



**Pete Graphos
Sneaky Pete's
Birmingham, Alabama**

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Interviewer: Eric Velasco
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Project: Greek Restaurateurs in Birmingham

[Occasionally the faint sound of ringing office telephones ringing can be heard in the background.]

[*START OF INTERVIEW*]

Eric Velasco: This is Eric Velasco for the Southern Foodways Alliance. I am conducting an oral history interview with Pete Graphos. Mr. Graphos started Sneaky Pete’s Hot Dogs in 1966 and built it into a franchise before selling the family business in 1986. Now he is a Realtor. It’s March 22, 2017. We’re sitting in a conference room at Realty South in Crestline Village in metro Birmingham, Alabama.

Please introduce yourself, Mr. Graphos, and if you would, please, also spell your name and give us your date of birth for the record.

[00:00:37]

Pete Graphos: Pete Graphos. My date of birth is October the 9th, 1939, but that’s top secret.

[00:00:45]

Eric Velasco: And then I guess that was it, yes. So tell us about starting Sneaky Pete’s. I believe it was originally called Sneaky Pete’s Hot Dogs and Things.

[00:00:57]

Pete Graphos: That’s right, Hot Dogs and Things, started in September of 1966. I came out of the Navy in ’63 and I went to work for the Social Security Administration here in Birmingham,

the payment center. And I was always intrigued with the downtown hot dog stands. My father worked for my Uncle John Collins, who had the Lyric Hot Dog. He was there quite a few years, and my brother Jimmy also worked there, and my cousin Andrew Collins, my Uncle John’s son.

So I thought about the downtown hot dog stands, and then I talked to my father, and he offered to finance me if I wanted to open a hot dog stand. So I was drawn to the University of Alabama Medical Center, UAB [Interviewer’s note: University of Alabama at Birmingham], which was fairly small in ’66, and I would go over at lunchtime and stand on the corner of the Eighth Avenue South, which is now University Boulevard, and Twentieth, and I was amazed at how much foot traffic there was, because at that time there was a lot of foot traffic downtown. I knew you had to have that to have a successful hot dog stand; you had to have people within walking distance. So I did that for maybe three weeks.

There was a small space there on Eighth Avenue that became available for lease, so I called the gentleman, Mr. Shields, and he said the owner would actually make the improvements, and the rent was \$125 a month, which seemed like a lot to me at that time.

[00:02:38]

Eric Velasco: How many hot dogs would you have had to sell then to pay the rent?

[00:02:43]

Pete Graphos: Oh, my gosh. You know, we opened with twenty-cent hot dogs, twenty cents a hot dog, ten cents for chips, and ten cents for bottled drink.

[00:02:51]

Eric Velasco: So that rent seemed like a lot of money.

[00:02:53]

Pete Graphos: It seemed like a lot of money. [laughs] Anyway, so we made the contacts, got everything remodeled, and I bought pretty much used equipment. My parents loaned me \$3,500, that was what it took to get in there, and I was proud to pay that back in a year.

So anyway, we opened up, opened on a Monday in mid-September. I think there was a football game on Saturday at Legion Field, and I felt like that was probably the last thing I would be able to do [laughs] once I became a prisoner in that hot dog stand, so we opened that Monday.

[00:03:35]

Eric Velasco: And just so people will understand here, when we say a football game at Legion Field, we’re talking about the University of Alabama Crimson Tide.

[00:03:43]

Pete Graphos: Yes. I think they were playing Vanderbilt. And you know Legion Field games were big time for Birmingham. I mean, it was just—they were always packed.

[00:03:43]

Eric Velasco: And that’s where ‘Bama played its home games.

[00:03:54]

Pete Graphos: That’s right, Legion Field, yeah, they did.

So we opened up, and we thought we had enough food prepared for the week, like our sauce, our hot beef, our chili. Well, by Wednesday, we had to do a lot more cooking [laughs] because we sold everything Monday and Tuesday. It took off. It was really amazing. We had primarily employees of UAB. We had a lot of medical students. The dental school was across the street at the time, within walking distance, and there were apartments going up all the way on Twentieth Street, where most of the students lived. So that location turned out to be prime.

[00:04:40]

Eric Velasco: Now, where was this in connection with Michael’s and Rossi’s and the Parliament House, which seemed to be quite a busy district in that area?

[00:04:50]

Pete Graphos: It was about four blocks away from Rossi’s, Michael’s. They were on Fourth Avenue. I was on Eighth Avenue. But we were both on Twentieth Street there.

[00:05:00]

Eric Velasco: These were also Greek-owned restaurants.

