

PEARL JOHNSON
Tamale Maker
Reno Café – Greenwood, MS

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Date: June 9, 2003
Location: Mrs. Johnson's Residence, 118 Vardaman – Greenwood, MS
Interviewer: Amy Evans
Length: 40 minutes
Format: Analog Cassette
Project: Greenwood Restaurants

[Begin Pearl Johnson Interview]

Amy Evans: All right. It is Monday, June 9th, two thousand and three, and this is Amy Evans at 118 Vardaman Street in Greenwood, Mississippi, interviewing—

Pearl Johnson: Annie Pearl Johnson.

AE: Who, makes some fabulous tamales. And may I ask your age, Mrs. Johnson?

PJ: Sixty-seven.

AE: Okay, and are you a life-long resident of Greenwood?

PJ: I’ve been here since I was sixteen [1952].

AE: From where did your family move? Or why did your family move?

PJ: Well, my father was living here and I came to live with him when I was sixteen years old.

AE: Okay, well, where are you from?

PJ: Eh, Charleston.

AE: Charleston, South Carolina?

PJ: No. Charleston, Mississippi! *[Laughs]*

AE: Okay. Have to clarify. I did drive through there once.

PJ: *[Laughing]*

AE: Um, so how did you learn to make tamales?

PJ: I started working at Lucas barbecue stand when I was eighteen [1954].

AE: Can you tell me a little bit about Lucas barbecue? I’ve been hearing a little bit about that.

PJ: Well, he made barbecue, hot tamales, hamburgers. And at that time, you know, we had a car-hopping place. And so that’s how I started off working there. And I worked there, I worked there about—I worked till he closed. Well, he passed and then she closed the business up.

AE: And where was that located?

PJ: At, on Avenue F. On the corner of Avenue F and Percy Street.

AE: Do you remember kind of what year they closed?

PJ: [Pause] Mmmm, could be like sixty-seven, I think. Sixty-six or sixty-seven, I ain’t for sure.

AE: Hum, and then did they just retire or—

PJ: Well, he passed away and then about a year later she just retired.

AE: Okay. And do I understand correctly that that was a white woman with a black man that ran that place? Were they married?

PJ: No, they weren’t married. He was white and she was black.

AE: He was white. Okay. And how’d they do? They were popular? I have been hearing good things about that barbecue.

PJ: Well, she could so some GOOD barbecue.

AE: Yeah.

PJ: She did all the, you know, the cooking, barbecuing, and making hot tamales—and that’s how I learned how to do it.

AE: And when did you—you just kept making them on your own after you left?

PJ: Well, it was—it was about—about ten years ago, after my daughter started running the restaurant then I started making them.

AE: Okay, and your daughter runs Reno Café.

PJ: Reno Café on McLaurin.

AE: On McLaurin. And why did she decide to open a café?

PJ: Well, I had been working for this guy and then she started working for him, and after he passed, she just kept the place.

AE: And what’s your daughter’s name?

PJ: Launice Gray

AE: And so did you kind of—how did you remember the recipe from Luca’s?

PJ: Well, I—before she passed, I had started making them, you know.

AE: Uh-hum.

PJ: And when she passed, then I would do a lot of the cooking. Like making hot tamales and making the sauce for the barbecue and stuff.

AE: Do you have a secret for your tamales?

PJ: Well [*chuckles*], no. Not really. It’s just [*laughs*] the idea of knowing, you know, how much stuff to use in it.

AE: Uh-huh. Do you know where she got the recipe?

PJ: I sure don’t.

AE: Huh.

PJ: Cause when I came to Greenwood, they were there on that corner. I think they started off down there on McLaurin, and then they moved down there. [Pause] So I don’t know—I don’t know —when she got them by tasting somebody that was selling them, and she just start, you know, when she found out the ingredients that they used, just tried it and it worked.

AE: Hum. And so how many tamales do you think you make—in a day or a week or a—

PJ: About twenty-five or thirty dozen.

AE: Yeah. And is that the thing—I mean, that’s the thing that I know you for. Are there other things that you enjoy to make that are popular—that people like?

PJ: Well, I like cooking.

AE: Yeah.

PJ: Making sandwiches and stuff. That’s what—my daughter mostly sells . You know, she cooks dinners and sells sandwiches, cooks breakfast.

AE: She’s open breakfast lunch and dinner?

