

**JEWEL McCAIN**  
**Owner, Solly's Hot Tamales – Vicksburg, MS**

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Date: February 21, 2006  
Location: Solly's Hot Tamales – Vicksburg, MS  
Interviewer: Amy Evans  
Length: 1 hour, 13 minutes  
Project: Mississippi Delta Hot Tamale Trail

**[Begin Jewel McCain-1.mp3]**

00:00:00

**Amy Evans:** This is Amy Evans in Vicksburg, Mississippi, at Solly's Hot Tamales, and it is Tuesday, February 21<sup>st</sup>, I believe, 2006 and I'm with Jewel McCain here at Solly's. And Jewel, would you mind stating your name and what you do?

00:00:19

**Jewel McCain:** Jewel McCain and I own and operate Solly's Hot Tamales in Vicksburg, Mississippi.

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**AE:** Would you mind also stating your birth date for the record?

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**JM:** October 4<sup>th</sup> 1950.

00:00:31

**AE:** So can you tell me about Henry Solly and his hot tamales and how he got in the business?

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**JM:** Well he started the Solly's Hot Tamales in August of 1939. He was married at the time and had three children of his own and a stepchild, and he and his wife decided to move to Vicksburg

and take a chance on making hot tamales. And they found a house, and I guess got it fixed up and everything like they wanted. And he went to the local grocery, which was close by and approached the man. The man's name was Foots Ferris—Foots is his nickname—Ferris and told the man what he wanted to do; he wanted to make some hot tamales. He said, "I don't have any money," he said, "but if you can give it to me on credit, and if I make some money doing, this I'll come back and pay you. And if not, I'll work out—work it out somehow," you know, like that. So the man agreed and he went home and made them, and Solly's has been around ever since.

00:01:46

**AE:** So if I can back up a little bit; where did the—Henry Solly and his family move from to come to Vicksburg?

00:01:53

**JM:** I want to say it was Meridian from what he mentioned years back, if I'm correct in that; I think it was from Meridian or around in that area. He was—he was a—kind of a handyman, jack of all trades. He could do a lot of things, and he did it to support his family. And I guess he decided that, you know, there's got to be something better. You know, "Something else I can do." And he learned in his days as a hobo how to make hot tamales. He helped a man out.

00:02:27

**AE:** So he learned to make them—while in Mississippi?

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**JM:** Now that's debatable; I don't really know where it was. He just—he would sit and tell me stories and I just, you know—I couldn't pinpoint exactly where that might have been.

00:02:42

**AE:** But he was born in Cuba; is that correct?

00:02:44

**JM:** Right, right.

00:02:47

**AE:** Do you know when he left Cuba—what age?

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**JM:** He was a baby or maybe up to two years old. His grandfather feared for his—their safety—his mother and his sister and himself and he feared for their safety, so the grandfather moved them to the United States, possibly around San Francisco when he was about two years old, I think.

00:03:12

**AE:** Hmm. Did you have any idea how they ended up in Mississippi from there?

00:03:16

**JM:** How he did—just traveling, just—he left home; he ran away from home or left home when he was nine years old. And he only went back one time, and after that he never went back. So where he traveled to, I’m sure he went to Texas and—and I couldn’t imagine where else he went, because he rode the train and—you know.

00:03:46

**AE:** Just traveled?

00:03:48

**JM:** Right. So I just don’t know. But you know, he would talk about—he never talked about any particular state or maybe city but, you know, just—just traveled.

00:03:59

**AE:** What year was he born?

00:04:02

**JM:** Eighteen ninety-one.

00:04:07

**AE:** And he passed in 1997?

00:04:07

**JM:** Ninety-two.

00:04:10

**AE:** Ninety-two, okay.

00:04:10

**JM:** He was almost 101.

00:04:14

**AE:** Wow. So how did you meet Henry Solly?

00:04:18

**JM:** That began with my mom and dad. And he has a story—he would tell a story and my mom would tell how it was, you know. So his story was a little different from hers. She was—in nurses training, is what he likes to tell the story—the way he always liked to tell the story. And being in training, you know, they stayed in like a boarding house or whatever, and they weren't allowed out after a certain time. And so he had a little [tamale] cart. And he had it on the street for years up until about 1958, when he got sick and he would go around the Washington Street or Belmont area—you know, Clay Street, you know, not—not real far from wherever his home was, but he would—he would go there. And he was there close to the—to the dormitory, so to speak—whatever. And some of them hollered, “Hey, hot tamale man! We’re going to put a basket down.” So they put a basket down with the money in it, and he would wrap up however many tamales and do that. But one night he said my mom came by or was on her way home from—after being on duty or whatever, and she told him she was hungry and didn’t have very

much money. And, of course, he joked at her, “Yeah, you’re a nurse,” you know. “You make plenty of money.” And she told him—she said, “No, not really.” So he kind of took a liking to her, I guess, and he gave her some hot tamales, and it just kind of, you know—she and my dad got married probably not too long after that and Daddy would—they would help him out, you know. They—he took them to their home and introduced him to the family, and so we just kind of became friends. I grew up with his grandkids and—and know his great-grandkids and—and he knew all of us. He spent holidays with us. And trips—and took some trips and everything. So you know, we just were one big family. And then when he—before he died he had already made his will up and everything, and he left Solly’s to my mother, and she gave it to me, which I had been doing this for about ten years when he died.

00:06:47

**AE:** Did your mother have—ever have anything to do with the business?

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**JM:** She came—she helped him. There was a family falling out with his—his family, so my mom stayed and he would tell everybody that she was his daughter, you know so she came up and helped him make the tamales and chili and you know just—just help him do that but she was not an inside person. She didn’t help him, you know, run the business, but she came up and helped him.

00:07:15

**AE:** What’s your mother’s name?

00:07:16

**JM:** May Belle Hampton.

00:07:19

**AE:** So do you remember how old you were when you had one of your first hot tamales here?

00:07:24

**JM:** My—the most vivid memory I have is about when I'm eight years old. And I just remember it being so cold. And down the street there's an old Mississippi Hardware building that had—where you could pull up under and—Papa is what we call him—had his cart there and we got out and stood against the wall where the wind couldn't get to us and visited with him and probably ate tamales then but that—that's my first vivid memory of him and his cart.

00:07:58

**AE:** Can you describe what his cart looked like?

00:07:59

**JM:** Gosh, let me think. It was a—it was a big box. I don't know how far—how long or how wide, probably about hmm, I don't know how big. I can't—I can't just—just it's just like a big old square box on wheels, and it had a little lid that you raised up. He had his tamales sitting in there and he had those wrapped in—with newspaper around them sitting in a croaker sack, because when he left his house he would take them off the fire and wrap them and put them in



that and that way they stayed hot. And then he had the lid and he had his newspapers, which he wrapped them in; he had those with him too, and he had a little lantern that kind of hung on it and, you know, he just pushed it with the handle.

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**AE:** And was the cart decorated in any way or—?

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**JM:** No, not really; it was just white. It was a white cart; I remember that much.

00:09:11

**AE:** Do you know whatever happened to that or is it still—?

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**JM:** I think it just basically deteriorated because he got sick in 1958, and after that he never went back out on the street again. He stayed in.

00:09:25

**AE:** What kind of sickness?

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**JM:** I don't remember; I don't know exactly what it was.

00:09:30

**AE:** So he brought his family to Vicksburg and what you were saying earlier, to take a chance with his family on making some money selling hot tamales in Vicksburg?

