

David Bessinger
Melvin's Legendary Bar-B-Q - Charleston, SC

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[End David Bessinger — Melvin's Legendary Bar-B-Q]

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Rien Fertel: All right; good, this is Rien Fertel with the Southern Foodways Alliance continuing on the South Carolina BBQ Trail. This is our last stop and Denny [Culbert] and I are visiting Melvin's Legendary Bar-B-Q. We're going to sit down with Mr. David Bessinger and right now we're in the dining room. The address here is 538 Folly Road in Charleston, South Carolina. The —today's date is June 26, a Tuesday, 2012, and it's just about 10:30 in the morning. And I'm going to have Mr. David Bessinger introduce himself, please.

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David Bessinger: Hello; well, I'm Melvin David Bessinger and I was born November 27, 1959 and I am now the CEO and President of Melvin's Legendary Bar-B-Q.

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RF: Okay; so your first name is Melvin and the name of the restaurant is Melvin's. Who is Melvin?

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DB: My father is Melvin. I'm not a junior. I didn't find out he had a middle name until about five years ago so he kept that hidden from my parents and from my mother and I and my sister. So at any rate, my dad is the—considered the second generation on pit master. His father Joseph

Jacob Bessinger was the original founder of not Melvin's but was the—you know, he's the one that started the dynasty here that we have today.

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RF: Let's go back; yeah, let's go back a generation with Joseph Jacob Bessinger. Tell me what you know about him, when and where he was born.

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DB: Sure; he was born in 1892 and I believe, Orangeburg. Now I—you know, that's a good question. I think it's—they moved back and forth from Holly Hill to Orangeburg, but I'm pretty sure it's Orangeburg. Because we have a farm still up in Orangeburg that his father was—married Lizzie Whisenhut in 18—in the 1800s. She was deeded this land and his name was Mack Bessinger, my great-grandfather, so we got 100 acres. They grew up on that farm. He had fourteen children and Joe—Joseph Jacob Bessinger, we call him Big Joe, was a twin and he was one of fourteen children.

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And he had eleven children and my father, Melvin, is one of the—one of the eleven.

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Mack did not start the—was not into the barbecue business, so my grandfather started this in the early 1930s.

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RF: How far back can—or have you traced your family's roots?

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DB: We originally—I have not personally done this on—on the internet but just from—from the stories my father has told me and so forth, some of my uncles and aunts, they came from Germany and there was three Bessingers that were actually let out of prison in Germany so they sent them to America. One went West and I believe the other two went to the East and I don't know much about them except but I believe Mack was one of them. I think he fought in the Civil War at the age of twelve, of what I've understood, and so actually when he—he got—you know, after the Civil War and as he got older, eventually he got married and he married Lizzie Whisenhut. And I don't know much more about those—the family roots, you know, coming from Germany and so forth.

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But we went to Germany, my dad and I and my mom and my sister went back in 1980 and we went to Germany and that's where we originally came from. So in the phonebook I saw where they had the Bessinger and also Besinger—was with one 'S.' We were originally called Besenger in the early '30s and—or the '20s I believe it was and they changed it and put another S to it. So, you know, that's about as far as I know.

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RF: What part of Germany was this?

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DB: I—we were in Alsberg. My father fought in World War II and was a—you know, got captured and was a POW and escaped and so he hid in a family's house, a German family's

house for about three weeks in Alsberg until the Americans took over. So that's where we— actually that's where I looked in the phonebook right there when we were in Alsberg and I saw the Bessingers but we didn't have enough time to kind of do any research. We were just kind of —basically there just to kind of see the, you know, different parts of the countries, you know, in Europe.

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RF: What was Mack's profession?

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DB: Mack Bessinger, I don't know much about him other than he was my great-grandfather and —other than he had fourteen children. And he married my great-grandmother Lizzie Whisenhut.

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RF: Was he a farmer?

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DB: You know, to my knowledge I think he was. And like I said, I don't know a lot. My dad can't really—actually right now, you know, he's almost ninety so I don't—I've never really asked that question about—. That's a good question. I know my grandfather was a farmer and a logger and he—he logged a lot. And I know that he got hurt on the job. He hurt his back. I know those stories. He—during the Depression things were really rough so he went into the—went to Holly

Hill and opened up a café, the Holly Hill Café in 1939. And from there it only lasted a couple years and he went back to farming.

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So, and then after my father returned from World War II, the money that he had saved in—over there in the War he had around 1,500 dollars and he bought this piece of property in Holly Hill and my—my grandfather wanted that land so my dad bought it for him for 1,500 dollars and they built a cinderblock building and I—what I've understood it was my Uncle Ronald Bowles that built it and that's where it really began Joe's Restaurant. And that was a famous restaurant between Charleston and Columbia because back in those days they didn't have the Interstate. So that was the only stopping place as far as a restaurant, so everybody that was anybody stopped and, you know, from the Senators to Governors and so forth would stop there and eat.

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RF: What year did Joe's Restaurant open?

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DB: Joe's was established in 1946. The barbecue sauce we—my grandfather invented was in 1933 but they didn't use it; you know, he didn't open up a restaurant until '39 which was the Holly Hill Café and then actually they really started getting their—their start in 1946. They didn't do a lot of barbecuing, just on the weekends and they cooked the pig in the—in the ground and stuff and so forth. And—and but the sauce was—and this is a good story here—is that the sauce was invented by old man Sweatman and my grandfather. They both were friends and so they

both worked on this thing together and obviously there is a difference in the sauce. But so I guess, you know, they did a little tweaking there and here and there so my grandfather came up with his version and Sweatman's came up with their version.

