

**Wanda Cortez and Lois Sykes**  
**Middendorf's Restaurant—Manchac, LA**

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Interviewer: Sara Roahen

Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs

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**00:00:01**

**Sara Roahen:** This is Sara Roahen for the Southern Foodways Alliance. It’s Thursday, May 8, 2014. I’m at Middendorf’s Restaurant in Manchac, Louisiana, and I am sitting here with Miss Wanda and Miss Lois, and I’m going to let them introduce themselves. Could I ask you both to state your full names and tell me what you do for a living?

**00:00:22**

**Lois Sykes:** Marie Lois Sykes, and been a waitress all my life. [*Laughs*]

**00:00:27**

**Wanda Cortez:** Wanda H. Cortez. Waitress.

**00:00:32**

**SR:** Thank you. Are you willing to share with me your birthdates?

**00:00:36**

**Lois Sykes:** Sure. November 23, 1938.

**00:00:39**

**Wanda Cortez:** March 17, 1942.

**00:00:43**

**SR:** Thank you. Now let's start—can I ask you just to begin when you started working at Middendorf's?

**00:00:52**

**Lois Sykes:** Oh God, I never stopped to figure that one out. You know, I worked different places because it was three restaurants here, you know. So I just did all three of them over and over, but I've been here a long time. Twenty-five years at least.

**00:01:09**

**Wanda Cortez:** Yeah, this last bout—because I've been here twenty-four. And she's the one who got me to come down here because they were short-handed. It was supposed to be temporary. [*Laughs*]

**00:01:21**

**SR:** Twenty-four years. I don't know. Is it still feeling temporary?

**00:01:25**

**Wanda Cortez:** No, I love it. I love it.

**00:01:27**

**Lois Sykes:** I do too.

**00:01:28**

**Wanda Cortez:** She does, too.

**00:01:28**

**SR:** I do, too, yeah. My favorite work. It's all I've ever done, really.

**00:01:32**

**SR:** What--what were the other restaurants? You said there were three restaurants?

**00:01:35**

**Lois Sykes:** Yeah. Well, we had Allen's across the street by the--by the water, and then we had Bill William's right in the parking lot here. And a couple of guys took it over. You know, like Mr. Louis Munchausen took it over, and—who else run Bill's? I think that's it.

**00:01:54**

**Wanda Cortez:** Yeah, I think so.

**00:01:56**

**SR:** Was it called Bill William's?

**00:01:58**

**Wanda Cortez:** It was Ship Ahoy.

**00:02:00**

**Lois Sykes:** Ship-a-Hoy. And Mr. Bill's, I don't think he had a name.

**00:02:06**

**SR:** And what about Allen's? Was it called Allen's Seafood?

**00:02:10**

**Lois Sykes:** Allen's Seafood, uh-huh. Yeah, the whole family worked it.

**00:02:15**

**SR:** What years were those restaurants around?

**00:02:18**

**Wanda Cortez:** Well, gosh, they were here when—

**00:02:22**

**Lois Sykes:** I think I was sixteen when I went across there. How long would that be?

**00:02:30**

**Wanda Cortez:** She's seventy-five now, so—. [*Laughs*]

**00:02:32**

**Lois Sykes:** I don't figure too good in my head.

**00:02:33**

**SR:** That's okay, that's okay. You were sixteen when you went to Allen's?

**00:02:35**

**Lois Sykes:** Yes, Ma'am.

**00:02:36**

**SR:** That was the first place you waitressed?

**00:02:38**

**Lois Sykes:** Uh-huh. Well, I didn't even waitress. I was too young. But I worked in the kitchen and I did the salads on the plate and just odds and ends and made coffee. Little things in the kitchen. But it got me out of the house.

**00:02:50**

**SR:** When you were sixteen, wow. So, I didn't ask y'all this, but my next question was going to be: Where did—where were you born, and where did you grow up?

**00:03:00**

**Lois Sykes:** I was born in Chackbay, across the river by Thibodaux. And I didn't stay there many years. Then I—we moved to Ruddock about five miles down the road here, and we lived there—I don't know—five or six years. And then my daddy was fishing, so we moved on down here. Been here ever since.

**00:03:24**

**SR:** In Manchac?

**00:03:25**

**Lois Sykes:** Uh-hm, yes, Ma'am.

**00:03:28**

**SR:** Although the postal address is different, right?

**00:03:29**

**Lois Sykes:** Uh-huh, yeah. I think they said they was getting the mail confused in Ponchatoula and so they changed the address.

**00:03:39**

**SR:** And where were you born, and where did you grow up, Miss Wanda?

**00:03:41**

**Wanda Cortez:** I was born in New Orleans and I grew up in Slidell down the bayou. I moved here with my husband and kids in 1966. And we've been here ever since. Didn't want to go back. [*Laughs*] I love it.

**00:03:58**

**SR:** Why did you move here?

**00:04:00**

**Wanda Cortez:** Because my husband wanted to. He's from here, and he wanted to get back into fishing, crabbing and shrimping. So we gave him a year, and at the end of the year we told him he could move back but we wasn't—me and the kids. We loved it.

**00:04:19**

**SR:** What did you love about it?

**00:04:19**

**Wanda Cortez:** Everything. I could go out in the lake with him while he run pots, and we'd-- we'd go fishing down the Pass and we just did everything together. Her husband and her and me and Mark, we went shrimping. We got shrimp boats and we thoroughly enjoyed our life.

**00:04:39**

**Lois Sykes:** Sure did.

**00:04:40**

**Wanda Cortez:** It was really great.

**00:04:42**



**SR:** Can you tell me, for people who might be listening to this and don't know: What does that mean, "running pots?"

**00:04:48**

**Wanda Cortez:** Crab pots. You bait them up and leave them overnight, and then the next morning when you go out you pull—he was pulling by hand out of a twenty-footer. And he started off with seventy-five pots and we'd load the boat down with crabs right here in this little lake. And we'd come in and he'd sell them. He would re-bait the traps and go out the next day or the day after, depending on the weather.

**00:05:20**

**Lois Sykes:** And the best part about him crabbing was the crab boils on weekends. [*Laughs*] I love them. And just about every weekend he'd boil them for us.

**00:05:30**

**SR:** Tell me what that is, crab boil?

**00:05:33**

**Lois Sykes:** Just, they would boil crabs and we'd—they'd invite the neighbors to come down and eat crabs. Delicious.

**00:05:39**

**Wanda Cortez:** Put potatoes in it and mushrooms—

**00:05:40**

**Lois Sykes:** Corn.

**00:05:41**

**Wanda Cortez:** —onions, corn, sausage.

**00:05:43**

**Lois Sykes:** It was the best.

**00:05:44**

**Wanda Cortez:** It was--it was a meal. It's just, it was great.

**00:05:49**

**Lois Sykes:** It really was. We enjoyed it.

**00:05:52**

**SR:** Kids running around?

**00:05:53**

**Lois Sykes:** Kids running around. Oh yeah, they were there.

**00:05:55**

**Wanda Cortez:** And then we had the crawfish boils, same thing: friends would come down and they'd go crawfishing and come back. We had the boiling pot and boil them up and kids would eat, we would eat. We had a ball. It was wonderful.

**00:06:10**

**SR:** Tell me: How long have y'all known each other?

**00:06:15**

**Wanda Cortez:** I met Lois the first time in '57.

**00:06:19**

**Lois Sykes:** First time you came down.

**00:06:20**

**Wanda Cortez:** Yeah, when I came to Manchac I got introduced to her. And then she was pregnant the same time I was pregnant. And they gave her a surprise shower, and I took her out of Manchac on the fiasco that I was looking for an apartment, so we spent all day looking at rentals. **[Laughs]** And then she says, "Well, you know Henry and Yvonne has got a place on the other side." Well Honey, that's where the shower was, so it just worked out beautifully.

**[Laughs]**

**00:06:51**

**SR:** So you showed up to look at an apartment and there was your shower?

**00:06:54**

**Wanda Cortez:** Yeah, it was wonderful. It was wonderful. And then when I moved here, we just—we were neighbors and—

**00:07:01**

**Lois Sykes:** We just clicked, you know. We liked the same things, the fishing, and just everything. The camping. And we call it camping, but it was like being home. You had all the comforts of home.

**00:07:13**

**Wanda Cortez:** We'd go down the Pass. We had a friend, Fernell Leader. He had a camp down there, and every weekend the crew went down. We had a ball. Fishing, running fishing lines. Her and I used to run lines out of a sixteen-footer. [*Laughs*]

**00:07:31**

**SR:** Tell me what that means?

**00:07:33**

**Wanda Cortez:** Oh, that means you get in your little boat with your bait and you go pick up the line, and it's going across the Pass and you bait it. They got fish on it, and you unhook that and put it in the well of the boat. And I would run a line and I'd get the motor and she'd run the next line. [*Laughs*] Biggest fish she caught—what was--what was that? Ten pounds?

**00:07:59**

**Lois Sykes:** It was nice. It was a nice fish.

**00:08:01**

**Wanda Cortez:** Big old ten-pound blue cat.

**00:08:02**

**Lois Sykes:** Beautiful fish.

**00:08:04**

**Wanda Cortez:** No dip net. So we had to let the fish down on the line, go to the camp and come back. And the fish net we had was stainless steel. It was so heavy. She took one side, I took the other, [*Laughs*] and we dipped it and brought the fish in. Just things like that.

**00:08:22**

**Lois Sykes:** We just tried everything. [*Laughs*]

**00:08:24**

**SR:** What did y'all like about fishing?

**00:08:27**

**Lois Sykes:** Well, my husband didn't fish, but he loved to fish—hand-fish. But he didn't run lines. Well, he did for fun, but he worked at Shell. Mark did all the fishing, but we liked to fish too. We just—it's just fun if you catch—especially if you're catching.

**00:08:47**

**Wanda Cortez:** You bring them and the men skin them, fillet them, and we fry them and eat.

**[Laughs]**

**00:08:55**

**SR:** What are the kids doing while you're out on the water?

**00:08:58**

**Lois Sykes:** Well, they got their own things. They had their boats. Yeah, her son had a boat and motor and mine had a boat and a motor. My girls, they would head for town with their girlfriends.

**00:09:10**

**SR:** So this is when the kids were a little older?

**00:09:13**

**Wanda Cortez:** Uh-hm, yeah, but when they was little we had them with us. But as they got older they—you know teenagers. They don't want to go with Mom and Dad.

**00:09:23**

**SR:** But would they go out in the boat with you and fish?

**00:09:24**

**Wanda Cortez:** Uh, Marky—

**00:09:28**

**Lois Sykes:** Marky did the most, I think.

**00:09:30**

**Wanda Cortez:** Yeah, my son. He went with me. He said, “Mom, I don’t want you going by yourself.” I said, “I’m right here in the Pass, Marky. I ain't going nowhere.” But he always went with me if--if Lois wasn’t able to go with me. My son went. But no, we just--we just had a ball.

**00:09:48**

**Lois Sykes:** We sure did. We really did, yeah. And then we had the fire department you know. That was a lot of fun, too.

**00:09:54**

**Wanda Cortez:** We started that.

**00:09:56**

**SR:** What does that mean? Tell me about that.

**00:09:57**

**Wanda Cortez:** We had—we bought a truck, fire truck, and we kept it in the yard and whenever—. The phone for the fire station was our phone, and we had a bar back then and a fish market in the front. So when the phone rang, all of them would be in there shooting pool or playing cards. I'd holler: "They got a car fire!" So they would get up and take off and go put the car fire out. **[Laughs]** The state troopers called them the "White Boot Brigade" because they were fishermen and they all wore white boots.

**00:10:40**

**SR:** So these weren't trained firemen?

**00:10:42**

**Wanda Cortez:** No, uh-uh. No, uh-uh, not--not when we first started. Now they got trained—a little training later on. But they built us a fire station and we had festivals on the road here that we'd close it off. Not Middendorf's, you know, but further down. And we would have festivals. And we'd raise money to buy us a new truck, so—.

**00:11:08**

**SR:** What gave you that idea? Were you—fear—scared that there wouldn't be—?

**00:11:12**

**Lois Sykes:** No. Just, everybody—. Who had a little fire, Yvonne?



**00:11:17**

**Wanda Cortez:** No, the lady next door to her. Her house caught on fire. We emptied Yvonne and Henry's house, remember?

**00:11:24**

**Lois Sykes:** Yeah.

**00:11:25**

**Wanda Cortez:** Because the only thing that saved them was the awnings. They had metal awnings, and it kept the fire from getting—really getting in the house.

**00:11:36**

**Lois Sykes:** It was the guys' idea, you know. They said, "They should have a fire department here."

**00:11:40**

**SR:** Because otherwise you depended on the fire department in Ponchatoula?

**00:11:44**

**Lois Sykes:** Uh-hm.

**00:11:45**

**Wanda Cortez:** Right, yeah.

**00:11:46**

**Lois Sykes:** But they come right away as soon as you call. They'd be down here; they respond quickly.

**00:11:53**

**SR:** But the fire department that's right here—it's like catty-corner from Middendorf's—that's a result of you buying a fire truck?

**00:12:01**

**Lois Sykes:** Uh-hm.

**00:12:02**

**Wanda Cortez:** Well that and having the festival. And we'd go to the Strawberry Festival, and we had a booth there. We raised money. And the government came and said they would build us a fire station on the--on Federal land, and they built it right there under the interstate. Well, on the side of it, but—. Then we had our festivals there for a while, but everybody got older and we were losing them; they were dying. So we just cut it out. We didn't have enough to do anything with.

**00:12:39**

**Lois Sykes:** And the young people never took it over like we did. A little bit, but never like we—. I mean, we just went—.

**00:12:46**

**SR:** That's so great. But now there is a fire station there?

**00:12:48**

**Wanda Cortez:** Yeah. George takes care of it now. George, and he's out of Amite, but he's a trained fireman. And he's in charge of our fire station now because there's nobody left. All the young kids moved out and went to the plants and just moved out. And we—nobody moved in.

**00:13:14**

**SR:** Who pays George, then?

**00:13:16**

**Wanda Cortez:** The government, yeah. He's paid. He's paid—.

**00:13:22**

**SR:** What is his last name?

**00:13:27**

**Lois Sykes:** I don't—

**00:13:28**

**SR:** That's okay, that's okay.

**00:13:28**

**Lois Sykes:** I don't even know George. I don't think I've ever met him.

**00:13:31**

**Wanda Cortez:** I know George, but—

**00:13:32**

**Lois Sykes:** They see him because he comes across. They live right across, and I live a little further down.

**00:13:35**

**Wanda Cortez:** But I can't tell you his last name, but I will find out. [*Laughs*]

**00:13:39**

**SR:** That's fine. I'm just wondering. That's a great story that you started your own fire department and then the--the government just decided to help you fund it.

**00:13:47**

**Wanda Cortez:** Well, the federal government helps us, and the State and—

**00:13:50**

**Lois Sykes:** And I think when they came down they was impressed. I do. Our guys, they were working and they wanted that to go—to make it.

**00:14:01**

**SR:** You must have had to figure out where to get, like, fireproof suits and all that kind of thing.

**00:14:05**

**Wanda Cortez:** Well, after the fire station came, then the men got catalogs, and they--they knew what to do. And then I guess they had a couple of training sessions. People came down and they trained them.

**00:14:17**

**Lois Sykes:** Yeah, people came, uh-huh. And I don't know their names but we had guys to come down and train these boys, you know, and show them what to do—what to do with the truck; how to use this and that and the other.