[00:05:03]

Pete Graphos: Yes, Connie Kanakis, Mike Matsos, Ted Kakoliris, all those guys. Yeah, they were all Greek.

[00:05:23]

Eric Velasco: So that foot traffic you saw obviously made its way to your front door.

[00:05:30]

Pete Graphos: It really did. It was unique in that we actually had two lunch rushes. We had lunchtime, and then about four-thirty or quarter to five, we had another dinnertime, which was unique for hot dog stands, because at night they’re pretty much closed. But we had all the students who came in for the six o’clock classes, so they would come there and eat before they— I had a small black-and-white TV, and at five-thirty we would watch Huntley-Brinkley News. [laughs] You know, that’s what you did back then.

[00:06:04]

Eric Velasco: “That’s the way it is.”

[00:06:06]

Pete Graphos: Right. And I opened about seven in the morning and closed at eight at night. We did that six days a week.

[00:06:14]

Eric Velasco: What would you serve in the morning?

[00:06:16]

Pete Graphos: We did egg sandwiches on a bun, hamburger bun, egg and cheese, sausage, bacon, that kind of thing. We didn’t do much in the mornings, but later when we started

franchising, we realized we needed to do more morning business, so my brother, Jimmy’s the one who introduced “Buy one egg and cheese, get one free.” Well, that took off, and that led to sausage and bacon and ham, you know, additional cost. So our mornings got bigger and bigger as a result of his idea to do the “Buy one, get one free.”

[00:06:54]

Eric Velasco: When did he start doing that?

[00:06:55]

Pete Graphos: Probably in the early seventies when we started franchising, yeah.

[00:07:01]

Eric Velasco: How did it get the name Sneaky Pete’s?

[00:07:05]

Pete Graphos: I had a good friend, A.F. Barkley, and he was the art director at Channel 6, and we were together a lot socially, and when I gave him the idea of the hot dog stand, I said, “I’m trying to come up with a name.”

It didn’t take him long, couple or three days, and he called me. Didn’t have cell phones back then. [laughs] But he called me and he said, “I’ve got the name, Sneaky Pete’s.”

I said, “Aw, come on,” you know. [laughter] They actually used to call me that occasionally. So I said, “Well, what do you think?”

He said, “Oh, I—.” And he did the eyes, the logo, that one shot, and that’s lasted the duration of the business.

[00:07:48]

Eric Velasco: Wow.

[00:07:49]

Pete Graphos: So anyway, that’s what we did, Sneaky Pete’s.

[00:07:51]

Eric Velasco: What did you do to get a nickname like Sneaky Pete?

[00:07:55]

Pete Graphos: Oh, my goodness. One thing I did back then, I was single and I used to wear sneakers with no socks. [laughs] And the gruffier they got, the more proud I was of ‘em. You know, you didn’t want to walk around with white sneakers. [laughs] So that’s sort of what started it.

[00:08:15]

Eric Velasco: I guess they would lose the squeak the older they got.

[00:08:15]

Pete Graphos: Oh, yeah.

[00:08:19]

Eric Velasco: So you could sneak up on people?

[00:08:20]

Pete Graphos: They lost the squeak and gained a lot of cuts, you know, like the blue jeans they wear today with the— [laughs]

[00:08:26]

Eric Velasco: So you were a man ahead of your time from a fashion standpoint.

[00:08:29]

Pete Graphos: Well, maybe, maybe, yeah. That was about the extent of my fashion statement.

[00:08:35]

Eric Velasco: Now, you mentioned other Greek-owned hot dog stands downtown. Where the original Sneaky Pete’s was, was not downtown.

[00:08:44]

Pete Graphos: No.

[00:08:45]

Eric Velasco: It was on the south side of the city center, about twenty blocks removed from downtown. [Interviewer’s note: It actually was eight city blocks from the railroad tracks that marked the dividing line with downtown. Numbered avenues run north and south from there. Numbered streets run east and west.]

[00:08:52]

Pete Graphos: It was the first one out of downtown, because, like I said, people thought you had to be downtown where all the bodies were, the foot traffic.

[00:08:59]

Eric Velasco: Where the offices were.

[00:09:01]

Pete Graphos: That’s right, and this was a duplicate of that demographic. You had Pete’s Famous; you had Lyric Hot Dog; you had Hot Dog King; you had Gus’; you had Tom’s Coneys; you had the Downtowner. These were all within probably five blocks of each other. That’s how dense the population was downtown, or the workers. As a matter of fact, I was going to price my hot dogs at twenty-five cents, but everybody had ‘em at twenty downtown, and I didn’t realize they were not my competition. I could have had twenty-five or thirty. But I opened with a twenty-cent hot dog.

