DAN BROWN
Leonard's Pit Barbecue – Memphis, TN

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Interviewer: Rien Fertel for the Southern Foodways Alliance
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs
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[Begin Dan Brown-Leonard's Interview]

00:00:00

Rien Fertel: Test; this is Rien Fertel with the Southern Foodways Alliance. It is July 15, 2008, a Tuesday; I'm in Memphis, Tennessee—5465 Fox Plaza Drive—that's the address of Leonard's Pit Barbecue. I'm here with Mr. Dan Brown; Mr. Brown will you please introduce yourself and tell us your birth date for the record?

00:00:26

Dan Brown: Okay; my name is Dan Brown and I was born on April 4, 1947.

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RF: Okay; and how—how long have—well first; what is your position here at Leonard's Pit Barbecue?

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DB: Right now I am the owner of Leonard's Barbecue.

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RF: And how long have you been the owner for?

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DB: I've been the owner for 15 years.

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RF: Okay; so what year was that—that you bought the place?

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DB: I purchased the restaurant from the previous owners in 1993.

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RF: Okay; so—so Leonard's has a very long history, one of the oldest restaurant traditions in Memphis barbecue culture. I think we should maybe start at the beginning with what you know. Tell us when this restaurant was founded—the name was founded—and who it was founded by.

00:01:17

DB: Okay; the restaurant was founded in 1922 by Leonard Heuberger and it was originally at the corner of Trigg and Latham here in Memphis. Then in 1932 he moved from that location to Bellevue and McLemore, 1140 S. Bellevue and it was at that location from 1932 until that restaurant was closed in 1991. And we moved out here actually a few years before that one closed in 1987 in anticipation of the lease running out on the—on the property.

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RF: Okay; can—can you just—just for my own geography. I'm sort of familiar with Memphis; where is Trigg and Latham in the City?

00:02:08

DB: Okay; it is in South Memphis okay and it's very close to the Bellevue and McLemore location. It's within a mile of the Bellevue and McLemore location.

00:02:19

RF: And Mr. Heuberger was—it sounds like a German name; was he German? Do you know anything about that?

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DB: Yes; he was German.

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RF: Was he from Germany or were his parents? Was he an immigrant or a first generation here?

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DB: I do not know.

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RF: Okay; did you—well let's—

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DB: About one of the stories I heard—I'm thinking that maybe he may not have been an immigrant but I'm—I'm thinking that maybe back in the '30s and—'20s and '30s that—that it may not be too many generations removed because I did hear one time people talking about or I saw an old newspaper clipping of during the War and Mr. Leonard was featured on—on a featured article with his picture and everything buying War Bonds during World War II because being of German descent, there—like rumors would get started that—that there were German

sympathizers if you were of German descent kind of thing. And to help dispel those rumors and to keep his business going because it was hurting because of it, he purchased I think what was then considered a huge amount—thousands of dollars of War Bonds and I've actually seen the picture that was in the local paper. So something about that article leads me to believe that—that his family was not in this country many, many, many generations before that.

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RF: Right; so he was showing his support for the country.

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DB: For the country; yeah.

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RF: That's really interesting. Did he open up his original restaurant—Leonard's as a barbecue restaurant? Was it a full service restaurant? What do you know about those early days and what they served?

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DB: There—there—I don't think there were many what you would call full service restaurants, you know then—maybe some hotels or something like that but it was actually pretty much called Leonard's Lunch when he opened at Trigg and Latham and it wasn't I think until after he moved in '32 to Bellevue and McLemore that—that the barbecue became a staple and—and the main item of his—of his restaurant.

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RF: Was Leonard's Lunch—was it sandwiches? It sounds like sandwiches?

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DB: Yeah; mostly—mostly just sandwiches and carry-out service and a little counter with a few stools and may not have even had any tables for dining and—and had very few tables when he originally moved to Bellevue and McLemore.

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RF: And Bellevue and McLemore that's where he started doing barbecue; do you know where he got the idea to do barbecue? Do you know any of the old cooks that might have started the barbecue tradition for him or taught him to do barbecue or encouraged him to cook barbecue?

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DB: I do not know personally any—you know if it was his idea or whose idea. I know a lot of the old cooks and whatever that were there; there was—there was a Pit Cook, name of Paul Tappan that was one of the first—if not the first—man that—that was responsible for just cooking things on the pit. There was a kitchen person named Annie Tillman and her husband Tom Tillman. Both worked for—for Leonard's and I believe Annie was the one most widely credited with coming up with the final barbecue sauce recipe. But I know with—with Mr. Leonard and his wife so you know—input on that also.

00:06:08

RF: Did you ever get a chance to meet the Tillmans?

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DB: Oh yes; I—I worked there and when I started in ’62 Annie Tillman was still—she was the boss of the kitchen and Tom Tillman still worked for Mr. Leonard personally.

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RF: Okay; well let’s talk about—well let’s—let me ask you a few questions about when you started and then we’ll get into the Tillman(s). I think they might be interesting. Tell us when you started here again and what was your position back in the ‘60s?

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DB: I started in 1962 when I was 15—a freshman in high school and it was just a family connection. My family knew the—knew the Leonard family and—and got me a job there. And I started as just a general kitchen helper. You know you just come in and slice onions you know or 200-pounds of onions every morning for hamburgers and onion rings and things like that. And then just gradually all the way through high school you know just kind of progressed to where they had a position—they—they just called it a sandwich man and—and that’s what I did was make barbecue sandwiches, you know lunch, dinner.

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RF: And you—you worked during the summers only or on weekends or after school on weekdays too?

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DB: After school on weekdays, weekends, and then you know all the time in the summer—days, nights, as much as I could work.

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RF: And you said your—your family was friends of the Tillmans?