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RF: So this is Bub Sweatman, who they call—?

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DB: Well no, because I don't know them that—I don't know them. I know that Sweatman's is not owned by a family member anymore but the—the founder, you know, he had to be born in the 1800s as well, the 1890s, you know, I'm sure because there kind of close in age I believe. So, I don't know his original—his name, but I just know that my dad told me when he was around ten years old he saw them doing something and he asked him what they were doing and they working on the barbecue sauce recipe.

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So that's how he got the—you know, the recipe; my dad was the—right now is the oldest living brother. He's—there's five of them left and a couple of them before him that went into the barbecue business and some of them did not, just practically about the whole family went into the—into the restaurant industry except for two of them.

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RF: Can you tell me—on the subject of the sauce can you describe the sauce a bit?

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DB: It is a—a mustard-based barbecue sauce. I think a lot of people from outside of South Carolina think it's like more of a French's—you know, French's Mustard. But it's not; it's—it's more of a darker golden look and that's why we call it the "Golden Secret." My grandfather told my father hey; we got something here. And back in those days in the '30s he said, "This will make you \$1,000,000 one day." So, you know, that was a lot of money back in those days with—you know, it's still a lot of money today, but as you well know it doesn't go a long ways when you open up a restaurant.

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So it's—it's more of a golden look; we have—we do have mustard in it, some sugar and some other ingredients, I don't want to have to tell you, but yeah; it's just not that real yellow look. But we feel like it's very unique. You don't see it a lot. I think you only see it in South Carolina, maybe parts of Georgia a little bit, but, you know, other parts of the country they have more of a—more molasses in their sauce and it's a darker look. But we also—my dad came out in 1974 with a—with a tomato-based barbecue sauce because there are a lot of the people from the North that were coming down, back in those days, and they wanted something a little different, so he came out with that. And then in the '90s we came out with a hickory-based and then I came out with a habanera sauce here a couple years ago. And then I came out with the dry rub as well.

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So, you know, with those ingredients, with those types of flavors I think we're—we're reaching the clientele that—that enjoys, you know, our barbecue with these sauces. I know a lot of people like the vinegar-base, you know, that's just a preference and the molasses is—you

know, that's more of a preference and that's what makes barbecue so unique I think is the different regions, the way they cook it; everybody has their own take on it. I know Alabama has a white barbecue sauce and we're known for the—the mustard-base in South Carolina. And actually, you know, most of—a lot of the Germans came over to South Carolina and settled in Orangeburg. And that's how we—I think that's how a lot of the Bessingers came—you know, came about because a lot of them came over here and farmed the region. And they were considered very, very hard workers.

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And I'm the third generation and, I tell you, that second generation of Bessingers they all worked very, very hard, all of them did. They worked on the farm, picked cotton, you know, did the plowing and so forth and they—they didn't get a lot of chances to play. They really grew up hard in that time and Dad talks about that and just—it's just you hear the stories but you really don't—you don't really understand what they went through, you know, without electricity, without running water. So we bought that farmhouse about six years ago and renovated it and you just—you know, it's the same size and you just think about wow. They didn't even have bathrooms in here. It's only 1,500 square feet. They had eight one brothers in one room and three sisters in another and then the parents in another room. No running water, no electricity, no phones, no television—

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RF: This was the farmstead that your father grew up on?

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DB: Right; it is the farm my dad was in and they all were born in the—in a house and never—none of them were born in the hospital. But this is the one my dad was—was raised in and, so yeah, it's amazing, you know, it really is, to think about what they went through. If we lose electricity for ten hours we—we're very impatient and we—you know, we—we don't like it.

00:12:42

RF: I want to ask about that in a minute. But before I forget one more question on the sauce. So the sauce is—is created in '33 in Holly Hill. Have you ever heard of why—why mustard?

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DB: The Germans. I think they had—they liked the—they liked mustard and I read a little bit about this and I think the Germans really—it has to be something with—with the food they eat over there and because—that is a good question, why mustard; why not—? I think South Carolina has—you know, we might be the only State that has the four original sauces, the vinegar, the tomato-based, and the mustard-based, and there was one more, I can't—I can't remember. But I think when they came out with this mustard-base it just was—it was a hit with all the—the friends and the kin around came around for it, weekend barbecue and it took off, and I—you know, I really don't know why. I just really believe it's the—it's the Germans that came over that really must have liked a lot of—must have liked mustard. I'm sorry; I wish I could answer that but I don't know why.

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RF: Are there any stories that stick out that your father has told you about growing up?

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DB: Of the barbecue business?

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RF: Well, maybe first the farmstead and then we'll go to the barbecue business or maybe first life in his family with such a large family.

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DB: Yeah; you know, they—as I said before, he—he grew up—they grew up very hard. They walked to school barefooted and didn't have anything growing up. I remember when he married my mother, she—he had—she gave him a birthday cake and that was the first one he ever had. Growing up they didn't have birthday cakes. They couldn't even—I mean they just didn't—you know, for Christmas he got an apple and an orange and that was it. And so, you know, they didn't get much. And so, I just hear stories of when his uncles and aunts would come over for dinner, you know, they would eat first and let the kids wait. Nowadays it's the kids eat first and the parents eat last.

