

ELLA AND DOTTIE BRENNAN

Commander's Palace

New Orleans, LA

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Date: January 17, 2016

Location: Ella and Dottie Brennan's Residence – New Orleans, LA

Interviewer: Sara Roahen

Filmmaker: Ava Lowrey

Transcription: Lori Lawton

Length: One hour, fifty-five minutes

Project: The Brennans of New Orleans

0:02:48.5

Sara: This is Sara Roahen for the Southern Foodways Alliance. It's Monday, January 17, 2016. Martin Luther King Jr. Day. I am in the Garden District in New Orleans, Louisiana. I'm sitting here with two powerful restaurateurs. May I ask you to please each individually state your full name and your birth dates, if you're comfortable?

Ella: My name is Ella Brennan, and I was born November 27, 1925.

Dottie: Dottie Brennan June 15, '33.

Sara: Thank you. We also have in the room, I should say, Ti Martin, who is Miss Ella's daughter—who might pipe in.

Ella: Why don't you say "Ella," before we start all this?

Sara: Say "Ella" instead of "Miss Ella?"

Ella: Instead of "Miss Ella."

Sara: Sure.

Ella: Make me feel younger.

Sara: That doesn't feel quite right, but I'll follow your instructions. I know that you're essentially retired now. But in your words, what would you say you did for a living—or do for a living?

0:04:00.7

Ella: Got up in the morning and went to work. Did whatever that they demanded, whatever it demanded. And it changed, but I think the most exciting thing about my work was that it was not anything that was stereotyped. You did the same thing every day? No way. It was very different every day.

Dottie: Managed to have a lot of fun.

Ella: Managed to have a lot of fun. What did you do?

Dottie: Tried to keep people happy and give them the table they wanted at the time they wanted, the dining room they wanted; smile and hoped that they came back.

Sara: Not an easy job.

Dottie: It was fun.

Sara: You're sisters. How many years separate you?

Dottie: Well, we joke about this all the time. There's really just eight years of difference, but Ella wants me to be younger so she says she's ten years older than me. You figure that out. It's just a joke. It's easier to remember, she says.

Sara: I'll take that. So you were born in New Orleans. Could you tell me your parents' names?

Ella: Owen Edward and Nellie Valentine.

Sara: Was her name Ella?

Ella: Her birth certificate says “Ella,” but she was always called “Nellie.” I don’t know if it started with my father or not, but he always called her “Nellie.”

Sara: But no one called you that?

Ella: Nellie?

Sara: Tell me a little bit about what your household was like growing up.

Dottie: Crowded, busy, people in and out, as it is today. There were six of us so there was a lot of coming and going.

0:06:00.3

Sara: And what was the age span? How many years separated the oldest? The oldest was Owen, correct?

Dottie: Owen, and he was born in 1910, I think.

Ella: Yeah.

Dottie: And I was born in '33.

Ella: Twenty-three years.

Sara: Your mom was pretty incredible.

Ella: Her pregnancies were far apart. They were four or five years apart.

Dottie: She said every time she sent someone to kindergarten she had a baby. And it was kind of that way.

Dottie: Every five years except for me. I was three years after my youngest brother. My youngest brother—Dick.

Sara: She was busy. What did your father do before he got into the restaurant business?

Ella: He worked at Todd Shipyards across the river and he was *[Unintelligible]*, he ran the yard and ran the workers, estimated the cost of the jobs. Whatever the shipyard took. It was just like we do in the restaurant business. You did what had to be done that day. And it was eventually bought by a big company called Todd Shipyards out of New York and became Todd-Johnson. And it was right across the Canal Street ferry, down a few blocks. And he worked there my entire life.

Sara: But he did get into the restaurant business?

Ella: When he was getting ready to retire, which is why we went into the restaurant business—because they both had little heart problems. In those days they would put you to bed. So he had been put to bed for I guess months. And somehow or other my older brother, who seemed to have more sense about the situation, said, “Look, we’ve got to do something about Mom and Dad. They’ve got to be able to retire.

0:08:03.2 So we’re going to have to do something to support them.” Because in those days they didn’t have pensions. Families lived with families; you know, that sort of thing. And whereas my father had done very well even during the Depression—I can remember very well; I think Dottie can justify this: we never had any feeling of insecurity or you weren’t going to have what you needed. We weren’t rich by a long shot. We lived in a double house, but my parents were so down to the

ground. They were solid. You never worried about them retiring. It never entered my mind. That's how Owen decided we were going to go into the business, some kind of business, and he bought a restaurant. And that's how we got into the restaurant business.

Sara: Okay, so it was really your brother who had the initial inspiration?

Ella: Yes, he had bought the Absinthe House. I don't know if you know that or not. And he had taken the Absinthe House from being just the Absinthe House—and it was the war years when he bought it. World War II. And he did bring it up to what they were calling all over the country “Café Society.” And he elevated it from being just a bar. He created a scene, if you know what I mean. I'm thinking of Casablanca; you know, what was the man's name? I don't remember too well.

Dottie: Humphrey Bogart?

Ella: Yeah, but his name in the film? Rick. Owen imagined that and was trying to make the Absinthe House crowd be like that. It happened really overnight because there was Arnaud's across the street, and there was Galatoire's right here, and a few blocks over here was Antoine's.

0:10:12.1 So we were right in the middle of the pre-dinner, after-dinner crowds. And the bar became a—I call it a money machine. It was very attractive, very popular, and so that's how he got the Absinthe House. Now thank god he bought a few little pieces of rental property—not rental property; property that he rented out in the Quarter. He didn't have a lot of money to buy real estate but he bought it and

rented it out. So he was beginning to think that way very, very young. So that's it, huh?

Sara: First of all, how could he create that atmosphere at the Absinthe House? Was it his personality?

Ella: Yes. To know Owen was to love Owen. He was a very interesting guy. He was fun. He met you; he would know you the next time he saw you. You would love him; he would love you. And it just developed word-of-mouth, word-of-mouth, word-of-mouth. I don't know where he got this personality from, but he was one of the most unusual people I ever met in my life. And he tried to teach us all how to do these things we eventually did in our life. And he was a great older brother and we loved him dearly.

Sara: I'm sorry you lost him so young.

Ella: I am too, but when I get to the saloon in the sky, where he's going to be, I'm going to hug him first and then I'll give him a big punch.

0:12:05.5

Sara: He was in his forties when he passed away.

Ella: Forty-five. Headline, the "The Item" paper ["The States-Item"], front page headline: "Owen Brennan Dead at Forty-Five." That'll tell you a little bit about his personality, huh?

Sara: And it sounds like he also had a real business mind.

Ella: He did. He had a natural instinct for what I call—today we call the hospitality industry. Owen was the meaning of the word hospitality. He greeted you, he liked you and he talked to you. He made you feel great. I don't want to use the word "flamboyant," because I don't know the exact definition of that word, but Owen was a very warm, outgoing, lovable person. Full of the devil—jokes and all those good things—but I've never known anybody quite like him.

Dottie: They loved pulling pranks on each other even though they were adults.

Sara: Owen and Ella?

Dottie: No, Owen and his friends. That kind of personality.

Ella: They were full of jokes. Owen would be trying to trip the other up in some kind of hoax or other. It went on for years. It was great, great, great fun.

Sara: So he had the Absinthe House and then he bought—

Ella: Well, first of all, when he bought the Absinthe House my mother was very distressed, very upset. The French Quarter was this horrendously horrible place and she did not want him doing it. But he did it. He came home and told her he had done it. It was already done. And then he took me down because he needed somebody to do daily routines and he stayed late at night because the place was open until four o'clock in the morning. During the war it was open all night. And when the war was over they cut it off at four o'clock.

0:14:04.3 And he would—it was a very strange thing: his sister, Adelaide, and my brother, Owen, were naturally night people. They just didn't function in the day, in the

morning. And you could get them to go to work anytime after around four or five o'clock in the afternoon and they'd work until ever. But there was something in their personalities that didn't like daytime. And later I kept thinking about it and I could never figure out how they got away with it. And it turned out they had the same skin I have. They sunburned badly. My sister Adelaide always had her little umbrella to keep the sun off. I can see him taking his children in his grownup life fishing and my mother having rigged with like a safari hat with a white cloth down the back, white shirt to deflect the sun, white gloves, and white socks. He had worse skin than I do. Both of them did. But Adelaide—didn't go out; they didn't go in the sun. You have it too, don't you?

Sara: I'm from Irish heritage too.

Ella: I can tell by looking at you that you understand exactly what I'm talking about.

Sara: You're describing me.

Ella: So when he decided—where were we?

Sara: Well, that he needed you to do some daytime work.

