

**Terry Wootan**  
Cooper's Old Time Pit Bar-B-Que—Llano, Texas

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Southern Foodways Alliance  
&  
American Studies Department  
The University of Texas at Austin

Group Members:  
Lisa Powell  
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**[BEGIN INTERVIEW] 00:00:00**

**Lisa Powell:** Today is September 11, 2007. This is Lisa Powell and Andrew Busch, and we're here in Llano, Texas to interview Terry Wootan of Cooper's Bar-B-Que. OK, so, first could you please state your name and your date of birth for the recording.

**Terry Wootan:** Terry Wootan, September twenty-eighth.

**LP:** Thank you. All right, so just to get started, would you mind telling us how you got started in the barbecue business?

**TW:** Back in 1986, I was a real estate broker and things kind of got slow in Llano. So, I had the opportunity to lease Cooper's Old Time Pit Bar-B-Que in—in Llano. And so I did, and I run a real estate office, uh, on the same lot as Cooper's. And I purchased Cooper's in 1992.

**LP:** OK. And so could you tell us a little bit about Cooper's before you took it over. What was the business like? Or who owned it?

**TW:** Tommy Cooper started, uh, the Cooper's in Llano in the mid-fifties. And he, uh, he run it, family owned, family operated until 1979, and he was killed in a car accident. And his family sold out to a couple of local business men, and then they leased it to one of his employees, and then in 1986 I had the opportunity to lease it. And then I took it over in 1986.

**LP:** And so you've always been here—or Cooper's has always been here at this same location?

**TW:** Yes, it's been on the same lot, uh, the original barbecue pit that he built had a dirt floor, and a dining room, one little concrete building. I think he had two pits. And on the tables they had one knife that was chained to the tables. You—you ate on butcher paper just the way we serve it now. And with your—there was no sides. You'd buy the meat, pay for it by the pound, and you could get chips or pickles, and then you had a drink machine in the back that you could—could, uh, buy soda water.

*[Recording pauses briefly for Mr. Wootan to speak to an employee.]*

**LP:** We had a brief pause in the recording, and now we are resuming. So, you were just talking a bit about the, um, older building and the—the older, um, pit construction and the setup of the restaurant. Could you talk a little bit about how that changed through the years?

**TW:** In about 1974, Tommy built, uh, the facility that operate out of right now, which is about half of the size that it is now. We—we did a—a large remodel and expansion in about '92, right after I bought it. But it was a pretty neat operation, the way he—the way he did it before. The dirt floors, had bread on the tables, which we still do that right now, and, uh, it was a, quite a—quite a rustic little operation. But now it's still rustic, but we thrive on the cleanliness. Uh, we've got concrete floors, cinder blocks, and we've got about eight pits now. Uh, and we've—we will cook most every weekend, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, at least two cooks per pit. So, we do, we do have a really good business, high volume.

**Andrew Busch:** I notice that your pits are right out for everybody to see. Um, I really like that. Is there, is there a reason why you do that? Do you just kind of—is that a tradition? Or?

**TW:** Yes, uh, that's the best advertisement we can—we can have. That smoke floating across that highway. It's kind of hard to pass by, uh, the barbecue pit here, without smelling the aroma and seeing the long lines. And so it, it's built-in, free advertisement really.

**LP:** And so could you tell us just a little bit about the construction of your pits? Kind of what the setup of them is?

**TW:** We have—our pits are of metal construction. We have two that has the brick around it, our holding pit, our serving pit. But the rest of the pits are just solid steel construction. Uh, we do not have a fire box like a lot of the barbecue pits do because we cook with—with direct heat. Just like you're grilling your steak in your backyard. We've got large, uh, burn barrels, which we'll put a pallet of wood, which is about half a cord, burn it down to coals. Then we have long shovels that we put the coals directly under the meat, and, uh, cook—we cook pretty fast, pretty high heat. People ask me what temperature we cook at, and I always kind of go by the three second rule. You hold your hand over the grill, and after three seconds, you better move it. That's a—that's a perfect temperature that we cook at.