00:09:40

**JM:** Right.

00:09:42

**AE:** So presumably, the [Mississippi] river had something to do with that, I would imagine, and traffic in this area or do you know—?

00:09:48

**JM:** I don't know. I just—I couldn't imagine.

00:09:57

**AE:** Hmm. We can pause this if you need—.

00:09:59

**[End Jewel McCain-1.mp3]**

**[Begin Jewel McCain-2.mp3]**

00:00:00

**AE:** All right; so we're back with Jewel after you served the customer. And we were talking about Mr. Solly's cart in those days when he was peddling on the streets of Vicksburg. So he was then making the tamales in his home.

00:00:18

**JM:** Right, right.

00:00:20

**AE:** And where was his home in town?

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**JM:** He had several different locations; he was on South Street, Cherry Street at the corner of Cherry and Clay in the old [inaudible] building, and he and his wife divorced in [nineteen] fifty-eight. I don't know exactly when. And she stayed there. So there were two Solly's in Vicksburg one time. And he moved in at the corner of Dykes Furniture [on Washington Street]. There was a little section of it that was not the furniture store, and he stayed down there for several years. It was—it was small. And then he moved into this location [1921 Washington Street]. And it's been here for pretty close to fifty years, pretty close to it.

00:01:10

**AE:** So obviously then he—his—his debt [to the grocer]—?

00:01:13

**JM:** Paid off—paid off. And he is world-known, and I can honestly—I will say world-known because we have had people from far away visit Solly's Hot Tamales.

00:01:25

**AE:** Did he ever advertise or anything?

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**JM:** We did. Vicksburg had a little tourist book that we were in for a while, and they have one now. No, *The [Vicksburg]Post* had that; I take that back. *The Post* did it. And then they quit doing it for whatever reason, and so we're mentioned in the Vicksburg Tourist Guide now. We do a little kids' page in *The Vicksburg Post*. It's just you know business card size, but we're in there. And basically word of mouth. People know, you know—.

00:02:06

**AE:** When Mr. Solly gave the—left the business to your mother, was she expecting that? Was she—

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**JM:** She knew. He had already told her and I mean, she didn't—she wasn't going to work in it. I mean yeah, she worked in it, but she was not one of the people that—one of these people that could stay inside all day long. She was an outside person, and he just didn't want to leave it to his family because of the problems they had, and he wanted somebody to carry it on.

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**AE:** So had he taught your mother the recipe?

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**JM:** She knew it, and he taught me how to do it.

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**AE:** Can you talk about that a little bit?

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**JM:** The recipe?

00:02:48

**AE:** Well without giving any secrets, but maybe how he taught you or—?

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**JM:** Oh well [*Laughs*]*—*he liked to travel. Let me get this—get this in there and he—we were on a trip to Reno [Nevada] which is—he liked to go to Reno; he liked to go up there and gamble. And he mentioned it to me and he said, “How would you feel about taking over after you know—after I’m gone?” I was like, “Well, you know—.” I was working at the bank, and it’s like well yeah, you know, thinking of better things for my children at the time. And I said, “Well yeah, I guess I could give it a try,” you know. So we came back and he—he started teaching me how to mix up the meal and—and make up the chili, which is the meat that goes inside the

tamales, and I had to learn how to season. You use your hand to season with, spoon on some of them but hand, mostly. And—

00:03:55

**AE:** How do you mean exactly?

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**JM:** Well you know you measure like three ingredients with your hand and the other three you use a spoon. Why, I don't know. That's just the way he did it and the way he taught me, and I haven't changed. [*Laughs*] I mean I can measure it out, you know, "Okay, this is how much a handful is," you know, "like a fourth-cup, third-cup—whatever, you know. Each handful. So yeah, you could just keep going with that, but—and then I had to learn how to season the meal. And you're always supposed to take the test—sample—do it in the mornings to mix it up. And then we used that machine right there—well it's not put together but it goes right there—

00:04:36

**AE:** Okay, I see.

00:04:37

**JM:** To make the tamales with.

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**AE:** Extrude the filling? And the tamales here are pork tamales?

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**JM:** Beef.

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**AE:** They're beef, okay. So when you were learning how to make them at—you had grown up eating them, were you surprised at the amount of work that goes into making a hot tamale?

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**JM:** Well I knew there was a lot involved. I mean, because we had helped him out, you know, other times. Like we would come up on Saturdays and help him roll tamales, so we would have enough for the weekend, and help here and there. So in a way, I already knew. But it's a very time-consuming—you just—a lot of people don't realize; they think, "Oh, you can just go back there and whip up some tamales." And it's like, you know, it's not quite that easy. It's a little more involved than that. You know, we just don't do that, and you just can't do that.

00:05:36

**AE:** So how many do you make at a time when you sit to make tamales?

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**JM:** Well—.

00:05:44

**[Short Pause]**

00:05:45

**AE:** So we were talking about the amount of tamales you make at one time.

00:05:49

**JM:** Okay, we go by the—the meal. We make up fifteen, twenty, twenty-five pounds of meal, which twenty-five pounds of meal makes about 160-65 dozen tamales. [Phone Rings] But anyhow, it's—it depends on the—the meal—every how many pounds. Like when—I mean, we've done—we've even done fifty pounds of meal sometimes, when it was just trying to catch up because we were behind and had big orders and things, so I mean any—anywhere at 150—now we don't necessarily sell that many. We do have busy days to where we can go through a lot of tamales and—but we make enough during the week to where we don't have to roll like on Saturdays or Sundays, and we put them in the freezer. You know, freeze them and then just take them out and thaw them and cook them.

00:07:03

**AE:** May I ask you, for the meal do you use cornmeal or the masa flour?

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**JM:** Cornmeal—plain white cornmeal—not the masa.

00:07:13



**AE:** And you call the—the meat that you put inside—the meat filling, you’re calling that chili?

00:07:18

**JM:** Right, right. It’s ground beef with six different spices in it, and it has the rendered grease from beef fat or kidney fat that we use in there, so they’re not really health-conscious food. But they’re good to eat and people don’t care, they eat them anyhow.

00:07:41

**AE:** So do you have an idea bout how they became so popular and how they’ve stayed in this area?

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**JM:** I think it was something different. People tried it, and they liked the flavor of it. I mean they’re hand-rolled and in—they’re in cornshucks, which the cornshucks help keep the juice in them and keep them from drying out. And it—I think it just began kind of—you know, out on the street with the cart, you know, and people saw it and said, “Hey,” you know, “let’s try it and see,” you know. So they tried it, they liked it, they went back, they told a friend who, you know, went and tried it and just by word of mouth—because he didn’t advertise then—it was just word of mouth, and it just spread. I mean everybody—I don’t know of very many people in Vicksburg that don’t know of Solly’s. Now there are some that probably—newcomers or whatever—that haven’t found us yet or heard about us but most—just about everybody.

00:08:51

**AE:** Do you have any idea of—in the early days when he was peddling downtown—if there was anybody else selling hot tamales?

00:08:58

**JM:** There was an African American man named Isaac King, I think is his name. He had a cart at the corner of what is now Mission and Clay Street. I think he stayed pretty much around that area. And he's dead now, so there's, you know, no more—there aren't anymore carts.

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**AE:** Did you ever have Isaac's tamales?

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**JM:** Um-mm, never did.

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**AE:** Did you ever hear about how they may have—may have been different or smaller?