**00:14:30**

**Wanda Cortez:** And it just took off from there. Now we have two trucks. The first truck we bought—what did it hold? Five hundred gallons of water?

**00:14:37**

**Lois Sykes:** I think so. It wasn't huge.

**00:14:40**

**Wanda Cortez:** It was the color of your shirt. [*Laughs*]

**00:14:43**

**SR:** Not red?

**00:14:44**

**Lois Sykes:** No, uh-uh.

**00:14:44**

**Wanda Cortez:** No, no, it wasn't. It was the only fire truck that--that was green. [*Laughs*] But that's how it came, so that's how we took it. But it had a tank in it where you could fill it up and you know. But you had to go back and fill it up. Now they got—

**00:15:04**

**Lois Sykes:** Hydrants all along the road.

**00:15:05**

**Wanda Cortez:** Yeah, yeah.

**00:15:07**

**SR:** I see. Oh, right.

**00:15:11**

**Lois Sykes:** And I hope we never have to use them. [*Laughs*]

**00:15:12**

**SR:** Well, I was going to ask that. Have there been many fires?

**00:15:15**

**Wanda Cortez:** No, not--not since that lady's house caught on fire and—

**00:15:20**

**Lois Sykes:** I don't think so. We've never had to use it.

**00:15:23**

**Wanda Cortez:** —then Yvonne and Henry's partially caught on fire. But we haven't had a fire since. But we got a fire department. [*Laughs*]

**00:15:33**

**Lois Sykes:** Yeah, and we used to—I mean I'm so used to watching everything, especially since my husband passed, you know. When—before I leave to come here, I go check the stove, even though I know it's out. I go check everything. And when I left my grandson was smoking, and he was going to put the bottle in the garbage, but I didn't know about that cigarette and I said, "Don't put that cigarette in my garbage can." "I'm not, Maman; I'm going to stomp it." Because

I mean, you don't know what kids are going to do. So I told him, I said, "Don't put—" I try to be very careful.

**00:16:02**

**Wanda Cortez:** That's what we do. We cut the ceiling fans off and the TVs and everything when we leave.

**00:16:07**

**Lois Sykes:** You know I don't leave mine run anymore because when I was over at my brother's, one of the ladies was saying that that's how their--their daughter's husband's mother and father—that's how they lost their house. The fan caught on fire. It was hard for me to believe that, but Joe's mama and daddy, they went to visit and left all the fans running and the firemen claim—you know, they investigated and they claim it was the fan.

**00:16:33**

**SR:** That's something to keep in mind.

**00:16:34**

**Lois Sykes:** So I keep mine off now. And you know, my brother gets ill with me, but when I'm over there—I used to spend more time than I do now—I turn his off. He says, "What you doing?" I say, "I'm turning the fan off. It causes fire." **[Laughs]** He said, "You're so crazy." I said, "No, I'm not. I'm trying to tell you Joe's mama and daddy lost their home with a fan fire."



**00:16:55**

**SR:** I'm going to pause this for a minute.

**00:17:01**

Okay, I wanted to ask you about—I wanted to ask you how Manchac has changed over the years. You mentioned that there used to be a lot more people here. Can you talk about that a little bit?

**00:17:12**

**Wanda Cortez:** Oh God, yeah. We had fishermen and we had *[Inaudible]* Shaffer and the Williamses and—

**00:17:16**

**Lois Sykes:** There was houses all—

**00:17:18**

**Wanda Cortez:** Robinsons. All the way from where the church is all the way down, you had a house that had people in it.

**00:17:24**

**Lois Sykes:** And then on the other side of the canal. And then when they built the road, the people had to move out. But we had people all over here.

**00:17:34**

**SR:** What canal are you referring to?

**00:17:36**

**Wanda Cortez:** The Highway Canal right here. Where the road is, that's the canal. They dug a canal on the other side to fill that canal in.

**00:17:43**

**Lois Sykes:** That's right. They put it in the back and they put us a road out front. When I left Allen's to go home, I'd walk with my neighbor Deloris and she'd walk me to my house maybe a block across—just across the street. But I lived across and she lived on the street. So she would watch me go across and she'd holler, "Okay?" And I'd turn my light off and on and she knew I was in.

**00:18:09**

**SR:** Because there was a bridge there, or how did you—?

**00:18:11**

**Lois Sykes:** On a boat. No, you had to get in a boat and paddle across, uh-huh. It was neat. And we were young; we didn't care. I don't think I'd like to do that anymore. I'm too old. But back in those days it was nothing.

**00:18:27**

**SR:** When they filled in the canal, were you disappointed?

**00:18:30**

**Wanda Cortez:** Well no, because they dug another one on the side of it.

**00:18:34**

**Lois Sykes:** Yeah, they built—

**00:18:35**

**Wanda Cortez:** I don't know if you can understand this, but they dug a canal to fill the other one up to make a road. Now, the highway. Not the service road here, but the next one. It's unreal.

**00:18:53**

**SR:** Why do you—well, first of all I wanted to ask: Do you have any idea what the greatest population was here, like at that point? Any clue?

**00:19:03**

**Lois Sykes:** Gosh, I didn't even think about that, you know. We were young. A lot of people move across the river where their mom and dad was—in Vacherie. And I had a brother-in-law, and Baby George and them—you know, they moved here. It was a lot of people come in, and they moved from LaPlace. But I have no idea how many—.

**00:19:25**

**Wanda Cortez:** I'm trying to think. There was the Saltzmans. Yvonne and Buck and their three kids. And then Myrtle Williams and her husband and their four kids. Then they had the Robinsons with their two, and then Viola—

**00:19:45**

**Lois Sykes:** But her kids was grown and married.

**00:19:47**

**Wanda Cortez:** Yeah, yeah, but—

**00:19:50**

**SR:** So, are you talking like in the hundreds, and not like a thousand people?

**00:19:54**

**Wanda Cortez:** No, uh-uh.

**00:19:55**

**Lois Sykes:** No, probably hundreds. You're right.

**00:19:57**

**Wanda Cortez:** They had Sykes' Grocery. That was her mother-in-law and father-in-law's. And then that's where the first fish market was that we had was right next to them.

**00:20:10**

**SR:** What was that called, Miss Wanda?

**00:20:12**

**Wanda Cortez:** Q-B-On. Capital Q, dash, capital B, dash, On. Q-B-On. [*Laughs*]

**00:20:21**

**Lois Sykes:** And so that's what they called her--her father-in-law, too.

**00:20:23**

**Wanda Cortez:** My father-in-law.

**00:20:24**

**Lois Sykes:** Q-B-On. [*Laughs*]

**00:20:25**

**SR:** So that's a take on--on a dish, right?

**00:20:31**

**Wanda Cortez:** Well, courtbouillon is a fish dish. But Dennis Rottman, when he had his place over here, picked on my father-in-law and said, "You can't catch enough fish to make a good courtbouillon." [*Laughs*]

**00:20:45**

**Lois Sykes:** I think that is how it all started.

**00:20:46**

**Wanda Cortez:** That's how it got started, right. But that's what they called him: Q-B-On.

**00:20:51**

**SR:** What--what was his last name?

**00:20:54**

**Wanda Cortez:** Cortez. John Cortez, yeah. He--he was my husband's dad.

**00:20:59**

**Lois Sykes:** It was a business where the parking lot is here, and they had a business where Horst has got—on this side.

**00:21:04**

**SR:** Uh-hm, where the—near the water. So it sounds like there were a lot of fish markets.

**00:21:09**

**Wanda Cortez:** Well yeah, because the guys down here—you had fishermen like this—

**00:21:16**

**Lois Sykes:** Yeah, I think they had one across the bridge. This one—this was a big one. Reno's has one. And I don't know if they had one across Allen's. I don't know if they had a little market.

**00:21:29**

**SR:** Well where was Q-B-On?

**00:21:32**

**Wanda Cortez:** It was—it's right down the road next to my house. It's a big gray building, and it's closed now, but it was Q-B-On Fish Market and Bar. And we--we run that for years. My husband had guys that would come in and buy crabs wholesale. And the guys would bring their crabs in, and we'd count them and mark them, and then when the guy came to pick them up, then we paid them. So it—and the fish, too, you know, but—

**00:22:02**

**SR:** And so I'm just trying to get a picture of what existed when. So there was Reno's Fish Market?

**00:22:09**

**Wanda Cortez:** Yes, the one that's still there.

**00:22:10**

**SR:** Right. Was that there at the same time?

**00:22:13**

**Wanda Cortez:** No, that was—

**00:22:15**

**Lois Sykes:** Mr. Henry lived there.

**00:22:16**

**Wanda Cortez:** Yeah, Henry and Yvonne Kramer lived there. Rotuman had the biggest one and that's where Horst's deck is now. He had the big turtles, the big—the live catfish.

**00:22:29**

**Lois Sykes:** Anything you brought in, I think he would buy. Alligator, anything.

**00:22:33**

**Wanda Cortez:** Yeah, frogs, you know. He had everything in there. He--he really had a nice business.

**00:22:37**

**SR:** So that was your competitor?

**00:22:40**

**Wanda Cortez:** No, because we didn't open until what? '74?



**00:22:46**

**Lois Sykes:** And people that came there was—

**00:22:47**

**Wanda Cortez:** Or '75.

**00:22:48**

**Lois Sykes:** —mostly passing through, or big business, and they just caught everybody—you know, people coming to the store—and they'd run across by her place and pick up if they needed something.

**00:22:59**

**Wanda Cortez:** But no, we didn't build that place until '74, I think.

**00:23:04**

**SR:** And how—and then when did it close?

**00:23:06**

**Wanda Cortez:** Oh, you ain't going to believe this but they had a fight in the fish market. I was waiting on two wonderful ladies and I was wrapping their fillets up. And these two guys got in a fight over hampers—

**00:23:24**

**SR:** Over what?

**00:23:25**

**Wanda Cortez:** Hampers that you put your crabs in. Because the guy would take them, but he-- he didn't bring back all the hampers that he was using so you had to go buy some.

**00:23:35**

**Lois Sykes:** I can't remember.

**00:23:36**

**Wanda Cortez:** And they're going—hampers went to flying. I had to get the two old ladies out the door and she says, "Let me pay you for your fish." I said, "No, Ma'am. Here. I'm so sorry you was in this." Then when my husband came in, I said, "This is it. I've had it. It's over."

**[Laughs]**

**00:24:00**

**SR:** Those were two crabbers that were fighting?

**00:24:02**

**Wanda Cortez:** Uh-hm. Friends of ours. And these two old ladies, bless their hearts—scared them. So I told him, I said, "We're not dealing—." We had thirteen crabbers at one time and I told him, I said, "Uh-uh, that's it." You sell yours to whoever you want. But I'm not dealing with

this. I was so embarrassed. They were cussing, and two little old ladies, you know, [*Laughs*] and I felt so bad.

00:24:30

**Lois Sykes:** Every other word was cussing.

00:24:33

**Wanda Cortez:** I know, I know, but he didn't mean it. He just—it's the way he talked.

00:24:35

**Lois Sykes:** No, it was his way of talking.

00:24:37

**Wanda Cortez:** But these two little old ladies didn't know that. [*Laughs*] So I gave them their fish and helped them get in their car to leave, and then I put the "closed" sign on.

00:24:47

**SR:** Forever?

00:24:48

**Wanda Cortez:** No. I just went in there and I just told the guys, I said, "Y'all got to find somebody to sell your crabs to, because I've had it. I'm not dealing with this anymore." It was

always something that didn't go right and they would start arguing and fussing. And it's not worth it. So we got out of that business.

**00:25:11**

**SR:** What year was that, that you got out of it? Do you know?

**00:25:13**

**Wanda Cortez:** Hmm, I don't know. Right around '80, I think. Ted rented it, yeah. Yeah, Ted Black came along and he wanted to rent it. And Bobby Colkmire rented it. But—

**00:25:29**

**Lois Sykes:** Yeah, I had forgot about Ted.

**00:25:32**

**Wanda Cortez:** Yeah, Ted and Pat Black. They sure did; they rented it.

**00:25:34**

**SR:** So they rented it and ran it as a fish market?

**00:25:37**

**Wanda Cortez:** Uh-hm, fish market and bar. And then Bobby Colkmire took it over and that was it after that, you know.

**00:25:47**

**SR:** Why do you think there are less people, and especially young people, living here now than in the heyday?

**00:25:52**

**Wanda Cortez:** Because they can't make a living on the fishing and the crabbing like they used to. My husband had seventy-five pots. And he would come in with just hampers and hampers. Now these guys have 500 to 1,000 pots and barely make it.

**00:26:13**

**Lois Sykes:** Barely make it, uh-hm.

**00:26:14**

**Wanda Cortez:** And I know my son, he tried it. And he couldn't—he said, "No, Mama. I got to find something else." So he went to work at the plants.

**00:26:26**

**SR:** What do you mean by "plants?" The oil—?

**00:26:27**

**Wanda Cortez:** Shell, yeah. Shell, that's where he's at. Her husband worked the plants. But no, it--it—and then as the kids grew and got older, they just went to work. Got their education and went to college, and then they went their way. The fishing industry down here—shew.

**00:26:50**

**SR:** Is it because the crabs don't exist, or they're just not getting a good price for the crabs?

**00:26:55**

**Wanda Cortez:** No. They just—I think they're fishing them out, myself. And then when that spill happened in the Gulf, it all got into the grass where they laid their eggs. It smothered them, so we have no idea what--what it's going to do later on.

**00:27:15**

**SR:** Are you talking about the BP oil spill? [Interviewer's note: technically, the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, in 2010]

**00:27:17**

**Wanda Cortez:** Uh-hm, yes, Ma'am. It affected—the shrimp and the crab are out in the Gulf, and they lay in that grass along the coastline until the eggs hatch. Well, the oil got to them; then it smothered them and it killed them. So I guess they just have to wait, and maybe the next generation. I don't know. But I know my grandkids, they're not in it. And I got great-grandkids and they're going to get a college education. They're not going to come down here. But no, uh-uh. We loved it.

**00:27:56**

**Lois Sykes:** Well they had—

**00:27:58**

**Wanda Cortez:** But we had shrimp.

**00:27:58**

**Lois Sykes:** Your husband made a good living. My brothers made a good living in that lake, and my dad did, but I don't think—I don't think it's there anymore.

**00:28:09**

**Wanda Cortez:** Uh-um.

**00:28:10**

**SR:** By “that lake.” do you mean Lake Maurepas?

**00:28:12**

**Lois Sykes:** And Pontchartrain.

**00:28:15**

**SR:** Yeah.

**00:28:16**

**Lois Sykes:** I just don't think—

**00:28:19**

**Wanda Cortez:** It's just not what it used to be. We fought to get the dredgers out of this little lake.

**00:28:26**

**SR:** Tell me what you mean by that.

**00:28:27**

**Wanda Cortez:** Well, we formed the Fishermen's Association, and we got help from our representatives and senators, and they pushed and got the dredges out. Because the dredges, what they were doing was getting the shells, and if they were anywhere near your pots they stirred up the mud, and when you went to run your pots your crabs were dead. You went to run your lines, the fish were dead; they had mud in them.

**00:28:54**

**SR:** And the dredgers were catching fish or—?

**00:28:56**

**Wanda Cortez:** They were doing the shells. You know the white shells that you can buy? Well, that's what they were dredging, shells. And they had a barge on the side, but they'd eat your crab pots up or they'd eat your fishing lines up.