PJ: Just breakfast and lunch.

AE: My goodness. Is she open on the weekends?

PJ: Mmm, she open all day on the weekend. But she don’t serve lunch on the weekend, she just serve breakfast.

AE: Okay. What kind of stuff do you have for breakfast?

PJ: Like sausage, bacon, ham, magnolia sausages, grits, eggs, toast. We don’t serve nothing like hash browns or nothing like that.

AE: How much is breakfast over there? For a plate.

PJ: Just bacon eggs, grits and toast is \$2.75.

[Pause]

AE: And do you have a lot of carry-out business over there? Do people eat in? Or both?

PJ: Well, it’s both.

AE: Uh-hmm. And I—so I know you sell your tamales to Giardina’s Restaurant. Do you sell anywhere else?

PJ: There’s a lady over at the Flat Top, she buy em. [Flatland Grill]

AE: The Flat Top? Where is that? Over on [highway] 82?

PJ: Uh-huh. Back over in there off of Fred’s Dollar Store.

AE: Well, when did you do that kind of selling out of the restaurant?

PJ: Hmm, well, I think the Flat Top [Flatland Grill] been open about—it’s been open about a year, I think. [Toddler crying in background. A woman walks in the house with a young boy.] And well, Giardina’s just started getting them

AE: Uh-hmm. You like that? That your tamales are that popular?

PJ: Well *[smiling]*, I enjoy it.

AE: *[Laughing]* Hey, how are you [to woman who walked in].

Woman: All right.

[Sound of screen door closing]

AE: [Pause] Well, what d you like best about cooking for people? Or cooking, period.

PJ: Well, I’ve always enjoyed cooking, you know. I’ve always—mostly, you know, when my children were coming up, I cooked for them and other children would be there and so now I just cook for the family most of the time. Like on weekends. Sometime all of them eat then. I just enjoy cooking.

AE: How many sons and daughters do you have?

[Toddler talking in background]

PJ: I got two sons and four daughters.

AE: Do all of them like to cook?

PJ: No. *[Laughs]*

AE: You’re the only one?

PJ: *[Laughing]*. Some of them like it. The one that run the restaurant, she like to cook. Well, I got [pause]. My oldest son, he cooks some. The youngest one, he’s started cooking.

AE: Yeah.

PJ: But they just f—well, I got a daughter that likes to barbecue. But she loves barbecuing. [Child talking in background]

AE: Um-hum.

PJ: She’ll just barbecue for the whole family when she get the opportunity *[short laugh]*—she do most of the barbecuing. [Child talking in background]

AE: Do you have barbecue over at Reno?

PJ: Sometimes we have it. Not too regular.

[Counter: 65]

AE: Well since you’ve lived in Greenwood all this time [pause] what kind of changes have you seen happen around here? [Child talking in background]

PJ: Well, it’s—it’s been a lot of changes in Greenwood. Added on. There been a lot of jobs in Greenwood, you know, gone out here recently. We’ve lost a lot of jobs. Major jobs that, you know, was helping this city. But now it’s kind of going back down since a lot of the jobs is gone.

AE: And do you think the restaurant business is a pretty good business to be in? [Child yelling in background.]

PJ: Well, it’s—it’s pretty good. It really varies to be in this, you know, the businesses going out has slowed it up.

AE: It’s a hard business to be in.

PJ: It sure is! Now that—that’s a working business!

AE: Uh-hum.

PJ: It—it’s really more work to me than that—to me than the factory work. Cause I worked at Baldwin and then I worked at the blue jean factory till they closed up.

AE: Uh-hum.

PJ: But I had to quit at Baldwin cause I had a bad leg and I got so I couldn’t wear closed-in shoes so I had to leave them [the company] out there.

AE: Hmm.

PJ: But they—they just went out of business.

AE: Uh-huh.

PJ: That’s when I left. Then. So that’s when I started working with my daughter.

AE: Hmm. And are there any other employees over there [at Reno Café]? Or is it just you and your daughter?

PJ: Me and my daughter.

[Pause]

AE: How old is she?

PJ: She’s forty-one.

AE: Does she have kids?

PJ: She has three boys.

AE: Do they work over there?

PJ: Sometimes. Well, the two oldest ones is grown and the baby go to school, so he work when he’s not in school.

AE: How about some of the other restaurants around here? Q-Ball’s Barbecue and—They have good barbecue over there?