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DB: Of the—of the Heubergers.

00:07:37

RF: Of the Heubergers; where—where was—where did you come from? Where was your family located?

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DB: My family was right here in Memphis. They were—we were in—in East Memphis at—near Park Avenue and Highland. Leonard's daughter, who—who—and—and son-in-law, Bill and Thelma Hughes were actually the—the Managers of the restaurant. Leonard was there every day but his daughter and son-in-law were—were there working the restaurant and his daughter and son-in-law went to church at St. Paul's Catholic Church in White Haven and my uncle was the Pastor of that church; so that's where the—where I got the job; yeah.

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RF: Okay; and—and tell me what you—you remember about Mr. Heuberger and any stories. Do you remember maybe how he—how he looked? Did he spend any time in the kitchen cooking?

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DB: I—I never saw Mr. Heuberger in the kitchen. Now you know when—you've got to remember; when I—when I started there he was probably already in his mid to late '50s or something and had a daughter and son-in-law. Bill Hughes, his son-in-law worked right next to me and trained me and taught me how to make sandwiches and—and—and Bill and Thelma had two sons, Tommy Hughes and Billy Hughes and they both worked there, and I worked right alongside them and Bill, you know in the kitchen. And you know as—as a 15 year-old I didn't have much of any interaction with Mr. Leonard. I wouldn't—you know I'd say good morning, sir or something like this; he was a very friendly man. It wasn't that he wasn't approachable; it was just nothing—there was nothing that I had to say to him—ever you know. In other words, I'd—I dealt with the people that were my superiors.

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RF: Well do you remember him—was he ever in the front? Well when he was in the front of the house like I'm sure he was, would he greet customers? Would he go table to table?

00:09:39

DB: He was always in the front of the house and he was always greeting customers but he did not stand at the door and greet customers. He had a stool that he sat at—at the counter and everyone that came in, he knew them and—and most of them he knew by name. And if he

didn't—if he was speaking with someone the people would wait you know like a reception line almost to—you just didn't go sit down without saying hello to Mr. Leonard. He sat at the same spot at the counter every day—every day.

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RF: And—and that second location on Bellevue or the second incarnation was it a lunch and dinnertime place? Was it one or the other; was it—was it—who—what kind of meals were served and who ate there? Was it families? Was it a Sunday after church kind of place?

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DB: Yeah; it was all—definitely a family kind of place and businessmen Monday through Friday at lunch from 11:00 to 2:00 and—and even in the—all through the '50s and even through the early '60s when I first started, tremendous parking lot business, carhop business you know where the carhops came and took your order and brought the food out on the little tray that hooked to your window, kind of like Sonic does now. But the—the carhop business really started declining with air-conditioning, okay. That's when people—they were eating out on the lot not because we had carhops, it was just that it was so uncomfortable inside the—the restaurant that you were just much more pleasant to eat in your—eat in your car, so—. But it was a lot of Sunday after church business because we did a lot of plate lunches, a lot of turkey and dressing and meatloaf and you know meat and three vegetable kind of plates but it was still barbecue, barbecue, barbecue. It was you know lunch and dinner seven days a week; we were never closed. Thanksgiving and Christmas were the only two days of the year we were closed.

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RF: Right; talking about the carhops, there's a sign here in the—the restaurant now that says it was the busiest carhop—that Leonard's was the busiest carhop restaurant in America in the '50s. Is that—is—?

00:11:54

DB: Sounds good to me. **[*Laughs*]** Yeah; you know I have no way of knowing. I can tell you it was busy. When I started there in '62 I'd work weekend nights and—and I worked on the—we had a side just for the carhops. You know it was—there was a dining room entrance. There was the carry-out and if you were coming in to place your order for carry-out you came in the dining room or went up to the counter that had stools where you could sit down and eat there, but you could also just stand at the end of the corner and place a carry-out order. And then there was the carhop business. We had just as many sandwich boards set up to take care of carhop orders as we had to take care of the entire dining room and all of the carry-out business and it was—it was busy. On Friday and Saturday nights we'd have 18, 19 sometimes 20 carhops if there was a big football game or something like that. They'd have as many as could—as could come in.

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RF: Do you—do you remember in the—in the '60s in your teenage years, do you remember eating at any other barbecue restaurants or any other places that were really popular that you'd go to with your family or on your own with your friends?

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DB: Sure, yeah; I was—where I lived I was within a half a mile of Beretta's Barbecue which I believe opened in the '30s in Memphis—if not the '30s, the very early '40s but it was there a

long time—family-owned just like Leonard's was and—and the old Pig and Whistle which was on Union was similar to Leonard's. In other words it was—you had carhops and barbecue and—and I ate at both of those places. There were others—Kaye's on Crump and that was a drive-in with carhops and barbecue but I didn't eat there much. That was downtown getting close to the bridge and—and you know even though Leonard's was pretty close to there, it was just—it was further away so there was other places to go you know that—but those are the barbecue places that I remember eating. I love it; I—I to this day if I take a vacation or go out of town, if I see a barbecue place that's not a chain or something like that I'll for sure stop there.

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RF: I see, well and tell me about your time in the kitchen here. Tell me about the Tillmans; what do you remember about Mr. and Mrs. Tillman?

