

DR. CHARLES REAGAN WILSON
Center for the Study of Southern Culture, University of Mississippi, University, MS
(Regular Customer at Busy Bee Café, Oxford, MS)

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Date: August 13, 2004

Location: Dr. Wilson's office, Center for the Study of Southern Culture, University, MS

Interviewer: Amy C. Evans

Length: Seventeen minutes

Project: Restaurant's of Oxford's Past – Busy Bee Café, Oxford, MS

[Begin Charles Reagan Wilson Interview]

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Amy Evans: This is Amy Evans on Friday, August thirteenth, two thousand and four. And I'm at The Center for the Study of Southern Culture with Dr. Charles Reagan Wilson, and we're here to discuss his experiences at Mrs. [Georgia] Isaiah's Busy Bee. And, Mr. Wilson, would you please state your name for the record?

[Sound of microphone being turned to face Dr. Wilson]

Charles Reagan Wilson: Um, my name is Charles Reagan Wilson.

AE: And then, describe for us your experience there at the Busy Bee because Annie Isaiah mentioned you, um, very quickly *[in her interview]* as being a regular there, so I'm here to have you round-out the story of the Busy Bee.

CRW: I moved to Oxford in August of nineteen eighty-one, and I ate out quite a bit. One of my favorite places I discovered very soon after I got here--from word of mouth--was Mrs. Isaiah's Busy Bee. Mrs. Isaiah had been the, um, cook for Chancellor J. D. Williams *[at the University of Mississippi]*, and she told me one time that she started her, uh, café after her mother died. And she was grief stricken and wanting to take her mind off of all of that, so she started selling sandwiches first and then developed the idea of doing a set meal. And so, this was one of those dependable things one could count on, no matter what kind of craziness was happening in your life or work. Uh, you could go out there

and depend on Monday night being roast beef; Tuesday night, pork chop; um Wednesday night, um—what was Wednesday night? Thursday night was fried chicken. Oh, ham was Wednesday night. And you'd get two or three vegetables from her garden and, uh, a delicious little dessert, and a big glass of mint tea. And, uh, she cooked just one set meal every night, and there were, I think, uh, for or five, uh, tables in the Busy Bee. And there was a little group of us that were regulars. Not necessarily there every night, although many of us were there many nights. And so it became a little community--a Mrs. Isaiah community. And, um, people like Larry DuBord and his wife Betty, uh, ate out there frequently. Bill Ferris, uh, from the Center [for the Study of Southern Culture], um, my colleague, he ate out there. We were both carefree bachelors in those days, so we would eat out there some. Um, when Jack Bass, who came here to teach in journalism, uh, when he moved here, he ate out there often. Uh, and we would have visitors from out of town come, and that was one of the stops we would make often. I remember, uh, R. J. Apple, who at that point was the chief political correspondent for the *New York Times*, and is now of—the chief food writer, one of the food writers for the Times, he came here giving a talk and so several of us took him out to the Busy Bee. And he loves food, and so he did, uh—uh—uh, a good job of having, I think, several of the set meals. Maybe, I don't remember. But, uh, he had a healthy appetite, I do remember. And we had a very good time whenever we would take people out there. They just loved it because of the character of the place. I'm trying to remember, um, what it looked like inside. [Short pause] A very small space. There was a, uh, counter, uh, that separated the four or five tables, where people sat, from, um, the—just a small space in the back. And the--the kitchen was the real, you know, where she was active. Um, but there was a little counter

there. There was a, uh, calendar, I believe, with, um, Dr. Martin Luther King—an image of him on the calendar. Um, there were various, um, things she had cut out and put on the wall--university stories or stories of her church. She was a very active churchwoman at the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church. And, um, she would sometimes, um, take off if there was a friend of hers ill in the church. And she would just be closed for a few days as she was tending to someone who was ill. And then we all understood that was part of the deal. That is she was closed, we understood she would be back. And, uh, so we would keep going out there. Many students would go. Undergraduates sometimes. It was a part of the experience of many undergraduates, uh, in the nineteen eighties. And, um, and into the nineties, I guess. And also graduate students. Um, it was a very warm kind of atmosphere. She was a very maternal kind of figure. Um, she was [clears throat] she had been born nearby. Uh, the Busy Bee was on the top of a hill [*clears throat again*], and she told me once that the area that is now a shopping center, uh, with Big Star [grocery store], um, on the east side of Oxford, um, that had once been little houses—small houses—and her family had lived there. So she was born not far from where the restaurant was. And she had, uh, by the time the restaurant opened, she had, uh, next to it, her home, which was a nice brick home. That meant that she could walk from her house to her café with just a few steps. One Christmastime, I remember—one of my favorite memories of the Busy Bee is, um, the university had closed, students were gone, many people were gone, and she usually closed sometime around Christmas. You know, when every—so many people left. But it was never quite sure—clear when she would close. And so, um, I was checking on her schedule—and I was staying late, right before Christmas in Oxford. Right before going somewhere. So I asked her, “Are you going to

