

ROBERT BARBER
Owner, Bowen's Island Restaurant – Grandson of May Bowen

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Date: January 16, 2007
Location: Mr. Barber's home on Bowen's Island – Charleston, SC
Interviewer: Amy Evans
Length: 2 hours
Project: Bowen's Island Restaurant

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[Begin Robert Barber Interview]

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Amy Evans: This is Amy Evans for the Southern Foodways Alliance on Tuesday, January 16, 2007; and I am in Charleston, South Carolina, on Bowen's Island with Mr. Robert Barber. Mr. Barber, would you say your name and also your birth date for the record, please, sir?

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Robert Barber: Surely. I'm Robert Barber, and I was born on July 29, 1949.

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AE: Were you born on Bowen's Island?

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RB: Well I was born in Charleston, but the first place I lived was—was Folly Beach. I lived on Bowen's Island as—as a young child but the first place I lived was on Folly Beach over a family's restaurant there [called Bob's Lunch].

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AE: Okay. That's a good place to start because your—your grandparents, Jimmy and May Barber, is that right—?

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RB: Well their last name was Bowen. May Bowen was my dad's biological mother and—and Jimmy Bowen was his stepfather and so they were married when he was a—a fairly young child too, yeah.

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AE: And were they originally from this area? Were they born here?

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RB: My grandmother was. Yeah, she was from—from Charleston. My grandfather, Mr. Bowen was originally from Baltimore, but they actually met in—in Savannah, where you recently were visiting.

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AE: Do you know how they met in Savannah?

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RB: As I recall, my grandfather played music. Actually he—he, as a young boy was put in an orphanage in Baltimore, a place called St. Mary's Industrial School. It was a Catholic orphanage and he learned to—he trained to be a printer while he was there, and they also gave him private music lessons, and he became a professional musician as well. And so he was playing music in Savannah when he and my grandmother met.

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AE: That's a good story. So then they decided to relocate back here to Bowen's Island?

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RB: Actually came back to Charleston. I'm not sure when they came back. My dad can probably recall that. But they came back, and she was also a hairdresser, and so they came back.

And I think he played music a while longer, and she had a hairdressing shop. And he also was—was in the printing business. But they lived downtown for—for a while and then started a restaurant on Folly Beach, which is about two miles from Bowen’s Island. And after the War in World War II, when my father [Bob Barber] came home, he took over that restaurant then, and we lived upstairs over the restaurant and—and also during part of that time he—he went to the Citadel as a veteran student and got a degree in business and went into banking.

Now in the late ‘40s my grandparents purchased Bowen’s Island. And when they—when they bought it—it truly was an island. I mean it was surrounded by—by water. You’d have to come over on high tide and they—I guess one of the first things they did, certainly, before they moved here was to, you know, finish up a causeway that connected the island to the mainland. And they—they built a little one bedroom house, and I think there was one other two bedroom house. As a matter of fact, where we’re sitting right now—we had a two-bedroom house; we added a third bedroom onto it, and so my grandparents lived next door to us and—and my grandmother and grandfather operated the restaurant and my grandfather also—from eight to five in the daytime, he went downtown and worked in a print shop.

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AE: So what made them want to get into the restaurant business? Do you have any idea?

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RB: Now that’s a very good question, and I—I think—I know when they came to Bowen’s Island they didn’t intend to open a restaurant here. They had been in the restaurant business [on Folly Beach], and when they came over here, I think they, you know, kind of wanted a peaceful existence. And when they first started they had—they started a little fish camp, and they built the

dock and, you know, sold tackle and soft drinks and stuff like that to the customers. And at that time and actually before Hurricane Gracie—Gracie was a pretty big hurricane here back in 1959—we used to have lights on the dock and people would come out, you know, with their families and would sometimes fish all night long. And I think their actually getting back into the restaurant business was maybe a bit of a surprise with them. I think they had customers who, you know, would buy snacks and would catch fish and finally, I guess, somebody asked them about cooking fish for them, and they started cooking fish before long. So I don't think they intended to get back into the restaurant business, but they got into it fairly soon after they moved out here.

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AE: What all do you know about the restaurant on Folly Beach? Do you know the name of it or what it was like or was it seafood or—?

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RB: It was—it was more like a typical little café. It was called Bob's Lunch because my dad's name is Bob. And across the front of the—the restaurant you—in the little diamond shapes things you see in neon “Bob's Lunch” across there. It was right across from where the police station is right now. And, you know, it was a typical place where you go get a breakfast or and—and certainly much busier in the summertime than in the wintertime when—when the folks would—would come to the beach in the summertime. But, you know, a variety of food, but it certainly wasn't anything fancy. It was a typical kind of—little tiny café kind of place.

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AE: And so you might have said this, but did they get out of that restaurant because of the hurricane that it devastated the building or—?

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RB: No, they came—my grandparents got out after they bought Bowen’s Island and moved over here. My dad got out because I think he probably had his fill of the restaurant business. And when he finished college, he had two kids, and he got a job with what used to be called the C&S Bank, and so he was a banker for the next thirty—thirty years—forty years, long—long time from—yeah, from ‘54—for about thirty-five years. So he was—he was kind of ready to get out of the restaurant business.

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AE: For about how long, would you say, was that restaurant on Folly Beach?

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RB: I don’t think Bob’s Lunch was there much more than about eight or—eight or ten years, I don’t believe. It’s—it’s a little place called John’s Sundries now. It’s kind of an assortment of beach kind of paraphernalia. But I don’t think the restaurant was there more than ten years.

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AE: Do you have any idea, when your grandparents bought Bowen’s Island, what kind of real estate value it had back then—what they paid for it and—?

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RB: I think it—well first of all, I think Bowen’s Island is about fourteen acres or somewhere in that neighborhood. And it sits on what is called Folly Creek, Folly Creek being the first deepwater river behind Folly Beach. Folly Beach is separated from the—from the mainland by Folly River, and if you follow Folly Creek around, if you go—Folly Creek goes up to the Stono River. If you fork off, you—you swing back around into Folly Creek where we are. I think they bought that from a gentleman who was maybe—I think is still alive today, a fellow named Mike McCarthy. And Mike was in the restaurant business on Folly—owned a real well known place called the Sandbar that was there for a long time. But I believe that they paid \$3,900. And I’m also thinking it probably cost them more to finish off the causeway to connect the island to the mainland than—than it did to buy the island. And so—but you know they were—it sounds fascinating now that everybody wants to live on the water that anybody could have bought that but it—everything is relative and things can be different. At that time they were thought to be rather peculiar people to want to go out and live on, you know—kind off to themselves when most people were beginning to get excited about the idea of living in a subdivision, you know. But they were a little—little bit eccentric. No doubt about that.

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AE: What was Folly Beach like when they had Bob’s Lunch? Was it mostly locals or was there still kind of a—was there starting a kind of tourist business in any form?

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RB: Well back—people would—today wouldn’t believe this but back in the ‘40s, Folly Beach was probably much more popular than Myrtle Beach. There used to be a pier on Folly. Now there’s a fishing pier there, but until the early ‘70s there was a big pier that had great—great

national entertainers would come there to perform on the Folly pier, you know, Fats Domino and, you know, Little Richard. I mean some real well known people. I don't know about Little Richard, but I know Fats Domino. But Folly had, you know—a lot of people came to Folly Beach. And in the wintertime you probably didn't have 150 people who lived there year-round, like we did. That was—there just weren't very many people. We had a little tiny Baptist church and a little tiny Methodist church and a little tiny Catholic Church and the—but you know, the beach would fill up in the summer. I mean there were a lot of—when I say they were rental houses, but most of the houses on Folly at that time were very, very modest and—and most of them were owned by families that maybe didn't rent as much as they did—used the beach a lot in the summer but they were rental houses over there. But it was—there were, you know, in the summertime a lot of—lot of people would come to the beach. Folly was a very popular beach.

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AE: So then fade into when Bowen's Island Restaurant really started getting established, when the fish camp kind of grew to be an actual restaurant. Can you pin down what year that might have been?

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RB: You might get a more accurate figure from my dad on that, but it was the very early '50s. I mean it—there was food being served before then, but I can remember—I was born in '49, and I can remember as a very small child when they—when we served oysters out in the yard. In other words, you put two sawhorses up and a—you know, a piece of plywood over it. And back then, as opposed to getting all you could eat for a certain amount of money, they would serve them by the bushel or by the peck and you—you know, you'd have a family that would come and order a

bushel of oysters, and they'd all stand around and they'd eat that bushel of oysters and—and leave. But the—it was the early—the latest, the early '50s when they were serving food. I think it was before then, myself.

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AE: And who was out picking the oysters for them then?

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RB: Well the first person I remember was a gentleman who lived to be over 100 years old. His name was Ben Richardson. And Ben—you may want to make a note—Ben is, I think, related to both Goat and to—to Nell [who are the oyster pickers for Bowen's Island today]. So they know him. One of them is a distant—one of them is—I think Nell's granddaddy or grandmother and Ben were brother and sister, and I think Goat was a nephew or cousin. But Ben was the first one I remember and, you know, Ben would come in on his boat and would come up to the restaurant because my grandmother would be over there. And we had a fellow that worked for us by the name of John Sanka, who was from Pennsylvania—came down here with the Navy and actually cooked for them a little bit on Folly Beach before they came over here. And he showed up again and ended up cooking for them for about thirty-five years until he died. But Ben would come up and look for John, and he would say something to the effect, "Cap'n John da-dere?" Captain—I guess it's, "Is Captain John there?" And John would walk down on the bank. And they would count the oysters out, you know, by the bushel and you would pay—pay him by the bushel and—and in days gone by you—they would just drop the oysters in the water down there and—and then John would retrieve the oysters whenever he needed them to wash them and to cook them. He didn't have to—you didn't put them in a cooler back then; you just dropped oysters in

the water right down there by the restaurant. And but Ben picked oysters for my grandparents for a long time. And then Ben—Ben had a son who did it as well, a fellow named Arthur Richardson. We've had some other—other folks doing it but, you know, right now the two picking are—are Nell Walker and—and Goat Lafayette. And last spring we had another wonderful person named Josiah Small, who died of a heart attack. But Josiah was a very devoted seafood man, I mean crabs and—and shrimp and—and oysters, especially.