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**JM:** No, but I just—the tales always go back to where—they always talked about the—the cat and dog population in Vicksburg [would go down on tamale-making day]. [*Laughs*]

00:09:37

**AE:** That's an old wives-tale all through the Mississippi Delta, I tell you.

00:09:41

**JM:** It's—it was always—I didn't eat them for a while. I would not eat them unless they came out of a jar. Now this is back in my teenage years. It's like, "I don't want any, uh-uh. I heard the stories." It's like, "No, I don't—uh-uh." So I mean, you know—of course I know, you know—I grew—then I got a little bit older and it's like you know, "That's just a bunch of junk," you know. But I had—I used to have a customer that would come in that would love to pick at me; he'd say, "Well what are they made out of today? Cats, dogs, or what?" I said, "Road-kill." So I mean, you know—he said, "That's good." You know, he just liked to pick. But you know—.

00:10:19

**AE:** Well can you describe the personality of Mr. Solly? What he was like?

00:10:23

**JM:** Well [*Sighs*] he was a very generous person. If he liked you, he'd give you the shirt off of his back. He'd help you anyway he could. He loved to talk and loved to travel, and he loved his family and his extended family because he had a lot. He—there were people that called him Uncle Henry or Papa, like we did. He was like our grandfather without being any blood relation. And like I said, the Uncle Henry, the—so but I mean he loved his—and he loved family. He loved people, and he loved to talk. He would sit and talk, and if he didn't like you or you made him mad, don't—uh-umm, that was it. He wouldn't have, you know—he might tolerate you but

that's about it. He—you know he would—he wouldn't do anything to help you unless, you know, he had to.

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**AE:** So do you think ultimately he really enjoyed making and selling hot tamales?

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**JM:** He had to have had, you know, to do it as long as he did, yeah. He raised his family in here, his—his kids and his grandkids, a lot of them. So yeah—

00:11:50

**AE:** I mean outside of it being a way of life to support his family, did he really love eating hot tamales and have them everyday for breakfast or—?

00:11:58

**JM:** No, no, he didn't have them everyday for breakfast. He—he might but he had something for supper that was left over, he would probably have that for breakfast. He said, "My mother always told me, if that's what you want—breakfast, dinner, supper—it doesn't matter. Eat it if that's what you want. You don't have to have grits and eggs for breakfast and such and such for dinner and so forth." He said, "f you want grits and eggs for supper, eat it for supper," you know. "Or if you want soup for breakfast, eat it for breakfast." Now when we were coming up here and we'd all be rolling tamales, and he'd go, "What you want to eat, baby?" He always had to feed us a snack. And it wasn't just a snack; it was a meal. And you had to put your hot tamales down, eat

your food, and don't touch them because that really made him mad. You ate your food and then you rolled tamales again, but you didn't do both at the same time. That was an ultimate sin.

00:13:01

**AE:** What kind of food would he cook for y'all for your snacks?

00:13:03

**JM:** Oh, we had soup; we had burgers, hotdogs—whatever we wanted. If he didn't have it here, he'd go to the store and get it; it didn't matter.

00:13:15

**AE:** Did he ever cook anything that maybe kind of harkened back to his Cuban heritage at all?

00:13:21

**JM:** I don't think he remembered much of that. I mean he was just a baby, basically. So unless his mother cooked him something, I mean he never really bought it, you know. It's like some things—like he liked pickled pig feet and fish-head soup. Ew, gross. He and my mom used to eat pickled pig feet, and I couldn't stand for him to make fish-head soup. “You want some baby?” [he'd say.] “No; I don't think so.” [**Laughs**] I mean, he'd leave the fish out, and I might eat some but no—no, no, no. But I mean, you know, he fixed—he fixed different things, like you know cabbage. Just whatever he wanted that's—that was what he ate. And he liked Wild Turkey, 101 proof. He did; he liked that. He drank it quite a bit. He used to go to the liquor store and get five or six bottles [**Sighs**] and he'd have him a little sip.

00:14:31

**AE:** Get him through the day, huh? *[Laughs]*

00:14:33

**JM:** Well sometimes more than that when he got—when he got on up there and—and couldn't get around very much. We had to take it and hide it. Not hide it but take it to where it wasn't—he couldn't reach it because he did tend to—while we were busy—get the bottle. And when we got to where we got a little smart—we got a little wise to what he was doing, so we moved it and he had to ask us for it.

00:15:02

**AE:** Well back when you were telling about how he came to Vicksburg and went to the store and got these things on credit and came up with this tamale recipe, do you know if—I mean do you have any idea if there was kind of a learning curve for him to perfect what he wanted to make, and he found that early on and stuck with it the whole time or anything like that?

00:15:24

**JM:** He never really mentioned much about that. He always told me about his story in his traveling days, supposedly as a hobo, where he was in this town—where I don't know—saw a man that had a cart selling hot tamales and the man had a broken arm, and he approached him, and asked him if he needed some help. He needed some—a job. He said the man let him work with him, and he would go out and sell the tamales. And then one day the man's meat was there, and I guess he went to get his arm looked at or whatever and Papa, you know—he told—the man

told him, said, “Wait until I get back, and then we’ll do it.” Well Papa didn’t wait. He went ahead and did the meat and seasoned it or whatever, and when the man got back he said, “What have you done?” You know and he tasted it and Papa said from then on—he said, “From now on you do it.” So I don’t know where, but the—I’ve heard stories from his family that he learned how to make it from his—from his father-in-law, so I mean I don’t know. That’s not the story I was always told. It was always the one with the man with the arm—the broken arm; that’s the one I always heard. So I mean you know—I sat here and listened to an awful lot of stories, from when he left home and went back and things he used to do when he rode the train. He had a gang; they were not a bad gang; they were a good gang. They would go out and raid a cornfield and cut down the corn stalks, but they didn’t just leave them in the field. They would take and stack them up at the end of the field, so people always knew well Solly and his gang have been here. They didn’t leave a mess and they just didn’t go in and ransack or ruin things. They went in and got what they wanted or needed and—but you know, they didn’t just go in and get everything they could get or just leave it there to ruin.

00:17:33

**AE:** Were they just getting corn to eat or were they getting husks or—?

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**JM:** I—they just got—I mean this was one of the things that he told me, you know, like the cornfield, he mentioned that you know. He had a gang and he said but they weren't bad; they worked. And he defends being a hobo; he says they're not bums. A hobo works; a bum doesn't. He said there's a difference and he would get very high agitated to hear somebody say that a

hobo was a bum. He'd say, "No, they're not." And he rode the train a lot, so—I mean where he went, how far, I don't know. I have no idea.

00:18:16

**AE:** A little wanderlust in him, huh?

00:18:18

**JM:** He did. He loved to travel, now. He did. He used to take my kids and myself, we'd go on vacation when I worked at the bank. "Where do you want to go on vacation? I want to—he'd say let's go to Texas, San Antonio—go see the Alamo." "Okay." We'd load up and drive. Dark came, you stopped and you found someplace to stay, and the next morning you got off and you took off again to get where you were going to go. And we went to San Antonio. He always wanted to go to—what was it—St. Augustine, Florida? He always wanted to go back there; he had been there and he liked it, and he always wanted to go back but he never made it back.

00:18:59

**AE:** When y'all visited Texas, did you eat some hot tamales over there?

00:19:03

**JM:** I think we tried them. We went to a Mexican section. And you've got to remember my children were little. *[Laughs]* And this has been quite sometime ago. It had to have been at least twenty—twenty years ago. So but yeah, I think we did. And I was not very impressed. And I have eaten tamales now from the Delta, and I just don't like them. I don't like the flavor.