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So, at any rate, I just remember that, you know, having thirteen people around the table they didn't talk. And if you did I'm sure they would get a whipping because it was just too much chaos, I imagine. And, you know, I've heard my Mamma growing up, you know, having all these children, she got married when she was fourteen and had her first child at fifteen. You know,

you're washing all the diapers by hand outside in a tub. They'd pump their water. You know, I don't know what they—I think they went to bed early at night because when it turned dark, I know they would sit on the porch and talk a little bit. And Dad would tell me there was some times when it was so hot he would just sleep in front of the door and have the door wide open and sleep on the floor because having eight brothers in one room I don't know how they did it, in one bed, I just don't know how they did it—because I'm living—you know, we go up there occasionally and—and stay in that farmhouse and those rooms are not big at all. I'm just like, "How in the world did they do this?" I don't understand.

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So they slept in front of the door, you know; it was hot in Orangeburg. I don't know if you've ever been up in that area but it gets real hot. But believe it or not that—that section where our farm is it gets real breezy at times, so it's very, very odd. But I'm sure it cooled off at night.

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You know, he's—that's about it as far as the—the growing up. I just know that my dad, you know, he finished high school when he was seventeen and he went to—I think he went and worked for the shipyard and then the War broke out and then he joined the Service, fought, came back, worked for his—I think he worked for his mother for a while, and then went into the Citadel, the Military College of South Carolina. And then his dad had a heart attack and he was there and he left the Citadel for about six months to help his mother run the restaurant and then he returned and graduated in 1951.

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And then after that he went back to Joe's Restaurant and ran it for a while and then my dad heard that I-26 was being developed, the Interstate. And he thought that, you know, Holly

Hill was going to be dried up so he decided to move to Charleston, around 1957, I think it was. So with that he worked for his—a brother that was already in the restaurant industry. And back in those days the brothers, there were eight of them obviously; six of them I believe went off and opened restaurants and they came out with this restaurant called Piggy Park Drive-In. So back in those days the drive-ins were real popular.

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And at any rate, my father finally opened his first Piggy Park Drive-In on Savannah Highway, west of Ashley, in 1961. And with that he opened it up with his—one of his brothers, a younger brother and they were partners for thirty years. So, then in 1991 we decided to go our different ways and so we came out with the—with a Melvin's. And from there on we've had these two locations, one in Mount Pleasant and one on James Island. And it was called—originally called Melvin's Southern Bar-B-Q and I—I eventually changed that name in the '90s to Legendary and started using the—the when we were very—you know, when we started our first restaurant this, you know, was established since 1939. Those—that's where they got their experience, in Holly Hill, and from watching their mother cook too.

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RF: So, Holly Hill Café did not have barbecue?

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DB: It did not. I don't know; I think they served a lot of sandwiches and so forth. I don't really—I didn't ask too many questions about that. It doesn't exist today. I know that the Joe's Restaurant, they served a lot of breakfast, lunch, and dinner. They'd sell barbecue maybe like on

the weekends. So I think, you know, at that time they just had a huge breakfast business—breakfast and lunch and for dinner I'm sure they served country fried steak and, you know, whatever else, you know, catfish and so forth. But I guess barbecue, you know, in those neck of the woods, it just—I think it was just a weekend family tradition.

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RF: And did—was there only one Joe's Restaurant? Did he only have one restaurant?

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DB: Yes; and actually it's still there today. It's—it's changed hands a couple times. My uncle bought it about—

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RF: [Aside] There's someone at the door trying to get in. Okay; so we're back. So we were talking about Joe's Restaurant. They were only serving barbecue on the weekends. How long did Joe's Restaurant last, your—with your grandfather as owner?

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DB: My grandfather really didn't do a lot of work. When he got hurt during logging he kind of sat back, and I heard the stories—he would sit back in the chair outside and just smoke a cigar and watch his sons work. And but, you know, after returning from the War my dad—or maybe from the Citadel, it gets a little sketchy here, I think he rebuilt that restaurant and the way it looks today with the fire lines still there, all the stainless steel is still there from the early '50s when he

had it installed, but from 1946 until probably the—the mid-'50s, if not the late '50s, is when my dad decided that—to get out. And he told his mother that, you know, he wanted to sell the—the restaurant and go to Charleston.

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So he actually when he did that he moved his mother to Charleston as well because his dad had already—he had a heart attack and I think he had a heart attack in, you know, like I said maybe '49, so 1949 so—it was from 1946 to probably the—the mid-'50s, if not the late '50s, but it, you know—that's when it closed. And from there on I don't know who really owned it. I can't—I can't remember. He's told me these stories but I can't remember. It—it changed hands and it really did kind of dry up a little bit, Holly Hill kind of did. I mean it's still a nice little town to visit but, you know, there's not many restaurants there. And there's a lot of—it's a lot of farming. You know, the—the Huttos are real big in Orangeburg. I don't know them. I just heard the stories. They grow a lot of—you know, there's a lot of corn now being grown everywhere in the Midlands like that, or I guess that could still be considered the Low Country somewhat. But yeah; from—so from the late '50s until 2006 I don't know who had it.

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RF: And so your dad moved to Charleston in '57; opens up Piggy Park in '61. When was the first Piggy Park and where was it?