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AE: So all these oyster pickers that you've been talking about and that you introduced me to when we were down at the restaurant earlier, they're all African American oyster pickers; and can we talk a little bit—just take a moment to talk about the relationship between Bowen's Island and Sol Legare and Backman's Seafood and all of that and kind of the network of producers and—and the industry and how it—Bowen's Island is connected to that?

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RB: Well we used—we used to—we have a dock down here that used—we run shrimp boats off of and Backman's—the Backman family is an African American family—very large family—and has been in the seafood business at least fifty years. And at one time, I think, they owned several shrimp boats; they still have a shrimp boat down in Florida but they've—they've, you know, caught a lot of shrimp and—and had people pick a lot of oysters over the years. They generally, you know, retail and sometimes wholesale what they catch. In other words, if I was running low on oysters, I'd buy oysters from them for more of a wholesale price than a retail price. But most of what they sell is—is retail and people come in their little shop over there and, you know, buy X-numbers of bushels of oysters or buy shrimp or whatever. But they—they have

supported a very large family for a long time in the seafood business over there. And Mrs. Backman, who would be the sort of the matron of the family, died a few years back now. It seems like yesterday, but I guess it's been about ten years ago. Anyway but she—I mean she—she was—she ran a pretty tight ship over there, and I guess she and my grandmother wouldn't have been too many years apart. My grandmother would have been older than she was, that's for sure, but my grandmother knew the Backmans very fondly. And, you know, we maintained a very good relationship with them and—and we'd buy from time to time, you know, seafood from them when we were running short on something.

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AE: And so when you're not running short on something, where are you getting your shrimp and your fish, if you're not get it from Backman's?

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RB: Well we generally get our shrimp, we try—you know, we try to get the wild shrimp, if we can. If it's not oyster season, we try to get—we get shrimp through Crosby's [Seafood] or sometimes PYA [/Monarch Food Service]. But we have shrimp boats that run out—you know run out of this area so when we can get—we can get them we do.

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AE: And then with folks like Nell and Goat, all they do is pick oysters for you? Is that their only—?

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RB: That's—that's all Nell does. Goat will work—he works parties sometimes for us, and we'll do, you know, big oyster roasts for customers and things like that, and he's very, very good at that. Nell does a good bit of crabbing, too. We don't do too many crabs on a regular basis, unless people ask us for them. People, I don't think around here, fully appreciate the—what a wonderful creature a crab is and how—I mean, I think they enjoy it, but they think about catching crabs when they're at the beach and on vacation. They don't realize how expensive crabs are and how much you've got to pay for them, you know. But Nell catches crabs, as well. And Goat used to work, you know, regularly on a shrimp boat in the summertime. But he's—he's a very engaging fellow. The customers like a lot and so, when we have private parties or we do benefits, Goat frequently, you know, prepares oysters for them.

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AE: Does he roast the oysters in the restaurant or do any of them kind of share that responsibility on a regular basis when the restaurant is open?

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RB: He doesn't do that. A gentleman named Henry Gilliard does that. Because Goat, you know, if you—if you go in a restaurant and you sit—you lay your eyes on an oyster, and you have no idea what goes into getting that oyster in front of you. Around here, you know, people don't mechanically—I mean oysters aren't mechanically picked. They're picked by hand. And so if I—so you know when Goat and Nell go out there, they go out, you know, they kept their boat in the water, they go to where they're going to pick from, they get out of the boat, and they pick an oyster up, they cull them and they break off the part—you know, around here we have cluster oysters. We don't have so much the singles like they have in the Gulf [of Mexico], and so you've

got to cull—you knock off the unproductive shells on there, and you leave it on the bank; and that helps next year's bank, you know, leaving that shell there. And so they cull the oysters, they put them in the boat, they come back to the landing, they take the oysters out of the boat, they put them on the [cement] pad, they wash the oysters and measure them and bag the oysters, and they put the oysters in the cooler. And after you've gone through that, you know, you don't—you don't want to see an oyster for a little while, you know what I mean. So the average person that—that looks at an oyster has no idea of what goes to getting that there. It's a lot of work—lot of work.

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AE: And are Nell and Goat paid—so you mentioned before people being paid by the bushel. Are they still paid by the bag?

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RB: Still paid by the bushel, that's right. They put them in a bag, but they're measured by the bushel—still do it—still do it that way. And you know you can do it—and maybe it's a little better or more easily done with the Gulf oysters with the singles, you know. You buy a box of oysters that are from the Gulf and you—those are more sold by the pound, I think, so you get a 50-pound box or something like that. But I think with the—with the—with the clusters, maybe it makes more sense to buy them or sell them by the bushel. And the weight is a little bit misleading sometimes.

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AE: You have an idea of how the—the pay for the bags of the oysters has changed, since your grandparents started the place and you were a kid and what you're paying those guys now?

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RB: Well in real dollars, I don't know what the difference is. I mean I know that, you know, probably when they started they probably were paying twenty-five cents or fifty cents a bushel or something. And now it's, you know, many, many, many times that. Again, I don't know how that stacks up against inflation. You know, you could make a pretty good living picking oysters if you—if you don't mind working at it. And most of these guys don't mind working at it. I mean it's—it's—but it's a strenuous activity. But I don't know how that goes against what it would have been back then, really.

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AE: Do you think the oysters are different at all themselves than they were when you were coming up?

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RB: You know sometimes I think they're smaller, but I'm not so sure about that. And, you know, you feel like well, there's not as many out there as there used to be. Well I'm sure there's not as many as there was when I was a small child, but I think over the last, say, decade I don't—I think they—we continued to harvest at least as many oysters as we did in a seven or eight or ten years ago, at least as many and more people—and this was a surprise for me. I was checking on some facts recently that there are more people picking oysters now than there were say six or seven years ago. And I don't know whether that's—whether that's a reflection of maybe a

decline in the number of people involved in the shrimping industry, and so they're looking for other things to do but—and one of the things I've always feared was that there—because most of the oyster pickers I know are—are around my age, that maybe there weren't going to be anybody there to pick oysters in a while. But in terms of people securing permits to pick oysters, there are a lot of people out there picking oysters right now. And they're all not—all not African American. It's a—you know, there's a lot of people who've always worked on the water that—that are picking oysters now.

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AE: Is Bowen's Island as a restaurant is it—is it kind of an anomaly that you have your own oyster pickers that have always been with you, and they harvest just for you, or is that a pretty regular arrangement?

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RB: You know, for a restaurant, I think that would probably be somewhat unique. They—there used to be a restaurant over on the beach. I'm sure the Sandbar probably did the same thing on Folly Beach, and probably Bushy's that used to be near Folly Beach did the same thing. But I don't know anybody right now—a lot of—a lot more people than you think just because of the—the presentation, you know, local restaurants serve Gulf oysters. It's not because of the taste because our oysters truly taste better—in spite of what some of the Gulf Coast people would think. But the—you know, the little singles is a nice presentation compared to our cluster, but the clusters just have an exquisite taste to them. So there are a lot of restaurants that serve the—the Gulf oysters, particularly if you do them, you know, on the half-shell. But I don't know any other—I can't think of anybody else that I know of that serves their own oysters.

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AE: Is there anything about that arrangement or some other element of what Bowen's Island Restaurant is that is kind of grandfathered in to what the Charleston business and restaurant scene is? I mean just the way you operate, is it something that you're able to do because your grandfather and them had been doing it so long?

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RB: No, I don't think so. I mean it's—you know we—like I was telling you about the—and days ago—years ago when they would drop the oysters on the bank, you know, you can't do that—nobody can do that. The—the things that are DHEC [Department of Health and Environmental Control] related are not—are not grandfathered in. You have to stay up with whatever the current standards are, in terms of how we operate as a restaurant. We are more of a family operation. I mean even though I've got employees and we—it's just a small operation, you know. It's different. We don't do tableside waiting. I mean you come to the counter and you order and you—we bring your dinner to you. But if you want another glass of tea or you want another beer, you come back to the counter. No—nobody is going to come find you and see how you're doing. You've got to kind of fend for yourself, and I think there's—there's certainly some uniqueness there that you wouldn't find in most restaurants around here.

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AE: So growing up here on Bowen's Island and in the restaurant, what was that like? Do you have some memories that stand out?

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RB: Oh, yeah. I have a number—lots—lots of good memories. I—actually, you know, my dad was a banker and got transferred to Columbia [South Carolina] when I was in the fifth grade, and I would—I was the oldest grandchild, and my grandmother [May Bowen] and I were very close. And I would come back in the summers and stay down here for, you know, three weeks or so and we'd come—we had a house at the beach that belonged to my grandmother, and we'd come down and spend an additional—I'd be down there for at least four more weeks in the summer. And, you know, our beach house wasn't but two miles from Bowen's Island. And, you know, I remember everything from, you know, Ben [Richardson] bringing in oysters, to going down to Carroll's Seafood, which is, if you're downtown, a building is at the corner of Market and East Bay, a place called the Noisy Oyster is there. There used to be a place called Carroll's Seafood. And I would go down with my grandmother and, you know, you could go in and buy—they'd weigh—weigh the shrimp on the scale and you'd—I don't remember how we brought them back, to be honest with you, but that wasn't—we must have had a cooler or something with us. But you know, we'd go by there. And we'd go down there to buy the non-oyster stuff that we—that we would serve: the fish and the shrimp and stuff like that. You know, I remember my grandmother—one of the most wonderful pieces of fish in the world to eat is a small flounder, and they used to call them dabs. A dab, when you took the head off, wasn't about as big as your hands, a beautiful little size. Of course, now they're too small; you're not supposed to eat them, you know, not supposed to catch them that size. And she used to clean all the—she and John would clean all the fish that they served. I mean, you know, everything back then. You'd see [fish] scales on the wall. **[Laughs]** I mean because they'd clean the fish back then, you know, and peel every shrimp. And they would make a crab cake that it was the best tasting least-filled crab cake you'd ever—it had a very little crab meat in it but boy that thing tasted good. And

she'd make those on Sunday morning, when nobody else was around and made it look like a little nugget. And they was very protective about them; we always called them golden nuggets because they were so protective about letting those things go. But made a good crab cake and the flounder was just as good a thing you'd ever eat in your life and wonderful—wonderful shrimp.

