

**FRANK CARLTON**  
**Organizer, World Championship Hot Tamale Contest**  
**Tamale maker**  
**Greenville, MS**

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Date: July 24, 2005  
Location: Washington County Convention Center-Greenville, MS  
At the Annual World Championship Hot Tamale Contest  
Interviewer: Amy Evans  
Length: 24 minutes, 29 seconds  
Project: MS Delta Hot Tamale Trail

*NOTE: Various sounds occur throughout this interview. Rather than mention them individually and interrupt the flow of the conversation, they are noted here: the first part of the interview was conducted in the main arena area, where the contestants were set up, so the crowd can be heard in the background. When the interview moves to the judging room, the tamale judges can be heard talking from time to time. When the occurring sounds are an obvious interruption to the interview, they are noted in the transcript.*

**[Begin Frank Carlton.mp3]**

0:00:00.2

**Amy Evans:** This is Sunday, July twenty-fourth [2005]. This is Amy Evans for the Southern Foodways Alliance. I'm in Greenville, Mississippi, at the Washington County Convention Center, and I'm with Mr. Frank Carlton, who began the [World Championship] Hot Tamale Contest here fifteen years ago. Is that correct?

0:00:16.7

**Frank Carlton:** That's correct.

0:00:17.1

**AE:** And we're here at the contest today. Mr. Carlton, could I have you introduce yourself for the record please, sir?

0:00:21.0

**FC:** Yes, my name is Frank Carlton, and I live here in Greenville, and lived here all my life. And the--the Hot Tamale Contest is an integral part of a food festival sponsored by a community action agency known as WWISCAA [Warren, Washington, Issaquena, Sharkey Community Action Agency. Pronounces this "Whiska"]. WWISCAA does a lot of public service things, and the [annual] Food Festival, as you can see is--they have different themes, and they try to cook food that follows the theme. They [the entrants] dress and build a set in the same theme, and so they're judged on costumes, sets, and foods. Integral to that is the Hot Tamale Contest; they don't have--they're not participating in that [the booth and costume judging]. These are hot tamale vendors from all around the state. I have one here from Jackson and one from Vaughan [Mississippi] and Indianola--and all around--Greenville. Greenville is sort of a hub for hot tamales; it's sort of the mega-center of hot tamales. There are more hot tamales vendors in Greenville, Mississippi, than there are in Memphis, St. Louis, whatever. New Orleans.

0:01:27.8

**AE:** So that was your idea when the--when the Food Festival started, to incorporate a hot tamale element.

0:01:33.2

**FC:** Actually yes and no. The--the hot tamale contest was independent of the Food Festival. I was on WWISCAA Board; I'm no longer a member of the Board but I was on the Board and so I saw an opportunity to let one hand wash the other, to marry the two and--and spend a mutually successful partnership.

0:01:55.0

**AE:** How has the Festival changed over the past fifteen years?

0:02:00.3

**FC:** Well the Festival is put on by originally workers--people who worked for WWISCAA, and it still is basically sponsored that way. But it's a hell of a chore; it's a lot of work, and it costs a lot of money. So the groups have gotten larger to dispense the--disperse the work and the money and the--and there's been fewer. So we used to have around eleven different sets [booths]; we have--now we have--I think this year we have seven and it runs seven or eight. We are thinking in terms of changing the basic nature and hiring a Chinese cook to come cook Chinese, an Italian cook to come cook Italian, and so forth. Now obviously, we'll change the basic nature of the event if we do that and still have the--the people--the employees do some, too. We're wrestling with that; I don't know exactly how that's going to come out, but that's the change that you mention. We're going smaller--I mean fewer, larger groups. Now you get the same amount of food because they're cooking more foods but—yeah.

0:03:25.3

**AE:** Well how about from the tamale end of things? Have you had people who have been here since the beginning of the contest?