**00:29:11**



**SR:** What year was that, that you—?

**00:29:14**

**Wanda Cortez:** That was back in the '70s.

**00:29:17**

**Lois Sykes:** I think so, yeah.

**00:29:19**

**Wanda Cortez:** We worked hard for that to, you know—

**00:29:20**

**Lois Sykes:** They sure did.

**00:29:21**

**Wanda Cortez:** Uh-hm.

**00:29:22**

**SR:** Do y'all know anybody in Manchac who is fishing for a living, and that's what they do for a living?

**00:29:28**

**Wanda Cortez:** Rocky.

**00:29:30**

**Lois Sykes:** Yeah, he crabs all the time.

**00:29:31**

**Wanda Cortez:** Yeah, he crabs and he fishes, Rocky Rakocy.

**00:29:35**

**SR:** I'm hopefully talking to him, too.

**00:29:36**

**Wanda Cortez:** Okay, well, he's one of them. And that's about it. That's all I know is Rocky.

**00:29:43**

**Lois Sykes:** The little Windecker, is he going—?

**00:29:46**

**Wanda Cortez:** Oh, Walt. But he's crabbing. He's not fishing. He's crabbing. He lives right down the road from us and—

**00:29:56**

**Lois Sykes:** I don't know too many.

**00:29:56**

**Wanda Cortez:** John Saltzman, he crabs. He's got crab pots.

**00:30:01**

**Lois Sykes:** Okay.

**00:30:02**

**Wanda Cortez:** John is in that trailer—

**00:30:03**

**Lois Sykes:** There's a lot of things I don't know about the fishing. [*Laughs*]

**00:30:05**

**SR:** Yeah, but still, the fact that you can name them on one hand is—yeah, that's not very many.

**00:30:09**

**Wanda Cortez:** John Saltzman and Rocky Rakocy. But John and—Flip Windecker. That's his nickname, Flip.

**00:30:24**

**SR:** Okay. Oh, I just lost my thought. Sorry. I think I was going to ask you more about the dredging, because you mentioned when I was here before, Miss Wanda, that there was some

dredging that was smothering the crabs. The mud was smothering the crabs. Is that what you meant, when they're dredging for the shells?

**00:30:49**

**Wanda Cortez:** When they were dredging for the shells they stirred up the mud and the mud would smother. I'm trying to think. Somebody flew over the lake and started taking pictures and it was just solid mud. And that brought everything to a head. A photographer took pictures and it was just all mud. And took it back to Baton Rouge, and that's when the ball really went to running fast, so but that's what it took. This used to be freshwater. But it's brackish.

**00:31:27**

**SR:** You mean the Pass?

**00:31:29**

**Wanda Cortez:** The lake. It was fresh because the rivers run in it. You got Blind River, Amite, Wadesboro, and the rivers come in and it was fresh water. But they dug the Industrial Canal and that's a straight shot from the Gulf. Well, that made Lake Pontchartrain, which was brackish, made it salt. It come up the Pass and it made that one brackish because it's got salt and fresh water.

**00:32:00**

**SR:** How did that affect the fishing?

**00:32:04**

**Wanda Cortez:** [*Laughs*] Let's just say it wasn't really good. But with the storms, you know, pushing through—the storms had a lot to do with it, too, because it--it brought God knows what with it. I mean [Hurricane] Isaac is the one that tore us up down here. That's why we're off the ground.

**00:32:25**

**Lois Sykes:** More water than anything. Oh God, I never seen so much water in all my life.

**00:32:31**

**SR:** That was in what year? Remind me?

**00:32:32**

**Lois Sykes:** Twelve—

**00:32:34**

**Wanda Cortez:** It was 2012, yeah. Yeah, because I just got back in my house the Fourth of July last year. Had to gut it.

**00:32:44**

**SR:** And then did you lift it up?

**00:32:47**

**Wanda Cortez:** Uh-hm, yes, Ma'am.

**00:32:48**

**SR:** Do you have a raised house, too, Miss Lois?

**00:32:49**

**Lois Sykes:** Uh-hm, we raised it up and we took four feet out. We could have went with three, but I told Stevie, “Just cut the boards in half and just go four and make sure we were safe.” We didn’t want nothing damp.

**00:33:00**

**Wanda Cortez:** She had two feet of water. Her house was higher than mine.

**00:33:05**

**SR:** How many feet did you have?

**00:33:06**

**Wanda Cortez:** Four and a half. It was over the door knob, over the windows, and it just tore everything up.

**00:33:17**

**Lois Sykes:** It stayed so long.

**00:33:19**

**Wanda Cortez:** Yeah.

**00:33:19**

**Lois Sykes:** The water. Usually they come in and go right out and you can dry out. But this—

**00:33:24**

**Wanda Cortez:** You used to take—you know, let the floor dry and—

**00:33:30**

**Lois Sykes:** Could have stayed in the house four or five days.

**00:33:32**

**Wanda Cortez:** Uh-hm, stinks.

**00:33:33**

**Lois Sykes:** Stinks.

**00:33:35**

**SR:** But you've had other floods where you just dried everything out?

**00:33:38**

**Wanda Cortez:** I've had—what—since '85. You know, I'm talking inches.

**00:33:43**

**Lois Sykes:** Yeah, I had just enough to wet the floor, and I had to redo my floors, but we didn't lose nothing.

**00:33:49**

**Wanda Cortez:** But we're talking inches. But when we would leave, we'd raise the refrigerator, the freezer, the washer, and the dryer. You know, on cinderblocks, and just come in and redo your floor and put everything back down and start over. But Isaac—

**00:34:08**

**SR:** Did it make you think about moving somewhere else?

**00:34:10**

**Wanda Cortez:** Oh no. [*Laughs*] I think her brother—

**00:34:14**

**Lois Sykes:** I was gone—

**00:34:15**

**Wanda Cortez:** —her brother wanted her to move.

**00:34:17**



**Lois Sykes:** My brother would love for me to get out of here.

**00:34:20**

**SR:** Where does he live?

**00:34:21**

**Lois Sykes:** He lives in Ponchatoula and Wadesboro. It's nice and dry. I don't think they've ever had water. But like I told him, "You don't never know." I didn't have it but one time, and look what I got. [*Laughs*] So you never—you know, just because it's high and dry don't mean he'll never get water.

**00:34:40**

**Wanda Cortez:** They built those levees in New Orleans and the water had no place to go.

**00:34:49**

**Lois Sykes:** I think so, too.

**00:34:50**

**Wanda Cortez:** And I think they're going to levee LaPlace. Well, that's just pushing the water further and further down to us. But my kids wanted me to move to Ponchatoula. They live in Ponchatoula. I said, "Are y'all crazy?" [*Laughs*] Me and your daddy is staying here. This is home.

**00:35:13**

**SR:** Y'all just like it here.

**00:35:13**

**Wanda Cortez:** Well, we love it. It's home.

**00:35:16**

**Lois Sykes:** It's home.

**00:35:17**

**Wanda Cortez:** Yeah, it's home.

**00:35:18**

**Lois Sykes:** The only explanation I have is nothing in particular that we love. It's just, it's home. We've been here so long, it's home.

**00:35:25**

**Wanda Cortez:** We raised our kids here, you know, and now grandkids and great-grandkids  
*[Laughs]* and—

**00:35:31**

**Lois Sykes:** It's just home.

**00:35:32**

**Wanda Cortez:** Yeah, this is home, baby. We love it.

**00:35:35**

**SR:** Where do you do your grocery shopping and things like that?

**00:35:37**

**Lois Sykes:** Ponchatoula.

**00:35:41**

**Wanda Cortez:** Boning's in Ponchatoula, and sometimes Winn Dixie. We get gas up there. We bank at First Guaranty in Ponchatoula. Everything is in Ponchatoula. The kids went to school in Ponchatoula, St. Joseph's. They had a school bus that picked them up.

**00:35:56**

**Lois Sykes:** And now we even have a Wal-Mart.

**00:35:59**

**Wanda Cortez:** Oh yeah, they got a Wal-Mart in Ponchatoula. [*Laughs*]

**00:36:02**

**SR:** Was there ever a school in Manchac?

**00:36:05**

**Wanda Cortez:** No.

**00:36:05**

**Lois Sykes:** No.

**00:36:06**

**Wanda Cortez:** Churches.

**00:36:08**

**Lois Sykes:** Church.

**00:36:10**

**SR:** I want to go back to when you were talking about fishing, when you would run lines in the Pass. Was it always catfish, or were there other fish there, too?

**00:36:20**

**Wanda Cortez:** Well, sheepshead; something like that. What else? Croakers. But mostly it was cat. Yeah, mostly it was catfish.

**00:36:31**

**Lois Sykes:** I think so, and that's the best eating, so—

**00:36:34**

**Wanda Cortez:** Flounder.

**00:36:35**

**Lois Sykes:** I love flounder, though. You like flounder?

**00:36:36**

**Wanda Cortez:** Flounder. Yeah, flounder was good. But we'd go rod-and-reeling in the lake and we'd catch flounders.

**00:36:43**

**SR:** How would you cook that?

**00:36:47**

**Wanda Cortez:** Fry them.

**00:36:48**

**Lois Sykes:** Fry them.

**00:36:50**

**Wanda Cortez:** Scale them. Get all the scales off of them and clean them real good. Broil them with lemon butter. My husband, if he caught a small one he wanted it fried. But the bigger ones you could stuff.

**00:37:05**

**SR:** Stuff with what?

**00:37:08**

**Lois Sykes:** Stuffed crab. Well, I say stuffed crab because that's what my neighbor used to bring me. Every time she made it she'd bring me a dozen, so I just do the crab in it.

**00:37:16**

**Wanda Cortez:** Yeah, my mother-in-law and her neighbor, Aunt Vi, made stuffed crabs.

**00:37:22**

**Lois Sykes:** It's also like crabmeat, bread, and seasoning. Stuffed crabs.

**00:37:28**

**SR:** Yum.

**00:37:28**

**Wanda Cortez:** But she could make a crawfish bisque, Aunt Viola. She was—

**00:37:34**

**SR:** Oh God.

**00:37:35**

**Wanda Cortez:** She'd stuff them heads and cook that gravy, and she'd give us all some. And

[Laughs] you—I'm not kidding you, it was great. That woman could cook.

**00:37:45**

**Lois Sykes:** I didn't share with nobody. [Laughs] Well I mean, I gave my husband, but—and

Earl was gone, but I didn't share; I didn't spread it all over Manchac. It was mine. [Laughs]

**00:38:00**

**Wanda Cortez:** Yeah.

**00:38:01**

**Lois Sykes:** She was a cook.

**00:38:02**

**SR:** She was your neighbor or she was your aunt?

**00:38:04**

**Lois Sykes:** My neighbor, but we just called her Aunt Vi.

**00:38:08**

**Wanda Cortez:** Everybody did. They called her Aunt Vi. She was my mother-in-law's cousin.

**00:38:13**

**Lois Sykes:** I think so. First cousin, yeah. I think—

**00:38:15**

**Wanda Cortez:** Yeah, everybody called her Aunt Vi. That was her name.

**00:38:19**

**SR:** How many kids did y'all have?

**00:38:21**

**Lois Sykes:** I only had the one. And he's been gone for seventeen years?

**00:38:28**

**Wanda Cortez:** Yeah, '93 he got killed.

**00:38:29**

**Lois Sykes:** 1993—Almost twenty, really.

**00:38:32**

**Wanda Cortez:** Yeah, he sure did.

**00:38:34**

**SR:** Sorry to hear that.



**00:38:37**

**Lois Sykes:** It was bad.

**00:38:40**

**Wanda Cortez:** I have three.

**00:38:41**

**Lois Sykes:** And they're still here.

**00:38:43**

**Wanda Cortez:** Oh yeah. Oh Lord, yeah, they're here. I got one in Georgia, but I got two in Ponchatoula.

**00:38:50**

**SR:** But none of them fish for a living?

**00:38:51**

**Wanda Cortez:** Uh-um.

**00:38:52**

**Lois Sykes:** Uh-um.

**00:38:52**

**SR:** Does your husband still fish?

**00:38:54**

**Wanda Cortez:** No, Honey. He had a stroke, and then he had open heart surgery, and he is retired. *[Laughs]* That's what he tells everybody. *[Laughs]* But no, he—

**00:39:06**

**Lois Sykes:** Well, he needs that. He worked hard. I mean fishing is a hard living.

**00:39:11**

**Wanda Cortez:** Yeah, he fished, crabbed, he shrimped, and he trapped in the swamp during the winter. They trapped muskrat, mink, otter—him and his dad.

**00:39:20**

**SR:** To sell the pelts.

**00:39:22**

**Wanda Cortez:** The hides, yes, Ma'am. Yes, Ma'am, they sure did.

**00:39:26**

**SR:** And he grew up here in Manchac?

**00:39:27**

**Wanda Cortez:** Uh-hm, this--this was his hometown. He drifted in Slidell, my daddy said.

**[Laughs]** But he--he was working at Irish Bayou on the other side of the lake, and we had a beach with a pavilion where you could go swimming and play the jukebox and eat and everything. That's where the teenagers hung out, and that's where he seen me. And he followed me home. **[Laughs]** Weird, I was only fifteen.

**00:40:00**

**SR:** He followed you home from the beach?

**00:40:02**

**Wanda Cortez:** Uh-hm. He found out where I lived.

**00:40:05**

**SR:** Did he get invited inside?

**00:40:08**

**Wanda Cortez:** No. He just, when my daddy pulled in the driveway, he went around and Daddy said darn that car followed us all the way from the beach. And I said, "I wonder—."

**00:40:19**

**Lois Sykes:** You probably didn't know, though. No.

**00:40:21**

**Wanda Cortez:** No, uh-uh. I had no idea. But his first cousin was dating my--my cousin. And that's how we met. But I was--I was fifteen. [*Laughs*]

**00:40:34**

**SR:** That was a while ago.

**00:40:36**

**Lois Sykes:** Long time ago.

**00:40:37**

**Wanda Cortez:** Well, Mom and Dad liked him. That was the part about it. They liked him from the word go—get. I mean they thought he was—. You know, he was something else, and I kept looking at Mom and I said, “That’s your friend?” She said, “Yeah, that’s our friend.” [*Laughs*]  
But he came over to the house a couple of times, but I was dating somebody else. We would go to the movies. It was the neighbor, Glen. He used to save me a seat on the bus. That was my little puppy love, they call it, until he came along.

**00:41:15**

**SR:** That’s a good story.

**00:41:17**

**Wanda Cortez:** Well, if I had known that he had kept telling everybody he was going to marry me, I'd have made him work harder. **[Laughs]** But he told—he told those boys, he said, “That’s the one I’m going to marry.”

**00:41:32**

**Lois Sykes:** So he knew what he wanted.

**00:41:33**

**SR:** That’s confidence at a very young age.

**00:41:35**

**Wanda Cortez:** Two years later.

**00:41:38**

**SR:** Miss Lois, I’m sorry if I don’t remember from the beginning of our conversation, but your husband worked for Shell, you said.

**00:41:43**

**Lois Sykes:** Uh-hm.

**00:41:46**

**SR:** And what—where was that? What town is that in?

**00:41:48**

**Lois Sykes:** In Norco.

**00:41:49**

**SR:** So he had to commute, but you still wanted to live here, huh?

**00:41:54**

**Lois Sykes:** Uh-hm, oh yeah.

**00:41:56**

**SR:** So y'all made that decision, but the younger people who, you know, are working in the plants as you said, they're just deciding not to live here?