[00:09:42]

Eric Velasco: Who was your competition at the time?

[00:09:45]

Pete Graphos: There was on the corner, it was Grayson’s Spinning Wheel, the ice cream place. We didn’t compete with each other, sort of complemented each other. But they were on the corner, I was right next to ‘em. And at that time, Eighth Avenue South was a two-lane road, and there was diagonal parking on either side. So in 1970, the city widened it and renamed it University Boulevard, so we had construction for about a year. People had to step over barrels and go around barricades to come to our store, but it really didn’t affect the business.

[00:10:25]

Eric Velasco: I was going to ask that.

[00:10:26]

Pete Graphos: It didn’t.

[00:10:27]

Eric Velasco: You had some pretty dedicated customers.

[00:10:29]

Pete Graphos: Oh, yeah.

[00:10:30]

Eric Velasco: Well, I guess part of it is when you’re the first, that’s where people go.

[00:10:34]

Pete Graphos: That’s right. And we had—you know, back then, the dentist, the residents, you know, they didn’t make any money. I think today they live comfortably, but back then they—and a lot of them would come in and eat. And, you know, we didn’t have computers, and I just had a pad, and they would write down what they ate that day or how much it was. At the end of the month, they’d come pay me.

[00:11:02]

Eric Velasco: So you kept a little ledger.

[00:11:04]

Pete Graphos: Yeah. [laughs] It was all handwritten. But I see those same dentists and doctors today, and a lot of them became good friends, and I can tell you exactly what they ate, you know, two no-kraut. [laughs] We used to call the ones with just mustard, we called that the Rickwood.

[00:11:24]

Eric Velasco: The Rickwood? Why’s that?

[00:11:24]

Pete Graphos: That was the Rickwood. Well, at that time, if you got a hot dog at Rickwood, it generally just had mustard on it.

[00:11:31]

Eric Velasco: And for people who are listening, Rickwood is what?

[00:11:33]

Pete Graphos: It’s the original baseball park for the Birmingham Barons. I think it’s the oldest stadium in America for continuous play of baseball.

[00:11:43]

Eric Velasco: And for those who are listening, it was included in the Jackie Robinson movie, 42. Some of the scenes were shot at Rickwood Field here in Birmingham.

[00:11:54]

Pete Graphos: That’s right, and they still play games there. The Birmingham Barons don’t, but they have other teams, local and all, that play, high schools. And once a year, this year it’s May the 31st, they have the Rickwood Classic, and the Barons will play Chattanooga, an actual Birmingham Barons baseball game. And they pick a year in the past, and the uniforms are all from that same year. It’s quite a day.

I went to Phillips High School, grew up in Norwood, and we still have a close-knit group of that class from Phillips, and at the Rickwood Classic, we go every year. [Interviewer’s note: Norwood is a residential community in north Birmingham.] We pitch a tent outside of the entrance, and I take a big cooler full of hot dogs [laughs], and we’ll have a sip of brew and reminisce and go to the game.

[00:12:47]

Eric Velasco: Tailgating for baseball.

[00:12:49]

Pete Graphos: That’s right. [laughs]

[00:12:51]

Eric Velasco: Did you go to Rickwood a lot when you were young?

[00:12:55]

Pete Graphos: I did.

[00:12:56]

Eric Velasco: Would you go when Jebeles, I believe is his name—

[00:13:00]

Pete Graphos: Jebeles. [He corrects the pronunciation, jeh-bul-EEZ.]

[00:13:01]

Eric Velasco: Jebeles. Was it Jebeles-owned? [Interviewer’s note: Konstantine “Gus” Jebeles, an immigrant from Geraki, Greece, was a successful Birmingham businessman. He started Dixie

Coffee in 1921 and later owned the Reliance Hotel and Jeb’s Seafood House. Jebeles owned the Birmingham Barons from 1944-1949. He is often referred to as G.J. Jebeles.]

[00:13:03]

Pete Graphos: You know, I didn’t go then. I was really young, but the Greek community went.

[00:13:07]

Eric Velasco: Because he’s a Greek man who owned restaurants?

[00:13:11]

Pete Graphos: Well, no, they went before he bought it.

[00:13:13]

Eric Velasco: I see.

[00:13:13]

Pete Graphos: Because that was their entertainment. They lived in Norwood, and they would ride the streetcar out there. My mother was a huge baseball fan, and she would go by herself and sit out there and watch a game, and, you know, they went—I think when Jebeles owned it, I want to say they used to draw about a half-million people a year through that forties and fifties, which is a lot of people for Minor League baseball.

