

**FRANKLIN PENN, CHARLES PENN & BEVERY PENN WALDROP
C. F. Penn Hamburgers – Decatur, AL**

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Date: February 20, 2010

Location: Franklin Penn's car in front of C. F. Penn Hamburgers

Interviewer: Amy Evans

Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs

Length: Forty-eight minutes

Project: A Hamburger by Any Other Name

[Begin C. F. Penn Hamburgers]

00:00:01

Amy Streeter [EVANS]: This is Amy Streeter on Saturday, February 20, 2010. I'm in Decatur, Alabama, outside C. F. Penn Hamburgers. I'm with some of the Penn family. I'm here to interview Dr. Franklin Penn, who is here before me, and Dr. Penn, if I could get you to state your name for the record and then also your connection to C. F. Penn Hamburgers?

00:00:23

Franklin Penn: I'm Franklin Penn, and I am one of the owners of C. F. Penn.

00:00:30

AS: Okay. And would you mind if I asked you to say your birth date for the record?

00:00:34

FP: No. January 28, 1941.

00:00:36

AS: Okay. And if we could start with the fact that C. F. Penn was about to maybe be closed at the first of this year, and y'all decided to keep it open. Can y'all give us a quick synopsis of—of that?

00:00:50

FP: Well the economy is not good all over the country and certainly it's affected us. And so I told the employees in January that by the end of the month, if things didn't improve, that we'd probably be closing. *The Decatur Daily* newspaper here in Decatur wrote an article about this, and we had a tremendous response from people saying they wanted us to stay open, and so we've decided to do that.

00:01:24

AS: And now if we could start at the beginning and talk about your grandfather, Charles Franklin Penn, and how and when he came to open C. F. Penn Hamburgers?

00:01:34

FP: He opened the first business in Hartselle, which is about eight miles from here, in 1927. He then opened the Decatur place in 1939. Also, there were, at times, a C. F. Penn Hamburgers in Cullman and one in Birmingham. After my grandfather died in 1958, my father [Hugh Penn] and his mother [Bessie Penn] actually owned the business and had managers for the businesses. They didn't actually work inside but he over—was an overseer of the business until he died.

00:02:28

AS: Now do you have any idea what Hartselle was like in 1927?

00:02:34

FP: No, I obviously was not around then. We do know that there was a Main Street. There were several stores for about a two- or three-block area on each side of the street, and the place my grandfather first had was a very small place.

00:02:58

AS: And now I read that it was a wooden building on iron wheels, is that correct?

00:03:00

FP: That's correct at—at least at first. The story was that they felt like if—if for some reason the—the place caught on fire, they could move it away from the other buildings, so that nothing else would get burned.

00:03:19

AS: And that would be fear of, presumably, a grease fire?

00:03:21

FP: Well not—not the grease but the oil because they had oil stoves and that—that was what the fear was that—that might catch on fire.

00:03:34

AS: Okay. So was your grandfather from this area originally?

00:03:38

FP: Yes, he was born in Morgan County, which this is Morgan County. He did other things before starting this business. For example, he worked for the L&N Railroad for a while.

00:03:58

AS: And do you have any idea how he came to decide to open a hamburger restaurant?

00:04:02

FP: No, I really don't. I—I know that after he worked for the railroad he decided to do this, but just exactly what made him do that I don't know. I know that my grandmother has told us the story about my grandfather clearing some right-of-way for the railroad in Florida and that he came back home because she said that he didn't like to have to sleep outside where there were alligators. That was a little bit ironic in that my grandfather was an avid hunter himself and often ate small game that he would shoot.

00:04:58

AS: What was your grandmother's name, or is she still—she's not still living?

00:05:00

FP: No. my—my grandmother is not living. She died at the age of 94, and her name was Bessie.

00:05:11

AS: Okay. And so I'm—I'm curious, are there any family stories about how your grandfather got a recipe for these burgers or was he just a—a fan of hamburgers or how that started?

00:05:23

FP: No, I guess we never asked him, and he never told us just how this all came about.

00:05:30

AS: Well, and I'm curious, too, because then one of the things that really inspired me to come and get your story, of course, was the threat of closure, but then also we at the organization where I work have been talking for a long time of—of doing a project on slug burgers, which I consider these slug burgers. But I haven't heard anybody in Decatur or anybody who has written about C. F. Penn actually calling them slug burgers. They're saying "hamburgers".

00:05:52

FP: I haven't heard that term, either, so I—I really don't know what that is.

