside and eat, so I would rather eat outside. Now oysters I don't eat, so I don't go there in the cold weather and sit inside and eat oysters, but lots of people do so that—that wouldn't have been my style.

00:22:20

AE: Do you have a memory of a—an unusual event or happening or fun memory from your days going there?

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PB: Well it wasn't the restaurant itself, but I was always very amazed that I could climb on top of those pilings and dive into the river. And Robert may not even know this, but some of us used to go back to the restaurant in the middle of the night and go out on the dock after we left the Sand Dollar at Folly Beach and go swimming in the water of his dock. Because there's phosphorous in the water, so we'd all go skinny dipping off his dock in the middle of the night, although he probably would have joined us, if he had known we were there. And I just dearly loved Steve, who was the oyster cooker. I mean he was just a great guy and fun just to sit and talk to and so other than that—.

Well I will tell you, one night I went out there and—no, when I sold legal research, the Public Defender's Office were having their annual party there, and Robert would say, "I don't know how I'm going to handle them because there's so many people." So I went out there and played waitress for a night. I just knew them, and I went out there and acted as a server and, you know, waited on the people from the Public Defender's Office. It was just kind of fun. **[Laughs]**

Lot of people have come and gone through that restaurant. It always tickles me to go over there and see Robert Barber back in the kitchen. And here's a man with a law degree, you know. He's an Ordained Minister and Registered Lobbyist—back there in the kitchen, you know, brooding shrimp and frying them up. And I just think—of course I think cooking is the most loving thing you can do for someone—to prepare someone a meal and sit down all together. It's almost becoming a lost art, too, because families don't eat dinner together anymore, and so that was part of it, too—is just like the—the hominess. I'm not sure I'm making sense to you, Amy.

00:24:17

AE: No, you're doing great.

00:24:18

PB: [*Laughs*] I'm not sure I am, so ask another question.

00:24:21

AE: Can you tell me more about Steve and who he—what kind of person he was?

00:24:26

PB: Steve was a tall kind of craggy seemingly gruff fellow who just—I remember he was out there one night—or one afternoon, rather—oh, I wish I could remember the guy's name—shooting off rifles across the river. [*Laughs*] And it always interested me because here was all this stuff going on, and Robert just let it go. Oh, I can't remember the other guy's name, but he lived in a little house that—I don't know what's there now. I think there is another house there, but I think it's been torn down. There's another house there now, but he's gone for a long time—a long time from Bowen's Island. It's Goat that's cooking now or is Goat bringing in the—?

00:25:08

AE: Goat is a picker, from what I understand. He cooks sometimes for catered events and things like that.

00:25:13

PB: Who is cooking?

00:25:13

AE: I think James.

00:25:16

PB: Okay, I think I might know him by name. No, that's—I mean one time Steve had a big—when the Lost Boys were all out there, and they were all young kids and there was Steve kind of like—they told me I could be Wendy and I said, “Hell no. Wendy had to take care of that motley crew. **[Laughs]** I'll be a Lost Boy before I'll be Wendy.” But he was kind of like an adult Peter Pan with all these guys around—with the blender making margaritas all day long on the dock out there. So and it's really going to be a shame if all that just totally disappears. I—I think Robert doesn't want that to happen either. I think he's dedicated to keeping it going, but it's already lost a lot of it. If you could step back 20 years ago and see what the island looked like back then, with only one or two what we would say nice homes on it; the others were all falling down. But even the houses that were falling down people have fixed them up and—. But other questions—?

00:26:16

AE: What was it like when people would drive out there on a really busy night and parking and all that kind of stuff? Did some people drive off into the creek there?

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PB: I don't know about that. I really don't. I—I don't know. They may have. Have you heard that?

00:26:30

AE: No.

