

SALLY EASON & CHARLES HUDSON
Sunburst Trout Farms, Canton, North Carolina
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Interviewer: Sara Wood

Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs

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[Begin Sally Eason Interview]

00:00:00

Sara Wood: So this is Sara Wood with the Southern Foodways Alliance. It's April 17, 2014. I'm here in Waynesville, North Carolina with Ms. Sally Eason and Mr. Charlie Hudson at Sunburst Trout Farms. And I'm wondering for the record Sally if you would go ahead and say hello and introduce yourself and tell me who you are and where we are right now.

00:00:22

Sally Eason: Oh I'm Sally Eason and I'm CEO of Sunburst Trout Farms. I'm part of a third generation farm. I'm the middle generation. My children are in the business as well. And we've been at it for sixty-five years. My dad [Dick Jennings] started it in 1948 and we are embarking on a whole new mission of moving from our traditional place into an indoor aquaculture facility. That's where we're located now.

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SW: And Charlie would you be so kind as to do the same thing and say hello and introduce yourself and tell me a little bit about yourself?

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Charles Hudson: Okay. Hi, I'm Charles Hudson. I'm with Sunburst Trout Farms. I've been here almost eight years and have used Sunburst products probably for the last twenty years. I have been at several different locations throughout my career. My education, I was trained at AB

Tech in the culinary program and earned a degree in physics from UNC-A [Asheville] in 2000.

And I have been able to flourish here at Sunburst.

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SW: Thanks guys. The first question I wanted to ask is for you Sally; could you talk a little bit about the history of Sunburst and how it got started and maybe a little bit about your dad?

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SE: Sure; my dad moved to North Carolina in [nineteen] forty-eight full-time and took over a very raw piece of land that his great-grandfather [Edward Henry Jennings] had purchased over a period of time in the 1800s. And he wanted to farm trout and mink and that was not common to his background. It's just something he had a wild crazy notion to do. And he had the property with the water on it to do it. So that's what he did; he embarked on that and—and stayed with trout throughout his career. He also raised mink but let that go in the [nineteen] seventies. But the trout stuff he kept—he kept.

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My husband [Steve Eason] came into the business in seventy-five. I came along in eighty-five and joined. My kids came in the early 2000s at three different times. I have two sons [Ben and Wes Eason] and a daughter [Katie Eason Hughes] and they're all in it. The sons both work at the trout farm at the main facility and my daughter has recently moved back from New York and she runs the retail store which is our first brick and mortar retail business. My daughter-in-law [Anna Eason] moved here from Raleigh, North Carolina. She's very much in the business and has three children and has jumped into it real full-time now that her kids are a little

bit older. And then I have a newer son-in-law [Clay Hughes] and he's also a chef and he is running the retail shop with my daughter, Katie.

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SW: Well it's a long family tradition.

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SE: Yes.

00:03:17

SW: Can you talk or maybe share some memories of growing up on that particular land where we were and—and what you remember about it and your dad working with the trout?

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SE: Sure; it was an idyllic place to grow up. It was very, very barren and wilderness like but I have a brother [Dickie Jennings] and sister [Binford Jennings] and we were each other's best friends and that's just where we grew up on the farm. We—we had to work from the time we were about six years old. That was before labor laws were real well in place, but we liked that too and we were just allowed—thinking back it's crazy that we were allowed to do what we did 'cause we would leave early in the morning and come back at dark and have a little sack with food in it. And you know if my parents had to find us I don't know that they could have. But it was great.

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I remember the smell of the mink farm being really disgusting. It was fun to go to the trout farm 'cause we'd push each other in the raceways and stuff and I liked watching the fish be hatched. That was especially fun for me.

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SW: Can you describe that for people who have maybe not experienced that before?

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SE: Sure; you have to have an incubator, first of all, which can be a little tiny shed or just a small room and it has a thing that looks like a rack with a whole bunch of drawers in it and each drawer you pull out has about 10,000 eggs in it. And they're little tiny fish eggs in very little water and you don't feed them for the first two weeks of life. They live on their own sack. And then when that starts to go away and they eye-up—that's an expression when you can see a black spot then they are ready for the first level of feed which is just so fine it looks like dust. And you actually have to dust the fish every hour for twenty-four hours and you have to do that for about three weeks, so it's a very labor-intensive process when they're little. And the mortality rate is about fifty percent. That's the norm.

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So if you start out with a million eggs you're obviously going to have half a million fish give or take when they're—when they reach finger length size. But you just assume that's the case up front. And then you have a hatchery building with long raceways that are about five—four feet off the ground so you don't have to lean down and the fryer put in there and then as

they grow you graduate them to different sizes because they're basically cannibalistic so you don't want different sizes in the same raceway. So a lot moving around of the little bitty fish as they grow and then you have a bigger system at someplace either or elsewhere where you move them for their final however long they're going to be with you.

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And in our particular case we raise them to be at least two years old. We enjoy the caviar process a lot and sell a lot of it, so they therefore have to be two years old or older because they're not sexually mature until then. So if you want the caviar you got to raise them that long.

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SW: And Sally could you just quickly kind of describe you know I got to see the farm this morning and the raceways but can you—for people who may not be familiar with raising trout can you talk about where they start from what river and sort of like the process you just talked about, the hatchery?

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SE: Well the most important thing for raising trout especially mature ones or getting to be mature is water. It has to be real, real good clean water and it needs to be a lot of it. And where we're located now we have 12,000 gallons a minute in a good scenario. When we have drought-like conditions it's not that good but even in a drought-like condition we still have pretty good flow. And that's we think really in large responsible for the great flavor of our trout. The other thing would be the feed, but that much water and pure water just insures a great product at the end.

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I forget what else I was going to say.

00:07:19

SW: What—what is the river? I mean do they come—can you talk about where they come from?

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SE: Well see they come from—they come from the eggs we buy so—and I didn't tell you anything about that, so to give you that piece of information, we have several growers across that mountain that I referenced where they didn't used to be a road. And those people—those farmers purchased—we actually we purchase the eggs for them. The eggs go to their farms. They raise them until they're whatever size and then they sell them to us. And we take the price of the eggs off the invoice so it's—it's a sort of a wash.