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DB: His brother, JD was a year younger than my father and he opened one in the late '40s, when he fought in World War II too, he was in the Navy. But he opened the first—the first Piggy Park in Charleston and that was down on Rutledge.

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RF: And that was the first one ever?

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DB: Very first one, yeah. And, you know, the—you know having eight brothers not everybody is going to agree on everything. You know, I mean some people don't even get along with just two—two siblings. So we—you know, they—if they just could have worked together and got along they could have had probably one of the first franchises in America, because they all went into the business and they all used the word Piggy Park.

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But yeah; so I mean it's just, you know, with some people wanting—I think one brother wanted fifty-one percent and the other six or maybe other five was supposed to share the forty-nine percent and it was like—my dad was like “No way,” you know, “that's going to happen.” So, you know, they just couldn't get along in that perspective. But, you know, business is business, you know, so at any rate when they were outside of business they all got along fine. It's just when—I think when [*Laughs*]*—*when you're all in the same restaurant and you're serving the same food it gets kind of a little sketchy there, you know.

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RF: So when you opened Piggy Park did—was it his own? Did he own it?

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DB: And, you know, he worked—he actually worked for JD for a while with his younger brother because Dad came from Holly Hill, so he didn't really have a lot of money, didn't make much money off that piece of property or that restaurant. So JD was well established here in Charleston and he had a booming business down—down by the Citadel. So I think he worked for JD on—on Dorchester as I recall in the late '50s and I believe my dad, his younger brother, two younger brothers—excuse me. It was my dad and two younger brothers and his best friend all lived in a trailer behind the restaurant. And then I believe with rent and everything my dad was just like, “This is not working out. I want to own my own.”

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So him and his brother Thomas they found a piece of property on Savannah Highway and, if I recall, they both put up 5,000 dollars a piece and bought the land built the building for \$10,000. So from 1961 when it was—when it opened its doors, and I don't know the month, I was two years old, but, you know, they worked hard day and night. And from there they, you know, they built a great name. And so I'm—we're—we're all, you know, we're all in the same business; some of them—some of the brothers cook their—their pork a little different than we do. Their sauce might be a little different than we do. Some of the burgers and sides could be a little different. But, you know, a lot of people get us confused with the last name: Bessinger. We—dad had—he knew that the drive-in was actually disappearing and the drive-thru was coming into the fact and so forth and the dining rooms were coming around. So he wanted to change the

concept and so forth, so we built—he built over the original Piggy Park Drive-In and so he built this big restaurant and we named it Bessinger's Bar-B-Q in 1972 or '71 it was. And that's still there today. That's on Savannah Highway. So I grew up working there; that's where I had my first job at ten years old.

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And so, you know, he, I guess from, you know, working thirty years with, you know—or longer with a brother or two and your best friends he just wanted to kind of venture out on his own, so that's why we came up with the name of Melvin's, you know. And then to kind of backtrack a little bit, you know, my father had a—a Piggy Park Drive-In in Orangeburg, South Carolina in the '60s and one in Beaufort. So he had ventured out a little bit but, you know, he had some people working for him and eventually he couldn't trust them and things were, you know, it was just tough for him to travel back and forth back in those days and eventually had to close those. So we concentrated more on the location on Savannah Highway, so we built that. And then we had some—a few little locations around Charleston that were named Bessinger's and so forth. And then we opened a Melvin's in Hilton Head and one in Summerville, and Hilton Head was a very—it was very tough. If you got to be down there by—you know, you got to be down there and run that place as a family—I mean as—you know, you got to live there to run it. It's tough because you can't see anything. They won't let you build a big sign and that was back in the early '90s. It's definitely changed a lot now.

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We've had—we've had some bad managers and so forth so we had to close those restaurants as well so we just decided to—to down-scale and keep these two and—. Another thing too is that back in those days we were open up seven days a week and now—you know, I

was very persistent on closing on Sundays and so was my mother. My father was not. He felt like he had to be open seven days a week to make a living. But I told him, I said, you know, “e—we’ve got—we can't do this.” You know, “We’re believers.” And I felt like, “Hey, every time I go to church or Sunday school I was getting paged to come into work” and I was like, “this is just not worth it. I don’t care what kind of money I’m making. I can’t—I have got to have a day off.” So we closed it. Finally came to that conclusion and now we do more in six days than we did in seven, you know. I’m sure we could do a great business on Sunday, I know we could, because that’s more of a family time to eat, go out and eat, but we decided to close it and the Lord has blessed us. I mean from the—I think the mid-’90s when we did this it’s been great.

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And so—so hopefully that—that answers your questions right there. I might have got a little sidetracked.

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RF: Oh no; that’s good. Just a few more questions; you mentioned your brother was a twin.

Who is his—who’s the twin?

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DB: Yes; my grandfather was a twin. My grandfather was a twin and his name was John, I believe. He moved to Beaufort. Well some of the stories—you know, I have this recording and I—you know, I need to listen to it some more and but I think he had a—a liquor store. Maybe he had something up here on Broad Street or something like that—but some—a lot of those

Bessingers were—some of them were, you know—they made some money back in the day, I think one of them had a cigar shop. And but the twin, I'm pretty sure the twin moved to Beaufort.

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And that's how come there's Bessingers down there because I remember we'd go to Hilton Head every summer and I'd take a little shortcut through Beaufort and I remember seeing a Bessinger truck at someone's house. They were an electrician and I was like, Wow," you know, "Bessinger. I never knew they were down there." So I kind of asked my father about it and that's when he told me the story.