**00:05:44**

**LP:** OK. And so, who built these pits? Or how were the—and how were they constructed?

**TW:** Some of the pits were here when I—when I bought the business. But we've hired local welders. And, you know, there's not anything, they're just a square box. There's nothing fancy with the grill. And, in the box, that we can take out and clean. Each pit has an opening on each end where you can put the coals—half the coals from one side, and half from another side. We designed one other pit, that—that the grill flips. So, when we cook our chickens, we put our chickens or briskets in there. And it's got a grill on both sides. That way we don't have to flip each individual piece. Um, it worked pretty well. But the old-fashioned way is the best way. Just get out there and turn it by hand because a lot of the times one piece might not need to be turned, and the piece right next to it will because, you know, you can get the grill, the coals completely even all the way through the pits. So, you kind of got to watch it, you know, if you've got a hot spot, you've got to turn it more often. But, uh, it's pretty simple, pretty simple.

**LP:** So, you mentioned that you—can I say that you cook quickly? What are the cooking times like for the different kinds of meat?

**TW:** We—we believe that you need to sear the meat to keep the juices in. Um, you hear these guys cooking briskets eighteen hours, but we sear our briskets on both sides really, really good. And have to cook them about two-and-a-half to three hours. And then we will wrap them in tin foil and finish them the last hour. So, brisket is anywhere from three-and-a-half to five hours. Most the time about four-and-a-half hours. Pork chops, we will—we could cook those in probably thirty to forty minutes. Ribs is the same—the same distance—I mean, same time. The cabrito will be about three, three-and-a-half hours. Chicken is about an hour-and-a-half. And that's pretty much the basics, you know. We slow it down a little after we get it good and seared.

But, uh, you know, we cook really fast, really hot. It keeps the flavor in. You don't have a—we do—we do not have a smoke ring on our product. Like, uh, if you go to a barbecue cook-off, they say you've got to have a big smoke ring and all that stuff. But in our opinion, our brisket doesn't have a smoke ring, and I think it's as flavorful as any—any brisket around. You don't get the after-effects of having a smoke ring, the belching, that you get the taste of barbecue for another two days. Uh, with the direct coals, we do it, we do not have that problem.

**LP:** And to go back just a bit, could you describe the process of searing a little bit? What that means?

**TW:** What I mean by searing is we will try to cook it hot enough that you get a brown, uh, cover over the outside of the product that we're cooking, so the juices won't be dripping out. It kind of seals it on the outside. And then you get the—the good flavor then. Then, that's when we slow it down to finish the product.

**LP:** Thank you. And so you describe the different types of meat that you cook. Um, has that always been the same? Or have you made any changes in the menu over the years?

**00:09:56**

**TW:** When I first got the barbecue pit, uh, there wasn't much pork sold. And I had a base, a background in the hog business. And so, I always loved pork and wanted to promote the pork. So, we—we started cooking our pork chops two inches, and then we took the logo on “The Home of the Big Chop.” That's our, kind of, logo of Cooper's Old Time Pit Bar-B-Que. Uh, basically, when Mr. Cooper owned it, it was, uh, beef, chicken, sausage. The beef he sold was,

uh, mostly chuck, which is a forequarter of the beef. We've—we've now served sirloin, prime rib, uh, and brisket. That's the three, and beef ribs. And we serve pork ribs and pork chops, chicken, goat or cabrito, whatever you want to call it. We have two different sausages. We—we manufacture our sausage right here in Llano. It's a custom formulation that we—we kind of built up over the years. We—before I put a meat plant in—I've got a USDA inspected meat plant on the adjoining lot, which we have a—we do all of our mail-order business out of. That's where all of our meats—before it goes to Cooper's it's taken to the mail-order plant. And we get it in truckload lots, pallet ties, we age—age the prime rib, and then, uh, then we ship it, uh, to our barbecue pit right across the street. We've, in boxes, everything is cut fresh at Cooper's, uh, and that's pretty much it on that part.

**AB:** I'm—I'm wondering how you came up with the idea to serve cabrito. And actually for a lot of the people from around here—if you know any of the history of cabrito, or just exactly what cabrito is. It's a very unique thing, I think, to this area.

**TW:** Mr. Cooper did sell, uh, cabrito before I took it over. And we—the—the cabrito is a tradition from Texas and Mexico. It's a—it's a younger goat. We use, uh—and the real term for cabrito is—is, kind of, you know, I've heard definitions from several places. You know, it's all milk—milk fed. Well, ours *per se* is not milk fed, but it's all young goats that's been on feed. You know, a temporary time, not very long because they will get too large, and we don't like serving the large—large goats. But, you know, *per se* cabrito is—we may be, kind of, not really serving cabrito, but everybody calls it cabrito because cabrito is—is supposed to be weaned right off the mama and served. And we do not serve that, but it's a very good product.