00:08:00

There are, let's see, three farmers on that side I think who do the growing for us and they do a great job. And you know they feed what we feed and when we vaccinate them we go over and vaccinate them and so forth. So when the fish are roughly six ounces or thereabouts we get them on our farm and we grow them out to maturity to harvest size.

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SW: And I wanted to know could you—what do you feed them?

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SE: It's a specially blended feed that we came up with about fifteen-plus years ago. We were doing business with Whole Foods then and this was when Whole Foods was really trying to sort of make a name and brand themselves. And so they asked if we would be willing to sort of retool our feed and make it as top notch as it could be? They brought their chemists in. We brought the chemists from the feed company and we spent about a week together with all those chemists working together to come up with what we felt was the healthiest most appropriate salmonid diet that had been designed. Since that time we don't have our feed produced at the same place. We've gone through many iterations of who we use. I'm not even sure who we use currently. I think it's Mellick. But anyway it's—it's a really great feed. It has super conversion, no hormones, no antibiotics and no animal byproducts. And it has the colorant that gives our fish that pretty orange hue. It's an all-natural derivative of red phaffia yeast. So it's—it's actually good for you; it's an antioxidant, so—.

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SW: And I wanted to just back up a little bit more. Could you—do you—why did your dad decide to do—I know you mentioned the mink farming but why—why trout?

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SE: I think he enjoyed fishing as a young boy and did so with his dad. And if you knew my dad you'd know that he's just—he's pretty out of the box. And he—his family was in the oil business in Pittsburgh and he'd have certainly done a lot better if he stayed there and it would have been safer and many other things. **[Laughs]** But he just—he's not about that; he's—as I mentioned,

he's a renegade and he likes challenges a whole lot. And when he finishes with one he goes right onto another one. He likes to start them and move on. So that's pretty much what he did with this trout business. Nobody did it back then, nobody, and there's a picture right here which ironically Charlie's sister-in-law had in a book that she bought at a yard sale—

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CH: Estate sale, yeah.

00:10:52

SE: —estate sale and he was visiting them recently and saw that. Notice the date; where is the date on there Charlie?

00:11:00

CH: I don't know if the date is on there or not but—

00:11:02

SE: Well it had to have been the early [nineteen] sixties because it references Cashier's Valley Trout Farm. That was the original farm. So that means Lake Logan what you saw today wasn't in existence yet. And what does he say on here?

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CH: *Healthy mountain trout and then we supply brook, rainbow and brown trout for stocking private waters. We also have dressed trout for discriminating restaurateurs.*

00:11:34

SE: The fact that he came up with discriminating restaurateurs in the sixties you know that sounds like something you would say today. He was so ahead of his time. **[Laughs]** And you know he's the one who thought we should start doing caviar when all the eggs are lying all over the floor in the fall when they were naturally spawning. And he found some guy in Asheville who had spent a lot of time in Europe and knew quite a bit about how to process roe and he went to this guy's house and said, "I need you to help me do this." And you know after about a year he figured it out and started selling to Caviarteria in New York. It was the only place that would buy from us and they bought it in bulk in two-pound bags. And we froze everything we did and sent it to Caviarteria. That was our only market. So he has had a lot of vision and foresight in many ways that's kept this company forward-thinking and not stagnant.

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SW: So you mentioned selling the caviar to the place in New York. What was the reception like locally? Were people just not interested?

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SE: Oh no, no; the interest was not here—not then. But in very early 2000 I had occasion to run into a chef in New York who had a great publicist and actually have remained in a relationship with her all these years and she's done many wonderful things for us. And she's super-savvy and very connected in the food world. And that's really the—what sort of catapulted us into more of a nationally known presence as far as our caviar goes. And then when Charlie came onboard he

took what we did with the caviar and took it from like one to ten. So a much finer process, more refined, and then came up with the other flavors as well.

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SW: So your—your father started out by selling—he was selling—he started off selling immediately to restaurants and—?

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SE: Initially he just stocked ponds for individuals and some government streams. That's all he did and then he got the idea that he would like to sell to a restaurant. So he got in his truck and you know I'm sure he threw a bunch of fish in the back, probably not even on ice and you know got lots of doors slammed in his face. Out of frustration one day he came upon Aunt Fannie's Cabin in Atlanta and there's a great story to that. If you don't know you should check it out sometime. But he went in and said, you know, "What do you think about this trout?" And they said, "Yeah; fine."

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So Aunt Fannie's Cabin was his only restaurant account for years. And he drove it all down there himself. [*Phone Rings*] And then he wanted a restaurant so—

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SW: I'm going to stop you just for a second—

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SE: Sure; thank you Anna. I didn't realize I left that on—sorry. It's in that outside pocket.

Thanks hon. Do I need to back up any or just keep going?

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SW: Just keep going.

00:14:41

SE: So he wanted a restaurant so he had to go all the way to DC—I mean a grocery store; he had to go all the way to DC to find one who was interested and that was Giant Foods. And I'm quite sure that the only reason Giant ever agreed is because he drove them crazy. He just kept hounding them and hounding them and I think just out of desperation they finally said, "Okay. God we'll buy your trout." And so he drove that up there for many years.

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And then when I came onboard it just—it seemed like a natural move to start looking for other customers closer [*Laughs*] to our home. And you know looking at carbon footprints and the local food movement that of course just enhanced that thought—concept.

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SW: Was he smoking and like doing the cold smoke and the hot smoke at the time as well?

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SE: He started smoking in the mid-eighties and he got a defunct trailer from a tractor trailer rig and brought it out to our farm, cut a hole in the bottom of it, put a woodstove underneath it, had a

local supply place called Ball's to fashion something so that the smoke would then come up into the trailer and he built racks inside there and smoked it in there.