be open tomorrow night?” And she said, uh, “Yes, I will be.” Well, I got there, uh, and it was closed up. But there was a note on it, “Charles, please come next door.” So I went to her house and knocked on her door, and she had cooked dinner for me, and we had it in her home.

[*Short pause*]

AE: Wow.

00:06:40

CRW: Um, so those are some of my favorite memories about the Busy Bee, I guess.

AE: Well you mentioned she had a garden. That’s the first I recall hearing that. Um, where was the garden in proximity to the café?

CRW: It was behind and to the side of the café. Um, when you’re facing the café, her—her home was on the left, and there was a gravel driveway, uh, that let up from a, uh, uphill kind of driveway. And it circled a tree—a big tree—and people would park around the tree and in the driveway. And the—the, um, the garden was on the right side of the café and then behind the café. And she would grow, uh, collard greens and turnip greens and, um, peas and beans and tomatoes and, um, I’m not sure if she had corn or not but probably some corn. And okra. And, um, just a lot of different things, but especially greens. I remember she always had fresh greens.

AE: Would she ever can anything and have that available in the café for sale?

CRW: No.

AE: No?

CRW: Not to my root—not to my memory.

AE: Um-hmm. Um, and I'm also curious—

CRW: [*Clears throat*]

AE: --when you said that she closed to go tend to people in the church, would she put a closed sign up with an explanation or was it just—

CRW: Word of mouth. Yeah?

AE: --understood.

CRW: Just understood. Yeah. Yeah. She especially did that toward her latter years. Um, and so whenever it was closed—and—and the word would go out among the kind of word-of-mouth community. If somebody had gone on Monday night, and she wasn't there, a lot of times we would figure well, she's going to be gone for a while.

Whenever—this happened several times—we got used to where we weren't surprised at it. And then she would just reopen without any word. She never advertised, you know, in the paper or anything. Uh, no radio announcements for Mrs. Isaiah. It was all word of mouth. But, uh, you would just see friends that you knew went out there and you would tell each other, "Well, she reopened last night," or whatever. And so then you would know that, uh, to—to go out and get your—get your food.

AE: Do you remember the last meal you had there before she closed?

CRW: [*Sighs*] I'm afraid I don't remember the last meal, although it was a little melancholy, you know, becau—in the last year or so—because she was closed so much. And we always regretted we didn't—you know, the system broke down a little bit.

AE: Um-hmm.

CRW: Uh, because the more she was closed, the fewer people would go out there after a while because you never a—a—never quite sure when she was going to be open. So it was all a little melancholy. And I had been going out there for so long, of course, it made me think back on all the wonderful meals and experiences I had. But I can't remember exactly, the last meal.

AE: Did you see Mrs. Isaiah after she closed?

CRW: I did. I used to see her in the grocery store. Uh, hovering over the vegetables.

[Laughs] I guess she stopped having her garden after a certain point. But she always had a sharp eye for the fresh vegetables.

AE: Um-hmm.

CRW: So we would see each other there and, uh, have a nice visit and catch up. Um, so—she was a very sweet lady.

AE: Well and her daughter-in-law, Annie Isaiah, said that she was a talker and could carry on a conversation. Did you have many nights where you'd stay late and sit at a table with her in the café.

CRW: [*Sighs*] We did that. We did that some. She was very, uh, um, she was very unobtrusive. I think her attitude was that people came to the restaurant to have their food and to talk among themselves, so she stayed in the back—usually in the kitchen—and she would, uh, the—the food was all fixed, of course, so she would sit back there and read or read her bible and—and, uh, and if there was somebody helping her that night, then they would talk or whatever. But, um, she also was always ready to talk if you wanted to talk so—especially when there weren't very many—when there wasn't anybody else in there or whenever I stayed late. She would, uh, we would have very nice talks about, uh, Oxford and—and, um, about her church and about different things. And—and, uh, so she was always willing to share her own kind of, uh, experiences, as well as share her food.