But we would go, you know my grandmother and I, we would go up the highway and pick up my granddad. He'd take the bus into work, you know, and go downtown to the print shop, so we would go down there—go downtown—I mean go down the highway and wait for him and pick him up at the highway and bring him back. But she and I would play cards in the afternoon, you know, before the business started. They were open all day long, but most time business didn't start until, you know, six o'clock or something like that. We would, you know, sit down in the dining room playing a game called Stealin' Casino. I can't remember how you play it now, but I remember just enjoying that like crazy. But, you know, I remember they'd sell beer, and back in the early days beer was about twenty-five cents, back when Schlitz was a big beer and, you know, Pabst Blue Ribbon and the—.

You know, another unique thing about the restaurant was that the people there were really interesting characters. My grandmother was—was the boss. I mean she, you know, called all the shots. And she was very conservative, financially, other than what she gave to her family. She was very generous to all—all the family but she acquired a lot of property over the years and—but lived a very modest lifestyle. I mean she'd—she lived in either a trailer or a little concrete block two-bedroom house for the last, my gosh, you know, thirty-five years of her life and could have done a lot of things but just completely content to be here. My grandfather was you know very much dependent on her, but he was around the restaurant an awful lot. And I've

got some great pictures I'll show you before you leave of him sweeping—you know, sweeping outside of the restaurant, sweeping the leaves out of the way with a broom.

And the restaurant was—you went by it today but, of course, you couldn't tell by what you saw but the restaurant was a very unusual and—and kind of a modest, you know, old block building. But we had the same cook for good Lord, thirty years. John [Sanka] used to cook for us and do just about everything else—handyman. But with a little bit of help they built that building or most of the building. My dad [Bob Barber] helped—helped with it, too. But John was the—he was into extraterrestrial life and far—very unusual Far Eastern religions and channeling and all this kind of stuff, you know. And my grandmother was somewhat a skeptic about all the stuff he was into but they were—you know, they were there at the restaurant eighteen hours a day together. It's amazing they didn't drive each other nuts. But they had assigned—assigned duties around there and those—those three people pretty much kept that place going for thirty years. It's amazing. But you know, they were really—and—and when you go into the restaurant, you know, my grandmother was the boss, too. You know [the saying] “the customer is always right”? Well that—the customer wasn't always right in that restaurant. **[Laughs]** The customer was out of there, if you didn't agree with her, you know. And there were a lot of people that, you know, kind of got their feelings hurt but they were—but people have very warm memories of the restaurant, quite honestly.

Sometime along the way they—and she kept—you know, I'll tell you; she was a hairdresser. We still had two pieces of equipment: one was a hair curler that had these strings of electric wires coming down with these clamps that would put on the curls on your hair, and there was a hair dryer, which looked like a little, you know—the head on one of those characters on *Saturday Night Live* or, you know, unusual equipment. But she had, you know—had a real

Depression [era] mentality. You know, she could always go back to fixing hair or, if things got real bad, she could always live out of the river, you know, from what she could get out there. But they lived very modestly but were very generous to us. And people have a lot of fond memories of coming to the restaurant everything from, you know, she was very—never very good at carding people and there were many, many a Charlestonian who drank their first beer there when they were fifteen or sixteen years old, you know. Even before—anyway. If you would go in and ask for a beer from her, you would about get one. That was a dangerous thing. I got elected to the School Board back in '84, and I said, “Well Grandmother, you can't be doing this. **[Laughs]** You've got to—you've got to check these people out. Because I saw some kids,” and I said, “I know that I saw those at my daughter's school,” you know, in high school.

But and they ran—they ran—it was kind of a rigid operation. I'll tell you, we had an oyster room where if you didn't—if you weren't buying oysters, you didn't sit in that room. And you might—you might have come with ten people, and nine of you wanted to eat oysters and not the—the tenth person could not go in that room, unless they were paying to eat oysters. It just—that wasn't the way we did it. And really, it really wasn't a bad rule because it's a real headache when you—when you take up too many seats in the oyster area with people who are not eating oysters, you know.

You know, I remember as a kid coming down here and going on the dock early in the morning about six o'clock in the morning with a little transistor radio listening to The Big Ape Radio out of Jacksonville [95.1 WAPE FM], and everybody else was sleeping. What do you do? I would go out there on the dock and just lay down there and look at the sky **[Laughs]**—look at the sun come up. But you know, so it's—it's—they developed an interesting place. And I worked in restaurants from college and graduate school and then law school and never intended

to get in the restaurant business, but when I came back here to practice law, they were getting old. And I mean it was just such an interesting unique place that so many people have enjoyed coming to. It's—and it's a real—real treasure.

00:33:01

AE: So I have a bunch of questions about your grandparents, and I'll ask your parents on Friday too, but can you—you alluded to some of the personality of your grandmother running a tight ship, but can you describe who they were as people and your grandfather's personality and kind of what he brought to the mix and—and—?

00:33:19

RB: Yeah. He was—he was a very loving fellow. I tell you, he grew up in an orphanage. His name was James Aloysious—and of course Aloysius, you spell it A-l-o-y-s-i-o-u-s is—I think one of the Popes was Pope Aloysious, but I don't know where he got that name—if the parents were Catholic. But you know, he—he was a very generous person in spirit, and he was really concerned about all of us. And sort of one of our—it's not a joke, it's true, but I get a kick out of it—our oldest child went to a very prominent boarding school in New England and—and when she finished, my grandfather wanted to buy her a typewr—typewriter, so that, you know, she could have a job as a typist. Well I mean that was, you know, a very wonderful thing that he wanted to do that for her, but that wasn't exactly what she was cut out to do, you know. We still chuckle about it. He wanted—he was determined he was going to buy her typewriter, so you know she could go to typing school. But he—he used to help out around the restaurant a good bit and took great pride in the fact that he was really an outstanding printer, you know. Before you had all this computerized printing, you had to set type and—and it was a very, I would think,

challenging thing to do, particularly if you were doing it fast like they took pride in doing. And he was a great printer and was in the Marine Band in both World Wars, because he was a great trombone player. I mean he's really—he's a real good trombone player. Again he was—he was taught that in the Catholic orphanage up there. And even though he was—he was our step-grandfather, I mean he was always, you know, a grandfather to us. See they'd been married a long, long time. But he—he was a real rounder in his younger days and, you know, heavy drinker, partier kind of thing. And I think my grandmother finally kind of had to lay down the law to him, and he kind of really settled down as he got a couple of years on him. But, you know I think she kind of gave him an ultimatum about all that. But he certainly took good—good care of my dad, you know, growing up. I think my dad was like six years old when he—when Mr. Bowen and my grandmother got married. But—and you know, he pretty much took his orders from my grandmother. But she was a good business person and you know, he—I don't know if he knew too much about finances, quite frankly, but he hadn't made a lot of money playing music, and he had always earned a good living with—with the printing business, but I think he always turned the—you know, turned the check over to my grandmother and took—she took care of everybody.

John [Sanka] was a very mysterious fellow who—when he—when he passed away, I, luckily, had come across a piece of paper in some of his things that had a phone number. I mean I don't think he went back home; he was from somewhere outside of Pittsburgh, and I mean he completely—I mean he was a—he was part of Bowen's Island. I don't think he went back to Pennsylvania a dozen times from the time he was thirty years old until the time he died, when he was seventy-four or something like that. I mean he—and he just found a home—spiritually and mentally and everything else. And you know, they were all completely content to stay on

Bowen's Island and you know to—you know, John probably wouldn't leave Bowen's Island the last twenty years of life more than once a month. And you know, my grandmother, other than to come to a wedding or a graduation, she never left Bowen's Island. I mean they were—they just were there all the time. *[Laughs]*

But they were awfully charitable and loving to—you know, to all of our family, you know. My grandfather, if you were a customer, he'd talk you to death over there. I mean he—that was part of, I think, why he liked being there, so he could just talk and have somebody to listen. He loved to tell stories. And you know, my grandmother didn't—wasn't quite so talkative but she had a way of sort of—you know, people liked her, even though she could be pretty crusty. Let's put it like that. And they were just quite a unique threesome, I'll tell you.

00:38:29

AE: And was your father—did he retire in the printing business and then was kind of here at nights or was there—?

00:38:34

RB: My grandfather?

00:38:36

AE: Yeah, I'm sorry.

00:38:37

RB: Yeah. Yeah, he'd, you know, leave work at I don't—four or five o'clock and he'd be around the restaurant most of the time 'til he got older. You know, I don't know how much he—I don't know how much he actually helped around the restaurant, other than piddling around a

little bit. But I think he actually used to maybe cook oysters sometimes during—during those years. And he loved to get out in the boat, you know. He loved to row a boat. You know, we'd go down—go down the creek and go crabbing or go shrimping or whatever. He—he was—he was very good at rowing a boat, and that's harder than you think.

00:39:17

AE: And so was your grandmother, then, kind of like the matriarch of the restaurant? And it sounds like she had a real presence and was really involved in everything and doing a lot of the cooking herself.

00:39:29

RB: She did. I—I think for the longest time John did most of the cooking, and she took the orders and served the beer and took the money and that kind of thing. After John died, she did the cooking, and I took the orders and that kind of thing, so—but they both could do all of that. And my grandfather didn't really get in the kitchen like that, but both of them did that. And it's absolutely amazing. Until she died, we had never cooked—of course all we cooked was, you know, oysters in the oyster room, shrimp, crab cakes, fish, and hushpuppies. We didn't do French fries; we didn't do any grits—nothing like that. But everything that got cooked in that restaurant got cooked in a frying pan—no fryer. I mean it is amazing that—I mean it's not as busy as—as it is now days but it's still amazing that so many people could be fed out of frying pans and not a big fryer with a lot of firepower to it. It's something else. But they cooked everything in frying pans.

00:40:55

AE: You got a fryer, eventually. Was that on your watch?

00:40:58

RB: Yeah, we had—we had to get a fryer. It got to—*[Laughs]*—jeez you'd go nuts trying to get everything in the frying pan, I'm telling you. I don't know how we did it.