**LP:** OK. And so you were talking about, um, the facility that you have attached to Cooper's where you, kind of, process, if you will, and, uh, send your meat through that facility. Where—what is the source of your meat before it comes into that facility?

**TW:** We buy from one supplier. Um, he knows what we want. He doesn't send anything that—that won't pass our specs. Uh, we use the highest quality product that we think that we need—we need to serve. We do not serve Prime or Choice like a lot of people say, because it's too fattening. But we do age the prime ribs and the sirloins to get your tenderness. And when it's the right date—how long every, it's supposed to be aged. Then we serve—deliver it up to Cooper's, then it's cut up at the—at the restaurant. And the sausage and all the mail-order products are made in, in the mail-order plant and shipped out nationwide.

**00:14:37**

**LP:** So, could you tell us about what some of those mail-order products are?

**TW:** Our mail-order products, uh, on the beef, we—we sell the brisket. And that's the only product *per se*, the barbecue brisket. We have two different types of sausages. One's a beef and pork mixture. We have a pure pork sausage that we sell with jalapeños in it. We serve pork chops, pork ribs, chicken. We also have a smoked chicken, a smoked turkey, a snack stick, which is a beef stick with just a little bit of pork in it. We also have a jalapeño cheese, a beef stick. One of our most popular products of the—of the smoked products is, uh, the pork tenderloin—really, really delicious tender, uh, smoked product. And all of our products are ready to eat. They—they don't have to be heated. If you want to eat them cold, they're—we don't serve anything that has

to be heated. But the simplest way to—to heat the products back up is in the microwave. Everybody says that's crazy, but if you will put it in the microwave with the—with a little bit of the barbecue sauce on top of it. It kind of stings it, brings it back to life, and it's just like you're picking it right straight off the pit. Our sausage is a little unique. We do not sauce any of our products until the customer wants it at the restaurant. We ask them—we've got a big pail of barbecue sauce, which is a thin sopping sauce, uh, lots of vinegar with a tomato base. And then we dip it in—in the sauce, as they wanted. At the mail order, we go ahead when we pull it off the pit, we go ahead and sauce it, dip it individually, or pour it over the top of it, then chill it down, package it, and freeze it, and then it's boxed up to be shipped.

**AB:** I actually have some of your sauce in my refrigerator right now. I love it. And I'm wondering how you get it to, to stick to the meat so well, um, when it's so thin?

**TW:** Well, that's a question I may not can answer. This is basically the formulation of the Cooper family. And we've changed it, tweaked it a little. But it, uh, it doesn't stick to it like a really thick ketchup sauce because ours is just a little bit of ketchup, not a whole lot, and lots of Llano river water. So, uh, we—we don't like a thick, you know, sweet sauce over our meat. You know, our sector of the—of the United States doesn't like a really sweet sauce that—that, you know, in our opinion, you know, everybody's got their own opinion, but it—it sticks to it. It's no secret. I don't know why, but it's awful good sauce.

**AB:** It really is.

**LP:** All right. Thank you. And so, could you, um, you were talking a little bit about what this sector of the US likes with its sauce, um, are there any sort of other characteristics of barbecue in this area that you see as defining it?

**TW:** Well, right here in Llano, everybody—the biggest part of everybody, that when you have a barbecue, not just a restaurant, it's cooked with direct coals. And that's—that's, kind of, our cup of tea, you know, for the Hill Country or Llano to cook with direct coals, kind of the cowboy way. That's one reason we call it the Old Time Pit Bar-B-Que. You know, the cowboys started this tradition out on the ranges. They'd build a fire, and they'd either get a stick and cook it that way or then when they, uh—in the following years, they'd have some kind of grill that they would put it over. And so, that's the reason we call it the Old Time Pit Bar-B-Que because we do cook the cowboy way.

**LP:** And so, is there anyone cooking with you now who was cooking, um, before you acquired the restaurant, anyone who's been involved for a long time?