00:19:30

**AE:** Why?

00:19:30

**JM:** I don't like the taste. They just—they just—most of them are so bland, but you know you're talking Greenville and that's the way people who have grown up there are used to eating, and so I mean, that's the way they like tamales.

00:19:52

**AE:** Okay, so you would say that you really don't like other Delta tamales as much because they're not as spicy as yours?

00:20:01

**JM:** Right. They—they have a—I guess growing up on these, my taste is more of these than anything. But I have tried them, because I wanted to see what they were like. And they just don't have the flavor that I would think a tamale would—would need. They're kind of bland—some of them are, and—and a lot of them are made with the—most of them I've seen are made with masa and not the cornmeal, and I think that makes a difference, too.

00:20:31

**AE:** How so?

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**JM:** With the—with the flavor. I think a masa—the masa is more cornmeal and flour mixture, whereas you know just the corn—the cornmeal itself. And then, too, the spices that they use. I think if maybe some of them used different seasonings then it might improve the flavor. But like I said, that's Greenville and people who have grown up, that's how they made them and they're still around, so people up there like them like that.

00:21:04

**AE:** Was the recipe that you learned from—is it something that's ever been written down or did Mr. Solly write it down or you or—?

00:21:09

**JM:** No, I have written it down and given it to my daughter because she needed to know how to do it when I was gone—when I went to the Smithsonian; she had to know how to make them, so I had to kind of teach her.

00:21:21

**AE:** Tell me about that—the trip to the Smithsonian.

00:21:25

**JM:** Actually, when the—I got—I received a phone call one day. And I do not remember the lady's name or the man—whoever called, and they told me they were from the Smithsonian and wanted to know if I would be interested in coming to the Smithsonian and talk about making tamales. And I went, "Well can I get your phone number and name and—and let me call you

back?” They were very nice and gave it to me, and I really, really, really thought it was a joke. And then when my daughter and another girl that worked here they came in, and I told them about it and they was like, “You need to call them! You need to call them and find out.” My gosh. So I called them back and I said, “Is this really the Smithsonian?” And they said, “Yes, it really—it is.” And I went, “Oh, my gosh.” I said, “Really, I thought it was a joke.” I said, “Yes, I would,” you know. **[Laughs]** I’m like, “Why not.” My gosh, they paid for everything: for me to fly out there, to stay, and money to spend, you know. And I would have been crazy not to. And it was totally—it was the most awesome experience. And I have never been one of these people to be able to stand up in front of a crowd and talk without going **[stuttering]** a-da—a-da—a-da—you know, just clamming up or stuttering. But it’s almost like I was just—somebody let me go, you know, and I just rattled on. Of course, I had John T. Edge [who wrote about Solly’s in his book *Southern Belly*] to thank for that because he was very good. He asked questions and led me to, you know, keep going and keep going. And then after that first day, I did two demonstrations I think that day and after that he said, “You don’t even need me up there,” you know. I was like, “Yes, I do. **[Laughs]** I need you up here.” But it—it was—it was wonderful; it was absolutely wonderful.

00:23:34

**AE:** How are you and the Solly’s tamales that you made there, how were—how were y’all received?

00:23:40

**JM:** I think everybody loved them. I know the workers, they just ranted and raved about them. And the thing I had to do is, I didn't have a machine to help me. I had to do this by hand. And that's how Papa did—back in—when he was first starting out before he did get a machine. He would take like a big old washtub and mix his meal up and he already has his meat—I don't know in what kind of pans or anything that he'd have them in, and they would sit—he would sit and take the cornmeal, and it would be kind of pasty and not real soupy or real hard, but kind of pasty. And he would take and smooth it on the shuck, and then somebody else would probably put the meal—the meat inside of that, and then they would just kind of stack it. And they had a table and everybody rolled them. So it was, you know, just kind of an assembly line thing going on. And then, of course, when he got the—the tamale machine [extruder] it made it a lot better because then you didn't—you know, you didn't have to do all that. You just filled a tray up with tamales, and then you just set it in the middle of the table, and everybody started rolling from that. So it made it a little easier; it made it faster.

00:24:55

**AE:** About when did he get the extruder machine?

00:24:58

**JM:** I really don't know. I know it's been around for as long as I can remember. So he's—and he's had different ones. They wear out, so—**[Laughs]**.

00:25:12

**AE:** Well can we walk around like when we paused before—we were walking around talking about some of the tamales and things you use here and stuff like that. Can we kind of narrate a little tour of the back of the shop here?

00:25:23

**JM:** Okay.

00:25:25

**AE:** Now I want to ask you about the—the way that you cook the tamales because you lay them in the pot instead of standing them in the pot.

00:25:33

**JM:** Well yeah, they're—they're layered. We take—it's kind of a rack [*a circular piece of metal with holes in it and feet on the bottom*] and just—we call it a bottom because we're so used to just putting it and it fits in there. And then we take and put water to where it comes right up under the bottom of this and like a tablespoon of—of red pepper, cayenne pepper in there, and then I take and start packing the tamales in layers and just continue until I get them as high in the pot so that when we do keep adding the water to them all day, so that they don't just bubble over the side. And we just kind of try to—they're already cooked, basically, but you're just kind of blending the flavors is what it does; it just brings the flavors together. And we don't add anything special other than the grease—Papa's liquid gold, as he called it—rendered beef fat. And we add that to it. But other than water and—red pepper is the only thing we add to the pot during the day.

00:26:46

**AE:** Are these stands [or bottoms] homemade or are they—?

00:26:48

**JM:** Yes, uh-hmm.

00:26:49

**AE:** Okay, who—did he make them?

00:26:50

**JM:** He's had people that made them—make them for him; they—they were made and we've just—we've had to throw one or two of them away. But they're made out of aluminum or stainless steel so they—the only thing that wears out are the little legs. You have to continually make those.

00:27:07

**AE:** So describe what purpose that serves—just keeping them from sticking [to the bottom of the pot]?

00:27:11

**JM:** It keeps them—it keeps them from being right on the very bottom of the pot and therefore they—if they were right in the bottom, they would have a tendency probably to burn. You know,

we've done that with that in there, too, now—forget to put water in them or not get it in there quite soon enough and kind of scorch them.

00:27:33

**AE:** And so then the layering system provides a whole different kind of insulation and—and layer of cooking than the tied bundles that are—that stand up? Do you—

00:27:43

**JM:** I would—I would—never really seen the tamales that are—have been tied. I know they're in kind of a basket, I think, and they're just set in there and then put down. I don't know what they're put in. But this is just how I've always known; this is how I was taught to do them like that. And you layer them and you make sure that your ends are all sealed so that when they're bubbling or whatever, they don't boil out, which they will tend to at times, you know, if you don't get them sealed off good enough, they will.

00:28:20

**AE:** And so it's—because I guess tying the bundles helps in—for them—the people who make them that way, for them to stand up while they're cooking, and then also when they're selling them they can count them easily.

00:28:31

**JM:** Yeah.

00:28:32

**AE:** But is that—that doesn't matter to you?

00:28:33

**JM:** No.

00:28:33

**AE:** That's not important?

00:28:35

**JM:** Um-mm, no.

00:28:36

**AE:** Okay.

00:28:37

**JM:** And we still use plain old newspaper to wrap them in just like he used to—the best insulation areas to keep them hot.

00:28:46

**AE:** Okay, so how many tamales would you say fit in this pot we have right here?

00:28:51



**JM:** Twenty-six dozen.

00:28:54

**AE:** And when you make them and roll them, do you fill them in pots to reserve them to put on the stove, or they stay in another container and are—?