00:41:07

AE: Did your grandmother like to cook before she got into the restaurant business? Is that something she always enjoyed and kind of took to it naturally?

00:41:14

RB: You know, that—you'll have to ask my dad that. I don't necessarily think so. I don't remember her, other than the seafood, her being a particularly good cook. I mean she cooked the best shrimp in the world, but I just do not recall her being especially good with vegetables or anything that tickled my palate. That's kind of strange, isn't it? *[Laughs]*

00:41:37

AE: And what about the Frogmore Stew; when did that become a part of Bowen's Island?

00:41:41

RB: We didn't start that until I—you know, my grandmother died in 1990 and—and we made a couple—few changes on the menu—didn't do a whole lot. We—we did two things: I think we added the Frogmore Stew on there, but we also put a couple of big platters on there—big shrimp platter and a big seafood platter. Because the way she used to do it, somebody would order—instead of a little plate of shrimp, they may have a double shrimp or something, so rather than

saying, you know—explaining to people, “Why don’t you get a double,” we just said, “We’ll have a big plate, and we’ll have a regular plate.” But I don’t think we did any Frogmore Stew then. After she died, we—you know one of the things that we did was to—and it was word of mouth but we—we began to have large parties we would cater on premises. We didn’t do any off-premises catering, but we’d do a party for, you know, 100 people or something and—and so we had several items on that—that we don’t do in the restaurant. But anyway, after she died we put big seafood and a big shrimp [platters] and the Frogmore Stew and the shrimp and grits on the menu. And when we do the catered events, we have a more extensive—we do different kinds of vegetables and barbecue—whole hog, barbecued chicken and stuff like that. We—we just don’t—people who come into the restaurant I don’t think expect that, but if you’re having a rehearsal party catered, a lot of times you each got something different in mind, you know, so we try to be a little more flexible on that front.

00:43:33

AE: So on a catered event, where you have a whole hog barbecue, for example, do you do that here on the island?

00:43:38

RB: Yeah. Yeah, we have a big grill down there and we buy—buy a hog from a fellow named Frank Marvin down in Hollywood, down the road. And you know, we—we enjoy doing that. I mean it’s kind of neat, you know. Nothing, I think, gets more attraction than looking and seeing a whole hog that’s been barbecued, you know. But we don’t do any barbecue for the restaurant; it’s just for catered events.

00:44:02

AE: And are you in charge of that or is that somebody's specialty that you just kind of are using?

00:44:07

RB: Jack—Jack [London], who works in the restaurant now for about eight or nine years, Jack is—is in charge of cooking that—the hog and other barbecue and stuff like that.

00:44:19

AE: Jack London, is that right?

00:44:21

RB: Uh-hmm.

00:44:23

AE: How did—how and when did he become a part of the restaurant and—and prior to that, kind of the wave of who's been involved in the restaurant since you took it over and kind of when that happened and how that happened?

00:44:38

RB: Right. Well I—as I said, I came back in '83 to practice law and got involved in politics to some extent. But my grandparents were getting older, and I think my—my—John [Sanka], our cook, died in '85, and then my granddaddy died in '86. And so, other than the oyster cooker, my grandmother and I were the only people working there from '86 to '90, when she died. And she died on July 27th, and then we didn't open again—I was closed until like January 1 or something

like that. And if I can remember—if I'm remembering correctly we—instead of being open every day—my grandparents, they were over there every day I mean all day long—I just opened like Thursday, Friday, Saturday for a while. That's right. Because I was in the Legislature at that time, so we were open just three days a week. And I had a woman that was living out here on Bowen's Island that cooked for a while and another woman who used to live on the island that cooked for a while and—and I guess by the—about the mid-'90s it probably began looking a bit more like it looks now, in terms of how we were set up. In other words, I used to have a gentleman named Steve Shroyer, who kind of oversaw things for me when I was in Columbia [South Carolina]. And but I was—I was working every weekend then, I mean every Thursday, Friday, Saturday then. And when Jack took over he actually kind of came on as a manager for me and—and you know, took care of the cash register and took care of ordering stuff. And plus, Jack lived right across the street from me, so it's not like we're not talking all the time, you know. But I took over in 1990 and have been pretty much in charge since then, so for sixteen years—it seems like yesterday. But—and we've added on. I usually keep, you know, I don't do the cooking. I cooked for a few years, myself, when I had to, but I'm getting a little rusty at that, really. I have usually some younger fellows that we teach how to cook. And you know, Henry has been—been with us now cooking oysters for Lord, at least ten years and—. But most of my guys that work, you know—we have, you know, turnover. I mean we have young guys that work for us for two to five years, and then they move on. We've got, you know, guys that left us and have gone to really some, you know, good jobs in the food business. One of them is down at Mills House now and got another one that's—who was here when he was at Johnson & Wales and some big—big outfit. And so I keep a fairly young group of cooks—people working in the kitchen for me—and we've usually got somebody old cooking oysters. And I don't know why

that is. **[Laughs]** But and most people that work for us live relatively close by, I mean on James Island or Folly Beach or Sol Legare or something like that.

00:48:19

AE: Can you describe the process of cooking the oysters and how you do it here?

00:48:24

RB: Yeah. We basically do something you call roasting oysters. Or you can say steaming oysters, but mostly people refer to it as roasting around here. If you put them in a pot with water in the bottom, I mean that's more like steaming and we do that sometimes for—when we cater events. But in the restaurant we—we roast them and we've got a—well we had a pretty good-sized pit. We could probably put four bushels on at a time. And up until—up until about four or five years ago, we cooked them over wood. **[Phone Rings]** No, that's fine. Four or five years ago we—Jack actually custom designed a—a gas rack that went under the sheet of—that we cooked the sheet of metal that we cooked oysters on, and it was good because, I mean, you know, you could have—when you're cooking with wood, it takes as much wood to cook for three people as it does to cook for a dozen people, you know, to get that fire going that good. And it just—and in the old days, when Granddaddy would cut wood or John would cut wood or I'd cut wood with a saw or something like that, and it just got too expensive and too labor intensive. And—and so we—we built this rack under there and you know, you put the oysters on there and you—of course oysters around here are grown in something called pluff mud—kind of a dark mud—and you've got to wash them off good. So, boy, hopefully before you put them on the fire, they've been washed well, and ours have been because we've got an apparatus where we wash them with something that looks almost like a baby fire hose or, you know, it's not like a little garden hose.

This stuff will really get the—the mud off of them, you know. So we put them on there and then we put wet—we call the croaker sacks—the burlap sacks—over the top and you know, it builds—that steam builds up and makes them crack open. And when they crack just a little bit, you—we shovel them on the table. We put newspapers on the tables and give people a knife and a rag and cocktail sauce and let them go at it. And you know, people like them cooked to different degrees. I like mine where I've got to work to get in them, and some people like them shriveled up and cracked open, so they're easy—easy to get to. That's not the way I like them but you know—but it's a wonderful—it's a great way to cook them. A lot of people who have never—who will—who might—who might say, "I don't—I don't like oysters but I'll—"—the only thing they've ever tasted is a wet cold oyster on the half shell, and for some reason to some people that's not appetizing. But there are a lot of people who have eaten one that's been cooked on the fire like that and can't believe how good it tastes. And I mean I think these oysters have an exceptional taste, anyway, but you know, if you eat a hot juicy oyster, it's just as good as anything in the world, you know.

00:51:30

AE: Can you describe what that taste is that's so special about the oysters here when they're raw and when they're cooked?

00:51:36

RB: Well they are—the difference is, I would say it's three—threefold. One, is to me they are—have such a nice salinity to them that it's almost like it's sweet. And the other is that they have kind of a texture to them that's a little bit chewier. I mean it's nothing yucky, nothing slimy, nothing—just got like a nice texture that's good and chewy. And if you—you know, I like to eat

mine—we make a homemade cocktail sauce, but it's on the thin side compared to most cocktail sauces, but to me it's perfect. It's great for oysters because if you've got good oysters, you know, you don't need much. And it's really good for fried—fried shrimp or fried fish because, I mean, if you've got good shrimp, you don't want to coat it with thick—and I like ketchup, and I like cocktail sauces of every kind. It's just that—if I want to have a good quality seafood, I don't want to have it overshadowed by a cocktail sauce that's too strong or too thick. So I just think—especially, I think the salinity but—but I think, you know, eating them when they're steamy hot is maybe part of it, too. That's, you know—I'll eat them raw, but I'm just not nuts about eating them raw compared to eating them roasted.

00:53:10

AE: Now is the salinity, do you know, is it something that changes from where the—the oysters are being harvested or the weather or the water or is—is that ever a variable in the quality of the product that you get?

00:53:24

RB: Yeah, it can be. In other words, it—around Bowen's Island we have fairly high salinity. I guess because it's closer to the ocean, I don't know. You know, we don't have any mixing of the tides. Now, it can be—it could be diluted by heavy rain. But, of course, with a heavy rain you're probably not going to be eating oysters here because of the heavy runoff. They're probably going to shut the beds down, where you can't pick from them, anyway. So I don't know how much—there would be a variation in it, but I don't think there's variation in it, when you consume them too much. I mean, you know, because they're pretty quick—you know, you've got a couple good days of rain, and they're going to shut the beds down, and they're not going to let you pick from

them because the runoff—there’s kind of micro-organisms and yard—what fertilizer and Lord knows what else.

00:54:29

AE: Does that happen very often that they close the beds down?

00:54:32

RB: I would say it probably happens once every—at least once every six weeks. And it’s one of the things you have to do, you know. You have to really be like you were talking—you mentioned to Nell today about the rain. Well if it rains tomorrow—if he didn’t mind getting wet, he could go pick oysters, you know. I don’t blame him; it ain’t no fun to be out there when it’s wet like that. But you generally know when you’ve got something like that—a heavy rain coming and sometimes you have to anticipate—let’s say if we knew we were going to have a big Friday and Saturday night this weekend, we knew that it was going to be raining cats and dogs starting Thursday, we better be getting some oysters today and tomorrow to make sure we’ve got some in case they shut the beds down Saturday or something like that, you know. But you can—you know, you can usually—usually kind of know when that’s coming.

00:55:31

AE: And then with the roasting of the oysters, you were talking about how you like them when they’re still closed. Can you talk about how—how you would order that or request that like, “I want a three-minute roasted oyster” or what those descriptives are?

