

Steven Bel
Sal's Sno-Balls – Metairie, LA

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Date: May 3, 2011

Location: Steven Bel's residence – Metairie, LA

Interviewer: Sara Roahen

Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs

Length: 1 hour, 40 minutes

Project: New Orleans Sno-Balls

[Begin Steve Bel-Sal’s Sno-Balls Interview]

00:00:00

Sara Roahen: This is Sara Roahen for the Southern Foodways Alliance. It’s Tuesday, May 3, 2011. I’m in Metairie, Louisiana with Mr. Steven Bel. If I could get you to say your own name and your birth date and how you make a living, we’ll get started?

00:00:17

Steven Bel: My name is Steven Bel. And my birth date is December 13, 1965. And my name is spelled Steven—S-t-e-v-e-n, and Bel with one L—B-e-l.

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SR: Thanks. Could you tell me in your own words how you make a living and what your profession is?

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SB: Right now I am full-time sno-ball operator of Sal’s Sno-Balls. I retired three years ago of 21 years at Continental Airlines. So I used to have two jobs. *[Laughs]*

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SR: What did you do with Continental?

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SB: I started out on the ramp, did baggage, turn cleaning, freight, mail for the first 10 years, and then I moved upstairs and did ticket counter, gates; I was employee rep for the city, and--and then actually the sno-ball stand kind of pushed me into retirement because after Katrina we had a great increase in business. And it was a whole lot more work. And the--so I retired three years ago so about two years after Katrina. And those were two rough years because I had—I'd get probably three hours of sleep in the summertime because I'd get up—. I started work at 4:00 a.m. at the ticket counter, so I'd get up about 3 o'clock and then I'd close the sno-ball stand at 11:00 [p.m.], and by the time I'd get home it was about 11:30; get in bed for about 11:45, so I'd get about three, three-and-a-half hours a sleep five days a week. So it got to be really rough.

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SR: Why was there an increase in your business after Katrina?

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SB: You know I think there's several things and this is just my theory. But I know, well this area didn't flood, so a lot of people had family members, people living with them, and they would just—you know, in the house when you add that many people to it some people just have to get out. So we had—and we were open rather quickly after Katrina. We actually got--were here before people came back. So we actually opened up and served just the military and the police. We just gave sno-balls away. And then as people came back, it was a staple that you know was taken away, and people came back and you couldn't get a po-boy. You couldn't get anything. You were getting MREs and water.

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So a lot of people were coming out, and then a lot of people were just--were hanging out there at night. It was like a meeting place. And then they’d see people that, you know, they had lost connection with. And then so our business increased probably 50-percent after Katrina. And we had—so that was one of the things. A lot of sno-ball stands didn't open up after Katrina. And then I think people that moved away or people that were coming in town to visit saw the pictures on TV and thought, “Oh I’ll never be able to get beignets. I’ll never be able to get oysters and all these things. And so when they came back, it was—I had people say, “Oh, I just got off the interstate and I came--I found out you were open, so I came to get a sno-ball first.”

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“And then I’m going to see my aunt’s house that’s flooded and then I’m going— wherever—Central Grocery to get a muffuletta. So I think, that’s--that’s just my theory on why I think it increased so much.

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SR: Has it stayed? Did it--did it then keep being that much busier than it had been before Katrina?

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SB: It tapered down, but yes, I think all the old sno-ball stands had--kept the increase just because it was less--less sno-ball stands out there after Katrina, and then people that come back in town, just are looking for something that they used to do since so many things were destroyed

and lost. And I think it’s just a—something they can grab out of the past that’s in the present and it’s something that they enjoy, you know, that they can—they haven’t lost.

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SR: So Katrina was August 29-30, 2005. When did y’all reopen?

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SB: We were opened 21 days after Katrina. We--we actually left and the sno-ball machines came with me. They stayed at my cousin’s in Mobile, Alabama, and then we evacuated to Tallahassee and then Fort Myers and Disney World and--and then came back. We got passes to get back in the city and came across the Causeway, and it took about—I guess about five days to actually clean the sno-ball stand because I had never--we had never evacuated before. And just knew--knew I needed to take the machines because I really didn’t think anything—if we had took a direct hit, I didn’t think anything was going to be here. And the manufacturers of the sno-ball machines are all local. Sno-Wizard is on River Road, Eisenmann’s is down on St. Claude, which got flooded out and they’re now working with Southern Snow over across the river. So it’s not like, you know, if all the cars are flooded you can get a new car from Detroit. It was—so we got back and all the syrup had fermented. My refrigerators had—the soft-serve ice cream mix; no electricity. It probably got up to 130 degrees in there. The--the vegetable trays on the bottom were probably halfway full of like a whey.

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A friend of mine, Jay DeSalvo, helped me clean it and he--he answered the phone after we were in there about an hour. He answered it, “Sal’s Wine and Cheese Shop.” **[Laughs]** So

it—we got everything cleaned out and then my icehouse that I used to get ice from was in Kenner. And they have a piping system in there with ammonia in it, and with the loss of electricity, and a lot of the drug addicts were going in there to drain the ammonia to make methamphetamines. So it wasn't feasible for the icehouse to re-pipe it and open it back up, and they were two years away from being 100-years-old. So I had—they had another plant over across the river, which is where I get my ice from now.

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And the ice is made in a 300-pound block. And 21 days after [Katrina], they were down to about 150 [pounds], so when they would dump the--the cans it was basically a half of a block, a 300-pound block. So I talked to the owners of the icehouse and they said, "Come get what we have." So I would go over there at different times when—because you didn't want to cause a riot of people trying to get bagged ice and I'm pulling all these blocks out. So we--we got that and we opened up, and then the--the dairy Kleinpeter in Baton Rouge contacted me and they didn't have any damage, so they were able to get me ice cream mix rather quickly. And we opened up; it was 21 days after Katrina hit. We were open for business but had no business because no one was here. **[Laughs]** But shortly thereafter it—people came back, and we normally close the week before Halloween and several of the girls that work for me have other jobs. And those businesses weren't open. So they asked me how long—because they were looking for money—so, how long we could stay open. So we've never gone into November but we did that year and that's the only year we did it. We--we went to, I think it was the Monday before Thanksgiving we stayed open, which is very unusual. We had hot weather. And when we closed on that Monday and Tuesday it—I think it was in the 30s, so we timed it perfectly.

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And that whole--whole time, you know in October and September and October we were opened, and then November, we were just extremely busy with people. And they would just come and hang out and I’d stay ‘til—we’d close at 11:00 [p.m.] and they would stay ‘til 12:00--12:30 [a.m.] just staying out and talking to people that they saw.

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SR: It’s like a bar.

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SB: Yeah. [*Laughs*] Actually I had to--I had to get an electrician to come in and put my lights on the outside on timers because I didn't want to leave the people in the dark, and then I didn't want to spend the money to keep the place lit up ‘til I came back the next morning. So yeah, Katrina was interesting for us. You know I—we didn't know what to expect when we came back, if people were going to come back, and you know we came back and opened and opened rather quickly. I had—we stayed with family members in Fort Myers, and one of the things they told me was the people—because I think it was the year before or two years before Katrina, they had two storms that crisscrossed Fort Myers and the businesses that lingered back and tried to get the insurance money or just didn't know what they wanted to do for whatever reason, a lot of those wound up failing and going out of business. And the ones that just came back and struggled to stay open wound up succeeding.

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And one of the examples my cousin told me was there was a restaurant he used to go to around the corner and the people kept saying, “Well, we’re not sure we’re going to open.” Just

they were kind of dragging their feet. So they found another one that had been there but they had just never gone another couple of blocks [from] it. And they went there and liked the people and liked the food and then wound up eating there a lot. And then the other restaurant opened and they said, you know, they never really went back over there. They kind of found a new home.

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So and I think that was true with a lot of businesses in the city: the people that came back, and opened up quickly, succeeded. You know people were just happy to see them back in.

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SR: That’s so interesting that you were able to get advice from people who had been through a similar situation.

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SB: Yeah, it was—we had no intentions of making it there but [*Laughs*] we went to Tallahassee and I have a cousin that lives in Fort Myers, and we went down there and, yeah, it was interesting that some of the things that they had been through and didn't realize. But on the way in we had passed the FEMA trailers that people were still living in, which became a staple here after—. [*Laughs*] So we—the blue tarps on the roofs down there that was still there after, I guess it was a year before—or two years before. So you know, didn't realize the things that I was seeing there I was going to be seeing in New Orleans, in Metairie, for years to come.

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SR: Let me backtrack a minute. So you were telling me about the icehouse. What--what is the icehouse name that you use?

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SB: It’s Cristina’s Icehouse.

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SR: I didn't completely understand what you meant about how they only had 150-pound blocks instead of 300.

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SB: Okay, I use the ice. We do things old-school at Sal’s. I still use the ice that they used 100 years ago, that the ice man would come and put a 50-pound block in an ice box before electricity in your house. And those are made in 300-pound blocks. Sometimes they were made in 400, but mainly 300-pound blocks. And it’s a tall vat and it’s a metal container and it’s made in the icehouse and there’s a room, large room, with a concrete tank and it’s filled with water. And they use that to cool the ice down.