**00:42:04**

**Lois Sykes:** They--they just go to Ponchatoula. Most of them are in Ponchatoula.

**00:42:08**

**Wanda Cortez:** Yeah, they live—

**00:42:09**

**Lois Sykes:** I don't think any of them went to LaPlace.

**00:42:11**

**Wanda Cortez:** Not that I know of.

**00:42:13**

**Lois Sykes:** I think they just went on down with their girlfriends to Ponchatoula.

**00:42:16**

**SR:** [*Laughs*] Now tell me about—. So, you said that you worked--you worked in restaurants basically since you started working. And there were different—. What was it like when there was more—. I mean, I know that there's a restaurant right down here by Reno's, a small--small place?

**00:42:35**

**Wanda Cortez:** And sandwich shop.

**00:42:36**

**Lois Sykes:** Yeah.

**00:42:36**

**SR:** So there's—FatBoy's, that's right. But other than that, there isn't another food—another restaurant in Manchac anymore, right?

**00:42:44**

**Wanda Cortez:** And she opens on Monday and Tuesday when we close. She's closed on Wednesday and Thursday. Then she opens for the weekend. But she has some fabulous alligator, soft-shell crab, oysters, shrimp, and she has homemade hamburgers. And she cooks her roast beef.

**00:43:08**

**Lois Sykes:** It's good. [*Laughs*] Yeah.

**00:43:09**

**Wanda Cortez:** It is great. You know, she shreds it and makes you a po-boy or a bun, whatever you want. But she's got good food.

**00:43:17**

**SR:** I need to get there. But what was it like when there were several big restaurants here?

**00:43:23**

**Lois Sykes:** It was neat. They each had—they all had good business, really.

**00:43:28**

**Wanda Cortez:** Yeah, the regulars—

**00:43:29**

**Lois Sykes:** It was enough to--to share.



**00:43:32**

**SR:** And was it mostly local people, or people passing through?

**00:43:36**

**Lois Sykes:** It's mostly people passing through, and you'd get some locals—you know, repeats—every weekend. But it was mostly people—

**00:43:46**

**Wanda Cortez:** Like what we have—what the fourth generation now coming here, they'll tell you: my great-grandpa started—and the great-grandpa was going to Southeastern, and he used to bring his girlfriend here. That's how long. Yeah, they'll tell you, you know. He said, "Boy," he said. "I remember when I was a kid."

**00:44:11**

**Lois Sykes:** They do, yeah. They say, "My grandpa used to bring me here when I was just a little bitty boy," and he'd show you about like that [*Gestures*]. And I said, "You remember?" "Yes," he says. And he said this hasn't changed much, and it hasn't.

**00:44:23**

**Wanda Cortez:** No, it's still the same.

**00:44:24**

**Lois Sykes:** This part. [Interviewer's note: Lois is referring to the original building, where the interview is taking place, when she says, "this part."] And he built that. But this is the same cypress, I think, and everything except for the floor. He's changed the floor.

**00:44:32**

**SR:** Before you started working here, did y'all eat here as customers?

**00:44:37**

**Wanda Cortez:** No. We had seafood at home, you know. We--we cooked our own seafood.

*[Laughs]*

**00:44:42**

**Lois Sykes:** Yeah.

**00:44:45**

**Wanda Cortez:** Now her husband loved—

**00:44:46**

**Lois Sykes:** Stuffed flounder.

**00:44:47**

**Wanda Cortez:** —the stuffed flounder.

**00:44:48**

**SR:** Here?

**00:44:49**

**Wanda Cortez:** Yeah.

**SR:** So he did eat here once in a while?

**00:44:50**

**Lois Sykes:** He did. I'd always tell him, I'd say, "When I go to work, you come have lunch, because I don't want to eat."

**00:45:01**

**Wanda Cortez:** And what I do, when Mark and I would come in from shrimping, they had the best fried chicken and coleslaw.

**00:45:08**

**Lois Sykes:** Miss Maggie? Or here?

**00:45:09**

**Wanda Cortez:** Here. I would call and we would get—

**00:45:12**

**Lois Sykes:** I remember y'all doing that.

**00:45:13**

**Wanda Cortez:** —and I would call. “This is Wanda. I need a half fried chicken. I need some coleslaw.” And then one day I was out of milk, so I used to talk to Joe, and he sold me a half a gallon of milk. [*Laughs*]

**00:45:25**

**SR:** Who sold you that?

**00:45:27**

**Wanda Cortez:** The owner, Joey. I asked him, I said, “We’re out of milk.” But I used to come here and pick up the chicken. It was just, you know, it’s a half a fried chicken. But that’s plenty for two.

**00:45:41**

**Lois Sykes:** I don’t think my husband ever ate chicken here. But he ate the flounder. But he would come next door, and Miss--Mr. Williams’ wife would fry like at home in a big old iron skillet, and so we’d call and say we’d be there in a half hour. I was going to get chicken. She’d fix it for us and when we drove up she’d have it, this chicken. But she could really cook that chicken. Like they say, it was like Mama did or Grandma. That was Miss Maggie, was—. But she didn’t do it in a cooker. She had a big old skillet that she would fry that chicken in.

**00:46:17**

**SR:** Well, how were the different restaurants different from one another? Or did they mostly serve the same thing?

**00:46:21**

**Lois Sykes:** They were all serving the same thing, I believe: seafood.

**00:46:25**

**Wanda Cortez:** Now I remember going to Ship Ahoy, and they had a band or a jukebox in the back, because I came with Mark, my husband, and--and we went back there.

**00:46:38**

**Lois Sykes:** Yeah, he had—

**00:46:39**

**Wanda Cortez:** They had a little dancehall.

**00:46:41**

**Lois Sykes:** —a hall maybe a little longer than this behind his little restaurant. And on weekends—and they had a little hall that went to it, and it went to the kitchen and the storeroom and the dance hall in the back. And we've had a lot of good times back there. [*Laughs*] Oh yes.

**00:46:58**

**Wanda Cortez:** I think my mother-in-law and father-in-law—. I mean you know, it was a place for people to go in Manchac.

**00:47:02**

**Lois Sykes:** Everybody came, uh-hm.

**00:47:04**

**Wanda Cortez:** And that's where they would go to, Mr. Williams, and play music and drink beer and just have a good time.

**00:47:12**

**SR:** What kind of music?

**00:47:14**

**Wanda Cortez:** Fifties, '40s. I don't know.

**00:47:15**

**Lois Sykes:** I guess '50s, yeah. It was so long ago, yeah.

**00:47:17**

**Wanda Cortez:** Back there, and it was—

**00:47:20**

**SR:** What was the—do you know when that restaurant closed?

**00:47:24**

**Wanda Cortez:** Gee whiz, Lois. I remember—oh my God. Mr. Dick bought it, because he built that new restaurant.

**00:47:33**

**Lois Sykes:** I'm trying to think when he built the new one. That's about when—

**00:47:35**

**Wanda Cortez:** That was '72.

**00:47:36**

**Lois Sykes:** Was it?

**00:47:37**

**Wanda Cortez:** Yeah, it was '72.

**00:47:38**

**Lois Sykes:** Well, before that when he bought Mr. Bill out and tore it down.

**00:47:40**

**Wanda Cortez:** Yeah, about '71, '70 —'71, '72.

**00:47:43**

**SR:** By the “new restaurant,” what do you mean?

**00:47:46**

**Wanda Cortez:** Well, that restaurant was built in '72.

**00:47:50**

**SR:** FatBoy's? Or, no—

**00:47:52**

**Wanda Cortez:** Right next door.

**00:47:52**

**Lois Sykes:** Next door, the white building. We don't use it anymore.

**00:47:56**

**SR:** Oh, I see what you're saying. The--the new dining room?

**00:48:01**

**Wanda Cortez:** Well, no.

**00:48:02**



**Lois Sykes:** No. It's a building.

**00:48:06**

**Wanda Cortez:** It's a building right over here.

**00:48:08**

**SR:** The metal building?

**00:48:10**

**Lois Sykes:** That's why we have the parking lot there.

**00:48:14**

**Wanda Cortez:** That used to be a restaurant, and we called it the "new restaurant."

**00:48:17**

**SR:** The new restaurant.

**00:48:18**

**Lois Sykes:** Suzie run the new and Joey run the old.

**00:48:20**

**SR:** I see what you mean.

**00:48:22**

**Lois Sykes:** Yeah.

**00:48:22**

**SR:** And what—you know, did y'all like working in the new restaurant?

**00:48:29**

**Lois Sykes:** Yeah, I didn't mind, uh-hm. It was fine, Baby. It really was. When I first came here they were open seven days a week, but that opened on Friday, Saturday, Sunday for the overflow.

**00:48:43**

**SR:** We're talking about a separate building, just for the record, that the previous owners of Middendorf's opened to take care of the overflow.

**00:48:50**

**Wanda Cortez:** Overflow on the weekends. They sure did.

**00:48:54**

**Lois Sykes:** That's why the question with the parking lot. A lot of people ask me why the parking lot—when we still used the other building—was between the buildings, and I said, “Well, we had another restaurant there.” “I've never seen it.” I said, “Yes, we had another restaurant there.” Maybe just enough space to drive a car through between them.

**00:49:14**

**SR:** But okay. I'm trying to get this straight. Was the Ship Ahoy ever opened when the—when the new restaurant of Middendorf's was opened?

**00:49:22**

**Wanda Cortez:** No. Miss Maggie lived in the back. We'd go see her, and she was in the back of the restaurant.

**00:49:29**

**SR:** Well, one thing I was going to ask you—and this includes the new restaurant even though y'all aren't using it anymore—but do you have a preference of where you like to work in--in Middendorf's? Like what section you like, which dining room you like?

**00:49:45**

**Wanda Cortez:** I like the front because it's cooler and I have COPD and asthma, so they keep me in the front.

**00:49:51**

**SR:** What do you mean by “the front?” The--the new, new dining room, or—?

**00:49:53**

**Wanda Cortez:** No, this dining room right there. This is—that's the main, this is the north, and this is the private.

**00:49:59**

**Lois Sykes:** We stay down here most of the time. On Wednesday we work up there. But other than that we're here.

**00:50:06**

**SR:** By "up there," you mean the new dining room?

**00:50:09**

**Wanda Cortez:** Yeah, on Wednesday.

**00:50:11**

**Lois Sykes:** But when we come tomorrow we'll work here.

**00:50:15**

**SR:** Do you usually work in the same area?

**00:50:16**

**Lois Sykes:** We used to, but he's changed tables around, and I've been working in here now and she's been working in there.

**00:50:25**

**Wanda Cortez:** That's okay, that's okay. We check on each other. If she needs something she'll come to me. And I'll go to her, you know, and she'll be in the kitchen: "Lois, can you get me a gumbo for table thirteen?" And she'll get it. Or she'll ask—they'll call her name back there for food. I said, "What table?" "Thirty." I'll pick her food up and bring it, you know, when she's taking an order.

**00:50:45**

**Lois Sykes:** It works out real good.

**00:50:47**

**Wanda Cortez:** So no, we team.

**00:50:50**

**SR:** When you all started working here, was it Joey and Suzie were the owners?

**00:50:55**

**Lois Sykes:** Yeah.

**00:50:55**

**Wanda Cortez:** But she came before me, and I think—

**00:50:57**

**Lois Sykes:** Yeah, when I worked here it was Miss Pat Midland was renting it.

**00:51:02**

**SR:** Oh, so she was here when you—when you started.

**00:51:05**

**Lois Sykes:** Uh-hm.

**00:51:06**

**SR:** Can you tell me a little bit about her? I haven't heard much about her personality.

**00:51:11**

**Lois Sykes:** I don't know too much about her. When she left here she moved to Hammond. She had houses to rent, and her brother came down from Mississippi, him and her, and they worked here, and she bought them a house on the Range Road. And I don't really know too much about Miss Pat. She was kind of private. She had the room in the back and—

**00:51:35**

**SR:** Where she lived in the back of the restaurant?

**00:51:36**

**Lois Sykes:** Uh-hm, uh-hm.

**00:51:37**

**SR:** And did she—did she, like, run the front of the house or the back of the house? Or did she—here at the restaurant?

**00:51:46**

**Lois Sykes:** She kind of just stayed in the kitchen mostly. I don't think she ever come out here to do anything. She would tell the girls what to do, but she mostly stayed in the kitchen and kept an eye on the cooks and made sure all the food was good.

**00:52:00**

**SR:** Was the menu basically the same?

**00:52:06**

**Lois Sykes:** A lot cheaper, I think. [*Laughs*] But basically the same. The thin was always the main thing down here, the thin fish.

**00:52:17**

**SR:** Always. huh?

**00:52:18**

**Lois Sykes:** Always as far as I can remember.

**00:52:20**

**Wanda Cortez:** That's what they were famous for. That and the southern fried chicken. Oh, they had some chicken back then. *[Laughs]*

**00:52:29**

**SR:** So chicken isn't the thing you would order now, huh?

**00:52:32**

**Wanda Cortez:** Yeah.

**00:52:34**

**Lois Sykes:** I think it comes out pretty. I mean, I haven't ate it.

**00:52:37**

**Wanda Cortez:** It's beautiful. It's a half a bird.

**00:52:38**

**Lois Sykes:** It's beautiful when they bring it down.

**00:52:39**

**Wanda Cortez:** It's beautiful. It's golden brown.

**00:52:42**

**SR:** What are the—what has changed about the menu since y'all started working here?



**00:52:47**

**Lois Sykes:** They've added a few things. The salmon—

**00:52:50**

**Wanda Cortez:** The stuffed mushrooms, Italian oysters—

**00:52:54**

**Lois Sykes:** Yeah, we've got a few little things.

**00:52:57**

**Wanda Cortez:** What else, Baby? I know that's new. We still got shrimp remoulade, shrimp cocktail, stuff like that.

**00:53:01**

**SR:** If someone came in and said, "You know what? I don't want—I always get catfish, and I want to try something new," what would you recommend?

**00:53:09**

**Wanda Cortez:** Well, they got shrimp and fish, and then they got oysters and fish, and then they got oysters or fried shrimp.

**00:53:15**

**Lois Sykes:** We have flounder. And we have—

**00:53:20**

**Wanda Cortez:** Stuffed crabs, uh-hm.

**00:53:23**

**SR:** Do you have something that you always order if you eat from here?

**00:53:26**

**Wanda Cortez:** The thin and crispy catfish.

**00:53:28**

**Lois Sykes:** I like the thin fish. [*Laughs*]

**00:53:32**

**Wanda Cortez:** And--and the oysters fried soft.

**00:53:34**

**Lois Sykes:** Now Wanda is an—she's an oyster person.

**00:53:35**

**SR:** What does that mean, “fried soft?”

**00:53:37**

**Wanda Cortez:** Well no, they are—they drop them and then they pick them back up. *[Laughs]*

**00:53:43**

**Lois Sykes:** As soon as they're brown. You know, they don't let them get through and through hard.

**00:53:48**

**Wanda Cortez:** See, I like mine raw, but that's as close as you can get to raw here.

**00:53:51**

**Lois Sykes:** We have a lot of people come in and order fried well-done, and then we got—

**00:54:00**

**Wanda Cortez:** I like mine fried soft. So man, I type in big letters: SOFT. I know what they mean.

**00:54:07**

**Lois Sykes:** No, uh-uh. We've—

**00:54:11**

**Wanda Cortez:** I can't say anything bad about this restaurant. It has always been good to us. Suzie and Joey were fabulous. Karen and Horst are fabulous. They—and Dawn and you know Dee Dee and them, they're just fabulous to work for. That's why we're still here.