00:55:44

RB: It wouldn't be by minutes, although it might—you might be able to—to scale it—I mean you may be able to figure how to do it that way. I just tell Henry, “I don't want mine open much now,” you know. “I want to have to work to get in them a little bit”—something like that. Some people refer to ones that have been cooked a long time as being dry. I guess that's about—they're not really—they're generally not completely dry because a lot of times, you know, it keeps a little bubble of water there, so sometimes it's got a little bit of water there. But you know, I might—I like mine wet, you know—I think that if—if you've got somebody who is cooking enough—regularly enough, they know what you're talking about. And I don't want mine cooked too much now. I want to have to work to get in them. I just want mine hot, you know.

00:56:34

AE: And you have an all-you-can-eat scenario for the roasted oysters?

00:56:37

RB: We do. And we're—you know, we're real well known for that. It's a little bit of a frustrating legacy to some extent. Again, because people expect it, and at the same time it's certainly not the most responsible or the most conservative way to serve them because, you know, you can—sometimes—some people aren't like me. They're not going to work to try to get most every oyster there. If one is kind of hard to get into, they just drop it in the bucket and let it pass, you know. And so you get a lot of waste that way but still, we're real well known for that and it's a wonderful—I mean it really is a communal kind of event. **[Phone Rings]** People come and we sit down when we—let me make sure it's not my wife [calling].

[Recording is pause for approximately one minute, while Mr. Barber takes the call.]

00:57:36

AE: All right. We are back, and we were talking about roasting oysters.

00:57:45

RB: Well, as I said, what—you know, that’s really the only way we—we serve oysters here is roasting and we—we probably ought to consider frying them because a lot of people like fried oysters, too. We never have done that, and maybe part of it is because the local oyster isn’t quite as big, and I think people expect a little bit bigger fried oyster when they get one. It’s—it’s a communal event. In our restaurant, you know, if you come to the restaurant and eat oysters, you know, you sit down, which is probably—that was another mistake we probably made forty years ago to let people sit down because they tend to stay two-and-a-half to three hours, you know, to do that. But they are—I think so many people have very fond memories. And there are different associations for those memories, of course. I mean whether it was like, as I said, coming in when you were a teenager, getting a beer before you should have or—the restaurant used to be very poorly illuminated. There was like a single light bulb on the front out by the door. Well so many people remember, you know, “My husband—we were on our first date, and we came down that road and,” you know, “it wasn’t not a light to be found—to be seen and just such a spooky looking place, so dark and everything.” And we have people who have been coming out for a family birthday for gosh, thirty-five years. I mean, really. And people remember—I’m getting off track here from the oysters but you know, at one end of the dining room we used to have a battery of TVs, and I don’t know how that ever started. But my grandmother, she would actually, you know, take a junk TV and—we had a lot of junk TVs and usually only one of them worked,

but people remember coming out there on a Sunday afternoon and seeing a professional football championship game. They remember we used to have a little—it almost looked like miniature church booths, and you couldn't squeeze but say three or four people on one side that faced a little table that had old carvings in it and stuff like that, and it was right by the jukebox, and so many people say, you know, "We got engaged at this table," kind of thing, you know. Just so many different things. But oysters and—and to a little lesser extent, although more people probably ate shrimp in terms of individuals. But you know, so much of the feelings about Bowen's Island did result from the oysters. And I think a lot of it had to do with my grandmother being a dictator about, if you didn't pay to eat oysters, you couldn't go in the oyster room. That's one of the legends. But the other is the—the sitting around a table with people, whether it's friends or family or whatever else and—and having somebody shovel those oysters on the table for you and you just stay as long as you want to stay and, you know, you drink just—. I guess it's one of the few things where people really and truly don't feel rushed, you know. They just feel like—when you go to eat oysters, you know, you're going for the evening. You're not going for a snack or an appetizer or you're not going for fast food. You're not going for any of the things that you—. I don't know. You know, I guess most time—even when you to a decent restaurant and you feel a little pressure time-wise, it's kind of timeless, you know. **[Laughs]**

01:01:40

AE: So was there ever a day or a night or a time that was—there was a rush of people that it was like a popular meeting place, you know where thirty people every Friday would come for oysters or anything like that, or was it just kind of a constant stream of folks?

01:01:54

RB: Yeah, it—I don't think we've ever been a place where people—like your neighborhood bar where you go every—once a week or something. It's never been like that. And we have people that come during oyster season every couple of weeks or every three weeks or something like that, but they're regulars but they're not every week kind of regulars. And I don't think oysters—it's not like a pizza. It's not like—or Mexican food where you go—you've got to get your one-day a week fixes—maybe every two or three weeks or something like that. And because of the way we've run it, it's always been a first come, first served kind of thing around here. And I mean it's not like a typical restaurant, you know, and maybe it's something we should have done where you have—you give somebody a filler while they're waiting, or you set up a bar and you try to maximize the bar sales because people have to wait. You know we have people that, you know, have to wait, you know, a half-hour to an hour when we're busy. And again, we—you know even on—in recent years, when I feel like we've kind modernized things a little bit, we never have over five people working, including me, that I can think of. And if you serve several—you know, a couple hundred people that's a lot of—lot of work and a lot of—. And so you know—you know people aren't being served within twenty minutes. I mean it's—particularly people have to—even after they sit down, they're waiting an hour, and so we've got some awfully good patient customers. That must mean we've been serving pretty good food or something, you know, because people—they somehow tolerate it. But so we do have some—yeah, we're still—and this is unusual; we are probably the only restaurant on—on the coast in South Carolina that's busier in the wintertime than in the summertime. And you know, sure we're getting more tourists year-round, but the—you know January and February, which are two of our better months, you know, the tourists aren't here like they are in July and August. But now our summer business has been growing every year but again, I think part of that is the you

know—the attachment to oysters and part of it—but part of it's because we never—and—and when we build—and I'm not going to do it again—we don't have heating and air. And so in the summertime, particularly, with our old building—and after my grandmother died, I expanded and enclosed the porch and built that big deck and—and rebuilt the dock down there that [Hurricane] Hugo had destroyed [in 1989] and so we had a lot of space where—I mean around here most of the time, even in July, we've got a pretty good breeze, unless it's dead low tide or something. And so if you're on the deck of the dock, it's not unbearable. But you know, when my grandmother was alive, you know, really and truly most people didn't want to come sit inside the restaurant in August, you know, sweating in your shrimp. It just wasn't—it was too—it was stifling, and there was nowhere to eat outside. So—but so we, you know, we did—that's one thing we did try to maximize the view because it's such a pretty place. And then, you know, take advantage of the nice breeze. And even in the summertime with customers, and it would be relatively comfortable. That doesn't mean that the no-see-ums and the mosquitoes aren't, you know, going to come out sometimes.

01:05:32

AE: So all those—those expansions happened when you took it over, primarily, is that right?

01:05:38

RB: Pretty much, yeah. We had—we had a little porch tacked on the front, and I think I might have screened that in before my grandmother died because she—she used to sit on the porch all the time, you know, swatting mosquitoes, and it didn't make any sense, so we screened that in and we had—built this dock and used to run shrimp boats out of it back in the early—early '70s and Hugo pretty much obliterated that. And so I rebuilt that after she died. She—I had made all

the arrangements to get an SBA [Small Business Administration] loan, a real low interest loan to rebuild the dock but she didn't—they didn't want to do it. They didn't want to—she didn't like their requirements and so we didn't—we didn't do that. And so after she died, I went ahead and went to the bank and [*Laughs*] and got a loan and built it back but—.

01:06:26

AE: Well when we were walking through the ruins of the building earlier and you mentioned that—that the one room was the original room—was that to the right of where the oyster room was?

01:06:37

RB: Right.

01:06:37

AE: So it was just that one room, and the oyster room was added on later?

01:06:41

RB: Yeah. Well as I mentioned to you earlier, when—when we—when we first served oysters, we served them outside. And then so that oyster room was added to the dining room. And I remember—I believe it was when I was in early college, the floor in the—in the oyster room was still dirt and the pit was in the middle of the room. And they had to change it around and, of course, had to put a hard floor in there instead of dirt. I guess that didn't, you know, meet the health standards and something, and so that was not the first room added, though. That—if you remember where I showed you where the drink box was, that area up in there kind of—about where the drink box was—was where the original kitchen was in a very compact area there. And

people would come in that front door by that drink machine—the antique Coke machine—come in that door, and the drink box used to be about five feet from the front door right there, so you could come in there and right behind the drink box was where the kitchen was. And you know, there had been about, you know, eight or nine additions of one kind or the other growing back that way. But—but that dining room was—was—I don't remember a kitchen. My dad and mother might be able to tell you where that was laid out or what. But I don't remember any kind of kitchen in that main dining room so maybe—maybe there was another little room tacked on there, but the first one I remember was about where that drink box was.

01:08:19

AE: And then the oyster room being built as an oyster room, and you said the pit was in the middle originally, can you talk about how like the—the South Carolina tradition of roasting oysters and it being, you know, a—a family event or a community event and a special event and the style of doing that and the style of what you have here with that pit in the back and kind of the architecture of it? Do you know what I mean?

01:08:47

RB: Well most of the time oysters are—are roasted, like I was saying, so when they came in from outside where they had something that would resemble sort of a—you know, a brick barbecue pit or either that—it would have been real basic at best just to have a little bit of a chimney off the back but it wouldn't—wouldn't have necessarily been permanent. A lot of times what people do here is to stack up some bricks or dig a little whole or dig—you know, dig down some and—and—but you—a sheet of steel, a sheet of tin or something like that. And so basically, what we were doing in the oystering with the—with the pit like it is was—was kind of

doing it in a way that's always been done around here. I mean, you know, I'm sure you—you know the oysters were eaten by the Indians around here. I mean it—I don't suspect they put a—they probably had the fire, and they would somehow be able to put the oysters close to the fire to get them to break them open. I don't know that they used a pit, but as long as I can remember that's the way people here have done them, whether you had a fire underneath a sheet of steel or a sheet of tin and your wet blankets on top of the oyster to crack them open. And here they're done—you know a lot of people do oyster roasts at home, I mean particularly around a certain holiday. That's why, when you talked to Backman [Seafood], you know, around Thanksgiving and Christmas and New Years, they sell a bunch of oysters because people are wanting to do their own oyster roasts. And you know at our place it's—it's probably as close to, you know, visibly—I mean you're sitting there looking at the fire. I would assume that most restaurants—I don't go out to eat oysters anywhere, but they don't have a fire open where you see it. I don't know whether they're steaming somewhere in the kitchen, you know what I mean? And so this is kind of like an outdoor—like a home oyster roast, except somebody is doing it for you and—.