0:03:28.4

**FC:** Yes, we have a number who have been here all along. Shine Thornton over there on his walker, and George Dailey [from Greenville] over here, [in tamale booth] Number One, he has been with us since the very beginning. Some of these people are here for the first time; several of these are very first-timers. Every year we have a--a different sort of group but--and we had--I think we've got ten people--ten different vendors here. We usually have twelve to fifteen. One lady got sick and called yesterday or the day before and just said she couldn't make it. And one, I don't know what happened to them; they got lost I guess--whatever. But anyway it's working pretty good and we're having a good time and--.

0:04:15.0

**AE:** How did contestant participants--how did they hear about it?

0:04:18.4

**FC:** Well we advertise and--in the paper and we also--word of mouth and this guy right over here is a famous rocking chair maker. He makes rocking chairs for Presidents.

0:04:30.7

**AE:** Okay. The guy out of Jackson [Mississippi] that has these huge tamales? [Greg "Doe" Harkins of Papa Doe's Big Fat Hot Tamales]

0:04:32.8

**FC:** Yeah, the guy with the beard--the guy with the beard.

0:04:34.1

**AE:** Yeah, has he participated before, or is this his first year?

0:04:36.2

**FC:** No, this is his first time, and he read about the results last year in the paper--saw the World Champion and so forth, and he called and said, "I'm really the World Champion." I said, "Well bring your ass up here and prove it." So here he is.

0:04:47.7

**AE:** *[Laughs]* I know Mr. Shine [Thornton] won at least one year; I saw the belt buckle he got for winning. But is it--what kind of prizes do you give and how do they change each year?

0:04:55.6

**FC:** All right. Okay, the—essentially, they stay the same. We added a belt buckle a couple years ago, as well as a trophy for first place. But you have first, second, third, and fourth place--\$400;

\$300; \$200; and \$100 cash prizes--nice trophy. Everybody gets an outstanding competitive medal. Win or lose you get a medal, so there are no losers. And, you know, it's kind of hard to judge sometimes, to tell you the truth. Two hot tamales were really good. I make a good hot tamale. I'm not in the contest; I don't claim to be the best, but I sure ain't the worst.

0:05:37.0

**AE:** So who do you recruit to judge the Tamale Contest?

0:05:39.9

**FC:** Well we--we get out in the community and try to have a cross-section: white, black, old, young, bankers, and so forth. It's really a cross-section of the community as--as is everybody here. I mean, you can look around and see that this is black and white and old and young.

0:06:02.5

**AE:** What criteria do you look for when you're judging those tamales?

0:06:05.8

**FC:** Strong stomach. *[Laughs]*

0:06:08.9

**AE:** [*Laughs*]

0:06:09.7

**FC:** No, seriously.

0:06:10.8

**AE:** Part of the job description for the judges?

0:06:14.2

**FC:** Extra Pepto-Bismol. Somebody who--who can be--be honest and fair, that's what we always took.

0:06:21.2

**AE:** Well then, what are they looking for in a tamale? What makes--?

0:06:23.8



**FC:** I'll show you--I'll show you the scorecard, but it boils down to this. I'm hard-pressed to tell you what makes a good hot tamale. It's sort of like pornography; I know it when I see it. I mean, I can describe it okay, all right. Now my point is [*Laughs*] a good hot tamale is hard to describe and--and there are varieties of hot tamales. [*Laughs*]

0:06:48.3

**AE:** You kept me laughing on that one. Go ahead.

0:06:51.9

**FC:** Anyway, but we--we judge them on flavor, appearance, texture--because hot tamales have different textures--and then the overall impression, which is really a tiebreaker. If you have two that are pretty good or two that are real good and whatever, and you want one, then you give the overall impression. You score a little higher on that than the others. So there are four categories of--and you get a numerical score. We have the people that you see walking around testing and--and they get to interact with the--with the vendor. They get the BS, they get the--and that's part of it. It's like a barbecue contest where, you know, if you didn't think you had the best, you shouldn't be here. And that's the same here with hot tamales. So the onsite judges do all of that. Then we have judges back here--I'll show you in a minute--who are number one, two, three; they don't have any idea whose hot tamales they're judging. It's amazing that the scores come out pretty close to the same. Number One out here will be--almost invariably it will be Number One

in there. The total may be a little different, but it's going to be about the same numerically. And you ask me questions now. What do you want to know?