**00:19:20**

**TW:** Uh, my—like I say, I've had Cooper's since '86. So, it's twenty-one years. None of my employees right now worked with me when I started. Uh, I cooked it, did all the cooking the first year and a half, two years myself. My wife ran the cash register. My two high school—well, one of them was in high school, like a freshman, the other was a sixth grader. We pretty much run it as a family, and I had a couple of part-time employees. And then about '87 I brought on about one or two full-time employees. And now we've, you know, we've got like thirty-eight. But I basically learned how to cook it. When I was in high school, I worked at Cooper's some when I

was in high school. And I burned a lot of meat up trying to figure out how to do it. But we've—we've perfected it, to our opinion—that we try to serve the same product every day. And it's pretty hard to train somebody to do it your way. But I've got about four really good cooks, uh, that have learned, you know, passed my test. And we—we have a hard time, you know, a lot of cooks have come and gone, but I've got four boys that have been with me. The oldest—the longest is about nine—nine or ten years. And so, we've got about four really good cooks right now.

**LP:** And so, whenever you did work here in high school, um, what was your specific job at Cooper's?

**TW:** When I was in high school, we kind of did it all. It was kind of, you know, in the mornings, we add the seasoning, cook the meat, and then when the customers started coming in, we'd have to wait on the customers. But Tommy Cooper, he did a lot of custom cooking. People would bring chickens or steaks, and he'd charge them extra—fifty cents a pound or seventy-five cents a pound. So, we had to label each meat to keep it so—they brought their chicken, they wanted their chicken back. And we used the old ice-cream spoons and we'd write their names on the thick part of the ice-cream spoons, and sharpen it, and stick that piece—that spoon in that piece of meat. And it was, you know, we'd have like forty to fifty different customers come in every Saturday and Sunday, mostly on Sunday, uh, and we did a lot of custom—custom cooking, which we don't do that anymore. But that was—that was fun. But when you waited on the customers, you'd see Mrs. Smith come in for her chicken, you'd know, whoever was available would go get her chicken and load it up in a little pan. We'd take it inside and wrap it in butcher

paper. We did not wrap it in tin foil back then, just butcher paper. It would drip all over the sacks. But people liked it or they'd bring their own pans, then we'd cover it with foil. But there was no foil used back then. But, like the customers come in now we—we wrap everything in foil or put it in foil pans. Kind of basically the same, but we've kind of went up a step.

**LP:** And so—so, you worked in high school at Cooper's, and then you did your own cooking the first couple of years you owned the restaurant. Did you do, kind of, any additional practice or training or talking, um, with anyone in the meantime? Or did you kind of jump back into it?

**TW:** Well, it's kind of jump back into it. I leased Cooper's, kind of, overnight. I had thirty days to get ready to open it. The—the young—young guy that was here before me, his lease was up on May 30, I mean, June 30, pardon me, August 30. So, I opened up September 1. So, it was, kind of, you know, I didn't have much practice other than cooking for events. I brought in—I called Tommy Cooper's son, Barry Cooper, and told him—I said, "Hey, guess what, I leased Cooper's." He said, "You've got to be kidding. What in the world for?" Then I said, "Would you please come down and help me for two or three days?" Well, I brought him in and a couple of other friends of mine, Kirk Winfrey and Lynn Winfrey, which had worked at Tommy's. So, about three or four of us, and we opened the barbecue pit. And when they left at about Wednesday or Thursday the first week, I said, "What have I got myself into?" But, uh, like I say, we—we burned a lot of meat, and I threw a lot of meat away, and I learned by the hard knocks. You know, it's a little different cooking in your backyard than it is cooking for the public. One of my interesting stories is that I was cooking one day, and we mix our salt and pepper and seasonings up and put it in a big tub. And I kept cooking, and my meat started turning black. I

couldn't figure out what in the world was wrong. So, I tasted of the seasoning. And this Spanish boy that worked for me had mixed sugar and pepper. He got the sacks mixed up. So, you know, after about an hour I realized that all my meat didn't have any seasoning on it. So, I went through there and re-salted everything. And I did put sauce on it that day. And then we seasoned it, and we got by that day without throwing everything away. But it wasn't the taste that I really wanted. But that was one of the many interesting stories that you learn by the hard way.

**00:25:35**

**AB:** Speaking of, uh, starting up new restaurant, I just was in Junction [Texas] actually, and I noticed that you have a restaurant out there too. And, uh—it's not you?

**TW:** The original Cooper's was started in Mason [Texas] by George Cooper, which is the daddy of, uh, Tommy Cooper. And his grandson, I think in about 1992, um, opened that one up. You know, we're all good friends. They call his Cooper's Bar-B-Q and ours is Cooper's Old Time Pit Bar-B-Que. But you know, it's same name, originally same family, but the only restaurant that I—I personally own is the one in Llano. We're in the process of franchising Cooper's as we speak. Our first location will be in New Braunfels, Texas. The second location will be in Fort Worth, in the parking lot of Billy Bob's Dancehall. We—we have sold a group of investors a franchise for both locations, which I am an investor in too. I'm going to own a piece of the pie. We've got Temple [Texas] that will be the next one. We've got Dallas fixing to open up. Then we're expanding, probably to ten to—ten to twenty Cooper's in the state of Texas in the next three years.