Ella: Yeah. So I went to work. He had an office on the third floor of the Absinthe House, and my mother was in shock. The rule became I couldn't go in the bar. There was an entrance on Bourbon Street that you go up the steps, but I couldn't go on Bourbon Street so I had to walk on Royal Street where the antique stores were; come across Bienville and go upstairs where I banked; I took the cash banks and fixed them—.

0:16:07.1 I walked up to the bank—not on Bourbon Street; on Royal Street—and did those little chores. I ordered the whiskey.

Sara: How old were you?

Dottie: Seventeen.

Ella: Yeah, when I went to work then I was about seventeen. I was just out of high school, just minutes out of high school. And she was a little bitty girl who was up at Sacred Heart Academy and they would put her on the streetcar. She would come down and we'd meet her and go to the movies.

Dottie: They'd take me to the movies after school.

Sara: In the French Quarter?

Dottie: They would pass me from policeman to policeman. There used to be a policeman on every corner. And everybody knew me, including the strippers, the policemen—the strippers, everybody.

Ella: My mother's brother, Uncle Teddy, ran the Third District, which was the French Quarter. And he had put out word that, "These girls are our girls."

Sara: Before that, during your growing up in New Orleans, did you spend time in the French Quarter? Or was that off-limits?

Dottie: Well, we were so young, especially me. But she was just a teenager.

Ella: We got you going down—we took her on tours of the neighborhood when she was quite—still in—

Dottie: Grammar school.

Ella: Grammar school and high school. In those days you could walk down closer to the river and you could go down Royal and Charters and down to the Square and the Cabildo and the Presbyterian—all those interesting, beautiful buildings. And we introduced her to that.

Sara: You got an education.

Dottie: And when I was alone I'd go down Bourbon Street because it was shorter.

Sara: Because it was what?

Dottie: Shorter.

Ella: And she was a smart little kid.

0:18:01.7

Sara: In what year did your brother, then, buy the restaurant?

Ella: He bought the Absinthe House in '43 and the restaurant in June of '46.

Sara: And then you were on Bourbon Street.

Ella: Yes, and the restaurant was across the street.

Dottie: Directly across the street.

Ella: On the same corner. So it was interesting, interesting—very strange.

Sara: When your brother wanted you to come help him with the daytime things, what did you think of that?

Ella: I was glad not to have to go look for a silly job that girls did in those days. He said, “Stick with me and I’m going to figure this out. We can work this out.” And he didn’t have to explain much to me because he was fifteen years older. I did what I was told. He bought the restaurant like that, and he had a guy he knew come in and run the place because it was a very ordinary little French restaurant. You’ve heard all this before, haven’t you?

Sara: No. But if there’s a story you don’t want to tell anymore, that’s fine.

Ella: It seems I repeat the same story over and over again.

Dottie: That was your life, and you’re only allowed one life.

Ella: Okay. What happened was Owen became very, very friendly with Count Arnaud [Cazenave] from Arnaud’s. And Count Arnaud would come over to the Absinthe House at night and he’d bring some guests.

0:20:00.9 And Owen and he argued all the time in jest about, “You’re an Irishman, what did you buy a restaurant for?” And that was sort of the discussion they’d have every time they saw each other. So Owen decided, okay we’re going to do our best with this restaurant, and he put this man in there. Owen didn’t get out in the daytime so he had someone running the restaurant. Well, I was going over there a good bit, just walking across Bourbon Street to the restaurant, and I was complaining a lot about the restaurant. It just wasn’t any good.

Sara: The food wasn't any good?

Ella: Yes. It was just such ordinary food. My mother was a fantastic cook, right?

Dottie: Absolutely. She and Leona were a wonderful team.

Ella: We had a black lady help out.

Dottie: When she first came to work for us she was very thin. And she had to retire. She looked like Aunt Jemima. And we all loved her and she was a fantastic cook.

Sara: What was her name?

Dottie: Leona Nichols.

Sara: And was she from New Orleans?

Ella: Yeah.

Sara: So what would they cook together?

Dottie: Everything.

Sara: What would they cook?

Dottie: Well, her brothers would hunt and fish and whatever they could catch, somehow or other and they would bring it to my mother. So we grew up eating rabbits and turkeys and duck and you name it. Any fish that they caught or any seafood that they brought to us. And that's what we grew up eating.

Ella: My mother—

Dottie: She was a fantastic cook.

Ella: I always said she had magic in her hands.

0:22:01.6

Sara: So that was your mother's brothers, or Leona's brothers?

Ella: My mother's brothers.

Sara: Oh, okay.

Ella: And one was a fireman, one was [at the] police department and Teddy worked on the river. And he had a serious accident and was paralyzed. So they would take him anywhere they could take him and give him entertainment. And they would hunt and fish. We had the most magnificent food. And I've always said no matter what your income was in New Orleans, you sure could eat well.

Dottie: And you didn't have to have a lot of money because you could go do it. Go fish, you know.

Ella: Dottie tells the story about them taking the streetcar to go hunting.

Dottie: It's the truth.

Sara: Where did they get off?

Dottie: On Bonabel [Boulevard] and Metairie Road. Because that's where the city stopped. And they'd take the Metairie streetcar, which ran right down Metairie Road right smack in the middle of this little narrow street and they'd transfer from

the St. Charles/Magazine streetcar—whatever—to the Metairie streetcar; get off at Metairie Road and from there take the lakefront to Baton Rouge. They'd go hunt. And they'd take their guns on the streetcar.

Ella: And the fishing poles.

Dottie: And the fishing poles and all that.

Ella: The city was there.

Sara: Wow. So if it was a special occasion or your birthday, what would you ask your Mom to cook?

Ella: Well, we all had our favorites. Let's say for the family favorites, she did fabulous red beans and rice. She did fabulous redfish courtbouillon. She did soft-shell crabs beautifully.

0:24:00.3 And sometimes you picked crab. Sometimes she cooked and made crabcakes and all that sort of thing. She also made fishcakes from salmon in a can.

Dottie: But the seasoning was the point. You'd never know it came out of a can.

Ella: Oh, one of my favorite dishes that she did with what was called veal daube and spaghetti. It was a light red sauce, not a heavy sauce, even though she did use a little tomato paste. And she just made this fabulous food.

Dottie: Ella's favorite meal at home—usually she has me fix it for her on a Sunday morning, even though the restaurant is right next door—she likes very soft scrambled eggs, and she loves sautéed bananas.

Ella: Fried bananas—

Dottie: And so those two things.

Ella: —that are not fried, they're sautéed in butter, sugar.

Sara: Those two things together?

Dottie: Yes.

Ella: Eggs and bananas.

Dottie: The sautéed bananas. It's a wonderful taste. Try it.

Ella: You gave it to me Friday morning.

Dottie: Yeah.

Sara: So you sauté just in butter with a little sugar?

Dottie: I don't even add sugar. I think the bananas—

Ella: They're good enough without sugar. But my mother added brown sugar. There is something called bananas Foster.

Sara: I wasn't going to ask you about that. Is that where it came from, huh?

Ella: Well, basically yes. There's a little more of a story to it, but we love bananas in New Orleans. We're the banana-importing city. So everybody had a stalk of bananas—

Dottie: Hanging somewhere in the house.

Ella: Somewhere in the back of the house, the garage—they didn't have garages.

0:26:02.1

Dottie: We had a pantry where the stalk of bananas was always hanging.

Ella: Yeah, I remember that.

Sara: Because you would buy it by the stalk?

Ella: Yeah. Well, it was so inexpensive. And, believe me, sautéed bananas with any game, like venison—or I'm trying to think what particular game. I want to say there was something with duck, but I'm trying to think what she served it with.

Dottie: [Filet] Stanley, meat.

Ella: Oh yeah, some kind of roast. But not a heavy, heavy meat dish. That was beef, but anyway.

Dottie: With horseradish and bananas sweetened and sautéed.

Ella: Creamed horseradish.

Sara: So when you say "Stanley," you're talking about a dish at Brennan's restaurant?

Ella: Yeah.

Sara: But did you eat that at home? Your mother didn't cook that.

Dottie: We didn't call it that, but that's what we ate.

Sara: Oh, she made that at home?

Ella: Oh yeah.

Sara: Beef with bananas?

Dottie: It's very easy. Think about it. You just sauté some bananas.

Ella: Let me say one of the greatest things that would really tell you what a great cook she was, in addition to all this: my father loved sweets so she had to have a dessert every night. And either she or Leona—one would cook one day; one would cook the other day. They'd take their turns, who was in the mood to cook today and who's going to clean up, who's going to wash. It seems that my mother, anytime good fresh fruit was around she made pies. And I remember saying this—

Dottie: She would be doing—unconscious; she was doing something else and making pies. It just happened.