00:29:00

**JM:** We have—we always pack a partial pot—what we call a half-pot to—if the whole pot—we get really busy and the whole pot gets low, a half-pot will cook a lot quicker than the whole pot. So we break them down into half pots, so we can just throw them on real quick, and—but any that we don't pack in the pot during the day, then we put them in containers and put them in the freezer.

00:29:29

**AE:** Okay. And so how long has this pot been on the stove today?

00:29:34

**JM:** Since 8:30 this morning. I mean they're ready but we just like to, you know, kind of keep a fire on them to keep them—the juice on them so that they won't dry out. And we turn them off during the day, you know, after—you know, continuously during the day they're off and on, off and on, off and on. If we turn them back on, and we add a little bit of water on them, and then you know it's just a continuous cycle off, on, off, on all day.

00:29:59

**AE:** When did tamales start being fried here?

00:30:02

**JM:** Fried?

00:30:04

**AE:** [Inaudible]—Do you know?

00:30:04

**JM:** Uh-um, no—not yet. I haven't—well I've tried it—I've tried it, but I keep saying I'm going to—going to because I've heard that they're really good. I've heard but I—I don't know exactly what type of batter—how they fry them.

00:30:21

**AE:** Well I'll tell you what I know about fried tamales and that is that they need to be fried from a frozen state so they don't fall apart out of the husk. And I know one place in the Delta just dips them in like a beer batter kind of situation.

00:30:37

**JM:** Well that's kind of—that's kind of what I was thinking, but we have actually taken the tamale right off the tray and—and it stayed together because it's the cornmeal, you know.

Cornmeal will stay together and it's got water and that grease in it too, so it's you know—it's not going to—the water like this would make it fall apart quicker than the grease would, I think. So I'm going to have to try it; I've got to. *[Laughs]*

00:31:02

**AE:** Yeah. Has—has—did Mr. Solly always sell hamburgers and hotdogs and stuff in addition to tamales, when he got in the building?

00:31:08

**JM:** Yeah, he did—he did forever, and then he just got—well then when it—when it was just him doing it. He quit doing the hamburgers and hotdogs because he couldn't keep up with it. But when we reopened after his death and we waited about six months, maybe a year, and we started selling the hamburgers and hotdogs, and then we just kept adding to it. So we have pretty much a full menu. We sell burritos and nachos and a “Fiesta,” which is refried beans, tamales, chili, onions, cheddar cheese, Picante sauce [salsa], jalapenos, sour cream; and it comes with nacho chips and that's—we sell that. And the burritos, like I said, and we have grilled ham and cheese, chili-cheese fries, fries, jalapeno poppers, cheese sticks—.

00:32:03

**AE:** Is there a Mexican restaurant in Vicksburg?

00:32:06

**JM:** There are two or three.

00:32:07

**AE:** Okay. Do you know if they have tamales on the menu?

00:32:10

**JM:** I think they do. But I've never tried any so—.

00:32:16

**AE:** Okay. And you make a tamale pie or something?

00:32:19

**JM:** Well we call ours a “Fiesta,” and we also have a Frito pie. Now some people confuse the two; the “Fiesta” is what I think they would call a tamale pie because it's got the—it's—it's a layered thing; we put it in a tray, and it's got the refried beans and unwrap the tamales and put on it and then put chili, onions, cheddar cheese, Picante sauce, jalapeno, sour cream, and we serve nacho chips with it.

00:32:42

**AE:** Is that popular?

00:32:44

**JM:** Oh, yeah. Yeah, it is.

00:32:45

**AE:** Do many people come and ask for—rather than a Fiesta, just like a plate of tamales with chili and cheese or something?

00:32:53

**JM:** We have them—we have them do that, too.

00:32:53

**AE:** And is the chili—just to reiterate, you were talking about filling the tamales with the chili that you make and then serving it with the chili. Is the chili that you serve it with what's coming out of the pot with cooking, or do you reserve some to put on it later?

00:33:09

**JM:** We—we make up a lot, and it's frozen in pans.

00:33:18

**AE:** So—I see. Okay then. [*Laughs*] All right.

00:33:20

**JM:** And we take it out as we need it.

00:33:22

**AE:** All right. So can you describe the extruder machine to me?

00:33:26

**JM:** Oh, sure. I'll even show you; I'll put it back together for you.

00:33:29

**AE:** Okay, okay, great.

00:33:53

**JM:** Okay, it has two holes—this side is the side that the meal goes down. This is for the meat.

And I've got it turned upside down. And this is the tube that it comes out of.

00:34:13

**AE:** Okay, so the bigger side for the meal?

00:34:15

**JM:** Right.

00:34:16

**AE:** And the smaller side for the meat?

00:34:18

**JM:** Right. And then it just sits up here and you can see—

00:34:39

**AE:** Uh-hmm; separation there.

00:34:42

**JM:** And—

00:34:47

**AE:** San Antonio, Texas?

00:34:48

**JM:** Uh-hmm.

00:34:49

**AE:** Hmm.

00:34:50

**JM:** Curry [Manufacturing Company] manufactured them, and they've gone out of business.

But you got—that's how it is.

00:35:03

**AE:** So how many tamale fillings can be extruded in one filling of the vessel here, would you say?

00:35:11

**JM:** About—depending on whether the meal and meat mixture are similar in consistency, I guess, you know, if the meat is soft like meal then it will go pretty good, and I can get like twelve dozen to a cutting maybe.

00:35:38

**AE:** Okay. And the hand-crank here does that give you a good workout?

00:35:42

**JM:** Oh, yeah. [*Laughs*] I have a bad right arm.

00:35:45

**AE:** So I've seen something kind of similar to this that a man has in the Delta, but he rigged an electric motor and a little foot pedal to it.

00:35:52

**JM:** And you can spend about \$13,000—\$13,000 or more and get one that's electric.

00:36:09

**AE:** But this does you fine, huh?



00:36:10

**JM:** Yeah, it does—it does.

00:36:11

**AE:** And you say he's been through a few—a few of these over the years?

00:36:15

**JM:** This is the second one of these that I actually know of.

00:36:24

**AE:** Okay. And so when it—is it extruded out of this front part here?

00:36:28

**JM:** Right. I—I stand here and do like this [*places hand under extruder spout to catch and then break of the lengths of extruded meat and meal*] and just break it off and put it on the tray, which this is one of the trays, and it's three across all the way down. And I put as many as five layers on it.

00:36:50

**AE:** All right. Sounds like a lot to work with. [*Laughs*]

00:36:55

**JM:** It is.

00:36:55

**AE:** So who helps you when you make them? The whole family still helps roll and—?

00:37:02

**JM:** My daughter—my oldest daughter—and then a lady that I have helping part-time, since my daughter is going to school. I have to have somebody help me in the mornings. Even though I can do it by myself, it just takes a little bit longer so—.

00:37:14

**AE:** And your daughter's name is—?

00:37:15

**JM:** Deanna.

00:37:16

**AE:** Deanna McCain?

00:37:17

**JM:** Johnson.

00:37:20

**AE:** Okay. And so tell me about all of these pots and accessories you have hanging around, especially these number three galvanized—

00:37:26

**JM:** The old washtubs.

00:37:27

**AE:** Washtubs.

00:37:27

**JM:** We make the meal up in those. And we also grind the meat into it, season them; and then after we cook them, we split them into the tubs and stir so to make sure all of it is blended in and what have you, and that's basically, you know, what they're used for. [*Short pause*] So but that's what they're used for, and then we have the pots of course; these are what we use to boil the meat in. And our other pots, too. And some of them are just for cooking, you know. Just if we wanted to cook something for ourselves, you know, we've got some pots.