**AB:** Wow.

**LP:** And other than, of course, the unique atmosphere of this location, what would be some of the difference, and the similarities as well, between these new franchises and the current restaurant?

**TW:** There's not going to be many changes. When you pull up to our new restaurants, it's going to have the same face, the same look. You can see the pits outside; you pick the meat directly off the pit. You go inside; we will weigh your meat up, serve it on butcher papers, uh; bread, beans, jalapeños, and onions will be furnished with your meal. Just like in Llano, if you want sides of potato salad, coleslaw, we sell the big pickles, drinks. We will have our mail-order products in there, just like Llano. When you walk in it, you're going to think you're in the same one as Llano. We have, uh, over the years, since I started my mail order, to—to help train cooks, we have designed and we are using it, uh, in our mail order exclusively. It's a rotisserie-type pit that you put the coals directly under it. It's thermostatically controlled. It's got a chart recorder on it. So, I can pull somebody off the streets and say, "OK, we've got to keep this at this temperature range, uh, and it does just as good, or better, than the big square pits." It doesn't generate as much smoke, so you don't have the EPA [Environmental Protection Agency] problems, the smoke problems with the neighbors. And we—we have been doing that since 2002. I opened up the mail order September first of 2001. We were cooking the same way, and we were having, having a little problem training cooks. So, I helped design this pit, and it took us until about 2005 to make me feel like it would be the same product that we served in Llano. We have—we have taken product right directly off the pit at the mail order on the rotisseries, taking it up there and—

and did blind tests and people cannot tell the difference. We will be cooking some on the square, long rectangular pits in each location, but they will be the same quality product.

**LP:** So you mentioned, um, EPA concerns. Has—has that been a concern with the smoke from the pits?

**00:29:54**

**TW:** We really haven't had any problems, but, you know, Llano is a small town. And if you went to downtown Austin and generated as much smoke as we do in Llano, we would have a problem. I've never had any problems here, uh, but when we go to these locations, uh, we're the new kid on the street. We, you know, and we aren't in Llano. We've been here since the fifties, so. We just—we just don't want to be a nuisance to our neighbors and not generate anymore smoke than we have to.

**LP:** So, in the course of talking about the franchises, you did kind of mention your sides. So, could you talk just a little bit more about what sides you offer here at Cooper's?

**TW:** We offer coleslaw, potato salad, three peach cobbler, apple cobbler, blackberry cobbler with Blue Bell ice cream, chips, pickles. We want you to buy your meat and pay for it. Out in the dining room we have a pot of beans. You can eat all you want. We have full loaves of bread. You can eat all the bread you want and onions. That's pretty much it. It's pretty simple.

**LP:** And, um, what were the sources of your recipes for your beans especially, but some of your other sides as well?

**TW:** The beans were—I had a Spanish boy working for me, and he and I kind of formulated what I want. I wanted something that had a little bite to it. So, we do have jalapeños in our beans, and it's got a lot of salt and pepper. Some people think it's a little salty, but, uh, we put nothing but pure bacon in there. The, uh, the potato salad was kind of a hit and miss. We peeled potatoes. We did different kinds of formulations, and then my wife and I formulated the recipe for the potato salad. We finally went to the red potatoes and leave the peeling on it and boil them, mash them up, we make the dressing up on the side, and put it right on the, on the potatoes, and make potato salad.

**LP:** Thank you. So, could you, because we've kind of alluded to it a little bit, but could you go ahead and just, kind of, walk us through what the experience of coming to Cooper's to eat is like for the customer?

**TW:** The experience at Cooper's is—is kind of tough for some people. Our—our lines get kind of long, up to an hour-and-a-half wait. But when you drive up to our parking lot, you've got to hunt for a place to park, or go on the neighboring streets, may have to walk two blocks. But we—we form a line outside, and everybody goes through the line to the serving pit, in which your meat is served right directly off the pit. And we have all our products, which is the pork ribs, the pork chops, the beef ribs, sirloin, prime rib. I forgot we do serve ham, the chicken, two different types of sausage, the brisket, and if I didn't mention beef ribs, uh, that's pretty much everything, laying out on pizza trays or bacon pans with—we put butcher paper over the top of it, and everything is presented. We do not have a menu, never had one, not going to have one.