00:05:57

AS: Well in North Mississippi there's a long tradition of—of hamburgers—of the—the meat mixed with a—an extender, cracker meal or flour or soy-based flour or something. And so I know that—that the secret ingredient here at C. F. Penn may be—perhaps is something along those lines. Do y'all ever divulge what that is—the secret ingredient?

00:06:17

FP: In—in a short answer, no. [*Laughs*]

00:06:22

AS: [*Laughs*] Okay. Is it safe to say that there is an extender there that's mixed with the meat?

00:06:27

FP: Well there could be. I'm just, you know, not at liberty to say. In fact, when we had a place in Birmingham, my dad actually got a copyright on the hamburger, and it was legally called a Penn Burger, but just what was in it was not divulged.

00:06:53

AS: And about what year was that, do you know?

00:06:56

FP: No, I am not sure. We're probably talking about somewhere in the [nineteen] '60s that—that happened.

00:07:04

AS: Hmm, okay. And so the ladies that—that are in there today, Cindy [Whited] and Lillian [Coggins] and Vivian [Valerie Kelley], I believe, do they—they know the recipe and they make the burgers or who—who is in charge of that?

00:07:17

FP: Yes, they—they know the recipe and—and they make the burgers fresh every day. We don't get anything frozen; we don't keep anything frozen about our hamburger. It's fresh meat every day. You go in there and—and you get a fresh hamburger and nothing is held over.

00:07:42

AS: And I read in one of the articles, too, about your grandfather shopping at the A&P for his ingredients and—and paying everybody in cash and not keeping any debts overnight.

00:07:49

FP: Well as far as the A&P Food Store, it was here in Decatur, located just about a half a block away. And so he and later on the manager would go to the meat market part of A&P and—and grind the meat themselves. They were allowed to do that in those days.

00:08:20

AS: So he had a special way he liked it ground, then, and he would do it?

00:08:23

FP: Well he—he just liked to do it; you know, to see that it was done right. Of course that wouldn't be possible today, but back in his day you could do that.

00:08:34

AS: And did your grandmother have anything to do with the—with the restaurant over the years?

00:08:37

FP: Not a thing that I know of.

00:08:41

AS: And I'm—I'm curious, too, about the opening date of the original store in Hartselle in 1927, just before the Great Depression, and then the location in Decatur opened like ten or twelve years after that? Do you—?

00:08:55

FP: Yes, that's correct, and it opened during the Depression. And obviously things—things were very difficult to get. I know he—my grandfather would tell me that sometimes even drinks were not available—Pepsi and Coke and so on—because of the sugar shortage during that time.

00:09:22

AS: And so do you—are there family stories about him having a hard time keeping the business open during that time? But I imagine not, since he opened a new location during that time?

00:09:29

FP: No, I don't think we've ever heard that he had a hard time keeping it open. It just didn't make much, but neither did a lot of other people, so he—he didn't complain about it.

00:09:43

AS: How much did a burger cost back then?

00:09:46

FP: They were a dime or three for a quarter.

00:09:52

AS: And now they're a dollar-something?

00:09:55

FP: Yes; now they're \$1.20 and we're—we're still—have one of the lowest price burgers anywhere in the area.

00:10:05

AS: And can you talk a little bit about the style of the burger and how like, for instance, I understand that you used to only be able to order them two ways, with or without onions, and now the kind of evolution of—?

00:10:17

FP: Yeah, when my grandfather started the business, he decided just to use two condiments, mustard and onions, and that continued for many, many years. And I think it was probably in the late [nineteen] '50s or early '60s that ketchup was added as something which you could get and then later the possibility of—of a cheeseburger, putting cheese on it and so on. As far as the onions are concerned, he believed that, just like the meat, the onions ought to be fresh every day. And so he bought onions by the fifty-pound sack and peeled them there at the business and—and diced them, and we still continue that. We're probably the only place that does something like that with our own onions fresh every day.

00:11:16

AS: Now is there anything about the—the decision to just put onions and mustard on the burger that—I mean those are the two of the stronger things that you can put on a burger. Is there any rationalization behind that that you know of?

00:11:29

FP: No, I would suppose that in the [nineteen] '20s and '30s that that was fairly popular—two things to eat on a hamburger and those are just what he chose.

00:11:42

AS: Uh-hmm. And then what about the tradition of putting red pepper—sprinkling red pepper on them, and also the kraut? Can you still get kraut on the burger?