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AE: And then Annie Isaiah, what was your interaction with her?

CRW: Well, she was the person who most helped Mrs. Isaiah. She—I can't remember when exactly she started working with her. Uh, it wasn't as soon as I came in nineteen eighty-one but after that at some point. And she would basically be a kind of waitress, bringing the food out, uh, so that saved Mrs. Isaiah a few steps was really all about what she did. Um, I don't know whether she helped cook or not. I suspect in the latter days that she probably did help more than the early days, uh, when I knew them. She was basically, um, coming and giving you your drinks and that—and, uh, sometimes there'd be a choice of dessert, so she'd ask you your choice of dessert and that kind of thing. And, uh, so again, someone who, when you see them so often in your daily life, you get to feel like you're close to them and—and, uh, so, um, and they were all--both very, very sweet to everybody who came and, uh, she—she was quiet. Uh, not—I didn't have as many talks with her, I guess, as Mrs. Isaiah, but she was a, um, a big—a big part of the Busy Bee in terms of--of somebody, again, we saw every day.

AE: Um-hmm. Did you ever have the occasion to meet, uh, Mr. Isaiah or their son, George?

CRW: I'm—only kind of in passing, when they would be in there just as the café was opening, helping with something. But they usually stayed out of the way, over in the house.

AE: Um-hmm. Well, when the café closed, where did you go for your plate lunch?

CRW: Um, I went to, um, different places. I went to A—Abbeville to Ruth and Jimmy's, which was another wonderful place to get a plate lunch a little further away. And I usually would go there for—for lunch instead of dinner. Mrs. Isaiah only served dinner. Um, so I would go to Ruth and Jimmy's and, uh, again, a lot of us from Oxford went. And then, at some point, the ladies who worked there kind of split off and came down to Oxford and—and established Ray's Truck Stop, uh, and so I got the same vegetables and meats there. And wonderful desserts. That's one of the things I remember about Ruth and Jimmy's and Ray's Truck Stop is wonderful cobblers and banana puddings and, uh, those kind of desserts. And, um, where else? Used to go to Smitty's sometimes for a plate lunch. You would have a, uh, counter, uh, she—first she would, uh, you would order the plate lunch, and they would bring it out to you. But at a certain point in the [nineteen]nineties, she had a, um, buffet tray, but she would always serve you, uh, from behind and ask you what you want, and so that also was at lunch, uh, where I got my plate much there. SO those are the main places, I guess, for plate lunches. Uh, I've always gone to the Beacon--some. More for breakfast probably than, uh, for supper or lunch but some of all of that. Um, when I first started going out with Marie Antoon, who became my wife, she was impressed with how, uh, I knew so many restaurants and cafes around Oxford and ate out at--at them. After she moved here she was discovering that-- she'd say that wherever there was a pot of greens on, I knew where they were.

00:14:53

AE: [*Small laugh*]

CRW: So we ate out quite a bit in those days.

AE: What was your favorite night to have supper at Mrs. Isaiah's?

CRW: Thursday night was fried chicken, and the fried chicken was always very, very good. Um, and, um, it—I had a friend who was a regular out there, uh, who, uh, who was a political scientist, and he was, um—he would buy se--several of the fried chicken dinners, and he would take the fried chicken home with him and have it on Saturday night [short pause] as his dinner.

AE: [*Laughs*]

CRW: So, she was actually feeding him twice, fried chicken during the week—two nights of the week.

AE: That's smart for him to plan ahead.

CRW: That's right. [*Laughs*] That's right. [*Laughs*]

AE: [*Laughs*]

CRW: Yes.

AE: So is there then anything that has matched your experience at the Busy Bee, since that was in operation.

CRW: Mmm, nothing in—I guess nothing in Oxford quite has that combination of wonderful food and warm character. And, uh, I think the kind of space of it also. It was out a little bit on the edge of town. Um, it was under this big tree. Uh, had the garden that you could see as you walked up. Uh, it was a small intimate place in terms of the space itself, and her presence kind of was there everywhere. And, uh, and then that little community of people that supported it and shared information about it. Uh, so I don't think there's been anything quite like that, uh, since then.

AE: Well that's a good note to end on and a nice rounding out of the portrait of Mrs. Isaiah's Busy Bee, so thank you.

CRW: Thank you.

00:16:39

[End Charles Reagan Wilson Interview]