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DB: I remember just Annie Tillman just being such a gracious, kind, classy lady—just so nice and pleasant, never you know—as a 15 year-old when you're working back in the '60s you're a little cowed by everything and she was obviously the one. She was the person okay and she was just so kind. She would show you everything she was doing. I was really interested and—and she never—I never got the feeling that I was bothering her or anything like that. And Tom Tillman, her—her husband—the same way—just the kindest, gentlest man and kind of small in stature and he just did odd jobs around there. He could fix anything; he was the kind of man—it would really be nice if you owned your own restaurant, he was the kind of person that could save you a lot of money because you, you know he could do minor plumbing, electrical, carpentry—some major things he could—he could do. And he helped around there and—and I believe that—that

Mr. Leonard just had him on salary. I mean they—'cause he worked a lot for Leonard at his house and—and my understanding, in his younger days he was one heck of a baseball player. Really from—from what Leonard and his daughter and son-in-law and grandsons told me that he—he could have been a professional baseball player. He was a black man and—and he—he actually I believe played in the Negro leagues but—but at that time it was—when he was young it was pre-Jackie Robinson and there was no opportunity for him. And so after his—after he got up in years the baseball was not an option for making a living. But from what I've heard he could have made a living at baseball and he—he was just a great guy—great guy.

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RF: Do you—do you remember—did you know where he was from? Was he from Memphis or outside the City?

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DB: I have no idea but there—I never heard anything that would have led me to believe that he was not from Memphis. Never heard them talk about any other place or city or anything.

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RF: And he was a really, really good cook?

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DB: Now Tom, I don't think—in other words, I never saw him do anything other than—other than the—just the general handyman kind of thing. Now he would you know check in trucks; I mean he was—he was the trusted back of the house individual. In other words he would—he

would be the one that for Leonard to check-in—check-in meat trucks you know and things like that, but I—I never saw him actually with an apron working around the food. That's all Annie did.

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RF: And—and so you took over in 1993.

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DB: Yeah; yes.

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RF: Was there a period in between the Heubergers and you of—of ownership?

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DB: Yes; in other words in—in the late '60s around '67, late '67 maybe early '68 a group of men headed by TW Hoehn that was a huge car dealer owner here—it was Hoehn Chevrolet, one of the biggest Chevy dealerships if not the biggest in the entire Southeast United States and a group of men who were all just customers of Leonard's and really loved it, well there was the boom going on in the late '60s, early '70s of McDonald's franchising, restaurant franchising, and it was their idea to make Leonard's the McDonald's of the barbecue business. And so they bought Leonard out. When they bought him out I had actually been drafted and I was in the service; I was gone from '67 to '70—did not work for Leonard's for those three years, and it changed hands during those three years, so—. All I know is that it was sold. When I came back out of the service and was going to school at then Memphis State University on the GI Bill I

went back to Leonard's to get a part-time job so I could work. I was married; I got married while I was in the service and that's when I found out that it had changed hands. And I worked for those people from 1970 until I bought it from them in 1993.

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RF: And how do you spell that man's name—is it Owen or—?

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DB: It's Hoehn—H-o-e-h-n.

00:19:02

RF: Okay.

00:19:05

DB: TW Hoehn.

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RF: And what did you in between those years when you worked for the new owners?

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DB: Basically the same thing; when I started with them I was just—I was just working in the kitchen. It was part-time and I was going to school full-time and I made sandwiches and you know worked the—the sandwich line. I did catering; we did a lot of catering—still do a lot of catering and I did the same things with them. And as I stayed there over the years I kind of

started working more hours and going to school more part-time and working more full-time and then they were opening up more restaurants. They were opening up fast-food restaurants all over the City of Memphis in anticipation of this making a big franchise type operation. So they were—they were trying to get you know six, seven, eight, ten fast-food restaurants up and going that were company owned with those being then the—the prototypes of what they would use to—to start selling franchises. And as they did that I kind of—then I kind of became an Assistant Manager and then a Manager and then later on I actually became like what they called a General Manager. It was position they just created; so I was over all the Managers of their—of their city-side fast-food restaurants. Unfortunately for them, fortunately for me that type of thing—barbecue is not fast. They wanted it to be fast-food but it's not fast, so no matter how many times they tried to make it to where you could just come in and say I want this and you could get them right out through and out the door with a little small dining room like McDonald's had at first you know with you know four tables and—and no drive-thru or anything like that but you couldn't do it. You just couldn't do it and no matter how hard they tried and no matter how good they were in their hearts about it it's just something that was never going to work and it didn't work. **[*Laughs*]**

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RF: What were these—were these restaurants called Leonard's?

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DB: Oh yeah; yes they were all Leonard's Barbecue uh-huh.

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RF: So there were 10 or so around the City?

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DB: Yes; uh-hm—may have been—you know they'd—they'd open and close them. They would build—they would have fast-food restaurants that were free-standing and then they were trying to open some that were in like shopping center type locations—strip shopping centers, things like that—maybe a mall location, you know just to have all the different kinds of fast-food types all going at once. And they all made money, but they all made just a little bit of money. And—and that wasn't the idea to have those small places; if you have 20 small places and every one of them makes $1,000 a month you're making $20,000 a month but you've got a lot of headaches if you've got 20 places, so—.

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RF: Yeah; and did they keep one large full-service restaurant like the one we're at now? Was this part of that chain?

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DB: They kept the Bellevue and McLemore.

00:22:16

RF: Oh they kept—

00:22:16

DB: Yes; even though Leonard did not sell them the property or the building; in other words that was on a—on a two—you know a ten-year lease with two ten-year options or a ten-year lease with a ten and a five-year option or something like that which is why in 1993 which I think was 25 years after they sold it that the final option of the final lease was running out and the piece of property—at that time the City had gone past Bellevue and McLemore, so Bellevue and McLemore instead of being at the—on the outskirts of the City and the prime business and—and tourist and even residential hotspot, now it was in the middle of an industrial area that was where the—where the residential area had passed it by. And—and so as the—as the leases ran out the piece of property became more valuable to be something other than a final destination medium-priced family restaurant. It was a huge corner location which is now a Walgreen's, something that's turning big bucks you know.

