

BALLERY TYRONE BULLY
Bully's Restaurant – Jackson, MS

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Date: April 9, 2014

Location: Bully's Restaurant, Jackson, MS

Interviewer: Mary Beth Lasseter

Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs

Length: 26 minutes

Project: Bully's Restaurant

[Begin Ballery Tyrone Bully Interview]

00:00:05

Mary Beth Lasseter: This is Mary Beth Lasseter with the Southern Foodways Alliance and I'm here at Bully's Restaurant on April 9, 2014. Mr. Bully can you please state your name, your date of birth, and tell me what you do?

00:00:22

Ballery Tyrone Bully: Okay; my name is Ballery Tyrone Bully. I was born July 21, 1957; owner, operator, cook, the whole works at Bully's Restaurant. I been open since 1982 at the same location. We got one location. And the business was started by my father. It was his idea and we started in 1982, like I say; uh-hm, okay.

00:00:58

MBL: You say it's been in the same location. Can you tell me where that is?

00:01:01

BTB: That's 3118 Livingston Road, Jackson, Mississippi. And the zip code is 39213.

00:01:10

MBL: What made you open the restaurant in this community?

00:01:14

BTB: Well we used to have a grocery store on the corner and at that time we had a lot of manufacturing plants in this area and like I said, it was my father's idea. And before that we used to—I used to lay bricks and I was glad to get out of that field. When he thought about it I said yeah and I jumped at it. And I had—when we was building it we intended to build a—just a fast-food like a hamburger joint, sandwich joint, and as we was building it one of the neighbors behind us saw it coming up and she was an excellent cook. And she came over and asked us could—when we opened would she—would we hire her to be a cook? And we did.

00:01:59

And we went with a full course meal and that's how it got started. We—we did burgers and we did pig ears and smoked sausage and dinners. And as the dinners got more popular we left the sandwiches off and just went with a full course meal. And that's kind of how we got started.

00:02:18

MBL: So when you started how many employees did you have and how does that compare to the staff you have today?

00:02:25

BTB: When I got started it was just me and the head cook. And it evolved from that; she would come in and cook and I would be her—her assistant. And then she would leave and then I would finish up, cleaning up, serving 'til about 8:00 or 9:00 at night and then start all over again. And when we first started we was open seven days a week and then I saw them seven days catching

up with me and so I cut it back to six days a week. And that's—that's pretty much how it got started.

00:03:02

MBL: You mentioned that your dad had the idea for it. Was he involved?

00:03:06

BTB: No; he wasn't involved. He—he built the business—he built the business and he built the building and he always would tell me he knew how—how it was supposed to taste but he didn't know how to cook it but he knew how it was supposed to taste. I think he was just pulling my leg. I don't think he wanted no part of the kitchen. He was an outdoor man; he was construction and everything so it just wasn't his cup of tea but he knew it was a good idea. I mean he—he had that sense. My father was half African American and half German from Gluckstadt and he—he with an eighth grade education he was able to open up a shoperette, a liquor store, and a grocery store, and a restaurant, so—.

00:03:52

MBL: When did he move from Gluckstadt? How did your family get to Jackson?

00:03:57

BTB: Well that was before I was born. They left the plantation back in—shew; I don't know. I guess it was back in the early forties and moved to Jackson. It was him and three brothers and one sister. And all women. They didn't have no—they didn't have a father figure so it was all—

he grew up with his aunties and great-aunts and all, you know. So I think it was around '42, '43 when they moved from Gluckstadt to Jackson.

00:04:36

MBL: And where did he learn the brick trade?

00:04:38

BTB: He learned the brick—here in Jackson. When he moved to Jackson he was working at a grocery store and somehow he met someone. I can't even think of the gentleman's name now. But he taught him how to lay bricks and he worked for him a while and then he branched out on his own. And probably did it about fifty years.

00:05:08

MBL: Now for the record can you tell me his full name again?

00:05:11

BTB: WB Bully. And the WB was just WB; it didn't stand for anything. It was just WB Bully.

[Interviewer's note: customer walks over and shakes Bully's hand while he is speaking.]

00:05:24

MBL: Can you tell me a little bit about that first cook who was the neighbor to the restaurant?