You pick it right straight off the pit. The products with the bones, like the pork chops, you've got to buy whole pork chops. We'll cut you one inch of brisket or sell you ten briskets. And it's—everything is stacked on a tray. And then you take the tray inside yourself to our buffet line, I guess that's what you call it, hand it to one of the meat cutters. They, the wrap it for your To Go, if you want it To Go. Or if you want to eat it there, they will wrap it in butcher paper. And then you go down the line and get your sides, which we do have corn. I forgot about corn. I keep forgetting about everything. But just follow down the line, kind of, like cafeteria-style. You get to the end of the cash register, you pay out at the end, uh, and then we—we give you a piece of butcher paper. And you go to your table and everything is, uh—we serve on picnic tables. And, uh, you sit at the picnic tables, you set your meat down, then you go get your drinks, and things, and onions. You go back to the table and you're maybe sitting across the table from somebody from Europe or New York City or, you know, maybe a farmer from here. It's just, kind of, family style, which makes it unique. People really enjoy the talking and meeting different people. It's not like going to the restaurant and you've got your own individual table and you don't get to mingle and meet everybody and hear all the stories. It's pretty—pretty fun experience.

**00:35:42**

**AB:** So, you get customers from all over the place? You probably have a lot of locals too? Would you just talk about your customers for a minute?

**TW:** We have a lot of local business, uh, but basically our business is—is people in transit or driving here to eat. We have like fifty planes, the last time I talked to the city, to eat with us. We've got a little airport, and I started going out there. And they'd call me, and I'd go out there

and pick them up and bring them to the airport, just kind of a service. Well, the city furnishes one to two vehicles. And then we furnish a van for people that do fly in. We've got a really high trade of fly-in business. We've got following from motorcycle people. I mean, we've been chosen the best restaurant or road food every year since 2001. Our parking lot has been completely full of motorcycles, which are good customers, good people. Um, the biggest group of motorcyclists that we've ever had was, like, 300 showed up at one time. Of course, we knew it was coming, but all you could hear was that roar of the motorcycles and for miles just see motorcycles lined up. We had a parking lot next door that we—we used, had it plum full and the whole, whole lot was full. But we—we've got customers, I should have started a list, but we've got a lot of European customers that come in that have read articles, and, you know, different magazines we've been written up in. I mean, we've been in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, all the California magazines, nearly every major newspaper around has written up, written an article on us: *Texas Monthly*, *Southern Living*, *Cowboy's Venue*. We've been on *Good Morning America*, uh, and several other Epicurious wine shows. So, we've had a lot of Bobby Flay, a lot of free pub—and so we do get a base of a lot of out-of-state customers and foreign customers.

**AB:** All right, I noticed the times that I've been here the motorcyclists, and also I noticed a lot of hunters here. Um, is this, is that just something that has to do with the area? Is there a lot of hunting around here?

**TW:** Llano has been the deer capital of the world. And when Tommy Cooper owned it, if he didn't make his living in November, and December, and the first week of January. He had

starved to death the rest of the year. And it was basically because of the, the hunters. Tommy ran a lot of deer hunting services, uh, he used to buy deer hides of all things. And then the hunters would bring them in, and he'd buy the deer hides from them, and Tommy would take them to different locations, and salt them, and sell them. And they made leather products. But, uh, since I've taken it over, the—the deer hunting deal is still great, and is a great boost to our economy, but lots of—lots of deer hunter in this area. But, you know, we have expanded our business and thank goodness we've got the year-round business. One of our busiest times of the year is the spring time because of the pretty flowers in the area. I mean, Llano's known for its beautiful wildflowers and its blue bonnets. And we get bus, after bus, after bus that come in and our volume of business—our best month now is April because of the wildflowers.

**00:39:44**

**LP:** And just going back to the folks who fly in real quickly. Are they flying in from other places in Texas or they—some of the more national and international folks you were talking about flying in as well?

**TW:** You know, I—I probably can't answer that completely correct. But by just seeing the people fly in, mostly people within a two-hour flying radius. But we've had people just fly in for lunch from Dallas and Houston and over and over. We've got a really nice little airport, and they keep the fuel cheap and, uh, they just kind of use it for a fuel stop and a barbecue stop. So, it works hand-in-hand, and, uh, it, it, you know, from two to three fly-ins a month to two hundred, you know, it's increased. They city of Llano has worked real close with—they keep their fuel at a low—at a low price, to try to get people to stop and visit Llano.