00:11:48

FP: No, we don't use kraut. And as far as pepper, we furnish that on the counter for people who want it, but we don't put red pepper on unless it's requested and never have.

00:12:04

AS: Did you ever have—offer the burgers with kraut or did I mis-hear that?

00:12:08

FP: No, I don't think so. I—I don't remember offering kraut or my father or grandfather saying anything about that. Mustard, onions, ketchup, never lettuce and tomato or kraut or anything else. It's—it's been very simple for eighty-three years.

00:12:30

AS: How about individual ordering styles like, you know, I've been reading a lot of people who have them off the stack or double-dipped or extra crispy? Can you talk about that?

00:12:40

FP: Well there are many customers who want their burger in a particular way like you just said, and because our employees, many of them have—have been with us a long time, they pride themselves and knowing particular customers, exactly how they want their burger fixed.

00:13:03

AS: How do you like your Penn burger?

00:13:06

FP: I like it with mustard and ketchup.

00:13:09

AS: Do you have a preference on how it's cooked?

00:13:12

FP: Not really. I—I just take the generic.

00:13:16

AS: And how about fries and onion rings; when did those come on the menu?

00:13:19

FP: Fries and onion rings didn't come in until, I would say, probably fifteen, twenty years ago. And we've continued those since—since that time.

[There's a knock on the car window]

00:13:37

AS: Uh-hmm. We can pause this if we need to.

00:13:41

FP: Yeah, pause it.

[Beverly Penn Waldrop gets into the car.]

00:13:43

AS: All right. We paused for a minute for Charles and—and Franklin to let their sister, Beverly, in with us. And, while we were stopped, Charles wanted to add something. And Charles, if I could also get you just to say your name for the record and then you can talk about what you mentioned.

00:13:58

Charles Philip Penn: Okay, Charles Philip Penn.

00:14:03

AS: And then things that you wanted to add to the record about this being the first—.

00:14:08

Charles Penn: About my grandfather?

00:14:07

AS: Yeah, about your grandfather and about this being the first fast-food place in Decatur?

00:14:12

CP: Right, okay. My grandfather did not want to owe anyone at the end of the day. And so not only did he pay for the meat, of course, at the supermarket, but he paid his employees daily, not—not wanting to owe anyone after—at the end of the day. And I think probably C. F. Penn Hamburgers was—was the forerunner of the fast-foods businesses that you see today. I remember that in the late '30s when he came to Decatur, many of the people who ate here worked in factories and they only had thirty minutes to eat. And so many of the factory workers would—would eat daily at my grandfather's business and the employees who—who worked for him knew most of the customers. They knew how they liked their hamburger and what they drank and so as they—as the employees would see the individuals come across the street, they would prepare their food, and as a person came in and sat down at the counter, their food would be right there waiting on them.

00:15:22

AS: Hmm. So can—can y'all, then, talk a little bit about what this part of Decatur was like maybe back then and—and kind of where we're located in town on Moulton [Street] here?

00:15:34

CP: Originally, the hamburger business was about a block from where we are now, and this area of Decatur was—was a booming area compared to [*Laughs*]*—*to what it is now. The—the factories that I referred to are—are not in the immediate area, so—so the men would have to come for some distance and that made their time all the more precious to them. And that's why they—they needed to be able to get in and get out in a hurry.

00:16:06

AS: And what were the big factory industries here over the years?

00:16:11

CP: Wolverine Tube was one and—and—Franklin, you may have to help me on—on some of the others.

00:16:18

FP: A company called Chemstrand. It was later 3M and then it was bought out by other people. There was a steel making plant here called Ingalls, and they actually made ships for the Navy during World War II. Second Avenue, which is just a half a block from where we are now, was in effect the Main Street of Decatur for many years, and so all in this area were merchants, banks, professional offices and so on. And so the—the business for many, many years was right in the heart of the Decatur downtown area.

00:17:10

AS: And we're just around the corner from the Princess Theater. Can you tell us—tell us how that's affected business over the years or—?

00:17:16

FP: Well the Princess Theater is another historical place here in Decatur, a—a place where you went to the movies and it was a popular place for people especially on Saturday. Many people

have told us that when they were younger, they would come to the Princess and see a double-feature movie and then come over to our place and eat.

00:17:46

AS: And when you said that the original location was just a block away, what year did this location open, do you—do you remember?

00:17:53

Beverly Penn Waldrop: Nineteen thirty-nine.