**00:54:29**

**SR:** Well, I imagined there must be some reason.

*[This portion of the interview has been omitted.]*

**00:55:42**

**SR:** I think that it's really phenomenal that so much staff has stayed. I mean, I've worked in restaurants and I know how hard it can be to adjust when there's new ownership. So the kitchen has changed a lot. Tell me how hot that kitchen was before it had air-conditioning.

**00:56:06**

**Wanda Cortez:** Well, we didn't stay in the kitchen. We would run in, write our order, pick it up, and go back out. And they had fans in there.

**00:56:14**

**Lois Sykes:** Oh yeah, we had fans.

**00:56:16**

**Wanda Cortez:** I don't remember it being that hot. Now the cooks had to stay, and they had that big blower over them that sucked everything up, and that had a little breeze to it.

**00:56:26**

**Lois Sykes:** Yeah, and then they had the big window and big old fan drawing that heat out. It wasn't to where you're going to pass out.

**00:56:33**

**Wanda Cortez:** I imagine the cooks were hot because they were right over the fire.

**00:56:35**

**Lois Sykes:** I'm sure if you ask them now they will tell you it was hot in there.

**00:56:40**

**SR:** Probably one of those things that you don't know how hot you were until you—you know, you're not anymore, but—. I wanted to ask: what do you—so you've been a waitress for a long time. You know, you've worked in restaurants. What do you like about working in restaurants, and especially at the front of the house?

**00:56:55**

**Lois Sykes:** You have a different—you have every day, and all day long, you have different people to talk to. It's not boring. You know, different families, uh-huh.

**00:57:09**

**Wanda Cortez:** And you talk to them and they're coming from somewhere and they're going somewhere.

**00:57:13**

**Lois Sykes:** Yeah, and it's interesting.

**00:57:14**

**Wanda Cortez:** That's right: they're interesting.

**00:57:16**

**Lois Sykes:** You don't get bored with the same thing all day long. It's different all the time.

**00:57:21**

**Wanda Cortez:** We love people. And making them happy and putting that smile on the face just—

**00:57:28**

**Lois Sykes:** It works out good.

**00:57:28**

**Wanda Cortez:** —you know, it makes you happy. But oh, God. Just the--the people—

**00:57:34**

**Lois Sykes:** And we have such—I always do anyway. We have such nice customers. And some people say they was fussing at her or this or that or the other. I don't never have that. They're always so sweet.

**00:57:46**

**Wanda Cortez:** And then if you say, "I'll be with you in a minute." "Don't rush, Darling. We're not in a hurry."

**00:57:52**

**Lois Sykes:** I don't never have any problem.

**00:57:53**

**Wanda Cortez:** And you go do that and you come back. We bring water. That's a habit with us. We're the—

**00:57:59**

**Lois Sykes:** Well, we were trained that way.

**00:58:00**

**Wanda Cortez:** Yeah, we're the only two that still bring water to the table with the silverware.

**00:58:05**

**Lois Sykes:** Years ago you had to bring water.

**00:58:07**

**Wanda Cortez:** And people appreciate that. “Oh look, water.” *[Laughs]*

**00:58:12**

**Lois Sykes:** They really do, especially in the summertime. And we have more water drinkers now, since bad times maybe. I don't know. To save a little on the drinks, you know. And lots of times you have just water. “Water will do, Honey.”

**00:58:29**

**Wanda Cortez:** “Water for me. Can I have some lemon?” “Well you sure can, Darling.” We give them a big water to go with this little water—a big one—and we'll put lemons around it and bring them a straw and turn them loose.

**00:58:41**

**Lois Sykes:** We have a lot of water drinkers, I find. More than ever.

**00:58:45**

**SR:** Well, I appreciate it when someone brings water. So you were trained to do that here at Middendorf's?

**00:58:49**



**Lois Sykes:** Uh-hm.

**00:58:49**

**Wanda Cortez:** Oh yeah, every table. We were trained you had to bring water to the table.

That's how it went—

**00:58:56**

**Lois Sykes:** And if she walked out there and didn't see the water, she'd say, "Miss Lois, your table don't have any water."

**00:59:04**

**SR:** Who is "she?"

**00:59:05**

**Lois Sykes:** Suzie or—yeah, if she walked out there and—"You don't have no water on that table." "Yes, Ma'am. I'm going to get some now."

**00:59:13**

**Wanda Cortez:** She--she watched everything. And then—

**00:59:15**

**Lois Sykes:** And I think it was a good thing.

**00:59:17**

**Wanda Cortez:** —they would get out here and clean tables to help us out. If we got a rush, her and Joey would come in here and bring them quarts and they'd clean our tables. They would, and then they'd—"Here's your tip." They'd clean your tables, handed you your tip, and then they'd sit two or three more people. But they--they were involved. They were out here. Sometimes if we got really, really busy, Suzie would come out with a pad and take your order for you if you got like bam-bam-bam slammed. She would come out here and take your order for you and bring out the drinks. No, uh-uh, they *worked*. Suzie has been in this—what? She was fourteen or fifteen. Her mom and dad had it as a child, and her maw-maw and her paw-paw.

**01:00:03**

**Lois Sykes:** Now the other girl, Patty, she didn't—she didn't care for this, I don't think, because she never showed an interest in it.

**01:00:12**

**SR:** Yeah, that's what Suzie said.

**01:00:13**

**Wanda Cortez:** Yeah, she stayed home and cleaned house and Suzie over here working to learn the restaurant business. And then when she married Joey, bless his heart. [*Laughs*] I don't think he knew what he was getting into.

**01:00:26**

**Lois Sykes:** I don't think he knew anything about the restaurant business. But he learned.

**01:00:30**

**Wanda Cortez:** I mean, he was cool and calm, and he never got upset. He knew how to talk to people. No, he was good. We loved him. He--he was great. He really was.

**01:00:41**

**Lois Sykes:** And Horst is Karen is great. You don't see Horst as much because he's out doing something. He's a busy man.

**01:00:49**

**Wanda Cortez:** And he's always got a project going.

**01:00:51**

**SR:** He's a project man.

**01:00:53**

**Wanda Cortez:** He—I'm telling you, he's always got something. Did they tell you about the duck Lucky that he—? Honey, that--that's their children, those chickens and rabbits. And people come up: "Look at that cat laying by that rabbit." *[Laughs]*

**01:01:09**

**Lois Sykes:** And you know, people love that. They go back there all the time and look and bring the kids and point out everything to them. They love it.

**01:01:17**

**Wanda Cortez:** Yeah, Horst and Karen and that--that house, the chicken coop, it's heated for the winter. [*Laughs*]

**01:01:25**

**SR:** I did not know that.

**01:01:26**

**Wanda Cortez:** They--that's what I heard. I heard they had heat in there for them.

**01:01:29**

**Lois Sykes:** I heard that.

**01:01:31**

**Wanda Cortez:** So when it gets cold, you know, like this past winter he had heat in it. He's got the same little chicken coop at his house in Springfield. That's right.

**01:01:44**

**SR:** Do y'all ever work on the deck?

**01:01:45**

**Lois Sykes:** No, I didn't want to. I don't know about Wanda.

**01:01:48**

**Wanda Cortez:** No, uh-uh.

**01:01:49**

**Lois Sykes:** When we first was upstairs and I had station one and one table on the deck, on the porch, I went to Miss Karen and I said, "Miss Karen, if you don't mind I don't really want to walk that much." I said, "I'll take my station at one and they can have the porch." I know they make good money. People love it out there. But I've had enough. I'll take my little tables right here. I don't want to go—

**01:02:16**

**Wanda Cortez:** Well, it gets hot out there.

**01:02:17**

**Lois Sykes:** Not only that—

**01:02:18**

**Wanda Cortez:** And I can't—I never took a table out there.

**01:02:22**

**Lois Sykes:** —it's the walk, you know.

**01:02:23**

**Wanda Cortez:** I said, "I cannot breathe in the heat." She said, "Oh, okay." So she took us off of one and two and put us on seven and eight. [*Laughs*]

**01:02:31**

**SR:** Which is down here in the—?

**01:02:33**

**Wanda Cortez:** It's on the wall where the tree is. Either she's the tree or I'm the tree and she's the—. But they keep us on that L-shape right there, which is great.

**01:02:45**

**Lois Sykes:** Yeah, I don't mind. I hear some of the girls say, "Well, I don't like it under the tree." It doesn't bother me. As long as they bring customers—

**01:02:53**

**Wanda Cortez:** Well, yeah.

**01:02:54**

**Lois Sykes:** —it doesn't bother me.

**01:02:55**

**Wanda Cortez:** I mean—

**01:02:57**

**Lois Sykes:** Just bring me my customers.

**01:02:57**

**Wanda Cortez:** To us, it's great. We enjoy them. But the other girls are, "I don't like that. The station is too little." Well Honey, we know our limitations. Three tables is plenty for us.

**01:03:12**

**SR:** What about, I met the waitress—and I can't remember her name right now, but she has a color-coded system for taking her orders. Do you know who I'm talking about? She has all different colored markers in her apron.

**01:03:23**

**Lois Sykes:** Really? I don't know who that is.

**01:03:26**

**SR:** Well, it's okay. I was just wondering if you—if you've had any technique—if you have any techniques.

**01:03:31**

**Lois Sykes:** No, I just put the pen out and do the number of my table. You know, table thirty or thirty-one, or—

**01:03:40**

**SR:** I'm wondering if you have any really memorable customer moments, like a repeat customer or customer that told a story.

**01:03:48**

**Wanda Cortez:** I have call customers. Especially Miss Walldroff [spelling?] and her daughter. When they—they come once a month, and they know I work on Wednesday, so they come on Wednesdays now, and they ask for me, and they automatically put them there. And--and what's the other guy? Shoot—

**01:04:06**

**Lois Sykes:** The electrician?

**01:04:07**

**Wanda Cortez:** —Freddy. Him and his wife. They came in here one day, and I was on station two, and they turned that big table this way and just lined them up. He had his whole family.

**[Laughs]** And you know, you got people that ask for you, but it--it works out. I have friends: "I'm going to ask for you." I said, "Look, when my station is full you go sit down. All the waitresses will wait on you. Just make sure you tip them because I know you." **[Laughs]** It's a joke.



**01:04:45**

**SR:** But what if you don't get a tip, or you get a really small tip? How do you get over that?

**01:04:51**

**Wanda Cortez:** You go to the next table. One monkey don't make no show, Honey. You just—the first thing you know you got a \$3 tip on a \$70 bill, so you put the \$3 in and go to the next table. I had a couple one time that was celebrating his birthday, and she took care of everything. And he said, “You know, Miss Wanda.” He said, “You were so good.” And he—I thought it was a \$5 bill. He put it in my hand and he said, “Thank you so much.” I said, “You're so welcome, Darling.” When I opened it up to put it in my wallet, it was a \$50. **[Laughs]** I looked over at him and he said, “That's yours.” I was fixing to go back. I thought he made a mistake. And I looked and I said, “Oh, no.” And he said, “That's yours.” I said, “Thank you,” you know. It was just, they make your day. And then people will—older people will get up and give you a hug or, “Thank you so much. You were so sweet to me.” That makes your day.

**01:05:52**

**Lois Sykes:** Yeah, I've never had an ugly customer.

**01:05:54**

**SR:** Never?

**01:05:54**

**Lois Sykes:** And then—never.

**01:05:56**

**Wanda Cortez:** No.

**01:05:56**

**Lois Sykes:** The only time, those young people. It was two guys and one girl, or maybe three guys. I can't remember, but—and Dawn found it strange. She told Miss Karen, she said, “There’s something wrong here. I’m going to talk to Miss Lois.” And they went over there and told Karen how rude I was, and I wasn’t. And you know, I think they looked at the menu and they just didn’t want to stay. They were young. Anyway, Dawn come and she said, “Miss Lois, what happened with those guys over there?” “Oh,” I said. “Dawn, they were being so rude,” I said. “Well, they told Karen how rude *you* were.” I said, “Well, I was not.” I said, “He wanted a shrimp sandwich, and I asked him did it he want it on toast or a bun or a French. So he said, ‘French.’ So the other one said, ‘I’ll have a shrimp sandwich, too.’ I said, ‘Well, would you like yours on toast or French?’ He said, ‘Let’s just go.’”

**01:06:52**

**Wanda Cortez:** Yeah.

**01:06:52**

**Lois Sykes:** Okay, bye.

**01:06:54**

**Wanda Cortez:** I told—

**01:06:55**

**Lois Sykes:** I mean, I was doing my job.

**01:06:57**

**Wanda Cortez:** I told her he was looking at the prices and they probably didn't have any money so they had to make an excuse. And, bingo, you know.

**01:07:05**

**SR:** That's amazing to me, that you can think of the one bad customer you've had.

**01:07:10**

**Lois Sykes:** Oh yeah, because that's the only one. People are usually really nice to me. And her, too. I actually told—she said, "I can't believe they went and told Miss Karen [you were] rude."

**01:07:19**

**Wanda Cortez:** I said, "Honey, don't you worry about a thing." I said, "Either hair is going to grow on their tongue or they're going to have a flat going up—." We made a joke, you know, and that's how you look at it.

**01:07:31**

**Lois Sykes:** Dawn knew better. I mean, she's been here for years with us.

**01:07:34**

**Wanda Cortez:** She said, "No, I don't believe that."

**01:07:35**

**Lois Sykes:** She told Miss Karen, she said, "I'm going to talk to Miss Lois. That don't sound good." I told her the truth. I said, "I think they was upset because I asked them if they wanted it on French." But I really think it was a money problem. I really do.

**01:07:48**

**Wanda Cortez:** I've had people come in, you know, and they'd look at it and they said, "Oh, you raised the prices." I said, "Yes, Sir." I said, "Go in a grocery store. Anywhere you go the prices are raised." He said, "Well, I don't want to pay that much." I said, "Well fine. Let me see if we can find something else on the menu for you." And the wife would just looks up and she says, "Bring him a seafood platter, and bring me a shrimp and fish, and we want two O'Doul's. Don't pay him any mind." And he'd turn around and look, and I just looked at him and I said, "Well, okay." And he said, "Yeah." He said, "Listen to her and don't listen to me." **[Laughs]** So she knew—she didn't open up the menu. He did. She knew what to order, bless her heart. And she says, "And two cold mugs." I said, "That comes automatic." And something else we found: we was taking that test for the service permit that you have to have. O'Doul's has alcohol in it. We didn't know that. We thought it was a non-alcoholic beer. So when they order O'Doul's, we have to look at their ID.

**01:09:00**

**SR:** Oh really?

**01:09:00**

**Wanda Cortez:** Yeah. I've been selling O'Doul's—I thought it was non-alcoholic.

**01:09:05**

**Lois Sykes:** We don't have too many young people ask for beer or drinks. Usually, you know, they're at least twenty-five, just looking at them. And the young ones, well, they get a Coke or tea. I don't have no beer problem.

**01:09:17**

**Wanda Cortez:** But I had a lady one time. She ordered a mixed drink. I said, "Can I see your ID?" "Oh," she says. "Oh, I'm so happy." And she pulled it out. She was thirty-five years old. I said—I looked at her and I said, "Well, I don't know what kind of makeup you use or what kind of cream." But I said, "You write it down for me." She was thirty-five years old, and it just blew my mind. Boy, she was so excited. She was—. [*Laughs*]

**01:09:46**

**Lois Sykes:** I had one that wasn't age; she was drunk. And I said, "Honey, I don't think I can serve you a drink." And the guy said, "I'm driving." He said, "Bring her one." I said, "I'll ask." But Horst said she can only have one. She was drunk. I mean drunk.