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So the--the ice is cooled from the outside in and there’s an aerator they put in it to make it a clear ice. And they pump air in it and as the core gets smaller they pull it out and there’s a thin white line on the inside of it. So, and the top of it is open; there’s just wooden tops on the top of it. So when the electricity goes off you have this basically very large ice cube in a metal container and the top of it has outside air temperature that can hit it. So with the--the icehouse

without electricity and shut down, it's not cooling the water around it. So it's—which, that water stays cold so that stayed cold on the bottom. The top that had the outside air temperature, which got pretty hot without electricity, started to melt from the top down. Like if you take an ice tray and just take it and put it out, you get that water on the top of it, so it started to melt down. They didn't know until you dump them; it's four of them you pick up at a time and you dump it, and when they dumped it out it was, basically half the container was full. The bottom half, which would be the 150-pounds. So I was picking up [*Laughs*] smaller blocks and I was just getting as many as I could to put in the sno-ball stand until they—because they had to—. They couldn't refreeze it because you can't get the aerator down it because the bottom is solid. So they had to dump that; they'd get 150 pounds out of it and then fill it up with water and start the ice process again. So that's why it was 150 pounds.

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SR: Yeah, so it takes about 21 days for half of it to melt.

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SB: Um, yes, under those conditions that's about what it took.

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SR: I'm surprised it stays that cold without electricity.

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SB: It's--you know you'd have to take the owners at the icehouse, but it's--it's an old process and it works well. And with that—I don't know what the water temperature is that it's sitting in, but you know that is going to stay pretty cold because it's almost like—it's like in a cave. It's all concrete, so even with it getting hot on the top it takes a lot for that heat to—. And then the heat has got to penetrate through the ice it's melting before it warms up the water underneath.

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SR: When you take a 300-pound block from them, what kind of vehicle do you have? How do you transport it?

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SB: It's transported in a three-quarter-ton pickup truck. It's slid—I don't lift the 300-pound block. We--you pull it over on its side and you use the weight of the ice to move itself basically. And it's slid into the back of my truck, and I usually pick up six blocks, five to six blocks, 1,800 to 2,100 pounds at a time. We go through roughly about 1,000 pounds a day of ice and we put them in the truck in the back of the truck and then it's covered with an insulated tarp. And I get up about 5:15 in the morning and go before it gets hot and the sun comes up and pick it up when they open. And then when I get back to the sno-ball stand, you--the 300-pound block is cut into six--50-pounds, and then those are brought in and put into an insulated box. And then the size that goes into the sno-ball machine is 12-and-a-half pounds—blocks. So you take the 50, cut it in half, and then cut the--cut that in half, and you get the 12-and-a-half pounds that goes into the machine.

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SR: Cut it with what?

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SB: Cut it with an ice pick.

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SR: And where do you do the cutting?

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SB: In--just cut it right in the back of the truck and then take it out and--and haul it in with the old ice tongs.

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SR: And I guess I should be able to do the math, but how often do you have to go get the ice?

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SB: My box will hold about—if I overload it I can hold about 2,400 pounds of ice, but I go every other day to get ice.

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SR: That's a lot of manual labor.

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SB: Yes, sno-ball work is a lot of—sno-ball--owning a sno-ball stand is a lot of work especially the way we do it. We--we get the ice; we make our own syrup. We don't put preservatives in it. So it's every day we're making and mixing syrup. You have to start with a simple syrup base and then use your extracts for the flavoring. So yeah, it's a lot of work.

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SR: Could you get like blocks of ice that were already frozen in 12-and-a-half-pound blocks?

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SB: Yes, you can. There's actually a machine that is—there's several people that make machines that make it for sno-ball stands, because the icehouse is--is a dying breed. And if you're in Baton Rouge, if you're away from the water—icehouses were basically for seafood and cooling, and so if you're away from the water, you know, if you're in Houston or Dallas and you don't have an icehouse and you want to sell sno-balls, then you have to make your own. And there's machines that freeze it. The problem—the original Mr. Hansen, Mr. Ortolano, Eisenmann, Southern Snow—those machines were made back in the '30s and '40s; they were invented and they were made for the ice that I use.

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You can still use the frozen ice in them but there is—you get a different texture of ice and the ice comes out--my ice--and the best way I can describe it is my ice is a softer ice. The frozen ice is a hard ice. So when you cut—when I put my ice in the machine it's like cutting a soft wood like a pine; when you put the frozen ice in, it's like cutting oak or teak or mahogany and it wears

the blades down and it wears the machines down more. So that ice is—and that ice is a white ice, because if you just take a block—you know a container—and put it in your freezer, it's going to be white on the inside. Because mine is made with the—it's pumping out all the--the air in it and it's bringing—it's making it clear when it's frozen.

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So it's—I get more ice out of it because it's a solid piece but it's a soft piece of ice. If you take the ice that I have in the box and you cut it and you put it in a glass and you pour water on it, you just get a glass of ice water. But if you take it out of a freezer and, you know, you get your ice cubes and you put water on it, they start cracking and sticking together, it's real hard. A lot of people will make that ice and try to soften it by letting it sit out and putting water on it to soften it, and if you go to different sno-ball stands you'll see the soft ice; you can fill the cup up all the way and put the syrup on it and it goes right out the window. The hard ice, it's real fine and crystalline and they'll fill it halfway and put syrup because it falls down because it's so crystalline. Mine is more like snow. And that's what, you know, Mr. George always used to say: it's just like the snow when it falls out of the sky—comes out of the machine. The other is real crystalline and you can see the difference if you—. And that's the difference in a lot of sno-ball stands, the texture of the ice.

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SR: No one has ever explained that to me. That's really, really interesting. So what—I think you told me over the phone that Cristina's is the only icehouse left. Is that true?

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SB: That is--that is the only icehouse that makes 300-pounds of ice left in the city, the Greater New Orleans area. They—at one time I think they had up to eight icehouses. There was an old man that used to work there who, actually this is his—last year was his last year there. He--he lost one of his legs, I think, due to diabetes, but he used to work on an ice wagon and bring ice to people's houses. And he used to tell me, he said, "Yeah, it was a different world then." You know he's an older black man. He said, "We used to go into Uptown neighborhoods. The back door was open. You'd go into the house at 2:00--3 o'clock in the morning and put a piece of--a block of ice in the refrigerator and leave." And I'm not sure how that—I'm sure there was money left there for him. I'm sure it was, you know, a quarter [*Laughs*] or less for a block of ice. You just couldn't do that in today's world.

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But at one time we—in the City of New Orleans, we probably had, if I had to guess, 80 to 100 icehouses. They were in every neighborhood. We used to have one on Labarre and Metairie Road; we had one at the railroad tracks and Metairie Road. We used to get ice from the one at Labarre. Then when they closed up we'd get our ice from Claiborne Icehouse. And then they closed up and we went to Cristina's out in Kenner, and then Katrina took that one. And now we're at the one across the river, which is the last one left that they own and they had, I think, seven icehouses at one time where they produced 300-pounds blocks.

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SR: What would you do if they closed?

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SB: Oh it's—I have nightmares about that sometimes. **[Laughs]** I'm real good friends with the owners of Cristina's and always—it's two cousins and they're a little bit older than me. And I always tell them, “When you're getting ready to retire you need to let me know.” I guess I've—you know in my mind I've had several plans. I will probably try to build a small plant for my own consumption. There's a couple of people in the city who do ice carvings for weddings and stuff and they get their ice there. So I guess I could always sell—you know I wouldn't have something where I'd be selling out to the public, but somebody like that I could sell the extra to. I haven't looked into that. It's something that I thought my son, who is 10, would be dealing with but it'll probably be in my lifetime that I'll have to fool with that.

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SR: You can't be the only sno-ball operator who gets his ice from them, right? I mean this could be a crisis all over the city.

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SB: Um, no, I don't think it would be a crisis all over the city because a lot of people—Mr. Duplontier makes block ice and delivers. You can get it delivered to your sno-ball stand, you know if you open one. And a lot of people do that. I still--I do—like I said, I do things the old-school way so I still get up and get my own ice. And it's a cost thing, too. It's--it's a whole lot cheaper for me to go pick it up and get it than have it delivered. So, no, people could go to—and I could do that too. I could go and buy my own machine or have them deliver it to me. Though my customers are used to, you know—that's the other thing. Each sno-ball stand has a customer

base and they're used to a certain thing and they don't like change. *[Laughs]* So we'll see how that goes.

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SR: It reminds me of like the barbeque pitmasters who go out and cut their own wood.

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SB: Yeah, yeah. It's something they've always done. It's cheaper and they know what they're getting and they know what they're putting in their product.

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SR: Wow, well that—I got off track from where I was going to start, but that was really fascinating. I'd like to now ask you where you grew up.

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SB: I actually grew up in the house next door [to the one] that we are in. This is 133 Helios; I grew up at 135 right down the street—actually one, two, three, four houses away from the sno-ball stand.