0:08:13.1

**AE:** Well, how long have you been making hot tamales?

0:08:14.9

**FC:** *[Laughs]* *[Excitement]* All right, initially the hot tamale contestants had to bring 300 hot tamales to give out. Well that's a pretty good burden to put on; we don't charge admission and you have a chance of winning cash prizes. And you have fun doing it, but by and large--by--after all 300 hot tamales is--is pretty stout. So in order to make the Hot Tamale Festival a little more competitive and a little more--a little easier to get in, I decided to start making hot tamales. I bought a hot tamale machine [extruder] and made some hot tamales, and they went over pretty good. And I bought two hot tamale machines, and now I make hot tamales. And I have a crew that makes hot tamales, and we sell pretty good many hot tamales.

0:09:04.6

**AE:** Where did you get your recipe?

0:09:07.1

**FC:** I made it up--.

0:09:07.6

**AE:** Trial and error, huh?

0:09:08.3

**FC:** Well, that's exactly it. And let me just tell you--I hate to divulge this secret, but it's the truth. If you can make good chili, you can make good hot tamales. That's really all that it took.

0:09:17.6

**AE:** All about the spice, really? That's what makes them unique?

0:09:20.3

**FC:** Yeah, essentially. Yeah, I don't put the beans in it but other than that, yeah. You know, the mixture is essentially a--a good chili mixture.

0:09:27.3

**AE:** So you say you have a crew now that makes hot tamales for you. How does that work and--  
?

0:09:31.7

**FC:** Well I am CEO of the Big River Goat Ranch Kick Ass Cooking Team. And we cater party and so forth, so they—well, I have seven members on the team. They don't all come the same time. But occasionally they come in and--and we mix up a couple hundred dozen, and then we sell those and we make some more.

0:09:55.4

**AE:** Do you sell them? Do you have like a stand or do you--?

0:09:58.0

**FC:** No, just people come by the office.

0:09:59.9

**AE:** Okay, okay. How much do you sell a dozen for?

0:10:01.5

**FC:** Six dollars a dozen.

0:10:05.3

**AE:** All right. And how would you describe your tamales? How might they be different from everybody else's?

0:10:07.7

**FC:** Well, I don't feel it's fair for me to enter the contest because I'd blow them all away.

0:10:15.8

**AE:** Okay, enough said. Well, do you have an opinion on how hot tamales got to the Delta and how they stuck around so long?

0:10:21.7

**FC:** Well that's a--I think--and--and I've heard this issue debated a lot. I think hot tamales came to the Delta because of the large black population. A hot tamale is, after all, a way to take a small amount of meat and make it go further. Hamburger Helper, spaghetti--all of that is a way to spread meat to make it go further. And so I--I think the hot tamale caught on here because of the

large black population, and it's a way to spread the--take meat and make it go further, and so it caught on. Doe's Restaurant [in Greenville, Mississippi] is a famous hot tamale place as well as steaks. And so Greenville started the epicenter of hot tamales, really. And I think it's in large part because of Doe's. Now they don't ever get in the contest and they don't want to not win. And I understand that because they've got a commercial investment. And--and I don't blame them; I'm not mad at them. I think they ought to enter under some sup--other name, and then if they win say ha-ha-ha. If they don't win don't say nothing. But that's their business. But Doe's is really responsible for Greenville being important in the hot tamale world, yeah.

0:11:44.8

**AE:** Well how do you think the [Mississippi] River figures into hot tamales in the Delta?

0:11:47.4

**FC:** Well, other than its connection to the black population, I don't think it makes--I don't think it has a lot to do with it.

0:11:58.1

**AE:** No? Okay. All right. Well you want to walk around and--and tour the--?

0:12:01.3

**FC:** Yeah, come on. Right over here is where they're giving away my hot tamales [near the middle of the Convention Center].