00:05:28

BTB: Yes; that's—we call her Ma Pearl and she was a very strict person. And she taught you what she knew and she wanted you to follow it by the rules—didn't care if you was the owner or if you was just somebody just hired. She taught you how—the way she wanted it done and cleaning the chicken, peeling the potatoes or washing the greens. She wanted it done that way and came behind you and saw you wasn't doing it right I don't know care if it was me or someone else, she would—she would scold us. She would get us—get us straight.

00:05:58

She didn't mind—she's not like a lot of people that at—that knew how to do things and didn't want to share them. She didn't mind telling you her secrets. She didn't mind telling you her recipes. She didn't mind telling you how this was supposed to be done and why it was supposed to be done. She was a—she was a—well she was the beginning and the backbone of this business really.

00:06:21

MBL: How long did she work for you?

00:06:23

BTB: She worked for me for about—about 18 years up until she got real sick and couldn't work anymore; uh-hm.

00:06:35

MBL: What was your favorite dish that she made?

00:06:39

BTB: The meatloaf; the meatloaf was my favorite dish, other than the beef tips and rice and smothered pork chops and fried chicken. Yeah that—that—that was pretty much it; yeah.

00:07:00

MBL: Do you still use her recipes for those dishes?

00:07:02

BTB: Yes; we—we still use them. Yeah; we still use all the recipes that she taught us, uh-hm.

00:07:10

MBL: Can you tell me a little bit about where you get your food? I was here last week and saw Miss Jackie stemming fresh collard greens, so who—who is giving you your vegetables, your meat—?

00:07:25

BTB: Well I had a local grower but since the weather has been—the winter was so cold it killed off so many and now I have to get them out of the grocery store now. And 'til the weather breaks. But usually I have a local grower either at the Farmers' Market—we get greens, potatoes, squash, rutabagas, all of that we usually get it from a local grower.

00:07:56

MBL: Can you tell me a little bit about a typical day here for you?

00:08:02

BTB: Usually start about 6:00 in the morning and we'll come in and most of our prepping is done the day before; our green-washing, and green-picking, and potato-peeling, and meat-cutting and all of that is done the day before. And then we come in—in the morning around 6:00. We get our sinks cleaned out and get our tables and cutting boards washed and then we start washing out meats and get our greens on; cleaning the chicken and baking the chicken and cleaning the chicken for frying and season it. If we have ribs we have to smoke them and we usually get the grill cranked up about 7:30—8:00 and then kind of start then. It's a race until 11 o'clock when we open, so—.

00:08:58

MBL: How many people are you serving in a day?

00:09:01

BTB: Ah, I really hadn't counted. I see them coming in and I get the—I really—I couldn't tell you; yeah. Some days better than others but I really have—I hadn't thought about counting it really.

00:09:20

MBL: How do you plan for the amounts of food that you're going to cook?

00:09:26

BTB: Well it depends on the day it is too. Monday is a mediocre day. Tuesday is—and business is kind of like the weather you know you can't really predict it. You just kind of have to try to gauge it the best you can. Naturally the weekends are our best time—Thursday and Friday and Saturdays. So we kind of just gauge it like that.

00:09:55

MBL: Can you tell me a little bit about how this restaurant is used by this community?

00:10:02

BTB: Well we serve a lot of people and we serve them quality food and nourish—good nourishing food. I think people are satisfied with the prices and the quantity and the quality of food so—something they can't get everywhere.

00:10:28

MBL: Do people use this restaurant for meetings?

00:10:30

BTB: Yes; we have meetings. This year and last year I had a lot of the fiftieth anniversary of the Civil Rights Movement. We had a lot of people from out of state coming in and different Freedom Riders. Reporters would come in and speak to them. And we have meetings with church groups and civic groups and Union people and just—just college students coming down and so it—just multi-purpose for the small—for a small restaurant we—we get them in and get them out.

00:11:22

MBL: Can you tell me a little bit about the people who came in when the city was marking the fiftieth anniversary of Civil Rights?

00:11:30

BTB: Yeah; we had a church group come in from Washington State from Seattle and we had the reporter, Jerry—I can't think of his last name, but he was one of the ones that helped break the story on—well he reported on the story of Medgar Evers and helped open the case up to—to get Byron De La Beckwith convicted of the murder of Medgar Evers and he was just telling the different stories and things that he went through getting the evidence and getting the information and different things, so—. We had him in. And a lot of the faith-based groups like Mission Mississippi—had them in. So that's pretty much it. They're working on—that's pretty much it.
[Interviewer's note: Jerry Mitchell was the journalist.]