00:26:30

PB: I don't know. **[Laughs]** I do know people would have trouble when the tide came in, and that's why they moved the road because the tide would come in, and you'd have to be trying to

back out on the road that was coming in. So I do know that when he's had parties out there, parking is a horrendous problem. Parking was a big problem the last time I came there. I'm not real sure why I was out there that long back. Anyway, no, I don't know about that—no.

So but it's also—I don't know if the oysters are especially good or is the shrimp is especially fried well, but there's something about the ambience of a place that compensates for that. And now when I went out there to film the commercial, the shrimp were wonderful. I don't know what Robert had done to them, but the shrimp were wonderful. But like I say, for me it was never about the food; it's always been a destination place to go for the experience. And it's a place you took out-of-towners because there's nothing like it anywhere else that I know of. I mean it's just so funky and the continuity of the same state—like I say, it always amazes me every time I've been in there to watch people looking for the name they wrote in there in the '50s. And, of course, then the dock started getting all the graffiti on it, too. I don't know anywhere else you can go do all that so—.

00:28:01

AE: What were some of the reactions of the folks that you took there for the first time—out-of-towners—do you remember?

00:28:06

PB: It was like, “Wow! Oh, my gosh,” you know. [*Laughs*] And also—but I will tell you this: this place is dirty. This place is kind of dirty, isn't it? [*Laughs*] Well yeah, [*Laughs*] what's your point? You know there are probably people that wouldn't eat there but—but it—I wish I could find the right words. I mean our family has always just—I remember that's where we went to when my brother, who is a doctor in California, we were out boating and we pushed the boat too

hard. It got grounded, and I fell down and got like a ten-inch cut up my leg on an oyster. So we went back, and I got off at Bowen's Island. The people there were helping bandage me up 'til we went to the doctor. People come by boat there to tie up and, you know, go inside and get a beer or something. It's just always been there, and we hope it always will be there. And in a town where everything else—I sound like my mother. I think I really don't like too much change; I think I really don't. I think I have this—the older I get, the more nostalgic I get for the way things used to be. And we need to keep some things the way they used to be. We need to pass that onto our children so that it's not all brand new this—. Now Charleston is steeped in tradition, and downtown Charleston looks the same but, you know, our restaurants could be picked up sort of and put somewhere else. Does that make sense? And Bowen's Island couldn't be; that's the only place it could be, so—anyway, I feel like I'm babbling, Amy. *[Laughs]* Do other people feel that way?

00:29:56

AE: It can be awkward with me and this microphone. Do you remember, specifically, when Mrs. Bowen passed and kind of the change of guard there at all?

00:30:06

PB: No, I really don't remember that. I don't—what year did she pass do you know?

00:30:10

AE: I want to say '90 but it may have been a year or two before that.

00:30:18

PB: No, I don't remember that, uh-um.

00:30:19

AE: How about—have you heard anything about what’s going on down there now since the rebuild? You said you hadn’t been down there but—

00:30:25

PB: Robert called me before Christmas, and he wanted the name of a friend of mine who was a carpenter because they were going to get started again, and he wanted to be open by January 1st. But I was told that they had not started. Have they started?

00:30:37

AE: They’ve started, and folks like James and Jack and Goat and all are down there doing it. It seems like everybody who worked there had, you know, an interest in the place.

00:30:44

PB: It was roped off. The last time I was on the island, you couldn’t go down there, and that was the press conference for Robert right before the election. I think that—that fire had something to do with Robert losing because he—he looked like he had a brave face but I could—I know it really hurt him. I know it just was devastating to him two weeks out from an election, kind of like, you know, just sucked the air out of him. But I knew that Andy Weiner who was an electrician had been out there working. Now Andy has a band, Smokey Weiner and the Hot Links. You must have heard of Andy. [*Laughs*] And he plays out there, you know, for free for different groups, so they started the construction and the carpentry and all. Okay. Well I knew Robert wanted to get it done. and I need to get out there because I’ve got something that belongs to his sister, so I need to go out there. But—but no, it was like everybody was calling each other

the day of the fire, “Did you know Bowen’s Island—did you know Bowen’s Island burned?” And that’s indicative of what it means to people because, you know, I don’t think—you said you’d eat at McGrady’s and I don’t think people would—would, “Oh my God, McGrady’s burned!” It was like, “Oh, McGrady’s burned.” **[Laughs]** So ask another question.