0:12:05.4

**AE:** Oh, okay.

0:12:08.2

**FC:** And that's take the onus off of the contestants. And we can go over there, but all that is--is hot tamales [along the south wall of the Convention Center].

0:12:16.3

**AE:** Well, I'll make sure that I get my hands on one of those to try.

0:12:19.0

**FC:** Oh, great; I'd like for you to. Hot tamales take on--take on a different--different people make them different. The standard hot tamale is about two ounces. And it has a meat ingredient and is wrapped in cornmeal generally. Mine are wrapped in a mixture of cornmeal and--and masa, which I'm sure you know is a corn flour. I put the meal in there because the truth is,

people--masa is a little smoother than cornmeal. But people around here are accustomed to a rough texture, so I--I think the masa gives it a good flavor, but I think the cornmeal gives it good texture. So that's really what I'm doing.

0:13:20.2

**AE:** Do you do yours in shucks?

0:13:20.8

**FC:** Yes, yeah.

0:13:22.1

**AE:** Is that important to you?

0:13:22.9

**FC:** I think so. It's important to be traditional. I'm not really sure that shucks does anything for the taste. There are people who argue that it does.

0:13:38.7



*[Recording is paused for about twenty minutes, as Mr. Carlton is needed elsewhere. Later, Mr. Carlton finds me and takes me into a small office area that is adjacent to the main floor, and where the tamale judges are tallying scores.]*

*[Recording resumes]*

**AE:** [Entering the judging area and greeting the judges] Hey, everybody.

0:13:39.8

**FC:** We have Miss Evans here--what is your status with--?

0:13:45.7

**AE:** I'm a Special Projects Consultant for Viking Range, and I'm also the associate director of the Oral History Initiative for the Southern Foodways Alliance.

0:13:52.6

**FC:** Well, I didn't know.

0:13:55.2

**AE:** *[One of the judges asks about the recording device]* It's a--it's a recorder that has a hard drive in it.

0:14:03.1

**FC:** All right.

0:14:03.7

**AE:** *[Same judge asks whether and where the interview will be published.]* This is--I'll pause while I explain my [intentions]. *[Recording is stopped while interviewer explains the project to the judges in the room. They do not wish to be recorded, so interviewer and Mr. Carlton sit on one side of the room, away from the judging.]*

0:14:08.8

**FC:** All the blind judges--the others you saw walking around interfacing with the--with the contestants [in the arena]--are the onsite judges. They are operating on--[to judges] are ya'll through? I didn't know—okay. [To interviewer] They're operating on numbers--one, two, three, four, five--and we have one guy who's in it two times--six, eight—whatever. Okay. And they do--they do the judging that way. They [the blind judges] use the same scorecards that the onsite judges use but they have a different—[distracted]

0:14:45.3

**AE:** Is there a score that the onsite judges have for their interaction with the vendors?

0:14:50.2

**FC:** No, no.

0:14:52.7

**AE:** The personal reaction?

0:14:54.4

**FC:** Yeah, and that's really where the overall impression comes in.

0:14:58.3

**AE:** Okay, okay.

0:14:58.9

**FC:** You know, if somebody is really nice or somebody is really nasty then you give somebody a--. But I don't know. That's--that's how it's done and what's going on. Now these people are operating on the Food Festival [points to a separate table of judges, who are tallying scores]. They're the--they're the judges of the Food Festival. This is--this is part of the overall picture but not for the Hot Tamale Contest.