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And it was pretty darned good. It was certainly not FDA compliant, but we didn't have FDA then at least at our farm. But again he went back to Washington and went to Washington Fish Exchange and that was our first smoked customer. And they were the only one for a long time. Needless to say we don't use that anymore. You've seen the—the newer version which is a whole lot better and then he—the cold smoked, he—dad's traveled in Europe a lot and so he had occasion to eat gravlax and other wonderful smoked products there and was just bound and determined he could do the same thing with the trout.

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And he worked with a chef at the Biltmore. Do you remember who that was? I can't think of his name.

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CH: I can't remember the name; no.

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SE: I could maybe resurrect it; anyway for quite a while and he was very helpful, and he did come up with a good rendition. And again, when Charlie came to Sunburst he took it to a

completely other level and it's—I do think it's a beautiful smoked. It's a flavor unlike any other cold smoked I've ever tasted.

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SW: When you were growing up did you guys eat a lot of smoked fish? I mean was that a tradition in your family?

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SE: We didn't eat any fish 'cause neither of my parents like fish. [*Laughs*] Yeah; but they had only eaten fish the way it was traditionally cooked in the South. You know you just fried trout; that's just what you did. You put it in cornmeal and you fried it. That to me is great but they didn't like it. My mom didn't like the smell of it and so we—no; we had fish sticks.

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SW: Even though you had this trout farm?

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SE: Uh-hm; yeah it's crazy to think about. And they did fish fries for friends but no. We didn't eat much fish in our house that long ago.

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SW: What were the fish fries like? Do you remember?

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SE: Yeah; there was always a square dance involved and my dad always called it a square dance ‘cause he’s really good at that. And he fried all the trout in a huge iron skillet that was about as big as this sofa that we’re sitting on seriously. It was huge and he just did a big fire pit and cooked them in our backyard. And mama made coleslaw and we were good to go. It was fun.

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SW: Sally how did you end up—I know you told me this when we were walking around but could you for the tape, could you talk about how you ended up coming into the business?

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SE: Sure. I was a pediatric nurse and at Cashiers near Lonesome Valley where we first lived and the first trout farm and loved that. But I quit after my second child just to stay home with the kids until they were back in school and had every intention of going back into nursing. And then my father’s bookkeeper quit suddenly and he asked if I would come and work for him for just a week and just do payroll and invoicing. And I said, “I don’t know how to do payroll or invoicing,” and he goes, “I’ll teach you; it’s really simple”. And I said, “I’ll do it for one week and that’s it—no more.” And that was about twenty-five years ago, so I don’t know how that happened.

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CH: Similar to the way I started. [*Laughs*]

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SE: Yeah exactly.

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CH: Not—but not in bookkeeping. I came about eight years ago to—I wanted to learn how to make caviar and I called Sally up and said, “Hey I’d—can I come out and you know learn how to do caviar?” And she said, “Yeah; come on out.”

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SE: But I didn’t even know you did I?

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CH: Well I had done a few caterings.

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SE: Had you already done it then; okay, yeah, yeah that’s right, that’s right, yeah.

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SW: And were you at the time Charlie?

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CH: I was in a barbeque restaurant with my brother and actually had—I guess I had just left there. We had kind of parted ways on that adventure and I was actually—I was working—

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SE: You I mean—

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CH: Oh yeah; I was working at AB Tech as—as an instructor, an adjunct instructor in the culinary program and I was working with someone in a food business at Blue Ridge Food Ventures working on some products. Yeah; that’s—okay that was that summer. So then I came and said, “Oh I’d like to you know learn how to make caviar,” and Sally said, “Yeah sure.” We’ve got fish—we got eggs coming on and I had known Becky [Warren] who you met; I’ve known her for quite a long time and we worked together on different events. But so I came out and spent about a week and about in a week’s time I could see there was a lot of potential and a lot of excitement and a lot of I guess out of the box [*Laughs*] from your dad’s legacy and you know came up with a proposal. And then said I wanted to be Sunburst Research and Development Chef and so Sally got with her family and dad and they you know seemed—everything seemed to be a good idea. So everything fit and you know low and behold eight years later I’m still here. So I hope to be saying the same thing in twenty-five.

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SW: And what was the name of the barbeque place that you had with your brother?

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CH: It was a franchise. It was Bono’s Bar-B-Q out of Jacksonville, Florida and it was a franchise we had in East Asheville.

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SW: So had you been curing fish at all up to that point?

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CH: Yeah; I mean I—I worked at a restaurant in—in Hendersonville named Expressions. It's no longer but Tom Young was the chef/owner and actually we did—we did a gravlax with Sunburst's fish. You know we did a treatment with that and then—and I think we called it salmon trout for the—I guess the—. And we—we would cure that and sell it and that was just basically traditional gravlax cure and then I got into doing some different cures like some with bourbon and I'd throw in some other citrus, different herbs, some basil and that weren't the traditional gravlax. So that was I guess really where I started to cut my teeth on curing the fish which was that—that was gosh that was back in ninety-three, ninety-four, somewhere there.

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SW: Do you have a—a deep curing tradition in your family or did you sort of teach yourself how to do it?

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CH: [*Laughs*] That's a good question. I think we did. I think—I don't think we had a deep curing. We did have—we did have a trout tradition. There was a place my dad would take us trout fishing when we were little and we'd bring those home and then my dad would make sure that we—I was probably about five and he made sure that I learned how to clean the fish, you know take the hooks out, and you know if it needed a whack on the head then I learned that too.

So but then you know we would grill them as opposed to—I guess you talked about frying them but we’d—my dad would make a big event and that would be you know the charcoal grill and it was you know it was very ceremonial [*Laughs*] to grill the trout that we just caught.

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SE: My family was more redneck than yours I think. [*Laughs*]

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CH: I don’t know about that but—but the—I guess the curing I guess I was first exposed to it in culinary school at AB Tech. I had some you know wonderful instructors there. And you know I would just you know then I would—I would just play around with cures at home and you know basically it was just from reading books and you know asking other chefs and other people that have cured things and reading about you know country hams and just all different traditions from European, you know Scandinavians and the different types of cures, the marinades, ceviches and all of that. And then just that’s half the fun is just experimenting with you know new ways—different sauce, different treatments like you know I’ve done some blueberry and strawberry with some—some local berries and tried some with some cocoa and just we looked at doing—I guess something your dad came in. So he still comes in, Mr. Jennings at almost ninety and you know with different ideas and said, “Well,”—and he’ll just bring stuff into me and he—.