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RF: And in that final decade in—in the '80s and early '90s who was the Pit Master at the Bellevue location?

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DB: That would be and even before then would be James Willis. Paul Tappan was still there in the '60s when I first started. Paul Tappan was still there in the '70s and there was a James Willis and a Milton Smith that were both full-time Pit Cooks in addition to Paul Tappan. Then Paul started kind of phasing out and just hung around the daytime some and cooked a few ribs and a couple of hams and James Willis and Milton worked every night. Sometimes both of them worked at night if it was a weekend night and they were cooking a whole lot of shoulders.

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RF: Can—can you tell us what you remember about Paul Tappan?

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DB: I—I don't remember that much. He has two and maybe more than two—but two daughters that still come in the restaurant. I never had met them and—and until they came in here in the last two years and just mentioned that their father had worked for Leonard's way back in the '30s and '40s that was the first time I had ever met them, but of course I knew Paul. And I—I just remember him being—I didn't have a lot of interaction with him. All of the men that—that were Pit Cooks at Leonard's were all extremely classy guys. In other words, they—they were all working there; they were all on salary. They weren't punching a clock. They were all guys that always—always showed up to work. In other words, when—when Leonard had somebody and you had to be there to work. It couldn't be something where you just well you know I'm sick today or I don't feel good or my tummy hurts or something. I don't—I don't remember any of them ever missing a day of work **[*Laughs*]** unless like maybe for surgery or something like that. But not a whole lot of interaction with Paul but a whole lot of interaction with James Willis and—and he was the Head Pit Cook. And Milton Smith worked up under him. A couple guys—Herman Ivory, Clinton Powmore, a couple young guys that were coming in and—and—and actually worked by themselves. All the Pit Cooks had to be able to work by themselves but it was James Willis was the head guy; Milton Smith was number two and everybody else were just Assistants, you know.

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RF: And the recipe would be passed down from man—from Pit Cook to Pit Cook or was James Willis or Tappan—did they ever change anything? Were they allowed to?

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DB: Now I wouldn't call it a recipe—just a procedure.

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RF: The procedure, so it was passed down?

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DB: Yes; uh-huh yeah and—and all the Managers that were hired when it was going to be—when the—when the group headed by TW Hoehn and the President of the corporation was Richard Jacobs under TW Hoehn—and every Manager he hired had to spend a week out in the pits at night you know with James Willis and them. Now they considered it most of the ones that were hired, you know were guys that were coming from McDonald's or Shoney's and they considered that a—a drudgery you know where I was spending the night out there with them before anybody ever was telling people to go out there and spend the night with them **[*Laughs*]** because I wanted to see them do it you know and—and—and learn how to do it, and that's what I did and it was—it's a very simple procedure. There's nothing—there's nothing that anybody could learn it; it's just that it takes patience and—and people don't have the time anymore.

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RF: Right; well I want to ask about the—the cooking procedure but I want to ask just one or two questions about James Willis.

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DB: Okay.

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RF: We did interview him back in 2002, we—the Southern Foodways Alliance; so can you—do you have one or—one story or anything about him that stands out that you remember? He no longer works here and you can tell us about that but you know anything you'd like to say about Mr. Willis?

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DB: You know I really—I don't know; I think it's the—a good mark of the quality of the person that I don't really have *a* story about him. He was—you know he was just—he was the rock. He was always there, you know. If the pit caught on fire and everybody else—when everybody else is screaming and running and everything else it was James that picked up the little water bucket and barely cracked the door open and got the fire out and knew what to do. And if—he—he never—he never got flustered; he never—he never seemed like he was in a hurry but when he did it the meat always came off 45-minutes before anybody else that you'd go out there and they were rushing around and sweating and they were behind and they couldn't get this pit turned and the meat on this pit needed to be turned and I need a fire on the third pit but I'm down here. And you never saw that with James; he would just be all by himself, just this slow easy, graceful almost way of—of doing it that was just astonishing to me to this day because it's not as easy as he made it look. I guarantee you it's not near that easy. **[*Laughs*]**

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RF: And—and he's retired now?

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DB: Yes; he's completely retired, sitting at home, got kids and grandkids and great-grandkids and still living right now in the same house I believe on Gleason which is probably within four or five blocks of Leonard's. It was where he was originally living I believe when he went to work at Leonard's. Then he got married and moved but he kept that home and rented it—used it as rental property. And then after his wife passed away he sold the house that he and his wife were in and moved back and—and lived back, so he's right back in the neighborhood.

00:30:03

RF: Let's talk about your barbecue. How would you describe your barbecue? What do you cook, and then we can go into the processes?

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DB: Well I think any time you just say—if you're saying barbecue and you say Leonard's you're talking about a—a barbecue pork shoulder sandwich—pulled or chopped on a bun with barbecue sauce and coleslaw on the sandwich. And that's what a barbecue is; now it's actually a noun. It's not a process. What we do is cook it okay; **[*Laughs*]** and that's the process. We—we don't—we never use the word *barbecue* for what we're doing to the ribs or the shoulders or something like that; we're cooking them, you know. And then the—*a barbecue*—is a barbecue sandwich. Now ribs you know is getting to be a big thing and when I first started working at Leonard's, ribs were not a big thing.

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RF: Did you sell them or they just did not sell well?