0:15:25.5

**AE:** So there are--are there five--there are five offsite judges?

0:15:28.2

**FC:** And five onsite. Five blind judges and five onsite judges.

0:15:31.7

**AE:** Okay.

0:15:32.5

**FC:** We try--last year we had fifteen contestants. The truth is [that] that really stretches the judges because I try to have the same judges judge everybody. Participating in barbecue contests—I've done that a lot--I realized that you get somebody who is picky, and they don't

score you very high. And--and if the next set of judges are not quite as finicky, then you're at a disadvantage if you get the picky judge. But I don't know how to eliminate that. I'm attempting to eliminate that by having the same people onsite no matter how many contestants we have and the same people blind-judging no matter—therefore, I encourage them to take two or three bites of each tamale because if you've got like you have here now, ten contestants, well by the time you eat ten hot tamales—nine hot tamales--number ten is going to taste like all the rest. You're not going to do it right. [To female food contest entrant] Hey, how did you do?

0:16:43.4

**Female:** Well, I did great, and then I ate.

0:16:47.4

**FC:** [*Laughs*]

0:16:47.9

**Female:** Where you been?

0:16:49.4

**FC:** This is our Episcopal Priest, and this is her husband.

0:16:51.3

**AE:** Okay.

0:16:52.4

**FC:** This is the President of the--of the Bar—supervisors--Washington County Supervisors. Her husband is a--a law clerk with the--with the Federal Judge here and Rabbit [?] is a school teacher.

0:17:07.9

**AE:** Okay.

0:17:11.6

**Female:** This is great fun. I love it ,and I love this whole thing. It is neat.

0:17:15.9

**FC:** It's bigger and better every year.

0:17:17.0

**Female:** Yeah; I know. We need to put--you know put—like we were at church this morning.  
All these churches should have been here at lunch.

0:17:23.1

**FC:** Well I agree, and let me tell you. I was just--thanks for your--.

0:17:37.0

**AE:** When will--when will ya'll announce the results?

0:17:42.0

**FC:** In just a few minutes.

0:17:44.6

**AE:** Are you the number cruncher? [To woman sitting at adding machine]

0:17:45.8

**FC:** Yeah, yeah. She's the cruncher. See the adding machine?

0:17:51.7

**AE:** Yeah.

0:17:52.1

**FC:** All right. Let's go sit down here. Would you like some water?

0:17:57.5

**AE:** I would love some water, please. Why don't ya'll charge an admission here? That seems like it would be--.

0:18:07.1

**FC:** We do.

0:18:08.0

**AE:** Oh, I thought you said you did not.



0:18:09.0

**FC:** Yeah. No, no, we don't charge an entry fee.

0:18:13.3

**AE:** Right. Oh, for the--?

0:18:15.2

**FC:** For the hot tamales, yeah.

0:18:15.6

**AE:** Okay. Got you.

0:18:17.9

**FC:** Let me be honest, I have--the question you haven't asked. [To some of the judges walking out] Thank you--thank you.

0:18:25.7

**Female:** You're welcome.

0:18:28.0

**FC:** I--I really hope that I can get--get the whole thing up a notch. Emeril [Lagasse] says ratchet it up a notch. Well, I think we need to ratchet it up a couple of notches. The basic premis--the basic purpose for the Food Festival is to raise money for WWISCAA. WWISCAA is a community action agency as I told you. We are in four counties, four--two of them are very poor counties. Warren and Washington are large counties are not poor, but Issaquena and Sharkey [Counties] are very thinly populated poor areas of Mississippi--the Delta. And so we have a lot of need, is what I'm trying to say. And so we're trying to full--fulfill that need and money is getting scarce. The Federal Government is--is broke; so is the State Government and we just need to find other sources. We have for a long time been complacent. We've been--the government has given us a lot of money, and they've funded a lot of programs and--maybe too many. I don't know. I'm not arguing the philosophical aspect of it; I'm simply saying that practically money is drying up. And--and when you get it, it gets harder--you didn't ask for all this. But for instance, in the old days you could put up ten-percent with a grant any time, and you could say, "Well, we're going to use our car, and we're going to use our typewriter, and we're on our building, and it's our ten-percent." So nobody--and not just us--but none of the grantees really put up any money. Well that's changed from ten to twenty now in most federal grants, and the twenty [percent] has to be cash. Well this is one of the ways we try to get cash, is what it boils down to, to make the match. And--and we've been successful so far, but I can foresee that we can't be complacent. We're going to have to continue to increase and get better and--and get

more. And so I want the--the Hot Tamale Contest to--to expand. I want the Food Festival to expand--not necessarily in the same direction but bigger. And--and frankly, I very much appreciate you're being here because I think that will help us expand--no, no big secret.