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You know one—he came in and brought me like three different port wines and said, “I think it would be nice to have some port wine flavor on the—on the cold smoked trout.” “Well oh yeah, sure, okay; well I’ll try it,” you know and it’s—you know where kind of some people

ask me where you know sometimes the ideas for the creativity comes from and a lot of times it does come from Mr. Jennings still. Oh here try this. I think he was—he should have been a chef.

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SE: It's not too late for him is it?

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CH: No. *[Laughs]* But he—he just—he thinks along that line just you know pushing it and always trying something new and he doesn't—there's nothing to—he doesn't sit around you know. There's nothing—"Well yeah the cold smoked it's great. Well here let's try it with the port wine and we'll try it with you know whatever—vanilla sugar or—or saffron or something," so—. That's—that's all I can think of. *[Laughs]*

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SW: What was he doing before he did the trout farm?

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SE: He had—he went to Yale and after two years he left to join the service and that was World War II and when he got back from the service I think he had lost all motivation to go back to school and that's when he came up with the notion of moving to North Carolina. So he was about twenty-five or so I think when he left Yale and moved to N.C. So he was—he would have been an engineer had he stayed at Yale. That was his trajectory at that time.

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SW: And can you talk a little bit about how—why did he move from—started—the farm started in Cashiers and then moved to Canton. Can you talk about that move?

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SE: Sure; the reason he left Cashiers was he saw that there was opportunity to grow and to network and probably reach out to a wider market. And he had maxed out at the farm in Cashiers. The water there was plentiful but not nearly as plentiful as what you saw this morning at Lake Logan. So he—he was doing all he could do there. And he began looking around Western N.C. and the place he found with the best cleanest water was in Haywood County, an adjacent county about forty miles away as the crow flies, more like fifty or sixty on the roads.

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But he knew that there was some land and water usage available that belonged to the—what was then known as the Champion Papermill which is located in Canton. It's a—sort of the basis of the economics of Haywood County is that mill with all the people and employees, but they owned that water. They owned the water rights. They don't own the lake but they own the water rights and water is very important to run a papermill; so twelve miles downriver is the papermill. Happily it's below us and not above us. It wouldn't be the same scenario.

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So he contacted them and find out he—he could indeed lease that from them. They were happy to do it and I think the original lease was \$400 a month or something crazy like that. And we leased from Champion for probably twenty-plus years. And then it was sold to—employee

takeover and became Blue Ridge Paper Company. The same lease applied then; it was—they were both wonderful. And then now it's owned by a much bigger conglomerate, Evergreen Packaging but still the same lease and we have 1,000-year lease so I guess we can stay there a long time but we won't be purchasing it. But it's only seven acres, so we lease the water rights and have pretty much free rein as to what we do on the property. But it's an interesting side note that you can raise a half a million pounds of a protein that being fish on seven acres if you look at that same scenario with pork or beef or even chicken. It takes much, much more land.

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SW: Did your father build those raceways?

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SE: He did.

00:29:05

SW: He built all of that?

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SE: He built it all. That was former tobacco land. It was in the twenties and thirties. It was a big tobacco farm and since then it's been deemed flood plain so you could certainly have no homes or buildings of that sort in that area. So it's perfect for farming. So there was nothing there. It was just a blank slate. So he built all the raceways and dirt ponds.

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Since then several of the raceways have been redone and some of the dirt ponds have been changed into raceways. But it's—other than that it's pretty much the same design as what he came up with originally.

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SW: And does he eat trout now?

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SE: Yeah; he does. He does eat trout now and he—he likes it. And boy he loves nothing more to find out that Charlie is working on a new recipe and you know he's out at the farm bugging him all the time and always has criticisms, you know whether he loves it or not. He's always going to just tell him a couple things he should do differently. And—

00:30:08

CH: Constructive criticism, constructive criticism.

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SE: Right; that sort of their mojo. But yeah he loves fish now; uh-hm he does. And he—he has a good palate. He's very accepting of unusual different tastes and in fact I think the weirder it is the more he likes it probably.

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SW: And when did it go from being called Jennings Trout Farm to Sunburst? How did that happen?

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SE: In the early nineties there was a marketing group of students from a local college who wanted to come and do a senior project at Sunburst. Well it was then Jennings Trout Farm. And so my dad said, “Okay,” and they came out and after they had finished whatever their project was the takeaway that they gave my dad was you should rename your company ‘cause Jennings Trout Farm sounds real mom and poppish and if you really want to expand you need to have probably a different name.

00:31:08

So we thought about that and came up with Sunburst because the community above us was a logging community known as Sunburst from the late 1800s. It was a huge logging community, about 30,000 people lived up there, and so we thought okay. So we sort of took a transitional phase and for about four years we called ourselves Jennings Sunburst, so people would get the segue. And then we eventually dropped the Jennings and just went with Sunburst Trout Farm. And then after we started branching out we changed it to farms and made it plural, so.

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SW: And I just have two more questions that I want to ask you guys more about the modern day if you mind—do you have a few more questions in you—answers I guess?

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SE: Sure.

00:31:54

SW: I wanted to know has the type of—that you know you talked about your—your father stocking ponds for people and then raising these trout. Is it the same kind—are you guys raising the same kind of trout today? I mean is—or is it a different kind of trout?

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SE: It has—that has changed. Initially dad raised brook, brown, and rainbow, all three, probably in equal proportions. When he moved to Lake Logan to expand he let go of the brook and brown. They are harder to raise. Rainbows are hard enough and thank god he let go of the other two because that would have been daunting.

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But yeah; so it's just strictly rainbows from then until now.

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SW: And are—are rainbow trout and the other two are they native to this part of North Carolina? Where do you get the eggs from?