PJ: We got, well—Bo Roach got good Barbecue.

AE: Who’s that?

PJ: Right up on the railroad. Bo Roach.

AE: Okay.

PJ: He have good barbecue. But I don’t know about Q-Ball’s. I ain’t never eaten there.

AE: No?

PJ: But I don’t just—Really, you know, I had been bothered with blood pressure, so I just eat a little when my daughter fix some.

AE: Uh-hum.

PJ: And let it go at that.

AE: Do you eat your own tamales?

PJ: Sometimes. I love em, but I can’t eat them like I want to because of that pepper.

AE: Hmm. Well another question that’s kind of around the way here. Since wer’e so close to Lusco’s [restaurant] over there, what do you think about that place?

PJ: You talking about right down here? [Points back over her left shoulder].

AE: Yeah.

PJ: Well, I guess—it all right with me! *[Laughs]* We right up this way [motions in the opposite direction from Lusco’s. Mrs. Johnson’s home is located just between Lusco’s and the Reno Café along a NW/SE line. Just a few blocks away from each.] So they serve a whole different line of food.

AE: I just mention it because it’s been there so long.

PJ: Yeah, it’s been there a long time.

AE: It’s gone through some changes, and the neighborhood’s gone through some changes.

PJ: But they still hanging in there.

AE: Do you know anybody that works over there.

PJ: No, I don’t know nobody that works there now.

AE: Hmm.

PJ: The ones—there used to be a guy worked there—I knew him real well, but he passed. I don’t know any people that work there now.

AE: Who’s the one you knew that you spoke of.

PJ: A guy named Dan. Dan Johnson. He worked there a long time. And then the guy that used to have Booker’s Café. He worked there for a long time.

AE: Yeah, I’ve heard a little bit about Booker—Wright was his last name? Is his, somebody mentioned that his family might still be running something out of that.

PJ: No, they’re not running it anymore. They’re fixing to tear it down, and the church is buying it for a parking lot, I guess.

AE: Oh my. Now see, that’s a little piece of history that’s going by the wayside.

PJ: His wife had been let it go. Cause her nephew had been running it.

AE: Yeah.

PJ: So he—I guess like everybody else—start working. They going to just tear the building down.

[Counter: 104]

AE: Yeah. Well, is there anything else you [pause] you maybe want to share about your tamales and life in Greenwood?

PJ: Well, I like Greenwood. It—it’s not what I came to, you know. It’s made a lot of changes since I’ve been here, but I still like it. I would rather kind of be out in the rural now.

AE: Yeah.

PJ: But—[pause]. When you get my age, you got to stay where you’re at. *[Laughing]*

AE: *[Laughing]*

PJ: *[Still laughing]* You can’t move on!

AE: Yeah.

PJ: You have to just stay where you’re at.

AE: Yeah. Well, you think you’ll make tamales as long as—

PJ: As long as I’m able.

AE: Yeah.

PJ: I will.

AE: And how much do they cost for a dozen?

PJ: Five dollars.

AE: Five dollars? Do you make different kinds or just one?

PJ: Hot and mild.

AE: Is the hot on the inside or is that the sauce that goes on it?

PJ: Well, they—they hot. It’s hot! *[Laughing]*

AE: *[Laughing]* It’s hot!

PJ: *[Laughing]*

AE: And are they all pork tamales?

PJ: They made out of beef.

AE: Beef? All beef?

PJ: All beef.

AE: I didn’t realize that. [Pause]. There’s not a—is there a tradition of pork tamales around here?

PJ: Not as I know of. I don’t know. Somebody make them in Greenville. I don’t know, you know, what—what kind they make.

AE: Uh-hum.

PJ: But I know it’s a guy over in Greenville make ‘em.

AE: Are you the only person that you know of here in GreenWOOD that makes them?

PJ: It be some more—I think the—the other people maybe—Well, I know of a lady that used to make ‘em, but I don’t know if she still make ‘em. But I think the most of them buy them, you know, from the guy in Greenville.

AE: Hmm.

PJ: A lot of people say they did.

AE: Yeah, that’s the—I think you might be talking about Doe’s? In Greenville?

PJ: I don’t know the Greenville place, but I do know—

AE: Between you and me, they have a machine that makes their tamales. And I—I don’t think they make them by hand. But I guess that doesn’t really always affect the taste.

