

Suzie and Joey Lamonte

* * *

Date: April 9, 2014

Location: Suzie and Joey Lamonte's Residence - Ponchatoula, LA

Interviewer: Sara Roahen

Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs

Length: 2 hours, 29 minutes

Project: Middendorf's and Manchac

00:00:00

Sara Roahen: This is Sara Roahen for the Southern Foodways Alliance. It is Wednesday, April 9, 2014. I'm in New Orleans, Louisiana, on Constance Street. And I'm here with the Lamontes. If I could get you both to introduce yourselves and state your full name and your profession—or former profession?

00:00:21

Suzie Lamonte: Suzanne Lamonte. Full name is Suzanne Josie Smith-Lamonte. And my husband—

00:00:32

Joey Lamonte: I'm Joey Lamonte. Full name is Joseph Anthony Lamonte, III.

00:00:37

SR: Can you tell me what your profession is or was?

00:00:40

SL: We owned and operated—me and my family—Middendorf's Restaurant from 1934 until 2007. And we were—there wasn't anything I didn't do at the restaurant, [*Laughs*] actually, but we owned it. Did the front of the house, back of the house, forever—.

00:01:05

JL: Chief cook and bottle washer. The old phrase, “chief cook and bottle washer.” We did that every—we were there, whatever it was—mop the floors, check the whatever bathrooms.

Whatever it was that was there—front, back, in-between.

00:01:13

SL: Plumbing, electrical.

00:01:14

JL: Oh yes.

00:01:17

SR: Could—if you wouldn’t mind stating your birth date?

00:01:20

SL: Oh sure. January 26, 1954.

00:01:24

JL: And I’m March 15, 1955.

00:01:27

SR: Thank you so much. Could you tell me individually where you grew up?

00:01:34

SL: I was born in a Marine Base in Cherry Point, North Carolina, where my dad was stationed there right after World War II. Really, that would have been after Korea. Then we moved back to Manchac. We did about a year in Connecticut when my parents split up, [*Laughs*] and then from Connecticut we went back to Metairie, where my dad was a U.S. Deputy Marshal until he decided to go back into the restaurant in '67. Then from there it was in Manchac, and then after Manchac when I got married we moved back to Ponchatoula.

00:02:17

JL: 1975.

00:02:19

SL: In 1975.

00:02:21

JL: And been there ever since.

00:02:22

SL: Been there ever since.

00:02:22

JL: Same house, same place. Okay, I grew up in Hammond, Louisiana. I was born in—

00:02:27

SL: Camp Leroy Johnson.

00:02:27

JL: Yeah, New Orleans. Camp Leroy Johnson, an old Army hospital, which is now defunct—it's gone. My dad was in the Army at the time, but he was younger than her parents. He was not a World War II veteran. And I was born and raised in Hammond and lived there my whole life until we got married and moved to Ponchatoula, and that's where we've been.

00:02:42

SR: How did y'all meet?

00:02:44

SL: He dated every one of my girlfriends. [*Laughs*] And he was just hanging around so much. I needed a date for the prom because my other boyfriend and I split up. So he graciously offered to escort me to my prom. It was my senior prom. And I needed a date.

00:03:03

JL: I was a junior.

00:03:04

SL: Yeah, he's a year younger than me. And I needed a date really bad for my senior prom, and he decided to forgo his junior prom at St. Paul's in Covington, which was—it was at the governor's mansion that year.

00:03:19

JL: Steve Edwards was a classmate, a year older, so it would have been in Baton Rouge, a big deal.

00:03:23

SL: And he--he would forgo that to take me to my little dippy prom in Hammond. And I thought that was pretty cool. [*Laughs*] And I was very impressed.

00:03:34

JL: That was it.

00:03:35

SL: And that was it, and that was in '72. 1972.

00:03:40

SR: But y'all didn't go to the same high school?

00:03:42

SL: No.

00:03:43

SR: You just knew each other from living in the same area?

00:03:46

SL: Well, I was going to school in Hammond and he was friends with my girlfriend that lived in Hammond, too, and he lived in Hammond and we—. I was in Hammond a lot at that time because Ponchatoula and Manchac wasn't that cool as far as for a teenager anyway. *[Laughs]* But I was going to school in Hammond.

00:04:03

SR: Was there a school in Manchac?

00:04:05

SL: Hmm, no, never. I don't think so. There probably—no.

00:04:10

JL: There were several churches.

00:04:10

SL: There was Sunday schools.

00:04:12

JL: There was a lot of churches way back.

00:04:12

SL: Yeah, there was a lot of churches, but Sunday—schools no.

00:04:17

SR: Like, where did your dad go to school?

00:04:19

SL: Daddy when to Chamberlain-Hunt in Mississippi. My grandmother couldn't handle him. Actually, my grandmother had three husbands, and the first one was his father. He left, and when Mama Josie, my grandmother, was working at the restaurant my daddy was a handful. So she trucked him off to military school in Mississippi. And that's where he graduated. And then World War II broke out while he was going to school there, and he went from there straight to the Marines.

00:04:55

JL: He was a torpedo pilot in World War II.

00:04:57

SL: Yeah, he was a torpedo pilot in World War II, based in the Pacific. And my mother was a Navy nurse, a Lieutenant Commander in the Navy that was stationed at New Caledonia. So they met up, probably I think, in California after the war. But they both were in the Pacific.

00:05:18

SR: Wow, what a life.

00:05:19

SL: Yeah. Well, my grandmother was watching us—

00:05:22

JL: She was home doing the restaurant.

00:05:22

SL: —doing the restaurant.

00:05:24

SR: We should back way up and maybe [*Laughs*] —there's so—. It's hard to figure out where to dip in here, but this would probably be a good time for you to sort of tell me who founded the restaurant and when. And then, like the different ownerships through your family and outside your family.

00:05:45

SL: Let's see. My grandmother grew up in a dairy in Kentwood. She hated it. Her and her sister left as soon as they could and became waitresses at several pretty much high-end hotels. They were at the Peabody in Memphis, the Heidelberg in Baton Rouge. And she really took to the restaurant business, and she could cook herself rather well. But being in the back of the house and in the front of the house, she picked up pretty much on how a restaurant is run, especially in those high-end restaurants.

00:06:28

She met her first husband, who was Louis Middendorf. He was a traveling salesman—oh, third husband. I'm sorry. Oh, I should—okay, that's the one that started the restaurant. They started the restaurant. The third husband she met—yeah, she went through two other ones, and my dad came from the first one, but they're pretty superfluous to the restaurant business. They were never—they were never there.

00:06:53

The third husband she met, that's Louis Middendorf. He was a traveling salesman. He actually grew up in New Orleans and was from a rather well-to-do family, but like I said, during the Depression and everything, everything changed with that. They got married. He got him a job and got a job in Texas as—I'm not even sure what it was, but I knew they were living in Texas and he had an oil field job, and during the Depression they lost that. They lost their money. They had to go back to Manchac. That was the only place, like they said, that they had a home. My grandmother's mother was there. My great-grandmother was living there at the time. And they decided to start a business, very small café. Middy was pretty bad—

00:07:52

JL: Nicknamed Middy—they called him Middy.

00:07:52

SL: Yeah. He was pretty bad at business.

00:07:54

SR: That's Louis?

00:07:56

JL: Louis.

00:07:55

SL: He was very bad at business, and the first one—the first restaurant failed. The second—when they started it again they had gotten some money. It's really—

00:08:05

JL: He was a World War I veteran.

00:08:07

SL: He was a World War I veteran. And he got \$500 at the time. A lot of businesses were started, yeah. I'm kind of—

00:08:15

JL: I'm trying to think. It was like a bonus or something for World War I veterans. They all got some kind of money. This would have been in the '34ish time, so this is World War I. He got some kind of money from the government supposedly.

00:08:23

SL: A lot of businesses were started in '34, at that time, because of this. And at that time my grandmother said she was going to take care of the money and he was going to—he was going to work the front of the house. She was going to work in the kitchen. And that's how it started: very slowly, very slowly.

00:08:41

They started in Manchac because that was where they lived. It wasn't anything—when the highway came through, there was always—there was a road there, but when the main highway came through that really did help them out a lot because they were like an hour from New Orleans. They were an hour from New Orleans and an hour to New Orleans and it was just perfect for people to stop there and get gas or whatever and eat. **[Laughs]** So it really did work out both for them—that way.

00:09:11

SR: Many questions, but when did the highway come through?

00:09:15

SL: 1920s. That's all I remember, is the 1920s. At first—everybody went—if they wanted to go to New Orleans, they went by train from—I guess from Ponchatoula. If you were going to do that. And the--the road started in Ponchatoula. Or that's where it ended, from the North. But in the 1920s they built—I think it had probably something to do with all the roads that when the--the lumber people needed it, the logging people needed a way to get into the swamps. So they built, I think pretty much cross-tie roads into--into the swamp, and it went through Manchac.

And from there they said, “Well, let’s make a road,” I guess. I don’t know the history of it, but I assume that’s what it was for, is to drag all those logs out.

00:10:08

JL: Might be a question for Wanda and Lois.

00:10:10

SL: Yeah, Wanda and Lois would know more about that.

00:10:12

JL: And if you look in front of the restaurant, the old place—the old road is right out the door. The first highway is right on the doorway, and the second highway you see, and then the raised third highway—the elevated highway would be the third. So when was the second highway, do you think? In the ‘50s?

00:10:24

SL: Oh yeah. That was—the second highway was started probably right after I was born. Probably about 1955. And it took them forever because it kept sinking and they would—they had to keep bringing in sand, more fill, fill, fill, fill, and it took them—I think they opened it probably—

00:10:52

JL: Check if you look it up in the records. You can probably check it out.

00:10:55

SL: Yeah. The whole thing—because our business went up appreciably when the b—when that other road went through, which I’m thinking ’64—something like that. Probably that. And then as soon as they built that, they started the high-rise. You know they knew they needed—they were planning for the high-rise to go through there. And that opened up from LaPlace to Metairie in the early ‘70s, and then after that our business just went bonkers because it was so much easier to get from Metairie to Manchac. It took forty-five minutes, whereas you’d have to go Airline Highway and LaPlace. It took a long—it wasn’t a pleasant journey. It was very difficult, yeah.

00:11:43

JL: The old bumpy roads—

00:11:44

SL: The old bumpy roads and whatever.

00:11:45

JL: —through the swamp.

00:11:46

SL: Shew.

00:11:46

SR: Do those highways have official names, or do you just call it the first highway, the second highway, and the high-rise?

00:11:53

SL: Fifty-one. It's Highway 51.

00:11:56

SR: All of them were called—?

00:11:57

JL: Yeah, [Highway] 51 and Interstate 55.

00:11:59

SL: Yeah, but it's Highway—US 51.

00:12:01

JL: We just say “the old road.”

00:12:04

SL: Actually, that road goes straight—from what I hear—I don't know. It goes straight to Chicago, Highway 51 all the way up.

00:12:12

SR: Now, can you tell me your--your grandmother's full name and your dad's full name?

00:12:18

SL: Okay. My grandmother would be Josephine—I'm trying to think. Yeah, Josephine. Thank you. Josephine Arizona Bates.

00:12:30

JL: Was her maiden name.

00:12:32

SL: Smith.

00:12:33

JL: Smith was the first husband.

00:12:34

SL: I'm pretty sure the second husband is Stevens; [then] Middendorf. Yeah, that's it.

00:12:39

JL: Anyway, but she was a Bates, originally from Kentwood. That was her maiden name.

00:12:42

SL: And my dad was Richard Henderson Smith, Jr.

00:12:47

SR: I love that middle name Arizona.

00:12:49

SL: That was—yeah, I think Arizona made—she was born in 1903 or something, and it was a catchy name, because I think it became a State at that time. So it was kind of like, I guess it was a cool name.

00:13:04

SR: And their--their first café that failed, and then the second place that they opened—were they in the location where Middendorf's is now?

00:13:13

SL: Always, always. It's always been there. Actually, the foundations for the original—the original café—are there somewhere underneath all that. **[Laughs]** Pretty much because they-- they were built on mud sills, and there is no—a mud sills is like a table—. I mean it's about the size of this table, but about that deep and it just floats on the swamp.

00:13:37

SR: So like maybe like eight feet long and two feet deep?

00:13:41

SL: And then you would build your building on top of that. And it sinks in the mud so it doesn't disintegrate. It just kind of—

00:13:49

JL: Cypress will last forever almost.

00:13:51

SL: Yeah, it will last forever.

00:13:52

JL: That's kind of cool.

00:13:52

SL: So that—I think Horst has changed that up since then, but you know that's originally—everything in Manchac is usually—there was no pilings because you couldn't get to the bottom to where the bedrock was.

00:14:05

JL: At that time back in those days you couldn't do it.

00:14:06

SL: Back in that time, yeah.

00:14:08

SR: Huh, and you--you might not know this, but was there a café there before, or did their family own the land? Or do you know how they came—?

00:14:15

SL: There was another restaurant there, the Ship Ahoy, and it was next to us. It's--it's older than—it was our rivals for, gee, twenty years I guess. Daddy said it was two years older than--than ours. Or if it wasn't the Ship Ahoy it was something else, but there was always another restaurant there. And right on the water's edge was Rottman's Seafood Market. So that was the three buildings there, but there was a lot of buildings.

00:14:49

JL: Manchac's history goes way back to the early 1800s. I mean I can't tell you exactly what, but it's very old.

00:14:54

SL: Along the railroad there was saloons, there was a sawmill. A Doctor Groney from Southeastern—he's gone now, but he--he told us that right there where Manchac originally was, was a sawmill. And that's what built up that dirt there a little bit because of all of—there used to be kind of like a boondocks between La Place and Manchac. It was a sawmill area. I think he told me that was probably the early 1800s.

00:15:26

But along the railroad right there by the water there was saloons, bars. Because there's a lot of—they're pulling up—they're always pulling up bottles, old bottles, behind the buildings there. Not anymore, but I mean they used to. But that was a lot of people from Ponchatoula and Hammond would ride the train to Manchac in the heat to enjoy the water. And the barrooms and the dance halls. Actually, Daddy said there was like two or three dance halls in Manchac, but that was the turn of the century.

00:16:02

JL: And we missed—or the second highway—I was too young to remember all this, but when they built the second road they bought people's homes out. They just, they moved all these homes to make the second highway. They dug the canal. So there was a lot right across the street from the restaurant, which I don't remember that. Do you remember it?

00:16:13

SL: The highway took out a lot of residential areas.

00:16:17

JL: There were several buildings taken right across from the restaurant. There were all kinds of buildings—

00:16:21

SL: You know, Miss Lois and them would remember, the—

00:16:23

JL: Ask them about that. They would know a little more.

00:16:23

SL: —the Allen's bar. There was an Allen's bar there. There was a lot of buildings. But like I said, the roads tend to take most of them out.

00:16:31

JL: Right, yeah, we're right here. The second time they kept moving them over and they just finally didn't come back anymore. It was too far.

00:16:36

SR: Where did you live, in Manchac?

00:16:38

SL: We lived—. Well, before we got married we stayed there. Oh, that's true. I've got to mention, too: after my grandmother—when my dad went into the Service, she was getting pretty old for that too, and she rented out the restaurant for ten years—I'm pretty sure it's ten years—to Pat Midland. Now Pat Midland was a very vivacious woman. She originally was married to Dallas Woods, who owned a restaurant in Ponchatoula called Cave Tangie.

00:17:18

JL: That's a big deal. That was an old dance hall. Everybody from Hammond—it was a really big deal.

00:17:22

SL: Yeah, Cave Tangie was the same—it was a really big deal in Ponchatoula, and she and her husband ran that for quite a while. By the time we were old enough to know it, it had gone down and they had separated. But anyway, she knew the restaurant business really well. And my grandmother had her rent—she rented the building. And actually, if it wasn't for Pat Midland I don't think the restaurant would have probably survived at that time. She kept the name going while I was growing up basically, and my parents—like I said, Daddy was in World War II, and then they recalled him for the Korean War. So he was out of the restaurant—shew—from '42 — well, hey, he was eighteen. My grandmother, like I said, I think she leased it to—no, that's not right.

00:18:16

When my—when my dad came back in '46, he had the restaurant and they recalled him to Korea. And so when he was there in '51—she must have taken it around '52. And from '52 until '66, okay, and then—yeah.

00:18:40

JL: I think it was ten years total, but anyway—.

00:18:41

SL: But anyway, my dad came back from Korea and he didn't want the restaurant. That was just—that wasn't his cup of tea at that time. He was in his late 20s, early 30s, and he had—yeah, he was a fighter pilot and he had had enough of it. He tried his hand at going to college, and that didn't work, so he became a US Deputy Marshal.

00:19:04

Actually, he helped integrate the University of Alabama. And, oh goodness, in New Orleans he was—oh gosh, I'm thinking of what else did he do? Oh, I'm having a mental block.

00:19:22

JL: He had a lot going on.

00:19:23

SL: Yeah, he was—definitely helped with the University of Alabama. He always wanted to write a book about his experience from the inside out. You know, what happened, what was going on during that time, because it was really an interesting time. But he was based in New Orleans.

00:19:38

SR: What? I'm sorry. I just want to stay there for a minute. So, what did he do to help integrate the University of Alabama?

00:19:45

SL: He was part of the cadre of marshals that went in there and brought in the little girls and whatever. He—when he was talking to me, it sounded like there was about ten or fifteen of them, but it was actually more than that. There was about 200 U.S. Marshals all, you know, trucked in. And it's just like a Forest Gump—the--the Governor of Alabama was standing right in the door, and they made a big show at things. And Daddy said it was already decided beforehand that this was a big show to make the governor look good. The governor wasn't going to take a bullet for—you know, for integration. And he said that—they said they just made a big show of it, and he did it, but—.

00:20:33

JL: Almost pre-staged, almost pre-staged: “Here’s what we’re going to do, and if you don’t let us do it—. You act like you’re not—.”

00:20:38

SL: Yeah, he used to tell us a whole bunch about what was going on. He saw all the—all the marshals didn't have bullets in their gun. It was always—it was already done, pre-done. I don't know, but he--he said it was all a big—it was pre-ordained anyway. It wasn't as tense as it was supposed to be, but he said it got pretty tense.