00:12:34

MBL: Can you tell me a little bit about modern politics and how this restaurant has navigated the recent Mayoral Election and now Special Election?

00:12:46

BTB: Yes; we—we was in support of Chokwe Lumumba, Senior and then after he passed we supported Chokwe Junior, his son. And right now it's a runoff between him and one of the City Councilmen. So we're hoping he survives and carry on what his father had set out to do. And on

the—the Congressman—Benny Thompson we always support him. And pretty much most of the Senates—local Senators and local Representatives of Mississippi Caucus we usually support them too.

00:13:32

MBL: Do those politicians or groups come here for rallies ever?

00:13:39

BTB: Well they come to get fed a lot you know. They come to get fed a lot. In fact, we had Democrats and Republicans in the last Session that they held which was about—I think it ended last week, so yeah we had a lot of them in—this week—well it was last week we had them in; yeah.

00:14:02

MBL: And they come here I'm sure because the food is good but is it—is location a consideration?

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BTB: Well I don't know because they drive from way downtown and they pass a lot of restaurants to get here. I think it's the atmosphere and the quality of food and the service and kind of like the history of it.

00:14:30

MBL: Where do you think most of your customers are coming from location-wise?

00:14:36

BTB: All around because I'll have them come in from Ridgeland and Richland and Pearl and Clinton. People are calling all the time to get the directions and—and downtown and all around.

00:14:58

MBL: As I sat here waiting to interview you I noticed a lot of people walking to the door and you waved and you called them by name. Can you tell me about your regulars?

00:15:09

BTB: Yeah; regulars that support me usually three to four days a week and you get to know them by their name and a lot of times they call their order in and you try to have it ready when they get here, so you get to know people by their name and the type of food they want, the different meats, vegetables and we have a lot of people that like I say when they call it in you get to know their name and a lot of people you grew up with and so—loyal customers, yeah.

00:15:44

MBL: Now do you have any children or family that would be interested in carrying on this restaurant?

00:15:51

BTB: No; I don't think so. I think the work is too hard and the hours too long. At least right now I don't see it; yeah.

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MBL: Can you tell me a little bit about your family?

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BTB: Sure; I have my wife, she—she helps run it especially if I'm out or something and—but she has her own business now. And my son he works—well he went to college and then he came back and he works downtown, yeah. And my daughter is in college, so but no. They—I don't think they'll be interested in carrying it on, not right—not—not from what I see right now, yeah.

[**Interviewers note:** Greta Bully, his wife, runs an insurance agency which is advertised on the walls of the restaurant.]

00:16:37

MBL: Where did they go to school?

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BTB: Ridgeland High high school and my son went to Shaw University which is in Raleigh Durham, North Carolina and my daughter is at Holmes Junior College now.

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MBL: You mentioned that your wife has a separate business but how does she help you in this one?

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BTB: Well she does all the accounting work and the—oh most of the accounting work and helps me with the ordering and the different financial activities. She helps me with that.

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MBL: I came in here on Friday and I saw some live music. Does that happen a lot?

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BTB: Yeah; well on—every Friday, yeah. One of my—one of my customers decided to take up playing music and she's done a good job at it. She—her mother and father was sick and so she had to take care of them there. And she's spent a lot of time at home with them and just started picking it up and playing the guitar and singing to keep her—keep her busy or keep her occupied while she was with her mom and dad. And that's how she started. And one day she came by and asked me could she come play and I said sure. And we get—she don't show up certain Fridays we get people asking where is she? So she's become a fixture in the—on the Fridays, on the weekends, yeah, good.

00:18:22

MBL: How long has she been doing that?

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BTB: Now about—about six months now; yeah six months. It's something new we just started.

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MBL: I see in the dining room a wall with lots of posters of blues musicians. Do those folks—have they played here, have they eaten here?

00:18:39

BTB: Most of them have eaten here. We're on Livingston Road and probably about a mile and a half away from us is Malaco Records where a lot of the blues singers would come in and record. And so we—it wasn't that far and they knew about us from some of the other people that works there. And they'd come and eat—Johnny Taylor and his son and Billy Soul Bonds and had a lot of gospel singers come in, Ken Spirituals and William Brothers, a lot of the local singers.