0:21:06.6

**AE:** Yeah.

0:21:06.6

**FC:** Okay.

0:21:08.5

**AE:** Well, it was hard for me to get information about this, and I wondered how you got word out.

0:21:12.6

**FC:** Well, I can understand that because I have not done a good job of publicity. But one thing is [that] publicity costs money and—and, you know, you take out an ad in the Jackson--*Clarion Ledger* and the Memphis press--*Memphis Commercial Appeal*--and you--you're running into big bucks. Incidentally, I pay the expenses of the Hot Tamale Contest. The \$1,000 in prizes, the

trophies [that] you see, the belt buckle; I pay for all that. Until recently, I was the District Attorney around here, and I had a steady income. I didn't get rich, but I had a steady income. Well, I didn't run for reelection in January, and so in January of last year I went out of office, which is okay. But truthfully enough, I probably make more money now than I did then, but it doesn't come in steady. You know, I'll make a big bunch of money this month, and I won't make a dime next month. So I have difficulty with my cash flow and--but that's my problem. But by the same token, when January--I mean when July comes around and I have to pay for the trophies, and I have to write checks to these people, it really is my problem. *[Laughs]* But I got enough money now.

0:22:27.2

**AE:** What is--what is so important about tamales to you specifically to want to support something like this?

0:22:32.3

**FC:** Well, I don't know that tamales themselves are any more important than barbecue or golf, okay. But it is a--it is a--I told you earlier, I think Greenville is the epicenter of--of hot tamales; it is a local tradition. It's something that has wide appeal, and I believe that it's something that we can--one hand washes the other. I think we can expand the hot tamale awareness, and I think we can also make money for WWISCAA. I hope at some point for it to be popular enough to--to both charge admission to the Hot Tamale Contest, and maybe split it off separately from the

Food Festival, and also charge the entry fees. If--if it gets big enough then, of course, people will pay to be here.

0:23:26.6

**AE:** Would you consider doing the contest each year in a different location, maybe?

0:23:32.4

**FC:** I never thought of that, but that's a good idea. Yeah, roll it around. No, I have not considered that because I never thought of it.

0:23:39.1

**AE:** Well, there's your idea.

0:23:40.8

**FC:** Now that I think of it, I like it. [*Laughs*]

0:23:42.6

**AE:** All right, then.

0:23:43.7

**FC:** It don't take me long to look at horseshoes. Yeah, that's a good idea.

0:23:52.1

**AE:** Well I want to--.

0:23:53.5

**FC:** Let's expand on that a minute.

0:23:53.8

**AE:** Okay.

0:23:54.0

**FC:** Would you--would you think in terms of Greenville, Jackson, Memphis? Or are you thinking about Oxford, Tupelo, and Greenville or something--what?

0:24:04.0

**AE:** No, I would think Clarksdale, Indianola, Cleveland, Greenville, Greenwood.

0:24:07.6

**FC:** Okay. Keep it in the Delta is what you're saying?

0:24:10.1

**AE:** Yeah, definitely.

0:24:11.3

**FC:** Yeah, okay.

0:24:12.0

**AE:** But give the people--like maybe there aren't any Clarksdale people here but, you know, next year, if [the contest] went to Clarksdale, it could be a whole different--

0:24:16.2

**FC:** I like the idea. You asked me if I ever considered it. No, I never thought of it.

0:24:20.9

**AE:** Yeah.

0:24:20.9

**FC:** But I like that idea. Yeah.

0:24:22.8

**AE:** Well, maybe when this-- [The judges signal to Mr. Carlton that they are finished.] You're wanted. Well, I can turn this off here.

0:24:29.4

**[End Frank Carlton.mp3]**