00:38:12

**AE:** Is this liquid gold, is that used for anything other than tamales?

00:38:15

**JM:** Tamales, period. That's it.

00:38:21

**AE:** It resembles meal for a description for the record but [it] also [has] a little Velveeta cheese kind of coloration. *[Laughs]*

00:38:30

**JM:** Yeah, maybe a little darker. *[Laughs]*

00:38:34

**AE:** All right. And then in the back you were showing me the bales of husks?

00:38:37

**JM:** The shuck, yeah, the shucks; we get them in bales. A bale can weigh fifty-five, sixty-five pounds, and the shucks are compressed in it. And we get them from a man from Vidalia, Louisiana, and he gets them from Mexico.

00:38:58

**AE:** And do you wash them and prepare them again after you get them?

00:39:00

**JM:** We soak them in hot water to make them usable. You can't roll a tamale in a dry shuck; the shuck will tear. I mean this way they're moist, and you can just roll them up.

00:39:13

**AE:** And what about the quality of these shucks? Do you get—like I've heard of people who get like a supreme shuck [*Laughs*] that maybe has less tears or pieces in it or—.

00:39:25

**JM:** It doesn't matter; we can piece them, we can trim them—the cuts off and we can piece—put a little piece of shuck in where there's a tear and still roll that tamale right on up—trim them, the end of it off when it's finished and it doesn't matter.

00:39:38

**AE:** Do you know where Mr. Solly was getting his shucks back in the old days when he started?

00:39:42

**JM:** He—well the man that took this over—took it over from the man he did get it from, and I'm sure that—that man is dead by now, but he used to bring them to him. And it was somebody else before—Mr. Murray is the man that brings my shucks. And so—

00:40:04

**AE:** And then tell me just a little bit about these spices here.

00:40:07

**JM:** I order my spices from Dallas, Fort Worth, [Texas] from Pendery's. Of course, the salt I can buy anywhere, but you've got chili blend, which is a special blend, cayenne pepper, oregano, garlic, and cumin.

00:40:26

**AE:** Is the chili blend specific to your recipe; they make it just for you?

00:40:33

**JM:** No, they make—they make different blends. They make an original, a dark, a light; they have several different, but I have just one specific that we always ask for.

00:40:47

**AE:** Okay. Any other tamale things in here?

00:40:53

**JM:** No.

00:40:55

**AE:** Okay. How old is this building, do you know?

00:40:57

**JM:** This building—ugh—gosh, it's older than I am for sure. I'm not ancient yet, but I'm getting there. I'm saying it's probably back in the 1900s, maybe—anywhere from there to the

1930s. They—I was told it was an old VFW building at one time and, you know, when that was I don't know but it's—it's been here for a while. There was a donut shop next door for a time so—and then they closed, and there's not been anything in there since.

00:41:32

**AE:** Hmm. And what is it—can you describe the kind of front/service area of the building.

Deanna was talking earlier about it used to be chicken wire—.

00:41:40

**JM:** Oh, yeah. When you came in the front door, we used to have bigger windows, but then we had a lot of break-ins. And the last time I had them shorten—whatever—and there was a partition between the door and one of the big windows that when you walked in there was a counter and it—the top of it—it came about—above waist for me and it was petitioned off, and it had chicken wire to where you could see the people. And then you came in that way and that was—like if you came in the door, it was on your left, and then you faced forward into a wall. And at the end of the wall there was a door that was latched from behind back here, you know, so nobody else could come in and the—the cowbell above the door is the cowbell that's been there that—it's been there for as long as I can remember. We remodeled to have a sitting area; the cowbell went back up over the door. So but that's—but the chicken wire was there, and it had a little window, and it had a small side and it had a two-by-four right in the middle and then a bigger side where you could push the—you know, take the money and push the tamales through. But that's—that's how it was and then. You had a counter behind you that had—well, we had a radio and we had newspapers and then the other—where we were close to the stove to where we

could turn around and dip the tamales out and put them in the newspaper and then hand them to them.

00:43:20

**AE:** And so this large area has always been relegated to tamale kitchen area?

00:43:25

**JM:** Part of it. There—the back room back here was Papa’s bedroom. And then there was another room, which was pretty big, and it was just basically a big junk room, storage; it had all sorts of stuff—Papa’s tools, a pool table, shucks, freezer. I mean it just had a lot of stuff.

00:43:52

**AE:** So he lived in his business?

00:43:53

**JM:** Right, always.

00:43:53

**AE:** All those years?

00:43:55

**JM:** Always. If he had—he moved into a two-story house and they lived upstairs and had the business downstairs.



00:44:02

**AE:** Did he keep particular hours, or would he sell tamales in the middle of the night?

00:44:06

**JM:** He used to stay open 'til nine o'clock. And we stayed open for several years until ten [o'clock], and then we weren't doing anything so we backed—you know, from nine to ten, so we backed it up to nine. And then it seems like everybody decided okay, you know, we're not going to be out and about or buying tamales, so we went back to eight o'clock because it just—it just seemed more feasible. So everybody has adjusted to the hours.

00:44:34

**AE:** What hour do you open?

00:44:36

**JM:** We open at eleven and close at eight o'clock, unless we sell out of tamales. And that does happen.

00:44:42

**AE:** So if you sell out of tamales, you close the whole place?

00:44:43

**JM:** Right.

00:44:44

**AE:** Nobody can even get a hotdog, if you don't have the tamales?

00:44:46

**JM:** Because people mainly come in for hot tamales. And if you'll ask them, "Do—do you want tamales?" And they say, "Yes," and you go, "Well, we're sorry; we're out." They're going, "Ah," you know. And then somebody else will come in and get a hotdog or whatever, that's okay. But while they're getting their hotdog, somebody else comes in and wants tamales, and they get upset because they can't get any tamales because we're out. And, like I said, if—if we have enough time, and if we have some in the freezer, and if we've gone through—we usually have one or two pots in the refrigerator—if we've gone through those, we'll pull them out of the freezer, thaw them if they're frozen, and then pack them and put them on and cook them. And then we've—we've done that. But if they're frozen and we get down to a pinch, we don't have enough time to cook them without really probably making a mess—what we call fast-cooking, when we cut the water a little bit that we put in the bottom of the pot, turn it up real high, and just add little amounts of water so that things—they can steam, you know, and then we can turn them down enough to really work with them then.

00:45:49

**AE:** So when you sell out, do you have a sign you put on the door? Or when you're closed people just know you don't have any tamales?

00:45:52

**JM:** [*Sighs*] We usually put a sign that says *Sorry, sold out*. You know, we try to. But if it's like seven or seven-fifteen or whatever, and then they'll know, "Hey, they sold out of tamale," you know. Because we always tell them we're here until eight o'clock, unless we sell out of tamales. If we sell out of tamales we—you know, that's the draw; that's the tamales. That's what people like are the tamales.

00:46:16

**AE:** And for all these years it's been primarily a take-away business, but you remodeled and added a dining room?

00:46:22

**JM:** Right, it was always a takeout. And then after Papa died, we started getting more and more people that came in, and they will come in and go, "Oh, you don't have a place to sit down?" I'm like, "No, I'm sorry." Well they want a place to sit down, so we took a chance and said, "Okay, we're fixing to re-do it," and so we did. We added a small dining area that seats sixteen. Which I have had up to twenty people in here, and I actually had to have some in the back to sit down because the front was full.