Ella: If you said something to her about, “The pie's all gone—”

0:28:01.9 Everybody came after school and ate the pies—she made it early or something—and she would say, “Well that's all right, I can make one quick for your daddy.”

Sara: That's pretty exceptional.

Ella: And where she got her cooking talent from nobody knows. Her parents died when she was about thirteen. They had all these flu epidemics and they died. And she was raised by these sisters. The brothers, too, they clung together and they made a family and they all did well. They raised their own families. There was something in Nellie Valentine about cooking. She just understood it.

Sara: Aunt Lynne was telling us earlier today that you and her husband had really good palates, and maybe you got that from your mother.

Ella: We grew up eating well. If I taste something and I don't think it's good, I'll say so. It was part of our life. I don't think we were that unusual. My mother might have been unusual, but there were certainly a tremendous number of mothers in New Orleans that cooked extraordinarily well back in our generation.

Sara: And did you always have dinner together?

Dottie: Most of the time. Whoever was available, we ate.

Ella: Every now and then maybe John would be playing ball, or Dick was just learning to play ball, and they would have to eat earlier or later, but they were served the same meal.

Dottie: Another nice thing about it is food is a very comforting thing and it's an inclusive thing and we never had to call up and say, "May we bring a friend home for dinner?"

0:30:04.9 We could always bring them home because Mom said, "If we have a roast we'll just slice it thinner. If we have soup we'll just add more vegetables or water or whatever—milk." She said, "We'll make do."

Sara: So she had the hospitality—

Dottie: She wanted to know our friends, and so if you feed them, they'll come. Especially if you're a good cook.

Sara: I'm not sure what your household was like, Dottie, but—once you had kids and once you had your own family—but I know that you were working at the restaurant all the time. Was it hard for you to not have your own family there?

Ella: Let me say what happened to me. When I started working and I had children, my sister-in-law, Lynne, who you met today, lived in that house where she is right now. When my children came along, Lynne and Dick's children came along, and she was always magnificent about taking all the kids. If there's a movie, she'd take them to the movie. I'd take them over to the restaurant. Anything that they needed, their mother or I was there. I had no problem there. It was easy because I had brothers and sisters and I'd say, "Got to go." And I'd go. She loved to organize activities.

Dottie: She was a camp counselor.

Ella: And she took all the kids. She had two and we had two and by that time Nickie was with us. His mother had died—her brother's child. So that was five right there.

0:31:57.9 And there was always Brenne, your daughter, and Ralph and Lally. Cindy came along. There were eleven cousins, twelve cousins, all the time.

Sara: So there was always a family meal happening somewhere?

Ella: And you were always invited. It was automatic.

Sara: Let me ask real quick because I forgot to earlier: Are both of your parents of Irish heritage?

Dottie: Yes.

Sara: Irish from both sides?

Ella: Yes.

Dottie: I think we're pure Irish, or whatever you want to call it.

Ella: They came from Ireland.

Dottie: And then as we married, our children, of course, are not—

Ella: Pure Irish but they will not admit it. As far as they're concerned they're pure Irish.

Sara: And where did you grow up?

Ella: I was born at 933 Third Street, and we lived at 1019 First Street. 1019 is right off Magazine. The years I remember, by the time I got to high school we were living on Eleanor Street, which was Uptown. Do you know where that is?

Sara: Um-hm.

Ella: All right. We lived at 1435 and we stayed there as a family. That's where we all remember growing up together because we were getting a little bit older, we were growing up, and we could enjoy each other's company. So we lived there until I got married after Mom and Dad died. And we didn't want anybody to be stuck with Mom and Dad so we had all kinds of arrangements.

0:34:03.3 Adelaide stayed home with Mother and Dad the longest, and then when my father died I was married and his partner in the French Quarter next door to Brennan's.

Dottie: Momma died first.

Ella: Momma died first and then Daddy was by himself. We didn't want him by himself, so we all took turns going and staying up there. And if you had a child, you brought the child with you. It was always to keep him—. But he would go to the restaurant every day. Until he died he was going to the restaurant every day. He loved it.

Sara: What was his role in the restaurant?

Ella: If you had known him he was—

Dottie: When he first began he did the whole Brennan's thing on Royal Street.

Ella: But before that he wore beautiful clothes. He always wore Hart Schaffner and Marx suits. Now the reason I know that is because I was told that so much. I know my Daddy wore Hart Schaffner—he didn't wear Brooks Brothers or Levi or anything like that. He wore Hart Schaffner and Marx, which was men's suits. He went to the shipyard every day in a navy blue suit, white starched collar shirt, tie, and had polished shoes.

Dottie: Always polished shoes.

Ella: So he went to work dressed, and under his pocket he had a package. I can see him standing at the kitchen table right now taking a piece of brown paper and folding it to this size. He would lay out his khaki pants, khaki shirt—

- Dottie:** Another set of underclothes, because he bathed before he came home.
- Ella:** And then he would roll this up, very neat package, and he would tie it. And when he came home it was under his pocket.
- Dottie:** Under his arm.
- Ella:** Under his arm.
- 0:36:06.8 **Dottie:** And he always had one or two good Hart Schaffner and Marx suits. And he was a good-looking guy, wasn't he?
- Dottie:** Um-hm. He was.
- Ella:** Very good looking man. But he was immaculate. He was precision about his dress.
- Dottie:** And clean man also.
- Ella:** Oh, his manicures and hands.
- Dottie:** And he was around, doing something—
- Ella:** In the shipyard you can get dirty.
- Dottie:** And he was always scrubbing his nails, and our nails had to be as clean as his.
- Ella:** We had extraordinary parents.
- Sara:** You did.

Ella: We really did, because the most important thing we had about our parents was we had security like you wouldn't believe. Not one of us ever dawned on us about insecurity.

Dottie: They didn't argue at the same time.

Ella: That was a big rule. If they had an argument they wouldn't argue at the same time.

Sara: What do you mean?

Ella: That was their rule. If one started arguing, the other would shut up or vice versa. And they lived like that. I've been talking about this so much for this documentary, I feel like I'm—

Sara: Well, I'm sorry I made you repeat yourself, but I haven't read much about your parents so I really appreciate hearing about them.

Ella: Well, we thought they were pretty extraordinary. So my daddy went to work when Owen bought the Absinthe House. He went down there helping Owen to make this into—

Dottie: When you go into the restaurant of our business, there's a lot to do. You just stand there long enough and you can do a lot. And that's what we did.

Ella: Everybody found out what they did well and did it. We all contributed to the whole scene.

Sara: And your father enjoyed it.

Ella: And he would go down there on Friday and Saturday nights; he enjoyed it.

0:38:03.6 He would go down, Bobby would drive him down, and he would go into the Absinthe House, and he always had to have—. The back room at the Absinthe House was set up like a little café, and there was a grand piano and a mirror behind the piano with a spotlight on it. So when Fats played the piano—and all he was playing was Gershwin and Cole Porter; those were the songs. And the tables were small, red and white-checkered tablecloths with candles on them. Just a stage with no money. And he would be standing by the door and he would seat people, and he sat people with a whole reservation system. Because people would come in before dinner and they'd say, "Look, we're going to come back after dinner. Can we sit over there?" or something like that. And I'll never forget he'd go up to the dime store to find "Reserved"—little things to put on the table. One of the things that was so marvelous about going in the Quarter when we were young was you had the Business District. You had Canal Street. We had no shopping centers.

Dottie: And it was pretty.

Ella: That was the shopping area. And it was pretty. I can show you a picture right here how pretty Canal Street was. And then you had the Business District. So your customers were right there. And we lived way uptown in the Garden District, or Uptown, and then we moved down here [to the Garden District]. It was absolutely the most fabulous place to grow up.

Sara: Did your mother get comfortable with the fact that her whole family was hanging out on Bourbon Street?

0:39:59.6

Ella: By this time we were beginning to be—

Dottie: None of us were murdered so—

Ella: She was accepting the fact that we were in business. She didn't come in. I don't remember Mother being there more than once or twice.

Dottie: No, she didn't want any part of it.

Ella: And so we did our thing and she did hers and we had a good life. But the thing that was so interesting was that when we were on Bourbon Street—the restaurant—and we were losing our lease after ten years, we had to move. And we were scared sick because we were two blocks into the French Quarter from Canal Street. “Are we going to move further down? In the heat? In the rain—.” It always rained at lunchtime, you know. When we opened Brennan's on Royal Street, which was ten years after we went into the restaurant business, it was the Royal Orleans Hotel.

Dottie: Was the only hotel. And the Roosevelt.

Ella: The Roosevelt was a few blocks the other way. And the Jung was in outer space, and St. Charles was a big hotel too. The Monteleone and the St. Charles; Roosevelt. And that's all the hotels they had.

Sara: That's so hard to imagine.