00:32:03

AE: Well what do you think it will be like when it opens again? Because Robert and I had a kind of passing conversation the other day about how he’s a little worried that so many people might descend on the place when they open that he—he’s not quite sure how to manage that?

00:32:18

PB: You know what? Actually, I thought about calling Robert and telling him when it opened again, if he needed somebody to come as a celebrity server, **[Laughs]** that I’d go out and help him. I mean, I don’t mind. It’s kind of fun. I think that in five years we won’t even think there’s been a fire. The graffiti will be back on the walls; the—the stuff will be back in there; people will continue to bring remembrances of Bowen’s Island. And it’s kind of like Hurricane Hugo [in 1989]. When it came through this town, we thought we’d never be the same again. It was horrible. I couldn’t get to my house; I couldn’t find my way home for trees and all, but now there are very few remnants. Of course it’s not quite like Katrina. But I think it will—it will all come back and be fine.

00:33:12

AE: When I think it—I mean it definitely—everything that’s going on down there right now really underscores the fact of—of the people wanting to make it—everybody wanting to make it

what it was and really making due with what they have that's left and not, you know, totally razing the—the burned part but just leaving it there and waiting until the right thing occurs to everyone or happens—it's a very organic process, it seems, like down there.

00:33:37

PB: Well I know he wants to restore it as possible—not restore. Yeah, maybe restore but put it back the way it was because I don't know what—I mean I don't know maybe he could level it and build a fancy-schmancy, you know, restaurant in that spot. Obviously, it's zoned for a restaurant. I don't know. But—and—and that might actually make more money. I think he probably makes a lot of money on the dock now with private parties, and he's already doing that. He had some of those days after the fire. I mean that—that part didn't stop. But and maybe we live in an age when baby-boomers like myself and Robert—because there is this big thing for nostalgia. I mean things that were popular when we were kids—a longing for, but I—I agree with you. I think—and how [*Phone Rings*] I'll just let it ring; they can leave a message. How cool it is that all the people out there that work out there feel such a commitment that—that they're working on the place. I know the paintings [the portraits on the exterior wall] he was going to try to restore.

00:34:44

AE: You know the—the person who painted those?

00:34:45

PB: No, I was just going to ask you. I do not know who painted those, uh-um. But I know—I'm glad that didn't get destroyed. It was just primarily back by the kitchen, right, the roof?

00:34:56

AE: Well the—it's amazing that those paintings still are there. I mean it seems like they miraculously somehow have—have remained.

00:35:04

PB: It's magic at foot. [*Laughs*] Maybe so.

00:35:08

AE: And this is kind of a change of gears, but I want to talk about, if we can for a minute, about oystering here, and do you know much about that tradition or do you know [the oyster pickers for Bowen's Island] Goat or Nell at all?

00:35:19

PB: I know who Goat is. I don't know them well, and I know nothing about oystering. So that answers that, doesn't it? [*Laughs*] I can tell you more about shrimping. I've been shrimping, but I've never done oystering. I mean I've thrown cast nets for shrimp, but I've never done oystering, uh-um. Nope.

00:35:37

AE: Well then I want to put you on the spot, too, because you talked about Sol Legare before we started recording and your ideas or notions or memories or knowledge about that place—.