00:17:56

FP: No, we—we opened in 1939 when—when he opened but this place came up here in—somewhere in the—the late '50s.

00:18:09

AS: Okay. And then the '50s make me—reminds me to ask about Elvis and the connection that Elvis had to C. F. Penn.

00:18:16

FP: Well the connection with Elvis was the fact that he liked Penn Burgers, and one of the people who worked for Elvis for many years, grew up in this area and was familiar with the place and so the story is—is that one day he came through and got a sack of burgers and took them back either to Memphis or Tupelo, depending on where Elvis was at the time, and that

Elvis really enjoyed them, and so from time to time he would send this person back to Decatur to get some more.

00:18:59

AS: And has that connection meant a lot over the years? Is that something that—a story that the family tells often or just kind of anecdotally?

00:19:06

FP: Well, no, you know, we're—we're glad that we were able to be—be one of his favorite foods to eat. So, yes, we—we tell people that want to know.

00:19:22

AS: And Charles, you mentioned earlier two names, Wallace and Tig? Can you tell us who you were talking about?

00:19:28

CP: Two long-time employees of my grandfather, Wallace Bowen was—was one of them and Rufus Teague [*pronounces this “Tig”*] was the other. Wallace was a—a real tall fellow and—and Teague was a short fellow [*Laughs*] and—and they worked for many, many years for my grandfather.

00:19:49

AS: And we were talking before we started recording about the—the picture inside of—of the men working in there, and now there are a bunch of women working in there. How did that change take place?

00:19:59

FP: Well it was just an evolution in that when the—the two men that Charles just spoke about retired, then women took their place, and it's been that way ever since. They were the last two males to work for us.

00:20:19

AS: And I know Lillian has been in there a long time, and some other employees that have been with you for three and four decades?

00:20:27

FP: Lillian has been there well over thirty years and Valerie, another employee who is working today, has been with us about twenty years.

00:20:42

AS: Okay. And I—I had a friend actually send me *The Decatur Daily* article about the—the possible closing, but then I found Sharon [Penn] on Facebook [social networking web site], which is the sign of the times is that everybody is on Facebook. But reading all of the—the members on Facebook who are fans of C. F. Penn Hamburgers on there, there were a lot of people telling stories. And one of the stories that I read was about a woman whose husband's father tells the story about them being so poor that they would stand in the alley to get the smell

of C. F. Penn on them to—to—so they'd smell like they ate here. Do y'all have any stories that you recollect over the years that are similar and not necessarily to the—being too poor to eat here but just some interesting stories from the years?

00:21:24

FP: Well Charles and Sharon may have—be more familiar with—with stories that they've read on Facebook. I don't think I can beat a story that you just mentioned about somebody wanting the smell. I can't think of anything that would be more unique than that story. [*Laughs*]

00:21:41

AS: Well, and I also read people say that the Penn Hamburgers cure colds and all kinds of things.

00:21:48

FP: Well, I won't deny any of those things. [*Laughs*]

00:21:53

AS: Well tell me, then, about some of the letters and phone calls you received when it was in the paper that y'all might close.

00:21:59

FP: Well the people did write, you know, saying keep the business open, often saying things like they had eaten in the restaurant for a long time and they—it meant a lot to them and so on. We had people to call actually one person as far away as—well he was in the military overseas.

Other people called from, well, states at least as far away as Ohio, as I remember, and usually similar messages: “Don’t close. This is an institution in Decatur, and we don’t want to see it go.”

00:22:46

AS: And was that a surprise to any of y'all at all to get that response?

00:22:50

FP: Well, yeah, I think it was. We—we thought that there were probably some people who would feel that way but not in the hundreds or even thousands. And I think maybe another surprise was the age range of people. We felt like that most of the people who cared that we stay open would probably be older people because they had grown up with it. But we had just as much response out of younger people. In fact, the first letter I received to stay open was from a seven- and an eight-year-old brother and sister who lived in Birmingham.

00:23:35

AS: Hmm. That’s saying a lot right there. That’s five, six, seven generations—I don’t even know how many—that have been coming to C. F. Penn.

00:23:41

FP: Right.

00:23:42

AS: So—and we haven’t spoken of your father at all. His name was Hugh Penn?

00:23:46

FP: That's correct. Dad had a number of businesses in the '50s. In 1957 he became Postmaster in Hartselle and held that job until he retired, so Dad owned and—and was the overseer of the businesses but didn't actually work inside the business. There's always been people like you met today and always been a manager for each of the places that reported to my father probably on a daily basis.