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SR: So the sno-ball stand was open when you were growing up?

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SB: Yes. The history of Sal's: Mr. Sal Talluto was the man who opened the sno-ball stand. And he had a business on Metairie Road, which is now Regent's Bank, which is basically cattycornered from the house that was behind the sno-ball stand that he lived in. And it was Sal's Supermarket. It was opened in I guess the '40s or '50s. No, it was opened—I guess, yeah, in the '40s it was opened. He had a—the grocery stores back then he had a delivery route. We have the old books of the addresses in this neighborhood where people would get their groceries delivered and then they'd come pay their bill at the end of the month.

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And he had a heart attack in '58 or '59. And in the City of New Orleans when you owned a grocery store you were the butcher. [*Laughs*] And you know back then you'd get a cow or a half a cow delivered and you'd have to pick this up and cut it up into the meats you would sell. And back then when you had heart attacks, you couldn't lift anything after that. It put too much strain on you. It's not like today, the technology we have and medicine, so he was told he wasn't going to be able to be the butcher anymore.

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So at that time—before that time there was a sno-ball stand called AJ's Sno-Balls. It was in the alleyway between the grocery store and one of the stores in the little strip right there. And it was open for several years and it was an older gentleman that had it and he wound up closing it up when he got--had health issues. And so I think it was in the back of Mr. Sal's mind that, you know, it was something that he could do. So he opened up in front of the house that he lived in—a sno-ball stand and called it Sal's. It was opened in 1960; it was in a small building. The building we have now is actually the second building. We had discussed before about things that people get wrong. Some people think that it's the third building we're in now. He actually was

going to open it in an old Volkswagen crate. One of his customers had a crate that the Volkswagens would come in from Germany and he had it put in front of the building—his house—and then it wasn't going to work out. He needed to build something bigger, and like I think a little sturdier. So he got rid of the crate and then built the first building.

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And then that building was outgrown in '68, '69, so he had to build another one. And I guess after he opened Sal's, then the Parish came up with zoning laws and so they wouldn't let him tear the old building down. So he put it on oil cans, 25-gallon oil cans, lifted it up with a forklift, built the new building and then had to dismantle the old building and bring it out the front door. And in there we still have the--the round holes in the concrete. They basically put two metal 25- gallon oil cans and the sno-ball stand teetered on it, and they laid the slab and put the cinderblock and put the roof; tore it down, and then beat in the old cans and then filled in those holes with concrete.

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So that building was built in 1969. And then how I come into play was, Mr. Sal used to live on Galvez [Street] in New Orleans, and my grandfather, William Rodriguez, lived on Ursulines [Avenue]. And my grandfather had five kids—he had four girls and a boy. And Mr. Sal had two daughters. So they lived around the corner from each other. And then my--my Aunt Leonie [full name Anita Anne] moved into 136 Helios, and Mr. Sal's sister used to actually own the 1823 Metairie Avenue, the house that was back there behind the sno-ball stand, which we tore down right before Katrina. And it's now Fidelity Homestead; we lease that to them.

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And so Mr. Sal's sister was there. He opened a grocery store. The sister moved; he bought the house and moved in with his two daughters. And then my mother and father got married in 1965 and they bought the house next door, which was across from my aunt, from my mother's sister. And I was—

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SR: They bought the house next door to here, where we are right now?

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SB: Where we are right now, yeah. They bought 135 Helios, and they bought that in 1964 and I was born in 1965. And Mr. Sal's daughter—I was born December 13th, and that year Mim, which would be Mr. Sal's—one of his granddaughters—was born September 9th when [Hurricane] Betsy came through. And so we grew up together and I used to play on the steps probably when I was three or four down there with her and her brother, John. And so in 1973 Mr. Sal passed away, and that year when I was eight, his son-in-law, Johnny App, hired me. I used to get paid to pick up trash in the parking lot. I think I used to get \$1 to pick up trash, pick up the cups and the spoons. And back then the spoons were—I know you're new to the city, but the spoons were wooden. And I used to actually bring a spoon from my house when I worked there because I didn't like that wood when you eat it on your teeth. **[Laughs]** I'd bring a spoon and put it in my pocket to eat sno-balls. **[Laughs]**

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You know the cups were paper. The straws were paper. We had no plastic. The bottles, the gallons were all old ozone glass—water jugs, which were glass. The spoons were wooden

like I said, and yeah, that's how it was when I started. So things have changed, but we got—I think things changed--that we did change were for the better, you know. **[Laughs]** The plastic spoons are a lot nicer to eat with than a flat piece of wooden spoon.

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So I started there when I was eight and then the next year I filled bottles and worked inside, and then after that I learned how to make sno-balls and wait on customers. And then my wife started working there when she was 11. She used to live next door to one of the granddaughters and she started working there. She actually worked the day shift; we had a day shift and night shift. Mr. Sal had two daughters. One ran the day and one ran the night shift. So I'd work at night; my wife worked in the day.

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SR: And how old were y'all at that point?

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SB: We were both 11 when she started working there. So that's where we met, and then we got married a long time after that.

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SR: Tell me your wife's name for the record.

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SB: My wife's name is Gretchen Bel.

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SR: Wow, so they had 11-year-olds running the sno-ball stand? [*Laughs*]

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SB: No, not running it; there was adults in there with us. No, we—everybody started—you know it was a different world back then. I think kids went out and worked younger. You know I had a—I worked at the sno-ball stand. I was an altar boy at St. Catherine. And I had a *States-Item* paper route, so I had three jobs. The altar boy actually was a job because you got paid for weddings and funerals. [*Laughs*] So you'd make money if—you had to be an altar boy and serve at church for free, but then you made money doing the weddings and the funerals, yeah.

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SR: All right, so you started working there when you were very young. But I know from what you told me earlier that you had another career as an adult. So when did this transition happen of you actually owning the sno-ball stand?

00:34:13

SB: Well so I started when I was eight, and then I worked there all through grammar school and then high school. And then I went to—I was going to the University of New Orleans and that's when I actually started another job [*Laughs*]. I started picking up the ice from the icehouse. I guess I must have been 17, something like that. I bought an old—I think I paid \$600 for it—an old three-quarter-ton Ford. It was a 1978 truck, and so I--I had an ice route. I would deliver to—

I'd bring ice to Sal's and sell it to them. A lot of the schools had summer programs that the Men's Club would run and they had their own sno-ball stands they made, so I'd deliver to St Catherine's and St. Angela. I delivered to other sno-ball stands. So I did that; I had that, and then in '87 I started--I started working for Continental Airlines as a part-time job while I was going to school. And then I did that for 21, almost 22, years before I retired, so—. And the whole time I was delivering the ice, and so I've been doing ice since I was 17.

00:35:49

And now I just--I don't deliver to anyone else. That had kind of—a lot of the sno-ball stands that I delivered to in this neighborhood went out of business and then--and then a lot of the Men's Clubs kind of cut back on that. More people started going to the playgrounds and stuff. So and then working at Continental and different things, I had to kind of cut back on that. So I basically pick up my own ice and—.

00:36:25

So then--so I worked at Continental all that time from '87 on, and then because Mr. Sal; let's see, he passed away in 1973, and then his wife used to live in the house behind the sno-ball stand and the two daughters ran it, Miss Mim and Miss Joey. And then I guess in the late '80s Miss Mim had some health issues with her heart, and then Mr. Ronnie had some health issues. And so I do the—I kind of did more things—did the scheduling and did different things; picked up supplies. And so then in the--I guess in like 1980, 1990, '91, they wanted me to take over—you know, purchase the business. So we worked that out and I guess—so purchased it in the spring of 1992. And so that's how I became the owner of Sal's.

00:37:40

SR: Was Miss Mim a daughter of Sal?

00:37:47

SB: Yes, it was—Mr. Sal had two daughters. It was Mary App, which is we called her Big Mim because she had a daughter, Little Mim, and then Josephine Pembo—and her husband's name was Mr. Ronnie. So it was two daughters and their husbands that were the owners.

00:38:13

SR: What was Mr. Sal's wife's name?

00:38:15

SB: Mary Talluto, but she had this long like Donna-something middle name, but she was Mary Talluto and we always called her Miss Talluto,

00:38:30

SR: Are those people still alive, Miss Mim and Josephine and Ronnie?

00:38:36

SB: No, actually the year after Miss Joey sold me the business she found out she had cancer and she died shortly thereafter. Mr. Ronnie, her husband, passed away two years ago. And then Miss Mim is still alive. I still see her and Mr. John, who hired me, who—he is—it's strange. He worked for National Airlines when he hired me, and then I went to work for Continental Airlines [*Laughs*]. He retired; he's over in Atlanta and he is still alive.

00:39:20

SR: So do you get Mr. Sal's family coming to the sno-ball stand still, the younger generations?

00:39:25

SB: We do. Actually, his grandson—Little Mim, who is my age, her son works at Marjoria's, the drugstore by me, and then Mim's brother, John, comes by with his kids. So for like St. Patrick's Day, they come by. And then you know a lot of the family, we still see them come by.