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SE: Rainbow trout are not native to North Carolina. A lot of people think they are. They're actually native to—where are they native to?

00:32:57

CH: The West Coast area, the West.

00:33:03

SE: I think it's either brown or brook is native to here I think, right?

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CH: Yes; brown or brook are the native.

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SW: And I just have one more historical question about the area. Do you know if—I mean I asked about your family in particular but do you know if there was a curing tradition here in this area when your father started the trout farm?

00:33:24

SE: He was the curing tradition. I—yeah; I'm certain there were people at the reservation, the Cherokee Indian Reservation who were doing curing of some sort. I'm not privy to what they did or how they did it but we're real close to the huge eastern band of the Cherokee and certainly the Indians knew how to smoke well before we did. So I would imagine they would have some great stories to complement our technique and what—and our stories, but I don't know that.

00:33:54

SW: I was just curious.

00:33:56

SE: Yeah.

00:33:56

SW: And you talked about how you got into this business Sally but what compelled you to stay?

00:34:03

SE: Hmm; how much more time do we have? [*Laughs*] What compelled me to stay? The people there; there's so much gratification from the people I work with—just part of my family.

00:34:23

SW: And many of them have been with you for years, right?

00:34:26

SE: Uh-hm, right; the one who has been there the longest who isn't family is Chris [Inman], the guy you met this morning. He's been there twenty-two years as he reminded me when I said the wrong number. [*Laughs*]

00:34:38

SW: You were close. You said twenty.

00:34:40

SE: Yeah; I was close. George, the guy in the office has been here about eighteen years.

Charlie—eight, close to eight right?

00:34:49

CH: Uh-hm, breaking close to nine.

00:34:54

SE: Uh-hm; Anna how long have you been here?

00:34:57

CH: I think it's ten years. Yeah; she's two years before I started.

00:35:03

SE: And Kyle, how long for Kyle? He came in 2004? Ten, yeah; and over the time I've been there and especially since I've sort of taken the helm, we've had some really interesting characters. We've had a couple people who have done jail time. We've got some recovered addicts. We've had several of those. People who I think might have had a different life outcome, but—

00:35:32

CH: Definitely.

00:35:35

SE: —we like to offer opportunities and it's just really cool when you see them bite. And I feel like that's happened in many cases.

00:35:45

SW: And I know you told me this earlier when we were out on the farm Sally but how many employees do you have?

00:35:49

SE: We have twenty-six, now, right Anna? Twenty-four—

00:35:55

Anna: Twenty-four not including—

00:35:57

SE: Okay; see I always count us, so—. [*Laughs*]

00:36:01

SW: And I wanted to know—I know this is a big fat question but can you talk about some of the—the big ways things have changed since you know your era and—and Charlie coming on? Like what you have guys changed about the business?

00:36:16

SE: Oh it's changed so dramatically that it's not even close to the same. When I started working there after I did invoicing for one week, after that I got demoted big time to low woman on the totem pole on the floor, and through the next five years I was on the floor.

00:36:33

CH: The processing floor.

00:36:34

SE: Yeah; yeah ah, yeah I was on the processing floor. Thank you. And only women worked there then inside.

00:36:43

SW: Why is that?

00:36:44

SE: That's just who dad could get. They were you know looking for work and these women weighed you know gosh 250—something like that and had muscles like you wouldn't believe and I mean they were stout women. And nothing was machinated then. Everything was by hand so they actually had to pick up these huge tubs of fish and dump them out on top of the counter and it was amazing. And they loved to make fun of me more than anything. That was their favorite pastime. Everybody smoked cigarettes while they were processing back then. I can't imagine that now. It was just a very—I mean a big week back then for us would have been about 700 to 800 pounds a week. Now, we do as many as 10,000 pounds a week; so volume-wise it's dramatically different.

00:37:32

Also back in the beginning we just did the filets and dressed and you know then added on value-added products as we went, but definitely just the fresh fish was the—the mainstream product. The whole composition of employees has changed dramatically. As you saw we have

men, women, quite young, the whole staff in general is pretty young; people from all over, some fabulous Hispanic folks. There weren't any Hispanics who lived here then at all. And they're—they're a wonderful complement to our Sunburst family. The space has certainly changed dramatically. It was just an old cinderblock building that was burned down and it was smaller than what you were in this morning.

00:38:24

Great machinery that we didn't have so not as much handwork, far more efficient, and then the people that we have in particular and what they add is probably the biggest change that's made the biggest difference. Certainly Charlie, you've heard what he's done and what he's brought about in the company and his—he's not real good with people making mistakes and not living up to their potential—

00:38:57

CH: *[Laughs]*

00:38:57

SE: —so therefore he holds everyone to a very high standard.

00:39:04

CH: Wow.

00:39:04

SE: It's true and my son Wes has taken over sales and he is doing a great job. He's a real people person and loves to talk and he doesn't shut up 'til he gets the sale. And he's—he's genuine. My son Ben is the science head and he's so excited to start hatching fish again and he's going to be really, really good at that. He's—he's also very anal and what he's over he does a fabulous job with. Anna my daughter-in-law is just amazing with what she's done with social media. If it had been up to me it would be a real different picture. I'll promise you that. She's a brilliant marketing person, so just a great job.

00:39:45

And everybody brings something really unique to the table, so that's—that's the main thing that's changed it up so much I think. Would you add anything to that?

00:39:54

CH: Well I might have phrased my description of how I—. **[Laughs]** But I do; I have high standards and I mean that's just you know that's the culinary background. That's—

00:40:08

SE: I meant that as a compliment actually.