Ella: It was a small little—let me show you a picture. I've got a picture right here that I finally pulled out.

0:41:58.3

Sara: So going a block or two blocks further away from Canal Street was like maybe not a good business proposition?

Ella: We not only went down; we went toward the river. This is Canal Street, look. These were beautiful buildings.

Sara: I've never seen this book. I see, and so that's where your customers came from.

Dottie: On the other side of Canal Street.

Ella: The Business District, Canal Street and the French Quarter. The big old courthouse was down there.

Sara: How did you find that location to move to?

Ella: My brother, Owen, went searching for it. And he would walk the corridor every day all the time. And he finally came up with what was called "The Patio Royal." And during the war, which was right prior—'56 is when we went in. We found it I guess in early '55. So that was like ten years after World War II. And Royal Street was dead at night, just dead.

Dottie: All the merchants would go home.

Ella: They'd go home, turn off their lights and go home.

Dottie: So it was black.

Ella: And he'd walk up and down the street. By this time he had gotten to know a lot of them, and he suggested would they please leave on their showcase windows for us. And if they had a sign outside leave it on so we can lighten up the neighborhood.

Sara: That was smart.

Ella: This was a community. What I'm trying to say is the Business District, Canal Street, French Quarter, it was a neighborhood. It was a tight, tight city.

0:44:04.5

Dottie: Everybody knew everybody.

Sara: And so it was a restaurant? Brennan's on Royal Street was a restaurant before you all bought it?

Ella: No, the Patio Royal had been originally—Bank of Louisiana and all that history. But in our time the Navy had it as a living quarters for naval officers. And they used the patio for partying too. This man bought it, Ad Given Davis. Let me tell you: his place, his business, was on River Road. I wouldn't use his name; I just don't think it will mean anything to anybody but you're more than welcome to. Ad Given Davis. And they bastardized the building. They didn't spend any money on it. The carriageway was all neon signs and cheap, tacky—selling pralines or whatever. It was so bastardized. Owen went with a couple of friends

to go walk around looking and they said, “This could be fantastic.” And so when we decided to do it we leased it. Tulane owned the building. So they had a lot of archives and pictures and such. My Daddy went down and he said, “We’re going to strip this building and see what’s underneath it all.” And he took all this junk stuff that had been added, a door here and a bathroom there or whatever, and he stripped it down and you could see the bones of the building. And that’s when we all fell madly in love with it. And loved it. To this minute we love it. Ralph’s there now.

0:45:59.6

Sara: And it’s beautiful. So you did like a full renovation of it when you opened it?

Ella: Let me tell you something else about how small the world was.

Dottie: That’s when Owen died.

Ella: Before Owen died—we were in about six months before he died. He died in November and we had signed the lease July the first. I think it was July first. And so we were trying to figure out, “What are we going to do with it? We don’t have money. Where are we going to get the money? Everybody’s contributed in that area.” And he got a hold of—I had nothing to contribute to this. I’m not a designer, decorator. I don’t have the greatest taste in the world for that sort of thing. So Adelaide and Charlie Gresham—Charlie was this marvelous man who was an interior designer, worked at DH Holmes. And when we were on Bourbon Street every day Charlie worked at DH, would come out the back door, which is now—what’s that restaurant?

Dottie: Fins.

Ella: Fins restaurant, and into the back door of our restaurant. And he'd stand at the bar and he'd have martinis, and the cooks would put food there but Charlie never ate. He ordered it but he didn't eat it. He drank martinis.

Dottie: He ate the olives.

Ella: He was one of the most unbelievably fantastic human beings you ever want to meet. And so he and Owen and Adelaide—my Daddy by this time got involved cleaning it up, and they were all just looking at it. The architects came in, Koch and Wilson, and they all sat down and would sit around the patio and dream.

0:47:58.3 And Owen said, "I want a restaurant that looks like what people expect a restaurant in New Orleans to look like." He had the patio in mind. The restaurant would be around the patio. The kitchen was on Royal Street. It was a dream and they just all went to work. Owen died before this is happening. They're drawing plans and all this stuff. The contractor, his name was Gaston Gardablad. I remember that name. I'll tell you why I remember that name. He came in and he was sitting at the meetings and what have you, and people like John and me and Adelaide were there. Where were we going to get the money from? Owen had gotten a \$100,000 loan guaranteed from the bank. \$100,000.

Dottie: That was a lot of money.

Ella: That was a big loan on his life. But you had to do that before you start all this because he had to take care of his family. By this time he had at least one son.

Dottie: Owen?

Ella: He had three sons. When he died—

Dottie: Pip was in college.

Ella: Yeah, twenty-one, fourteen, and seven were his sons. Gardablad said, “And look, we’ve all talked about this. We’re not going to worry about money. We’re going to get this restaurant open and worry about money when you get the door open.” Not even a handshake. Not one piece of paper. And they knew we didn’t have any money. So everybody in the family had owned a house and we said, “Okay.” We started mortgaging houses.

0:50:05.1 And Dr. Trist was living—who you saw today [Lynne Brennan]. Her father was an old St. Bernard—he was a doctor and a banker and a sheriff, everything.

Dottie: The coroner. He owned the drugstore.

Ella: He lent us money. Claire Brennan—Lally. You know Lally and Ralph? Their grandfather [Ralph Lally] had been president of Standard Fruit Company, and their mother was a member of that family and all, and they lent us money. It just all happened. Within a few weeks—it was miraculous. We opened and it was a magnificent success, remember?

Sara: This might be a dumb question, but when your brother died, he was such a force and he was the driving force. Did it ever occur to you to just not keep going with the project?

Ella: We didn’t have any choice.

Sara: Because that was your way of life, that's how you made your living?

Ella: Yeah, that's where we were going to make our living. What were we going to do? I don't think anybody had been to college except John. And Dick—he graduated from Tulane. All the rest of us were—we were there. It's the way life was. You came out of the Depression into World War II and there we were. Talk about having fun.

Sara: It sounds kind of stressful, but once you got it opened—

Ella: Once we got it *open* it was stressful. It really was.

0:51:59.7 We had to find cooks. Owen wanted it to be the greatest restaurant that we could possibly make it, and at its day I think it was. I don't mean there weren't better French restaurants in the world, and in New York. I'm not saying there were not, but the way that restaurant looked—you tell them how it looked.

Dottie: It was fantastic. I was in San Francisco when the restaurant opened.

Ella: Talk up—

Dottie: I had just had a baby. And—Ella has been complaining about me just recently that I'm not speaking loud enough. But anyway, so I talked to everybody every day because I love doing those kinds of things. Adelaide and I were both kind of that way.

Ella: That artsy-craftsy person.

Dottie: And so she would tell me what was happening and we were all happy about that. And so finally I get home, and even though they had sent me sketches and everything I couldn't imagine what it was going to look like. We parked where the Royal Orleans is, parked down the street, and I could see the beautiful color. It was not Pepto-Bismol pink. It was a beautiful Caribbean peach. It was so pretty you wanted to eat it. And then you looked into the carriageway and we had these solid glass doors, which we had to change because they didn't fit in with the code of the district, but at the time when we put them in they had been approved. And there they were. You could look, and you looked all the way back through the carriageway into the patio, into the little patio behind, into the carriage house.

0:54:00.2 It was unbelievable. You walked in and the ceiling had striped, big wide striped awnings. And there was a runner similar to this down— and with the brass corners to keep it down. And I don't know if you remember that stairway. It's absolutely gorgeous. And if you ever look at it, look at the doors that they were going to throw away. They're round and the wall is round. Those doors are rounded to fit into that, and when you close them it forms a little circle.

Ella: And then beneath that you had the beautiful flowers and then you had the mirror reflecting the chandelier up there.

Dottie: And we had this gorgeous chandelier. It was like a Hollywood set. I could not believe it. I was going around, "I can't believe this. I can't believe it." I knew it was going to be lovely. I knew it was going to be pretty, but it was fantastic. And there had been nothing like that in New Orleans except maybe in a movie, a Doris

Day movie that Jacques Mapes had done and Ross Hunter. You know that kind of a movie? Where everything was pretty and the ladies were pretty and they were dressed—and people did dress at that time. Everybody dressed to go out, including the men.

Ella: The most important thing that we're telling you is that New Orleans didn't have a restaurant that looked like this. You came in the front door—what was immediately to your right?

Dottie: Oh, immediately to your right was the ladies' room and the men's room. And the ladies' room had Louise. Louise was this wonderful, sweet black lady that we all adored.

0:56:00.5

Ella: Brought from Bourbon Street with us.