00:39:53

SR: Was the decision to buy the sno-ball stand an easy one for you? I mean, did you anticipate that this is where things were going to head, or was that a surprise and did it take some thought?

00:40:05

SB: It was a surprise when they asked me if I wanted to buy it. And I think they wanted it to—you know I'm sure it was a hard decision, being a family business, but I think they wanted it to carry on and stay in business, is what my thoughts are on that you know. They didn't want to see it closed up, so I think that's where their thinking was when they were looking to sell it. So it was a surprise that they wanted to sell it to begin with, and then, no, it was—I didn't think twice about you know—. My thoughts were I didn't want the apartments. You know I was young. And I was in my early 20s and I'm like, I don't want to be a landlord. I don't want to have to work on stuff. But it was all one piece of property because the sno-ball stand was built right in front of the house; it was all connected. And so I got used to being a landlord and I wound up buying other

property, so I came around. But that was something that I was like, “Oh, just let me buy the sno-ball stand. I don’t want that house.” And you know, so it worked beneficial for me later that—

[Laughs] I got the house but the sno-ball stand came—yeah, that was a definite “Yes” from the beginning. So that house was questionable. **[Laughs]**

00:41:31

SR: Were you married at that point?

00:41:33

SB: No, I wasn’t. Yeah, we got married in—I got married three years after. We got married in 1995.

00:41:42

SR: Can you tell me a little bit about what Mr. Sal was like?

00:41:45

SB: He was—he always had these black glasses on, mustache, you know short Italian man; he you know—. We’ve been in business 51 years and people come by and they say, “Oh, I want to open a sno-ball stand.” This is great and I always tell people, you know, I made out on the better half of it because Mr. Sal opened that business up and had to build it from the ground up. And he lived in the back. He would walk down those steps, go in the side door, open the business up, and you know for the first couple of years he worked it every day by himself.

00:42:26

He was very friendly; all the customers knew him. I still get people that come back, you know with their grandkids, and can remember Mr. Sal waiting on them. He was definitely—had a lot of businesses. He had a real estate office; he sold real estate. I have a sign in the back which he made a shelf out of—he sold Carnival supplies when he was closed. He had the grocery store. There was a daycare in the back that they had at one time. There was—you know gambling was accepted widely in this Parish back in that time. He had—these are Keno cards on the side of the building; in the back was 105 Helios, and they would have Keno games there [*showing a photograph*]. And then there was—in the back part of it they had the poker room, and of course the sheriff—Sheriff Clancy back then would get a cut of the take from all the gambling in the Parish. And the funny story about this is when I was—. Like I said before, I didn't really want the house in the back, and I had to do some renovation work to it. And there was a basement underneath the steps. I mean it was a basement to the house, but then it was like a--like a cellar with this [*Gestures*] underneath and steps that went upstairs. And there was a large, probably two-gallon glass jars of Blue Plate Mayonnaise, and it was full of buttons, shirt buttons. So I'm throwing this stuff out and I thought, "Man, I wonder if there's something inside of these things." So I'm outside dumping them in the garbage can and Miss Mutter, who lives on Codifer—they own Doerr Furniture—she's lived in the neighborhood all of her life and she comes passing by on her bike. And she says, "What are you doing?" I said, "Well I'm just seeing if something is in here. I don't know why they have all these jars of all these buttons in here."

00:44:38

And I'm so glad she stopped by because she said, "Well that's what we'd mark the Keno cards with," because [*Laughs*] back in—they wouldn't use pennies because it was during the War in the '40s and copper was rationed, so they would get the buttons off of the men's old

shirts and the ladies would keep the buttons and that's what they'd mark the Keno cards with because there was no little—they were plastic slides, or the little dots that you use, the ink dots, to--to blot it out. You'd use the buttons from men's shirts or whoever's shirts, but it was—. So she got a little jar and she took them home. She wanted to save some of them.

00:45:17

But so, yeah, he did a lot of—he had a lot of businesses. And you know I think his last business hopefully will be around for a long time.

00:45:34

SR: Can you tell me for the record what Keno is?

00:45:37

SB: Um, they play it in—it's a numbers thing they pull out. It's kind of like a Bingo but it's-- I'm not 100-percent sure. I think it's an older, much older game, but they do--I know you--you pick numbers and stuff. It's a numbers game instead of letters like bingo and numbers. I think it's strictly just numbers they do. But there was no Keno cards in there so I've never seen what— Keno cards. So I don't know; it was just the buttons. That's all I found.

00:46:07

SR: And some tickets?

00:46:10

SB: And some tickets that you would pay. You know it has on here donation—dollar; there wasn't probably no donation then. **[Laughs]** And these are just the tickets I had found in the jars up there.

00:46:22

SR: I'll have to take a picture of those. We're looking at some framed tickets right now.

00:46:27

SB: And then I'll show you this while we're looking at pictures. This is 2012 Metairie Road. This was taken in January 3, 1952, and this is actually Mr. Sal right here inside the grocery store. And this is his son-in-law, Ronald Pembo, who worked for him, I think before he had married his daughter. And these are some of the people in the store and this is out front. This is the--the vegetable and fruits out in front of the supermarket.

00:46:58

SR: There's a lot going on.

00:47:02

SB: Yeah.

00:47:02

SR: In both of those pictures, just as far as stock goes.

00:47:06

SB: Yeah, the old cans and glass bottles and wine and stuff.

00:47:12

SR: It seems to me that there is a real tradition of Italians having had sno-ball stands. Does that seem true to you?

00:47:23

SB: Um, yeah. You know you had the--the Ortolanos, who—Mr. George who made the SnoWizard machine, and then—and it seems a lot of them were in the grocery business, too.

[Laughs] But I mean that's basically what they did back then. Let me just turn this—. **[Phone Rings]**

00:47:48

SR: We were just talking about Italians in the sno-ball business.

00:47:49

SB: Yeah, it does seem like there was a lot of Italians went into the sno-ball business and several of them had grocery stores that turned into sno-ball stands that went into the sno-ball business after they closed up their grocery store.

00:48:04

SR: Are you Italian, or what is your heritage?

00:48:06

SB: No, I'm not. I am Irish, French, and English, and Spanish. So no Italian, but I was taught by a lot of Italians—business. Miss Pembo, who I worked with a lot, which is I call her Miss Joey—she's Mr. Sal's daughter; and then Miss Ortolano, who just turned 100—I just went to her birthday—I used to go and sit with her husband, Mr. George, at his house. And he is the one who showed me how to basically take apart the machine and put it back together and sharpen the blades and basically do all the maintenance on the--the sno-ball machines.

00:48:57

So I have—yeah. I do all my own work on them and keep them running.

00:49:05

SR: So Mr. Ortolano—he built sno-ball machines is that right?

00:49:08

SB: Yes, he invented the SnowWizard sno-ball machine. And then he had a grocery store, and then he started with that and then--and then he basically did away with the grocery store and was just in the sno-ball business. And they--they sold the extract and the machines and basically started people in the business. Mr. Sal bought a used machine from Mr. George. It was a 1939 machine, in 1959, [*Laughs*] and opened up Sal's with that and I still have that machine.

00:49:44

SR: Do you still use that machine?

00:49:46

SB: That one I do not use. But the other old—we've got some from the '60s and yeah, I've got a lot of old machines. Probably when Mr. George—probably about two or three years before he died, he had a machine in his backyard and I'd go over there and spend about two hours a day and we'd put it together. And so I worked with him putting the last machine together that he made. And so I still have that one. I use that one that I put together with him, and then I have another one that he had—he was a perfectionist, you know. It had—if the little piece of metal wasn't right on it, you know, he didn't--didn't sell it. And after he died Miss O said, "I got that other machine back there. I want you to buy it." So that one I—it's put away and it's never been used.

00:50:41

SR: Would it—does it work?

00:50:43

SB: Oh yeah, they all work.

00:50:45

SR: How many machines do you have?

00:50:47

SB: Uh, I think I have eight or nine of Mr. George's machines, Ortolano machines.

00:50:53

SR: How many do you use at the stand at one time?

00:50:56

SB: We have three windows that we operate at one time, and then for St. Patrick's Day when the Italian parade—I mean the Irish parade—passes on Metairie Road, I bring another one in there and we'll open four windows.

00:51:12

SR: Is there anyone like Mr. George now who builds machines?

00:51:17

SB: His nephew took over the business, Ronnie Ortolano—I mean Ronnie Sciortino, is Ronnie's last name, and he runs SnoWizard now. And then the Eisenmanns, Ted and Gayle, they took over the business from their dad, Eisenmanns. They make a machine, and--and then Bubby over at Southern Snow makes a machine. And those are basically the three New Orleans machines that you can buy that make sno-balls.

00:51:54

SR: And you never call in another mechanic? You--you know how to fix them?

00:51:59

SB: Yeah. But they all have mechanics—machinists is what you, the term you'd use for them. They have machinists at their shops that work on them that you could bring them to.

00:52:11

SR: That makes me think: you were so familiar with the business before you bought it. You know, you probably worked every angle of it over the years. Was there any big surprise? Was there any big learning curve to owning it? Or, did it just come very naturally because you knew how it ran and--and you'd already learned everything?