00:40:10

CH: Yes; I know. It's—but I think the uniqueness of the workplace, the—the creative freedom, the—you know the opportunities to better yourself whether you're—it doesn't matter where you work in the farm but if there's an opportunity to learn something new or better yourself or tie them off to get to school or for children or for anything it's—it's the culture, the Sunburst culture there that, I don't know, the culture before but I hear stories of how Mr. Jennings ran the farm

and how Sally and now Wes and—and Ben are—are running the farm—quite different but like I said earlier, I’m—I’ve been able to—to flourish here and just you know explore creative paths or technical paths and just you know I just think that opportunity like Walter [Ager] you met in the kitchen, who is the kitchen manager now, he’s started on the processing floor, worked on the processing floor for a long time and came into the kitchen and it’s—yeah I mean there’s just a—you know commitment I think by everyone there now. It—there’s a—there’s a big commitment. I think we’ve taken the—I mentioned the HACCP, the food safety, I think we’ve gotten—we continue to get you know more and more precise about that. It’s a very important part of anyone that’s in the food business whether it’s a restaurant or manufacturer or a farm is that accountability for the safety of the food that you’re producing.

00:41:59

And that to me has come you know; we—we have really come a long way in that which is—I mean which is good. I mean we’ve always—Sunburst has always been quality, safety-focused but as far as being, you know, the tracking of that, the paperwork, being able to prove that is—has grown tremendously at the farm. And everyone there supports that mission.

00:42:39

SW: And I’m wondering—

00:42:40

CH: And we don’t smoke—and we don’t smoke on the floor anymore, so—.

00:42:45

SE: Only smoke the fish. *[Laughs]*

00:42:45

CH: Yeah; we only smoke the fish.

00:42:48

SW: The people aren't actually—?

00:42:48

CH: The people aren't smoking, so—.

00:42:51

SE: We're a smoke-free environment period, cigarette-free I should say maybe.

00:42:56

SW: I just want to ask you; what kinds of things did they tease you about when you were on the floor with the rest of the women? What did they say to you?

00:43:02

SE: Oh Lord, you name it. Just anything that I might say that would be incorrect. They would just make fun of me for the rest of the day. *[Laughs]* Mainly that and if there was a job to be done that was the worst job of the day they would say, "Sally your dad said he wanted you to hull off those heads this afternoon." So I'd go hull off the heads and of course my dad wouldn't

have really said that but you know I was the boss' daughter so I had to be broken in. It was just a rite of passage and I knew that then.

00:43:35

SW: What's so bad about hulling off the heads?

00:43:38

SE: Well number one it weighed about 300 pounds and that was pretty tough. [*Laughs*] And but you know it's all good; it made me stronger I'm sure.

00:43:47

SW: And could you talk about how—what the types of products that you have—have changed? I mean when you started 'til now because you guys showed me a lot of stuff today and I'm just wondering if all of that stuff was something that he came up with or how that evolved?

00:44:08

SE: The very first value-added product was the—the caviar and that was as I mentioned by mistake, dad just wandering through the plant said you know, “We should do something with these eggs maybe.” The next thing I knew we were making caviar. The smoked trout was second and then we discovered the little bits of smoked trout fell off the racks and you know you couldn't use that really but—“Oh but it's delicious pieces so maybe we should make a pate.” That was dad's word. And so he put two women to you know working on it. And these two

women, one had finished tenth grade and the other one had finished sixth grade and together those two women came up with the initial recipe for the dip that has morphed somewhat, probably considerably if I really thought about it.

00:44:58

But that was the third product. And then the—the cold smoked was next and let's see; have you done everything else—I think?

00:45:11

CH: Well the sausage I think Becky [Warren] did but—

00:45:15

SE: Becky did the sausage.

00:45:16

CH: I've been learning somewhat as I go too and have refined the—the development process the way we do it but I think the—

00:45:25

SE: Yeah; he's honed everything that I've mentioned already.

00:45:30

CH: —yeah so the—I mean the process now I mean I guess the ideas either come—well they can come from anywhere. But the jerky was the first item that I pursued as a new item. And that

took—that took on, I mean that was probably not the easiest thing to start with looking back, probably with all the regulations and paperwork that goes with it. That probably—well I don't know; I'd probably start there again because I like a challenge and you know I'm also—when people tell me I can't do something I'm going to do it just to spite.

00:46:07

So but the—but I think now the—the way it goes I think I look maybe and see—so we developed some marinated fish and some encrusted fish and you know going about okay well what do we have? Well we've got some fish that maybe it's a little bit smaller and maybe it's a little bit wider. You know how—what can we do with that fish to get it you know turned into a desirable product that we can sell quickly and get some money back in quicker than say if we brined it, smoked it. And that's where kind of like some of the marinades came from. And then the encrusted where we're doing—we're using hemp seed instead of nuts. And I wanted to stay away from you know allergens, having the allergens you know not only for the people that have the allergens but also having the allergens in the plant. So like if we had peanuts in the plant then we'd you know have to be more careful about what we do and change all our labels. And so thinking about not only just like the creative side of it but what's a you know practical food safety side—all of that goes in—into that now. And you know I'm working on a trout burger right now that is going to have the—the texture of—of a beef hamburger. And that was you know Steve [Eason] said—“We used to do a burger years ago. It wasn't—it wasn't quite good.”

00:47:40

SE: It wasn't quite good. [*Laughs*]

00:47:42

CH: It wasn't—I couldn't think of—I couldn't think of a—it—so we took it off the menu so to speak and anyway so Steve had said, “Oh it would be nice to have a nice burger again.” And so I started thinking, “Okay; well all right yeah okay a nice burger that would be great.” And so since—in the last eight years I've—you know we've met a lot of different people in doing some work with folks out of the N.C. State Seafood Laboratory and N.C. Sea Grant. And David Green and Barry Nash and Greg Bolton and you know I can pick up the phone or I can send those guys an email and say, “I'm thinking about a burger,” or “I'm thinking about you know making fish sauce,” which I had some under my desk you didn't see, but making that from the—some of the discards from the trout. And saying, “Well what do I—you know give me an idea,” and you know and—and I think we've gotten you know more people involved that are helping move the product along.