**AB:** Any, uh, famous customers you can think of?

**TW:** Oh, we've got a lot of famous customers, uh, probably the most famous was, uh—or let me put—some of the most famous—is—LBJ [United States President Lyndon Baines Johnson] used to eat here. [First Lady] Lady Bird [Johnson], uh—we've got pictures of her eating here, I think two years ago, about 2005, the last time I saw her in the restaurant. President Bush has eaten here once. We catered for him when he was governor at, uh, at the governor's mansion. And then when he was elected president, they called us the week that the re-count was finally finalized and said, "We've got to have you come to Crawford." So, my son called me and said, "Daddy, President Bush wants us to come cater. What do you think?" And I said, "Well, yeah, I think we can work it in our schedule." So, we loaded up, and it was a really unique experience. You know, everybody that went—we had to get social security, driver license, they did a background check on us, uh, I took a barbecue pit and got there about six-thirty in the morning, and forty-five minutes later after the—the dogs went crazy smelling all that stuff. They were looking for bombs, I guess. We unloaded and then, uh, I set my barbecue pit up, started my fire, and I had my own Secret Service guy that stayed right there with me and watched every move I made because I had knives, and forks, and all that stuff. But there was a lot of fire power there, and it was something for an old country boy like me to, you know—they had probably three-hundred policemen, you know, around the estate. And the Air Force was there and was flying over. Uh, got to sit in on nineteen—I believe it was nineteen—Republican governors that helped President Bush get elected. And they were all there. I just kind of mingled—mingled with them. And they had the bull session after the—after the meal. They had a press conference there first and then he said, "Boys, this is all for y'all. We're fixing to eat Cooper's barbecue from Llano, Texas." And

that was, you know, national. So, he—he made all the reporters leave and they had a big old feast. It was—it was a fun deal.

**AB:** That sounds great. That would be overwhelming for, you know, a city boy like myself too. That's cool.

**LP:** And so, what did you serve that day?

**TW:** At the—at the time that he was elected, uh, he—he had, I mean President—President-elect Bush had said to, I think, *USA* or *Washington Post* that his favorite was barbecue ribs. So, that's—that's one of the products. We served barbecue ribs, and brisket, and sausage, and chicken.

**LP:** And so, that sounds like a—a pretty major catering job, some of these that you've done. Do you do many other catering jobs?

**00:44:14**

**TW:** We used to do a lot of catering jobs, uh, I—I had the possibility of doing the Governor's deal, but that's just too big. I mean it's three, four, five thousand people. That's kind of overwhelming. We—we basically try to train our customers that, you know, if it's personal friends, this and that, we'll do a three hundred person catering job. But every weekend, we—we will probably cater four to five hundred people. But it will be forty to fifty people increments. We'll get all of the food ready, they'll come pick it up, and they'll take it and serve it themselves, which is more economical; then we don't have to charge them the high prices. My little building

in Llano is not set up to do what it does. So, we do not have a real big facility to get all the products ready to do a catering. The franchises will be built, you know, so we can do catering jobs, uh, you know, have a separate kitchen. And we will—we will be hustling the catering jobs in the new locations. But in Llano we're pretty much maxed out. So, we—it's a good problem to have, but we don't hustle the catering jobs because of our facility.

**LP:** And you did mention that you took a pit out whenever you went out to Crawford to do the catering. Have you ever done that any other time? Or is it usually that the food would be cooked onsite here and then taken to the other place?

**TW:** We've done a few onsite, uh, catering jobs, but most of it is prepared here, taken out there warm, or reheated. We—we just catered a—in Ruidoso, New Mexico a friend of mine puts on a horse sale there. And we, we catered seven—seven nights out there, just finished up. We served about 3100 people in the seven nights. But everything was cooked in our mail-order plant, taken up there frozen. We reheated, uh, through convection ovens. We had a barbecue pit up there that we cooked our sausage. It was a—it was a pretty big catering job.

**LP:** Earlier when you were talking about the—the sugar on the meat incident, um, you mentioned that was one of some good stories from maybe the early days of your involvement with Cooper's after you leased it and bought it. Do you have any more stories you'd be willing to share?