00:46:53

**AE:** Was there anybody when you took the business over who dared to comment that your tamales tasted different from when Mr. Solly was making them?

00:47:01

**JM:** I had some people just—I think just being ugly, but they don't realize I was making them while he was alive. I mean he didn't season them and everything; I did most of the time. And nobody knew it; they always thought he did. But then other people that had grown up on it and had been away and come back and—and tried them and said, “Tastes just like he used to make them.” It's like, “Well, thank you,” you know.

00:47:28

**AE:** Or do you get many people who come in here and have heard of Solly's Hot Tamales but have never had a tamale?

00:47:33

**JM:** Yeah, yeah. We'll say, “Okay, you want to try one?” And we'll give them one, you know. Let them taste it and usually they come back.

00:47:41

**AE:** So how would you, if you had to describe a tamale from Solly's, how would you describe it?

00:47:50

**JM:** As in flavor?

00:47:53

**AE:** Everything: appearance, smell, flavor—everything.

00:47:58

**JM:** [*Sighs*] Well if I was a first-timer, I would look at the shuck and go, “Okay, I’m supposed to eat this, but how do I do it?” But you unwrap it out of the—out of the shuck and the first bite is just—to me, it’s just mouth-watering. It’s just—you just want to keep going. That’s to me now. I mean some people will have taken the tamale and actually sucked—put it in their mouth and sucked the tamale out and then sit there and lick their fingers. Of course, that’s the best way: eat them with your fingers, not a fork.

00:48:35

**AE:** Do many people in Vicksburg, when they eat hot tamales, do they eat them with saltines or hot sauce or anything?

00:48:40

**JM:** We have a lot of people that get hot sauce. Some people, it’s like, “You want crackers?” and they go, “Ah, you don’t eat tamales with crackers,” you know. That’s just—but yeah, I mean we have people that eat them with crackers.

00:48:56

**AE:** Do you hear about anybody doing anything with the—the sauce from the tamales, anything unusual?

00:49:02

**JM:** No. We have them ask, you know, for the juice, and we'll either put in a cup or give it to them. Or if they're in a carryout tray, we'll put some over top of it because they want them in the juice. But no, not really, you know. And people eat them with hot sauce, ketchup—ugh, mayonnaise, sour cream. I have a crew that comes in that are bikers; you've got to give them sour cream or you're in trouble.

00:49:32

**AE:** Do you sell frozen tamales also?

00:49:33

**JM:** Yes, we do.

00:49:35

**AE:** And when you do that, do you give cooking directions or—?

00:49:38

**JM:** They're already cooked; they've been cooked and just chilled. I mean let—come to room temperature and then bagged and then put in the freezer and frozen, and we give them reheating instructions. So they're already cooked—the frozen ones, they're already cooked.

00:49:57

**AE:** Well then do you have—and the re-heating, do they—can they just be microwaved or put on the stove or put in a pot like this?

00:50:03

**JM:** You can—you can put them in a pot with a little bit of water, lid on them, low flame—very low—kind of just steam them back with a little bit of water. In the microwave you can put them on a microwavable tray with a tablespoon of water or two of water and put them—a piece of—well you can even use a wet paper towel to put over the top of them instead of the water and Saran Wrap or something like that to heat them up. And just do them like at a minute interval until you get them as hot as you want them.

00:50:31

**AE:** Do you ever tell people when they're cooking them in the water on the stovetop to add spice to the water?

00:50:35

**JM:** We tell them they can add some red pepper, if they want them a little spicier, because some people do like them hotter.

00:50:44

**AE:** All right. Well any final thoughts about the business here? The future of Solly's Hot Tamales? There's a question for you.

00:50:55

**JM:** Yeah, I thought about the future. I mean there's a lot of stuff I would like to—to do. I would like to see the—I'd like to see more Solly's other places. I've had people talk about franchise and, you know, never show up and never do anything. So I always am just kind of—okay, whatever, you know. They never show back up or call or anything, so it's like okay, they were really interested [*Sarcastic tone*]. They just really don't know how much work is involved; they really don't.

00:51:28

**AE:** Exactly. I've heard of people who have sold their recipes, and the people they've sold them to just put it aside because they—they find out. [*Laughs*]

00:51:35

**JM:** I mean yeah, you could—you could do two—two or three pounds of meat and five pounds of meal, but if you don't have a machine [*or extruder*], you're going to sit there for a while putting that meal on that corn shuck and putting that meat in there because I did that at the Smithsonian. Believe me [*Laughs*] it was truly an experience. None I want to daily do—um-umm, no. Because that was one stipulation; I had to hand-roll. I mean, you know, do everything by hand. And I thought, “Oh, man.” I said, “Well I've never done it before, but I'll try.” So I did and everybody liked my tamales while I was there.

00:52:16

**AE:** What year was that that you went up to [Washington] DC?



00:52:19

**JM:** I think it was [nineteen] '97.

00:52:26

**AE:** [*Watching Deanna serving some tamales*] And what is Deanna doing there? She's straining—?

00:52:28

**JM:** She's straining some excess juice off the chili.

00:52:34

**AE:** Okay.

00:52:35

**JM:** Because it sits there. We have that in a—in a steamer for—the chili goes on hot dogs, hamburgers, goes in burritos, goes on nachos, fiestas; I mean it goes on a lot of stuff.

00:52:49

**AE:** What do you think about people's tastes kind of changing and being exposed to different things that now—because it's kind of interesting to me that you have—you started with the Delta tamale, which is—a lot of people associate it with Mexico and Latin America, and then only, you know, in the late Twentieth Century did you add things like burritos and—and the fiesta pie and

that kind of influence of the kind of new migration of the Latino community to Mississippi and to the Delta. Do you have any—did that make sense and do you have any thoughts about that?

00:53:25

**JM:** [*Laughs*] I just kind of lost my train of thought. When we started out, I mean, we were selling just the tamales and the hamburgers and hotdogs and we had people come in [and say], “Do you have a salad,” you know, or, “Do y’all make burritos, do you have nachos?” And it’s like well, you know, we’re on this side of town, and there’s not a Mexican restaurant on this side of town. I mean they know they can come get Solly’s Hot Tamales over here, but they didn’t know, you know, all they had to do was ask and, you know, of course they couldn’t get it here they were going to go to Taco Casa or what is it—Taco Casa and—Taco Bell and get the burritos and nachos and all that. So we just kind of [said], “Well, you know, we’ll give it a shot and see.” So I mean people like Mexican food. I mean that’s a given; there are a lot of people that love Mexican food. The hotter the better. So I don’t know how or why it got here, but I guess it’s—I’m glad it did.

00:54:40

**AE:** It just fits right in.

00:54:40

**JM:** It does.

00:54:42

**AE:** Well and I want to ask you, too, maybe the last question—taking over the business when Mr. Solly passed and after he gave it to your mom—is—when took over the business, was it something that, you know, an—an allegiance to Mr. Solly and wanting to maintain his legacy as much as it was a career change for you to raise your family? Or—can you talk a little bit about what that meant to you?