00:21:00

But he also—he did some work with, let me think. [*Sighs*] It's not—there was a few times when he had to guard somebody, but when they had some of the mafia trials that were going on—. And like I said, we were working at the restaurant and it was kind of—I mean, after that it was kind of you never listened to your dad, you know, when he said stories and stuff like

that, but I—. This is when we were living in Metairie. I went from first grade to sixth grade there.

00:21:37

And after all this excitement or whatever, Daddy decided he had had enough excitement as far as the '60s was concerned in New Orleans. And decided—I guess he was in his 40s now, and he was talking of making—not making enough money. The government didn't pay much, and he says, "You know, I really wish we could go back into the restaurant business. My mother was a nurse at Ochsner's [Hospital] at this time, too. She was making most of the money. But he wanted to go back. So in '66 Pat Midland's lease was coming up and he said, "Okay, let's go back in the restaurant business." My mother fought it, but what are you going to do?

00:22:16

And—

00:22:18

SR: She fought it? Oh, your mother—your mother?

00:22:21

JL: She had been there and already done that.

00:22:23

SL: Yeah, she--she had helped before and she knew Dad wasn't probably going to stick with it. But luckily at that time we were getting older and when Daddy reopened the restaurant I was thirteen. And I could—my sister was right behind me at twelve, and we were helping them out

quite a bit. And it was only one restaurant at the time, so it wasn't--wasn't that bad. And we grew up in it.

00:22:50

SR: So during the—so for most of your youth, until you were thirteen, there was this sort of a family business, but you—?

00:22:58

SL: No. Pat—yeah, it was—we had rented it out. We never sold it, but we rented--we rented it to her and she kept the name alive, which was—. I thank her for it, for sure, but it did kind of let Daddy have a little time to decide what he wanted to do with his life. *[Laughs]*

00:23:19

SR: Did you—during that time, did you feel connected to the restaurant?

00:23:24

SL: Oh no. Not at all. Well, we--we would visit my grandmother there in Manchac.

00:23:29

JL: She still lived in Manchac. She had the nice house.

00:23:31

SL: Yeah, my grandmother still lived in Manchac.

00:23:32

JL: Right next to the restaurant. Two stories.

00:23:34

SL: And on the weekends—on the weekends, you know, she'd say, "Go get me a fish sandwich from Pat," and I'd go into the kitchen or whatever and I talked to Miss Pat a good bit. But you know, I was a kid.

00:23:47

JL: You were there a lot—

00:23:47

SL: Yeah, well, we were there. Yeah, we were there and we would get food from there and whatever. But as far as—no, she ran the whole thing there for those ten years.

00:23:56

SR: Was she disappointed, do you think, that—?

00:24:00

SL: She was getting older, too. Yeah, she was in her fifties about at that time. But she did—later on she did remarry and opened up a restaurant in Hammond. She was in her seventies and she had married somebody that was fifty, and it wasn't—it didn't work out. It didn't work out. But

she—no, I think she was ready to get out too pretty much after ten years. They didn't expect Daddy to make much of it, but he did. He managed to.

00:24:34

SR: What did you think when you were told that you were moving Manchac to run a restaurant?

00:24:37

JL: From Metairie to Manchac.

00:24:39

SL: Yeah, well this was—you realize this was back in the '60s, and there was the hippies and the go-go girls and the—you know, Metairie was pretty cool back then. It was--it was built new, and I had gone to Bizanet Plaza for those years. Westgate for the first grade. And everything was pretty cool back then and it was getting cooler. And going back to Ponchatoula, it was a wakeup call for me for sure. But I got used to it. I'm a country girl now. **[Laughs]** You know it—you live in Manchac, you learn to wear hip boots. I'm kind of glad we did move, yes—move back, for sure.

00:25:22

And once I got into it I really had a talent for it, too. I went to—I never graduated from college, but I did four years. And by then I was working full-time at the restaurant, too, and after my senior year I said, “What am I going to school for? I know more about the business than I could get in college.” And my grandmother always told me, “Never go into the restaurant business,” because it was so hard. But that's the only thing I really knew. It really was, and I was

good at it. It drove you crazy, but if you know some people just tend to gravitate to that, and we never left it. There was a bunch of time I wanted to just throw them out the door but you didn't. It was your family business.

00:26:06

JL: Typical family.

00:26:07

SL: Yeah, you know, typical family. But we never did—so you know it was—. [*Laughs*] You get used to the—I guess you get used to the day in and day out of it. There's exciting times and then there's terrible times, but you get through those, and it was fun. It was—all in all, it was fun.

00:26:29

JL: Give her a timeline, okay. The timeline: came back in '67. He remodeled the old place. He had to redo—added the third—. The place was kind of in shambles and he had to do a lot of re-working on it. So that's '67. So the old place was open until '72, and the new place came in, correct? The new place opened in 1972, the second building.

00:26:48

SL: When the interstate came through it was—Daddy had me [*Laughs*] sitting in a car and watch all the people—all the cars come in. This is when the interstate opened to LaPlace. And I saw for every three cars that came in, two left. It was just because the line was so big.

00:27:09

JL: This would have been like '70—

00:27:11

SL: Yeah.

00:27:12

JL: Watching the people come and go and leaving.

00:27:13

SL: They were leaving because the line was just out the door all the time. And everybody in Manchac started making noises that they were going to open up restaurants, and I—Daddy was so scared it was going to turn into a West End. You know, West End Boulevard [on the south shore of Lake Pontchartrain] conglomeration, where there's a restaurant every five feet. And some were actually looking into buying restaurant equipment and everything, **[Laughs]** and Daddy says, "I can nip this in the bud by opening up another restaurant."

00:27:44

And so he got—we were the first metal building in the parish. It went up in six months, and opened it up, and then my mother and I found that we were running two restaurants instead of one. **[Laughs]** Because it was—it just took off in a moment, and all these people that left, they all were coming in. And of course Daddy was really happy. We were happy. We were making a lot of money, but it was—it just doubled the effort.

00:28:14

The reason why a lot of people at that time thought that it was two brothers that were feuding: because the restaurants were separated. There was—the Ship-Ahoy Restaurant, the lady that owned it—it was closed, but the building was still in the middle.

00:28:34

SR: In the middle of what?

00:28:34

JL: There was a property—he didn't connect them. There was a parcel in the middle and he did not own the property there. He owned the old building and a lot with the Ship Ahoy in the middle, and he put the new place next to that—north of that—because he did not own it. He couldn't connect it. And he couldn't make it bigger, so that's—this lady was still living there, Ms. Williams?

00:28:51

SL: Yeah. Horst, he still has—the other building is still there. There's a parking lot between the two buildings. That's where the old restaurant used to be. We didn't own that one. Daddy had to build a restaurant. He had to build it because, like I said, we would have had too much competition. And in fact, later on the Rottman building turned into a restaurant.

00:29:18

JL: The waterfront.

00:29:19

SL: The waterfront. But that's no longer there either.

00:29:21

JL: That was like '75.

00:29:22

SL: I had the pleasure of tearing that thing down. But anyway, so that's why we had two separate—

00:29:30

JL: Not connected, because her dad owned it.

00:29:31

SL: When Horst got it, he realized what an idiocy it was. And it really was, to have two separate buildings.

00:29:38

JL: Not connected. Complete kitchens. Two complete everything.

00:29:40

SL: Two—you had to have—

00:29:41

JL: You couldn't watch one. You had to be two separate people to do it. You—one couldn't do both.

00:29:44

SL: So he closed up. He closed up the metal building one, and he maintained and enlarged the original one.

00:29:54

SR: So when you all opened—you call it the new building?

00:29:59

SL: Yeah.

00:30:01

SR: When you opened the new building in '72, there was—the Ship Ahoy building was in-between the two restaurants. But was—someone was just living there, or was there a business there?

00:30:08

JL: Yeah, they're still there.

00:30:08

SL: Yeah, Daddy had to—well, he took care of her until she died, and he--he was buying out—. There was—I don't know how many children there was, but there was more than two. And he bought out each other's interests until he could get that piece of property. But it's—

00:30:27

JL: At least ten years. It took a while.

00:30:29

SL: Well, they knew what they had. I know Horst was trying to buy some property that connects the restaurant now, and once you have a going business they know they have a lot of money in it. But Daddy finally managed to wrest control and pay for the building and get it in his name.

00:30:48

And the same thing: we never had the waterfront until--until we could wrest control of it, too, and now Horst has got the waterfront and whatever, but I never did anything with that.

[Laughs]

00:31:04

SR: What—so then once he did own the Ship Ahoy land, you tore down the building?

00:31:11

SL: Tore down the building and made a parking lot, yes. That—and we still had two separate buildings forever. **[Laughs]**

00:31:20

SR: Well it--it made sense at the time, right?

00:31:23

SL: Oh no, oh no. That was the only option. It was absolutely the only option.

00:31:27

SR: Can you—you mentioned he didn't want it to turn into a West End. And just for people who might be reading this and not familiar with New Orleans, can you talk about what that might mean?

00:31:38

SL: That was a place in New Orleans that people—I think it was like the turn of the century, and it was kind of like an Atlantic City boardwalk kind of thing where people would go in the summer to cool off in the day and whatever. It used to be at first dance halls and stuff on the water actually, and it eventually—the oldest restaurant there was Brunings. The Bounty, Brunings. I think it was the Brunings.

00:32:09

JL: They were—there were several—.

00:32:12

SL: There were several, but it turned—

00:32:15

JL: What's kind of—.

00:32:14

SL: Well no, they have—man, I can't think of it. Something with the lake. But anyway. The Yacht Club was there, all the boats were moored there. It was in Orleans Parish. But anyway, eventually in the '40s, '50s, and '60s there must have been at least twelve restaurants, if not more, back-to-back, side-to-side, fighting for parking spots. And like I said, when one restaurant kind of went down it took all the rest of them down. It looked bad.

00:32:54

And anyway, Manchac had plenty of room for that to happen, and that's what we didn't want.

00:32:59

JL: Just like a little strip—

00:33:02

SL: And actually, I still have the land today. There's property—Daddy bought property across the bridge to stop that, to—

00:33:09

JL: South of the restaurant.

00:33:10

SL: To stop that, too. Now they had some bars. They still have two bars over there, but they're on very narrow, narrow strips of land because I own in back of them. I own the back of them.

00:33:22

JL: They can't enlarge.

00:33:22

SL: And—

00:33:23

SR: Are they trying to wrest that from you?

00:33:25

SL: No, no. It—

00:33:27

JL: They asked in the past and we just kind of said, "No."

00:33:29

SL: I think I pay \$5 a year property tax.

00:33:33

JL: The tax is hilarious.

00:33:35

SL: It's just grandfathered. It's—all it is, it's just muck.

00:33:38

JL: Actually there was some old base—

00:33:39

SL: Yeah, it's from my grandmother's property.

00:33:43

JL: We're way back in the '20s, '30s. Something like that.

00:33:46

SL: Yeah, my grandmother—you tend to—. You know, there's not much land in Manchac. And honestly, it's interesting that Manchac will always be there. Because of the railroad and the highway, they're never going to let that middle little island go, no matter what. So it's always there, and the way Horst has got it now, he should be okay as far as the flooding is concerned. But that's another story.

00:34:12

SR: So do you mean: When you say that it's always going to be there, you think that the government will take care that erosion won't—?

00:34:19

SL: Oh no. I don't think it can be eroded now. I don't think it can.

00:34:22

JL: The railroad is a major—

00:34:24

SL: Yeah, because they need it. Highway 51 is a service road for the interstate. They have an accident or something, they need to use that to--to shuttle people off.

00:34:35

JL: They'll keep the highway up and railroad, they'll keep the railroad up so it's pretty much secured.

00:34:40

SL: Yeah, it's a good piece of property, but you know—

00:34:43

SR: It sounds like people doubted your dad's business capacity, but he—but it sounds like he really knew what he was doing. I mean, he had a vision.

00:34:53

SL: Well that, too, absolutely. And it did--it did help that my mother was a lieutenant commander in the Navy. She was—Daddy was a flyboy, and she was more of the now-let's-get-this-done kind of person, so it was a good matchup between them. He was the more flamboyant. It was kind of like Josie and Middendorf. She was the one that was the kitchen; he—you know, the front needed somebody a little more gregarious, so that's how that happened. As long—. If it was my dad by himself, yeah, they would probably have been robbed, **[Laughs]** but with my mother in there and me and my sister, and then later with Joey, we—you know, the food was the most important part, so that—that was more—.

00:35:36

JL: He was a very shrewd businessman. He was a very good businessman, very smart. He was always thinking about things, and he was always—

00:35:42

SL: As long as he didn't have to fry fish, he was okay. **[Laughs]**

00:35:43

JL: No, but he was a very good businessman. Very, very sharp.

00:35:45

SL: Yeah, thank you.

00:35:48

SR: What was your mom's name?

00:35:50

SL: Helen Steese. She didn't have a middle name. Helen Steese Smith. S-t-e-e-s-e, like geese but Steese. And she was from—well, basically she was raised in New York, Connecticut, New Jersey.

00:36:08

JL: She was a Yankee.

00:36:08

SL: She was a Yankee, yes. You know, my dad—there was a lot of Yankees after World War II in the South because they all got married in California.

00:36:15

JL: She liked it. She loved it here.

00:36:16

SL: She loved it, absolutely. She actually is the one that had no restaurant business whatsoever in her blood but was—she kept everything on an even keel, pun intended. But she's the one that taught me mostly about the restaurant and the kitchen and everything like that. My grandmother I

would go to for advice, mostly in dealing with the help and employees and—. You know, “Mama Josie, this is not doing well. What’s going on here?” You know, she’d always say, “The tail don’t wag the dog, Suzie. The tail don’t wag the dog.” I said, “Okay, I know—okay, I’m firing them,” you know. But I had—that was the hardest thing to do, was to spot people that really aren’t on the team. And she said, “You know, if they don’t want to do it, Suzie, you’re just going to have to let them go.” Okay, okay, okay, you know.

00:37:16

But you really—

00:37:18

JL: She--she was sharp, too. She was good.

00:37:20

SL: Yeah, it—and you know, the customers are not always right. *[Laughs]* And make sure you take care of your people. It was—we did have—I had two generations behind me, you know, helping steer the ship even when they weren’t in the ship. But I always had—we always had somebody that could tell us what would the right thing to do—.

00:37:44

SR: Did your mom stop nursing when you moved over?

00:37:47

SL: Oh yes, oh yes. That was 100-percent, 24-hour, whatever. When Dad died—dad died in '93

—

00:37:58

JL: 1996.

00:37:59

SL: 1996, sorry. That's when your mother—. 1996, and from then it was just Joey and I, you know, without even that little bit of input. Mom started getting Alzheimer's about '85 and she lasted a long time. But she wasn't really there past—I mean, she really didn't contribute after '85 for sure.

00:38:26

SR: How old was she then?

00:38:27

SL: Oh, let's see.

00:38:29

JL: Born in '20.

00:38:30

SL: She was born in '20, so she'd be—she was sixty-five.

00:38:32

JL: Even at seventy she was a little bit—

00:38:33

SL: Yeah, but they had—after they—Daddy died in '96, but they were pretty much hands-off.

We had the restaurant from 1976 on mostly. That was us, but—.

00:38:46

SR: When you say “we,” was your sister involved in that? Or do you mean you and Joey?

00:38:49

SL: No. It was—Daddy was smart about that. I don't—my sister married a dentist, so he wasn't going to be in the restaurant anyway. And she liked Mississippi. She loved Mississippi. And they—she was basically out of the restaurant from about—

00:39:06

JL: Took her to Ole Miss in '75.

00:39:08

SL: 1975, yeah, she was—

00:39:10

JL: She never came back. *[Laughs]*

00:39:10

SL: Yeah, she never came back. Smart, but—

00:39:13

JL: I guess we weren't married yet. We drove her before we got married. We took her dad's big Cadillac and drove her up to Ole Miss and brought her stuff up there and it was—she never came back home except to visit, of course.

00:39:23

SL: Yeah, and it helped out. It helped not having—. Because a lot of restaurants, the family tends to break them up. It seems to—or partners of—. Well, that's one thing that Daddy always told me, is never take a partner or whatever because there's always—. There's probably one restaurant that I know of that the partnership worked out. And they--they basically—because they each take a different restaurant, you know. *[Laughs]*

00:39:49

JL: Yeah, they have multiple—

00:39:52

SL: But—

00:39:53

SR: What about, did Josie have other children?

00:39:56

SL: No, she only had one, and that was my dad. She didn't want anymore. And like I said, it—
like, I said she had to ship him off to a military school because he was just—

00:40:06

JL: It all worked out.

00:40:07

SL: —I think he failed school in grammar or elementary school twice, mostly because his—the
first husband left. You know, his dad. There was—it was interesting. Nowadays, I don't think
anybody knows who their dad is now.

00:40:25

JL: It's not uncommon now to—

00:40:25

SL: It's not uncommon to--to have people in broken homes, but back then he had probably only
seen his dad maybe twice his entire life. So it--it weighed on him a bit. He had a complicated
family life as that was. And my grandmother was always trying to find a father for him. And of

course anybody from a broken home knows that won't work, you know. They won't—you know, you want your own father.

00:40:55

So anyway, actually I kind of think World War II kind of helped him out a little bit and set him straight and gave his life a little purpose that normally it probably wouldn't have done.

00:41:07

SR: I'm curious, Joey: When you started dating and getting serious and thinking about marriage, what did you think about entering the restaurant business?

00:41:20

JL: Well, I forgot to mention I grew up in a family grocery store in Hammond. A very small, but I mean it—. So I grew up working, but had no idea what was involved in a restaurant.

[Laughs] It was a different world. So I'd just go see Suzie and pick her up. I didn't--it didn't faze me. I just saw—it looked like work to me, no big deal, but when I got there I learned it was a little bit different. It was a lot crazier than I had thought, you know.

00:41:40

SL: Well—

00:41:41

JL: It was funny.

00:41:43

SL: He hadn't finished school yet, and I was still—we were working, and I would get home at twelve o'clock at night, and it was funny. Joey wanted to go out and I said, “Uh, I’m tired.”

00:41:53

JL: On Saturday night.

00:41:54

SL: On Saturday night.