Dottie: Yes, she had been the ladies' room attendant there too, and Louise had more friends than anybody because she had a cabinet and she had every lipstick because all the department stores would bring it to her. Perfumes and lipsticks and whatever a lady would need, she had. And of course she wouldn't charge them for them because they had been given to her. So if the lipstick costs a dollar, they'd give her \$5. And she made this fantastic business going all on her own in this ladies' room.

Ella: And everybody loved Louise. But tell her about when Louise's package would arrive.

Dottie: Oh yeah, and my sister, Adelaide, would call Bergdorf Goodman and get her the French maid outfit, and she wore them in gray or pink with the lace on the aprons and the little hat.

Ella: And she had a little hat. She was just this little chocolate drop.

Dottie: She was a sweetheart.

Sara: How long was she there?

Ella: Forever until she died. She came in when we were on Bourbon Street and she stayed with us until the day she died.

Dottie: And she and Larry had a love affair, the bartender, and they finally got together.

Ella: And I'll never forget the day Louise bought her brand new Chevrolet automobile and rolled it up on Royal Street and everybody was outside looking at Louise's new Chevrolet. But see, Owen always said, "When the ladies can enter the restaurant, she's going to want to adjust her hair, put on her little lipstick, check her skirt and stockings and we should respect that. So when she comes in the restaurant she's feeling like she's making an entrance."

0:58:01.5 See, he was in show business.

Sara: He really was. And you made his vision come true of having the prettiest restaurant.

Ella: It was the prettiest restaurant in town. Ti has some pictures of what it looked like originally.

Dottie: The original sketches.

Sara: I read somewhere that you said that you were first Americans in New Orleans to open a restaurant of that caliber, or something like that.

Ella: Well, that's certainly true. Everybody else was French, huh? Around the town, the lower end Quarter and around the town, we had Italian restaurants. But all these restaurants were mom-and-pops and they were on corners in neighborhoods. I'm not saying they weren't good, but they were not the thought he had of what New Orleans could be. He wanted New Orleans to be Paris, and I still do to this day. And I just feel that the city—there's something in this town, and you can see in that neighborhood where we came from, this city is so unique. We forget it. We get up, we go to work and we do our thing. But if you sit down and think about New Orleans and you think, number one, the Mississippi River. My brother Owen said, "If you can't sell the Mississippi River you can't sell anything." It was phenomenal. I can remember this time my mother taking us for rides on the streetcar on a Sunday afternoon. We went down on the streetcar, got on the ferryboat.

Dottie: And that was great fun.

Ella: So New Orleans is in us. And I think the city means that to so many people.

1:00:02.3 It's just like I had a good friend call me up the other day and he was bitching about the fact that we're going to have all these little parades all over town and he wanted to be able to get where he wanted to go on Mardi Gras weekend. And I said, "Will you shut up. All those little tacky parades are made up of New

Orleanians having a great time. Now we've got to shut up and let them have their fun." That's the way I feel about New Orleans. We used to drive to go across the lake, and there used to be all these black people fishing, crabbing, and I would say to myself, "They're going to have the best time in the world." They've got the food; they've got the music. They don't need money. I didn't mean that I didn't think they should be integrated and to be allowed to have good schools and all. But I felt that the people in New Orleans lived well no matter their age—

Dottie: Or their circumstances.

Ella: —their circumstances, their color. It didn't make any difference. Look how the Vietnamese came in and settled down there and how happy they are. Now I don't mean that suddenly their kids [are going to] Oxford or Harvard something, but they made a home real quick.

Sara: You travelled so much though—

Ella: I did.

Sara: —in your lifetime. And it seems to me, from what I've read, you got a lot from your travels to bring back to your restaurants.

Ella: When I first started I had bitched about the restaurant not being any good.

Sara: That's what I read.

Ella: And he said—

Sara: You meant Brennan's or Vieux Carré?

Ella: View Carré, and believe me it took a long time to get Brennan's where I wanted it. He sent me to—I can't tell you—New York, Chicago, San Francisco, LA, London, Paris. I did go to Rome but I wasn't impressed with Rome and the restaurant business.

1:02:11.4 You had to be invited to somebody's house and the hotels weren't good at that time in my opinion. I'm talking about back a long time ago. And let me tell you what he did. Owen—by this time, the Absinthe House was very successful and every writer—newspapermen particularly at that time—were customers. The southern correspondent for “The New York Times”; for whatever—“Life.” John [*Unintelligible*] was “Life,” and what was her name at “Look?” They were all stringers here or correspondents coming from newspapers. When I went on a trip—there was a man in Chattanooga—believe it or not, Owen would call Johnny and say, “Look, Ella is going to go to San Francisco. Introduce her to the stringer or the correspondent; ask him to take her to lunch or something and tell her all about the city.”

Sara: Is that Johnny Apple?

Ella: Johnny Apple was sort of at the end of my years. Johnny Popham was at the beginning of my years. Johnny Apple was an extraordinary guy. But having met all these “Times” people—Art Buchwald in Paris; John Crosby, food critic in New York; I can't remember who was in San Francisco at the time, although Lucius Beebe lived there. He was “The New Yorker” and “Gourmet.”

Sara: I can't believe you knew all these people.

Ella: Well, I did because my brother introduced me to them.

1:04:01.3 And he said, “Look, she’s my kid sister and I’m trying to teach her the restaurant business. Help me. Take her to lunch.” You know who moved next door to me? Turner Catledge, who was the editor of “The New York Times.”

Dottie: And ask Ti what she did.

Ella: When I was married and had my children. I was living on 2308 Prytania. And Turner built the house next door to me.

Sara: Wow, and what did Ti do?

Ella: What did he do?

Dottie: Ti and Alex.

Ella: Tell her what you did.

Ti: I’m off-camera. You tell her. Doesn’t matter. Not important to the story.

Ella: Turner was building this house and all while he was building the house I had given a key to my house and said, “Well, if you need the facilities.” They were staying at the Pontchartrain [Hotel] right there. You know when you’re building a house you’re going over and you’re picking up and straightening up, so I said, “If you need anything in my house, come in.” And frequently on Saturday mornings we’d say, “Come have breakfast.” This is a man I had met through all the “Times” people. I didn’t know he was going to move next door. So all of a sudden they’re building this house. Turner Catledge built the house. Turner was a

cousin of ours, Iris Turner Kelso, who was a big reporter here in New Orleans. So anyway, he would invite frequently Iris and Ella over for cocktails. “Come over, somebody’s going to be here tonight.” It could have been anybody because Turner had been the editor of “The New York Times” and so he knew everybody on earth, and when they came to New Orleans they’d come to see him. And if he thought we’d be interested in them, “Come up girls.”

[This portion of the transcript has been omitted.]

Ella: So Ti and Alex came back to my house. We had an extension in the house which was a utility room/playroom. They got on the roof and had mud in their hands and they were throwing it over into the swimming pool the night [Mrs. Catledge] gave her welcoming open house.

Dottie: Right after they moved in.

Sara: That was with your brother?

Dottie: Alex got all the blame.

[Laughing.]

Ella: Anyway, New Orleans at that time—. There was a secret little time—I wouldn’t say secret but a special little time in New Orleans after World War II, before Europe had been rebuilt, and everybody was going back traveling.

Sara: One thing that’s really intriguing to me is that you travelled so much, and I think the next generation of Brennans travel a lot, and I assume it’s for educational purposes in a lot of ways. But whatever you get, or you got, on your travels, you

came back and you create purely New Orleans restaurants. And it's interesting to me: you distill down whatever you got internationally into a purely New Orleans place.

1:07:57.7

Ella: Well, this is what we tried to do. The whole dream is to create a restaurant in a city. We feel like we've brought up the city, that when people come to New Orleans they fall in love with it like we have. And come back. And I'd like to see New Orleans keep on growing into this unique city. I think what they're going to do on the riverfront—and if they don't do it well I'm certainly going to be coming from hell, raising hell about it, because that is the most magnificent river. It is a magnificent river. And to have that at our door front—. And you know who told me to really appreciate the river, besides my mother taking us on the ferry? Clay Shaw. I got to know Clay very, very young. And Clay was planning to build an international trade mart. And he kept insisting that it be built on the riverfront. By that time Mr. Charlie Keller, who was one of our honorably good, good citizens, had built a building, the California Building, on the street past Rampart. I can't recall the name of it. The street that City Hall is on, that corner.

Sara: Loyola?

Ella: Right before Loyola. Between Rampart and Loyola. [He] built the California Building and he was very involved in the development of New Orleans. And Clay said, "We don't want to build the trade mart out there."

1:10:02.0 We want to build the trade mart on the river.” Clay was working for the trade mart. He was a director. And thank god he did that because as horrible as that building/its history has been, it’s going to be the anchor we need. Fifty years later that building is causing that riverfront to be empty. And you know there’s a tunnel under that building.

Sara: I did know that.