00:35:46

PB: Well I taught first grade here. I taught 10 years, and I taught very low-income African American children, many of whom lived on Sol Legare Road. And Sol Legare Road—excuse me one second—is another place that's transitioning awfully fast. If you go down toward the boat

ramp at the end of Sol Legare Road, they're already building expensive homes and they're on the water, so there's another area where the land and my guess is—this is just a guess, some of it's probably heirs property and you probably know something about heirs property, right? Well heirs' property is where a family didn't have clear title in wills, so 16 people own a parcel of land, so there's no clear title to this land. But I want to sell, and you don't, and it's my understanding if I want to sell, you're forced into selling. So there's even a non-profit set up in town to help. And it's primarily an African American thing. So heirs' property down Sol Legare Road, forcing other people to sell. There's a place down there called Mosquito Beach. It was always African American; it's always been kind of rough, possibly. I've never been—I've been by Mosquito Beach. Backman Seafood is down there, where you can dock your shrimp boats. I know Susie Backman very well; she's worked at Publix [grocery store] with my brother, and I've been to Blackman Seafood, but I don't know why I was there. And I—I believe this is to be true, but I don't have any factual information that it's true, but Charleston, of course, was a very segregated community, and African American families were not allowed to go to the beach at Folly Beach, so they went to Mosquito Beach or 'Squito Beach. They went to Mosquito Beach to swim or, you know, it was kind of a clubhouse. They built this huge Piggly Wiggly [grocery store] on the corner. Across from that is a huge piece of land that has something to do with the Barber family. Are you aware of that? And I believe that Sol Legare—I hope this is not hearsay—that it was with that piece of property, the issue was height ordinances, and the only way they could justify the condos was to get height ordinances. And they had gotten it okayed, and then it was annexed into the—the Town of Folly Beach got it somehow—and to prevent that—which has been a big brouhaha because all those condos on the left on Folly Road, and now condos jumped to the right on Folly Road—it's just going to affect the development going

down Sol Legare Road is what it's going to do. I have an acquaintance I used to teach with, Harriet Wilder, who lives down Sol Legare, and if I had to bet on it, I'd bet that in 20 years that kind of development will go down Sol Legare. Because when land becomes too valuable—and that's what saltwater, oceanfront, marsh-front land is doing here, people will end up selling out. And like that trailer park in Florida; I don't know if you know about that, but the last little trailer park in Florida, the little mom and pop trailers, just sold out and made every person a millionaire except one guy held out but he finally—. So my guess is that's what will happen, too. Because when I moved here to go into Folly Beach there was—and we're talking about in history a very short time span. We're talking about I've lived here 40 years; there was not a single franchised restaurant, there was one grocery store, maybe two gas stations. There was nothing. Everything at Folly Beach was two stories. Where my daughter lives, it was fishing shacks. Her father happened to buy one on Clark Sound on deep water; now everything on Clark Sound or, you know, they're sitting kind of high off the ground and they're multi-million dollar homes. And it's the deep water part of it. And now Folly Road is all—all fast food. We don't have a single kind of mom and pop restaurant, locally. I'm trying to think if we have a locally owned restaurant; well there's one down—down there but it's become a bar more than a restaurant, but 90-percent of it at least is franchised restaurants. Not that that's a bad thing, but there is just not any locally owned—I think it's probably hard to stay in business. And so my guess is that—that's going to continue. But that's why we need to make sure Bowen's Island doesn't fall into that—that thing of—of disappearing. I don't think it will. I think Robert is very dedicated to it. Other questions?

00:40:48

AE: Well you've—you've kind of done this in different ways through the course of the conversation but no, it's been wonderful. I wonder how you would maybe describe—describe

Bowen's Island Restaurant to somebody who hadn't been there and what to expect. I mean you mentioned it all along the way but maybe a succinct kind of explanation of the place.