00:41:54

JL: She'd get home quarter to twelve. We'd watch Saturday Night Live and she'd get home to watch the very end of Saturday Night Live. We're talking like 1975, '76. I said, “What are y'all doing? Why do you get home so late at night, for God's sake?” You know I got off at the store eight o'clock. I'm home eight to eleven o'clock waiting for her to come home.

00:42:08

SL: I said, “Joey, I’m tired.” And he said, “I’m tired too.”

00:42:10

JL: I'm tired too.

00:42:11

SL: And so anyway, after he got—he got in the restaurant about three months later, and he said, “I know what you’re talking about.”

00:42:16

JL: Came in '76 and it was my first summer. Oh my God. I had been through football camp and Marine camp, but that was pretty tough. **[Laughs]** It was brutal.

00:42:23

SL: You know, technically we—he was going to go join the Marines and be a judge advocate and a lawyer. And like I said, that all culminated about when the restaurant—. We had the two restaurants running at one time. And the closer we got to leaving and him graduating and us leaving, the more I realized—my mother was having a really bad time running it by herself. My dad was there, but like I said, it was the kitchen that really is the hardest part of running a restaurant. To me anyway. And she was having a difficult time.

00:43:05

JL: There were two, but they were two separate worlds.

00:43:07

SL: And I could see my mother—

00:43:07

JL: No matter what people think, two of them are insane. Two of them is just—it's still two different worlds. Two different.

00:43:12

SL: And I could see my mother was having a hard time.

00:43:13

JL: You could not leave your mother. I don't blame her. I couldn't leave my—

00:43:17

SL: I couldn't leave her, so we made the commitment to--to basically not be a lawyer, which is—I'm so glad. *[Laughs]*

00:43:24

JL: I don't want to be—I don't think fondly of attorneys anyway, so it's okay. It was a good choice. *[Laughs]*

00:43:29

SL: Yeah, it was.

00:43:29

SR: You don't—was it hard for you at the time?

00:43:31

JL: Not at all. No, no. No big deal.

00:43:35

SL: I wanted to help my mom and he wanted to help me and we jumped in it with—well, we knew what we were getting into. I did. And like I said, there was money to be made and my—like I said, my mother needed the help, and I couldn't have abandoned her. I think the restaurant would have stopped at that point too, because she was getting—

00:43:56

JL: She would have been fifty-seven then.

00:43:57

SL: Yeah, she would have been—yeah.

00:43:58

JL: She was already fifty-seven at that time, which you know sounds young, but she was having trouble. It was hard. It was very difficult, too.

00:44:02

SL: Yeah, and I knew from my grandmother and from my mother that the—my late fifties, that was going to be it. You need the energy. The employees—you know, you're getting older and they're getting younger. When you—when I was in my twenties and thirties it wasn't—you

know, you could keep track of them. But I realized when we were getting in our late fifties—I mean, not late fifties, but I told Joey, I said fifty-five tops would be what we were going to, you know, handle at the restaurant. Because it takes a nervous—kind of a nervous person to do a restaurant, and I was getting a little too nervous, I guess you would say. I don't know, but we were ready to get out pretty much and probably have a life. **[Laughs]** Have some kind of a life anyway. But it's—doing the restaurant was a hoot. It was--it was fun. There was a lot of things that—you know, I can't remember all the good times. It seems like I only can remember when something bad happened.

00:45:14

JL: The crazy ones, yeah.

00:45:15

SL: That's with Karen, you know. She's—there was a few funny times where I said, “Boy, Karen, I only remember when people quit or when something went bad or Joey almost got electrocuted or the floods and the whatever was going on. But there must have been a reason for us to stay all those times because we've enjoyed it.” **[Laughs]**

00:45:33

SR: What were your different roles in the restaurant?

00:45:38

SL: Well, I took care of the women.

00:45:41

JL: Kitchen ladies.

00:45:40

SL: The kitchen ladies. And Joey took care of the men. Actually, most of the restaurant. I don't know how Horst is doing it now, but it was about eighty percent female as far as the waitresses and whatever. We never ever had a male waiter. They never applied. You know, we just never—I don't know why. It was just—I always told Joey I wanted to hire a couple, but nobody ever applied for it. But it was the ladies in the back, the ladies in the back, and the ladies—I took care of that. Joey took care of the boys in the fish—where the fish was done. He did all the boiling. He did the—there was a time when we had to catch, or we had to buy, raw whole fish and break that down for our sliced fish. That was—that stopped probably in the '80s when they had the—the pond fish start coming up.

00:46:42

JL: You could just buy fillets, ready-to-go fillets, instead of having to dress the whole fish, which took a lot of time and effort. You bought a big old tub of fish and wound up with a little pan of fish. You know, skinning and gutting them.

00:46:50

SL: You had to skin and gut and get rid of the stuff that you didn't need. And you had to oversee the boiling and make sure that they rotated and stuff. And all that kind of stuff. That's

what Joey did with the boys. We had some men in back that did all that. And then you had your dishwashers and your bartenders.

00:47:11

JL: Your bartenders.

00:47:11

SL: Bartenders. But I took care of the waitresses and the kitchen ladies, but—

00:47:15

JL: Bus girls. You took care of all—

00:47:17

SL: Yeah, or just it worked out better that way. For us it was anyway.

00:47:24

JL: Well you told whatever had to be done, whatever—if you saw something done, you got it—you said, “Hey, blah, blah.” You did not tell somebody something like correct someone like a waitress. I said, “Whoa, whoa. You don’t do that. Stop.” She was mainly in control of them, but we were always—we were the eyes watching.

00:47:38

SL: Yeah, I would hire—I would hire and fire them and Joey would hire and fire the guys.

[Laughs]

00:47:44

SR: By “pond fish,” you mean farm?

00:47:46

JL: Correct.

00:47:48

SL: Farm fish. We had—we kept a fisherman. At one time I think we had like three or four, and that was—everything was wild-caught. But it got to a point where nobody wanted to fish anymore. They just didn’t want to do it. Crabbing is kind of like that now. You’ve got your commercial crabbers and whatever, but it got to a point in the—I’d say the late ‘70s, early ‘80s, we couldn’t get enough fish. We never ran out of fish, ever, ever, ever in our entire life. We came close. But it got to a point where we just could not get enough fish.

00:48:25

JL: Couldn’t get the local. We had to start supplementing with the pond, and therefore we said, “Hell, this is much better.” Wow, it’s like—

00:48:31

SL: But I dare say—I know this is something that a lot of people don't understand, but we had a lot of say-so on the catfish and these certain—. We bought what two pounds—

00:48:46

JL: Well about a ton a week, roughly.

00:48:47

SL: Yeah, two tons. Two tons of—

00:48:50

JL: Two tons of fillets, you know roughly.

00:48:51

SL: Yeah, and that was—just think of all the whole catfish you would need, you know, plus the—. It just wasn't happening.

00:49:00

SR: You would buy two tons of fillets a week?

00:49:02

SL: A week, a week.

00:49:05

JL: One ton for sure. One ton.

00:49:06

SL: One ton for sure, but in the summer, yeah.

00:49:08

JL: They would be in fifteen-pound boxes, and if you'd buy one-hundred-something boxes, you got—.

00:49:10

SL: Yeah, a lot of people don't understand how busy that restaurant is. They just don't understand it.

00:49:14

JL: To buy—to get that much fresh fish you'd have to have a roomful of fish and dress it to wind up with that much fillet. You know, you'd just have so much waste. I forgot what percent.

00:49:22

SL: But if the catfish farmers do their job and don't let the catfish bottom feed; if they feed them the corn that they're supposed to, you know on the surface, catfish is just as good if not better. I mean corn-fed beef; you know, it's corn-fed catfish. And I always said I could get some wild catfish and I could get some stuff that we used and they couldn't tell the difference. And they

can't, and they didn't. They didn't because there was a time when we used to lie. *[Laughs]* We used to lie—.

00:49:55

JL: We said, “We buy a little bit of pond.” A little bit.

00:49:57

SL: Yeah, right, we used to lie and—

00:49:59

JL: And we were still buying a little bit of fresh.

00:50:01

SL: All right. Then when the stuff with the mercury and all this started coming up about the wild fish, and then they were talking about the pollution in the lake and all that, I started saying, “Okay. I give up. We’re using one hundred [percent] pond.” You know things—it just depends. Originally catfish was a--was a trash fish on the—. That’s what I was telling Karen. On the original menus, which I do not have, it’s called the “Middendorf’s Special.” It doesn’t say “catfish” anywhere on the menu. People thought that was trash. And we had trout at one time. But that was trout. That--that was—

00:50:38

JL: Back then it was speckled trout. It would have been what you'd order. You would not order catfish. You'd get speckled trout or some other—drum or whatever.

00:50:45

SL: Yeah, but I mean if you wanted the Middendorf Special, that's catfish.

00:50:48

SR: Did people know that was catfish?

00:50:49

SL: Well, I think some of them did.

00:50:51

JL: If they asked.

00:50:52

SL: If they asked I think they did, but they just—I think it was more of an affectation on the menu so to speak. But if you wanted trout—you know, if you were from New Orleans and you didn't want to eat catfish—we have trout. But the Middendorf's Special is the special, you know. But that was—that's where we made the money. It wasn't on the trout.

00:51:08

SR: Well, that's one thing I wanted to ask, because I've just seen in a few places on the earlier menus—or Karen has one thing hanging on the wall right now—that chicken dinners were the thing that was more advertised. And I wanted to ask, first of all, what that was. And—?

00:51:24

SL: It—you had two things. You had two things that sold. If you really wanted to be adventurous, and a lot of people didn't know, you could eat soft-shell crabs. Soft-shell crabs wasn't a big deal way in the day. You know, that was—I guess they did mostly boiled or whatever. But she made—originally it was chicken and catfish. It really was. It wasn't chicken—you know, I'm not too sure. Probably on some days my grandmother might have sold more chicken than catfish. But slowly but surely, the catfish started. That was what we were known for. But oh, every café had fried chicken. *[Laughs]*

00:52:04

SR: So the chicken dinner was fried?

00:52:07

SL: Oh, absolutely.

00:52:08

JL: Like it's a half fried—

00:52:09

SL: Oh, it's a half-fried chicken. Oh yeah, oh yeah.

00:52:11

JL: We had it on the menu. We still had to have fried chicken on the menu.

00:52:15

SL: And I'm kind of thinking that back then the cat—. You had your chickens in the back and you--you plucked—

00:52:21

JL: Way, way back.

00:52:21

SL: You had them, and she really didn't like anything to do with farming. And that probably got shunted to the wayside if she could get rid of the chicken sort of.

00:52:33

JL: Yeah. Here's a funny note: the time with the chicken.

00:52:38

SL: Oh no. Well that—well that's what—. We do good chicken, or we did good chicken. And Tom Fitzmorris, he was doing some of our advertising for me. [Interviewer's note: Tom Fitzmorris is a food and restaurant writer with a radio show.] And now chicken, I mean you'd

get—it's not a big food. I mean, you don't make a lot of money on it. You don't. I guess McDonalds does, but I'd rather--I'd rather sell a soft-shell crab or some frog legs. I get more money; you know, whatever. I guess that's what I'm trying to say.

00:53:08

JL: Now chicken took twenty, thirty minutes to cook. Catfish can be cooked in five minutes. So he's going to do a big thing about how wonderful the fried chicken is at Middendorf's. No, Tom. No, please.

00:53:18

SL: I think he got mad at me for that.

00:53:19

JL: He got upset. I said, "No, we don't want to talk about it. I know it's good, but don't advertise it like—."

00:53:22

SL: We don't need to advertise the chicken. I know we have good chicken. We don't need to advertise it.

00:53:26

JL: I mean, if we get twenty-five chickens [ordered], we're like—

00:53:28

SL: But every café did—that was—

00:53:31

JL: That was a time—

00:53:32

SL: You know, hamburger wasn't even a big deal back then. You know everybody ate chicken, if they weren't going to eat anything else. And I don't really remember—see, that's what—I've never seen--I've never seen an old menu, so I don't even know if we had steaks. I don't think so. I'm really thinking especially during the Depression it had to be there, and Middendorf—

00:53:57

SR: What had to be there?

00:53:59

JL: The product. The product.

00:54:00

SL: The food. Your product had to be there. The catfish had to be there. The chicken had to be there. I know Middendorf went once a week to the French Market to get the lettuce and the--the produce for that whole week, and everything was done with ice. You know, they had ice. Instead of a walk-in cooler, it was like an ice room where you kept your big blocks of ice. And you kept

most of your stuff—it lasted for about a week, and then he'd go back and get some more. But I imagine towards the end there they ran out of lettuce and tomato and whatever. And you could get some of that stuff local, but the French Market at the time was supplying all the restaurants in New Orleans, too. And he was from New Orleans, and he used to make a day of it.

00:54:48

And because he was German he'd go to mostly where—Cobb's. Or is it Kolb's? Yeah, that's where he used to go. And he—my grandmother used to hate that because he'd be gone a whole day and come back drunk. But he got the produce.

00:55:09

JL: He got the produce.

00:55:09

SL: He got the produce, you know.

00:55:10

JL: He got sidetracked. Middendorf died in '47. I'm not sure if you knew that. He passed away in '47. And there was a terrible fire in '47, right. The restaurant burned down in '47 also.

00:55:21

SL: Partially, partially.

00:55:23

JL: Yeah, okay.

00:55:25

SR: How did that happen?

00:55:27

SL: I'm thinking somebody said that a bartender left the cigarettes on the bar. You know how you put the cigarette on an ash tray. And it fell into a—it fell into the drawer. I think. I'm not positive.

00:55:41

JL: That was before our time.

00:55:43

SL: That was before my time, but I do know that when we were redoing the restaurant in '67 we opened up a wall and you could see the char. You know, they had used that wall still from the fire. But we never had a fire since. That was one thing I always told: between us in '76 and '07, I never wanted a fire, and I never wanted anybody to die in the restaurant. And we managed that.

[Laughs]

00:56:09

SR: That's kind of amazing considering how many people came through there.

00:56:12

SL: Uh-huh. We've had a couple of heart attacks.

00:56:15

JL: We've had—they've taken them out on the stretchers, but they didn't die.

00:56:19

SL: That's the only thing. That was just, you know—we made that.

00:56:25

SR: Well that—so was Louis Middendorf—did he come from Germany?

00:56:30

SL: His father did. Or was it his great—? No.

00:56:35

JL: I think it's his father. I'm pretty sure.

00:56:35

SL: His father did, and actually my parents went to go visit them. They—hmm, I'm trying to think. They're in north—they're around Hamburg area. They're still there. Like I said, it wasn't my dad's relative. That was--that was just my grandmother's husband. But he went there to go see them, and it was an interesting—

00:57:01

JL: He had a good time.

00:57:03

SL: He had a good time. My mother gained ten pounds and he lost ten pounds. He didn't like German food. **[Laughs]** Don't tell Horst. But anyway—.

00:57:12

SR: Well, that's so interesting to me that it started with a German and now a German owns it.

00:57:17

SL: Oh, absolutely. There's been a few things in our lives, Joey and ours, that just—things you look at each other and you're going, "How did that happen?" And I fully believe that no one could have taken the restaurant other than Horst. It's just—he's done more with it in seven years than I dreamed of doing in all the time we were there. And it was—he's got the stamina.

[Laughs] He's got—

00:57:52

JL: He loves it.

00:57:53

SL: Oh my goodness. But when—you know, when we were in negotiations and he would say, “I can do this, Suzie. I can do this.” And I said, “I know you can. Honey, I know it. I know it. I can feel it.” But—

00:58:07

JL: I was walking around the restaurant and we were showing him the new place. We were walking round doing this and that and he said, “I love it. I love it.” His friends tell him, “Horst, be quiet. Don’t say that.” I said, “He’s going to do it.” He said, “I want it. I’m going to do it.” And his friends, the attorney and the CPA, said, “Shhh, don’t act like that.” He said, “I don’t care. I want this. I want it.”

00:58:26

SL: But I always wanted to do a recipe book or whatever. I know Karen is going to do it. I just know she’s going to do it. And it’s--it’s wonderful seeing them doing what they’re doing. It’s fantastic. My dad, he would be so proud of it today. Absolutely.

00:58:43

SR: That’s great. The German connection is really great. I mean—this is skipping ahead, but as long as we’re here, did you have—did you talk to other potential buyers before you met them?

00:58:54

JL: It was an—

00:58:58

SL: Honestly, I didn't expect to get any bites for years. [*Laughs*] You know we were just kind of putting it out there because we were—. Ah, we had been stymied quite a bit because everybody [said], "Are you crazy"? You know, selling your own family restaurant. And I said, "It's just Joey and I." I said, "You know, we have no—." I don't want to say no life. We never got to do anything. And like you said, when you're in the restaurant business you have too much time and not enough money, or not enough money and too much time. Well, when I got to my 50s, I said, "You know, Joey I just like to be off on a weekend every once in a while." So we put it out there and tried to see if we could get any nibbles. Well, we didn't, actually. And we got one lawyer and I'm going, "I know a lawyer is not going to be able to run this."

01:00:01

SR: One lawyer was interested?

01:00:02

SL: One.

01:00:04

JL: The one, and I said, "We can't sell it in good faith." I said he's not going—I mean it's just not going to work.

01:00:08

SL: Well, yeah. I mean I wasn't that desperate, but I said, "Joey, not—no." And I--I put it out to a few people. Because number one, the big thing was I didn't want anybody to know about it. I didn't—you know we didn't advertise or whatever. It kind of like went through little channels. And I actually went to Galatoire's and told them about that, and they said they were going to think about it. And then all of a sudden Horst steps in. We—oh, we've got some—it's kind of interesting. He was without a restaurant.

01:00:40

JL: Katrina. You know, the roof fell in—

01:00:41

SL: Katrina, you know, and he was running a—basically the same kind of operation we were.

01:00:46

JL: Year and a half. Been a long time. Year and a half he was out of business. It was over a year. It had been quite a while.

01:00:49

SL: It was over a year.

01:00:50

JL: August '05 to I don't know. A long time.