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DB: They were on the menu but they weren't—not anything we took a lot of trouble with. I think Leonard—I don't know; you know par-boiled them or something. It just wasn't—that just wasn't it you know. They were on the menu and I doubt if they were one-tenth of one-percent of his sales. Ribs have come along since—since they just got so wildly popular and even in Memphis. If you went to Leonard's you went for a barbecue sandwich—chopped pork shoulder sandwich. If you—when you went for ribs you went to the Rendezvous; that was it—the Rendezvous has got pork shoulder sandwich and back then had pork shoulder sandwiches but it wasn't a big part of his operation, just as the ribs were not a big part of Leonard's operation. I think Beretta's may have been the first of the old places that—that more or less featured the ribs, okay; but then as places started coming along and national chains like Tony Romo's and places like that—that were serving mainly ribs as—as being a barbecue place but when you went in that was the feature was—was ribs. Well then Leonard's had to—had to change and back in the '80s we started taking as much time with the—with the ribs. And James Willis could cook anything; he could cook anything. He could cook ribs certainly on the pit—no par-boiling. All of that stopped okay; **[*Laughs*]** so you know they were just put on the pit and cooked with charcoal, old lump charcoal when James Willis started cooking. And when Paul Tappan started cooking there was no such thing as a charcoal briquette. It hadn't been invented yet, so—so what we used is still the old-fashioned what they call lump charcoal. We don't use briquettes and that's just the way we learned to—to cook and so that's what we use.

00:32:58

RF: And what is that lump charcoal made from?

00:33:01

DB: It's just hardwood charcoal. That's it.

00:33:06

RF: And where do you get it from?

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DB: I get it from—there's—there's actually a business here in town called *The Charcoal Store* **[*Laughs*]**. Guess what they sell?

00:33:15

RF: Charcoal **[*Laughs*]**; so and—and your shoulders, can you tell us a bit about the process without giving anything away?

00:33:22

DB: Oh yeah there's nothing; yeah there's—there's only one secret and—to Leonard's and that would be the barbecue sauce, okay. That's a secret recipe. Shoulders, we—the same thing that we did way back when; you just—you trim them, trim a little of the fat off of them, leave some fat on them but you're trimming a little bit. The manufacturer sends you—sends them to you a little heavy. So we trim a little fat off of them and throw it away, and then you just—you're

cooking the shoulders about—still about 10 or 11 hours. Now we're using a hickory smoker for the—for the first 75-percent of the cooking but then it's still just right onto a charcoal pit and—and that's what gives it that brown—finish them off there and—and the charcoal gives them a little more of the—. The smoker gives them a lot of flavor on the inside of the meat, which you don't get from just cooking them directly over charcoal. But the charcoal finishes them off and gives them that—that crunchy what we call brown meat on the outside which is what Leonard's customers are looking for.

00:34:42

RF: That—that first part of the process, the—the—the smoker is that an electric smoker?

00:34:47

DB: Gas with hickory wood, yeah; gas-fired but burns hickory—hickory wood so it's the hickory wood that's giving the flavor to the inside of the meat 'cause it's slow-smoked on there and then comes off of there and goes on just a regular charcoal pit.

00:35:05

RF: And the process has always been this two-part process?

00:35:08

DB: Never had a smoker before even though they—it was just a charcoal pit but they did try and cook them slower at the beginning which is the—the step that the smoker has replaced as far as the pit. Now what I can do—what you couldn't do back then is put them on that and go off and leave them, okay because they won't catch on fire because you're getting the slow smoking as an

indirect heat. Before there was no way to do it indirectly ‘cause all you had was the pit, so even though you were doing a real low fire, someone had to be there to keep the fire going and to be sure that it didn’t flame up. And now I’ve just eliminated having to have a person sit there during that step but then once you get them off of there then it’s strictly hands-on after that.

00:36:01

RF: This is overnight having that person sit with it?

00:36:04

DB: It was overnight yeah; so now it’s—it’s overnight but there’s—there’s no person sitting there and then everything is done when we come in—in the morning.

00:36:14

RF: And how long is the whole process?

00:36:16

DB: It’s about a total of 10 or 11 hours—about eight hours on the smoker and two hours on the charcoal pit and an hour of prep and moving them.

00:36:27

RF: And are they rubbed or spiced before they’re put on the pits?

00:36:30

DB: We don't do anything. Now a lot of people do okay but we just—we just don't do anything. The—the only thing and there is one small difference there is that back when—when James Willis and all them were doing it they used to have a big barrel of just table salt and they would just reach in with their hand and throw the salt onto the shoulders.

00:36:51

RF: As it was on the pit?

00:36:52

DB: As they were sitting on the pit. One time only okay when they first put them on and—and for you know—then they sat there and cooked for 10 hours so I mean it wasn't—then the—then the fat was dripping off and all that salt was dripping off so we don't salt them anymore. Okay; if you're going to salt them you can salt them after, but Leonard—but everything is the same. In other words, it's just meat that's cooked; that's it. There's—there's no—we don't use any of the things—and I know a lot of people do and I'm sure it makes a difference but ours is just meat that's been smoked with hickory and cooked over charcoal and then it's what we—after it's cooked, a homemade recipe of the barbecue sauce—the sweet sauce and the homemade recipe of the sweet mustard coleslaw.

00:37:45

RF: How would you describe the barbecue sauce here without any secrets?

00:37:50

DB: I think sweet is the—yeah; because that—that's going to be the two kinds of barbecue sauces that you see in this part of the country is either a sweet tomato-based, so ketchup, sweet red barbecue sauce or a browner thinner tangier more vinegary sauce. Even though ours has a lot of vinegar in it, it has a lot of sugar in it too, so it—it becomes sweet and I think that's the two kinds. I think Topps Barbecue Sauce would be what I would call a good different type of barbecue sauce, just a—a more brown tangy sauce but ours is sweet.

00:38:32

RF: Do you have a hot sauce also or a hot variety of your sweet sauce?

00:38:36

DB: We do not have a hot variety of the sweet sauce but we have a homemade hot sauce that just sits on the table. It's a non-cooked sauce. It's been—it's hot.