01:10:47

AE: Well that's part of the, you know, unfortunately, I haven't had the first-hand experience of eating at Bowen's, but walking through there today and seeing the pictures, it seems like that oyster room—there is such a theatrical element to it with the oyster cook being down at the far end and kind of being on stage all night.

01:11:03

RB: It—it is—really is a performance of sorts. And for, you know—Goat did cook for me for—in the oyster room some years ago. And there really is—like I got a present delivered to my door

Christmas and I said, you know, “I wonder who is sending me a present.” And I looked down and it was from Henry Gilliard, our oyster cooker. And there is a—more of an opportunity to perform and to develop a relationship with customers there than you normally would have, you know except when you’re real busy. And there’s generally an appreciation for somebody working their rear-end off and not having the time to—one or two things, you know, to stand there and talk to you or get them to you quite as quickly as you like. Because, I mean, you can sit there watching and, you know, they’re not sloughing off somewhere. I mean they’re working as hard as they can work. So but it is something like that.

It’s—I’ll show you some pictures before you leave. It’s—there have been lots of narratives written about different people’s experiences in the oyster room down there and descriptions of what the oyster cooking was doing and how he did it and—and that room was—was always somewhat on the dark side, anyway. And particularly, from years of having had a wood fire in there, even though there was writing all over the walls that—you know, writing was also shaded by years of, you know, the smoky room and the smoke kicking back in the fireplace and that kind of thing. And because of recent health concerns about smoke, I mean there was another for changing the way we’ve been doing it because sometimes, you know. Depending on what the wind was like outside, that dag-gone wind wouldn’t let the smoke out, and you might have—you might literally have a cloud of smoke the top three feet in the room. Well you know, that smoke is not good for you, I can tell you. But—but you’re right it’s—it is a bit of theatrics there.

01:13:22

AE: And the oyster cooker only works for tips, too, is that right?

01:13:25

RB: Pretty much. Pretty much. He brings all of his gear and does his own thing and does pretty good with it, really. *[Laughs]* He does pretty good.

01:13:37

AE: So can you describe kind of the dynamic of what the dining room is like during service? And is the oyster cooker just looking for an empty table to pile oysters on, or is there kind of a rhythm or timing to it?

01:13:49

RB: Well what—again, we don't serve—we don't have table service, and we don't have a greeter or somebody to handle that. You come to the counter, and it's first come, first served. And we write your name in a notebook and take your order and give you something to drink and then you can—if you're going—the—one rule change we made is I—I let a group go in the oyster room, if the majority of them are eating oysters, depending on how busy we are, you know. But I mean—. So if you're going in the oyster room, you know, you—we generally would give you a knife and a rag and cocktail sauce and show you what table to sit at because invariably, if you don't, a small group is going to take up a big table, and that don't work. And so you know we get—connected with Henry [Gilliard] about—“Henry, we've got four oyster eaters here. I'm going to put them at this table.” So far as other foods are concerned—shrimp, fish, crab cakes, those kinds of things, we—short of letting you go out on the dock, because we don't want to have to track you down, we just say, you know, “You're going—if you're going to go out on the deck, or are you going to be on the porch?” And find out where they're going to be sitting so we'll know when—when Evans order comes up, then we can walk, hopefully, the right direction

and say, “Evans is out here.” And again, in the meantime, if you want another beer, another tea, or another soft drink, why then you’ve got to make your own way back. So we have a—I mean we’ve got a system. I don’t know if I’d call it a rhythm, but we’ve certainly got a system that, most of the time, works pretty well.

01:15:30

AE: Then, as far as the oysters are concerned, when they’re being cooked, is it something you order them each time you want a new pile dumped on your table or are they just—?

01:15:40

RB: No, we assume as long as you’re sitting there, you probably want some more. Now sometimes—so, you know, and Henry will take turns and try to be fair, particularly if it’s a busy night. I mean you don’t—you don’t want me to get served twice, and you ain’t gotten yours the second time or whatever. So he’s got a pretty good handle on that. Now he also—I mean if you’ve been cooking oysters a long time, you frequently know—you—you can see how fast somebody is eating and how much they’re slowing down. This isn’t exactly true, but I’ve always analogized eating oysters to running a marathon; and I’ve run six or seven, and they talk about hitting a wall. Well, there really is something like that. It may not be twenty miles, like they say, but something—you just feel like things—inertia setting on and I think eating oysters, to me, is you’ve—boy, you start eating them and you feel like you can eat them all night. And then, suddenly, it’s like you’re kind of full, you know. But you can see people slowing down a little bit and—and a good oyster cooker recognizes that, you know, so you’re not generally—don’t go back and put a big load in front of somebody that you know that has been eating there for too long.

01:16:58

AE: So can we talk a little bit more about the—the physical space of the place, and to start with—maybe the writing on the wall and when that became a tradition.

01:17:09

RB: Well I think that started not until really the early '70s. And I have people—if I'd let them, they would argue with me about that. I don't get engaged in that. But I have had people [say,] "Oh, I wrote my name on the wall in 1961." Well I don't remember writing on the wall—I mean—actually, believe it or not, the restaurant was fairly neat and more clean looking; the walls were painted—originally, the walls weren't painted. I can't remember when they got painted but I do—but I had a picture of—I had some nurses come back for a class reunion, the Class of '72, and they were standing around the jukebox, and there was no writing on the wall behind the jukebox, so it probably wasn't until '72, anyway so—. But somewhere along there somebody did write and unfortunately, the only bad thing is that it didn't stop with the walls; it went on anything that was there was going to get written on. That was unfortunate because we had a couple things that were very—a couple of nice prints that got ruined, but that was our fault. But people started doing it and it, you know, came to be something that was really very meaningful to a lot of people and even little children—most intriguing to little children, at least that—that had the opportunity to do that. And it was particularly gratifying for them or anybody else when they would come back, you know, eight years later and, luckily, they found their name on the wall and, you know, a date or something like that. But and there also used to be notebooks that people would write in that were—people would write poetry in various states of inebriation and really some interesting stuff there. But the writing became an important thing. And it was

certainly something that was not encouraged; we didn't encourage it because we didn't provide pens or markers. So I mean, if we were trying to encourage it, we would have had those available. Sometimes we would inherit them, and we wouldn't hesitate to give them—particularly to kids to let them use them. But you know, the only thing that was ever a problem with that is once in a while you would find somebody—like if you go out there and look at the outside of the dock house, you know, why in the world somebody would do it, I don't know but would sneak a can of spray paint in there. And you can just ruin, you know, just a treasure of memories and names and dates by thirty seconds with a spray can. And so the only thing that's ever been done to intentionally affect the writing was from time to time I would—if—if somebody used a spray can, I would go back over that spray can with a can of white paint or something to at least allow people to start over again, you know. But it—it—whatever started it, it really kept on going, and it's something that people really did enjoy it. It's a funny thing; I can't quite figure it out. *[Laughs]*

01:20:13

AE: People like to make their mark.

01:20:15

RB: I guess.

01:20:17

AE: Are there any—were there any autographs or areas of the walls that stood out to you that you remember, specifically? Some—some autographs or pictures or anything?

01:20:29

RB: Well the—the most wonderful one is one that I will show you before you leave because the man who did it—did a charcoal [drawing] on the oyster room wall but also did a charcoal on—on a piece of paper, thank goodness, of my grandfather [Jimmy Bowen]. And people wrote over one of them in the oyster room, but thank goodness I have the one on paper. That one was priceless. There was a neat one on the far end of—as we look down—as I—if we were standing in the far end of the room and we looked down into the oyster room pit, if you go to the other—the dining room and you stand and you look all the way to the other end—that’s where the TVs were, there used to be a little—looked like a little elf or something and it was like “The Jesters.” It must have been a social club at the little Presbyterian school here—Erskine College had a little character, and it was up there for ages. There was another that was up for a long time, somebody out of—a group out of North Carolina that called themselves Apple Chill Cloggers or something like that—that was up there for ages and never got messed with. There were, oh, you know, hundreds and hundreds of people who, you know, came back five and ten years later than found their names, and luckily, from time to time I’d move a piece of furniture around or something and give somebody a little new space in there to do that. But the other thing that’s amazing is how that catches on because, see, I didn’t build that L-shaped porch, you know, that the roof collapsed on when we were standing in the dining room right there until ’96, I guess it was. And if you had ever walked onto that porch, you would have thought that because of all the writing that it had been there for thirty years, you know, just—. That’s one of the reasons I’m not—that I really think that whatever—you know, when we rebuild the restaurant, that it will take hold very quickly. It doesn’t take too long with people to feel comfortable with something, you know. The writing is a nice—a nice addition.

01:22:59

AE: Well and let's—we've only kind of mentioned the fire in passing, but the restaurant burned in October of 2006.

01:23:08

RB: October 22nd, I think.

01:23:09

AE: October 22nd. And there are a million ways to talk about that but what is—how do you talk about that today?

01:23:16

RB: Well I—you know, one of the first things that came to my mind when it happened was that I had lost a family member. And in certain—you know, that's not to equate, you know, the loss of bricks and boards and tin to anybody—any of your loved ones, you know, so it's not a real analogy but—. Having been so familiar with it for so long, and it really is in that sense—it was like losing someone very close to me. And I can still walk in there, and I just—in my mind, I mean I just—the way it was before the fire is just so familiar. I mean I've been going there for you know, fifty—sixty—my whole life, you know. And I thought it was a—you know, to me, it was a wonderful building. And it was chopped up. It was—we had wasted space in there we didn't utilize, but it just was so familiar and had a—to me, it had a very nice flow. And we continued to do things with that over the years, and it was a place that so many people were comfortable in going, you know. And in that sense it—it is irreplaceable. And at the same time it's—the building itself wasn't necessarily the—it didn't exhaust what the place was about. You know, the place was—was all—it was more so about, you know, the characters who were there

who could have been at a different time and place and just been every bit as interesting and—and enjoyable as they were here, you know. And so it's—**[Emotional]**—you know, it will never be duplicated but I believe that, hmm—I believe it will be a place there that, you know, people continue to enjoy coming to. And, you know, quite honestly, I try not to think about it too much, but—.