**01:10:08**

**SR:** Joey and Suzie told me that they had a drink maximum, right, like—?

**01:10:11**

**Wanda Cortez:** Three drinks.

**01:10:11**

**SR:** Three drinks, yeah.

**01:10:13**

**Wanda Cortez:** And then food.

**01:10:14**

**SR:** Did you have to enforce that very often?

**01:10:18**

**Wanda Cortez:** Sometimes, yeah.

**01:10:18**

**Lois Sykes:** Yeah, Laurie had some deputies or something back here. It was a little party. And he had his three drinks. So when he ordered his next drink, she said, "I'm sorry, Sir, but I can't serve you another drink." He says, "Why not?" She says, "Well, you've had three and that's all

I'm allowed to serve you." He says, "Well, I want to talk to the manager." She says, "Well, I'll go get him for you." But she said, "I can't."

**01:10:44**

Joey said, "You did the right thing, Laurie. That's all you're supposed to serve." And he went and talked to him and I think they brought him another drink. But that makes it hard on you. I mean I don't know what to tell them. I know they're not supposed to have it.

**01:10:58**

**Wanda Cortez:** Well, when we used to get like a party of drinkers I'd run in the kitchen with the order: "Suzie, they're drinking." She would get that order out right then and there because once you got the food to them, they quiet down.

**01:11:12**

**Lois Sykes:** But now when that order goes up they go by these tickets, and I don't care what problem you're having, you're going to wait. Now, we had for the festival down in Ponchatoula—the Strawberry [Festival]—they come in and they smell so bad one bad time. So I went in the kitchen and I said, "Now Joey, I got three small fish and they stink." He said, "What, Miss Lois?" I said, "They stink. So I would appreciate it if you—" "Oh, yes, Ma'am." [**Laughs**]

**01:11:38**

**SR:** You mean stink like alcohol or just stink like they've been at a festival all day?

**01:11:42**

**Lois Sykes:** Stink like they'd been there for three days. They smelled bad. Now you don't get that much, but oh God, they did. I could smell them.

**01:11:51**

**Wanda Cortez:** No, we—

**01:11:51**

**Lois Sykes:** I went right in there and told him. I said, "You got to—."

**01:11:55**

**Wanda Cortez:** If you had a little problem with people drinking and you just went in there and you told Joey and Suzie, they got that food out right then and there. And after you served them, the whole table quieted down and they was eating. And that--that's the way we handled it.

**01:12:11**

**SR:** Well, most of the people who come here are going to be driving right?

**01:12:13**

**Wanda Cortez:** Uh-hm.

**01:12:14**

**Lois Sykes:** Uh-hm, oh yeah. They would have to drive.



**01:12:18**

**Wanda Cortez:** Like that guy said with the—that gives us our permits, he said, “If you see somebody who comes in and they’re drunk and you serve him one drink and he leaves and gets in a wreck, they’re going to come back on you and this restaurant.” I said, “Yes, sir. We know that.”

**01:12:36**

**SR:** How often do you have to take that test?

**01:12:38**

**Wanda Cortez:** Four years.

**01:12:40**

**Lois Sykes:** Four years.

**01:12:40**

**Wanda Cortez:** We just took it, what? April thirtieth. So we’re good for four more years.

**01:12:47**

**Lois Sykes:** I said—when I went in the kitchen, I said, “Well, this will be my last test.” And those girls said, “What do you mean your last test?” I said, “Well, I’m seventy-five.” “How much longer do you want me to—?” I said, “I’ll be seventy-nine.” **[Laughs]**

**01:13:00**

**SR:** Is the kitchen staff—are there a lot of people who have been here for a long time on the kitchen staff?

**01:13:07**

**Wanda Cortez:** Elaine is the longest. Elaine.

**01:13:10**

**Lois Sykes:** But I think Horst has got mostly new people except for Elaine.

**01:13:16**

**Wanda Cortez:** Yeah, Elaine is the only one left over from Joey and Suzie. Mae-Mae was here for a while, but she quit. She was leftover from Joey and Suzie.

**01:13:24**

**Lois Sykes:** Elaine left and came back. I don't know the details, but—

**01:13:28**

**SR:** Um, what about—have you ever had to use the sheriff?

**01:13:34**

**Lois Sykes:** I think they've asked Mr. John once or twice. A different girl—not me.

**01:13:39**

**Wanda Cortez:** Well, sometimes they get rowdy and you just go get the deputy and he starts walking around in the dining room and everything quiets down. That's--that's it. And Mr. John, he's got tact. He knows how to talk to people.

**01:13:51**

**Lois Sykes:** Yes, he does.

**01:13:52**

**Wanda Cortez:** But he can just come in and start walking around and looking, and the first thing you know, boy, everything is quiet.

**01:13:59**

**SR:** Handy to have a deputy on staff, huh?

**01:14:02**

**Wanda Cortez:** Well, it's good because it's ten miles that way—and it's fourteen this way—and if there's a problem it takes them a while to get here. Maybe, you know, four or five minutes. But in the meantime we have the deputy.

**01:14:16**

**Lois Sykes:** I think it's good to have him here. I really do.

**01:14:19**

**Wanda Cortez:** We've always—since I've been here they've always had a deputy. And Mr. John, he sees a bunch of cars pull in he'll come in and he'll fix tea glasses and water glasses for us so we can just run in and pick it up.

**01:14:33**

**Lois Sykes:** He's a team—he works as a team with us.

**01:14:38**

**Wanda Cortez:** He sure does. He's a good man.

**01:14:39**

**Lois Sykes:** I like him.

**01:14:41**

**SR:** Karen has a picture of—it might even be hanging up; I'm not sure—of some people outside the restaurant and it says, "Club Middendorf's." Does that ring a bell?

**01:14:52**

**Wanda Cortez:** Uh-hm. That had to be back in the '40s.

**01:14:55**

**Lois Sykes:** It had to be. I don't remember.

**01:14:57**

**Wanda Cortez:** Thirties and forties. No, uh-uh.

**01:14:58**

**Lois Sykes:** It's always been just Middendorf's.

**01:14:59**

**Wanda Cortez:** Middendorf's, yeah.

**01:15:03**

**SR:** What about, tell me: Have you had any other family members working here? I thought that you did, Miss Wanda, huh?

**01:15:08**

**Wanda Cortez:** I had a granddaughter that bused tables, Jordan. She bused tables. And TJ, my grandson, was bus—did dishwashing. But, darn, he's thirty. And what is she now, twenty-five? They're married and got kids. **[Laughs]** But when they were younger, yeah.

**01:15:28**

**SR:** Have you had any family members working here?

**01:15:30**

**Lois Sykes:** I don't think—I don't think Earl has ever worked here.

**01:15:39**

**Wanda Cortez:** He didn't skin fish at one time?

**01:15:39**

**Lois Sykes:** I don't know. It's so long ago I don't know.

**01:15:43**

**Wanda Cortez:** I thought he worked in the fish market there for a little while. I know Joe Reno and them skinned fish, and I thought Earl was in there, too. I'm not sure.

**01:15:55**

**SR:** That's okay. What about when there was a train stop here in Manchac?

**01:16:00**

**Wanda Cortez:** Oh Lord, that's way before my time. That's back in the '30s. **[Laughs]** They had a depot. Where is the picture at? They had a picture somewhere.

**01:16:09**

**SR:** Yeah, I've seen a picture.

**01:16:10**

**Wanda Cortez:** Oh, okay, okay.

**01:16:13**

**SR:** That must have increased the--the people who came through the town, huh?

**01:16:19**

**Lois Sykes:** I truly don't know about the train stop.

**01:16:21**

**Wanda Cortez:** Yeah, that was back in—.

**01:16:22**

**SR:** Okay, too long ago, huh?

**01:16:25**

**Lois Sykes:** Uh-hm.

**01:16:26**

**SR:** What about—I worked in restaurants for—well, all through high school and college and for about seven years after college. And I stopped because my feet hurt, my back hurt. How do you deal with that?

**01:16:42**

**Lois Sykes:** I take two ibuprofen after I get home and a good hot bath and soak my feet.

**[Laughs]**

**01:16:48**

**Wanda Cortez:** I don't have back problems. She has back problems. I have a bunion.

**01:16:53**

**Lois Sykes:** And my legs never really hurt me, until a couple of years ago they started.

**01:16:57**

**Wanda Cortez:** But like she said, we take ibuprofen. **[Laughs]**

**01:17:04**

**Lois Sykes:** It's not a cure, but it helps a lot.

**01:17:07**

**Wanda Cortez:** But no, uh-uh. It—

**01:17:12**

**Lois Sykes:** And we wear good shoes. That's—I think that has a lot to do with it.

**01:17:17**



**Wanda Cortez:** I wear SAS and she wears SAS. That's all we wear. I don't care if it's a sandal or it's a slip-on or it's a work shoe. It's always SAS.

**01:17:29**

**Lois Sykes:** I don't think you could manage this job with flip flops.

**01:17:32**

**Wanda Cortez:** No.

**01:17:33**

**Lois Sykes:** All these cheap shoes that are flat, you know.

**01:17:37**

**Wanda Cortez:** Most of the girls wear tennis shoes, but her and I, we do the SAS. That's what we started with, and—

**01:17:43**

**SR:** How long will a pair last you?

**01:17:47**

**Wanda Cortez:** Two, three years. I change the insole. You know, I buy the insole, but when the bottom starts getting slick then you change because you don't want to—.

**01:18:01**

**Lois Sykes:** I have two, three pairs, and I just swap them out.

**01:18:04**

**Wanda Cortez:** She rotates them.

**01:18:05**

**Lois Sykes:** I had an old man tell me that at a shoe store. So I said, “Well, now is a good time to try it.” You know, I get this pair and a week or two I get another pair. I just now rotate them. And I think it really works. I don’t know. [*Laughs*] When I get tired I’m tired no matter what I do.

**01:18:25**

**SR:** What about tipping over time? Do people tip better or worse now, or has that changed?

**01:18:32**

**Wanda Cortez:** Well, times are hard. When I first started here, tipping was—you’d get a couple and they’d leave \$20, and four people would leave \$30, and—but it’s not like that anymore because the economy has changed, so—. You roll with the flow.

**01:18:52**

**Lois Sykes:** It’s not as good as it was, no. Now these girls that are working doubles and—they do better, you know.

**01:19:06**

**Wanda Cortez:** Yeah. When we first started—what—seven days a week, maybe; five doubles a week. I don't know how we were doing it.

**01:19:14**

**Lois Sykes:** Yeah, because we were open on Mondays. Because you worked Friday, Saturday, Sunday, and come back Monday for another double. That was enough to kill you.

**01:19:22**

**Wanda Cortez:** She asked the head waitress, “Why do you put us on Monday?” “Well, y'all live here.” Oh, other words, if we didn't—

**01:19:29**

**Lois Sykes:** I said, “If we move, we don't have to work Mondays?” [*Laughs*]

**01:19:34**

**Wanda Cortez:** But no, Mondays was busy.

**01:19:35**

**Lois Sykes:** But Monday was a great day.

**01:19:38**

**Wanda Cortez:** Yeah, Monday was a good day. It really was.

**01:19:38**

**Lois Sykes:** I was so surprised. Yes, Ma'am.

**01:19:41**

**SR:** Why do you think that is? People are driving back to wherever they came from, or—?

**01:19:45**

**Lois Sykes:** I don't know, but it was always a good day.

**01:19:46**

**Wanda Cortez:** We had five girls and these two dining rooms, and then they'd have to open that and everybody had a station back there, too.

**01:19:57**

**Lois Sykes:** I didn't care for that.

**01:19:58**

**Wanda Cortez:** No, I didn't either, but—

**01:19:59**

**Lois Sykes:** Well, these people got left out. You would stay where you got the tables and then you said, “Oh, I got to go check, on them.” You forget. Or you’d have the girl that’s, “If my table—call for me. If they need anything, call for me.”

**01:20:12**

**SR:** Because you were—right now we’re talking about a dining room that’s sort of set apart. And so you’d forget those people.

**01:20:17**

**Wanda Cortez:** Usually private. Yeah, they’d have to open up that, and you was working in the front, and then you’d have to run through here and go check on them, so—.

**01:20:24**

**Lois Sykes:** Uh-hm, and when you got so busy—you hate to say it, but sometimes you’d forget about them.

**01:20:30**

**Wanda Cortez:** Yeah, and then you’d walk in there. “Well, where have you been?” “Uh, okay. I’m so sorry, but—.

**01:20:36**

**Lois Sykes:** They would—a lot of them understood. They said, “Man, y'all are busy.” “Yes, Sir, we are. What can I get you?” And I'd bring everything: tartar, lemons, water. You know, get everything settled and run back in the front and did them tables. But we did it.

**01:20:52**

**SR:** I think this job must keep you young because I'm amazed by you two.

**01:20:57**

**Wanda Cortez:** [*Laughs*] Well we just—like I said, it's great. It really is.

**01:21:04**

**Lois Sykes:** And if you got people that will work *with* you—you know, she might be really busy there and this one is kind of laying low. Well, go set her up. Like we do, you know. But some of these will stand there—

**01:21:19**

**Wanda Cortez:** They'll stand there and see you get a table and they don't set you up.

**01:21:23**

**Lois Sykes:** “Miss Lois,” you know, “You have a table.” Yes, Honey. Why don't you go set them up? You think I'm stupid? Yes, I know I have a table. [*Laughs*]

**01:21:30**

**SR:** They needed some training.

**01:21:33**

**Lois Sykes:** I'm telling you. We don't—

**01:21:34**

**Wanda Cortez:** Well, Dawn and Dee Dee is good about that.

**01:21:37**

**Lois Sykes:** Oh, yes.

**01:21:37**

**Wanda Cortez:** Especially on a weekend. And if they slam you one, two, three, then Dawn or Dee Dee will go take and order for you and bring it to you.

**01:21:45**

**Lois Sykes:** Well, they were waitresses. They know what—they know what to do. That means a lot.

**01:21:51**

**Wanda Cortez:** Uh-hm, yeah it—

**01:21:54**

**SR:** Do y'all work just day shifts now?

**01:21:56**

**Wanda Cortez:** Uh-hm.

**01:21:56**

**Lois Sykes:** Uh-hm.

**01:21:57**

**Wanda Cortez:** Ten to four.

**01:21:57**

**Lois Sykes:** Ten to four, and that's enough.

**01:22:01**

**Wanda Cortez:** Wednesday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday.

**01:22:02**

**Lois Sykes:** You get tired.

**01:22:03**

**SR:** I was so surprised when I came in here maybe two months ago and people were outside waiting to eat at 10:30 in the morning.



01:22:15

**Wanda Cortez:** Uh-hm.

01:22:16

**Lois Sykes:** On Mother's Day, I wasn't working. We was coming up the Pass and Fernell said—we thought—he thought something happened here. There was people—we had to stop for the bridge. It was people all over the—all over. He said, "Something must have happened in Manchac. Look at those people." I said, "Oh no, Fernell. That's just Middendorf's. It's Mother's Day." "Oh, I forgot." [*Laughs*] But that's how it was. It was that many people lined up.