00:52:36

SB: No surprises. *[Laughs]* Yeah, I've been doing it for so long there was no surprises to take it over.

00:52:43

SR: Did you know how to make all of the syrups and everything?

00:52:47

SB: Yeah, I had been doing that since I was little.

00:52:50

SR: Do you have the recipes written down or are they all in your head?

00:52:53

SB: No, they're written down. *[Laughs]*

00:52:56

SR: What did you do when you opened right after Katrina about sourcing extracts? Did you have enough left over, or were there companies that reopened really soon?

00:53:08

SB: G&M Fountain Supply is one of the places where I get my extract from, and I had just gotten a big order right before—I think that Friday right before Katrina hit. So I had a lot of supply to last me a couple of weeks. And then, but we went over to G&M, which got flooded out, and I was able to—you know they must have had about a foot of water in their business, so the stuff that was up on the shelves I was able to get and I got a lot of stuff and brought it actually to my house.

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So yeah, I had—I had enough supplies. And then, like I said, the icehouse had got up and running, and then for the soft-serve ice cream they were bringing—Kleinpeter was bringing that in from Baton Rouge. So I didn't have a problem with getting supplies. I had to go pick up a lot of stuff because a lot of places didn't have delivery drivers to bring it to me, but I was able to get it.

00:54:10

SR: What about now? Do you get your extracts all from one place, or do you kind of go around and get different things in different places?

00:54:17

SB: I have 54 flavors and I use extract from Southern Snow, Sno-Wizard, G&M, which is—Parasols Flavors is what they have, which is the old--old Dennery Flavor. It's a company that's bought and changed names several times. Mainly the old Dennery is what I use, and then I get some from out of town, some extracts from out of town shipped in. So yeah, I use--we use a variety of stuff.

00:55:00

SR: Is that what you inherited, or did you—have you kept all the recipes just like it was before you bought it, or have you changed things, added things?

00:55:11

SB: Everything is—we've used the same recipes. We make the simple syrup with the same recipe that Mr. Sal made it with. We use like probably 95-percent of the extracts. We've added some flavors; not many. We've added a few flavors over the years. But basically 90-percent of it is exactly the same flavors [as] when Mr. Sal was there. He made--he made flavors—back then people would mix different flavors to make them move off the shelf quicker. You know we had a Blue Eagle back then, and basically it was blueberry because a lot of people—you had bubblegum, which was blue, and then blueberry. Well the kids really liked bubblegum so he called it Blue Eagle to get more people to buy it. You know, another flavor, and then it would move that syrup quicker so you weren't throwing it away, because we don't put preservatives or anything in it, so—.

00:56:14

And then a lot of the named stuff, like Robin, is a mixture, and that's named after his first granddaughter, which we still have that flavor. Purple Dawn is after his last granddaughter. Joker is a flavor we have, which is—and then we have Batman, and then Sock-It-To-Me is from the old *Laugh-In, Rowan & Martin Laugh In*. Sock-It-To-Me is a flavor that he makes, and Cherry Sip and Chocolate Mint and Popeye—all those are mixtures that he had come up with.

00:56:48

SR: For example, what is Sock-It-To-Me? What does that taste like?

00:56:53

SB: It's--it's a mixture of bubblegum and ice cream, and then like Joker is the berry—he mixed berry flavors. There's blackberry, raspberry, and grape, which is one of our top sellers. It's--it's a good refreshing flavor.

00:57:07

SR: So when you say “mix,” —they're all in one bottle. It's not like you pour a little bit on of one berry and then a little bit more of another berry?

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SB: No, no, it's all mixed up, and when we're pouring it it's already premixed.

00:57:18

SR: That's funny. I was kind of assuming, when I see at sno-ball stands those funny names, that those were really recent—that that was a recent thing. You know I see Ninja Turtle or—but he was making up names for different mixes a long time ago.

00:57:36

SB: Yeah, that was back in the early '60s he came up with all those, yeah. But--but something like Ninja Turtle, that's something new. And a lot of sno-ball stands will—whatever you know is popular at the times with the kids, they'll name it that; just give it a name, and it could be strawberry, and they just give it another name and sell it.

00:57:59

SR: Do you have Ninja Turtle?

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SB: No, we don't. *[Laughs]*

00:58:01

SR: Okay, what are some of the flavors that you've added?

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SB: We added a lemon ice, which is like the Italian ice. I'm trying to think of what else I added. Lemon ice, and we added diet flavors, which of course he never had back then. *[Laughs]* We have wedding cake, strawberry, and grape as a diet. And then yellow cake batter would be

something new that we've added—probably five, six years ago, something like that. I kind of lose track of time with the flavors when we add them.

00:58:46

SR: And the diet—is that sugar-free?

00:58:49

SB: Yes, it is. It's a sugar-free.

00:58:51

SR: Is that pretty popular, sugar-free flavors?

00:58:54

SB: Um, it is. You know I stayed away from it for a long time. Just never believed in it, and a lot of the stuff that was on the market before—you know, like the saccharin, you'd have to put warning labels up because it causes cancer, and it's just not what I wanted—a big cancer warning label on the front of our business, so I never fooled with it.

00:59:17

And then--and then the supply houses came out with a--a mixture that you can basically make the simple syrup base without sugar with it, and it basically has a lot of stuff like in yogurt—like the aspartame and stuff like that. So that came about and that's kind of what made me go towards the diet, and you know a lot of the kids now are diabetics and stuff so we

would—kids would just come up and get plain ice because they couldn't have the sugar, so that's basically why I wanted it. For the kids.

00:59:53

SR: Are there flavors, like really old-fashioned flavors that have fallen off the menu because people just didn't order them anymore?

01:00:04

SB: Yes, anisette. We used to have anisette. I still have the extract bottle for it at the sno-ball stand in the attic. It was—it's a licorice flavor. It was a red flavor; it was licorice. We would only sell it on Sundays or Saturday evenings when the older ladies would come from church and they'd stop and get an anisette sno-ball. We would throw more of it away than what we made because it would—it was just such a strong old-time licorice, and if you didn't like that old licorice it was just the most nastiest thing to eat. [*Laughs*]

01:00:43

And we—that fell off--off the flavor list. It just, people weren't buying it anymore you know. And I think years ago, people that were used to going to the old corner grocery stores and getting that old licorice stick, and they were used to eating that strong licorice flavor, liked it. I think the younger generations coming up just didn't have that licorice—they weren't exposed to it, so when they tasted it on the sno-ball for the first time it was like, “Oh.” They just didn't like it.

01:01:17

SR: Does anybody still ask for it?

01:01:18

SB: Not anymore. I don't think I've had anybody ask for that in 10 years.

01:01:24

SR: Would they just get it plain on the ice, or would they have cream with it or ice cream?

01:01:28

SB: I could not imagine putting cream on it, how bad that would taste. No, it was just straight licorice that they would get it. **[Laughs]**

01:01:36

SR: What about when you were growing up? What was your flavor?

01:01:40

SB: My flavor. You know when I was little I always would get strawberry, but my flavor is cherry, which I have one every night when I walk home. I have a small cherry sno-ball. And then ice cream flavor would be the other one that I eat. **[Phone Rings]** And what were we talking about at the end? I forgot.

01:02:01

SR: At the end we were talking—before you answered the phone we were talking about that you get a cherry sno-ball or an ice cream sno-ball every night.

01:02:09

SB: Well I'll eat ice cream in the day when I'm in there, but I'll eat a cherry on the way home every night. I make a sno-ball and check the ice in the machines and eat it and see, because I sharpen the blades about every two weeks and I'm testing to see how the blade sharpens.

01:02:26

SR: So you haven't gotten sick of sno-balls yet?

01:02:28

SB: No. Still eat them.

01:02:32

SR: Same flavor. No--no cream on your cherry; no ice cream in there?

01:02:35

SB: No, I don't. I don't do that. I--I pretty much stick with the same flavors and I taste a lot of the stuff when I'm making it. But it's just a small taste, making sure everything is right because it's just either me or my wife that make the flavors, so it's always consistent.

01:02:54

SR: Your son is coming up on 11. Is he about to start?

01:02:59

SB: He already started a couple years ago. He helps us make syrup and fill the gallons, and he cleans bottles and yeah. No, he already works. *[Laughs]*

01:03:09

SR: What is his name?

01:03:10

SB: His name is Samuel.

01:03:11

SR: Does he like it, or is it a chore?

01:03:13

SB: Oh no, he likes it. Oh no, he has a good time. He--I'm trying to get it in his blood early.

01:03:21

SR: Oh I wanted to ask you one more thing before I forget. What was your degree in, in college?

01:03:29

SB: I was actually going to be an accountant. And so business is what I was getting into, and then I wound up being in business. So that's what my interest was, was basically to become an accountant or a CPA at one time.

01:03:47

SR: Okay, so you were showing me this other photo, which is really beautiful.

01:03:50

SB: Well let me show you this first. Do you know what this is?

01:03:53

SR: I think it might be some sort of ice-something.