01:00:53

SL: And I don't know how he—but through the channels he heard about it. He was running the same kind of operation, big operation, a lot of—yeah, The Foundry [a catering and event operation]. And now he had—he absolutely—. I said, “Horst, are you sure? Are you sure you want to do this?” And he—and he took to it. I was--I was strictly amazed. And we made—I told him what I wanted and he counter-offered and I said, “Okay, all right.” And then Galatoire's called up.

01:01:28

JL: They were interested. After we signed the papers Galatoire's—our waiter said, “Joey, they want to talk to you about—.” “Sorry, Mr. Charlie.”

01:01:38

SL: “It's gone.”

01:01:38

JL: They were like—. It makes you feel good.

01:01:41

SL: Yeah, it does. It does. It really did.

01:01:42

SR: Yeah, that's a compliment. So you—you are Galatoire's regulars if you have your own waiter.

01:01:48

SL: Oh gosh, yeah. Well, we used to at Antoine's—

01:01:53

JL: Go on Monday and Tuesday. Go eat anywhere you want on Monday or Tuesday.

01:01:55

SL: Monday or Tuesday, and we were their favorite customers because we were only Monday and Tuesdays. And that's when they were slow. We have a lot of favorite waiters because of our Monday and Tuesday soirees, but—. But yeah, well, we were Antoine's, and then we lost the waiter.

01:02:14

JL: Mr. Marshall retired.

01:02:15

SL: Mr. Marshall retired, and then we get—and then we've got Mr. Charlie. We don't--we don't go there as much as we used to because we're retired, you know, and we don't have—there's no frenetic thing. We used to go out to—. You see, Karen is doing just the opposite kind of. From

what I gather is that she's a country girl now. She used to be a city girl. And I was going,
"Chickens? What are you talking about chickens?" *[Laughs]*

01:02:43

SR: Well, because they lived in the French Quarter, right?

01:02:44

SL: Yeah, oh, absolutely. That's what—oh, we got invited to their house several times, and I said, "What are you doing leaving this? Are you crazy?" I said, "You've got--you've got the best of everything."

01:02:56

JL: Just had to walk to the restaurant, you know, like—

01:02:59

SL: Yeah, but they wouldn't do it. They wouldn't help him out. You know, and that was my gain.

01:03:03

SR: By "they," you mean the City?

01:03:05

JL: The City wouldn't work with him to get the building fixed.

01:03:08

SL: They wouldn't put a roof on it.

01:03:10

JL: Just ridiculous.

01:03:12

SL: But anyway, I'm glad. He's—where he is now, he loves it. He lives down the street from us.

01:03:19

JL: They wave at us all the time going to work. We just wave back and smiling and waving.

01:03:22

SL: He--he moved to Ponchatoula. They bought a big farm on [Highway] 22. It used to be—I don't know—it was thoroughbred. A doctor used to own that. They can't live in it right now, but it's—

01:03:38

JL: It's great.

01:03:40

SR: You—no, no, no that's all—. I wanted to get there, but I also don't—there are so many things from the past that I want to ask about, too, which like—.

01:03:52

SL: I get—

01:03:53

SR: No, no, it's good. This is great. It's great. But I wanted to—okay, chicken dinner and the Middendorf special. What--what came on the plate other than the fish and the chicken?

01:04:07

SL: I'm not sure.

01:04:09

JL: When we had it, or way back, you mean?

01:04:10

SR: Well as far back as you can remember, and then when you owned it.

01:04:14

JL: We had a meal at one point, a meal for a little while there.

01:04:17

SL: There was a—the Middendorf Special was a complete dinner. It had a shrimp cocktail, gumbo, and fish. I don't think—I don't think they did coleslaw back in the day because of the cabbage not being local. I don't think. I think what it was, everybody got a—well no, you either got your fish—. I don't think there was too much—I think it was a complete dinner. I think you got three things. You got the shrimp cocktail, you got the gumbo, and then you got the fish with French fries.

01:04:53

JL: I have never seen the menu. That's why I—. I've seen earlier menus.

01:04:56

SL: Yeah, when daddy took it back in '67 he stopped that and everything was a-la-carte. And they started with a lettuce and tomato salad, but it--it didn't really look good on the plate. And my mother was the one that started the coleslaw. That was with that. And Mama wanted to go back at one time and do what everybody else does: is offer a salad first and then you get your fish and whatever. And one of our good customers told my mother, "Don't--don't break with—." I mean, "Don't fix what's not broken." So we stuck with the coleslaw.

01:05:34

JL: So coleslaw and two hushpuppies, fish, and French fries. Every plate has the same things.

01:05:40

SL: Yeah, my grandmother might have done the hushpuppies, too, because that was bread. We did—yeah, that was the bread back then. No toast. Now Pat Midland used to put toast under everything, you know like the West End would do. Like New Orleans people would do with the seafood platters, is put the toast. But we got rid of all the toasters.

01:05:58

JL: It makes it look like more food. Toast on the bottom, looks like a big old pile of food.

01:06:01

SL: Yeah, nobody wants to see that grease on that bread anymore. But a lot of people *like* the grease on the bread. But anyway—.

01:06:07

SR: I love the hushpuppies, but that's not necessarily a New Orleans thing.

01:06:12

SL: No, that would be—that would be Kentwood. That would be my grandmother's thing.

01:06:16

JL: Take off on cornbread. Kind of a cornbread kind of thing.

01:06:19

SL: Yeah, and it's a more savory cornbread—I mean hushpuppy—than like what Ralph and Kacoo's—. they just use—they use more sugar. But we don't use any sugar. Some people like—they prefer it that way, but—.

01:06:32

SR: And the--the thin-fried: Was that always a thing when you were growing up, or when did that start?

01:06:38

SL: No, my grandmother started that, and that—we were the only person—we were the only restaurant in the world that did that, from what I can gather. And she learned that from one of her—she was the only one that did it. And it was--it was tough teaching people how to do it, because it was a pretty dangerous job to slice it that thin without—. Actually, I've sliced my finger a couple of times. But she always did it, and it was--it was easier to fry in the skillets. That's why she did it, because when you put a fillet in there, it doesn't get crispy if you keep it in there. They had no thermostats back then. It was all, you know, cast-iron skillets. When my daddy came back in, and then it was the thermostat deep-fryers, which was a lot safer. A lot safer.

01:07:31

But anyway, she cut it--she cut it up so it would fry quicker, basically, and it didn't change it. You know, it made it crispier because if you don't really crisp that—catfish is probably the only fish that you have to overcook. You have to make it crispy. You know how

with tuna and whatever, you take it right out because it gets dry? You really want catfish uber-crispy, and you can only do that by keeping it in the grease a long time.

01:07:57

So she did that, and she used to do it in her hand. I've seen her do it. She would hold it and do it in her hand. We never did it like that. We always did it on the table. Have you seen Horst and them do it? Okay.

01:08:11

JL: They may have machines. They may not.

01:08:13

SL: I don't know if he—

01:08:13

JL: Machines—

01:08:14

SL: He was trying the machine, but we never could do the machine. We never could do—

01:08:18

JL: See, it's hard to cut it. You hold it, and just a very sharp knife, and you really have to be careful, and that's how she did it.

01:08:21

SL: I think my grandmother learned that from watching smoked salmon being sliced. Do you know—have you ever seen it, you know, if you’ve got a—if you have a salmon station? I’ve only—they don’t do that anymore because it’s pre-sliced anyway now, but before in the day they would have somebody slicing off of a whole half. And that—I think that’s how—she must have seen that in the dining rooms at the Peabody or something. But that’s how we do it now, is to slice the fish.

01:08:58

SR: Your whole life there was the thin-sliced?

01:09:01

SL: Oh, it’s always been thin. Oh, it’s always been thin, but we’ve always offered the fillets, too. If somebody—there’s some people who don’t like it. I don’t know who. They’re just contrarians. Everybody’s got their—

01:09:11

JL: Thick or thin. Karen or Horst—“thick or thin,” the sign says. We didn’t do that, but—

01:09:15

SL: We always offered—we always offered the thick. But I mean, that’s what you came to Middendorf’s for, was the thin-fried.

01:09:21

SR: It's true, although I will say that I've always liked the thick also. I mean, it's good.

01:09:27

SL: Oh no. Even now, I don't—when I fry I'm frying fillets. Because I mean I don't want another cut finger.

01:09:34

JL: Ninety percent thin versus ten percent thick, or more: ninety or more percent thin versus thick.

01:09:39

SL: Yeah.

01:09:39

SR: That's what you sold?

01:09:41

JL: The fish was the most of everything period of everything no matter what.

01:09:44

SL: Right.

01:09:44

SR: It's funny you say that about your grandmother cutting it in her hand and not on the cutting board because my grandmother cut everything in her hand. Not anything that dangerous, but I never saw her use a cutting board. She always cut her potatoes in her hand.

01:09:57

SL: Yeah, I don't know. I don't understand. Like I said, I saw her do it and [makes a sound effect like she's wary or scared]. But especially with a big knife. I mean it wasn't a small knife. It was one of those—

01:10:06

JL: We call it a roaster.

01:10:07

SL: A roast slicer, yeah.

01:10:08

JL: Call them roasters; we used to buy dozens of them and just keep them stocked up and get one when you need one. Wear them out and get another one out.

01:10:13

SL: Yeah, but I don't know how Horst is doing it, but he had—. You know, I had always looked for a machine and he might—Gary and him might have gotten together—

01:10:24

JL: They had to fine-tune—

01:10:27

SL: Yeah, because we went all the way up to Vermont one time to look at a salmon slicer, and the salmon slicer—the texture is completely—. The salmon, the texture, is completely different.

01:10:38

JL: And our bag of catfish. Can you imagine nowadays you can't do that? We had a bag of cat—we had frozen-thawed bag of catfish on the plane, and now—don't try that now, I'm sure. They wouldn't let you on the plane. I don't know, they might.

01:10:48

SL: It didn't work, so we just—you know, you just hired people to slice it for you, and you showed them how to do it. And when they quit we'd hire somebody else.

01:10:58

JL: Suzie cut for a few days until we got somebody else broke in and—.

01:11:01

SR: But you think it would be okay to mechanize that, if it was possible?

01:11:05

JL: If you can do it, sure.

01:11:07

SL: Well it's—I mean, I always told Horst, I said, "Franchise." Franchise.

01:11:13

JL: He can do it. He can do it.

01:11:14

SR: So, I'm always surprised when I eat there—you know, I ate there when y'all owned it, and I still do—by how big the menu is. Because I think you could get people there just with the catfish. And I honestly haven't branched out that much, but whenever I do branch out I'm surprised by how good the food is. I love the gumbo. Was it—I guess it must have been worth it, to keep that many things on the menu.

01:11:39

SL: We didn't have—I guess you could work it a different way. I think even now—towards the end now we did kind of like Ruth's Chris, you'd have side items. You could add to it. But we—we had it—

01:11:57

JL: We cut back. We cut back. We had like four steaks and we cut back to one or two. We limited some things, but we had to keep the seafood pretty wide open. But actually, if you think about it—

01:12:06

SL: I guess that's an offshoot of the old menus. You know, like Tujague's and Antoine's, they just had gobs and gobs of stuff on the menu. I think that's how it was, too, because you had to have—. Well, I'll tell you one thing: if there was something on the menu that didn't sell, we took it off, you know. Daddy always—when I was a kid, he would—I'd write all the menu lists down and I'd go by the checks—

01:12:29

JL: Check off what we sold of each.

01:12:31

SL: —and checkout, you know. Now they do it by computer [*Laughs*].

01:12:36

JL: Computer. Push a button and there it is.

01:12:38

SL: You know, how many shrimp remoulade we sold, and how much gumbo we sold, and whatever. And Daddy used to have me doing that, and we'd do little checks and see what else,

and you look at it and say, you know, well we only sold three of this. And if it was like that on a regular basis we took it off. Like, we used to sell—

01:12:56

JL: Hamburger steaks.

01:12:57

SL: Yeah.

01:12:57

JL: I couldn't believe people would go to Middendorf's to get a hamburger steak. That just like—

01:13:01

SL: But they were with people that liked seafood.

01:13:02

JL: Okay, we'd get out-of-town people and they'd get a hamburger steak, you'd and say—well, you see somebody and say, “Can I just give you some—try some fish. Please try a couple—just try it.” And you'd give it to them and they say, “Oh, this is wonderful.” But they got a—where were they from, Minnesota? Hamburger steaks. Try some of the fish. Way up there—try a piece. “Oh, this is wonderful.”

01:13:21

SR: I was going to ask you if you could think of an example of something you took off.

Hamburger steak would be one?

01:13:25

JL: We had to keep it still. Did we keep it?

01:13:26

SL: No, we had to have that. We had to have that because—

01:13:28

JL: Oh, we had a child—did we take away the child's, or did we keep that too?

01:13:31

SL: No, the kids eat hamburgers.

01:13:33

JL: We had a—

01:13:34

SL: I'm trying to think if there is something. We took trout off because I didn't—we kept flounder because some people can't eat catfish. I mean we have some—was it the Cohens—?

01:13:48

JL: Jewish or something.

01:13:48

SL: Some of the Jewish people need to eat the scaled fish. But the flounder is—you know, after Brunings went out, after West End went down, I think we're just about the only ones selling flounders now. Let's see. Frog legs came and went depending on whatever we had.

01:14:08

JL: Supply. They were a little hard to get.

01:14:09

SL: The suppliers. Nothing—yeah, we took the—we took the trout. We never had lobster on there. Ever, ever, ever. Daddy said that, “Number one, that's not Louisiana seafood, and number two, it always takes away from what you're really good at.” And if anybody does order lobster, they're just showing off. We did do something one time. Back in the '80s when--when things were just a bit different, which was kind of cool, we had a wine list. We had a wine list. Nobody would order wine. You know, now they'll order a glass of wine, but back then—. The wine reps who come in and say, “Okay, Suzie” they said. “You got to have a wine list.” Everybody has got a wine list, you know. And I said, “You know what?” And so I said—we were in the '80s, and we were drinking Champagne back then, and I said, “You know what, Joey? Let's put some Champagne on the menu so we can have some Champagne when we go home at night,” or something or whatever—and bring something else.

01:15:00

And what did we—what was it?

01:15:03

JL: We put Perrier-Jouet on the menu for \$25 a bottle.

01:15:06

SL: Twenty-five dollars a bottle.

01:15:07

JL: It cost like \$23. Just to see. I think I sold one bottle. But guess what? We kept it on the menu because we could take one home on Sunday night.

01:15:14

SL: I wanted to see if somebody would go, “Wow, that’s a good price for that.”

01:15:17

JL: “Oh my God,” you know. I said, “Oh my god.”

01:15:18

SR: No one ever did?

01:15:19

SL: No, no one ever did. [*Laughs*]

01:15:19

JL: I think maybe one. We sold one bottle. Somebody said, “It’s really cheap.” And I said, “Yeah, I know.” [*Laughs*]

01:15:22

SL: But nobody bought it. You know, we were a beer place. We were a beer place. You know, that’s—. But anyway, towards the end the wine list went out. And we just did it by-the-glass.

01:15:32

JL: By-the-glass. You know, Chardonnay. It picked up a lot. The wine picked up immensely.

01:15:36

SL: We never had tap. We never had beer on tap.

01:15:39

JL: I think Horst does that.

01:15:40

SL: Oh yeah. But see, he’s a German. He’s got—beer is important, you know.

01:15:45

SR: But that's funny because Karen told me the same story about wine. They tried to do a wine program and it—

01:15:54

SL: It wastes space.

01:15:56

JL: But we always had long-neck beer and small Cokes forever. Even when the beer went out of style. But longnecks came back in. But for years they were not cool. We had all those—back in the old days you had to stack them up and turn them in and they'd pick them up and swap out.

01:16:07

SL: But we've always had long-necks. Always—we never quit. Actually, there was a time between the '60s and '70s that nobody used long-necks. They all—it was all canned beer. It was all canned beer and we were the only people that were actually saving the bottles and giving them back to the distributor. And we were the only restaurant that actually had bottled. You know, it was reverting to—

01:16:35

JL: It was draft or cans.

01:16:36

SL: Yeah, and reverting to sodas, I mean—

01:16:41

JL: Draft beer.

01:16:42

SL: And also sodas, too.

01:16:43

JL: The fountain Cokes.

01:16:45

SL: The fountain Cokes, that's it.

01:16:47

JL: And we kept the bottled root beer and Coke.

01:16:50

SL: So somebody--somebody said—well, a police officer or the Sheriff's Deputy came by there and says, "You been missing any beer lately?" And I was going like, "Not that I know of." And he says, "Well, a couple of your boys got drunk and we had to arrest them and they had cases of your beer in bottles."

01:17:05

JL: Stole some of our Heineken out back.

01:17:07

SL: Well, not Heineken. It was the brown bottles too, and the only reason why they knew it was our beer is because they were bottles. **[Laughs]** And that was—one of our bartenders was supposed to be—

01:17:17

JL: Now that was our manager, was doing inventory, but he couldn't tell me how much beer was missing because he didn't really—he just guestimated. He was guessing how much was in there.

01:17:25

SL: But the Sheriff's Deputy—

01:17:25

JL: I did it myself. I just kind of moaned, you know.

01:17:30

SL: Yeah, so that's—

01:17:31

SR: Oh boy.

01:17:32

JL: That was a funny one. It wasn't too bad.

01:17:33

SL: That was a funny one, yeah.

01:17:35

SR: Did he stick around?

01:17:37

SL: No.

01:17:37

JL: Not much longer. We gave him a week or two grace and— [*Laughs*].

01:17:42

SL: Oh gosh, it was funny.

01:17:43

JL: Estimating how many beer cases—how many cases of beer in the storeroom.

01:17:46

SR: What brand of beer was popular?

01:17:51

JL: We had Dixie Beer for a long—Dixie was a big deal because—

01:17:52

SL: Yeah, we tried to keep it local beer.

01:17:56

JL: Abita did real well. Abita was a good seller.

01:17:59

SL: Well in my grandmother's time it was Schlitz and Regal and Miller High Life and—

01:18:05

JL: Our high-end—Heineken was our best. Heineken was our best, and Abita. And we had Michelob.

01:18:10

SL: Of course Bud is taking over now.

01:18:10

JL: Well, Budweiser, Bud Light, Miller, Miller Light. But it's nothing major. Just all the—two or three Abitas—a couple: Abita Turbodog and Abita Amber. And we had Middendorf for a short period of time. We had our own label by Abita. We paid to get the legal rights.