01:26:39

AE: Well and it—I've read on the Internet some blog sites of people responding to the fire when it happened and some talk of people having their own oyster roasts or fundraisers to try and, you know, help with the costs of rebuilding your family's restaurant. Has that been the case? Have people stepped up and—and wanted to contribute?

01:27:02

RB: Yeah, they have. And I'll be honest with you. At this point I have been too involved in trying to get a few things going just to get the door open again to take advantage—there are people who want to do that and I need—need to get organized in that sense and—and take advantage of an awful lot of goodwill and a lot of good intentions, you know. We are going—as a matter of fact, I'm meeting Friday with—gosh, who is it—a young fellow here in town who—part of a charitable group and they want to do an event that will be—assist a charity and assist us some in that. You know the other thing that—that will be fun and we don't have the room for it now but I'm—I feel sure—you may or may not have read about the—the way the place was decorated with different kinds of chairs and stuff like that and we did have some—the oyster room tables didn't match at all. But we did have some in the dining room and—that matched and one of the things I really—really hate is I lost chairs—gosh, fourteen or fifteen tables that had

been in the original restaurant on Folly Beach. And I had been intending for the last seven or eight years to kind of re-hab them a little bit and give all of my siblings and cousins a table out of the original restaurant. But I don't—I have one in my study that I've had for a good while up there, and I've got one that's kind of lame looking on the outside of the restaurant down there right now. But we're going to receive—and somebody wrote a thing in the paper—a couple few weeks after the fire saying, you know, people made sure they had some good chairs and tables they wanted to donate to Bowen's Island. Because everybody has always said none of the tables and none of the chairs matched, so I feel sure we'll get—you know, I'm not planning on spending a lot of money on tables and chairs, but in the restaurant I think we'll get a lot of those as gifts, too. And we've got people who want to help us clean up. We had—about five weeks ago we got the roof extracted, which was the first step in making the place halfway safe to go into. But we will be having to make some decisions about what's going to remain, and we've got plenty of cleaning up to do, you know, whether some of the walls are going to be spared, or how we're going to handle that, I don't know yet. But they are—we've gotten lots of phone calls and even gotten some contributions in the mail and—. I bet you I have 200 emails or cards upstairs, you know. So we'll—we'll want to take—I mean because really—. Maybe I'll show you some of the cards because you have to read those to—it's amazing, you know, how much the restaurant meant to so many people, you know, which is **[Emotional]** one reason to keep it going. Otherwise I'd do what I think about doing one day and just selling it and leaving.

[Laughs]

01:30:48

AE: **[Laughs]** Well in this network of folks that you have who worked with you when the restaurant was in operation and who are all down there right now with hammers in their hands—

with Jack [London] and Andy [Weiner], whom you introduced me to, and Goat [Lafayette] is down there, and everybody is working to getting it back going, what has it—what has it meant to them? Because—especially now, since it's high oyster season for them to be out of work but also working?

01:31:16

RB: Well, you know, it's—it came at a bad time, you know, for everybody. This is the busiest time of the year for us. And, you know, not that it's anybody's business, but we didn't have much insurance on it, and everything is going out and nothing is coming in right now, so we need to get—get going again soon and there you got to get things going again, too.

01:31:41

AE: And so right now, you were describing earlier when we down there that you have that one kind of porch area that you've enclosed and then that small little kitchen room. Was that—that—what was that before? Had that been built specifically to be a new kitchen?

01:31:54

RB: That was—well the building wasn't built specifically for that, but it's being suited up for that. Did you look in there?

01:32:03

AE: Uh-hmm.

01:32:04

RB: Looks nice, doesn't it?

01:32:04

AE: It looks real nice. It's awful small though. *[Laughs]*

[Recording is paused for approximately one minute]

AE: All right, we're back again, and we were talking about the timing of the rebuilding and all of that and—and everybody pitching in. Did you have any other thoughts on that topic?

01:32:28

RB: Well there—as we, I think, touched on earlier—there are a lot of people who have expressed a lot of concern and a lot of sadness and a lot of good—goodwill about the restaurant and who—who are willing to help. And certainly, you know, all the folks who have been involved in it are—have been most helpful. You know, we've still got—we've got a ton of stuff to do, but sort of the immediate goal right now is to be able to begin serving oysters and shrimp again, and we're getting pretty close to that. And at the same time we've had, you know—I've had four different meetings about the—about the restaurant. And we're a long way from making final decisions about that but, you know, the intention is to—you know, is to rebuild and it's—it's more complicated than you would think, you know, being on what they call a V-Zone and a Hurricane Zone and in terms of decisions about what we can rebuild or what kind of—you know, do you—do you—are you being overly sentimental to try to build something just like you had or do you need—? And so, you know, I try to put my—put myself a little bit in my grandparents' place because I do feel like I'm carrying on, you know, a family tradition here and—and this is, you know, nothing more than a trust to me to keep it operating. You know, you don't want to be

too sentimental about it and want to have something—but you want to have something people, you know, are comfortable, who have enjoyed the place for years who feel—they will feel comfortable in the new place, too. And at the same time, you don't want to, you know, rebuild a place that twenty years from now you could kick yourself for not having [done] some things differently, given the opportunity you have at this point to do that. But, you know, all the people you saw down at the restaurant, they are, you know—really do have a personal attachment to the restaurant. And many of them go back to, you know, the days of when my grandmother was alive and known here, and some of them have known me since I was, you know, real small and—and I mean so it's been a big, you know—a big load for everybody. But, you know, nobody—nobody is staying up at night wringing their hands about it. Things are moving along.

01:35:18

AE: Over the years have there been other fires at the restaurant—kitchen fires or little kind of accident fires or—?

01:35:26

RB: The only two that I—you know I—I mentioned to you earlier, we have a family oyster roast every year, and one year a little spot around the chimney caught on fire and wasn't too much to putting it out. And then gosh, fifteen months ago, the dryer caught on fire and luckily, one of the things, I think, that kept it—that put it out was that the dryer was right next to the icemaker, and I think a portion of the icemaker melted, and so the water started spraying on the dryer or something like that. But those are the only two that I know about. I can't think of anything else. But you know, it—the building didn't have, you know, a fire—any kind of

modern fire system in it, and it was one of those things, if it ever happened, it was a good chance it might burn down, you know, although I never believed that would happen.

01:36:34

AE: Has it been determined what started this fire?

01:36:37

RB: No, I haven't read the report. I've talked to the—the Fire Chief about it and they—they could not conclude—it appeared to have started around the kitchen area. But, you know, Jack told me that he was very certain they had turned everything off before they left. They had a real busy Saturday night; they turned everything off and—but you know, in old buildings they could—if I had to be it was probably, you know, an electrical fire or some kind up in the attic. We still had—I had replaced an awful lot of electrical work in the building, but there was still some that hadn't been replaced. And, you know, that casing on electrical wires ultimately gets crumbly, and you get a rat or a possum or a raccoon or something chewing on it, and they can start a fire. And if I had to guess, that's what I'd say but it was—I don't think they could conclude what it was.

01:37:34

AE: Well and—and speaking of timing, you know, you say that you never thought that it would burn down to the ground, although there was a likelihood, given its age and—and all that, but I must mention, too, the James Beard Award that you received as an American Classic and how that was just a handful of months prior to the building burning. And I want for you to explain your experience in New York and wearing the white boots and all that, and then what that has

meant to you in addition to what's been happening and—and what that award has meant in general.

01:38:10

RB: Well it was, you know, it was kind of country come to town, you know, what I mean? But you know, it was awfully—such a gratifying thing. I—I told Mr. [John T.] Edge that over the years, not that I've gotten—not like I'm callous or something like that but we—to be, you know, a little hole in the wall where we are, we've had lots and lots of things written about us in—in you know, the *New York Times* to *Harpers Magazine* to you name it, and so I always you know—I appreciate nice things being written. But it's, you know, you don't take too much time to ponder it, but I certainly appreciated that and more so, once I saw the kinds of restaurants or food enterprises that had been selected in those—in that category. And I, you know, I felt like that it was—it truly was something that was here because of my grandparents and—and John [Sanka] that used to cook for us and Ben Richardson and, you know, so many people. And so I felt, you know—it reminded me that, you know, I was carrying on really—a really neat remarkable tradition and that's what I—I don't ever forget that. But and—and I appreciated, you know, a great organization like James Beard—the James Beard Foundation recognizing places that contribute in those kinds of peculiar ways, in addition to recognizing people who, you know, truly are masterful in terms of cooking food. And if we're masterful at cooking food, it's on a very limited primitive basis. It doesn't mean there's anything inferior about it; it just means that it's different. But that was really—really a heartwarming thing to be able to be there for that. And as I mentioned, I had—had a—had thought about that, you know, wearing my shrimping boots for the reception of the award and almost didn't, just because I didn't know that it might come across as very, very hokey but—but I did feel like it—it represented so many people, and

at least from my neck of the woods, who contribute, you know, so dramatically to local culture and cuisine and everything else. And so—and as I mentioned that night, the clincher for me was, you know, oyster picker Josiah Smalls—when Joe died, about two weeks before then, I said, “Well, what the heck. I might look stupid, but at least we’ll recognize these—these good guys,” you know. And so it was—it was well received. And the—not just because part of—you may remember that the theme of that was, you know, bringing back the New Orleans restaurants and, of course, with so many people from Louisiana there, they were more familiar with the white boots than your typical Californian or New Yorker would be, so they appreciated it. And it was a great conversation starter, too. **[Laughs]** But you know I—I was getting a little poetic that night. I read something recently about it and it really, to me, it was so appropriate for that particular award and something to the effect that, “We—we were warmed by fires we did not build, and we’ll drink from wells we did not dig.” And I thought it was a great one for that because, certainly, it fit me down here. But I was touched by that, and I won’t forget that.