Ella: Mr. George Healy from *The Times-Picayune* led the drive that we want to have a riverfront expressway. And a gang of people in the city marched, but they built the tunnel, but they built a trade mart on top of it.

Dottie: So they wouldn’t miss the view.

Ella: So we were such a little bitty city. Not that we’re big now. But I promise you it went down—as you can see from that picture there, it went down. And it’s coming back up. Maybe thanks to Katrina. Katrina had a lot to do with what’s happening now. But what happened to Canal Street was heartbreaking.

Sara: Can you explain how you think Katrina had a lot to do with what’s happening now?

Ella: Well, I would like to but that’s really Ti’s story. I was quite up in my years and I think Ti has been a very active part in every part of what’s happening in the city right now.

Sara: I am interviewing Ti on Thursday. We’ll talk about that.

Ella: It's amazing what's happened in the city. You know what's happening: they just announced the airport the other day.

1:12:01.9 Ti had a very big role in that. And then you have the riverfront, the airport, schools. The tax system, as far as having all the tax collectors. We now have a tax collector. The bad politics, that's all gradually going away. I think Mitch [Landrieu] has been a great mayor. And I'm trying to think of what else. The medical center. There's a lot going on there. Redevelopment. They took me riding yesterday. They showed me what's happening on Oretha Haley Boulevard. There's three words there.

Sara: Oretha Castle Haley.

Ella: They showed me that development. And as we drove from here to there we went across Jackson Avenue and the development of all those houses, and basically they were good houses that were let go. It had a lot to do with integration and no money and all that kind of stuff. How they deteriorated and they're coming back like crazy. And that's some of the most valuable real estate in the New Orleans area. So a tremendous amount of things are happening and I'm thrilled about it all. I think we have taken some wrong turns and maybe someday we'll turn back. I think personally Bourbon Street has gone far too far tacky; that's my personal opinion. I love Bourbon Street, now. I think it can be a great entertainment place.

1:14:02.9 And I don't care if they have a few stripteases, but not to the nth degree that it's become. Drugs and whatever.

Sara: You don't have to go far off Bourbon Street though to get to Brennan's, for example. Let me take you back in time a little bit. I want to know: Who was the opening chef? Who did you have as a chef when you first opened?

Ella: Well, Paul Blangé.

Sara: Was he the first chef there?

Ella: Paul came with us from Bourbon Street. He and Jack Ames worked there, and Paul came over to Royal Street with us. But he was never what you call a chef. He was a fantastically great cook. The magic in the hands. But he wasn't the person who was going to run a kitchen. He wasn't of that nature. And we talked about it many times, so I'm not talking behind his back. And so I started looking, wrongly, in Europe. First I brought—I can't think of his name. Rudy Steinhauer was the sous-chef and Otto was his first name. I can't tell you his last name. Brought him over from Switzerland—no, Austria. New Orleans, Austria? Well, okay? At least he was able to really teach us. Because remember there were no culinary schools then. There was no way to learn how to organize and operate a kitchen. So we were doing it the best way we knew how, and the other restaurants in town were doing the same thing. And we brought him in, and Rudy came with him and had a couple others. Over the years we brought a couple of other people in.

1:16:03.7 It was hard to bring people in from Europe because of the immigration laws. We got a few in but not as many as we would have liked. And that's when we started our school of study, teaching the people that work there how to cook. Getting out

the great cookbooks and put them in learning form. Do this one today, do this one tomorrow, do this one the next day, and everybody beginning to learn the basics of French cooking.

Sara: So you had like an internal school?

Ella: Yeah, we still do. And each person, when they came to work we said, “Look, we’re going to be trying to earn your trust and respect. I hope you do the same, and if we ever earn yours, tell us. What we’re going to try and do is ask a lot of you but we’re going to want to give back a lot.” And we started the setting up of the kitchen with like five sous-chefs; each sous-chef had an apprentice, and you just went on teaching whatever came up. The basics of Escoffier. I think it’s the first 150-some-odd pages of the sauces and all the real basics of fine French cooking. And later on came—well, before our friend Julia, way before Julia was on the scene, just sort of teaching the basics of French cooking.

1:17:58.4 Then taking a New Orleans fish and sort of overlaying it on the French cooking and, “Did that work or is it better without it?” How to do it, what’s the best way to do it, how you set up a kitchen, how do you set these dishes up that you can serve them to the people. It was pioneering kitchen work. Pioneering work. Because we had no organiza—most restaurants of quality in New York had a European setup, and we were too stupid to know there was a setup. We stumbled upon it.

Sara: Because you brought in the European chef and he helped you?

Ella: Yeah, he did the most. Can I tell you his last name to save my soul? Rudy Steinhauer was his sous-chef.

Sara: Was Paul Blangé still there then?

Ella: Yes. And Paul came in and did his thing. And he eventually died, as you know. After Rudy got there Paul died. He was pretty young if you ask me. I think he was in his late sixties.

Sara: Paul was?

Ella: Yeah. I don't think he was any older than that. He taught me—me—everything I knew and where to find it: what books to go for. Basically the books is what Paul—and his own experience. And they taught me and I'd go sit in the kitchen and watch them take a piece of fish apart.

Sara: What books would he turn you to? Escoffier?

Ella: Well, Escoffier was an American book that was sort of popular at that time. I didn't know it but it was popular at that time. It became our rudimentary sourcebook.

1:20:00.1 But then Paul had these old books that were European books. I guess they were basically French, but they were translated. He had two. And he gave them to me and I'll never forget them. They were wrapped up in what they used to call butcher paper, brown paper. They disappeared, but I had them for a long, long time. But they disappeared. But they were basically the first thing I ever saw of somebody just sitting down and talking you though all the old great things of

French cooking and the dishes; the names of the dishes. I think they have things out today they call “chef’s helper.” This was so much more.

Sara: Was he self-taught?

Ella: Paul was from Holland. His name was Blange. We put the accent on it. He was born in the Hague and he learned on ships, cruise ships. That’s where he got most of his education, and he got off in New Orleans one time and never went back. And that’s how we met him here. He was not a well-educated or an ambitious person. I’d lit a fire under him to teach me. He never went beyond that. He sort of clung to me for the rest of his life. And I adored him. He was my friend.

1:21:59.3 But he didn’t have the desire.

Sara: But you hired him, is that right?

Ella: No. When we bought the Vieux Carré he was working there. He and Jack Hanes. And we started developing—here’s somebody that still doesn’t cook, sitting down teaching these guys to cook.

Sara: Well that’s one thing that I wanted to ask you about: How does that work exactly? I know that you’ve had really intimate, collaborative relationships with your chefs over the years.

Ella: We generally became very close friends.

Sara: And how do you do that? I know that chefs can be pretty territorial. They’re artists in a way with their own vision.

Ella: Most people, you can break that down in a very short time. It's not true. Most people, if you work with them one-on-one, it goes back and forth. And I feel that way about it. I never felt any of them were that difficult. I felt there were people you couldn't teach; they didn't want to learn and grow. But if you didn't want to learn and grow, I don't want you working for me because I felt that you didn't have a lot to give if you didn't keep wanting to grow. You were stuck somewhere. You maybe could put out a dish or two but you weren't exciting to have working with.

1:23:58.0

Sara: Well this skips a little to the next phase of your career at Commander's, but you worked with—I think collaborated with—chefs like Paul Prudhomme, Emeril, Jamie Shannon, Tory [McPhail].

Ella: Oh, Tory is really Ti's.

Sara: They were all young, I think, when you started working with them. What did you see in them? What do you see in a chef that makes you think, "Okay, this is the one that I'm going to invest in?"

Ella: How they act in the kitchen, physically. How they pick up a pot or a pan. When they did the dishes, did they show pride in it? Did they want it to be the best they ever did? Do they, "We can improve this tomorrow. We can make this better"? If they get into that part of it, then you go on from there. You just keep going every day. And it's one of the most exciting ways in the world to live. I've always said if you have to work for a living, the restaurant business is a lot of fun.

If you have to work. If you don't have to work maybe you can find something else, but if you're working—. And one of the things you have to do is you have to allow these people to do their own thing. If they're cooking and they decide, "I want to try this," "Okay, go ahead, go ahead, go ahead." They pick up ideas. But honestly, in all fairness, the guys I worked with, they had to read.

1:26:00.7 They had to really read. They had to study. And it wasn't only reading, cooking. It was certainly wine. But let me say something here right now. How many sommeliers do we have in Commander's now?

Ti: We've had hundreds past the base level.

Ella: They have to go to wine classes. They have to have a book in front of them with the maps. They have to taste the wine. They have to understand where it comes from, why it tastes the way it tastes, who makes it. I think if you make the job, anybody's job, interesting, exciting, fun, they'll learn it. But if you just sit there and let them keep doing the same thing over and over and over and over. No, no. Can't work with them. Can't do it. You've got to go someplace else. Because the guys that work with—that learn and grow will make your restaurant.