01:18:23

SL: I got to give one of those beers—

01:18:24

JL: I got to give Horst some for their souvenirs. Anyway, and we had—until they—some kind of problem was—

01:18:29

SL: Well no, it was selling good. *[Laughs]*

01:18:31

JL: It sold wonderful, but there was a legal issue with something. Some state law changed or whatever, and we were paying Abita, and it was licensed to do it for us, but then they stopped.

01:18:38

SR: Was it a different beer?

01:18:41

JL: Abita Amber with our label. And you told people and everybody wanted a Middendorf beer to take a sample home or take a six-pack home, So it was good, you know.

01:18:48

SL: That didn't last.

01:18:49

SR: What about cocktails?

01:18:51

SL: Oh, that's interesting. Dad always—well, he came from the—what do you call it? What does he drink? The high-ball. **[Laughs]** He came from the high-ball era. You know, it's World War II. You drank it neat or you drank it with a little soda, but when Middendorf was there they were definitely more into the Drambuie and whatever. But when Daddy got in there, I think it was more of a cultural thing too, because now cocktails are a big deal. I'm—

01:19:25

JL: Now it's more clear. Now it's more vodka, clear things now. Vodka and gin. Whereas then it was all whiskey, and you know—

01:19:31

SL: We actually saw—yeah, we saw that taking place with, you know, it was nothing but whiskey, whiskey, whiskey, and then all of the sudden it's all clear.

01:19:38

JL: I mean you look at a bar now, it's all clear liquor.

01:19:39

SL: It's all clear. Yeah, it's all clear liquor.

01:19:40

JL: Tequila, vodka, gin. Whatever else—rum.

01:19:44

SL: Yeah, but we all kept them in a squat glass. You know, that was it. You filled—it's basically—Galatoire's does the same thing. I guess we never had a martini glass, and I did remember after we sold the restaurant that we were talking to Wanda. They're a card, Wanda and Miss Lois—

01:20:03

JL: You'll like them.

01:20:05

SL: —you'll like them. And she says, "What he's making us do? He's making us carry martinis in a tray." She said, "He's losing a lot of glasses." [*Laughs*]

01:20:15

SR: Now?

01:20:16

SL: When they started. When they started.

01:20:18

JL: Three or four or five years ago. We're not sure if they still do.

01:20:19

SL: Because I had to tug—you know, I really had to fight with those women to use a tray. They would like hand it in—you know, doing their glass—. You see some restaurants—. But my dad: you keep it on the tray. But boy, when they were—when he was doing Cosmos, they said, “He’s making us take these tall glasses.” *[Laughs]*

01:20:37

SR: Yeah, I can't really see that there. I imagine—I mean, what I would get at a place like, well, Galatoire's or Middendorf's would be like an old-fashioned.

01:20:45

SL: Exactly. Yeah, well, we did old-fashioned.

01:20:47

JL: No, we made the Manhattan, old-fashioned—

01:20:51

SL: Gimlets.

01:20:52

JL: At one point we did the grasshoppers and the pink squirrels, way back, and they kind of got a favorite, and we could do it still. The recipe was on the wall. We had a little list and put all the guys a cheat sheet.

01:21:00

SL: But we never did the blenders. We never did the blenders because it was too loud.

01:21:04

JL: Shaken margarita. A good shaken margarita.

01:21:06

SL: Everybody wanted to know why we didn't have strawberry daiquiris.

01:21:09

JL: We didn't want them. *[Laughs]*

01:21:10

SL: We didn't want them.

01:21:10

JL: Go somewhere else.

01:21:11

SL: There's just some things you can't do. I mean, you know, you got to put your foot down.

01:21:15

JL: But it was a full bar. It just wasn't the fancy, fancy stuff. We could try anything for you.

01:21:18

SL: We could get you drunk, but that was it. And we had a rule: you could only have four drinks. You could only have four drinks. We were very—you know, if somebody was—we never had—see, we never let anybody sit at the bar. And a lot of people thought we were crazy for that because you make a lot of money from selling mixed drinks. But we just didn't want the bugaboo, the problems with drunks. And it was a family restaurant. That was from my dad. You know Daddy says, "No." He says, "You don't want a lot of drunks around."

01:21:53

JL: He grew up—at the time you had a lot of locals that might have come in and drank at the bar. You might just—

01:22:00

SL: He never allowed any cursing. I don't know how Horst and them are managing that nowadays.

01:22:06

JL: I mean now—

01:22:07

SL: But we never allowed cursing. If you cursed you were asked to leave.

01:22:09

JL: In the front or back. In the kitchen or out front.

01:22:12

SL: Oh, we never let anybody curse at all. Because you—for me, if you want--if you want nice people, you don't—. There was a point in time when the back was kind of rowdy, and I could see the nicer people that worked for us tended to leave. And I--I said, you know, okay, we'll put the foot down. I said, "This is church. Be good." And it worked out that way. But like I said, it's—. The restaurant—you know, there's two ways of running a restaurant. You either run it like a pirate ship [*Laughs*] or you run it like—you know, you run it like a family. Like a family.

01:22:51

JL: A big family. You got good days and you got bad days with your family. Some days you're not talking to your parents and some—so it's no big deal.

01:22:56

SL: If your kids are working with you and you got your grandkids working with you, that's a family-type, you know—. But I can see where the pirate ship would be cool too. **[Laughs]**

01:23:08

SR: I'm fascinated by the sheriff who works there. **[Laughs]** Did that kind of help keep things in line?

01:23:13

SL: That had to be. That had to be. And I took great pains to explain to people why. And we-- we paid for the car, we paid for the uniforms, we paid their salary. The only thing that I, you know, wanted was a presence down there. They don't—they've never arrested anybody that I can remember, I don't think. They have escorted people out, but they've never arrested anybody.

01:23:41

But when my dad went back—and this was—I guess it was like '67, '68—it seemed like every weekend the Sheriff's Deputy was getting—. See, we were in the middle of nowhere, and you could--you could rob us and there wouldn't be any—you know, you could probably get away with it. They were getting rumors—

01:24:04

JL: Hammond. There was nowhere to go.

01:24:06

SL: Or get on a boat. But there were rumors all the time that someone was going to knock us over or knock—you know, or rob us. And they would send two or three deputies down there to scare them off if they were around or to escort my dad back. And this was going on all summer long, all summer long. I don't know if it was just—I don't know if it—. It had to be legitimate because the deputies came down.

01:24:29

And Daddy said, “Look, why don't you just—why don't you let me pay for a deputy and you stay down here while we're in operation?” And what we—what we basically started doing was, deputies that were retiring, and they just wanted a little job. And you just—just the car there kept us safe. It really did keep us safe.

01:24:54

JL: Once in a while you got to get up off the recliner and turn the TV off and come out front and just stand by and say, “Hey, you got to hold it down.” But usually there was nothing.

01:25:01

SL: But we--we gave them a little shack with a TV and a refrigerator, and they—. We got two, and they would come in when we came in and then they would stay, and they would be the last one to leave. So all the—all the waitresses and us, we'd go leave at one time and they'd follow us to wherever we were going. So we never—we never got robbed. [*Knock on Wood*]

01:25:24

SR: Amazing. I don't think I've ever known of a restaurant that had its own sheriff before.

01:25:29

SL: You know, some people do. I guess around New Orleans they'll do the police officers in certain times, yeah. But my dad—

01:25:37

SR: This is on-duty, right?

01:25:38

SL: Well, I'm kind of thinking since my dad *was* an ex-U.S. Deputy Marshal, that he probably had some kind of experience with something like that. And I'm kind of like that myself. You know, with the house you're always looking for, "Hmmm." I guess we're just natural-born police-type—you know, you're always looking for something.

01:26:04

JL: Observing.

01:26:04

SL: Observing, observing, yeah.

01:26:06

JL: You pay attention to everything.

01:26:07

SL: But Dad slept well at night knowing that somebody was there watching the place or whatever.

01:26:12

SR: Did you have to have the sheriffs help you enforce the four-drinks-only rule?

01:26:16

SL: Oh yes, oh yeah. Well, that's what—usually not. Not usually because after a while you keep it up and they know that we're not a drinking place. I mean, that's what Daddy always said: "You have to discipline your customers." You know that's—you have to. It's not—they knew that they could get so many drinks. I mean, when I go to Galatoire's, if I have two drinks I'm loaded. I mean, four—we're being generous.

01:26:46

JL: I wouldn't make it to the Monteleone [Hotel] if I had four drinks at the Galatoire's.

01:26:52

SL: Yeah, I mean that's enough. That's enough. And really we were ahead of our time in that because with all this—

01:27:01

JL: Not a problem now, but we realized we weren't located in town. People had to drive far. They had to drive an hour either way most times to get home so you didn't want—you don't want them to have a problem.

01:27:09

SL: That ServSafe that you have to get now. You go through class.

01:27:14

JL: Certified class and that. We did all—

01:27:15

SL: Yeah, so we were ahead of our time with that, I think.

01:27:19

SR: What about, so I love the crab gumbo, and I'm curious because y'all never have mentioned a chef or who—

01:27:30

SL: I did all the gumbo.

01:27:31

SR: Did you make the gumbo?

01:27:32

SL: Oh, absolutely.

01:27:35

JL: You got it from your grandmother.

01:27:35

SL: Yeah, it was—oh gosh, I made it once a week in batches in big, big things like this.

[Gestures] And you put all your—you put your crabs. You don't do—the shrimp goes later. You put all your crabs. You put your seasonings. You put your tomato. You put all your spices and whatever and you cover it over and stick it in the freezer. And you take one out a day to use for the next day.

01:28:00

JL: Take it out the night before.

01:28:02

SL: For the next day.

01:28:02

JL: So that will make like a five-gallon bucket, like one of these little dishpans—

01:28:06

SL: Would make five gallons.

01:28:07

JL: We had ten of them that we'd throw in the freezer.

01:28:08

SL: And we'd use about five gallons a day at one restaurant, sometimes two.

01:28:13

JL: Sometimes more in the wintertime.

01:28:14

SL: Sometimes two in the wintertime, but you'd make it ahead and just—that was strictly for convenience.

01:28:21

JL: We cooked fifty gallons a week. We cooked ten batches a week pretty much. Even in summer it sold good because it tasted good, so pretty much—

01:28:27

SL: But we would—I'd keep it in the freezer and then we'd thaw one out for the next day and then dump it in; fill it up with water.

01:28:35

JL: Suzie made the gumbo, and she she made the stuffed crab. She made—I made the hushpuppy mix. I made remoulade, tartar sauce, cocktail.

01:28:41

SL: He did all the sauces.

01:28:43

JL: I'd boil the crab. So we did everything pretty much. Anything made, we made it pretty much.

01:28:48

SL: Did most of those recipes, like the gumbo, come from your grandmother? Or did you—?

01:28:53

JL: My mother was more of that, because my grandmother—it was a long time. She helped with the gumbo. Mostly my mom formulated most of those when we started back. We had to really basically start from scratch because Pat Midland would keep—. But she had her own ways of doing things too. When we took the restaurant back from her, she had two small deep fat

fryers. Daddy added nine. He added nine. And so things went—she did things a little—. We completely redid the restaurant from scratch. From scratch.

01:29:31

And it was a little more laid-back affair. When Daddy went back, he went back whole hog. We were going to serious—you know, we were really going to do it this time and whatever. But anyway, but his thing was everything had to be in a separate fryer—everything. The fish was never fried where the shrimp were, and the shrimp were never fried where the oysters were. The oysters—they all had their own separate, so that's where the nine come in. And the French fries always—. You can always tell when somebody fries everything and it's one of these big vats because—

01:30:07

JL: They all taste the same.

01:30:07

SL: —they all look the same color. And just for personal preference, oysters should never be fried with anything else but oysters.

01:30:16

JL: They tear it up. They tear the grease up, they really do.

01:30:18

SL: Yeah, because of the water content. You know, it degrades the oil quick.

01:30:24

JL: We were kind of hands-on. We were very hands-on. That's why we—

01:30:27

SL: We had tried a couple of managers when we were younger and they were always deeply—

01:30:32

JL: One didn't count the beer.

01:30:35

SL: They were always deeply disappointing, and actually you ended up doing more work. You might as well go ahead and do your own work. But that's really not the way you're supposed to do it. But that's—

01:30:48

JL: It worked for us.

01:30:48

SL: Yeah, it worked for us.

01:30:50

SR: Did you have—were your recipes written down?

01:30:53

SL: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Actually, one time we were walking in—we used to keep them behind the bar, and one time Joey walks in and the bartenders are copying them down and Joey was—

[Laughs] He said, “Wait a minute.”

01:31:08

JL: “Uh, they’re mine. Did you ask me if you could copy it?” No. They were never kept the behind the bar again.

01:31:13

SL: So they were never kept behind the bar again because we knew them. It was more for a reference, you know, and—and, oh, I can probably write down the—

01:31:19

JL: We could almost rattle them off still. We might be missing a couple little minor things in the remoulade, but I can tell you pretty much, yeah.

01:31:24

SL: I mean the barbeque sauce—it’s a seafood barbeque sauce.

01:31:26

JL: Yeah, Suzie made that up. That was one of her creations, the barbeque sauce.

01:31:29

SL: And Daddy was—this was during when Paul Prudhomme was opening the whatever, and he was—he was a really big deal. I guess, what is that? The early ‘80s I guess or whatever, and Daddy said, “Suzie?” He says, “Paul Prudhomme has got this little barbeque shrimp. Why don’t you make something up like that?” And I said, “Okay, Daddy.” You know, “Okay, Daddy.”

01:31:49

And so anyway, it—well, it took—well, it’s only for seafood. It’s not sweet at all. It’s not sweet at all. It’s not sweet at all.

01:31:58

SR: Can you say, like, the—people might be listening to this or reading this who don’t know that in New Orleans a seafood barbeque sauce isn’t like a meat barbeque sauce. What is it like?

01:32:07

SL: Oh, it’s—

01:32:11

JL: It doesn’t work. It’s—

01:32:12

SL: It’s basically a way of—well, it’s for shrimp usually, but you can put it on anything that’s seafood. It’s a savory. Probably pretty much fifty percent butter to start with, with a little bit of

tomato mixed in and garlic. Lots of garlic, lots of garlic, and I used to put a little wine in mine. So it basically was a—no sugar whatsoever, and it would be a loose sauce. It wouldn't be a glaze. It's not a glaze at all.

01:32:42

JL: And you had to cook it. It only worked—with yours, you had to put it in the broiler.

01:32:47

SL: Yeah, you cooked it with it. It didn't go on afterwards. You cooked it with it. The only thing I can think of is it's a lot like Chicken a la Grande without the tomato sauce, I guess. I don't—that didn't make any sense, but it was strictly for—it worked the best with shrimp, that's all. It's just a shrimp sauce.

01:33:09

JL: I had a couple customers beg to put it on soft-shell crabs, so they would only—whenever they came I'd have to make sure the waitress knew they could have it on their soft crabs because they just had to have it.

01:33:14

SL: But somebody would want it on their hamburger, and I was like, “No, it doesn't go on a hamburger.”

01:33:19

JL: It would go on the fish and shrimp. The fish was very good, and the catfish too.

01:33:22

SL: Yeah, it was good on any seafood.

01:33:23

SR: Fried catfish or—?

01:33:24

JL: No, broiled. You broiled it. Yeah, partially cooked it.

01:33:26

SL: Well, you can. You can throw it on there, but it's you know—

01:33:27

JL: But the sauce has to be cooked though. The sauce has to be heated up. It was cold and it had to be heated up.

01:33:33

SL: Yeah, the sauce has to be cooked with it.

01:33:33

SR: When you say Chicken a la Grande, what are you referring to?

01:33:36

SL: Oh, that's a Mosca's chicken. That's the—it's more of a—I think —it's a fried chicken with olive oil and no flour, but lots of garlic and—

01:33:52

JL: Garlic and olive oil, Italian-style.

01:33:53

SL: Olive oil and butter and whatever.

01:33:57

JL: She cooks better than—

01:33:58

SL: Oh, stop it. *[Laughs]*

01:33:59

SR: Do you—well, did you, and do, you like cooking? Or was it just—?

01:34:02

SL: I love cooking. I love—I adore cooking. I still—like I said, right now I'm making bread for everybody. Everybody has got so much bread I feel bad for them. *[Laughs]* I love cooking. I

absolutely adore it. That's the only thing: I miss the physical—making things pretty and making things nice and putting things together.

01:34:26

JL: Friends are coming over Friday and you're making crab cakes.

01:34:28

SL: Yeah, that's—

01:34:29

JL: Crab cakes Friday night, so that's good.

01:34:31

SL: But—

01:34:32

JL: Hushpuppies maybe?

01:34:32

SL: Well, at the restaurant they do crawfish cakes, because the crab cakes would take away from the stuffed crabs, and the stuffed crabs is basically a crab cake anyway in a shell. But yeah, yeah, I love it. I enjoy cooking.

01:34:46

JL: Those cakes. I could have one right now. It sounds good. I'm getting hungry.

01:34:50

SR: I'm getting hungry too. Here's some snacks if you want. What—I mean, you've given me a lot of time, but I do have a few more questions if you don't mind.

01:34:59

SL: I'm not as nervous as I was.

01:35:03

SR: It's just totally fascinating. What would you call your style of gumbo?

01:35:09

SL: Oh, that's interesting. Well, [*Sighs*] I'm trying to think of what my grandmother used to call it. It's seafood. It's seafood. She didn't believe in putting sausage or—. I think—

01:35:29

JL: Like an andouille. Not the andouille.

01:35:29

SL: No, but some people do put sausage in the gumbo, too, and I like it with the sausage. I don't know if I would have done it, but it's just—it's seafood gumbo. That's it. And it's with a roux.

It's definitely roux-based. We--we did something that really doesn't change the flavor of it, I don't think so, but we'll brown the flour in the oven instead of making a roux. That gets the grease out of there. That's the only thing that we—I think a lot of people do that now. I might be wrong, but I just—we had a problem with a lot of the grease in the roux, so we just switched. We switched to doing that thirty years ago, so it's--it's a dry roux instead of a wet roux.