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So but yeah; I don't know, you know, his children. We just started—I just kind of—I was made the President of our family reunion two years ago and we had our family reunion—I decided to have it at our farm and I said, "Why not"—we were—for the past thirty years we had it at this church at—I think it's called Four Holes up in Orangeburg/Holly Hill area. And I said, "Why not have it at our farm where we all came from?"

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So we had the largest turnout ever, you know, at this farm last year and we found out some Bessingers came from Beaufort. So there's, you know, fourteen people and then one—my granddaddy was the only one that had that many children. All of them—all the other ones had maybe one or two. But just think about that offspring there, you know, we just don't know it. I don't hardly know my second cousins, you know, on this side, so I know there were a bunch of them. I used to be on—I was on Facebook when it first came out. I found some Bessinger in California, and I believe, you know, she was related to us. And I think her grandfather might have been—he was either a sibling. He—he came from the Bessinger clan, you know. I can't

remember—but yeah; they're just—they're probably all over the place. You know, she didn't know anything about me and about any of the history over here in South Carolina.

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RF: How many people were at that family reunion?

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DB: A hundred and twenty.

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RF: When was that?

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DB: Last November, and so each President has two years to—you know, to be in charge of this and to put on a party. So I got one more year left and, you know, before that we only had like twenty-five people. And it got to the point where no one was coming because it had just gotten a little boring, you know, the same old place, same—no one really talked or spoke to anybody. They ate, said a prayer and ate and kind of talked about the minutes of the meeting from the year before and that's about it. Everybody left. I said one thing I've learned over at the restaurant is you got to cater to the children.

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So then I came out with some—and I—you know, I had invitations sent out and so forth and had some activities for the kids and we had—being on the farm was great because they all did—you know, they could—some of those offspring could kind of reminisce and say, “Okay,

this is where my father came from and my grandfather and my grandmother.” And it was—I thought it was pretty cool.

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RF: Who did the cooking? Who provided the—?

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DB: We did; yeah we—actually I asked everybody to bring a dish and I told them I would supply the barbecue so we brought our smoker up there and I had a couple guys from the restaurant actually do the deboning and chopping of the pork and so forth and—and served it. And I brought sauce as well. And, but yeah; you know, I—everybody else brought some side dishes and so forth, so it was a lot of fun. We had a good time.

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RF: And in the '50s and '60s what kind of barbecue were they doing? What—what kind of pork were they doing?

00:33:13

DB: Same thing; they were—they were doing the mustard-based barbecue pork. They were doing a—more of a roast beef back in those days, a top round beef. And just to let, you know, I just found this out, too the other day is my dad, I guess he might have forgotten or I might have forgotten but back in the day they used to barbecue beef more than they did pork. And he said they used to do it sometimes on a pot too. And they would do the pork occasionally in the

ground. And I don't know why the beef was more popular than the pork back then. But that's what he told me. I don't know how true that is, you know, because I think at, you know, almost ninety years old some things he's saying could be I don't know what to believe sometimes. I just know that, you know, pork has always been real strong; you know, the pig has been the king in—in South Carolina around the Lowcountry, not—not beef. So he might be a little—he might be a little sketchy there.

00:34:14

But at any rate when you got back in the '50 and '60s it was still that mustard-based barbecue.

00:34:19

RF: Were they doing cuts of meat? Were they doing hogs?

00:34:22

DB: They were just doing the—the pig. We used a ham back in those days. Well back in those days they did, you know, the whole pig when they had friends come over. And then when he got into the restaurant business they did hams and the shoulders and mixed them together and chopped it up and mixed them together. Then I—then we went through a period of time when we just used nothing but hams, and that's the hind leg of the hog. And I liked it but I felt like it was like—you know, "This is kind of," you know, "a dry meat" and so I felt like, you know, "Let's go back to the shoulders and see how that turns out." It's more of a darker meat and more of a sweeter meat and that's the front part of the—the shoulder is the front part of the pig.

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So from then on I think that's been from 1995 until right now.

00:35:12

RF: Just pure shoulders?

00:35:13

DB: Pure shoulders, yeah. My pits are not really designed to cook a whole pig, you know, and I really—that's a lot of—you know, I personally think that presentation is great for, you know, a little catering, a little party and so forth but—but here I don't really particularly care for that. You know I like the shoulders better. And then we have a good—a good cut of ribs that we buy and that's the St. Louis-style rib, so—. And then the—now we've—I've switched the beef from a top round beef to brisket. And actually I didn't know a lot about brisket because, you know, the people from Texas do that all the time, so—.

00:35:52

At any rate, I just did a little experimenting with the briskets and did my own version of it and kind of, you know, tweaked it and I like it and I think the customers do too. We sell a lot of brisket. Still barbecue is number one.

00:36:11

Now our hamburgers, we've always been known for great hamburgers and in 19—I think 1998 or '99 is when Emeril Lagasse came in to the Mount Pleasant location and I was on vacation, and not a lot of people knew of Emeril but I did because I was watching a lot of Food Network back in those days. And he came in the restaurant twice. I think the—he was talking to Mehdi my general manager who is one of my right hand men since 1978; he came in because his

girlfriend lived in Mount Pleasant, is what I heard. So he came over twice and a lot of people didn't know of him and they didn't recognize him, but he came into the—into the kitchen and actually met Mehdi, and Mehdi forgot to tell me about this and then it came—it came out in *Playboy Magazine*, see. And when Mehdi called me and said we're in *Playboy Magazine* I was like, "What are you talking about we're in *Playboy Magazine*?"