00:38:47

RF: So it's like a Tabasco® type sauce?

00:38:48

DB: Type yes; we do make our own so it's distinctive.

00:38:52

RF: Okay; all right and—and tell me I'm guessing that hot sauce might go good with something that I had last time I was here two weeks ago and this isn't something you traditionally find at barbecue restaurants but you have really great onion rings. Can you tell me about those?

00:39:09

DB: Now I don't—we don't have too many people that put that hot sauce on the onion rings. That's on the table strictly for the barbecue sandwiches, yeah. But yeah; the onion rings like I said when I first started at Leonard's the—the first job I had was you know these jumbo yellow onions come in 50-pounds sacks. So the first day I come in there they put me in the back room and there's one of these little Berkel hand slicers, electric slicer there and with a dial on it that you can do the blade up and down and they said well you need to slice onions for hamburgers and for onion rings. And you slice the hamburger onions on number two or three which was real thin and the onion ring onions on 12. And so there's this room in the back of the restaurant and there was these four 50-pound sacks of onions on this pallet back there and then a table with the slicer. And so I said okay; and I said how many—you know how much of each? And they said one bag **[*Laughs*]**—one bag for hamburgers and the other three bags for onion rings. So that's how many onion rings—now at least I didn't have to punch them but I had to slice all those onions and then somebody else punched the rings out and you know we don't sell that many onion rings today here; we sell a lot I get about—I get about four 50-pound bags a week here—here and I don't sell hamburgers. So that was—I don't sell hamburgers because maybe it's because of the aversion I had to slicing those 50-pounds of onions for hamburgers every day, but I just—you know I kind of like to have a sandwich place that doesn't sell a hamburger because that's not what we do; we're a barbecue place. So we sell about four 50-pound bags of onions a week in onion rings and they're homemade. It's—it's the recipe—every recipe we use is the recipe that I learned in the '60s, so it's just a—a distinctive onion ring batter. They're not breaded and you know we—we sell a lot of them and I don't see people put anything on them. Maybe you put the hot sauce on them, but **[*Laughs*]** mostly salt, pepper, and ketchup.

00:41:30

RF: I put hot sauce on everything. But why—why do you think Leonard's has—has lasted so long when a lot of those other restaurants that you ate at you know back in the '60s aren't around no more?

00:41:41

DB: I think 'cause we're the best. I think—I think we were the best then okay. I loved Beretta's; I loved the old Pig and Whistle but we were always the busiest and I think—I just—we were the best. I mean it's the best sauce and slaw recipe that go together now. It doesn't mean it's—I mean there are different ones that are good but yeah for—for a sweet barbecue sauce with a sweet mustard coleslaw if that's the way your tastes run the customers are going to come here, and they still are from way back when.

00:42:17

RF: Okay; and—and what makes—what—what—why do you think customers enjoy the—the barbecue on the sandwich? What makes it so special?

00:42:26

DB: That's got—it's Memphis. Yeah; it's Memphis.

00:42:30

RF: Is it just Memphis-style and you do the best Memphis-style you mean?

00:42:35

DB: Well it's—I'm not going to go so far as to say we—we do the best Memphis-style. **[*Laughs*]** We do a really good barbecue sandwich but yeah that is—in other words you just you know—you—you have—I have people come in all the time and say I was in St. Louis and I was here, I was here. You know they don't even put slaw on their barbecue sandwiches or something you know like that or—or it was sliced instead of chopped. Well when you finish cooking this meat there's not a knife sharp enough to where you could slice it; it's no way. It will fall apart, so you—so it's just different styles of barbecue in different parts of the country and I think Memphis-style is certainly chopped pork shoulder. And it may not you know—pulled or chopped; it could be either one so pulled is nothing different. It's just not chopped; so it's either chopped or not chopped, but—so some people just like a little more texture to what they're putting in their mouth but the original was chopped and—and Leonard's always had pulled if people ordered it that way. But it was you know one out of twenty or something like that but Leonard's always also had white and brown and mixed. So the shoulder gets dark on the outside; that was brown meat. And it's—in the inside they called it white meat like turkey would be but it's you know not like that; it's just it doesn't have any of the outside crunchy part on it, so people that liked it a little leaner might order the white meat, but—. Mixed; you'd get a little bit of both and probably the best I think.

00:44:13

RF: And—and do people still order it that way here?

00:44:14

DB: Still order it that way, yeah—white, brown, pulled, hold the slaw, hot you know.

00:44:23

RF: And—and tell—just one abstract question; what—what do you think barbecue means to Memphis or why do you think barbecue culture is—is so big here and has been for so long?

00:44:36

DB: That—I don't know and that's—that's a great question and people ask me that all the time. I don't know; I grew up eating it. I love it; I eat it to this day okay. I eat it—I eat it here; I—I stop—I'll eat at Topps just to have something different. There's a place about six or seven blocks from here called Showboat Barbecue; I'll stop there. A guy named Porter Moss owns it; the owner is standing there working the drive-thru window, you know. It's a different taste; it's more of a tangy taste rather than the sweet and I just—I love barbecue sandwiches. I love barbecued ribs. I like wet ribs and I like dry ribs. I don't know; I grew up eating it and I'm—I don't know—I'm hooked on it and I think there are a lot of people in Memphis that are because you know if you go to other—I don't know. I don't know; you know maybe chili in Cincinnati or I don't know what these other regional things might be but—but boy Memphis has got—I mean so many barbecue places and they're—and we're all busy.

00:45:47

RF: Do you cook barbecue at home or smoke meats at home or do you get your fill of it here?