00:41:08

PB: I would tell them it's just this funky very eclectic place. Don't expect five-star dining because it's a really—it's a dining experience—not just for the food but it's an incredible view, and it's a place you almost can't visualize until you've been there. And then once you go there it hooks people. People come from around the world. Every travel digest, every, you know, travel guide, all tell you to come to Bowen's Island. And it's not because they're telling that it's got the best food in town, but they're telling you because it's a very unique Southern experience. It's—it's a South Carolina experience. There is no other place like it that you can go to this little funky concrete block building, get your supper, sit within a gorgeous view, talk to the owner who is interesting as can be, really have an experience with the people cooking the kitchen, very casual, bring the kids, let them run around and scream, and so I think it does hook people. I think after they've been there—when they come back to Charleston from 1,000 miles away, they want to go back to Bowen's Island.

00:42:16

AE: And what do you think about their—their slogan that says, “An island, a restaurant, a state of mind?” Pretty—pretty on target?

00:42:22

PB: I didn't know that was the slogan, but I like it. **[Laughs]** When did that come about?

00:42:27

AE: I don't know. We were talking about it last night, and it's on their shirt.

00:42:31

PB: Neat. Tell Robert—tell Robert I said it sounds a little trendy to me. *[Laughs]*

00:42:37

AE: Well did you—?

00:42:39

PB: An island—a restaurant, an island, a state of mind?

00:42:43

AE: Uh-hmm.

00:42:43

PB: Well I think that's very good. I think he stole it from Folly Beach because they say Folly Beach is a state of mind. Folly Beach, that's the edge of—where the edge of the world is, I think, is Folly Beach. What do I think about—what were you going to say?

00:42:58

AE: I was going to ask you about Bowen's Island and Robert winning the James Beard American Classic Award last spring.

00:43:03

PB: Oh, that's right. And you saw the picture, right, of the shrimp boats? I thought it was incredible. I thought it was really well deserved. Yeah, I thought it was very cool. I thought it

was interesting that something so different would be picked and not, you know, Emeril.

[Laughs] No, I thought it was pretty cool. I loved the picture. I thought he had a lot of nerve to wear that. Yeah, it's—it was a moment, for sure. Yeah, it was. So and in some ways maybe it's good that he didn't get elected. Maybe God has his way because after the fire, who—who would have seen to that the restoration was done, if he wasn't there? I don't think his children would. I think they've moved kind of on. Hope lives out of town. I don't know where Matt is. Do you know where Matt is? So I don't think his family would. I think it's his—his mission. And so, like I said, maybe God worked in mysterious ways.

00:44:00

AE: So what do you think, then, if we talk about the future of Bowen's Island and if and when Robert is not involved or—or around?

00:44:08

PB: Good question. That's a very good question. I don't know. What does Robert say? Did you ask him that question?

00:44:14

AE: Well he—he kind of hedged around it a little bit but that his—his—his children might take it over. They haven't made any serious, you know, plans but—

00:44:23

PB: Maybe Matt will. Matt is kind of the funky, smart kid, and maybe he would. I think he's in Law School, as a matter of fact, so maybe he would. If not him, there are other cousins; he's got you know—there are other nieces and nephews that live on the island and maybe they would.

00:44:39

AE: From everything you say, I mean Robert is definitely the lynchpin in—in the situation.

00:44:43

PB: I think, yes, I think Robert—Robert is—as you say, the lynchpin. He’s the guiding force behind what goes on there and—and I find that so interesting that—that he found that niche there and has a real love for it. I mean and I—I think—I don’t know which came first, the environmentalist or the restaurant or the restaurant and the environmentalist, but he’s a huge friend of the environment. And that just all kind of goes together because that restaurant—what is it, a one-story concrete block building and, you know, that makes that one little niche of the world absolutely unique that can't compare with anywhere. And there are not many places like that—that this one little square mile is very unique. The rest of the island is losing that uniqueness but down there at the point—how did you choose Bowen’s Island?