01:42:40

AE: Has it—what has it meant to folks like Jack and—and Goat and Nell and them? Is it kind of far-fetched that you went up to New York to receive some big city award for what they all do every day?

01:42:54

RB: They don’t seem to be too interested or distracted or bothered by that. But I will say that what—in our paper they—a number of papers used that picture [of me wearing the tuxedo with white boots], but in our paper, they actually had my mentioning Josiah Smalls, and I got a call from his daughter, and she was very touched. This was when—when he died—well after the

article came out, so that would have been about a month after he died, I guess, so that was enough in itself, you know. But, you know, they like—they like the recognition; they kind of brush it off and think they ought to get paid more, since they're getting so much—if I'm getting recognition, they ought to get paid more, but it don't work that way. **[Laughs]** It doesn't work that way.

01:43:57

AE: Well I would like to end—that's a good note to end on—on the award. But we also haven't mentioned your run for the Lieutenant Governor, if you want to speak to that a little bit. Because that, too, was going on during this whole cyclone of other events and milestones in your life.

01:44:12

RB: Right. Well I—I had just concluded the race for Lieutenant Governor here in what—November 7th, I think. And, unfortunately for the people of South Carolina, I lost by 3,100 votes. **[Laughs]** But had a—a most interesting fifteen months in doing that. And you never know how things work out and, you know, you've got to believe that there's always, you know—if one door doesn't open, another one is going to open somewhere else and—not that there's some preordained thing out there that it was supposed to work out that way, but there will be a lot of opportunities. And, you know, I worked real hard at it and came awfully close but—. It was a rather tumultuous the last couple weeks; the fire happened about two weeks before the election, so—. **[Phone Rings]** Let me grab that.

[Recording is paused for approximately two minutes]

01:45:14

AE: You were talking about your—your race [for Lieutenant Governor].

01:45:17

RB: Yeah, it was—it was a very tumultuous last couple of weeks and, you know, it was—it certainly wasn't—took a little extra effort to kind of get refocused and try to get the election over—you know, the last two weeks of the election. I think everybody at the restaurant that works for me was relieved I had lost, but they were all behind me. But they wanted me to come back and get to—get some work done.

01:45:46

AE: Uh-hmm. Well I read on your website the letter you wrote to your supporters that you posted after the election—after your loss—that—it concluded by saying, you know, “And excuse me now. I’ve got a restaurant to run.” Do you—do you—can you imagine what would have happened had you won the race and you were now the Lieutenant Governor? Would you still have the same focus to rebuilding the restaurant?

01:46:10

RB: I would still—I would definitely still have the focus to rebuild the restaurant. I guess, as I’ve looked at it over the last couple of months, it’s taken, you know—we’re working to set up kind of a transitional kitchen, which ultimately we’ll use in—in a long-range kind of way for catering and things like that, so it’s not like something we’re throwing together just for the time being. But it’s been—it’s taken more time to do that. I don’t know where we would be with that, so it might very well be that I would have had to say, you know, “The restaurant is closed until we get the new building back.” But then in terms of—since I have been here, I’ve—I’ve—spent

more time trying to set up this option to be able to serve food as soon as I can and—and also maybe, you know, for the better, in terms of any decisions about the—the—the particulars about rebuilding the restaurant. Because with the idea in mind that we’re going to be able to start serving some food soon, I haven’t felt the pressure to—to jump and to move forward too fast on the restaurant building, which again I’m—I’m glad of that. I mean I want to get it rebuilt, but I also want to make sure that it’s one that I’m going to be satisfied with, you know. So that’s probably the biggest difference. But if—if—what I—something would not have gotten done had I been elected, and I’ve got a feeling we just probably would have said, “Well, you know, we’ll be closed for the next year or so. But at this point I—we are—we are getting pretty close and, you know, the big—the big challenge right now, quite honestly, is that I think there are a lot of people who are eager for us to get reopen. And how do we disseminate the information about being reopened, without getting overwhelmed? You know, I don’t want to reopen secretly so—sort of like that, when there are a lot of people calling and saying, “I want to know when you’re getting open,” kind of thing. So we’ll probably have to put something in the paper, but I don’t—I’ve still got some questions on my mind of how big of a deal do we want to make that because I got a feeling we could be overwhelmed and, you know, we’re pretty slow getting food out, anyway.

01:48:43

AE: That will be a challenge, definitely. So do you—does the word *future* come into your vocabulary at all right now, or are you just kind of going day-to-day? Do you have an idea of what the future holds for Bowen’s Island and the restaurant?

01:48:57

RB: Yeah. In general, yeah. I mean we're going to be—the big thing is we're going to be—be back in business again. And in terms of the particulars, I think we'll continue to be pretty simple, pretty bare-bones, not—not try to sort of change the character of things too much. And I think the food is going to be probably the same, other than a couple of additions that—that maybe need—we need to do. And I mean, I'd like to start serving, you know, something like an oyster po-boy sandwich or a shrimp po-boy sandwich. Well I mean it's pretty simple. It's nothing, you know—. But in terms of the—the specifics of how things are going to look right this minute, I'm not—I don't—I'm not sure that I know one thing that, you know, we've—we've always been cash or check. I mean I've got a feeling we're going to have to get a credit card—the only reason being we're going to have to get, you know—we've got the location of where you—the customers make their orders and the kitchen are split, so for the first time we're going to have one of those cash registers, where you punch the thing in and it sends a message out for the cook what the order is over there, you know. So I mean I'm not—I don't know how—what that—that doesn't bode well for me. I don't do a lot of—anyway, that's a change; that's a big change for us, doing that. And what else—we're going to set us up a website, and part of the website, quite frankly, is that I haven't been getting many calls lately about private parties, you know, for—like rehearsal parties and graduation parties and things like that. And I know that that's—that—and traditionally, I've gotten at least five to ten calls a week with an inquiry about a private party. Well, I haven't been getting any of those. Well, to me, that's kind of an impetus right now for getting a website up. The parents were very responsive in covering—in responsible in covering what they did about the restaurant fire, but I think there is a bit of a sense out there—because I've talked—I talk to people all the time who—who talk to people and who just say, “I can't—you know, I didn't know they're still doing, you know private, parties. I mean I thought

everything burned down.” I mean a lot of people think everything burned down, and I’m not going to buy a full-page ad in the paper. So I think a website will help in that regard and—but that’s far different than anything we’ve ever done. You know, we’ve got an answering machine on the telephone, and if you call from Mississippi about a private party, I’ll call you back; and I’ll fax you a menu for what we do for private parties. And if you like what you see and what you hear about the restaurant, you send me a deposit. And, you know, after that, everything is done by phone and, you know, in today’s world, that’s probably exceptional. So I mean, I guess I’m trying to catch—I’m kind of catching up, but that’s a big deal for us to have met with that gentleman today [about the order/cash register system]. But in terms of the types of food and the—the feel, I don’t think things are going to change. Is that what you were originally asking me? I’m not sure how you were asking?

01:52:44

AE: Yeah, that’s what I asked. But then part of that—I wonder about a long view into the history—into the future, rather, and if, for example, if someone is in line to take the reins from you when you retire or the next generation of Bowen’s Island.

01:53:02

RB: Well we hadn’t—we haven’t made any plans, you know, about that, and I feel sure we will. I got, you know, two—two kids and got two grandkids and almost a third grandkid here and grandchildren, and we’ll work out something.

01:53:21

AE: It will definitely stay in the family, then?

01:53:23

RB: I think so; I don't have any plans to do anything different about that.

01:53:28

AE: Hmm.

01:53:29

RB: It's—you know, I don't know. You know, somebody else could—could get a feel for it but I just think—I think it's kind of a personal place. And it's a funny thing. It, you know—you know, I still think of—of the attraction of the restaurant being the food but also the personalities of my grandparents and John [Sanka] and what unique characters they were. You know, that's—I have to tell myself sometimes—you remember when you were a freshman in high school, how absolutely impressive and such stellar quality and such ability everything about people who were seniors in high school, and how when you got to be a senior, you could never believe that—how you worshiped those seniors who were there? And, to some extent, on a much lower level, you know, I've become somewhat identified with the restaurant, too, you know. So many of those things—it does grow, and you do mature and there are probably, you know, twenty-year-olds—there are thirty-year-olds who were not around when my grandparents were here, and the only exposure they've had to Bowen's Island has been me. And so that's part of that tradition in—in building that tradition, too, and it is something that—that ultimately, I will make a contribution to as well, you know. Not to say other people couldn't, but I just don't see selling the restaurant. It just ain't going to happen.

01:55:18

AE: Well, we can wind it up. We've spent a good couple hours together. I'm sure that we could talk about other—other things for many more hours, but it seems like we're at a good point to finish up. So I thank you for extending our time today and our visit, and I wonder if there's anything that maybe I didn't ask that you want to make sure to include or a final thought or anything.

01:55:37

RB: Oh, gosh. Well you'll get to talk to my parents this weekend, and they'll add a lot of things but they—they certainly made their contribution early on, you know, helping build the restaurant and things like that. And gosh, yeah, it's just very gratifying to have people who love coming to a place like Bowen's Island and—and certainly an honor for me to be able to, you know, carry on what I can consider a great Low Country—Low Country tradition and—and, you know, feel so fortunate to have been able to work with my grandparents and then work with, you know, interesting kinds of people like—like we've always had here and love serving good oysters and shrimp. But if I think of anything tonight I'll—anything that's—I'll talk to you.

01:56:43

AE: Okay.

01:56:44

RB: But also, yeah, the other thing is—and maybe you'll meet my wife [LaNelle] before you leave. It's, you know, I've gotten so that I have more freedom in terms of, if I need to go somewhere—I couldn't have made it through fifteen months of a campaign without that, you know. But it has still been, you know—there's an element of sacrifice with it as well and—and

been many a night when I had to work in the restaurant that if I had—had my druthers I'd have been out to dinner somewhere with my wife, you know. So your family puts up with a lot with those kinds of things, too. And you know—you can't forget that. But if I think of anything else I will—.

01:57:31

AE: I'll be around and thank you.

01:57:34

RB: Thank you.

[End Robert Barber Interview]