00:24:25

AS: So he never worked here as a young boy even?

00:24:28

FP: No, he didn't. I did. My grandfather brought me to the Decatur place when I was ten years old and—on Saturday and he certainly didn't recognize child labor laws. And we would come down here early and—and work till he went home and—which was usually in those days about seven o'clock at night because the business for many, many years stayed open until eight o'clock at night. We don't do that now. But—but we did then, and so I—I have worked for really several years on a Saturday at the Decatur place.

00:25:16

AS: And Charles, did you work here?

00:25:18

CP: I—I did. Probably not as—as much as Franklin but—but I did work a good bit on Saturdays and some during the summer. And just I remember when—when my grandfather was

living, he was a very interesting personality. He traded pistols. He—he enjoyed doing that and, at that time, police officers could carry different types of—of weapons than they carry today. They have the automatics, but my grandfather traded Smith & Wesson-type pistols and—and many members of the Decatur Police Department, at that time, purchased their pistol from my grandfather.

00:26:06

AS: Goodness. Well that's an interesting tidbit. Now so then with the other locations, how did that happen that they were opened and were they all in the family? Did you—did you—did I hear you correctly that you said your father managed them all?

00:26:21

FP: That's correct.

00:26:23

AS: Okay.

00:26:24

FP: They closed for various reasons in Birmingham. They were in a building downtown and—and other things needed to move in. It was also much more difficult to manage or to oversee a place that far away. And in Cullman we were open over twenty years and in Hartselle for longer than that. But just slowly, for various reasons, the other places have closed, and this one we've kept open.

00:27:00

AS: And now the Hartselle location, which is the original one, it just closed sometime in the 2000s, did it not?

00:27:06

FP: Maybe one of these folks would remember when it closed.

00:27:09

BPW: In the late '90s.

00:27:10

FP: In the late '90s, okay. And—and that was a very unusual thing that happened. It was discovered that the upper floor of the building we were in had been damaged by a fire maybe twenty or thirty years before that. We didn't know anything about it. And the building inspectors, after looking it over, said that they felt like it couldn't be repaired because it was a structural thing and that the whole building had to be torn down. And so instead of rebuilding and starting a business kind of over again, we decided just to close the place. And the building, by the way, was torn down.

00:28:02

AS: Hmm. And do you have an idea of what the reaction was—I mean do you remember what the reaction was in Hartselle when that closed? Was it similar to Decatur or—?

00:28:11

FP: We—we still hear people lament the fact that they can't get a hamburger in Hartselle, at least like ours. There are other hamburger places there but obviously not that measure quite up to what—what ours is. But we didn't get the same type reaction because of the way communication has changed. There was no Facebook and—and computer means of communication and so we didn't get near the reaction that we have on this one.

00:28:46

AS: Uh-hmm. What a few years will do, huh?

00:28:49

FP: Yes.

00:28:49

AS: So what, then, do you think now might be the future of Penn?

00:28:52

FP: Well I would hope that it will be open for a long time to come. Obviously, that will depend partly on the economy, and I have hopes that it's going to get a lot better. And it will also depend on the ability of the people sitting here to—to help maintain it.

00:29:18

AS: Now you three—you three siblings originally owned it, but then Charles, you're no longer part of the business part of it anymore.

00:29:28

CP: That's correct.

00:29:29

FP: Charles just eats here. [*Laughs*]

00:29:33

AS: And I haven't asked you, Charles, how you like your Penn burger?

00:29:36

CP: Very much like Franklin, just—just order a burger and what they present I eat and enjoy it.

[*Laughs*]

00:29:43

AS: And now do y'all have children of your own that might be interested in carrying on the Penn tradition?

00:29:50

FP: I—I don't think so. I don't think my children would be interested, and Charles can speak for he and Sharon but I—I don't think that—that will be the case. So that may make some difference on how long we—we can keep going.

00:30:13

AS: Would you ever consider selling it?

00:30:15

FP: I'm not sure we would because if we sold it, whoever bought it would want to keep the name, I'm sure, because that's what keeps us going. And I'm not sure we would want anybody else to operate under our name.

00:30:33

AS: Uh-hmm. And so I wonder—this is a change in gears a little bit—but I wonder if you could kind of describe a Penn burger for me.

00:30:42

FP: Well as far as a sandwich—sandwich is concerned, it's, you know, meat on a bun and mustard, ketchup, and onions, but it's put together and cooked in—in a way that makes it uniquely delicious and desired.