Sara: Right. So I guess maybe that was one thing that all of your chefs had in common, was that they were willing to learn and grow. Or eager to learn and grow.

Ella: And some knew more than others when they started. But one of the things where—Emeril was twenty-two when he came in that kitchen, and all he knew was what he had learned at Johnson & Wales, which is a lot because they teach the basics: the knife skills, the basics, stocks, things like that. He learned that.

But when it came—he knew nothing about New Orleans. So you had to take him and explain to him why he had to learn these things.

1:27:59.1 And why he had to learn outside the restaurant business. Once he was learning and enjoying reading, you could feed him outside stuff, interesting stuff that was going on in “The New York Times” today.

Sara: You mean not necessarily food stuff?

Ella: Not necessarily food stuff. Worldly stuff. What was going on in the world today. Your customer might want to come in and talk about it. You may want to read more about it if you're interested in it. It was a learning process. And you could not let them get away with slipping off. When they'd slip off you just get them to back up. Once they thought they knew it all we had to show them what they didn't know. So it is a teaching job and it was fun.

Sara: Were any of those guys from New Orleans?

Ella: We had, Prudhomme was from the country, Cajun country. He swore that he worked at Brennan's as a busboy, but I didn't remember him. He was very small. Skinny, skinny, skinny.

Sara: I didn't know that was part of the story: that he worked at Brennan's.

Ella: Yeah, as a busboy. Now, Paul was teaching *me* as much about Cajun culture—. And Marcelle Bienvenu. Did you know Marcelle? Marcelle was very into—well, she was from Cajun Country. And then I had a couple of other friends—

Sara: She worked at Commander's?

- Ella:** Yeah, and Brennan's in Houston.
- Dottie:** She didn't work in the kitchen.
- Ella:** You take Brennan's in Houston right now: we have this fantastic young cook, chef, came out of this kitchen, Danny Trace.
- 1:30:02.7 **Ella:** And Danny is fabulous. I think he came out of Kenner. He had me thinking he was from the bayou. He was phenomenal. Later in life he told me the truth that he's from Kenner.
- Sara:** He told you he was from the bayou at first?
- Ella:** Yeah. He was always telling me, "Oh, I'm going hunting. I'm going fishing." And he's just a character. I love him dearly.
- Dottie:** He's a big kid. He'll never grow up.
- Sara:** I was just wondering if it was by design that none of the four big names were from New Orleans. Was it coincidence?
- Ella:** Not at all. It was coincidence. You know—no, Jamie Shannon wasn't from New Orleans. There were a few guys from New Orleans, but most of the cooks, in my experience, were really not native New Orleanians. I think this man across from Eman's [at Dante's Kitchen]—what's his name?
- Ti:** Frank.
- Ella:** Frank. He's a New Orleanian, isn't he?

Dottie: Yes.

Sara: This is Frank Brigtsen.

Ella: I think he's from New Orleans, and I think he's turned out to be pretty damn good. He sort of does his thing. He has *his* restaurant, *his* style, and he operates that.

Sara: Was he the head chef here?

Ella: No.

Sara: I think that we should, for the record, talk about—like, we've talked about Brennan's, we've talked about Commander's. But the transition happened around 1974, that you came to Commander's. Is that right?

Ella: Yes. We bought Commander's in '69. I think we came to work there—I think it was later than '74.

Ti: '74 or '75.

1:32:01.1 '74 was the Mardi Gras; '75 came, I think. '73, '74, actually.

Ella: '74. And what came after?

Ti: You went to work Mardi Gras day.

Ella: Oh, yeah. We didn't go to actually work there—it was '69, '74. I can't remember the date. It was after that. Ti's got in her head. I don't know. The restaurant had been owned by some very nice people. And not only nice people. Frank was—he

was Mexican. The name was Frank Moran. No, Moran is the name he took. He had a Mexican name. I can't tell you what it was. He's from Mexico. His wife was from New Orleans, and they were husband and wife, a cook and a waitress who bought Commander's restaurant. We got to know them because we were getting in the restaurant business and they were up here. And Adelaide used to like to come up here for dinner and she got to know them and next thing you know we were all friends and telling them, "Look, when you retire we want first dibs. We've got all these kids." That's how it happened. She got ready to retire. He died and then she was by herself and she wasn't enjoying it anymore.

Sara: You were just thinking, "We have all these kids and they need somewhere to work?"

Ella: Yeah. We can't rid of them. They love the restaurant business. Somehow Ti got out for ten minutes. Ralph got out for two years. But most of them, when they graduated from college you ship them off to Europe and New York and tell them to learn what they can learn and they come back and want restaurants. How many do they have in New Orleans right now? I can't tell you.

1:34:02.4

Sara: And why this place? Because you liked the food or you liked the location or it was the right size?

Ella: This restaurant? Well, we had kind of grown up in the neighborhood. I was born five blocks from here. We just thought it could be another Brennan's.

Sara: Brennan's number two?

Ella: We'd have to work on it. It needed a lot of work. The physical building, we've rebuilt it a couple of times. I don't know if you know that or not. The upstairs wasn't really there when we bought it. It was there but it wasn't being used as a restaurant. The garden room wasn't there; none of that was there. The patio room wasn't there.

Sara: What kind of a restaurant was it? French?

Dottie: Neighborhood.

Ella: When Frank was there and cooking—they had become an Uptown restaurant. People who live in the neighborhood and all come for dinner. And then they hired an advertising agency. [*Unintelligible*], I think they hired. And they started trying to reach out and go beyond, for anyone, to get out to the city and to the tourism and all. And they got going pretty well for a while. But then Frank died and Eleanor didn't want to run it by herself, so that's when we got it. And it needed a lot of TLC. It was just almost like when we took over Brennan's. Everybody was like, "Go do what you do well. Dottie, you do your thing." Adelaide was doing her thing. John came back to work with us.

Dottie: Dick.

1:36:02.5

Ella: How much more do you want?

Sara: Well, we don't have very much more time. I know that we're supposed to stop at five [o'clock]. Can I ask you a couple closing questions, because of course I didn't get to half. But I'm really, really happy for the story that you gave us. One thing I'd like to know is: we never even got to talk about like every celebrity and politician you fed and entertained. But is there one in particular that you were tickled with having in your restaurant?

Ella: Movie star or celebrity?

Sara: Sure, yeah.

Ella: James Beard was one of the—he wasn't really a celebrity when we first met him.

Dottie: No.

Sara: But that's okay if you liked him and struck up a friendship.

Ella: We loved him. And he was very, very generous and kind to all of us and our kids. Jim was a friend, and we enjoyed his company and we especially enjoyed eating with him and touring New York with him. We'd go to New York and meet Jim and you do your thing.

Dottie: Tell her about the shower story.

Ella: No, I'm not going to tell her. He was doing a lot of work with Restaurant Associates. It was just beginning in New York and they owned about five major restaurants. And when you'd go to New York he would take you with him all during these restaurants opening and getting—

Dottie: He was writing their menus and everything for them and things like that.

Ella: And Four Seasons was the one where I spent the most time with him, in the background of that restaurant. It's closed, you know. You know that it's closing?

1:38:03.7

Ti: Moving.

Ella: They're going to move? Okay. They were opening this restaurant and Jim, who was really a sort of restaurant consultant type man, and he had taken over this company, Restaurant Associates. They had four or five—they had a lot of like chain-y—not chain-y. They fed, like, buildings, and they had food in various—a catering type business. But he opened these five restaurants and Four Seasons was the prime, the best one. And he had our Jim Beard to work on the menu. So we got to go hang out with Jim. And he'd say, "Come. We're going to be doing this, doing that." And we'd go there and be with him, and it was very exciting. He was a fantastic guy. I met him through Helen McCulley, who was an unbelievable woman. She was editor of "McCalls." And she and Jim were close, and that's how I got close to Jim. And then the guys that ran Four Seasons forever. There were two groups. The first group and then Paul Kovi and Tom Margittai were second. It just always felt like home to me. They were such wonderful people. My son Alex worked there for a while learning the New York scene. So we just loved—what was my question?

Sara: That's okay. I wanted to know about—

Ella: Jim Beard. Celebrities.

1:39:59.9

Ti: Katharine Graham?