00:45:53

DB: Oh no; I'd never cook it at home and—and not that—not because I get my fill of it here. If I wanted it at home—I'm here every day; I'd just take it home. **[*Laughs*]** There's no—you know I

already cooked it; I already did the cooking so I'd just—I'd just take it home. If I cook at home I have a grill outside. I don't have a propane tank okay; I got sacks of charcoal and—and a charcoal grill but I'll cook steaks or chicken or something like that on the grill—kabobs, burgers but—but no I don't have any kind of barbecue pit or—. I mean I got—yeah I got one; you know I'm only 15 minutes from home, so I don't need another one.

00:46:35

RF: We're in one of the main dining rooms, I guess the first big dining room that you see when you come into the restaurant and there's—there's a giant green truck **[*Laughs*]** in—in the middle of the dining room? What is that truck? It has Leonard's all over it; it looks like an old delivery truck.

00:46:47

DB: We just—it's a '54 Dodge panel truck that's painted up like an old catering or delivery truck and it's just—we did a remodeling here back years ago and just one of the things—we did everything kind of in a '50s décor to—to remind people that you know Leonard's has been around a long time and the interior decorator came up with that idea. He had some old pictures of some old catering trucks and so we painted it up like an old catering truck. His name was—he was a Memphis guy; his name was Grady Woods and I think he was the Memphis College of Art graduate and now he's a commercial interior designer and a racecar driver is his—is his two, and I think it's like a profession you know like—like Auto Club kind of thing and—and he had—there was a local artist here in Memphis named Charlie Miller who just passed away a few months ago. And he did all the murals and he—Charlie Miller painted the truck, an old Memphis College of Art guy that hung around. He was a kind of Midtown kind of guy; hung around some

of the beer joints. Well they're—they're not really beer joints, but hung around some of the places in Midtown and did a lot of art in there and did a lot of Elvis in a—like a bullfighter in one of the places in Midtown and he was a local legend here, and he painted all these murals in here—the old Leonard's.

00:48:17

RF: And tell me about—you have a really great neon side both outside and inside and tell us what it says, what it is, and if it's referring to you.

00:48:30

DB: It's not referring to me but that sure worked out good, so yeah the old pig twirling a cane and a top hat and a tuxedo was one of the original moving neon signs in Memphis. It's been featured in a few newspaper articles, the old—or still in business Bolton Sign Company made that sign. And when we moved it from Bellevue and McLemore to here—it's outside the restaurant, Bolton—grandson—his grandfather had actually made the original sign; the grandson refurbished the sign here and then there's a replica of it inside the dining room behind our buffet. And that was actually made I believe by West Memphis Sign Company when they filmed *Great Balls of Fire* here in Memphis, I don't know 20—I don't know—when they did it—20 you know decades ago **[*Laughs*]** okay. And they—they wanted to shoot a scene at the old Leonard's at Bellevue and McLemore of—in the restaurant but they couldn't shoot the sign outside the building 'cause it was on the street and they'd get too much modern background. So they made another sign that looked just like it to put over the door on the side of the parking lot so that when they showed the sign they would just be showing the vehicles that they had put in the parking lot that were all old '50s vehicles which was about 1.2 seconds in the movie itself and

they spent three days there, made a sign, full crew, big catering kitchen drove in from California, set up on our back lot. One day their sinks backed up, a big portable huge catering—bigger—it was as big as our kitchen and our restaurant and their sinks backed up and their dishwashers that—kids they hired didn't show up so they—they come in and said they—we were all there you know like watching the movie stars and Dennis Quaid and all these people and sat all my friends down there in the middle of the night. And they come in—and some of the—us that just worked there and they come in and wanted to know if we had anybody there that would wash their pots and pans for them after they fed the guys. And I told them—I stuck my nose up in the air and I'm said I'm not washing them; I come down here to watch this you know. I'm like a General Manager here. Some guy says okay and then this girl that still works for me named Loretta Hopper, she says I'll wash them. And I said don't go wash those pots and pans. She goes and washes those pots and pans—there was four of them, took her 10 minutes and he gave her $500. **[*Laughs*]** I said—I said man I was there the next night with my apron on. **[*Laughs*]** But they never asked me again to wash his pots and pans.

00:51:35

RF: Tell—tell me what exactly the sign says, the moving neon sign.

00:51:39

DB: Yeah; so—so it's the—the pig is walking and it says *Mr. Brown goes to town* and of course my name is Dan Brown, so that worked out great. But what it refers to is the—is the sandwich we were talking about on that pork shoulder sandwich you could get brown meat or white meat and on some of the real old menus it would say *Mr. Brown* for brown meat and *Miss—Miss White* for white meat simply because the white meat being a little more lean—the brown mean

you know off the outside of the shoulder and going to have some fat in it and so you know you were a little more macho if you ate the brown meat. So it was mostly men and a lot of ladies ordered the white meat ‘cause that they wouldn’t get the fat in their mouth you know and all of this. So it—the—the—I’ve got menus here that say *Mr. Brown; Miss White* on the—but that’s just your choice on the sandwich. And the pig and top hat was *Mr. Brown*.

00:52:36

RF: Hmm; and—and before we started our conversation you were telling me about—or the recorded conversation you were telling me that some of the Heubergers are—are still around. Are they in the restaurant business or—?

00:52:49

DB: One is; some are still around. The daughter—Thelma Hughes that I worked for, Mr. Leonard’s daughter, I believe his only child—the only one that I knew of, she’s still living and she’s retired, way—way retired. And she had two sons, Billy Hughes and Tommy Hughes and Billy Hughes is not in the restaurant business. He worked for the Commercial Appeal. I don't know if he still does or he may be retired and then Tommy Hughes does own his own barbecue restaurant in—down in South Haven, Mississippi on Highway 51, the same street—Bellevue that—except it’s in Mississippi right outside of Memphis and it’s called Tommy Leonard’s Old South Barbecue. Leonard is Tommy’s middle name, so it’s Tommy Leonard’s Old South Barbecue.