PJ: Well, as long as you put the seasoning in *[laughs]* right, sure it make ‘em good.

AE: *[Laughs]*

PJ: And I—I haven’t ate any of those. I—My husband used to drive a truck, and he brought me home some one time but they was, you know, real large, but they didn’t really—To me they didn’t taste so good.

AE: Uh-hum.

PJ: But, you know. It all depends on what you like.

AE: Yeah.

PJ: Course they didn’t have any sauce with them. That’s probably why they didn’t taste good. They were just, you know, just dry-like.

AE: Uh-hum. Yeah, I think the sauce is something different cause I’m from Texas—

PJ: It helps, that taste of ‘em.

AE: Uh-hum. It does. What is it—what’s in the sauce? Without giving too much away.

[Counter: 130]

PJ: It’s—you make it up out of tomato paste.

AE: Uh-hum.

PJ: Tomato paste and water and put you some salt in. Cook ‘em in it.

AE: Uh-hum.

PJ: That’s—after you make ‘em you have to cook ‘em in that sauce.

AE: How long does it take you to make a dozen tamales? How many do you make at a time, maybe?

PJ: Like I said, about twenty-five or thirty dozen. It take about—a good five hours.

AE: My goodness. You make ‘em every single day?

PJ: Ohhh, Lo-ord. *[Laughing]*. No!

AE: *[Laughing]*

PJ: No way! That’s too much work. *[More laughing]*

AE: Well, how often do you make them then?

PJ: Once or twice a week.

AE: Oh, okay.

PJ: And just fill the orders and make enough for your daughter’s place to keep people happy?

PJ: Right. Cause it’s too much makin’ tamales to make ‘em every day. *[Short laugh]* I’d sure enough be wore out.

AE: And you try and go over to Reno Café every day or—

PJ: Yeah, I go over there every day. Yeah.

AE: Well, I’ll have to make my way over there.

PJ: Okay. *[Laughs]*

AE: I’ve been eating a lot since I’ve been here. I might as well just keep going.

[Both laughing]

PJ: You gonna gain weight.

AE: I know, I know. But you know, I got to do my research and—

PJ: Well, I understand that.

AE: And keep from getting hungry so—Well. Well, I’ll ask you one more question. How about, I’ve been hearing a lot about Chicken Will Edwards. Do you know about him?

PJ: I know some. I didn’t—I didn’t know him.

AE: No?

PJ: But the lady—the people at Lucas Barbecue stand—they knew him, but I didn’t know him.

AE: Is there anybody still around who was kin to the Lucas barbecue folks?

PJ: No, because her sister passed.

AE: Uh-hum.

PJ: So, that was the only relative she had in Greenwood.[Pause] He didn’t have—his people lived out of town.

[Long pause]

AE: Well, all right then. [Pause] I believe we might just be done.

PJ: *[Laughing]* Oh, okay.

AE: Unless you want to add anything else. [Pause] I think we covered everything.

PJ: Okay.

AE: Okay.

[Counter: 153]

[End]

NOTE:

When the recorder was off, Mrs. Johnson began talking some more about Reno Café. I asked her where the café’s name came from, and she said that they just kept the name of the restaurant that was there before they were. I also asked her what day she makes tamales and if I could come watch her. She said she that she doesn’t have a regular schedule—sometimes Tuesday, sometimes Thursday. She said to call and she’d let me know. Her husband, Mr. Johnson, came in from work. Mrs. Johnson and I walked out to the front porch where I took a few pictures of her. Will visit again this week with follow-up questions and info from my visit to watch her make the tamales.

Follow-up Interview:

(Same audio tape)

June 11, 2003 @ 5:00 pm

Mrs. Johnson’s residence

Amy Evans: It’s Wednesday, June 11th, and I’m back talking to Mrs. Pearl Johnson, doing a follow-up interview at her house. It’s about five o’clock in the afternoon. And, Mrs. Johnson, for one, I was going to ask you to spell your daughter’s name: Launice

Pearl Johnson: L-a-u-n-i-c-e.

AE: And Gray? G-r—

PJ: A-y.

AE: A-y. Okay. And what was the Lucas family—What was their whole name? Who ran the restaurant?

PJ: Andy Love Lucas. And Katie was Katie McLean.

AE: Katie McLean. Do you know the name of the previous owners of Reno Café?

PJ: I know his name. O. C. Gibson.