01:36:23

SR: Then how do you incorporate that? You whisk it in, or—?

01:36:26

SL: Well, it's kind of—it's a process. You have to put the pan, a shallow pan, in the oven, and you brown your—you brown your flour, and you have to keep stirring it. It's hot as Hades. And you keep stirring it until you get it the right color that you want, which is pretty much brown. Dark brown, actually. I'm trying to—probably a little darker than that, yeah. And—

01:36:48

SR: So, like coffee kind of?

01:36:50

SL: Coffee-colored.

01:36:50

JL: That's a good way. Like coffee, yeah.

01:36:53

SL: And you take it out and you run it—well, you let it cool and then you run it through a sifter to get all the lumps out of it, and then you keep it in a container and you take it out when you want. And then you have to add water to your gumbo anyway. So you just mix up this roux; you whisk it in a bowl.

01:37:10

JL: You whisk it in a bowl, stainless steel bowl—

01:37:11

SL: And there you go.

01:37:13

JL: —and add it to your gumbo.

01:37:13

SL: It looks horrible at first, but boy, after a whole day of cooking.

01:37:15

JL: It cooks almost all day on the stove. You cook it and turn it off about 5 o'clock and let it cool a couple hours, and you put it in your bucket and you put it in the cooler for the next day or two.

01:37:23

SL: Yeah, and—

01:37:23

SR: So you whisk a little bit of the flour with water in a bowl?

01:37:26

SL: The whole thing. Yeah, the whole--the whole thing. You make a slurry—kind of a slurry—and that's your flour-base for it. And you get your color. That's—it gets its color from basically the flour and the tomato.

01:37:42

SR: So did you—do you associate with either of the words Creole or Cajun?

01:37:48

SL: Hmm, I think we're more Creole. I think that's—I think that gumbo is Creole for sure. And no, not Cajun. Not Cajun. Not at all. In fact, we had some movie people out there one time, and they were talking about Cajun land where Manchac is. And I said, "No, that's more west of here." And I couldn't make them understand that we were in the Florida parishes and that the Cajuns are over there. We don't speak French.

01:38:20

JL: There's no Boudreauxs in Manchac. No Boudreauxs.

01:38:22

SL: No. Now, I think Miss Wanda is a Cortez, which is Spanish, but they've got a lot of—they probably have some French blood in them for sure. But we're not—I never assumed that, but now the whole state is Cajun now.

01:38:39

JL: But you go to LaPlace, go to La Place, and now the whole world is in La Place. They talk like the Cajuns, you know, like—

01:38:45

SL: But no, uh-hm. Our family never did associate with that.

01:38:51

SR: What is your family's heritage? Like, how far back were they in Manchac, and where did they come from?

01:38:59

SL: Mostly on my grandmother's side, which would be the side that started the restaurant, they—I think the earliest person that they can—excuse me.

01:39:20

JL: Phillips? Is that the right side or no?

01:39:21

SL: Well no, I think the original Bates that came from England was like in the 1760s, 1770s, and he came straight to St. Helena Parish, from what I gather. Came straight down. Missed the Revolutionary War and came straight down here. And they stayed there until my grandmother moved down to Manchac. I mean I have—we have all kinds of relatives up in St. Helena [Parish] and Upper Tangipahoa [Parish].

01:39:50

JL: Now your mother's family is from way back, too.

01:39:51

SL: Well yeah, but they're—that's up north, yeah.

01:39:57

JL: They came over like a long time ago.

01:39:57

SL: Well everybody came over at once, but—. [*Laughs*] But no, but that's the only thing—yeah, I think that's the only thing I remember.

01:40:07

SR: What about you Joey? What's your family?

01:40:09

JL: Well, my grandparents came over in 1910 from Sicily, so I have one side very recently here—100 years now, plus. And then my other, the Voivedich, he was from Biloxi, a Croatian.

01:40:20

SL: They came over around 1880.

01:40:22

JL: Yeah, the 1800s, mid-1800s. I'm not sure when they came over. So I'm a new guy. I'm a new guy. I haven't been here a very long time yet. *[Laughs]*

01:40:29

SR: Yeah. But also, like those two groups of people—I don't know—from the beginning were in the food business, too, right? The Croatians—a lot of seafood.

01:40:39

JL: They loved seafood. They love—yeah, think of all—they love seafood. And the Italians love to eat, so they love to cook and eat, so it worked out pretty well I guess.

01:40:44

SR: And I know in New Orleans—I don't know about on the other side of the lake, but there were a lot of Sicilians who owned like groceries like your family.

01:40:50

JL: Sure, sure, yes, but that was actually—my grandfather had the store. It wasn't my—my grandparents on my Italian side were farmers. They grew up and had a farm and came over and bought property—

01:40:59

SL: Strawberry farmers.

01:41:00

JL: —way back.

01:41:02

SL: But my mother's side, I'm not too sure.

01:41:05

JL: They came over a long time—

01:41:05

SL: I'm not too sure. And then my dad—well, our maiden name is Smith, and that's my grandmother's first husband, and we know nothing about him. Nothing. **[Laughs]**

01:41:16

JL: They're very secretive. You met a cousin, and he said they're very secretive. Can't find out about them. Nobody knows anything about them.

01:41:23

SL: I mean they can't find anything. I've had relatives—like one relative, he said he came down and he said he's a Smith, and he says he can't find anything on them at all. Not one thing. They just like disappeared. I mean they probably don't even have a Social Security numbers anymore, but anyway—. [*Laughs*] But it—we always kept to ourselves. We always—we never really—work was it. Work was everything.

01:41:46

JL: Our joke was we had our forty-eight hours off: Monday and Tuesday. We had forty-eight hours—not totally off. You'd go to the bank and do errands first, and you're off, you know, two days.

01:41:53

SL: Yeah, but we would go in—we would go in at 9:30 and we would leave if we were lucky at 10:30, and that would be Wednesday through Sunday. And then we'd go back and have two days off and then go back—.

01:42:07

JL: It kept us out of trouble.

01:42:08

SR: It sounds like you made the most of your days off, though. You'd come into the city and eat and go to the auction?

01:42:13

SL: Absolutely, yeah. Oh, we couldn't have had any kids. The poor kids would have just been orphaned. They'd have been orphans. But yeah, oh absolutely, we loved—. We were thinking about getting a place in New Orleans, but I said, "We're only here for forty-eight hours, you know, and we're sleeping most of the time." But we would—yeah, we would do stuff. Just Mardi Gras and whatever, we would try and get—well, Mardi Gras was busy. We couldn't—we couldn't take that off.

01:42:40

JL: At one point we could and we stopped and couldn't take off anymore.

01:42:43

SL: Yeah, once that interstate went through, oh my gosh. Then you had all these Mississippi people that loved coming to New Orleans.

01:42:51

JL: That was a big deal closing Monday and Tuesday. We started that because Lundi Gras was busy, Mardis Gras was crazy busy, so we upset a lot of people for a while. And I said, you know, our poor waitresses were working—they were busy Friday, Saturday, Sunday, Monday. There were five days of crazy people, just traffic and busyness, and you know these people need a break. It was just too much and us, we get a break too, so—.

01:43:09

SL: But a lot of our customers came from Mississippi, because they—on their—you know, they'd stop on their way to New Orleans for anything, for any reason.

01:43:16

JL: Especially the Archie Manning days. Oh my god, we'd get busloads. Busloads.

01:43:21

SL: I mean the French Quarter Festival starts tomorrow, and believe me Horst is going to be Katy-bar-the-door-busy.

01:43:26

JL: And the Strawberry Festival.

01:43:27

SL: And the Strawberry—and then you got all these New Orleans people going to the Strawberry Festival. So he's catching—he's catching a—. This is our busiest weekend of the whole year.

01:43:36

JL: It is.

01:43:37

SL: Mother's Day is the busiest Sunday of the whole year, but Strawberry Festival—and whenever they're the same time, gosh.

01:43:47

SR: You're not [*Laughs*] —you're not missing it this weekend, huh?

01:43:51

SL: Oh no. Oh no, I've never been to the Strawberry Festival, never.

01:43:55

SR: No, no, but I mean you're not missing running the restaurant this weekend?

01:43:57

SL: No, no, no, not this weekend. Not this weekend. And in the spring they all get—

01:44:00

JL: The employees get spring fever, the young ones.

01:44:02

SL: I start—we started preparing for this weekend like in January. I would hire people and keep—

01:44:11

JL: Over-hiring extra people on purpose.

01:44:13

SL: —over-hire and keep them over so I would have them for this weekend, because you lose at least three people this weekend. You lose at least three. It's mostly the boys.

01:44:22

JL: They're like seventeen, eighteen, nineteen. They'll go to the festival and they just won't come back.

01:44:26

SL: Yeah, it's—

01:44:27

JL: They don't—they just can't leave.

01:44:30

SL: I mean it's the best part of their life. They can't imagine—. It's funny, but—.

01:44:33

JL: They don't realize they'll live long enough to go the other ones, but this is the one they got to be at. *[Laughs]*

01:44:39

SR: On a typical—not necessarily this weekend, but on a typical busy weekend that's not necessarily associated with the holiday, how many covers would you do on a Saturday or Sunday?

01:44:51

JL: Horst can answer that question exactly.

01:44:51

SL: Horst—. We never counted covers.

01:44:53

SR: You didn't?

01:44:53

SL: We never counted covers. I could always tell by the stack of tickets if we did good or not. And like I said, we used to keep—you knew when you were doing good. You know, but honestly I never counted.

01:45:08

JL: We didn't count.

01:45:09

SL: We never counted.

01:45:09

JL: But I could guarantee 1,000-plus on a Sunday, and maybe way more. I don't know. I know it's a lot. I could tell by the numbers in my brain. I could just say a number and—

01:45:16

SL: Oh, you know, that's one thing: we took oysters off.

01:45:19

JL: 1990.

01:45:20

SL: 1990 we took oysters on the half-shell off, and we would—we would open up at least sixty to eighty dozen, you know.

01:45:28

JL: Over the weekend.

01:45:28

SL: Over the weekend or whatever, but—.

01:45:29

SR: Why did you take them off?

01:45:31

SL: Daddy didn't like that sign that you're—the government—

01:45:34

JL: The warning about them causing problems.

01:45:37

SL: Warning about blood problems and this kind of thing.

01:45:38

JL: Yeah. This, that, and whatever and—

01:45:41

SL: And at the time it seemed like a bigger deal, but Daddy didn't want to put it on the menu, so we decided—. And honestly, the business got better.

01:45:48

JL: Got busier, and it didn't hurt us.

01:45:50

SL: We got busier.

01:45:50

JL: We got busier because that was slowing things down: waiting for a dozen to come out and eating them and whatever. So we got busier.

01:45:56

SL: We could--we could flip tables fast.

01:45:58

JL: It was just really—

01:45:58

SL: Well, I know we didn't do covers, but a waitress on a Sunday would—she would do twenty or thirty tables, you know.

01:46:09

JL: One waitress.

01:46:09

SL: One waitress.

01:46:10

JL: Say you had ten of them at least.

01:46:11

SL: Yeah.

01:46:12

JL: So multiply that by the numbers, by whatever; you know, how many tables—four at a table, six at a table. It was kind of like—

01:46:18

SL: But it was—

01:46:22

JL: I think I'd have gone insane if I knew how many we had fed some days. I would want to go crazy, so we just left it at that.

01:46:26

SR: What about, I wanted to ask you about hurricanes. I mean, you know, I kind of got the story from Horst about what they've endured since they've owned the restaurant, but what about like Betsy and Camille? Or maybe other hurricanes I don't know about?

01:46:41

SL: Well, my sister and daddy and mama and my grandmother rode Betsy out there. It was—before Betsy nobody really had any idea how bad a hurricane could be, and we were living in Metairie at the time, and my dad put us in the car and we went to Manchac and we were going to pick her up and go to somewhere in Mississippi because he heard it was bad. It was going to be bad. And she decided, “Nope, I’m not going.” My grandmother wasn’t—she wasn’t leaving.

01:47:13

JL: Not leaving her house in Manchac.

01:47:15

SL: She wasn't leaving. So actually, the eye of Betsy actually passed right over Manchac at the time, which was a good thing. We got the--the force of the winds, but Middendorf had built the house with a solid wood two-ply front and back on the building. It was—I can't explain it. It was --it was two inches of wood on the facing of the building on each side. So it was strong. It was extremely strong. And when the—when Betsy came through, you could tell the windows were rattling. and we lost--we lost several windows, but we never lost the roof. And you could tell—

01:47:56

JL: The carport blew away.

01:47:57

SL: Actually, when the eye—yeah, the carport blew away. But when the--when the eye came through, you know, my dad went out and we put as much covering on the windows that we could, and then we came back in and the eye went back out. But the restaurant was fine at that time. There was no flooding whatsoever. Actually, my grandmother—there was no flooding ever in Manchac until they built the Intracoastal [Waterway]. For some reason it shunted—hmm, how can I explain this? Manchac was a basin swamp. Originally it was a basin swamp; now current flows through it.

01:48:39

JL: Like tidal levels change. Manchac used to be just very moderate, and now it's—

01:48:45

SL: There was no—

01:48:45

JL: You get tidal changes. like drastic.

01:48:47

SL: In fact a lot of—I've seen myself oodles—okay.

01:48:57

SR: Let me pause this.

01:48:57

SR: Yeah, well, that must have been terrifying, though.

01:49:01

SL: Oh, well, they put us under the table like everybody else I guess, but—

01:49:05

JL: Your dad never stayed in Manchac again after that.

01:49:07

SL: No, he never stayed in Manchac after that.

01:49:09

JL: For a hurricane. He always would—

01:49:10

SL: But we never flooded. Like I said, it flooded—it started flooding when they did the
[Intracoastal Waterway].

01:49:17

JL: In the '70s.

01:49:17

SL: Yeah, because my grandmother saw—east winds started to bother us. Whenever we had an east wind, it would come in from Pontchartrain into Maurepas and build up. It would build up there.

01:49:31

JL: That goes into Juan, Hurricane Juan.

01:49:33

SL: And that's how Juan was—

01:49:33

JL: 1985, Hurricane Juan.

01:49:35

SL: —1985, we—oops, sorry. We had—we got, oh lord, six inches. Six inches in the old building.

01:49:47

JL: We couldn't get to the restaurant.

01:49:49

SL: Yeah; we couldn't get to the restaurant for three days. It was flooded. It was--it was beginning every time a hurricane would come, or a stiff east wind, water would start backing up with us. And Juan was the worst.

01:50:02

JL: That was our first—the floors got damaged. We had to do repair work after that. And the new place, too. The new place got wet, too.

01:50:08

SL: But Katrina, we didn't flood. We didn't flood with Katrina because it was—it's the way the storm comes in, you know. It comes in from there. Rita, Ike—yeah.

01:50:20

JL: Katrina—Rita was, what, two weeks later? Rita almost washed us away. Because we had built a seawall, luckily, in '02, so Rita was just a pounding surf. We fought for—

01:50:29

SL: I had a contractor friend that we brought in some people and sandbags and sand and we got some sandbags from the Parish. I tried to explain to Horst this, but it—unless you do it yourself—

01:50:47

JL: You have to see it. Once you see it, you'll believe it.

01:50:48

SL: You have to see it, you have to see it. We built a wall down the street to keep the water from coming in.

01:50:54

JL: And we were pumping it.

01:50:55

SL: And we were pumping at that time.

01:50:56

JL: Gas pumps. Pumping our lives, forty-eight hours pumping nonstop.

01:50:59

SL: Yeah, because you know how Manchac is in a little island area? Well, if you close off both ends, you can pump out the water and keep it from getting into the restaurant. What happened, we were—we were lucky in doing that for several times when that happened.

01:51:14

SR: I'm going to pause this and close the window because there's that noise. Where--where did you build the wall? I'm trying to visualize it.

01:51:24

JL: On the water—on the water edge.

01:51:25

SL: By the water edge. I have a—like I said, a construction guy who builds pools with a gunite—

01:51:32

JL: With a gunite—a thick, thick, thick wall. Gunite, yeah.

01:51:34

SL: Gunite, to keep basically—. When Juan was there, we noticed that the water was lapping on the building, and like I told you before, it was a mud sill, and my dad actually told us—

01:51:52

JL: The restaurant was floating on cross-ties and—

01:51:53

SL: Yeah. He said the water could get to a certain point where it would lift the building up and send it on its way, down whatever. And actually, during Juan we didn't know until the water went down if the restaurant was going to settle back normally.

01:52:10

JL: We didn't know. We couldn't—

01:52:11

SL: Yeah, we didn't know.

01:52:13

SR: And it did?

01:52:14

SL: Yeah, it did.

01:52:15

JL: It didn't move it, or it settled. It didn't move it, or it was fine.

01:52:19

SL: But I decided we better build some kind of a wave barrier to that. But you have to let the water go out, too, when you have rain. So we opened—we left holes in the dyke, so to speak, to let things go out. And when we were—hmm, sometimes you would flood just because of an east wind, you know. Just water would come up in the parking lot, not the building, but you know it

would come in from the parking lot and you'd have to—your toilets wouldn't flush and you'd have to close down, yeah, whatever with that. But once we put the—

01:52:59

JL: The seawall, because we could control—

01:53:00

SL: —the seawall.

01:53:01

JL: —a small pump and control the water. If it came over, we could pump it over the wall and put it back in the lake and put it back where it came from.

01:53:05

SL: Pump it out, yeah.

01:53:05

JL: So that was okay; we could do that.

01:53:07

SL: But it was—

01:53:09

JL: All right, so Katrina, basically we had wind and our lights went out. We were out of power for at least five weeks. Katrina blew—it was a windstorm that blew out the sign, a little roof damage. But Rita almost—could have washed us away. Rita was scarier for us. You know, Katrina was bad. We were out of business for five weeks until we got electricity restored. If New Orleans had not been so damaged, we might have been months without getting electricity. They couldn't get in here. Remember it was all the water sitting? So they got to us—the rural areas got—we think we might have been a lot longer getting in power if New Orleans was up and running. We think we'd have had to wait a lot longer. So it was blessing for us that they could come fix us up, you know, and get us back in operation.