00:55:06

**JM:** It was his—his legacy; he had already given me without—the only other person that knew was my mom and maybe my dad—he had already given me legal claim to the Solly’s name, so nobody could come in and say they were Solly’s because he had already given it to me legally. And he had already expressed years and years ago that he wanted somebody to carry on Solly’s Hot Tamales, and he chose me for whatever reason. And it was a career change from banking to having weekends off and then being up here, you know, and bringing my children and trying to raise them while I was here and having help from my mom. So it—it was a lot; it was a big difference. It was relaxing for a while, and then it got to be a headache for a while and challenging and everything else that goes along with having your own business. **[Laughs]** So yeah, it—it was a definite challenge. And at one time I almost gave it up. I almost—I was ready to quit. I just had a lot going on in my life. My mom had died, and that was my biggest holding card right there was to hang onto it for her because she had put so much into it. And then after she died I—I just kind of lost—I don’t know—the drive or whatever. And then when it came close to—to doing it several things happened, and I guess they happened for a reason because my daughter, my oldest daughter Deanna and I have been running it ever since. And we’ve done

pretty good. We've been holding it together, and it seems like the longer we stay, the more people hear about us and—and keep coming back. So it was worth it.

00:57:23

**AE:** Well I can imagine the community can't imagine a time without Solly's being here, so that's got to be a responsibility?

00:57:30

**JM:** It does, yeah, since 1939—that's kind of a—a tough one to live up to but, yeah.

00:57:39

**AE:** Are there some customers that are of the generation of when Mr. Solly was just starting out that still come by or—?

00:57:47

**JM:** They've probably all passed. Their children's children are coming by now, probably; they grew up on them. I remember when I was just a little kid and, you know, I couldn't see over the counter and, you know, things like that. So yeah, we get—we get a lot of those. And yeah, I remember how it used to—this thing—yeah, you remember the partition out there? Yeah. The chicken wire, you know? Just things like that; they remember all of that.

00:58:13

**AE:** Do you remember or have an idea of what hot tamales cost in the [nineteen]‘40s and then state what they cost now.

00:58:20

**JM:** He—he told me that he used to sing out, “Get your hot tamales, two for a nickel, three for a dime.” So I would imagine a dozen was what—probably fifty-cents or somewhere—thirty—thirty to fifty-cents, I would imagine so—I don’t know. **[Laughs]** He told me a long time ago but I—I forgot.

00:58:46

**AE:** What do you sell?

00:58:47

**JM:** They’re six dollars and seventy-five cents a dozen right now, which we’re probably fixing to have an increase since [Hurricane] Katrina caused havoc to everything else, you know. They keep increasing on us, so we’ll probably have a slight increase—not astronomical, but a little here soon.

00:59:04

**AE:** Do you sell them by the half-dozen and three—?

00:59:08

**JM:** You can buy three, half-dozen, dozen, just whatever; it doesn’t matter—we’ll sell one, two.

00:59:17

**AE:** All right. Well is there anything that I haven't asked that you think I need to know or would want to know?

00:59:22

**JM:** No. [*Laughs*]

00:59:24

[End Jewel McCain-2; Begin Jewel McCain-3]

[*Talking about Jewel's participation in the World Championship Hot Tamale Contest held in Greenville, MS*]

00:00:00

**AE:** All right.

00:00:03

**JM:** But it was back in 2003. Now we did this—we've done this two or three times. Back in the '90s we did it—

00:00:13

**AE:** For the record—

00:00:14

**JM:** Went to Greenville [Mississippi]. It's called a World Championship Hot Tamale Contest and it's in Greenville and they give trophies—they did then, gave trophies or awards of medals and things. And we went—we did it twice and always somebody from Greenville won, you know, so we went back in 2003 just to see, so—and because they're cash awards and trophies. So we took second place; a guy from Greenville, of course, won—not saying there's any favoritism or whatever, but anyhow—and \$250, you know, so it wasn't too bad.

00:01:02

**AE:** You think you'll do it again?

00:01:03

**JM:** They've sent us a thing, but I don't know. I may do it again you know maybe this year when they do it.

*[The last year for the World Championship Hot Tamale Contest was 2005. The organizer/sponsor decided to bring the fifteen-year-old tradition to an end.]*

00:01:11

**AE:** Because I actually went last summer to the contest and most everybody out of twelve people [contestants] was from Greenville, and one man was from Jackson. And I think it would be really wonderful if they could get a lot of different people from different communities.

00:01:22

**JM:** Yeah. You know they say *World Championship*. It's only Greenville. [*Laughs*] I mean how can you get *world* when you're not getting them from around the world?

00:01:34

**[End Jewel McCain-3; Begin Jewel McCain-4]**

**[Talking about the homemade candies that Jewel makes]**

00:00:00

**JM:** I did.

00:00:03

**AE:** Okay.

00:00:06

**JM:** Let me get them out; I'll come back up there.

00:00:07

**AE:** All right. Okay, Jewel was just saying she makes homemade candy, too, and we have this Tupperware of pralines and—



00:00:18

**JM:** Yeah, pralines.

00:00:18

**AE:** And you made these at the Smithsonian also?

00:00:21

**JM:** Yes, I did and [*Laughs*] that was—that was a job. And millionaires or turtles—whatever you want to call them and the chocolate looks a little—but it's okay. It's just cold.

00:00:33

**AE:** When did you start making all this?

00:00:35

**JM:** I was making the turtles or millionaires back before Papa died, so probably [*Short pause*] gosh, I've been making them for a while. And then I finally learned how to make pralines after about ten tries. So I've been doing it for about ten years, at least.

00:00:57

**AE:** So it was just trial and error when you started?

00:00:58

**JM:** With the pralines, yes; that was definite trial and error. With millionaires you can't—my grandkid could do it. My grand-baby could do it; it's that easy. **[Laughs]** It's just melt your caramels, add your pecans, drop it out on the buttered wax paper, and then melt some chocolate and paraffin, and then dip your caramel and pecans into it, and put it back on the paper.

00:01:26

**AE:** So people around here know you as—as much for your candies as—?

00:01:29

**JM:** Oh, yes. I have people that come in—I have one lady that comes in; she comes in specifically for the millionaires. And then I have people that come in specifically for the pralines. I do.

00:01:41

**AE:** Will they order like big batches of them?

00:01:42

**JM:** Well they'll just come in and say do—you know, of course, ask me because I do run out and don't make them sometimes. But they'll say, "You have any pralines or millionaires?" And I'm like, "Yes," or "No." **[Laughs]**.

00:01:56

**AE:** You used to make them for Christmas [Deanna] was telling me.

00:01:57

**JM:** Uh-hmm, I did. I made bite-sized [candies]. I do. I also know how to make divinity, which I do for her, but I don't do it to sell up here because it's a little more to it than—than this.

00:02:08

**Deanna:** She had this lady for several years that would call each Christmas that she'd have a party and she'd get Mom to make her a tray of bite-sized millionaires, divinity, pralines, and fudge.

00:02:21

**JM:** Fruitcake.

00:02:22

**Deanna:** Yeah, and fruitcakes. And for years Mama would do that every Christmas for her.

00:02:26

**AE:** Hmm. So what got you interested in doing that?

00:02:29

**JM:** I just like to cook. I like to make stuff. At home I was always making candy and cookies and cakes, you know, for my kids growing up. They were always having to have something, so I just—I've always liked it.

00:02:42

**AE:** How would you compare the task of cooking the candies to cooking the hot tamales?

00:02:47

**JM:** Piece of cake, easy [*Laughs*], not as time-consuming. So yeah it's—it's a piece of cake.

[*Laughs*]

00:02:56

**AE:** Well, all right.

00:02:58

[**End Jewel McCain-4**]

[**END Jewel McCain**]