01:22:41

**Wanda Cortez:** Yeah, you had people and the line went down this way and met the other line going in that other restaurant.

01:22:48

**SR:** Is that what it's going to be like if I come in on Sunday, Mother's Day?

01:22:51

**Wanda Cortez:** No. You're going to have to wait in line out there.

01:22:57

**Lois Sykes:** Miss Deloris was really good about seating them. She--she—

**01:23:00**

**Wanda Cortez:** Dee Dee's mama.

**01:23:01**

**Lois Sykes:** Dee Dee's mama. She was a good hostess.

**01:23:06**

**Wanda Cortez:** She'd take this table and turn it and make a six-top. She'd take that four-top and turn it and make a five-top.

**01:23:11**

**Lois Sykes:** She would ask them first. She said, "I have a four-top if you—?" "We'll take it." They want to eat, you know. She sat a lot of people. Go find them a chair, you know, and—

**01:23:21**

**SR:** Will you be working on Mother's Day?

**01:23:24**

**Wanda Cortez:** Uh-hm.

**01:23:24**

**Lois Sykes:** Uh-hm. Nobody—she's done had a little thing up on the—

**01:23:27**

**Wanda Cortez:** A little note, “Do not ask—.” [*Laughs*]

**01:23:33**

**SR:** Do not ask for off?

**01:23:34**

**Lois Sykes:** When I went to the doctor and he said that they needed to do my carotid vein, I said, “Well, I don’t know.” I said—well, first everything was set up, okay, and then I was talking to the nurse and I said, “When is Mother’s Day?” And she said, “That’s next week or so, Honey.” I said, “I got to wait until after Mother’s Day.” She said, “For what?” I said, “Because I got to work Mother’s Day. Dawn will kill me if—.” She wouldn’t; she would understand, but it’s something I could wait on. So I told her, I said, “We’ll do it after Mother’s Day.”

**01:24:07**

**Wanda Cortez:** That’s how we plan. [*Laughs*] And--and Father’s Day, we make sure, you know, there’s nothing going on.

**01:24:17**

**SR:** Strawberry Festival?

**01:24:18**

**Lois Sykes:** Yeah, that's another one.

**01:24:19**

**Wanda Cortez:** That's another one, uh-huh.

**01:24:21**

**Lois Sykes:** Easter.

**01:24:23**

**Wanda Cortez:** Memorial Day. Well, Easter we close at 4:00 so everybody can go home and be with their family. And then we have Christmas off. But some people will call up here. You know, "Y'all going to be open for Thanksgiving?" No, we're closed that day. It's turkey day.

**[Laughs]** Eat your turkey. But no, uh-uh, and we got such fine—they come from all over: Jackson, Mississippi; Jackson Hole, Wyoming. A truck driver used to come through here. I don't know what happened to him. I haven't seen him about three years. But he would come through here and make sure he got lunch. Went and took his eighteen-wheeler and backed it up, dumped it, unhooked it, and came back for supper. Then he'd go back and get another load, come through here, eat, and get small thin catfish to-go—just the fish—so he could eat fish going out. And he just—you know, people like that, and that's how this restaurant got famous, was people—word-of-mouth. That's all it was. There wasn't no advertising, radio, TV, or nothing. It was word-of-mouth.

**01:25:35**

**Lois Sykes:** I don't know if Horst and Karen does any advertising, but—

**01:25:40**

**Wanda Cortez:** Well, they got the billboards. You know, I've seen that, but—and I'm sure they've got a Facebook or something. We don't have computers.

**01:25:49**

**Lois Sykes:** No, I don't.

**01:25:50**

**Wanda Cortez:** We're in the dark ages. [*Laughs*]

**01:25:53**

**SR:** But you know what Facebook is.

**01:25:55**

**Wanda Cortez:** Yes, Ma'am. I hear the kids—girls—talking about it all the time. “Did you see that on Facebook?” And they—you know, we don't need it because they tell us what they see.

[*Laughs*] That's so true.

**01:26:07**

**Lois Sykes:** Yeah, it's true. They'll tell us.

**01:26:09**

**SR:** Are your orders computerized here or is it all hand-written?

**01:26:14**

**Lois Sykes:** Yeah, we get on the computer.

**01:26:15**

**Wanda Cortez:** I write it—we write it down on a tablet, and then we go put everything in.

**01:26:21**

**SR:** Was it always computerized?

**01:26:21**

**Wanda Cortez:** Uh-um, when they came.

**01:26:23**

**Lois Sykes:** No, that was the kitchen back there when Horst and Karen came.

**01:26:27**

**Wanda Cortez:** We'd write it down and we'd walk in the kitchen, and if he had two thins and two teas, you better have your tea out. Because when you write, "two small thins," Suzie don't move. She'd have them two plates—bingo. You was out the door. Yeah, if it, you know, was thin catfish, Honey, she had that ready to roll. Better have you drinks out. **[Laughs]**

**01:26:49**

**Lois Sykes:** And when we had the two buildings open, we had two kitchens. A lot of people—  
“Do you have to run next door?” I said, “No, Ma'am. We have a kitchen back there.”

**01:26:59**

**Wanda Cortez:** I could just see us running across the parking lot to pick up food. Unreal.

*[Laughs]*

**01:27:04**

**SR:** It would be hard to keep the fried food hot enough.

**01:27:05**

**Lois Sykes:** Yeah.

**01:27:08**

**Wanda Cortez:** Uh-huh, I know, Baby, but that's how people were thinking. And then I've had people over here that you're waiting on say the food is better here than there, not knowing the cooks left at 4 o'clock and went over there and cooked the same food. I had a lawyer tell me that and I told him, I said, “Huh, I ain't hiring you.” He said, “Well, the food tastes better here than over there.” I said, “It's got to be in the mind because it's the same food and the same cooks.”

*[Laughs]*

**01:27:44**

**SR:** Maybe he just felt better in that space.

**01:27:49**

**Wanda Cortez:** I don't know, but he--he had a son and his son loved me. So if I was there they had to come over there so I could wait on him. **[Laughs]** But he said, "No, the food is better next door." And I just said, "Man, man, man. Don't ever get in trouble." **[Laughs]** Bless his heart. But like you said, I don't know if it's the atmosphere or if they were used to eating here all the time and—

**01:28:17**

**SR:** Well, I do think you get used to a certain place. Like when I--I used to come here, you know before—when Suzie and Joey owned the place—and I couldn't imagine ever not sitting in one of these dining rooms. But then you sit in the new dining room and you make a memory. You know, you have a good meal and then you're like, okay. You have to—but I think people do get attached to certain--certain spaces, certain ways of doing things. You know, this is that kind of special place where you make—you've made memories here and you want to repeat that probably.

**01:28:50**

**Lois Sykes:** I think so, too, yeah. Because you have a lot of people—

**01:28:53**



**Wanda Cortez:** Generation after generation.

**01:28:55**

**Lois Sykes:** “Daddy used to bring me here when I was just so high.”

**01:29:00**

**SR:** Yeah. Well, we've talked a long time. I'm going to wrap this up, but I always end the interviews asking people what they like most about their job and what they like least about their job. And I know you already told me some things that you really like about it, but what—what's the hardest part of your job, and what's the best part of your job?

**01:29:20**

**Wanda Cortez:** The hardest?

**01:29:20**

**Lois Sykes:** I don't know. [*Laughs*]

**01:29:22**

**Wanda Cortez:** Hmm.

**01:29:24**

**Lois Sykes:** I don't know what the hardest—let's see.

**01:29:27**

**Wanda Cortez:** No, we--we come in and we cut lemons and we make tartar and we do tea and bread and—bingo. I don't find anything hard here because it's never been hard that I know of. And I don't think she's run into hard. Maybe somebody else has, but—

**01:29:48**

**SR:** Yeah, well, that's good. And then is your favorite part the people that you meet, like you said earlier?

**01:29:53**

**Lois Sykes:** Oh, yeah.

**01:29:53**

**Wanda Cortez:** Uh-hm, different—

**01:29:56**

**Lois Sykes:** All the different people and the kids, you know. Sometimes at the front table there, you'll get a little girl or a little boy and they're sitting in that chair and—

**01:30:03**

**Wanda Cortez:** And they're waving at you.

**01:30:05**

**Lois Sykes:** —they're waving at you or grinning.

**01:30:07**

**Wanda Cortez:** So you wave back and then you walk over there and find out their name and how old they are and—.

**01:30:12**

**Lois Sykes:** It's fine.

**01:30:15**

**Wanda Cortez:** It's great. It is really great. I have—I love this. I love to get up on Wednesday morning and Friday morning and—

**01:30:23**

**Lois Sykes:** Go to work.

**01:30:24**

**Wanda Cortez:** —pick her up and come on down.

**01:30:27**

**SR:** Oh, do you carpool?

**01:30:29**

**Lois Sykes:** No.

**01:30:30**

**Wanda Cortez:** Husband—we go pick her up and my husband drops us off and then he picks us up.

**01:30:35**

**Lois Sykes:** We live two, three blocks down the road.

**01:30:36**

**Wanda Cortez:** He picks us up in the evening. He's got the air-conditioner on in the summertime so the truck is nice and cool when we get out. **[Laughs]** No, uh-uh, we—like I said, we've been through thick and thin. **[Laughs]**

**01:30:51**

**Lois Sykes:** Yeah. Think about that sometimes—thick and thin.

**01:30:57**

**Wanda Cortez:** She's my buddy-buddy. She's better than a sister.

**01:31:01**

**Lois Sykes:** But you know, they love that thin fish. Mostly every—you get something when they like the fish, you know. But they love that thin—

**01:31:10**

**Wanda Cortez:** Thin and crispy. That's what they come down here for: thin and crispy.

**01:31:13**

**Lois Sykes:** I think you could just fry that all the time and just keep frying it.

**01:31:18**

**SR:** I'm getting hungry.

**01:31:20**

**Wanda Cortez:** Oh, okay.

**01:31:24**

**SR:** It's true: that's what I come for.

**01:31:25**

**Lois Sykes:** The thin? You like the thin? I like the thin.

**01:31:27**

**Wanda Cortez:** We do, too. We like the thin and I like the soft-fried oysters.

**01:31:32**

**Lois Sykes:** And I like the thick. I like both because I love the fish. I like the fish.

**01:31:36**

**SR:** But every time I think, “Okay, I’m going to try something new.” And then I get here and—

**01:31:40**

**Lois Sykes:** Oh, I get people tell me that. Well, they look and they look and they look and he says, “You going to get the fish, Honey?” “Yeah, I was going to try something new, but we’ll have the thin fish.” *[Laughs]*

**01:31:53**

**Wanda Cortez:** That’s your biggest seller, is the thin.

**01:31:55**

**Lois Sykes:** I think so, yeah.

**01:32:00**

**Wanda Cortez:** And they love it.

**01:32:01**

**Lois Sykes:** But I think everything we have is good, if you want to just say good.

**01:32:05**

**Wanda Cortez:** The oysters, yeah; the flounder and everything.

**01:32:07**

**Lois Sykes:** I think it's all good.

**01:32:07**

**Wanda Cortez:** It's all good.

**01:32:08**

**SR:** I do get the gumbo.

**01:32:11**

**Wanda Cortez:** Okay, sometimes it's a little bit peppery. It just depends on if Gail—what Gail is throwing in there. [*Laughs*]

**01:32:21**

**SR:** I had a waitress once tell me that it had too much celery in it. And I thought, "Well, you must be a good cook if you can taste too much celery." I like that.

**01:32:30**

**Lois Sykes:** I never tasted too much celery.

**01:32:31**

**SR:** No, this was years and years and years ago.

**01:32:34**

**Lois Sykes:** Every now and then I get me a little taste, you know, just to check it out.

**01:32:37**

**SR:** Yeah.

**01:32:37**

**Wanda Cortez:** Yeah, we put it in one of them little tartar cups. The gravy and—

**01:32:40**

**Lois Sykes:** I like to check it out.

**01:32:42**

**Wanda Cortez:** In case we get a kid who wants gumbo and we can tell them, “Well, it’s a little on the tangy side.” I’ve had kids order it and put hot sauce in it, and I look. And the mother says, “Yeah, I know.” [*Laughs*]

**01:32:56**

**Lois Sykes:** You know, like Stevie and Brandy. I bet you Brandy could do that because she’s been on pepper all her life because her daddy loves everything hot.



**01:33:06**

**SR:** And she goes along with it?

**01:33:06**

**Lois Sykes:** Oh, she eats it, yeah. And I mean hot [*Laughs*].

**01:33:14**

**Wanda Cortez:** Yeah, little Steve cooks—when he cooks, it's hot.

**01:33:17**

**Lois Sykes:** So Brandy, as a child she ate—she would eat that hot soup. Too hot for me, and I—he says, “Well, she’s used to it.” I never thought about it that way.

**01:33:27**

**Wanda Cortez:** We used to eat it hot, too, but as you get older—I have acid reflux now, and so does she, so—.

**01:33:33**

**Lois Sykes:** Well, yeah, and even all the guys that used to eat hot-hot, they’ve cut down. You know, my brothers don’t want hot-hot no more. They’ve cut down on the pepper.

**01:33:42**

**SR:** Do y'all cook at home these days?

**01:33:43**

**Lois Sykes:** Uh-hm.

**01:33:46**

**Wanda Cortez:** Mostly my husband cooks.

**01:33:49**

**Lois Sykes:** He got to where he's a good cook.

**01:33:49**

**Wanda Cortez:** Yeah, he's home all day and--and he does ribs in the oven; barbecue and sausage. And now he wants a gumbo, he gets me to cook it—or a stew. I'll start it and he'll finish it. I mean I get it going and then he'll bring me to work and then he finishes it. But I get it started. [*Laughs*] Bless his heart.

**01:34:14**

**Lois Sykes:** I don't blame him. It's a lot of little things to do that.

**01:34:16**

**Wanda Cortez:** Yeah. But no, he--he's a good cook.

**01:34:19**

**Lois Sykes:** Yes, he is.

**01:34:20**

**Wanda Cortez:** Fernell showed him how--how to—he cubes things. I mean perfect when he cuts—

**01:34:25**

**Lois Sykes:** Bite-size. I like that too.

**01:34:27**

**Wanda Cortez:** —deer, anything. It's cubed.

**01:34:29**

**SR:** Who does? Your husband or—?

**01:34:31**

**Wanda Cortez:** Yeah, my husband. He--he—

**01:34:32**

**SR:** Very precise?

**01:34:34**

**Wanda Cortez:** And patient. Me, I cut that up and say, “Well,” you know. But no, he—. But Fernell taught him that, Fernel Leader.

**01:34:45**

**SR:** Who is Fernell? That name has come up a few times.

**01:34:47**

**Lois Sykes:** Now he was a good cook.

**01:34:49**

**Wanda Cortez:** Yeah, he—

**01:34:49**

**Lois Sykes:** He was just a friend. He had the camp down there. And that’s where we’d go.

**01:34:57**

**Wanda Cortez:** He died in ’89. He had a heart attack July thirtieth.

**01:35:00**

**Lois Sykes:** He was in Alabama, I think, and he—

**01:35:03**

**Wanda Cortez:** Florida, a plantation.

**01:35:04**

**Lois Sykes:** Florida? Anyway, she called and she said, “I got some bad news.” And I said, “Oh God, no. Miss Viola died?” You know, and she says, “Fernell died.” Now that was a shocker, because I was looking for my neighbor, you know. I said, “I bet you Miss Viola—” when she said that.