01:53:43

SL: But we'd get all of our employees together and, you know, just like kind of like Horst did: clean up the place or whatever. But I do have to tell you that what hurricane that he—what was the one he flooded the worst?

01:53:58

JL: Gustav.

01:53:59

SL: Gustav, that was—I've never seen water that high.

01:54:01

JL: That was wild one, yeah.

01:54:03

SL: I've never seen the water that high ever, ever, ever, ever.

01:54:06

JL: Gustav and Ike.

01:54:07

SL: No, the new place—I mean the old place, the older building: the most it ever got in there that we really could see water line was maybe—

01:54:16

JL: The baseboard.

01:54:16

SL: —yeah, the baseboard. And his was—his was like three feet.

01:54:19

JL: Up in the windows or whatever when we saw it.

01:54:21

SL: It was crazy.

01:54:22

JL: That picture with the police car in the middle of the water, that worldwide photo of Middendorf's there. Yeah, that went everywhere.

01:54:28

SR: Did you stay or leave for Katrina and Rita?

01:54:33

SL: Oh, we were in Ponchatoula.

01:54:34

JL: At our home.

01:54:34

SL: We were in Ponchatoula. For Rita—for Katrina, we actually went down when we shouldn't have gone down.

01:54:38

JL: We went down the next day.

01:54:40

SL: We went down the next—well, yeah.

01:54:42

JL: Well, I'm sorry: it was that afternoon.

01:54:43

SL: It was in that afternoon.

01:54:44

JL: We were in an F-250 pickup on the interstate, and the truck was going [*Gestures*]. It wasn't really over yet. [*Laughs*]

01:54:48

SL: I just wanted to make sure it was—

01:54:50

JL: It wasn't over yet.

01:54:51

SL: I just wanted to make sure it was still there, because you know you have--you have to prepare yourself mentally if the restaurant is gone or whatever. But all it did was lose--lose the front awnings along that end, and—

01:55:05

JL: And the sign blew.

01:55:06

SL: And the electrical. The electrical. And the fun—. All right, I knew from losing—oh God, I guess it was from Juan—that's what it was. It was from Juan. We knew from Juan to get rid of the food out of the freezers. We knew to get rid—no cell phones. There was no phones. There was nothing. I could call one of my friends that got a pickup truck and took some food with them for the police officers or whatever, but we had—

01:55:36

JL: We had a freezer as big as this room full of food, wall to wall food, stacked—I mean, frozen seafood.

01:55:40

SL: And we had—and I knew to get rid of it. I just knew.

01:55:44

SR: Because what happened with Juan?

01:55:45

SL: Well, because we had electricity go out, too, and we had—it wasn't as bad. It wasn't as bad. It had thawed. But see, in New Orleans it went months. It went months.

01:55:55

JL: Full of seafood. You know, you heard about the stories of the restaurants, homes—

01:55:59

SL: I don't usually know what *rotten* seafood is, but once you smell it, it's like death. You never will forget it. But so [**Laughs**] anyway, we were lucky. We got rid of the food so we didn't have to wait for a new walk-in freezer like everybody else had to, and we were up and running in five weeks. And like Daddy says, you didn't—well, daddy wasn't there, but like he says, you don't want to—you could open up too soon, too, because everybody—. We went into New Orleans to go to—when the restaurants started opening. What was it? It was Bacco's. We went to Bacco's, you know, just to support them. Because we were open, you know, and when they started opening up, boy, it was a ghost town. It was really a ghost town.

01:56:47

JL: Nothing but construction workers everywhere you went. Just workers, workers, workers.

01:56:51

SL: And insurance.

01:56:51

JL: And insurance adjusters and workers—it's all there was. Nothing—no tourists at all.

01:56:54

SL: It was really weird. It was very weird.

01:56:56

SR: What was your business like then, when you first reopened?

01:56:59

SL: It was busy. It was busy. Everybody was ready. Everybody was ready to--to get back to normal kind of thing. And we got—like I said, we've got all the insurance people that were coming from Mississippi. It was very busy. We did a lot of—

01:57:10

JL: All the workers. I-55 was bumper-to-bumper coming to New Orleans: construction, insurance adjustors, etcetera, plus the regular folks getting back to work. So it was--it was good.

01:57:19

SL: Yeah, it was. Yeah, we did good. I felt bad about it because all those—the New Orleans people were struggling, trying to get their refrigeration and everything back up to line.

01:57:28

SR: You said that that was the first time in your life you ever had like a five-week vacation.

[Laughs] Did you all ever go on vacation?

01:57:34

SL: Only on December—only in December. It sounds so crazy. It sounds like we're like a bunch of masochists, but you know, if you have your own business, if you leave for any length

of time, when you get back you almost want to kick yourself for going because you've got so much to catch up with.

01:57:52

But we would go in December right before Christmas. That was the slowest week of the whole year.

01:58:02

JL: And we picked that. There it is; look at the books. Guarantee you the slow week—

01:58:06

SL: Yeah, it was guaranteed a slow week. We'd get back before his Christmas because his mother—when we were really young we went over Christmas, and his mother didn't like that at all. So I said, "Okay, all right." But we would go. Sometimes we'd stretch it out for two weeks, and that--that would be it.

01:58:21

JL: Every December we could do something. Caribbean for a long time, and then we finally got brave and went to Italy a couple times. Even though it was cold and freezing, we did a couple trips to Italy, Venice, Sicily, whatever. So—.

01:58:30

SL: Yeah, and we always tried to go someplace nice, because that was our main thing. And we-- we'd kind of sneak a day and go like three days to Destin or something like that, but normally

that's it. **[Laughs]** And then our friends couldn't understand why we couldn't be off on weekends, and actually I got a—we have a nice group of doctor friends over the years—over the last thirty years. For some reason they're usually off on Mondays. They take—when they take weekends off, they're off on Mondays. So we turned it into a Monday supper club, you know, and I'd have them over for dinner and—

01:59:00

JL: That was fun. She loved to cook, and so they loved for her to cook.

01:59:04

SL: So we had our fun. You know, we—

01:59:07

JL: You make fun. You just make it, You have to make fun.

01:59:10

SL: But—

01:59:11

SR: What about now? What do y'all do in your retirement?

01:59:13

SL: Honestly, we're doing a little farming. I'm doing a little cooking. It's not as—

01:59:22

JL: Every day flies by. The day is never boring, and we're living in our home for the first time, actually. We're living in our house. We're living there. We're actually wearing it out. We're living in our home.

01:59:30

SL: Yeah, usually we just go home to go to sleep and go back to work. It sounds so crazy—.

01:59:36

JL: No, but it's fun.

01:59:37

SL: It sounds so crazy.

01:59:37

JL: We're enjoying it, yeah.

01:59:38

SL: You have to be of a certain mindset to—you know, us and dairy farmers, I guess. I don't know [*Laughs*]—.

01:59:46

JL: You got to be a little crazy to do it anyway, so—.

01:59:48

SL: You have to be a little nuts to do it, but it--it affords you a good life, and I'm glad we did it.

[Laughs] I'm glad we're out of it. You know, I never thought we would, but yeah.

02:00:00

SR: Did you—well, I guess—you told me that you always kind of knew that in your mid-to-late fifties you wouldn't want to be doing it anymore. Did you ever regret it? I mean, what was that first day of retirement like?

02:00:15

SL: Amazing. It was amazing. **[Laughs]** We kept pinching each other basically.

02:00:21

JL: Is it real? Is it real?

02:00:23

SL: It was—it's so demanding I don't—some people don't—. It's I felt responsible the whole time I was there, every day even at night. When Daddy passed away it was even—we had the restaurant since, like I said, full-time since '76. But my dad was there in Manchac.

02:00:43

JL: He lived—he was in the house on the property because he wasn't going to leave. He just was there, so it was kind of like a little—it was interesting. A little bit of weight off, you know him just being there.

02:00:52

SL: Yeah, if the place was on fire he could call.

02:00:53

JL: He could call them and then call us. [*Laughs*]

02:00:54

SL: But when he died in '96, the whole—you know, the whole weight of it went on there with that, and you do bring it home all—. You brought it home before, but a glass of wine would make you forget really quick. But when you had—you know, when—it was just him and I once my mom died. Right after that. She died before Katrina, but she was in—she was—

02:01:20

JL: Alzheimer's.

02:01:21

SL: —pretty much out of it.

02:01:22

JL: It was ten years.

02:01:24

SL: Around when my dad died, too, so you know that was—

02:01:26

JL: I'll backtrack way back, all right. My sister worked with us as a hostess for quite a few years. My mother worked as a cashier. She liked to help. And my dad was—he stayed with us for twenty-plus years as a manager and helped manage it, so he would—. When your mom got too old, he would watch it on Monday and Tuesdays, when her mom couldn't do it anymore. Your parents were always there—

02:01:43

SL: We had a lot of family. You know, we had a lot of family.

02:01:44

JL: So her mother [*Unintelligible*] in '93; her dad died in '96. What else? Your mom died in '06, and my sister had a brain tumor and she died in '06, so we—after a while I said, “Okay, uncle.”

02:01:55

SL: Yeah, basically. If they were all alive it would be a completely different story, but it got—

02:02:00

JL: We had a lot of backups. So my dad did stay with us twenty-plus years, but he was in his upper seventies, and it was getting tough to even leave him. The kids, they're not that bad, but they just do silly stuff and then you get back. So okay, we can't do this anymore. So he worked a couple days at the end with us a little bit.

02:02:13

SL: But you realize, too, that it's a whole different animal. You're open from 11:00 straight through with no breaks. I was always jealous of--of people that had run restaurants that—. I know they had prep work to do—

02:02:29

JL: Five o'clock, six o'clock they're out of there. Wow.

02:02:32

SL: Yeah, they had five days a week. You know, they were five hours of—five hours of open time, and you know, we were basically ten.

02:02:40

JL: But we were busy all day. We're really—lunch is busy. Sometimes in the afternoon we're crazy busy. You never knew when it was going to happen, so you really—we weren't going to close for sure. What, a two-hour break? Three-hour break? Big deal. You just as well stay open. So it was silly, you know.

02:02:53

SL: They wanted to know why we were—everybody closes on Sunday, and that’s when we were the busiest. That’s the busiest day of the whole week. That paid for everything just about.

02:03:02

JL: Oh, the Italian family: “Oh, just come out to the house for just a couple hours.” Oh, you don’t realize what can happen—you know in the kitchen—what can happen in two hours if you’re gone? It was like—anyway, so—

02:03:12

SL: Yeah, one time this one boy, this one boy wanted to—he was playing a joke. It was a good-hearted joke, but he hid Joey’s shoes in the freezer.

02:03:20

JL: My spare pair. I kept a spare of shoes. Mom asked me about a month ago: “You’re not still made at Trey?” “I’m not mad at Trey. That’s thirty years ago. He’s a grown man with kids. I’m not mad—.”

02:03:27

SL: I mean, and they pulled jokes on each other too. You had to be there; you had to be there.

02:03:34

SR: So I guess that was—would you call that the most challenging part of the job, was just that you always had to be there?

02:03:39

JL: We felt like we should be there. Yeah, we did.

02:03:42

SL: Well, as long as me and him were together, it was fine.

02:03:44

JL: It worked out fine.

02:03:45

SL: Yeah, we were fine. We were together. A lot of people don't understand. I mean we would back up for each other.

02:03:50

JL: The question we get the most is how in the world can you work together and live together 24/7? How in the world can you stand each other? We said, "It's really easy for us."

02:03:57

SL: It's really easy for us.

02:03:58

JL: Not a problem.

02:03:59

SL: But even in--in retirement, we're always banging around the house doing stuff, and you know we help each other clean the house and [*Laughs*] it's—

02:04:08

JL: We got like about ten acres. I got a tractor and a Bobcat and stuff I can play with and toy, and she likes to piddle in the yard and do things and whatever, so—.

02:04:15

SL: Yeah, I want to get chickens like Karen, but he won't let me. [*Laughs*]

02:04:21

JL: We have a koi pond. It's about, you know a nice size—about the size of this room roughly—and it's a lot of upkeep. I said, "Your chickens are yours. You can have them, but they're all yours."

02:04:30

SL: I don't need the eggs that bad, but I think Karen—

02:04:33

JL: Karen will give you some.

02:04:33

SR: You could maybe go to the restaurant. I came home with some, actually.

02:04:37

SL: Yeah, oh gosh. Everybody that's got chickens gives eggs away. I know. I noticed that too. I don't really eat that many eggs, so I guess—and I'm certainly not going to kill them. That's what I told Karen. I said, "What are you going to do with them chickens when they get old?" *[Laughs]*

02:04:47

JL: Trying to give them away. She goes, "You want some?" I go, "No."

02:04:51

SL: Oh, gosh. They made that so wonderful. Oh God—.

02:04:57

SR: Did you ever have anyone in your family who would want to buy it, take it over? Was there ever—?

02:05:03

SL: Nobody.

02:05:04

JL: Nobody serious enough, no.

02:05:05

SL: Nobody.

02:05:06

JL: Her nieces and nephews are all professionals. Mine—I have one nephew who is too young. He's sixteen. But hers are all in their own field or whatever. You know, they're—

02:05:13

SL: I wouldn't—hmm.

02:05:14

JL: I don't want to say “wish it on them,” but it's kind of like—

02:05:16

SL: Yeah, it's—if we had--if we had kids that expressed—. Well heck, if we had had kids, they'd be forty now. They'd be forty now. So you know, we would have been out of it anyway. But yeah, that's what—when I realized there wasn't going to be anybody left and—and to take it on or whatever, I—Horst was the best thing in the universe.

02:05:43

JL: He's the man.

02:05:45

SL: The best thing. He's keeping the name and he's keeping the—he's actually probably doing a better job than we did, as far as doing it. You know, the funniest thing is that some of our clientele was getting kind of old, and I was noticing that, too. And he's got—with all the kids—

02:06:01

JL: The deck and everything and all that.

02:06:02

SL: All the kids' stuff. He's really getting more of the—

02:06:05

JL: Revitalizing. You know, you got to watch. You can get kind of placid or whatever.

02:06:08

SR: Can you tell me what you mean by "kids stuff?"

02:06:11

SL: Oh yeah—

02:06:11

JL: Out front.

02:06:12

SL: I'm sorry, the sandbox, the—all the whimsical little stuff he's got.

02:06:19

JL: The decorations for every holiday.

02:06:19

SL: The decorations. He's taken it to a—in a different direction.

02:06:25

JL: And I see Karen—I see Karen in the decorating, right? It's got to be Karen, right?

02:06:28

SL: Yeah, we never were much into decorating. It was more--it was more of a staid and, hmm. More—I don't want to say serious. You know, we had artwork and stuff, but the—and I never wanted to get into the deck, the deck by the water, because they would go—. Our family is always scared of drunks, I guess. *[Laughs]*

02:06:53

JL: It would be good, but we just didn't want to go there, and I knew it would be fine. I mean, we loved going to Friends in Madisonville before it washed away—Isaac, you know. It was a

great thing, but I didn't want to own one like that. I didn't want to have it. But he did it, and here it is.

02:07:05

SL: Yeah.

02:07:08

SR: I just remembered something that I heard: that you didn't have air-conditioning in the kitchen.

02:07:13

SL: Oh no, oh no. No, I was cheap. I was cheap. I was cheap, and besides with the nine—I always thought—I don't know how Horst has done it, but I guess he's smarter than I am. And you should see that bill. The bill, oh my gosh.

02:07:30

JL: I thought it was a big bill for us. **[Laughs]** I can't imagine what his is.

02:07:35

SL: Most of the venting of the--the cooking, the smoke—. Not the smoke—

02:07:41

JL: It seemed like it sucked the air out.

02:07:42

SL: —it seemed like it would suck the air out, too. So we just had lots of fans and we all worked—you know, it was miserable for three months.

02:07:51

JL: You gained weight. You gained weight in the winter and you lost it in the summer. You gained—got a little lazy in the winter, a little slower time.

02:07:55

SL: Yeah, we never had air-conditioning. Never, ever, ever.

02:07:58

JL: When I'd go in the boiler room it would be cool in the kitchen. When I'd come out in the 100-some-degree boiler room, the kitchen was a little bit cooler. It felt cooler. With the fan on me, it felt better, so—. [*Laughs*]

02:08:05

SL: But you know—

02:08:05

SR: The what room?

02:08:06

JL: The boiling, when you're cooking the boiled crabs, boiling seafood.

02:08:10

SL: But no, no air-conditioning. Actually, my grandmother—let's see. At the original—everybody in Manchac had outhouses. Even the restaurant had an outhouse. There was no flushing.

02:08:22

JL: Way back.

02:08:23

SL: Way back in the beginning. After World War II. Well, not—around World War II that was, but the first five or six years, I think—I'm pretty sure they had outhouses.

02:08:34

JL: There was nothing else to do.

02:08:35

SL: Well there's no running—. I mean, I guess no pipe. Not running water for sure.

02:08:42

JL: One question I get the most of all, and everybody says: “What do you miss the most?” I said, “Well, seeing family, friends, and getting a piece of catfish whenever I want a piece of fried—.” I really do miss my fried—I miss the fish. I loved it.

02:08:52

SL: Yeah, that’s my favorite food. That’s--that’s my favorite food.

02:08:55

JL: Eat it hot or cold. It’s delicious either way.

02:08:58

SR: You didn’t get sick of it?

02:08:59

SL: Never, never, not—

02:09:00

JL: No.

02:09:01

SL: —not ever. In fact, I had to keep from eating too much of it actually.

02:09:05

SR: Do you ever go there to eat?

02:09:06

SL: No, no. You know, I hate—

02:09:09

JL: We really can't. Like Wanda and Lois—somebody we worked with so many years, for so many years, they come and give us hugs and make a big deal. I feel uncomfortable to Horst and Karen and several—a lot of waitresses. A whole bunch of waitresses there.

02:09:19

SL: Well no, actually my grandmother did give me a bit of advice: she said--she said, “Number one, make sure when you leave, that’s what you want to do.” And she says, “Think long and hard—.”

02:09:30

JL: Good advice. Good advice.

02:09:31

SL: Because a lot of people jump from things to things.

02:09:35

JL: They regret it. Oh, we--

02:09:35

SL: And we had a lot of—we didn't decide to sell it, you know. We were planning twenty years. Actually, we had been planning since 1985.