00:37:07

So at any rate from there on *People Magazine* picked up on it, CNN, South America; I mean it was just a zoo. People came in here from all over the country to try our cheeseburgers, and we always felt like we had a good cheeseburger but we didn't feel like we had the "World's Best Cheeseburger," you know. And that's what he said; we did, you know.

00:37:25

There's a lot of great cheeseburgers and hamburgers out there people serving, you know, there's gourmet burgers nowadays but we just sell a basic, you know, all-beef, you know, eighty/twenty but toast the bun, mayonnaise, lettuce, tomato, onions, and we got a great burger. So it's—you know, the burgers and the barbecue is about tied. Sometimes we sell more barbecue and sometimes we sell more hamburgers than we do barbecue. It's a good burger though.

00:37:52

RF: Where does the bigger come from? Did your—?

00:37:55

DB: It's nothing; I hate tell you. I mean we don't—we used to make it—we used to make our own burgers, you know, patted them out and everything, and the customers didn't like it. Let me

back up; we did this back in the '60s and then we came out with this—we found out this—we saw a new burger at the National Restaurant Association in Chicago and we came out with it, and I don't want to tell you where I'm getting it from, but it was seasoned great, you know, and it's frozen. You know, so—you know, I went to that. People loved it and I—actually that's the one Emeril had.

00:38:28

So I—I—you know, everybody is getting into the fresh hamburger scenario right now; everybody is doing that so I decided to go back and do—do fresh hamburgers. Well my customers hated it. They did not like it and I was like “Wow.” You know, if they only knew these were frozen but they didn't like the fresh. So I went back and that's—that's history, you know, so —. I've even—we sell, you know, everything we sell here is not—you know, we don't hand-make it or hand-cut it daily. It's just—it's just simple, you know. I get my—I have a Grade-A steak-cut fry that I buy. I've tried to switch that; my customers complained and I had to go back to it, you know, so I think when you—when you first open a restaurant and you come out with certain items and the way you do it, this is the way they expect it. If you change on them, they don't like changes.

00:39:29

One thing we never have changed and that's the—the sauce, you know. We've always got that—that mustard-based sauce. And in South Carolina—in Charleston, I know in Charleston, all of the brothers, we did this; we always mixed our sauce with our meat. A lot of people like to have their barbecue dry and I've—I've tried that too by watching the Food Network, and my customers don't like it. They want that mustard-base on that meat already—even though I can give them the option to put it on themselves, they don't like it.

00:40:07

RF: Is the meat chopped, pulled, shredded?

00:40:10

DB: We pull it; we pull it and we chop it up with a meat cleaver and don't—we don't chop it very fine. We like to have it chunky and we put on a flat griddle and pour some barbecue sauce on top of it and we use a spatula and a knife and we toast our buns and put it on the bun and we have a —a sauce brush, that's like a paint brush, and we dip our sauce onto the meat like that and wrap it up in a piece of waxed paper. Nothing fancy—

00:40:41

RF: And one more food item you have available here at both—I've been to both locations and you have kind of a side bar with pickles and peppers. Where does that come from; why?

00:40:49

DB: My father started that and I don't know when he started it. You know what? I'm sorry; I think it was in the '70s when he had Bessinger's in the late '70s. He wanted to give the customers some free condiments, you know. So I think we're—I know that we're—you know, Melvin's is the only restaurant in town that does this because I even tried to save some money back when the economy was getting tough and that was one thing I cut out and I had an earful [*Laughs*], because that was 30,000 dollars between both restaurants that we were giving away free, you know, free condiments—pickles, hot peppers, banana peppers, and, you know, cherry peppers and so forth. So now I decided hey; I'm not going to make that—you know, that type of

adjustment anymore. It's just, you know, they love it. My dad came out—came out with it and we've—we've kept it ever since.

00:41:45

RF: And when did you get involved in the business?

00:41:48

DB: You know, my father made me start working when I was ten and I didn't like it a bit. You know, I hated it because back in those days it was a drive-in so I had to make all the desserts, the milkshakes, pour the drinks, clean the curb girls' trays, and they would yell at me all the time, I guess not doing something right. And then my dad made them give me fifty-cents for a tip or something like that. I think my dad gave me two dollars a day back in those days. And then I'd used to have go out there and pick up the trash in the—in the yard during lunch and I would tell my dad, I said, "I'm not going back out there. These guys—you know, these people just throw their trash out there in the yard just to see me pick it up," you know. And I was like—we had trashcans hooked up to the intercom system and so they—you know, that's just how he—he made me—I hated it. I did it; I hated—I hated working in that business.

00:42:37

And then the older I got I moved up into the—into the French fries and making onion rings and then, when I was around fourteen, I started working on the grill, you know, backing someone up, you know, with hamburgers and preparing the barbecue sandwiches and, you know, after college I decided "Hey, this is—I think this is in my blood. Now I mean I think this is what I want to do." And, you know, since 1982 I've just—I've been in here full-time and it's been a

good—it's been a great business, it really has. I mean it's—you know, everybody has got—it's like a roller coaster. You know, you got your ups and downs in any business but it's provided us with a decent living. We got great—great customers and we've had some great—great employees throughout the years.