00:53:49

RF: And do you know how—does he carry on the—the recipes and the family tradition of the barbecue here?

00:53:55

DB: As far as I know he does not use any of these original recipes; those were sold when—when his grandfather Leonard Heuberger sold it to Hoehn. And I'm pretty sure that Tommy just has his own. I've eaten there before; it's really good. It's really good but it's—it's been so long ago when I ate there that I'm just going by my memory that I don't recollect it being the same slaw and sauce.

00:54:22

RF: Okay; and—and just one or two more questions—I have a question about Mr. Willis again. You said he was—he could cook anything and I've—I've worked in a few restaurants and I know that on certain days the Chef is allowed to cook an employee meal. Was Mr. Willis ever—did he ever cook meals for the people who worked here only—special things?

00:54:49

DB: No; but—

00:54:51

RF: Did you ever eat his other cooking outside the restaurant? Do you know what he cooked?

00:54:54

DB: No; as far as I know—in other words, when he cooked it was that same as me. It was—it was there. Now he cooked all sorts of things. All the old barbecue places, Topps, Beretta's, Leonard's all used to take in meat from customers and cook it—nickel a pound, dime a pound, whatever. Well people would bring down at Leonard's would bring—during deer season they'd bring in venison; they'd bring in bear, goat, lamb, just all sorts of—all sorts of things. And—and James would—would cook whatever they brought in. And years later he used to cook for I—I want to say Marguerite Piazza every year had a dinner at her home, a social—she always sang the *National Anthem* at the Liberty Bowl.

00:55:52

RF: And she was an opera singer?

00:55:55

DB: Yes; and—and she would have a dinner before the Liberty Bowl game, a day or two before for all the people that were in town, all the celebs and—and I believe that she would bring meat down there and even after we quit taking in meat to cook, they always still cooked hers. And she would bring like venison and things like that and James Willis would cook that. And she'd buy a barbecue from us also to have something other than the game 'cause that wasn't always to everybody's taste—thing. But yeah; he could cook anything. I've—I've been there when he was cooking bear, when he was cooking buffalo, when he was cooking goat; he could cook anything. He could cook anything on that pit.

00:56:38

RF: And—and who is your Pit Master or Head Cook now?

00:56:40

DB: It's me and—and I have—I have several helpers back in the kitchen; Lindel Whitmore would be the main guy but there's—there's two or three of us that—that cook it seven days a week.

00:56:54

RF: Okay; and just one last question. Where do you think Memphis barbecue is going to go? Do you think it's going to change; do you think it's going—going to stay the same? Do you think—well restaurants like yours will be around for—for a lot longer? You're—this is one of the—this might be the oldest in the City that's—still has—you know still has the same name and recipes. What do you think is going to happen in the next 20 years or so?

00:57:25

DB: Well I brought my son down here; I only have one child, my son, Dan, Jr. And when he was a senior in high school, the summer before he started college and he was staying here in town and going to school here and I brought him down here right after he graduated high school and I said I'm going to bring you down here for four weeks 'cause what I do in the kitchen I could teach anybody to do it and—and in four weeks I could do anybody to do what I do. It's just—it's hard and it—and—and it takes patience but it's—it's not—it's hard physically. It's not hard mentally. And—and my son is real smart and so I said I'm going to teach you what I do and that way while you're going to school here 'cause I never took a vacation—I said then for at least the four years you're in school here during—during the summers you know you can come work and I might you know take two or three weeks off. I never took a day off. And so he said great;

so he came and—and he did the four weeks and at the end of the four weeks that—that was it. He started studying a lot harder and—and—and he told me, he said—he says I don't know what I'm going to do for a living but I know that it's not going to involve putting an apron on at 4 o'clock in the morning and—and working in a kitchen. And now he's a Research Physicist and works at Penn State University on stuff that I can't even begin to understand. So I guess that four weeks and he said he was going to start studying a lot harder and he really did, so there's going to be nobody in my family that takes it over. So unless—unless the guys working for me now that's like I was when I was working for the people that bought Leonard out they had no family that was the least bit interested in—in working in a restaurant. And so that worked out great for me, so I don't know; we'll just—we'll just see what happens. If I end up selling it to somebody, if I get so old that I can't do it and I don't have anybody that wants to—to take it over from me I'd certainly hope that I would be selling it to someone that was going to be an owner/operator 'cause I think that's the only way it works. That's the only way it works.

00:59:51

RF: When you started so young working at Leonard's did you ever think you would be—be the owner, that you would be Leonard's?

00:59:59

DB: No, no; you—you know not at 15. Now later on when—when Leonard had been—you know Leonard had been bought out and then it was the investors and then this whole fast-food wasn't working out you know you start having thoughts then you know like man if I just had you know this I could have one place like Leonard did, okay. When I bought it from them they still had three places open; they had this one and two free-standing fast-food restaurants that both had

60 or 70 seats each. And when I approached them about buying it I wanted to buy this one and well then they came back to me and said well we'll sell it to you but you got to take all three of them, so—. So I took all three of them and as soon as the leases ran out I could have renewed them, but I didn't; I didn't renew the leases. I just gave up the buildings, gave away the fixtures and the equipment and gave—I mean just—just let me get out of here and get down to—. You know Leonard made a nice living out of one place and I'm—I'm making a nice living, so I hope I can find somebody that wants to do it.

01:01:05

RF: Okay; well that's—that's a good note to end on unless you'd like to add anything else. I want to thank you very much.

01:01:08

DB: Okay; thank you. Cool.

01:01:11

[End Dan Brown-Leonard's Interview]