Ella: Oh god. I can't consider her a friend. I met her. I think she wrote the best biography a woman ever wrote. Have you read her biography? I would read her biography. She by this time had taken over the newspaper her father owned. And I only met her once, that I know of. Art Buchwald. Ever hear of him? Well, he was a very close friend, and he was coming from the Bush convention. President Bush. They had the Republican convention in New Orleans, and Art called me up and said, "Look, have dinner with me on this particular night. Kay Graham is going to be there." Walter Cronkite. Kay Graham's daughter. Mark Russell—you know the satirist with the piano? He played the piano well and he made up these stories about politics. He was on Public Broadcasting a lot. And we sat down and I was fascinated. The woman, she blew my mind. She wasn't in any way pushy or anything. I had just read her biography and I was just—. I guess that was *before* the Watergate thing, huh? She did all that. I don't remember what the book fell in, but she was fascinating. I loved Art Buchwald. He was a character, a character and a half.

Sara: You know how people make those lists of like, "Oh, if I could sit at a dinner table with these four people?" You sat at the dinner table with like everyone that everyone would pick. It's pretty phenomenal.

1:41:58.4

Ella: I couldn't pick one. I couldn't pick one. They were so fascinating, and the writers the most fascinating. The movie stars were fun and lovely, great people. They were on the road promoting pictures and they were so sick of hotel rooms. They were looking for friends, you know what I mean? So they were fun, fun, fun. Writers were the people that—

Sara: You're definitely a written word person, it seems.

Ella: I like it. I really do.

Sara: I know you've answered the bananas Foster question enough in your life, but is there a dish that you wish people would ask you about that no one asks you about, that you're proud of? Or a specific dish that you're particularly attached to or proud of?

Ella: No. I think we have one dish with somebody's name on it. Most of these dishes come up: "All right, we have a piece of fish today. How are we going to serve it today?" We don't have any—

Dottie: The menu changes constantly.

Sara: Yeah, your menu is not static.

Ella: No, it's not. And you can't have a steady menu if you're trying to teach folks.

Dottie: And you cook what's fresh and in season.

Ella: I remember the bread pudding soufflé. We had an American Cuisine Symposium when American food was really beginning to get recognized. We had this

symposium and we invited everybody that was interested in it down to New Orleans, and we had this meeting and dinner. And at the dinner we had to have some kind of great dessert. And we had been working with—“We can't serve bread pudding at Commander's. It's magnificent, but we've got to quit serving bread pudding at Commander's.” And Paul came up with a bread pudding soufflé. I think it was suggested to him, and he worked on it and worked on it and he got it. Those people that night, they were blown away with that dessert.

1:44:01.0 And I've never understood why anybody was blown away with bananas Foster or bread pudding soufflé. It seems such everyday New Orleans wonderful. It never dawned on me that people would get excited about those dishes.

Sara: Well, if it's delicious people are going to get excited about it.

Ella: But there were other delicious—

Sara: When did that symposium happen, and who did you invite?

Ella: Ti?

Ti: It was supposed to be in 1980, but I just found the menu the other day and it was 1983. It was supposed to be the hundredth anniversary of—what we thought was the hundredth anniversary of Commander's.

Ella: They found the wrong date. So they 'fessed up to the world that it was '83; not '80.

Sara: Oh, '83 that it was opened?

Ella: 1883.

Ti: '93.

Ella: Well, '93 is when we did the symposium.

Ti: You did the symposium in 1983. The restaurant opened in 1893. You had always been saying 1880.

Sara: So you invited influential people in food, or chefs?

Ella: Both. People that were excited about food. America—the United States; let's put it that way—didn't have a great reputation for food. Most people ate in their homes or the neighborhood restaurants. And around '80 is when all of a sudden America is really beginning to look at its food. They had guys like Jeremiah Tower in California, and you had Larry Forgione in The American Place in New York, and of course Jim Beard.

1:46:04.7 And all these people were beginning to say, "Why are we not recognizing our own cuisine?" They were beginning to write about American cuisine. They had just been writing about nouvelle cuisine—is that what it was called in Paris?

Dottie: Yeah.

Ella: They were trying to change the old French cuisine into nouvelle cuisine. You knew about that? Well, all of a sudden we're saying to ourselves, "Why aren't we doing these things? We never said, "Raw material." We had the greatest fish, we had the greatest vegetables, we have the greatest beef in the world. Why can't we have the greatest cuisine in the world? Why do we have to be second to anybody

else? And that's when it all started to happen. And we had the symposium here. It really was a gathering of people to get together and talk and visit; get to know each other.

Dottie: That wasn't too long ago.

Ella: No, that wasn't so long ago.

Sara: It seems really appropriate that it was here.

Ella: It was fantastic. We met all kinds of people and they became friends. The thing that my brother Owen always said is, "You've got to get people together so they can know each other and they can learn and grow." Because if you go to New York and you don't know the guy, you eat in his restaurant, that's no fun. You have to talk to him and you've got to find out why is he doing it this way; why is he doing that; why isn't he doing this and that sort of thing?

1:48:03.6 And I always felt New York was the best place in the United States for food and to learn about food, but these guys in California are starting. There's Jeremiah, Waxman, Michael McCarthy. I'm trying to think. There must have been about six or seven of them.

Dottie: Alice was there, too. Alice Waters.

Ella: We don't give her credit.

Dottie: We shouldn't. She's taken it.

Ella: She took the credit from Jeremiah Tower. He deserved the credit for that. So anyway, these people in California were doing their thing and we were all sitting around. We always had what you call “foodie meetings.” Every Wednesday after—a session like you see outside on the patio. “Anybody want to talk about food? Only food. Don’t talk about the broken air conditioning or you need shoes—none of that stuff. It’s food. Who wants to talk about anything interesting that’s going on in food?” And that’s how we said, “My god, we couldn’t be a greater place for food than New Orleans.” We’re certainly not Iowa or any of those places up there. And so we invited them all down here because we wanted them to know us and to know what was going on in New Orleans and become aware of what was going on in New Orleans. So it began to build. It’s all very young.

Sara: Was it a one-time thing, this symposium or did you do it more than once?

Ella: I think maybe we did it twice but I can’t swear. And then somebody else picked it up. We might have done it someplace else. Maybe they did it in California or New York. I really don’t remember. I can’t remember.

Sara: I wish they’d been videoing everything back then like they do now. Selfishly.

Ella: They were writing.

1:50:05.1

[End Ella and Dottie Brennan Interview 1]

[Begin Ella and Dottie Brennan Interview]

0:00:14.1

Sara: The legacy question is an obvious one, and I think anyone who has been an observer of your careers and your restaurants could wax poetic about what your legacy is. But what do you want—?

Ella: It doesn't feel that way with us.

Sara: What do you want it to be? What do you hope people see as your legacy?

Ella: Well, I hope that the young people in the restaurant business are going to do the best they know how. I think that's the secret of our country, is doing the best. Whatever you do, do it the best that you can do. And from that comes all this exciting, new and interesting things. Nobody sits down and says, "I'm going to do breakfast at Brennan's," as an example. Or, "I'm going to do Bananas Foster."

Dottie: It just happens.

Ella: It just happens. It's unbelievable how just in your daily life all of a sudden comes an idea. I feel that one of the most important things that we always wanted Commander's to be, in addition to being great, we wanted it to be a fun restaurant. We wanted people, when they went out, to enjoy themselves. No pretention, no genuflecting at the chef or genuflecting at the menu. You come and enjoy yourself. We hoped to have a great dinner for you. Lunch; whatever it is. We have found that people come to celebrate with us. So we have the balloons, we have the jazz band on Sunday mornings.

0:02:03.2 We came to Commander's, they were closed on Sunday, and we had done breakfast at Brennan's and we didn't want to be closed. And so we tried to make it fun. I don't know how to explain it to you, but relaxed.

Dottie: Relax the people as soon as they walk in the door.

Ella: Nobody to feel—

Dottie: Smile at them.

Ella: When they came to the front door. You don't want people to feel—

Dottie: Well, especially local people—you want them to feel like this is their restaurant, that they are known and that they can get the table that they want at the time that they want it. And they come back and tell you stories. “We started bringing him here for his birthday when he was three. And look: he's thirty.” Things like that. You just relax them and it's fun. They come back for their graduations. They come back for their First Communions, graduations—just anything. Grandma's birthday.

Ella: We have the Chef's Table. Anybody really wants to test us, see what we can do? All right, sit down.

Sara: That's in the kitchen, correct?

Ella: And it will be different every night. You do not repeat it. Everybody's got something back here they want to do. But the whole idea is that when you go into a place you feel welcome, relaxed, and you can enjoy. That's my idea of what a

restaurant is all about. That it is welcoming. None of this, “You’re not doing me a favor.”

Dottie: “We’re delighted to have you.”

Ella: “We’re delighted to have you. I’m not doing you a favor. Welcome, we want you to come in.”

0:04:05.8

Sara: Well, thank you. That was great.

Ella: Well, thank you. I want to show you these pictures.

[End Ella and Dottie Brennan Interview]