00:43:22

We've had a man that just retired here about two years ago. His name was James Young and he was with—he worked for me for about twenty-five years but he worked with the Bessinger family since 1954. So he was in his late 70s, you know, when he retired. You know, and right now I got my—like I told you, my right hand man Mehdi Rahimi; he was from Iran and came over here during the Shah's era of the '70s and went to the Citadel and graduated and didn't have a job and came to us when we owned Bessinger's. I'll never forget seeing him, too walking—walking on the sidewalk, walking in—on the—in the parking lot and asking my dad for a job. And dad saw his ring. And said, "I don't know if should hire you since you're from Iran." And—because of the tension that was going on back in the '70s but he took a chance and Mehdi has been a very honest, very faithful—I mean he's like—he's like my brother. He's been with us since, you know—for thirty-five years. And we got another lady Brenda Hayworth. She's been with me for fifteen years; another lady over here, Betty—Betty McKinley, she's been with us for, gosh, I think, thirty—thirty-five years as well. And we got some—we got some good employees we really do, faithful and honest.

00:44:43

RF: And this is—the restaurant you were describing that you grew in that was the Savannah Highway?

00:44:47

DB: Yes; that was on Savannah Highway and that was a drive-in. So and then when we—when we converted it over, you know, I remember those days when we—we were running the restaurant when we didn't have a roof because they were—they were actually building on—on top of this drive-in. So all—just imagine today, they wouldn't let you do that today. But back in the '70s, you know, I remember that. I was like, "How about if it rains?" I don't know what we did. I can't really recall. I must have been like eleven—maybe eleven—twelve years old. But yeah, I started off at Piggy Park at ten in 1969.

00:45:25

You know, I'd—we'd always go over there after church and eat, my sister and I and my mother and go, you know, pull up and order off the intercom system and, you know, Dad was always working, so that's the only way we got to see him on Sundays, you know. But yeah; worked—worked—worked there and then worked into the Bessinger's and now here.

00:45:45

RF: How would you describe your father?

00:45:46

DB: Very—a very hard worker, demanded discipline, very giving; I mean he gave so many employees—borrowed, let them borrow money all the time. A lot of them didn't pay him back, but you know what? He—he didn't worry about that, you know. But like I said, he—he was very, very clean, from the Military School and from being in the Army. He expected 120-percent from me. I mean he'd—he'd come in—you'd come in and he'd check your fingernails. He'd make

sure your uniform was clean. If it wasn't he'd send you home. He didn't care if he had to work extra. He just did not want dirty people working for him and he was—he was a tough man. And he's about turn eighty-nine here in a couple weeks. I've learned a lot from him. Now I know why he put me through what he did because it's a tough business. And you got to be strong. And you can't worry about if people like you or not, you know. You just got to—you got to—you got to do what you got to do. He's always said a lot of people want to see—see you fail in life so, you know, you got to be on top of your game and get there early and—and get organized and greet your customers and keep the place clean and have—serve good quality food. He's always taught us that.

00:47:10

And, you know, back in those days a lot of people didn't do the home—I mean everything wasn't always homemade like they're doing today like their ketchups and their mayonnaise and their mustards and so forth like that, but, you know, he always bought the best that he could buy. Great dad though; great dad—.

00:47:30

RF: So for—for close to—for over sixty years the Bessinger family has kind of almost dominated the—the South Carolina—

00:47:40

DB: Seventy-five—about seventy-five.

00:47:42

RF: So in almost seventy-five years they've dominated South Carolina culture and history, through many iterations; how, why? Why do you think that is?

00:47:53

DB: I—I believe that they've all—you know, that—that generation, my dad's generation all worked hard. And, you know, they grew up poor so they didn't want to be poor again. And so from coming from that type of background, they—you know, some of them—some of them went to high school—some of them went to school and some did not. Some did not—my grandfather only went through the third grade but he had common sense and he worked hard and—. But, you know, with my dad's generation and my dad is the only—the only, I think the only child that graduated from college, the only sibling, you know, that graduated from college. But with all of them just working real hard I think it just must have been in their blood, because I think them growing up into that Joe's Restaurant, I don't think a lot of them grew up in the Holly Hill Café, but I know they did in the Joe's Restaurant. And then I guess with their children, you know, we all—they all made us—you know, all those uncles and aunts made their kids work. The generation—you know, my generation is so different from the generation today, I think. The kids today are just expecting so much right away, you know, just like that, and—and it's—and it's not going to happen. You know, they're looking for that quick money.

00:49:12

We, on the other hand, even my parents, I mean my gosh. You know, and probably your great-grandfather, you know—they didn't have—we didn't have—they didn't have charge cards so they waited to save that money up to get that. Today we want it now so we charge it and then

we worry about paying it off and we can't do it. So we worked—I guess all the kids just came from that generation; their parents made them work hard. Today I'm not saying they don't work hard, but I know—you know, I'm a parent too. We—I think we tend to give a little too much sometimes. We play a lot of sports. They don't work as much as they probably should. And I know they want—everybody wants to have fun and there's nothing wrong with that. You know what? I don't think, you know—I guess they didn't know any better because they—they wish they could have played baseball and, you know, maybe football back then but they had to make a living—they had to eat and in order to eat you had to work your farm. And, you know, I don't know if we could ever go back and live those times—you, me, any of us. You know, I don't know if we could, but they could, because they came from that.