01:03:59

SB: Correct. This is a hand-held ice shaver, and they were made all over the United States in the late 1800s, early 1900s, through the probably '30s or '40s they were made. And basically what you would do, you had a--the 50-pound block of ice, or a 100-pound block of ice, the same one that I use now, and you would have it in a cart or on something, and this little blade right here, you would rub it—your hand—kind of like a planer on a door, a hand planer when you're scraping the wood off to get it to fit where it's rubbing. So you would scrape it and you would—when this would fill up, you would open the top up and you would turn it over and it would go into a paper container, which is very similar to what hotdogs would come in at the hotdog stand. You know, they give you the little paper thing.

01:04:59

And so it was like a waxed paper and you'd put it on that and you'd—usually two of these it would take to fill it up, and then you'd pour the syrup on it. And there was no straw, no spoon, and you ate it off of it like that.

01:05:13

SR: Without any utensil?

01:05:14

SB: Without any utensils, because you'd have this ice and they'd just put the syrup on it and you'd eat it like that. So what happened in the—and this is a picture from, I think this is like 1906 in the French Quarter. And you see the bottles of syrup here. They had, you know, like about a dozen bottles—probably not a dozen flavors; probably a lot of them are the same. The ice was down in here in the cart. The--they had a little roof over it, and you could see before electricity when he was down at the French Quarter at night, had the kerosene lantern to light it up. And you can actually see the kids holding the thing, and then they would just eat it like that and it would get all over you.

01:05:59

Of course this would definitely not pass the Board of Health inspection today because with the kerosene, I'm sure, dripping onto the [*Laughs*]--the ice and—but all these kids I'm sure lived and had grandchildren and lived to a good age and didn't have a problem. But that's an old cart, an old sno-ball cart.

01:06:18

SR: It's an old wooden cart with wheels.

01:06:20

SB: And you--you would push it and it was the sno-ball man, like the--the rag man or the waffle man or the ice man would push around. And I'm sure they'd call out, "Sno-ball man! Sno-balls!" And like everyone else that sold—the vendors on the street. So then what happened was, how we got to the sno-ball—the electric machine that we have today: back in the '30s there were a couple of men in the city who would see these people with this and they'd have these dirty hands and these kids would eat it and it's like, "Man, it's got to be a better way to do this where you don't actually touch it."

01:06:59

So Mr. George came up with the Sno-Wizard machine back in the '30s, and it's what we use today. It's been modified over the years. And it's still being modified over the years. Different parts have gone from metal to plastic and things like that, but basically the cutter and putting the ice in it and how it operates is exactly [like] when he made it. And then Mr. Hansen made a couple of machines; one of them that Ashley still uses. And then Ted Eisenmann, Mr. Eisenmann still makes a machine. [*Phone Rings*] You know they have one. So that's how we came from the hand-held to the electric.

01:07:47

So that's basically how they came from the hand-held, which there's no way we could keep up with the business that we do today scraping with this [*Laughs*]. But they're--they're

interesting, and I like to show them to the people and to the kids and stuff to see how it was done the old way. I mean it's got a little weight to it; you can feel it.

01:08:05

SR: Oh it's very heavy.

01:08:07

SB: And imagine sitting out in the heat in the French Quarter in the sun scraping that all day for, you know, a penny a sno-ball. [*Laughs*]

01:08:16

SR: Looks like that one was made in Philadelphia.

01:08:20

SB: Yes, I've got several of them. They're made all over the place. I haven't found one that was made in Louisiana or New Orleans, [*Laughs*] so I don't know if it was just made you know around steel mills and stuff like that. But they've—it's a cast-iron steel, and it--they definitely last.

01:08:43

SR: Where do you find them?

01:08:44

SB: I have a collection of them, but you can actually go on eBay and find these, and actually there's--there's someone in New Orleans who makes a lightweight aluminum with blades in it that, if you freeze your own block of ice and make your own syrup—. You know it's a novelty thing and people get them for 4th of July or picnics and stuff. But they actually buy new ones that are manufactured today of a different type of material. I actually bought one just to have a newer one.

01:09:16

SR: Does it work? I mean, have you tried it?

01:09:19

SB: Oh yeah, it works. It shaves the ice. Yeah.

01:09:22

SR: What--what do you imagine those flavors are on that really old sno-ball cart? Like what were some of the original flavors? Do you have any idea?

01:09:31

SB: You know I have no idea what they would be—what they made back then. **[Laughs]** I don't know what was around. I don't know, that could have been fresh juice that they had. I have no idea what would they would have been making in the early 1900s. That's a good question that I don't have an answer to. **[Laughs]**

01:09:49

SR: Could have been anisette.

01:09:51

SB: Yeah, may have been. You know I mean they—I'm sure that they had flavorings for a lot of the stuff. I just don't know what it—I'm sure it was basic. You know, strawberry or grape, cherry. I'm sure it was just the fruit flavors that they had. No Pac-Man or [*Laughs*] anything like that.

01:10:13

SR: What about the nectar flavor? Do you have any thoughts on that flavor?

01:10:19

SB: It--it's an old New Orleans flavor that's been around for a long time. Actually G&M Fountain Supply, Ernie Brown—he sold the nectar to K&B [drug store] for the nectar cream sodas. They would buy the extract and put it in a squirt bottle and put it in when they'd mix it up at the soda fountain. But nectar is an old flavor and it's just an old New Orleans flavor. It's made with evaporated milk. It's cream flavored. And it just has an old New Orleans taste to it. And a lot of out-of-town people that come don't buy it, but if you get them to try it they--they want to know what it's a mixture of, and it's hard to explain to them—it's nectar. [*Laughs*] But it--it's probably in my top 10 sales in flavors, is nectar.

01:11:22

SR: Is it pink at your stand like I've had in other places?

01:11:25

SB: Yeah.

01:11:27

SR: Well that brings me to another question. That's in your top 10. What are others in your top 10 for sales?

01:11:34

SB: My top two are chocolate and strawberry. Then it—nectar, ice cream; I'm going in my mind down the flavor thing. Bubblegum, cherry, wedding cake, which is a newer flavor which is a popular flavor; spearmint. Probably that's the top sellers that I have.

01:12:04

SR: When you go about making a new flavor like wedding cake, what do you do? Do you buy an extract called "wedding cake" from--from a supplier?

01:12:12

SB: The supply houses, in the last 10 to 20 years, are in high gear of making new flavors. You could probably—with the mixtures and stuff, you could easily have 500 flavors. I mean it would—it's absurd the flavors they've got. And I try them, and you know we kind of stick to the

old--old flavors. But every now and then they'll come up with—you know dreamsicle, that's a big seller. It's like the old push-up sticks, the old dreamsicle sticks. That's a cream flavor.

01:12:53

SR: Is that an orange cream flavor?

01:12:54

SB: Yes, it's orange and it--it's a light-orange because of the cream in it.

01:13:00

SR: What about, I know that you have—you mentioned soft-serve ice cream. What do you do with that? Do you serve it in a cone or do you serve it with a sno-ball?

01:13:07

SB: We serve it in the cone, we serve it in cups, and we serve it on top, the middle—they call it “stuffed” —at the bottom; some people get it all three. Dreamsicle is one that's a good one. They'll put ice cream in the middle and then kind of eat the top and then mix it in with the ice cream to kind of give it that—get that ice cream taste with the dreamsicle like the old push-up sticks.

01:13:29

A lot of people get chocolate. They'll stuff anything, put ice cream, soft-serve ice cream, on any of them.

01:13:38

SR: Did that exist before you bought the business, or did you bring the soft-serve in?

01:13:43

SB: No, we got our first soft-serve machine in 1975 or '76. So the first couple of years I was there we just had sno-balls, and then we got the soft-serve machine and I actually had that machine and replaced it in 1998--'99, and it lasted about 25 years. And it's actually still working. A friend of mine bought it and has it at a sno-ball stand up in Ferriday, Louisiana. I think just one side of it's working. He's taking parts off of one to keep one side working.

01:14:17

SR: And so in the '70s, you didn't have any kind of ice cream at the stand?

01:14:21

SB: In the early '70s?

01:14:22

SR: Before the soft-serve?

01:14:24

SB: Yes.

01:14:24

SR: What kind of product has the greatest profit margin?

01:14:28

SB: The sno-ball.

01:14:31

SR: Just plain ice and syrup?

01:14:32

SB: Just the sno-ball that was before the ice cream. The ice cream machines are expensive and a new machine would run—like I have probably \$25,000 to \$30,000. It runs off 220 electricity. You know, I pick up the ice. I bring it to the sno-ball stand. It goes in a box. It's no electricity hooked to it. The sno-ball itself is your highest profit because the ice—the soft-serve ice cream, you have a lot of expenses.

01:15:05

SR: There's no electricity going to your ice box?