00:45:41

AE: Well John T. Edge, the Director of the Southern Foodways Alliance for which I work, he’s very much connected to the James Beard Foundation, and I think he and some other like-minded folks were—some of the folks who nominated Bowen’s Island for that award, if I’m not mistaken. And it’s just, you know, one of those places. John Edgerton, as I mentioned, who wrote *Southern Food* [and included mention of Bowen’s Island], is, you know, very connected to Southern Foodways Alliance. *[Paula brought out her copy of Southern Food to talk about before recording began.]*

00:46:06

PB: I didn't know that he was with your group. *[Laughs]* Yeah.

00:46:09

AE: So it's something that's been, you know—a lot of, you know, people directly affiliated with the organization and membership have always, you know, known about Bowen's Island and visited here and all of that, and it just seemed timely with the award and everything.

00:46:22

PB: So now they feel protective of it—this could disappear, too?

00:46:25

AE: Well and that has been such a profound kind of underscoring to the work that I do, when we've been talking about doing this project for a year and then it burned—the restaurant burned—and so now we're thinking, you know, more than ever, it's time to get the story while it's still—even though it's burned, it's still alive, you know, and to get that story now so—

00:46:44

PB: Exactly. I think that's a wonderful analogy is Bowen's Island still exists. It may be burned and you maybe not—can go eat there right now, although he's having parties on the dock, but it didn't kill the restaurant. It defaced it or scarred it, but it didn't kill the spirit of the restaurant. That has lingered, and I think that it will—I think it'll—it'll—who was it that rose from the ashes in—in mythology? Well I think Bowen's Island will rise from the ashes and go back *[Laughs]* and—and be a destination—excuse me again, sorry about that. But I do think it—it is sad that so many small local places disappeared, and we don't value them until they're gone. And if Bowen's Island were gone, I think people would suddenly feel—well I think that's what the fire

did. I don't know if people thought he'd rebuild. But it's all people talked about is the fire at Bowen's Island.

And as I mentioned to you, my hometown—I go back there and it just—it just isn't the same town. Of course it's not the same town, but so much has disappeared from that little town. My grandmother, by the way, owned—and I was thinking about this and I could kick myself—my grandmother owned a diner in Lancaster—in Lamont, California. Now my parents were divorced. I didn't know my father at all; I just knew he was in California, saw him every three or four years and knew my grandmother owned a diner. And now I would give anything to know more about her diner. The one thing I do know is like, when I went to see them as a kid, they'd sit me on the counter and have me talk and pay me because I had a Southern accent. And I guess there were Southerners that had trans—gone out west that wanted to hear a Southern accent—give me dimes to talk. **[Laughs]** But I thought, “Gosh, I wish I knew—.” But my father was an only child. My grandmother was an only child. I'm an only child, and so I have an only child; she has an only child—that I never thought to even talk to her about her diner. And it may be too late, although I did think about trying to go backward and find out something about her diner.

00:49:03

AE: What was the name of the diner?

00:49:05

PB: I don't know; I have no clue. But you know the Internet is an amazing thing. **[Laughs]** It is amazing what we can find out, if we really start digging into things. So other questions?

00:49:18

AE: Well no, we've covered a lot. Is there anything that, maybe, you have come up with that you want to make sure to add or final thoughts or anything?

00:49:25

PB: No, I think that's—that's pretty much it. Who else have you interviewed?

00:49:30

AE: I've interviewed Robert, and I've interviewed Jack London and you. And I'm interviewing his parents tomorrow.

00:49:39

PB: Oh, please tell them I said hello—wonderful family. A really nice family. I'm trying to think if there's somebody else. I'm surprised Robert mentioned me. Of course we were very flattered to be in his commercial on television, even if they cut us out [*Laughs*]*—*even if they didn't show us. Well listen, good luck and call me. I think what you do is fascinating.

00:50:02

AE: Well it's a good gig. I have no complaints. I love it, and I love meeting folks like you, so thank you.

00:50:07

PB: Well if you come back here, I want you to visit. I'd like to just talk to you about what you're doing. I'm going to interview you. [*Laughs*]

00:50:13

[End Paula Byers Interview]