00:50:26

You know, so as far as why we all got into the restaurant business I think it's just—it's got to trickle down from one generation to another. It's just it's in our blood. You know, I have a—a daughter that's seven years old right now and I hope one day she can—she can take over. I hope I can survive that long; you know, I don't know if I want to work in the—in the restaurant as long as my dad did. He worked up until he was eighty-two and so he started having some problems then, you know. And that's a long time. And, you know, he—he did get to enjoy life; he got to see a lot of the world. There was certain things that he didn't get to do but it was just—it was in his blood. He just—he just loved to work.

00:51:13

RF: Does he miss it? Does he talk about not coming in?

00:51:16

DB: Not anymore. He says he's—you know, he's had enough of it now. He's paid his dues. He does still call and his taste buds have changed, so he's always saying "Hey, the butter beans don't taste right, the green beans don't taste right," and he'll call down there and say something to us. And we say, "Yes, sir; we'll—you know, we'll do better." But he's always constantly—you know, even when he was in the hospital just recently—he just got out actually as of yesterday, this past weekend he was telling me the butter beans weren't right at Melvin's or this and that. And I was like, "Yes, sir; I will check into it," you know.

00:51:50

But he's—I think he thinks about it a lot and he'll get on the phone but he can't really walk that great right now so he can't—he can't come down here.

00:52:01

RF: Maybe one more question about the family; it seems that a lot of the Bessinger's were—were run by—by the brothers, by the men. What place did the women in the Bessinger family have in the restaurant business or in any—any role at all?

00:52:14

DB: My dad never—always said, "Don't work with your wife." Because it's going—you're going to get—you know, you don't want to see each other twenty-four/seven. You just can't; you got to have a break. You back in those days—I'm not that old—I'm fifty-two, but, you know, my mom was a stay at home mom which is a lot of work because I'm a single father right now and I have fifty-percent—I mean I have custody—fifty-percent custody of my child, and let me tell

you something, it's—it's work. I don't care what people say. If you stay home and you're raising your child the way you think it should be raised, that's a lot of work. I'd rather be at work sometimes than do this, you know.

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But I love my daughter. I work and try to—I don't work at my restaurant as much as I used to. Thank goodness I got great—great employees and great managers, but the women back then, like my mom and them, you know, they just—they stayed home, they raised us, they were active in their church and throughout the community. She did work with my dad a little bit when they opened Bessinger's, because it was a buffet and we had a little country store, so she was in charge of that but didn't last for a couple years. She just—she didn't want to do it anymore.

00:53:27

Some of the—some of the other brothers' wives might have worked in there. If they did I don't know about it. The sisters, there were three sisters and all of them went into the restaurant industry as well, except for one. And so they worked—I think they work with their husbands, I don't know how—how they got along. But personally, you know, he's always told us never to date anybody here, never date your employees, and never—don't let them work in the same business with you because you'll just be asking for trouble. That—that might work for some other people but I always tried to go by his rules and regulations; even though he's—he set them forth fifty-six years ago, we still apply those rules today.

00:54:16

RF: Maybe just one final question on the legacy—the legacy of the family. The Bessinger name is extremely famous. I mean it's—it's kind of—it's known outside of South Carolina for sure.

It's, you know,—it's tied to barbecue a lot and the history and the culture of barbecue in the State.

00:54:37

But the Bessinger family has also like—it's left its mark on South Carolina barbecue culture and history. I mean, maybe mustard sauce is so popular because of the Bessinger restaurants and families. So can you talk a bit about the legacy of the Bessingers? What it—the family means to the State, to the history of the State, to the culture of the State?

00:55:02

DB: You know, I've never thought of our name as you just described it. You know, I don't think we're—I just never thought we were famous to be—to be honest with you. I don't know if I can describe what that really means, the legacy. I just—other than what I've told you, I don't think we're famous and I don't think we're any different from anyone else. But we—we did probably—probably one of the first barbecue families in—in the South Carolina to come up with that mustard-base and I have to credit, you know, old man Sweatman. And I don't even know his first name, but I just remember my dad calling him old man Sweatman, you know.

00:55:40

But yeah; we—and—and so we—I think we're one of the—well we might be the oldest—one of the oldest family-owned restaurants still around and—and in South Carolina. I don't know; I'm pretty sure we are. But as far as—and selling that mustard barbecue sauce I guess we could be a legacy now. And, all I know is the stories my dad told me in the past and the work ethic that he gave me, you know, I just want to continue to honor him as well and to run it to the best of my knowledge and my ability. And hopefully if I'm—you know, another twenty—fifty

years, 100 years, my—my—my child can continue to run this business and serve good—good barbecue and mustard barbecue sauce. You know, that—that recipe is—is not written down. It's in our—it's in my head. You know, obviously I cannot make it anymore. I'm kind of a little disabled with my back, so I do have a company here in South—in Charleston that makes it for me. And it's just—it's too much work to put all that heavy—heavy ingredients in a big old 400-gallon drum that we had and then to pour it out. That's how we used to do it back in the day and it's a lot of work.

00:57:06

But yeah; I just hope we can continue to serve good barbecue and for the future.

00:57:15

RF: Okay; well I think that's a good place to end the interview. I want to thank you.

00:57:17

DB: Yes, sir; thank you. I appreciate that.

00:57:20

RF: Yes, sir; thank you.

00:57:21

[End David Bessinger — Melvin's Legendary Bar-B-Q]