01:15:06

SB: No, it's—we used to use the old Coca-Cola boxes that—it was a cooler, and I think at one time we used to plug them in, but then after a while we just used it for insulation. It was an insulated box that they put the Cokes in. They had a slide top or a lift top that flopped open. When we outgrew that, Mr. Pembo made an insulated box made out of galvanized—wood and

galvanized metal. And then the year after I purchased it, that box was coming to the end of its life. I built a new one and it's made out of one-inch marine plywood. It has the hard blue foam board, insulated, and then it's a stainless steel insert with a wood top on it. And you could probably bury me in that thing. It holds a lot of weight, like I said. You could put 2,400 or 2,600 pounds of ice in it and it's not—there's no electricity hooked to it whatsoever. It's just a large, basically igloo ice box.

01:16:22

SR: I guess you go through ice fast enough too.

01:16:27

SB: Yeah, we do. But even if you put it in there and you don't open it, it'll—and you would have to close for a couple of days for whatever reason; it stays for a while.

01:16:36

SR: What about, do you have any of those crazy tart flavors that I've seen at some stands?

01:16:41

SB: The--the lemon ice is a little tart, but no. We--we don't get into the gimmick stuff.

01:16:47

SR: I've seen like a spray. You can get something sprayed on.

01:16:51**SB:** Yeah, yeah.**01:16:53****SR:** How long is your season? So you said that you usually close in October?**01:16:59****SB:** We open the last weekend of February and we close towards the end of October. My anniversary is at the end of October, so we usually close before then.**01:17:11****SR:** And what do you do in the off-season?**01:17:14**

SB: The last two years since I've retired, doing renovation work, but don't do anything in the off-season; just kind of do the stuff that—the chores around the house, the projects, and then I'm a big duck hunter and like to fish in the winter, so—. And then that's—I don't travel; we can't take vacations during the sno-ball season. So we used to travel a lot during the winter, and then now with my son in school we have to travel during Thanksgiving and Christmas and over that time. So that's usually when we go on vacation, is the winter, because this is a seven-day-a-week job from when I open to close. And we only close—we only have three holidays. We close Easter Sunday, July 4th, and Labor Day. And even on those days I wound up having to go down and clean up or something just—.

01:18:13

SR: You're open seven days a week then?

01:18:14

SB: Seven days a week. We're open—right now we open at 11 o'clock every day, except Sunday we open at 1:00 [p.m.]. And then we close every night at 10:30, and then the third week of May we go to 11 o'clock at night.

01:18:31

SR: People come that late?

01:18:33

SB: Yeah, people—sometimes, you know, you have people we'll be serving after 11:00. If they're out there we serve them, you know. We don't close the window at 11:00.

01:18:44

SR: I imagine I'd sleep a lot during the winter.

01:18:45

SB: Yeah. [*Laughs*]

01:18:48

SR: Oh, I saw online, I saw somebody writing on a blog about Sal's and writing about the tree stumps and how he remembered that from his childhood.

01:18:59

SB: Yeah, there was a big cypress tree that was in front of the house at the sno-ball stand. And which I have the picture—I'll give you that. And when Mr. Sal built the building we have now, he had to cut down the cypress tree because it was in the footprint of the building. So I don't know how the whole story went, but he paid somebody to come cut it down and it was a really big tree. And they left two of the logs and they were going to come back for them, and I think the tree was just so big they like—"We got our money; we're not going back," is what my guess was.

01:19:38

So people started coming to the new building and these logs were out there and they started sitting on them and eating their sno-balls out there, because before that you just walked up and left. There was no place to sit because it was basically a takeout. So he decided, "Well I'll just leave the logs because people are sitting on them, and then they hang out and people see that—you know, "What's going on there?" —and then more people stop.

01:20:02

So we still have those two logs. It's from the cypress tree. They're out front. And those have been there since 1969. And then we add other logs. I actually got a bunch of logs from Katrina, and there's actually a cypress—a friend of mine has a shipyard on the river, and with the river up high there's a big cypress log. He called me and they have it hooked and tied up to the river, but the river is coming up to 17 feet, so they have to wait for the river to go down to pull

the log out. And so it's an old cypress log that's floated down the river, so I'll get that and cut it and put it out. So that's how the log—and a lot of people remember that because when they were kids they'd come and sit on the logs. And the good thing about the log [*Laughs*] is you spill stuff on it; you know it's not like you got to go out there and clean them up after. You hose them off and they just—a good place for people to sit.

01:21:04

SR: So you *are* also gathering and cutting your own wood?

01:21:05

SB: Yes, I guess I am. [*Laughs*]

01:21:10

SR: What would you say to someone—you mentioned this a little bit earlier, but someone who decided that he wanted to open up his sno-ball stand? What would your first piece of advice be?

01:21:22

SB: Well I actually get that question a lot. We have a lot of people that come by and that are looking to open up. Most of them are out of towners that are looking to open up. And the first piece of advice is, “Where are you going to get your ice from?” You know if you're down in Florida and there's an icehouse, then that's fine; you can get it there. But if not, you know you're going to have to make your own. That's the first thing; you can't just buy a machine and get some flavoring—you got to have that lined up.

01:21:51

And then the biggest thing is they have to go in that town wherever they're at to figure out what the laws are, what they need. Every Board of Health in every state is different. So they--they need to find out what--what they actually need to open up in that. And I tell them, "Look, bring the information. Get the pamphlets from the supply houses about what you're going to open because you have to—" I mean they basically have to educate someone on the new business. You know if you're in El Paso, Texas, and they don't have a sno-ball stand and you're going to open one there and you go in, these people are like, "Wait, you're putting ice and you're cutting it. What are you doing?"

01:22:29

So you have to—they have to educate someone else on a new business and find out—what's my requirements? And then once they get up and running, the biggest thing I tell them is, you know, to be consistent. Consistent with your hours that you're going to be open. Be consistent with your flavors. And in some areas you just have to educate people. Go out and give cards out to people and say, "Come get a free small sno-ball and we'll show you what it is," and just give them a history lesson on—you know, get one of these old shavers off of eBay and show them what the old people used to do 100 years ago and how it evolved to this, and you're bringing this new product to a new town.

01:23:15

SR: It's funny because you haven't--you haven't had to do those things.

01:23:20

SB: No, I've had it—I've had on Easy Street. *[Laughs]*

01:23:21

SR: But you've still thought about it.

01:23:24

SB: Oh yeah, you know because it's just a lot of people call me and they—. I know the owners of the supply houses and a lot of people come and I send them over there to get their stuff and-- and they'll have people come to see what a sno-ball stand operation looks like. So yeah, that question comes about because people are coming to look.

01:23:45

And then, you know, we've been there 51 years so they'll come and they'll go by Hansen's, they'll go by Sal's, they'll go by Plum Street, and they'll kind of see what they want to do—what fits their mold of their business that they want to open.

01:24:03

SR: Have you been tempted to expand or duplicate the stand—have other locations?

01:24:08

SB: No, it's way too much work and--and we do everything by hand. You know I get the ice. You know I have two brothers that live over in the Northshore, and they're always, "Why don't you come over here and open one up?" And I tell them, I say, "Why don't you just open it?" They say, "Oh, it's too much work." So yeah, and I think if you spread yourself out, you know

something has got to give. You're going to lose some type of quality somewhere, either in your family life or in the business. Something is going to go down and not be up to par. And so I don't think that—that never worked for me to do that.

01:24:50

SR: Do you do any offsite catering or events?

01:24:55

SB: We do bigger stuff that's—we don't really fool with it. You kind of lose—you know you can kind of lose the consistency of your product by doing that. Unless I had frozen ice. You know unless we did the--the newer hard ice. But taking that ice out of the box and putting it in an ice chest and putting it in your truck and going somewhere—it's starting to melt more and sometimes you get a wetter sno-ball with it like that. I've done stuff for the New Orleans Hornets; we've done big-group stuff where we can go out with it and do a lot. I don't do like kids' parties where you're going out and doing 20 sno-balls. It's just not feasible for me to go out and do something like that.

01:25:46

SR: I have one more question for you. I'm sure you have to get to the stand because it's 11:22 [a.m.].

01:25:53

SB: Yeah, someone is there opening it.

01:25:55

SR: Oh okay. Unless you have other things that you think I haven't asked, but I wanted to ask you: What is your favorite part about your job?

01:26:03

SB: It's fun. You know there's so many favorite parts about it. So many of the customers you get to see over and over again, and you know them. You have, you know, a relationship with them as a customer; you—it's a fun business to be in. You know we don't get people—I've worked in the airline industry where everyone has got a complaint. If the weather is bad and the plane doesn't go, they're mad at you, you know. I have people that come out and it can be—they'll stand in six inches of water to get their sno-ball. You know we get a good rain and it floods and they'll come out and stand in the water to get a sno-ball. So that is a—from an industry that you get, just people are high-stressed and traveling and being away from family and going somewhere, it's a fun business to own and to run and to be in because you--you just don't have a lot of problems that a lot of other businesses have.

01:27:08

It's a seasonal business so you don't get—you know you close up, and I get four months to do whatever I want and then go back to it again and it's there. So there's so many fun things about it. It's hard to put your finger on one of them.

01:27:26

SR: And at this point—well I guess you have real estate projects and stuff, too, but could you support a family on the business?

01:27:33

SB: Sure.

01:27:35

SR: Alone?