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MBL: Do they ever have favorite orders that you remember?

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BTB: Yes; neck bones is popular with Johnny Taylor and a variety of different—catfish and the—had Marvin Sapp in and he liked the chitlins. He got him a plate on the way to the airport. And so, they kind of like—like it all, pork chops and the whole works; yeah.

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MBL: Can you walk me through your daily specials?

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BTB: Mondays is our liver day, calf liver and we sell a good bit of that. And then on Tuesdays we have the red beans, rice, and sausage, a little spice in them. And then on Wednesdays we have spaghetti. And then Thursdays is our baked chicken and dressing or turkey wing and dressing day. And Friday is meatloaf. And Saturday is chicken tetrazzini day. And of course Sunday we're closed.

[Interviewer's note: Mr. Bully briefly turns to the counter to check progress in the kitchen when he notices a customer has been waiting at the counter a long time. Whispering in background is Mr. Bully saying, "You checking on those wings?"]

00:20:38

MBL: Can you tell me about some of the photos that are hanging in this room?

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BTB: Yeah; we got a picture of the President. Well we got several pictures of the President. You're talking about in that room, right?

00:20:50

MBL: Either room. I was looking at this one beside the take-out sign.

00:20:56

BTB: The one with my daughter and son? My son when he was at Shaw University and then I got one there—

00:21:11

MBL: Above the register.

00:21:10

BTB: Oh above the register; that’s my mom and my father. Yeah; my mother and father [Aside: Mr. Bully says “Take care now” to customer now leaving restaurant.] Yeah that’s my mother and father there. Of course—and this is the Black Caucus here, the Mississippi Legislature; that was in 2003. And on the other wall we got Smarty Pants, one of the local artists came up with that; he’d go around to different schools and help kids learn to read and write and history of—give them a lot of history too.

00:21:55

MBL: Whose images are in the main dining room?

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BTB: What was that?

00:21:59

MBL: Whose images are in the main dining room?

00:22:02

BTB: Oh we've got like I said of course we have the President. We have several pictures of him. We've got a portrait of Malcolm X, Dr. Martin Luther King, Fannie Lou Hamer; we've got the father of gospel music, our local J. B. Mance, and we also have a picture of Jesse Jackson. And quite a few of the blues singer left their posters on and—you know that's pretty much it; uh-hm. Oh we also had a Tuskegee, one of Tuskegee Airman from Louisiana. He came in and ate and sent us one of his pictures when he was in the—the Air Force, right; yeah.

00:22:53

MBL: You mentioned that you weren't sure that your children would want to take over the business, but how—how do you see the business continuing? Would you sell it to someone else?

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BTB: [*Laughs*] I wonder about that myself right now. I don't know because like I say, neither one of them—son or daughter—seem to be interested in it and so I guess it'll be one generation the way it looks.

00:23:27

MBL: Did your mom have anything to do with the restaurant at all?

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BTB: No; my mom was—you know she—she came down and helped me but not—she never did any cooking or anything.

00:23:47

MBL: Is there anything about this place that you would want to share that I have not thought to ask about?

00:23:55

BTB: It’s just that we set out to do a good job and we take it in the spirit of Dr. King when he said to do a good job and do that job so well that the living, dead, or the unborn couldn’t do it any better. So that’s where I get my motivation every day, as the speech that Dr. King did—maybe not so famous as the *I Have a Dream* but it’s *Remaining Awake to a Great Revolution* and he always would tell us to strive to be the best at whatever you are. If you couldn’t paint a picture like—like Michelangelo, was it Michaelangelo? If you swept streets—sweep streets like Michelangelo painted pictures. That’s what his quote was. If you couldn’t be a tree just be a bush. If you couldn’t be the sun just be a star. But whatever you be, be the best at whatever you are and that—that sticks with me every morning I come in. I try to perfect my food to make it best and always asking my customers, let me know if something is not right and make it better or whatever.

00:25:12

So I—I take constructive criticism; I take it well. As the Bible says *open criticism is better than secret love*. And I try to—because none of us are perfect, so I just stay on my people

and I try to stay on them and that’s why I stay here most of the time and make sure everything is right.

00:25:33

MBL: All right; well thank you very much for your time today. I appreciate it.

00:25:37

BTB: I appreciate you. Did I get it? All right.

00:25:43

[End Ballery Tyrone Bully Interview]