00:48:49

So you know I worked with Barry Nash extensively on this trout burger and he's like, “Oh, well you know it's—the burger it's a little too rubbery. Here's—here's some ingredients that you can use to do that.” And then it's like well, “Okay; that's a great ingredient but that didn't fit our profile. It's hydrogenated fat so I can't use that.” You know I've got to have—you know we've got a very clean label clientele that you know are not going to buy the product. So you know working—and working with him and you know so we—we presented that trout burger to value-added Seafood Conference in Norfolk, Virginia last November, so we've gone you know even from when I first started from, okay everything is strictly in-house and maybe we're talking with a few people in the area, you know that—that the network of folks has—has just increased and it's—it's really exciting because now what would take you know a long time I can

talk—. Okay, so I've gotten to know this expert in this area and I developed a—a tomato jam so I got to talk with Walter Harrill over at Imladris Farms who makes you know tremendous—a tremendous selection of jams. And talked to him you know and then he—you know and then he calls me and he's working on a smoked tomato ketchup. And he's like, "Man tell me about smoking tomatoes." So it's just—it's almost like a community of—of different folks and you know different you know chefs and food technologists and farmers and you know and involving everyone at the farm and getting their input on this product and getting—using them as a tasting panel. I mean we started with the burger and we started with probably fifteen different burgers in getting—okay narrowing it down and narrowing it down and narrowing it down, I think involving more people early on because the—you know the food is going to appeal to a—a broader market.

00:50:52

You know, there are a lot of different people buying the trout and different products and so it's like okay well I get—Anna's opinion is going to be different than Sally's opinion but I got to have both of those opinions that makes that product stronger.

00:51:06

SW: Could you talk about some of the—I mean I asked you guys along the way but the different types of customers you have for the—the people you sell to?

00:51:14

CH: Yeah.

00:51:15

SW: I guess who buys your stuff?

00:51:16

CH: Sally is probably better to talk more about that but I know—yes.

00:51:22

SE: No; go ahead. Okay; I would say probably ninety percent of our customers are high-end chefs. And of those chefs probably seventy-five percent of them are within I'll say within 400 miles. So there's been a natural evolution. We used to sell nationwide, but when gas became so expensive about fifteen years ago – the first time – just by virtue of that—that sphere got smaller. And nobody wanted to pay the freight to get to California anymore.

00:52:03

So and as we mentioned earlier, chefs are such a tight-knit community not unlike the relationship business Charlie was just referencing, so one chef loves the product and tells another chef and another chef, so a lot of word of mouth for us. So we don't have to do a whole lot of cold-calling which is nice. There are other customers; we sell to Earth Fair Grocery Store chain which now has I think twenty-seven stores and it actually started in Asheville in the early eighties I think.

00:52:37

CH: Seventies I think.

00:52:38

SE: Was it seventies?

00:52:40

CH: Seventy-three I think maybe.

00:52:40

SE: Oh gosh I didn't realize it was that early. And it's you know now grown a lot. It started out as Dinner for the Earth and it's now the Earth Fair Stores. We sell to lots of the Ingles, not storewide but all the ones that are near us we sell to, Ingles being another relatively local grocery store. We sell to lots of specialty markets like natural food stores and that kind of thing. We have business at tailgate markets and that's fun for us. We like that a lot 'cause we're right in there with other farmers.

00:53:15

CH: Food trucks.

00:53:17

SE: Yeah; food trucks that's the newest.

00:53:18

CH: Food trucks and then we also sell to there's a few businesses that do kind of a home delivery service or you know and so we sell to them. There's Hominy Valley Farms that she does a—like a little CSA [community-supported agriculture] basket that you know has her things and then she'll supplement with trout. The jerky has opened up a whole new list of clientele that are

jerky outlets that sell jerky made from anything and everything. And so that's one thing that Wes has been working on is securing more jerky stores that will buy our product.

00:54:03

I think when we first started selling that we were doing about you know maybe ten packs a week, maybe seven years ago and now we're in the 200 to 400 packs a week range. And then we do you know direct sales that can't be overlooked from direct from the website which Anna has worked to really streamline and—and make popular. So those are you know direct from the web.

00:54:33

SW: And how long have you guys had the store?

00:54:36

SE: We opened our first one in October '11 [2011]. Was it '10 [2010], okay and we opened one block off of Main Street and it was fine. It was 800 square feet and my daughter did a fine job there, but there was just so much you could do in that little space off of Main. And so we thought about it and a space became available on Main Street. My daughter heard about it. She looked at it and within three weeks we had you know closed the deal and about another two weeks and we were in there. I mean it was a fast turnaround. So they opened in that store in October of this past year, so October '13 [2013].

00:55:26

And it's—it's done amazingly well. It's amazing how much more stuff you can sell on Main Street USA then off Main Street USA. It's huge. So they've cultivated a whole different clientele and customer base there. It'll be interesting to see this summer because it's such a tourist area and we haven't experienced that yet, so that will be really fun to see.

00:55:50

SW: Well did you guys—?

00:55:52

CH: I do and we are also selling to retirement communities. That's—

00:55:59

SE: That's sort of the new market.

00:56:00

CH: —sort of a new developing market for us, the—you know retirement communities, the assisted living facilities, that want a good, fresh, healthy protein.

00:56:15

SW: That's interesting.

00:56:15

SE: It is, isn't it and we sell a lot to two of the—I guess probably the two you know top ones in Asheville, certainly the biggest. The first one bought for a couple years and I think the second

one got shamed into it probably. But yeah; they buy a lot of trout from us. And the residents there love it.

00:56:35

SW: Well I just have one more question for you guys and then I'll—if there's anything else that you want to add that you think is important because I've taken up a good chunk of your time this morning, I wondered how you both feel about what do you think is important about continuing a curing tradition in terms of the fish and the farms here?

00:56:56

SE: You speak first 'cause I'll probably have something different to say than you.

00:57:01

CH: Well I mean yeah; one the tradition but I mean two, the—the amount of our sales that is attributed to the cured products that we sell is—is probably close to thirty percent of what we sell is cured. That's one thing and also I mean the tradition, the technique you know that gets—can be handed down and taught to others. And so if someone comes here and learns how to cure fish and then they go somewhere else they take that with them, you know passing on that knowledge.