**TW:** Well, there's been several times the guys forgot to season the beans and, you know, nothing anything major, uh, that I can think of.

**AB:** I noticed that we—we forgot this one of our biggest questions. What, what kind of wood do you use to—to cook?

**TW:** We—we cook with dried mesquite. These ranchers over the years have—have, you know, eradicated the mesquite or killed them. And our perfect wood would be mesquite that's been standing dead for at least two years. Uh, and we—we send a crew of boys, or our people. I buy it by the cord. They will go out there and cut the—the dead, dried mesquite that's—that's—and they'll palletize it on pallets, and we wrap it with shrink-wrap, haul it in with gooseneck trailers, but strictly mesquite.

**LP:** And is that how the wood that has always been used at Cooper's, even before you—you bought the restaurant?

**TW:** It's always been the—the same type: the—the dead mesquite that's been standing. So, I didn't change anything up, but it was working before. And like I say, "If it's working, don't change it."

**LP:** Are you worried about, um, that—you were mentioning that there had been some eradication of mesquite. Are you worried about the supply of that wood for the future?

**TW:** We—we do not have any problems, you know, getting it. The main problem now is the cost of cutting it and getting it in. We have—we have been, uh, you know, kind of low a time or two, but I've got a lifetime supply on one large ranch. I don't—don't think we're going to run out of mesquite. It grows pretty fast. And about the time you get them all cut down you've got another crop coming behind it. So, in my lifetime, in my kids lifetime, probably in my grandkids lifetime, we will not have a problem with mesquite.

**LP:** Well, Andrew, are there any other questions you would like to ask?

**AB:** I was just wondering, uh, what do you see as the future of, of Cooper's or, um, do you plan on keeping the business for forever?

**00:49:30**

**TW:** Well, I don't plan on selling out. But, you know, money talks. You know, somebody come in here and offers me an enormous amount of money, but I—I love it. It's a big calling card for Llano. I'm one of the largest employers of Llano, other than the city. And there's one large, uh, where, uh, hardware, Buddy's Hardware. So, it, it's been a really unique experience. You know, when we served fifty customers a day, I thought we'd knocked the homerun until we served 2000 customers a day. And I've got a really good crew. One of my sons is involved in the business, and in the future, I don't—I don't believe I'll be getting out of the barbecue business because it's a good way to make a living and, you know, my own little, you know, my—a lot of it's my heart. So, you know, it—it'd be hard to sell because it is a really popular restaurant. I can't go anywhere and they say, "Llano" and they say, "Oh, Cooper's Bar-B-Que." And, you

know, I'm not a celebrity, but everybody knows Cooper's Bar-B-Que. When they say Llano, they say Cooper's Bar-B-Que. So, I doubt if I'll be getting out of the business.

**AB:** Would you like to see it maybe go to your son as you get older?

**TW:** It will go to my family. I mean, uh, he's—he's very much involved in the mail orders and in—in the franchising. I've brought, uh, Tommy Cooper's son in, Barry, which was just like one of my own kids. And he's got another son. His name is, my namesake, it's Terry. He's been in the car business, and just recently he's—he's getting involved with, back into Cooper's. So, I brought the Cooper family back into the picture, which has been a fun deal. And Terry is going to—we're training him to be the manager at New Braunfels. Or he may even be part of the franchise because when we get four to ten of these things around the state, I mean, one of us is going to have to be traveling all the time to be sure to keep the quality up.

**AB:** That's great.

**LP:** One thing—one small thing I did forget to ask you about earlier. What are the beverages that you offer here with your barbecue?

**TW:** We have a coke, I mean, drink machines. We've got the Cokes and Dr. Peppers. We've been loyal Dr. Pepper people, uh, we've got iced tea. We've got sweet and unsweet. We serve beer and bottled water. That's—that's it.

**LP:** Thank you. Um, well, is there anything else you would like to add?

**AB:** I don't have any more questions. Is there anything you'd like to say?

**TW:** I guess I've told you everything I know *[Laughs]*.

**AB:** Well, that was great. We thank you a whole lot. Um, again this is Andrew Busch and Lisa Powell and we're here with, uh, Terry—

**TW:** Wootan.

**AB:** I'm sorry about that. My mind went blank there. But thanks so much Terry for the great interview. Again, it's September 11, 2007, and we're going to sign off here from Llano, Texas, Cooper's Old Time Pit Bar-B-Que. Thanks again.

**TW:** Thank you.

**[END]**

**00:53:04**