00:31:05

AS: Can you describe how it's cooked?

00:31:07

FP: Well, yeah, it's cooked in a stainless steel pan with vegetable oil and it's—well that—that would be the way it's cooked.

00:31:22

AS: *[Laughs]* And I may be misremembering this, too, but did I read that they were—in the older days that they were cooked in lard?

00:31:31

FP: Yes, originally that was true, but that wasn't unusual in the '20s and '30s because that's what people used at home to cook with, and so that's what my grandfather used for many years. I don't know exactly when the changeover occurred to vegetable oil. In fact, there are some people who somehow believe we still use lard to cook. They—they will use that phrase even though it hasn't been used for many years.

00:32:02

AS: Hmm. And—excuse me—I've spoken to, believe it or not, a couple of people in Decatur who have not heard of C. F. Penn Hamburgers. Any idea how that could be possible? *[Laughs]*

00:32:13

FP: Well I would just say that—that they are certainly deprived of something that we would like to see them be able to come over and appreciate like everybody else.

00:32:27

AS: Now I wonder if you think part of that might be due to, say, you know forty, fifty years ago that—that there may have been a little bit of a stigma attached to—not a stigma but that this was considered more of a working-class place that, you know, a certain part of Decatur just didn't visit?

00:32:41

FP: Well that may be true. It is interesting, though, I think, to all of us that even though, as Charles said, we—my grandfather, most of his customers were working-class people, but over the years we've also had people who were professional people, and I know the first email I received after the newspaper article was from a judge, who said that he ate here at least once a week and he didn't want us to close. We've had attorneys. We had one attorney, in fact, that not only eats with us, but had a birthday party here. So no, we—we have working-class people and then we have a lot of professional people who still come by.

00:33:42

AS: Do you think that there is anything true about maybe that men more often eat here than women?

00:33:47

FP: You know, I just don't know what the demographics on that would be. I've never even thought—if they come in and eat with us and they're hungry, then it doesn't matter to me.

00:33:59

AS: [*Laughs*] As long as they're buying a hamburger?

00:34:01

FP: Right.

00:34:02

AS: Has the interior of the—the building here changed much over the years?

00:34:05

FP: Probably not—not a whole lot. It’s a fairly simple interior. My dad liked to use red and white with the walls and so on and we—we have still maintained that in this building. But as far as anything real elaborate, we’ve never gone to that. My grandfather started off with a wooden counter. There were no tables in this first place, and the stools were handmade out of wood. And so we still keep it fairly simple today.

00:34:55

AS: And that reminds me that I was reading a lot on Facebook about how people would come and eat here and there were never any napkins, and you had to wipe your mouth and hands with a paper bag.

00:35:06

FP: Well you don’t have to use a paper bag to do that. We—we will—but we do not put napkins on the counter or on the tables. You—but if you ask for some, we’ll give it to you.

00:35:17

AS: And now thinking back to—yes, Charles?

00:35:20

CP: Originally, my—my grandfather would have the hamburgers wrapped in a napkin and—and when it was served it would be served on a napkin and so one way of—of knowing how many hamburgers someone had eaten is just to see how many napkins were there. And—and

when it was time to pay, you—you would say, “I had two hamburgers and a drink,” or whatever, but of course the employee could see how many napkins and so they would—just kind of a double-check to see how many hamburgers they had eaten.

00:35:55

AS: Hmm. Now how about that fried apple pie, has that always been on the menu?

00:35:57

FP: No, and it’s—it’s been something that has been added. We have never sold very many. We don’t push it at all. It was just at the request of some of our customers.

00:36:15

AS: And so over the years since—since those additions were made, like adding cheese and French fries and things like that, you know, I imagine those were in an effort to round out the menu and—and bring in more people who didn’t just want hamburgers. Are—do you foresee maybe adding anything now again that there’s this kind of new surge of—of popularity of the place and maybe trying to get a different kind of customer to start coming in?

00:36:39

FP: No. [*Laughs*]

00:36:42

AS: Okay. [*Laughs*] Say no more. All right, well is there anything that maybe I haven’t asked that you want to make sure to let everyone know about C. F. Penn Hamburgers?

00:36:53

CP: Let—let me say one thing and—and, Frank, you can—if you want this deleted or not—talking about working people versus professional people and—and so forth, one person who was a—almost the top official, he was very high in the Time Warner organization was born in Morgan County and—and then raised to that level. While he was in New York, from time to time, this was not on a weekly or monthly basis, but from time to time he would have hamburgers sent up there to him. For I think for his fiftieth birthday that—that was one thing that was done for him.