AE: O.C.—those are initials? O. C. Gibson?

PJ: That’s all I know is O.C. Gibson.

AE: *[Laughing]*

PJ: They call him “Fluke,” but I know it’s O.C. Gibson.

AE: And then what time does the Reno opening in the morning?

PJ: Six o’clock.

[Counter: 166]

AE: Six o’clock. And do you have a lot more breakfast cust—customers than lunch? Or does it vary?

PJ: Well, about the same.

AE: And, the Baldwin plant you mentioned when we spoke on the other day. Was that the Baldwin piano plant?

PJ: Um-hum. That I used to work at?

AE: Yeah. And what did you do there?

PJ: Work on the assembly line—up there.

AE: What part of the assembly line?

PJ: I did—they call it the spoons and let-outs in the back of the piano. And put the key beds in.

AE: And then, how did the LeFlo—LeFlores know to buy your tamales for the Giardina’s restaurant?

PJ: Okay, LeFlore. He used to buy them. His brother did. The little short one. I know his name, but I can’t think.

AE: William?

PJ: William.

AE: Uh-huh.

PJ: And so I guess he told his brother about ‘em.

AE: So he used to come and just get ‘em for himself.

PJ: Uh-huh.

AE: Pretty regularly?

PJ: No, not regular. Just every once in a while.

AE: And how about the lady at the Flat Top [Flatland Grill] Restaurant?

PJ: Well, I don’t know who told *her* about it either. She just come get ‘em every—you know. Like maybe once a month or sometime twice a month.

AE: And both restaurants, they come pick ‘em up?

PJ: [Nods “yes.”]

AE: You don’t deliver them to them at all?

PJ: [Shakes head “no.”]

AE: Okay. And then, just—I though maybe you could just kind of describe the steps in making a tamale.

PJ: Well, you have to have the meal. You got to precook the meat. And then season it. Then ground it up. And then you take the broth off of the—meat and make your meal up with it. [Pause] And that’s the way it—[pause]. You know, that’s—that’s how you go about doin’ it. *[Laughing]* You have to use the broth to make the meal up.

AE: Uh-hum.

PJ: So the meal goes around the tamales.

AE: Uh-hum. And then you said you cook them in that sauce.

PJ: Uh-huh. [Pause] And you just roll out and wrap it in a—they call it a parchment paper. And tie ‘em up, and then you cook ‘em in that sauce.

AE: You don’t ever wrap them in the cornhusks?

PJ: [Shakes head “no.”]

AE: Why not?

PJ: Well, the corn shucks is real expensive, and then you have to boil ‘em and—

AE: Too much trouble?

PJ: A lot of ‘em tear up. They real *good* with the corn shucks, now. They taste—to *me* the taste better, but—they’re hard to find.

[Scraping sound in background is Mrs. Johnson scraping the bottom of her cereal bowl. She was eating cereal during most of our conversation, which is why she shook her head to answer a few of the questions.]

AE: Huh. And you keep the tamales frozen as you go if you make extra?

PJ: When I make ‘em, I freeze ‘em and just cook off of ‘em.

[More scraping of the bottom of the cereal bowl.]

AE: Okay. Oh, the last question I was going to ask was, when we spoke the other day, and that woman came in? Is that one of your daughters?

PJ: That’s my daughter-in-law.

AE: Daughter-in-law and your grandson?

PJ: [Nods “yes.”] She married my son.

AE: Yeah. And how many grandchildren do you have?

PJ: Oh, it’s—eighteen, I think.

AE: Eighteen, my goodness. *[Short laugh]* That’s a lot to keep track of. Are they all here in Greenwood?

PJ: No, I have—I have one in Gulfport, three in St. Louis, all the rest of ‘em is—well, I have a grandson in Jackson, going to school. [Train whistle in the background.] But he be up back and forth home most of the time. Rest of ‘em live here.

AE: Do you think that your daughter over at Reno will keep making the tamales when you decide to stop making them?

[Train whistle still in the background.]

PJ: *Well*, I guess she will. She hadn’t said, but I’m sure she will.

AE: She knows *how* to make ‘em?

[Train whistle still in the background.]

PJ: [Nods “yes.”]

AE: All right, then. Well, that’s all my questions.

PJ: Oka—

AE: You’ve filled all my holes for me.

PJ: [Laughing] Okay.

[Counter: 208]

[End]