02:09:47

JL: One time I got us on a—

02:09:49

SL: Yeah, since 1985.

02:09:50

JL: You could blow away; you could burn down.

02:09:51

SL: Yeah, it was just we started to get a little more serious about work and about—. But we were in our thirties, too. You know, when you're thirty you start to think about the future, what the end-game is going to be, where you stop having so much fun every week.

02:10:07

JL: A lot of people don't ever think about it.

02:10:07

SL: Yeah, well now some people don't. Some—but we did. We did because I--I knew there was going to be some kind of end-game. And, oh, I forgot what I was going to say about—

02:10:16

JL: I do feel uncomfortable going and having a big—. I still do, because you know we'd have a lot of waitresses—

02:10:22

SL: Oh! She said, "Make sure you think long and hard." She says, "And when you get out, don't look back and don't think about it." I spent—I mean I've been cooking there for forty years. I don't miss it. I mean, I don't miss it. Because I've set my head like that, I guess it is. It would be fun to be in the—you know, frying fish again. Just to do it. Just--just for the body memory kind of thing. Doing this and all that. I could do it in my sleep. But other than—no, I was ready for this. The last age stage kind of thing.

02:11:00

JL: Yeah, the last thirty more years.

02:11:03

SR: Your grandma sounds like she was just—I don't know. A really wise person.

02:11:11

SL: Well, I think it was mostly she was the oldest of how many? God-darn, seven. Oldest of seven. She went through the Depression, had a baby at a young age. I think she was seventeen, and I think that is when—I'm not—yeah, that's about right. And like I said, the Depression part, that she saw misery and whatever. And--and in our family we try not to make the same mistake twice. You know, we always—like at the restaurant you always—. You know, oh there's always—we always tell each other, “Well, at least we've seen this coming.” You know, “We've seen this.” But every once in a while something will happen and we'll say, “Damn, that's never—.”

02:11:51

JL: Something you've never seen before.

02:11:52

SL: Yeah, [*Laughs*] you know, they never asked that question before. But we always try and learn from our mistakes and everything, and I think that's what she—we're big on old sayings, like “misery loves company” and all that kind of—

02:12:05

JL: They always—older people I respect. I pay attention to what they—they usually know what they're talking about, most of the time, and a lot of people should try that. It works.

02:12:13

SL: It keeps you.

02:12:14

JL: There's a few nuts along the way, but most people really know what they're talking about.

02:12:18

SL: I always take advice. I always take advice from people that know what they're doing.

That's just smart. But she was—she was good. She was—you know, she had a rough life. Like I said, Middendorf had a heart attack when she was like forty-one, so she lived by herself in Manchac. Well you know, we would visit on the weekends towards—and then like I said, World War II and the Korean War took my daddy away from her, so she really lived a pretty lonely life. She had her friends and everything in Manchac, but it was—. Yeah, she—but she talked a lot, and I listened.

02:12:55

SR: So she had three husbands. She was—like before she was forty?

02:12:59

SL: Yes. Oh yeah. Well, the first one was my dad's—and he didn't last. And then she had another one she only married for two weeks. And I'm thinking—I have no idea why. I'm pretty sure she didn't like him.

02:13:12

JL: He wasn't a keeper, I think. *[Laughs]*

02:13:15

SL: She--she separated from him from two weeks. She said something about dope. I don't know what it was, but maybe he hid it from her and when she—. And you know, when they got married or whatever it didn't work at all and she just quit him. And she took her time after that. And like I said, Middendorf was—. He's buried, actually, in St. Roch Number One, the original. The original St. Roch. He lived in the—around that area. I don't know. Mom—it's all lost probably now. But that's where—we actually—there was one Monday that All Saints [Day] fell on a Monday. And I said, "Joey, let's go—let's go to New Orleans and find Middendorf." And he's got—it's a family tomb. If you go to St. Roch, you know how it's got a chapel to the back? He's in the back left corner, and he's got a tombstone in front of the family crypt and it says, "Louis H. Middendorf. "You could see it. If you go, look at St. Roch from the beginning, from the front of the cemetery, and he's back left and—all the way back.

02:14:24

JL: Horst might want to go check it out. He might want to go see it. You never know.

02:14:27

SL: Well, but—

02:14:26

SR: I'll have to take a picture of it.

02:14:29

SL: I have a picture of somewhere, but I gave most of it to my sister because she has kids and whatever. But a lot I gave to Horst and left it on the walls and whatever for him, because I mean that's--that's his place.

02:14:44

SR: And how old was your grandmother when she passed away?

02:14:45

SL: Seventy-seven?

02:14:48

JL: I think so.

02:14:47

SL: Seventy-seven. That was in '81.

02:14:53

SR: I'm not going to keep you. [*Laughs*] I just—it's fascinating. I had a bunch of questions, but I think you've really—. Yet, is there anything that you can think of that I'm not asking you, that you would want to say?

02:15:09

SL: Well, number one, it's a shame that I can't remember the old stuff that my dad and my grandmother knew. And I just didn't pay attention to it. You know I—while we were living in the restaurant business, it was real for us. But when I was a kid, I never paid attention to it. And he knew all the names of all the canals. And see, that's what Miss Lois and them—

02:15:36

JL: I hope they can fill in some more blanks with those things because—

02:15:38

SL: We were constantly in the restaurant, constantly. We never—if it wasn't for one of my friends that dragged me out ten years ago, I would have never set foot in a boat for thirty years.

02:15:52

JL: We—

02:15:53

SL: He said, "Why don't you have a camp down there?" I *lived* down there.

02:15:57

JL: I mean, why would I—why do I want to go to Manchac when I'm off? I mean—

02:16:00

SL: I said, “Look, I kill fish for a living. Why do I want to catch them?” You know, I was like, “Uh, come on; give me a break. Let me live in Ponchatoula.”

02:16:08

JL: It’s a big recreation area. Okay, from Hammond they all come to Manchac and they have boats and boat houses and they all—they love it. It’s wonderful, but it just wasn’t for us.

02:16:15

SR: You just tried to get to the city.

02:16:17

SL: Yeah, I’ll give—. There’s some advice I could give to restaurant people. Just exactly what my dad said, is never drink while you’re working. **[Laughs]** Never ever. Don’t even start it. Don’t do it. Don’t allow it. Yeah, because when you get to be in your forties and fifties, it—you know, you’ll have a huge bad habit or you won’t have your restaurant. But I think if every—if restaurant people would do that, I think they’d be much better off being sober while they’re working. **[Laughs]**

02:16:49

SR: Right. I think that’s a big problem in the restaurant industry.

02:16:52

JL: Sober—all kinds of sober ways, whatever way you want to take it.

02:16:56

SL: Yeah, we took a drink—I never drank in the restaurant. Well, we might have sipped a couple wines with the wine rep, but we took one to go and that was it, you know. And that was it.

02:17:08

JL: Where was I?

02:17:10

SL: You did, too.

02:17:11

SR: You know, I realize I don't know much about Louis Middendorf. Like, what his personality was like.

02:17:16

SL: Um, a real true German in that my grandmother said he always had a beer in his hand, talking about working while—. But you know, he kept a beer in his hand the whole day and she said she never saw him drunk. Ever, ever, ever. But he was very laid-back. He liked to loan people money that would not repay him. He was—

02:17:41

JL: Very nice person. Very wonderful person, yeah.

02:17:43

SL: Yeah, and he couldn't—he couldn't cook fish, but he was a baker for some reason. He liked to bake cakes and pies.

02:17:50

JL: He liked to invite people over for holidays.

02:17:52

SL: He invited people from Manchac that didn't have family. They closed the restaurant on Christmas and—

02:17:57

JL: He'd throw a big dinner. He'd put a big spread for Christmas.

02:17:58

SL: Throw a big dinner, yeah.

02:17:59

JL: He was just a wonderful guy.

02:18:00

SL: Yeah, real good. But she would do—you know, my grandmother was the cook and he was the baker.

02:18:06

JL: Remember, your dad did say, “I never did appreciate Middendorf until he died.” He said, “He tried to be a good father to me.” Your dad—you know, he was the stepdad, and he said, “I never gave him the respect he deserved.” He was—

02:18:14

SL: Because it wasn’t his dad.

02:18:14

JL: No, but he said he was a fine man and he did really good—.

02:18:17

SL: Very, very huge gentleman, and they got laid low by the Great Depression. They would—yeah. If they wouldn’t have—. Honestly, if it wasn’t for the Great Depression they would have never started a restaurant at all. That was--that was the only reason: because they didn’t have any money.

02:18:35

SR: He died so young.

02:18:37

SL: Heart attack. A lot of them did back then. You know, they keep saying air-conditioning is kind of keeping a lot of people alive, [*Laughs*] so to speak. But—oh, that was interesting. He was a World War I veteran on the American side, but—and he was big in the VFW. He was the commandant.

02:18:59

JL: I want to say two or three states or something. I think a lot—big area.

02:19:02

SL: It was a three-state area. I don't know what state it was but it was a three-state area. He was in charge of the VFW and he went on—he went on conventions or whatever. He died, actually, going—I don't know where it was, but it was like in Memphis or somewhere, and he died during the convention.

02:19:21

JL: You could probably look that up for sure somewhere, yeah.

02:19:22

SL: Yeah, she fussed all the time when he left her because she had to run the restaurant by herself.

02:19:28

JL: “It’s a convention, Josie.”

02:19:30

SL: Yeah, but you—he was a—they call it a commandant or something like that.

02:19:37

JL: I think it was.

02:19:38

SL: Very generous with his time. They—it came down—this is interesting too. They don’t do it anymore, but at that time they used to have a lot of hobos that would come, that would walk to New Orleans like they do now on the interstate, but then you don’t see as many. But back then they would come in and they would--they would stay at the restaurant and then kind of look through the garbage or whatever back—this would be in the thirties for sure. And Middendorf would always get—he’d get two pieces of bread and a piece of fish and make a sandwich for them and give them some water, some clean water. Or, I don’t think he gave them a beer because those people probably didn’t need that. **[Laughs]** But he—every time he—always. Since we were between Ponchatoula, and they would starve between each area or whatever. And I remember even, when we were at the restaurant, there would be some homeless people or something that would look—they would be positively starving and they’d be walking to New Orleans or walking from New Orleans or whatever. And you’d see them out on the road and I’d go get the bus girls or whatever and I’d fix up a little sandwich or something and give it to them

and, you know, on their way. You don't see it very often, but you know when you see it. They were hungry.

02:21:00

JL: They knew where to stop.

02:21:01

SL: Yeah, they knew where to stop. But oh, and being in Manchac you--you took all the dogs that were—all the cats and dogs that were stray. You just—

02:21:11

SR: You did, too, because I know Horst is like—

02:21:13

SL: He inherited, he inherited.

02:21:15

JL: He's done a better job. We had tons of cats.

02:21:18

SL: Yeah, well, depending on how—well anyway, but they—. They figured, “Hey, it's a seafood restaurant. They'll have plenty of fish.” I'm like, oh please. But anyway, that--that was the only thing I can think of that's not even related.

02:21:35

JL: It was an important question you asked. Pick an important question—more important one.

02:21:40

SR: Well it's not written down, but I was wondering this when I was out there: When you were growing up, what kind of bread was used for the sandwiches? Was it—

02:21:50

SL: Oh, sliced bread. Yeah. Well, it was mostly sliced bread. We had—they had a hard—well, Middendorf would go into New Orleans and get French bread, but like you said, after three days it's—you know, it's hard. They didn't normally—I don't remember. I don't even know when po-boys started, actually.

02:22:11

JL: They delivered bread. I remember in the store we had French bread in Hammond in the sixties. Deliveries.

02:22:14

SL: I'm thinking it was sliced bread. I'm pretty sure the buns didn't come around until the fifties for sure. I know that. But—

02:22:22

JL: When we were in there we had buns, French bread, or sliced bread.

02:22:25

SL: No, but I'm talking with my grandmother. Oh, we always had the buns and the French bread and whatever, but I'm talking about beginning—I'm pretty much sure it would be the bread you had to slice. They call it something like cap bread or something. It could have been something like that, something that they don't use anymore now.

02:22:43

SR: But it wasn't like the—yeah, like the po-boy bread from New Orleans, because you couldn't get it daily.

02:22:48

SL: Well, even us, we had to keep it—we got it twice a week and we kept it—we'd freeze it.

02:22:53

JL: Freeze it and take it out.

02:22:54

SL: We'd place it plastic bags and freeze it so it would be fresh when we used it. Because French bread is notorious for—you know, the next day it's--it's crumbs.

02:23:04

SR: What about the oil? Did y'all—did you always use vegetable oil?

02:23:10

SL: Originally it was peanut oil. It was all peanut oil. I think that was—even my grandmother used peanut oil. But then the peanut allergies started becoming a problem and Mom switched to soybean. And from what I gather now, it's—you know, originally it had to have been lard.

02:23:27

JL: Way, way back probably.

02:23:29

SL: Way, way back it would have had to have been lard because that didn't spoil in—. It would have been peanut oil or lard for sure.

02:23:36

SR: Do you know when the transition came from frying in skillets to frying in deep-fryers?

02:23:40

SL: Oh, I'm wondering if—I know Pat Midland had it in the fifties, but I don't think—. I think when they rented it to Pat, which would have been '52 I think. It stayed until '52 because even—. When we were back in Casamento's at one time, and I looked in the kitchen, they were frying in a skillet, weren't they?

02:24:04

SR: I think they still are.

02:24:05

JL: Yeah, that's only ten years ago, yeah.

02:24:06

SL: But I mean, for dad that was just—there was—

02:24:11

SR: Your volume, too.

02:24:11

SL: Oh absolutely, and—

02:24:13

JL: We were saying '67 is probably when they got the fryers, probably? Would you think?

02:24:15

SL: Not, no. Pat had a—she had two small deep fats, but she could have still used skillets. Yeah, she could. Yeah, absolutely. But the big—you know what Horst is doing now that started in '67, the big—the big deep fryers, the fat fryers.

02:24:33

SR: And then I also wanted to ask: So I know that you started getting the farmed catfish, but the other seafood—would you get from fishermen around there, or—? Like the shrimp and the oysters?

02:24:43

JL: The oysters we did.

02:24:44

SL: The oysters came from Hammond. That was French Market in Hammond, Louisiana and—

02:24:53

JL: Bayou La Batre.

02:24:54

SL: Yeah, Bayou La Batre shrimp. We--we went all the way to Alabama to get the shrimp.

It's—my mother had a hard time in the—I would say the '70s—getting a really good count on her shrimp from locals. I think it was the latest—I mean, I guess you put up with it, but she got tired of it.

02:25:16

JL: You needed a reliable source. You had to have what you needed in your freezer, and you take it out and thaw it. It was fresh/frozen on the boats and you bought 500 pounds, 1,000 pounds.

02:25:23

SL: She was getting shorted.

02:25:24

JL: What you needed, you had when you needed it. You couldn't guarantee local. You couldn't guarantee you're going to have shrimp. You don't know that, so—

02:25:30

SL: And so she got it from Bayou La Batre since—I guess since then.

02:25:35

JL: The whole time I was—

02:25:35

SL: The flounders came from Alabama, too, huh? Yeah, they came from Alabama and—

02:25:41

JL: Gulf of Mexico.

02:25:44

SL: Our real crab shells for the stuffed crabs came from Florida. I know it's supposed to be—we had a problem with volume. We had—you either had one supplier was easier to deal with than, say, ten. And I know that was the one thing I really felt conflicted about, is about use Louisiana shrimp and use—whatever and this. But it was awfully hard on us to deal with that many purveyors at one time. If we were smaller, it would have been better. It would have been better. And like I said, I'm sure Horst is doing the same thing. We get *some* people in there just—

02:26:32

JL: You try it.

02:26:33

SL: Yeah, you get a little bit. But on an average it would be a lot less headache to have the most volume. [*Laughs*]

02:26:40

SR: Why don't we wrap up by you both telling me what was the best part of being in that restaurant, the best part of your job?

02:26:50

SL: Oh, well, for me it was having a family restaurant that was so well—you know, had such a great reputation. And you had something to do with that. And you know, you had a sense of

accomplishment every day. When it was fun, it was hugely fun. And when you--when you fed the—my big thing was feeding a whole bunch of people and making a whole lot of money and not one complaint. Not even—nothing. You know, not even the food is too hot or this, that, and the other, and everything went smooth. And the look in other people's eyes when they said, "You own Middendorf?" You know, that was—but you only saw--you only saw those people on Monday and Tuesdays, but anyway—. [*Laughs*]

02:27:43

JL: Because we didn't talk to—we didn't get to talk to them the rest of—

02:27:46

SL: We didn't talk to anybody else, but you know just the sense of accomplishment that we did it together, you know, as a team. It was—and nothing was really so bad that you had to tear your hair out. You know, hindsight is 50/50, and it was—I don't know. I could run on and on. Well go ahead, Joey. What do you think?

02:28:06

JL: That's pretty much—that's mostly it. It's the accomplishment and just doing it on a day-to-day basis. And boy, when Sunday came around and you finished that week and it was wonderful and no complaints and, wow, it was kind of—.

02:28:14

SL: Nobody died. Didn't have a fire [*Laughs*].

02:28:16

JL: Like one of our best friends, the radiologist, says, “Joey, everybody—.” He has a family of three boys, and they’re all grown now, and he’s sitting at the table. “Look around. Everyone here is happy.” He said, “I got to give people bad news. When I tell them the x-ray—.” He said, “Everybody here, they come here and they’re happy.” I said, “J.P., you’re right.” There’s a great—

02:28:32

SL: Yeah, that’s true. You don’t have to—

02:28:33

JL: That was wonderful.

02:28:35

SL: —smile while you’re doing it.

02:28:37

JL: You know, everybody is happy and they’re glad to be there and—.

02:28:39

SL: It’s a happy business. It’s a tough business, but it’s—

02:28:44

JL: It did us okay. We survived.

02:28:45

SL: Yeah, we survived it. [*Laughs*]

02:28:48

SR: Okay, well, thank you for sharing your story with me and with us.

02:28:53

SL: Thank you.

02:28:54

SR: This is really great.

02:28:55

[End Suzie and Joey Lamonte Interview]