00:37:36

BPW: And along that note, I'm a teacher, and one of my colleagues grew up with hamburgers, she and her sister. And her sister lives in California. And for her fortieth birthday she bought forty Penn burgers and put them on dry ice and had them shipped to her sister in California.

00:37:59

AS: My goodness. Do we have an idea what Penn burger looks like when it gets to California?

[Laughs]

00:38:02

BPW: **[Laughs]** I'm sure it needs to be resuscitated.

00:38:07

AS: Now Beverly, if I could get you to state your name for the record, please?

00:38:11

BPW: I'm Beverly Penn Waldrop.

00:38:14

AS: All right. Thank you. And I know it's not kind to ask a lady her age, but would you mind sharing your birth date for the record?

00:38:19

BPW: Did my brothers share theirs?

00:38:24

AS: Franklin did and I'm going to ask Charles, but you don't have to.

00:38:27

BPW: [*Laughs*] If I have to, I'm sixty-two.

00:38:28

AS: And your—your formal birth date?

00:38:32

BPW: October 11, 1947.

00:38:36

AS: Okay. And, Charles, if I could get yours?

00:38:36

CP: October 3, 1944.

00:38:39

AS: Okay. And how about kind of the—.

00:38:46

BPW: That should be off the record. [*Laughs*]

00:38:48

AS: Okay. I will—I will remove it from the—.

00:38:51

CP: You were asking a question earlier about if any of our children would—would be interested. Our—our youngest son certainly would be interested. The possibility of—or probability of him ever doing this is—is pretty remote, but our youngest son actually is—is in the food industry. He—he is the general manager of a Ruth's Chris [Steak House] restaurant over in Georgia, and he, more than any of the other children, seems to take pride in the—in the family business and heritage and so forth.

00:39:23

AS: Did he have a reaction when y'all were thinking about possibly closing?

00:39:28

CP: Well he—he certainly was—was surprised to—to see that—that might be a possibility.
And—and he said he would be really disappointed if—if it had to be closed.

00:39:41

AS: Uh-hmm. Now I wanted to ask you about kind of a desegregation question because I saw some black folks eating in there today and if there was kind of like a benchmark year or—or date that C. F. Penn was integrated?

00:39:58

FP: I really don't recall but it would have been whenever other restaurants in Decatur were—it was really no different than anybody else.

00:40:08

AS: Uh-hmm.

00:40:08

FP: But it was a long time ago.

00:40:12

AS: Yeah. And I feel like I had another question in my head, and I've now lost it. But if y'all don't have maybe anything else to add, we can just wrap it up, or if Sharon here—if you have anything that you want to note and that can be on the record and ask your husband [Charles] or brother-in-law?

00:40:35

Sharon Penn: No, we've just been very gratified at—at the response we've had because we've really felt like maybe the people who used to eat here had died and—and that the younger generation had grown up on McDonald's and so forth. But we've been very surprised and happy to see that some of the younger people have inherited it from their eating here from their fathers and their grandfathers because they speak of it on Facebook. I ran into a girl that I went to school with the other day, and she said, "My grandson, who is seventeen, heard about the possibility of your closing and said, 'Oh, they can't close. They're just like the moon and stars. They have to stay open.'"

00:41:22

AS: Yeah, and that does remind me about kind of the importance of a place like C. F. Penn, especially in a town like Decatur with another restaurant by the name of Big Bob Gibson's [Bar-B-Q] and how, you know, people far and wide know about Bib Bob Gibson's, mostly because they're really great advertisers, but they also happen to have really great barbecue. But has that ever been kind of a—a—not a—I mean it's apples and oranges, but Decatur is known for such great food and these iconic locations that have been here forever and what that means to a town like Decatur.

00:41:56

FP: Of course the Gibson barbecue place has never been a competitor of ours because they don't serve hamburgers, and we don't serve barbecue. It is true that they've been around a long time and also, just like I told you previously that we have tried to keep things simple, they have too. They still serve basically the same barbecue that they did many years ago. You still get

bread with their barbecue plates, just plain bread instead of some real nice fancy roll or whatever. So we—we do have a lot of similarities with them.