01:27:35

SB: Yeah, it would be hard starting out like Mr. Sal did, but he had—you know he had already owned his house. He was later in life; you know he was at that semi-retirement age and it was something that—he wasn't a man that was just going to sit, you know, and go play golf.

[Laughs] So he needed something to do. So I think—I don't think I could start out at—you know with a wife and family at 25-years-old and just go out and open a sno-ball stand and support yourself off of it. You definitely need something else 'til you build it up, you know. But like I said, this is our 51—51 years in business, so it's a lot—I ride on a lot of people's coattails. I learned from a lot of old people that did a lot of hard work. Mr. Sal, his daughters; just learned from a lot of them and--and benefited, you know, from the older sno-ball stands. And I used to help Mr. and Mrs. Hansen. They used to come get ice at the icehouse and I'd help them load it in their old--old Jeep wagon.

01:28:49

So it--it's fun. I love older people because of the knowledge that they have and their work ethic, and you can learn so much from them. So it's been fun to come up and grow up in it with the older people around. You know my--my son doesn't have that; he just has me to pass the information onto. And luckily I was able to gather a good bit of information of the business and stuff from a lot of those older people.

01:29:21

SR: And you still keep in good touch with Mrs. Ortolano?

01:29:24

SB: Yeah; I do. Like I said, she just had her 100th birthday and I'll probably go over and see her next week and she is definitely—hopefully longevity and the sno-ball business go hand-in-hand. You were talking about a lot of them, a lot of the Italians. Yeah, they all—everyone seemed to live to a very old age. The Hansens were old. Miss O is 100; she could easily go to 110.

[Laughs]

01:29:58

SR: I think the Hansens were in their 90s, I think.

01:30:00

SB: Yeah, they were. Both of them in their 90s, Mr. and Mrs. Hansen. And so, yeah, it's--it's been fun.

01:30:09

SR: Okay, well, thank you, Steven, for giving me your time. I appreciate it.

01:30:13

SB: No problem. And I'm trying to think if there's anything else. You know a lot of people come and ask questions and they—I always think, “Well they don't ask a lot of the--the good questions.” But you know I guess the--the flavors are—we have traditional New Orleans flavors that the stands here have. The supply house will tell you that some of the bigger sellers in Texas is root beer, which is one of our smaller sellers. So different parts of the country, they just like [different] things. And then I think the--the old sno-ball stands, or the neighborhood sno-ball stands, have a following that people remember from as a kid. You know if you grew up around Hansen's, if you grew up around Plum Street or Pandora's or out at Casey's out here, or you know at Sal's—you know people go back to that--that area.

01:31:11

And then I have customers that go to—just like good restaurants, they go to all of them. And they'll go to Hansen's and they'll go to Sal's and they'll go to Plum Street, and they'll hit you know a lot of them and they just like a variety of different things. So the customers are--are unique. You know the--the ones that are in the neighborhood that bring their kids back, and then we have some that just travel around and try everything.

01:31:38

SR: Well there are differences in—especially the sno-ball stands that you mentioned. There are sno-ball stands that are sort of cookie-cutter, but--but the ones that you just mentioned generally

aren't. What do you think of those people who sort of travel around and go to the different ones>
Like what is it about Sal's—like if they're craving, they're going to go to Sal's?

01:32:02

SB: Um—

01:32:03

SR: What's different?

01:32:05

SB: A lot of them like our ice. It's different because it's the older ice. They like our chocolate; just different things. The other advantage that we have, which I hope we keep, is that we live in a very safe suburb of New Orleans. So you can come to Sal's at 11 o'clock at night and get a snowball. Where in the city you're not going to go—you're not going to find something that's open because people just aren't going to go out onto a corner. You know they'll go out to a barroom or something that's inside late at night, but—. And I'm sure you have that in all big cities; you just don't have that safety to be walking around. You know I've got people that walk with their kids here at 10 o'clock at night, so that's—. We get a lot of the late-night people. So I think that's one of the things that we would have that other places don't have. And I hope we keep that; I hope I don't have to close at--at dark. So that's something that's unique to us here.

01:33:10

SR: I have to say, when you were telling me how late you were open, I was thinking, “Gosh, I wish I had that in my neighborhood.”

01:33:16

SB: Yeah.

01:33:16

SR: I live in the city.

01:33:18

SB: And it’s a shame, and hopefully things will change that we could start doing that, you know. It would be nice if we can—across the country we can get our crime rate and just change things where people could sit out, because I mean you know my mother and them grew up on Ursulines [Avenue], and they’d sit out on—you’d sit out on the stoop in front of your house and 11 o'clock at night, 10 o'clock at night, and no problems, so it would be nice if we—. You know things come in cycles and if we could get back to that. Then you could have sno-ball stands open in the city ‘til 11 o'clock at night.

01:33:52

SR: I’d be for that.

01:33:53

SB: Yeah, I think a lot of people would be for that.

01:33:56

SR: Do you eat sno-balls, or sno-cones, or whatever they're called when you're traveling?

01:34:03

SB: Actually I do except some places I don't because I was afraid I was going to get sick. We-- we were in Ecuador, I guess about 15 years ago, and there was a--a cart that—on a bicycle kind of like the ones you'd drive, and they'd have the old—. In the States we have the ice cream in it, you know, and you open it up. Well it was like that and had a little umbrella on it and we were in Ecuador and this guy is going along and he was shaving—. It was a sno-ball cart. And I bought one to take a picture of it and I wanted to take—you know I wanted the guy to make some money because you know this guy has got no shoes on and he's peddling out of his cart and we're in a poor part of Ecuador. And so I bought one, but there was no way I would eat it because I'm sure I would have been definitely sick from it. But it was—you know he had frozen—it was like a Tupperware dish that he had frozen this round piece of ice in. And he shaved it and you know had put syrup on it, and I bought it to take a picture of it.

01:35:13

But we were in Hawaii for Thanksgiving and we got the Hawaiian shaved ice. We stopped and got that. In--in Bali, in Indonesia, they have a—actually they sell them on the internet; it's a wrought-iron—it's a beautiful machine that it's got a crank on the top and it shaves it. It spins; it's basically all of them are cutting the ice but it's just a different way they cut it. And we had some there and that was interesting. They put fresh fruits on all those; they

squeeze fresh fruit, so it was just really good. You know I think we had—my wife had a watermelon and it was fresh-squeezed watermelon juice on it.

01:36:02

SR: It's hard to find a watermelon syrup that tastes like watermelon, maybe because watermelon is such a subtle flavor. I don't know, but that sounds delicious.

01:36:09

SB: Yeah, I mean it—you know just getting the juice straight out of it, or fresh-squeezed strawberries or something like that.

01:36:16

SR: And when you've traveled in this country, have you ever found a place that has the quality comparable to the sno-balls in New Orleans?

01:36:25

SB: No, I've never found a place outside of New Orleans that has the--the good ice. It's usually a sno-cone, crunchy ice, and I find the syrups are—I guess a good word to describe it would be “watered down”; just don't have a good taste. I think the Hawaiian flavors, and some other states will get the flavoring from the Hawaiian place—those are pretty comparable in taste. I just find the people don't make the—you know with sugar being expensive, people just cut back on things. And I think that's one of the things that newer sno-ball stands—you know people get into the business but don't actually know the business. And they get into it, and like I—when I used

to deliver even in the city to places, they'd sharpen the blades once a year [*Laughs*] and they wouldn't sharpen it the rest of the year. And if sugar got up or different things, they'd cut back on the extract or on the flavoring or—. You know, instead of using a certain amount, we'll just use a little less; nobody will notice. But it makes a big difference when you cut back.

01:37:51

SR: Well when you think about the sno-ball stands you mentioned a little while ago that are kind of known for having big followings, a lot of you learned from people who were doing it as far back as when the machines first started being built here.

01:38:09

SB: Yeah.

01:38:11

SR: Very traditional and very old—.

01:38:14

SB: Very old, yeah.

01:38:14

SR: Old recipes and old ways.

01:38:15

SB: I mean Ashley learned from her grandparents, who you know started in the '30s. I basically learned from Mr. Sal and his--his kids, who started in the '20s, and he--he watched someone at his grocery store back in the early '50s that had a place and learned what they were doing. You know the Blacks that have Plum Street, that business was handed down a couple generations—you know different owners, but they all learned from the previous owners. We all have. So I think that's an advantage that you have from the--the older places: just the information and how to do everything.

01:39:00

SR: When you were really young working at Sal's, was Mr. Sal a hands-on guy? Was he shaving ice and--and working, or was he more of just a manager?

01:39:12

SB: No, he--he was always in the window working when he was there. Those 13 years that he had it, he was always in the window working. You know he went—he lived right in the back and he'd come down and open up and he did everything.

01:39:28

SR: Okay, thanks so much.

01:39:33

SB: You're welcome.

01:39:35

SR: I'm feeling the press of time because I know that it's a small business and we really appreciate you giving us your time, and hopefully I can go take some photos.

01:39:44

SB: Yeah, we'll walk down.

01:39:48

[End Steve Bel-Sal's Sno-Balls Interview]