**01:35:20**

**Wanda Cortez:** No, I got the call from Florida from one of his workers, and they were trying to get in touch with his brother, but his emergency phone number was ours. He said, “Fernell has had a massive heart attack.” I said, “Oh, okay. Wait a minute.” So I went and got Wayne’s number and everything and I told them to call that number. And I’m sitting by the phone and I told Mark, I said, “Fernell had a major massive heart attack.” Yeah, he left on the seventh, yeah.

**01:35:51**

**Lois Sykes:** And they gave him a clean bill of health to go to Florida.

**01:35:53**

**Wanda Cortez:** I waited about forty minutes and then I called Wayne. I said, “Wayne, what hospital is he in? What can we do?” He said, “Wanda, he had a massive heart attack.” I said, “Yeah, I heard.” He said, “Wanda, he’s dead.” I lost it. “Massive” didn’t mean anything to me. I just heard “heart attack.” And then I had to call them. But he--he was a darn good friend. He stayed with me and Mark a while, and then he stayed with Lois and Earl.

**01:36:22**

**Lois Sykes:** Yeah, when Earl was in the Service. And it was freezing. Instead of going down there, we--he stayed at the house.

**01:36:28**

**Wanda Cortez:** He'd stay at our house. He had clothes there, and he had clothes there, you know. He was just a darn good friend. He really was. He was fabulous. But he was, what? Fifty?

**01:36:38**

**Lois Sykes:** He was young.

**01:36:40**

**Wanda Cortez:** Fifty-five, fifty-six.

**01:36:41**

**Lois Sykes:** Maybe fifty-five.

**01:36:43**

**SR:** Hmm, way too young.

**01:36:43**

**Lois Sykes:** Yeah, way too young.

**01:36:45**

**Wanda Cortez:** But then we got to thinking: when he would be cooking, he would be stomping his feet. You know, to get the circulation going. And then we found out later on he had—his daddy's brothers were dying in their forties from a heart attack. We didn't know that. And we didn't realize that his arteries in his legs and everything was getting clogged.

**01:37:08**

**Lois Sykes:** I didn't know none of that.

**01:37:10**

**Wanda Cortez:** And we got to talking about it and he was—you know, he'd stomp and do this and trying to get—

**01:37:18**

**Lois Sykes:** Get that blood moving.

**01:37:20**

**Wanda Cortez:** But we had no idea, but—

**01:37:20**

**SR:** He was a good cook, though?

**01:37:22**

**Wanda Cortez:** Oh my God, he cooked for the fire department. He would make the gumbos and the jambalayas and everything. He had these big old pots, and oh yeah. That's how my husband learned how to cook, because he would be there cooking with Fernell, and that's how he learned. He certainly did. He learned from Fernell, and that was a good ole boy.

**01:37:46**

**Lois Sykes:** We've had some fine people come through here.

**01:37:49**

**Wanda Cortez:** Uh-hm. Pat and James and Beatrice and George.

**01:37:50**

**Lois Sykes:** Really fine, fine people.

**01:37:52**

**Wanda Cortez:** The crew that we had, that we used to meet and go shrimping with and everything—there's nobody left but her, me, and my husband. They're all gone. And it's just us.

**01:38:06**

**Lois Sykes:** I don't even like to think about it because it makes me—

**01:38:08**



**Wanda Cortez:** Yeah, I mean—

**01:38:10**

**Lois Sykes:** —it makes me sad. They're all gone.

**01:38:13**

**Wanda Cortez:** But we'll be—my husband and I will be talking and he'll say, "Do you remember when so-and-so done such-and-such?" "Yeah, I sure do. That was something." But we have our memories.

**01:38:22**

**Lois Sykes:** Oh, yeah.

**01:38:23**

**SR:** Do you all ever talk about retirement?

**01:38:27**

**Wanda Cortez:** No.

**01:38:27**

**Lois Sykes:** No. Now, my brother does. He wants me to retire so bad, but—

**01:38:33**

**Wanda Cortez:** My kids did too, but—

**01:38:34**

**Lois Sykes:** It's like I told him: I said, "I'm going to retire when I have to. What am I going to do? Sit home and do what?"

**01:38:44**

**Wanda Cortez:** Yeah, when I had my hip done back in 2000 the kids wanted me to retire. And Dr. Vandever, he said, "I'll have you back at work—hey, Darling—in seven months. I was back in five.

**01:38:58**

**Lois Sykes:** You need something?

**01:39:01**

**SR:** Sorry, we just had to pause that, but I want you to finish. So you had a hip replacement?

**01:39:05**

**Wanda Cortez:** Uh-hm, in 2000. And then I had open heart surgery in 2003, and she had a valve replacement—what, three years ago?

**01:39:14**

**Lois Sykes:** Yeah.

**01:39:15**

**Wanda Cortez:** Yeah, they had to replace a valve in her heart.

**01:39:18**

**Lois Sykes:** But I hadn't had it like her. Oh, she's had a lot of stuff done. She really has.

**01:39:23**

**SR:** You look great.

**01:39:23**

**Lois Sykes:** She does.

**01:39:24**

**Wanda Cortez:** I bounced back like a rubber ball.

**01:39:26**

**Lois Sykes:** She does good. She does real good.

**01:39:28**

**Wanda Cortez:** That's what her sister-in-law Judy told me. She said, "You just bounce back like a rubber ball."

**01:39:35**

**Lois Sykes:** Well, you've done a lot. You've been through a lot.

**01:39:37**

**Wanda Cortez:** I've been lucky.

**01:39:38**

**Lois Sykes:** And she comes right back, you know, which is wonderful.

**01:39:42**

**SR:** Yeah, so no talking of retirement.

**01:39:44**

**Lois Sykes:** Not yet. [*Laughs*]

**01:39:45**

**SR:** Well, let me ask: Is there anything that I haven't asked that you would want to say about your work life? Or--or anything you would want to go on the record?

**01:39:55**

**Wanda Cortez:** It's been wonderful for me.

**01:39:57**

**Lois Sykes:** It really has. I'm not—we like all the people. You know, that makes a difference in your work. We like everybody here.

**01:40:05**

**Wanda Cortez:** And like I tell the girls, God is good.

**01:40:08**

**Lois Sykes:** You know, Miss Karen and Mr. Horst, they're good.

**01:40:10**

**Wanda Cortez:** Oh God, yeah.

*[This portion of the interview has been omitted.]*

**Wanda Cortez:** But no, Karen and Horst—I pick on Horst all the time. *[Laughs]* I told him one day, I said, “When is your mama coming back?” Because he's got a swell mom. Yes.

**01:41:04**

**Lois Sykes:** She comes every year. Every year.

**01:41:05**

**Wanda Cortez:** Well, his daddy died, so I don't know if she's—

**01:41:09**

**Lois Sykes:** Well, I don't know what she's going to do.

**01:41:08**

**Wanda Cortez:** But she was home taking care of him, and they had to make arrangements so she could come and somebody would be there with his dad. And [Horst] went back over there [to Germany], and I think about six weeks later he died, his dad. Yeah.

**01:41:25**

**SR:** Sorry about that.

**01:41:26**

**Lois Sykes:** I'm glad they got to go, though.

**01:41:28**

**Wanda Cortez:** Yeah, Karen went over there and so they--they had time with him, so—. That--that counts a lot when you have time. But no, we—I wouldn't do anything else. I don't care what you paid me or trained me for. This is it.

**01:41:52**

**Lois Sykes:** Oh no. I lived with my brother in Ponchatoula two years, I think, and they just wanted me to quit and—what you going to do? I said I'm going to ride—Miss Kitty Settoon

lived in Ponchatoula. I said, “I’m going to ride with Miss Kitty. They can put me to work the same day Kitty works and we’re going to ride together. I’m not going to worry about that.”

**01:42:09**

**Wanda Cortez:** And she sure did.

**01:42:11**

**Lois Sykes:** I said, “I’m not quitting. I like it.”

**01:42:13**

**Wanda Cortez:** And if she couldn’t, Miss Helen would go pick her up.

**01:42:16**

**Lois Sykes:** She said—Mr. Dick picked me up many a time, and Judy says, “Well, why don’t you quit and work at the Coffee Pot?” I said, “I don’t even like to serve coffee, much less go work at the Coffee Pot.” [*Laughs*] When I’m really, really, really busy I don’t care about all this coffee.

**01:42:34**

**Wanda Cortez:** Well, we try and make sure we got fresh coffee.

**01:42:37**

**Lois Sykes:** Yeah.

**01:42:37**

**Wanda Cortez:** If it's been there for an hour or so, we get rid of it and make a fresh pot and serve fresh coffee.

**01:42:44**

**Lois Sykes:** But we don't make a big bit. We just got the little pot, and that way you don't have a lot to throw out. We don't make big pots like some people have big pots. We don't do that.

**01:42:54**

**Wanda Cortez:** Uh-um. Miss Helen, Suzie's mama, was a stickler. She would walk by there and smell the coffee, and if she didn't like it, it was dumped right then. It could have been thirty, forty minutes old, but if she didn't like the smell of it—

**01:43:08**

**Lois Sykes:** She liked fresh coffee, yeah.

**Wanda Cortez:** She always wanted us—she'd tell Lois and them, and that's--that's when I came in.

**01:43:17**

**SR:** I know what she means. It starts to smell burnt, huh?



**01:43:19**

**Lois Sykes:** Yeah, it does if you leave it too long.

**01:43:22**

**SR:** Yeah.

**01:43:24**

**Lois Sykes:** Suzie [*Unintelligible*] used to take the pot and say, “Miss Lois, is this fresh?”

**01:43:29**

**Wanda Cortez:** They didn't drink coffee. [*Laughs*]

**01:43:30**

**SR:** And make you smell it?

**01:43:31**

**Lois Sykes:** I said, “Smell it yourself.” She said, “I don't know nothing about it.” I said, “It's fresh. Go ahead and serve it.” [*Laughs*] But she would tickle me.

**01:43:37**

**Wanda Cortez:** She put herself through college. She's a registered nurse now. She works at Children's Hospital in New Orleans and she works with the cancer patients with children.

**01:43:51**

**Lois Sykes:** But she did all that here.

**01:43:53**

**Wanda Cortez:** Yeah, she paid her own way by working here.

**01:43:56**

**Lois Sykes:** And she bought her grandma's land and built a house on it. She was a smart girl.

**01:44:05**

**Wanda Cortez:** Yeah, she would buy something and store it.

**01:44:07**

**Lois Sykes:** Times were so good then. Like I said, you made a lot more. Yeah.

**01:44:13**

**Wanda Cortez:** But no, she put her own self through college. And I met her in the Dollar Store one day and I said, "Suzie, what you up to?" She had a bunch of little toys and stuff. She says, "Well, we're going to Houston on a trip, and I want my kids to have something to play with while we're traveling." That's her kids. She never had any children. But these are her children.

**01:44:39**

**Lois Sykes:** I think she got another boy. You know they raised the one. She adopted the one, and I believe so—maybe Charles told me that. I think she's got another boy.

**01:44:49**

**Wanda Cortez:** Oh, okay. Well, I didn't know that. Her daddy meets us in church on Sundays. We go to St. Joseph's at 8:00, and then we zoom out of there at 9:00 and run home and get dressed.

**01:44:59**

**Lois Sykes:** I don't think we can go Sunday.

**01:45:00**

**Wanda Cortez:** No, we got to be here for 9:30.

**01:45:02**

**Lois Sykes:** I know that.

**01:45:03**

**SR:** Is St. Joseph's here in Manchac?

**01:45:05**

**Lois Sykes:** No, it's in Ponchatoula.

**01:45:07**

**Wanda Cortez:** Ponchatoula, but we would leave the church at 9:00 and get on the interstate and come home, change clothes, get our stuff, and come to work.

**01:45:17**

**Lois Sykes:** Then we got smart and started wearing everything but our blouse.

**01:45:20**

**Wanda Cortez:** Yeah, we'd wear our black pants and black shoes.

**01:45:22**

**Lois Sykes:** So when we'd get home we just had to change our blouse.

**01:45:26**

**Wanda Cortez:** That's right, and put your apron on. [*Laughs*]

**01:45:27**

**Lois Sykes:** And we're ready.

**01:45:29**

**SR:** That's devotion.

**01:45:29**

**Lois Sykes:** Yeah, she started—she said, “We’re going to wear our pants and we’ll be ready for work.”

**01:45:35**

**Wanda Cortez:** That’s right.

**01:45:35**

**Lois Sykes:** So we wear the black pants and the black shoes every Sunday. [*Laughs*]

**01:45:37**

**Wanda Cortez:** Just wear a different color blouse. And come home and—

**01:45:42**

**Lois Sykes:** Yeah, it’s a lot easier. It really is.

**01:45:44**

**Wanda Cortez:** Yeah, just put your shirt on.

**01:45:46**

**Lois Sykes:** It’s quick.

**01:45:46**

**Wanda Cortez:** Put your apron and get your stuff together and be down here for twenty minutes to 10:00.

**01:45:52**

**Lois Sykes:** It works out good.

**01:45:55**

**Wanda Cortez:** Even Karen was meeting us in church, yeah. And we would go to communion and I'd turn my phone on and I'd look at Lois and I'd do this, [*Gestures*] and she knew it was time to go so we'd—. "Where y'all going?" "We're going to work, Karen." [*Laughs*] "Well I'm staying." I said, "That's fine."

**01:46:11**

**Lois Sykes:** Yeah, you can stay. [*Laughs*] We can't.

**01:46:16**

**Wanda Cortez:** Well, we probably could and come in late, but that doesn't look good for the other girls. We don't want them to think—

**01:46:24**

**Lois Sykes:** No.

**01:46:24**

**Wanda Cortez:** —you know, they're showing favoritism. So we just zoom on in here. [*Laughs*]

**01:46:31**

**Lois Sykes:** And it gives us plenty of time.

**01:46:34**

**Wanda Cortez:** Oh yeah.

**01:46:34**

**SR:** You still get communion, right?

**01:46:35**

**Lois Sykes:** Uh-hm.

**01:46:36**

**Wanda Cortez:** Oh yes. And sometimes we can wait after communion. It depends on how long—

**01:46:43**

**Lois Sykes:** If he don't preach too long. But the preacher—

**01:46:44**

**Wanda Cortez:** Yeah, Father preaches—

**01:46:46**

**Lois Sykes:** —is good. I mean, you know. *[Laughs]*

**01:46:47**

**Wanda Cortez:** But we get communion and we can come back, and thank the Lord. And then I'll look at it and I say, "Oh, nine o'clock." When we're going out the church, the nine o'clock bell is ringing. *[Laughs]* And we park in the front so we can just jump in.

**01:47:02**

**Lois Sykes:** Yeah, because we leave out first. I don't think they care about that, which is good.

**01:47:07**

**Wanda Cortez:** But anyway.

**01:47:09**

**SR:** Well, I could talk to you two all day because the stories keep coming. You have such a rich history here. Well but I'm going to wrap this up now.

**01:47:20**

**Wanda Cortez:** Okay, all right.

**01:47:21**



**SR:** But I really appreciate it.

**01:47:24**

**Lois Sykes:** Oh—

**01:47:24**

**SR:** I love the stories, and I think it's important to get them documented.

**01:47:30**

**Wanda Cortez:** Well, thank you.

**01:47:32**

**SR:** So, thank you.

**01:47:33**

**Wanda Cortez:** Thank you. We enjoyed it. You want some more—?

**01:47:36**

**[End Wanda Sykes and Lois Cortez Interview]**