00:42:44

AS: And what about, say, you know, Big Bob Gibson's being around for as long as they have and C. F. Penn for eighty-two years and—and I—I imagine your grandfather, since they wanted to copyright a Penn burger, that he—y'all consider him an originator of what is served here, like this—he invented the Penn—this style of burger?

00:43:06

FP: Yes, that's correct.

00:43:10

AS: Okay, so then Decatur is known for the Penn burger and white sauce [that originated at Big Bob Gibson's] and—how those regional food things can leave a place and get a broader audience—I'm not really sure what my question is in that **[Laughs]** nugget of information, but, you know, it's just astounding to me that little Decatur, Alabama, can have these food traditions that have really taken, you know, a toe-hold in—in our kind of greater knowledge of—of Southern food and what—what can originate in a place and what sticks around, and y'all just must be so proud.

00:43:46

FP: Well, we are. We—we really are and—and of course in—in many, many cities in this country there are small places like ours that are well known for some particular food product. I

know the Food Network often features those kinds of places, and so we feel like we're just a part of that.

00:44:09

AS: Yeah, well, good. That's a good note to end on. Yes, Beverly?

00:44:11

BPW: I'm sorry.

00:44:12

AS: No, you're fine.

00:44:13

BPW: I think not only is it the food, but it's the tradition of it. I talked to a friend the other day, and she said that her son said, "Oh they can't close. I've," you know, "I've got to go eat there." And he said, "I remember my grandfather taking me there." So, so much of it has to do with nostalgia and the experiences that the people had with their grandfather or with their father, and I think that's as important to the people as the food itself.

00:44:45

AS: Oh, certainly. I think that definitely sums it up. Have—have I asked you how you like to order your Penn burger?

00:44:52

BPW: No, you haven't. [*Laughs*]

00:44:54

AS: How do you like it?

00:44:53

BPW: Well it's varied through the years. I guess I—I have mostly eaten mine with just ketchup. But I like them any way you can serve them. I grew up on them, and I love them.

00:45:08

AS: Good.

00:45:08

CP: I think, initially, Frank, correct me if I'm wrong, my grandfather had the onions and mustard, which the employees would put on. Later when—when ketchup was added, I believe that was on the counter, and, if you wanted it, you put it on yourself.

00:45:23

FP: That is correct.

00:45:25

CP: The employees didn't—didn't do that and—and that was to help speed up the service. There were only two things, and—and a person, I mentioned the—the fast-food aspect of it here—here in Decatur. If—if somebody walked in that the employees didn't know, they would

say, “With or without,” and that simply meant, “Do you want onions or not?” It was assumed you would want mustard. So that just, again, made it possible to—to have faster service.

00:45:56

AS: And now y'all were each named after your grandfather—Charles and Franklin—after Charles Franklin Penn.

00:46:01

FP: Yes, that's correct.

00:46:04

AS: And has that—do you think has any—I mean a family lineage, of course, but anything having to do with hamburgers? Like did your—did your father and grandfather want to make certain that you would stay connected in more than just name to the hamburger place?

00:46:19

FP: I'm not sure that that was ever talked about in that way. I think it was left up to us as to what we'd want to do, and, of course, all of us went into some profession and—and, as Charles said, only worked when we were younger at the business itself.

00:46:44

AS: And may I have—may I have y'all state what you—what professions you've been in for the record. [To Franklin] You're a psychologist for city schools?

00:46:52

FP: Yes, for Hartselle City Schools.

00:46:56

AS: And Charles?

00:46:56

CP: For the last thirty years I've been in the real estate industry. For—for over twenty years of that time in association management with—now with the Birmingham Association of Realtors. I used to be with the Alabama Association of Realtors.

00:47:13

AS: Okay. And Beverly, you're a teacher?

00:47:14

BPW: Yes, I'm a kindergarten teacher.

00:47:15

AS: Okay, how long have you taught?

00:47:17

BPW: Twenty years.

00:47:19

AS: And are you here in Decatur?

00:47:20

BPW: No, in Hartselle.

00:47:21

AS: Okay. Well I thank y'all so much for sitting with me in your car, Dr. Penn. [*Laughs*]

00:47:26

CP: Yeah, we've enjoyed it.

00:47:28

AS: Yeah, this is a first for me. No, this has been wonderful. And this—this has been really special. I appreciate y'all coming to meet me here today. Thank you so much.

00:47:34

FP: Well, thank you.

00:47:35

CP: Well thank you, Amy.

00:47:36

BPW: Thank you, Amy.

00:47:38

[End C. F. Penn Hamburgers]