00:57:40

I had Bob Worth, Chef Worth who was my instructor was—that was his mantra was pass it on, so I mean that is something that I have taken with me is pass it on. So somebody leaves they can pass it on to somebody else.

00:57:56

SE: Yeah; I agree with that and so I'm not going to say anything so different, but I think with our being so close to the Cherokee here and this part of the Appalachians you know why would we not want to carry that on? Not to mention the fact that smoking it gives it a longer shelf life. Now I'm going to to the practical side of it.

00:58:18

Our smoked fish, all three—well the two regular smoked have a shelf life of six weeks. The jerky a year because it's shelf-stable; so you build a lot more time to use that product into the product and I think that's a good thing from a sales perspective.

00:58:37

CH: Yeah; and this just came to me but you know we were talking earlier about the—the preschool kids and wanting to know where your food came from. You know now we just—we eat the cured because it tastes good but knowing that tradition why—why do we do cured food? Where did that—where did that come from? You know knowing the reasons why, well this was to preserve it that we didn't have you know refrigerators a couple hundred years ago. Man this is the way it was done and you know we're carrying on that—that tradition.

00:59:10

SE: I just thought of a good idea. That needs to be one of the classes that you offer, teaching people about the history of cured and how they do it.

00:59:18

CH: Yeah; that would be great, yeah.

00:59:21

SE: Okay.

00:59:23

CH: But we're not done because the—this—this came—the family, the curing, the tradition—you need to tell the story of how the brine percentage of the caviar was determined.

00:59:37

SE: I need to tell her that?

00:59:38

CH: Yes. That—you talk about—this is the best story ever. It's the best story ever.

00:59:49

SE: Okay; when we were first messing around with the caviar when my dad had connected with that man in Asheville, each week we would start with a batch of eggs and fix a brine. And we really didn't know what we were doing, so we'd do you know x-percent of salt and we would document what we were using but really not knowing what the end-result was going to be. And there were some really funky batches.

01:00:11

So at the end of every week we would put it in baby food jars of which I had many at that time 'cause my kids were little and label what the percent of the brine was and take it home and put it in the fridge and then at the end of the week we'd take it out and taste one against the other and just see—you know make notes and stuff.

01:00:27

So we'd been doing that for a couple months I guess; had several jars amassed in the fridge. Had been at work; came home late in the day and the baby sitter was in one room with our oldest son and the two littlest ones were in the kitchen on the floor unattended. And they had gotten in the fridge and gotten those jars out and taken all the lids off and they were in diapers sitting on the floor, no other clothes on, and were eating the caviar out of those jars with their fingers.

01:00:59

And to my knowledge they had never tasted it before. I think the color was what attracted them probably. And they had summarily pushed back the ones they didn't like and they both focused on one jar out of all the rest of them and they were getting the last eggs out of that jar. And that's the brine we still use.

01:01:18

SW: What was your reaction to that? I mean did you actually—I mean when you walked in were you at first just horrified that this was happening?

01:01:27

SE: My initial thought was, “I wonder if you can overdose on fish eggs,” ‘cause they had eaten a ton of it. And you know I had never known of a child to eat that before. So that was really my only concern. But then my second thought was, “This is awesome.”

01:01:46

SW: It’s an incredible story. Well I’ve asked you guys both a lot of questions but I wanted to just open this up to both of you if there is anything else you want to talk about or you think is important or anything else you want to add?

01:02:05

SE: Boy you have done a wonderful job of covering everything as far as the tapestry of Sunburst. I can't think of anything else that’s relevant to all of us but it’s always so fun for me when we do an interview like this because it makes me reflect on things that I forget in an ordinary day. And that certainly happened this time and it reminds me how grateful I am to everybody for their amazing contributions because it would be very different if we didn’t have that thing going on I think.

01:02:39

CH: Yeah; I just—I mean I’d just like to say that you know the—the support—all the supporting agencies, the—the folks that don’t get much attention and—and the people that come out to do this to bring attention to the small farms like—like y’all and—

01:02:59

SE: Like the SFA gosh.

01:03:01

CH: —and the other you know entities out there that help support farmers you know like North Carolina, the Tobacco Trust Fund Commission. Like I mentioned, we’ve gotten some grants from then, you know the NCD, the Extension Service is just—it’s indispensable to small family-run farms. You know without those kinds of agencies out there we wouldn’t—I don’t think we’d—we’d still exist and then the—the young farmers coming up. That’s you know—and then the chefs that—that use the product and—and give—give the farmers you know some of the—some of the spotlight. And this is Sunburst Trout Farms’ trout you know that spreading the word and the—you know just the young students coming up like starting at the preschool and just letting people know where their food comes from ‘cause that gets lost sometimes I think. And yeah that’s—yeah that’s basically what—just add that—that we wouldn’t be anything without the supporting network.

01:04:12

SE: That’s exactly right. And we’ve talked, probably in the last two years I’ve been here I bet we’ve had at least six conversations saying you know I get emails from SFA all the time and I said, “We got to do one of these events seriously.” It’s—it’s the stuff we love and you know

that's—that's on our bucket list for the next year to become more involved 'cause I've been involved peripherally for a long time. But it's—it's the same vibe as Sunburst I think, a lot of the same principles and tenets so that's what we need to do.

01:04:41

SW: And I forgot to ask you guys this in the beginning but could you each tell me your birth date for the record?

01:04:46

SE: Sure; June 11, 1952.

01:04:51

CH: April 21, 1970.

01:04:55

SE: Very soon.

01:04:58

CH: No, no.

01:04:58

SE: Yes; it is, too.

01:05:01

SW: It's Monday.

01:05:02

CH: It isn't.

01:05:03

SE: It is too.

01:05:06

SW: Well thank you both for sitting down and for taking me around to both facilities because that—that was a lot of traveling around, so thank you.

01:05:13

SE: You're very welcome; our pleasure Sara.

01:05:14

SW: Thank you.

01:05:15

SE: Thank you for coming.

01:05:18

[End Sally Eason Interview]