[00:13:39]

Eric Velasco: He essentially saved the team from going under, I understand.

[00:13:42]

Pete Graphos: He did. He was a big promoter. But it was *the* entertainment back then, baseball was.

[00:13:50]

Eric Velasco: At that time, it seemed like Greeks played a substantial role, especially in the food world—markets, fruit, restaurants.

[00:14:02]

Pete Graphos: Everybody, all my friends, you know, the Greek community was close-knit and our church was our social life, and everything happened on Sunday because all the men who owned cafes and restaurants were closed on Sunday. Weddings, baptisms, parties, they were all on Sundays. So all of—I would say ninety percent of my friends’ parents were in the restaurant business, and they were from Ensley, Bessemer, the Bright Star, Ensley, Fairfield, went out through East Lake. There was nothing south because Vestavia wasn’t even there back then.

[Interviewer’s note: Vestavia Hills, a municipality, is a suburb south of Birmingham. As it is located on the other side of Red Mountain from Birmingham, Vestavia Hills plus the neighboring municipalities of Mountain Brook, Homewood and Hoover are collectively known locally as “over the mountain.”]

So it was a community of restaurant owners, and a lot of ‘em back then were called cafes. Back then, a restaurant was upscale if it was called a restaurant. A cafe was just considered—and today cafe is a neat name for a restaurant.

[00:15:05]

Eric Velasco: It’s gotten to be the fancy name.

[00:15:07]

Pete Graphos: Yeah, that’s right. [laughs]

[00:15:12]

Eric Velasco: Norwood community, there seemed to have been a lot of Greek families that settled in that area. Describe Norwood for us, please.

[00:15:19]

Pete Graphos: Oh, it was great. You have Norwood Boulevard, which is very wide, beautiful big homes, and we used to play football and baseball on the Boulevard. That’s where we did our athletic endeavors. But we would go, especially on Saturdays, early in the morning and play ball all day long till it got dark. Of course, we didn’t have bottled water. We’d go across the street to somebody’s house and drink out of the faucet, you know.

But anyway, Norwood was—and there were a lot of Greeks and a lot of Italians. It was probably the most, I guess, ethnic neighborhood in Birmingham, there were so many different varied nationalities over there. Norwood, 12th Avenue North in Norwood was the commercial

district. It had A&P [Interviewer’s note: a grocery chain], had Hill’s Grocery, Norwood Barbershop, Norwood Hardware, Rutland’s Bakery, had a couple of restaurants, three drugstores, and shops. And I mean, it was, I guess, comparable to downtown Homewood, you know, that kind of—or maybe Crestline, Church Street. [Interviewer’s note: Crestline is one of three commercial-residential “villages” in Mountain Brook. Church Street one of the main roads in Crestline Village.]

[00:16:30]

Eric Velasco: It was back in the day where you had self-contained, walkable neighborhoods—

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Pete Graphos: That’s right.

[00:16:35]

Eric Velasco: —where you could do everything you needed to do within a few blocks of where you lived.

[00:16:40]

Pete Graphos: Of course, when we got bicycles, we rode our bikes down there, you know, and it was very safe. I mean, parents weren’t concerned, you know. And we were pretty good about checking in and not wandering off, that kind of thing. We did some crazy things, but we managed to make it through without any injuries.

[00:17:00]

Eric Velasco: Now, what was it that was bringing so many Greeks and Italians and other people from Europe, and the Middle East, too, here to Birmingham?

[00:17:12]

Pete Graphos: Well, it generally started, I think there was a Cassimus gentleman who was the first one here, but usually if a Greek moved to a particular area, he had relatives or friends who would follow him. [Interviewer’s note: George Cassimus was a Greek sailor and Civil War blockade buster who settled in Birmingham after the war. His Fish Lunch House, which opened circa 1902, is the city’s first known Greek-owned restaurant. Niki Sepsas, a Birmingham writer who has extensively documented the city’s Greek community, puts the opening earlier, in 1892.]

And, in particular, the part of Greece that my family’s from, it’s called the Peloponnese area, the southern part, and there are about three or four small little towns in that area, so when one came, the other one would follow, and then the other family would follow. And if they were from a certain geographical area in Greece, they would pretty much follow and settle with their peers or their families or their relatives or, you know, just friends. So most of the Greeks in Birmingham are from those areas.

[00:18:07]

Eric Velasco: Where’s your family from?

[00:18:08]

Pete Graphos: They’re from Sykia. That’s the name of the village.

[00:18:15]

Eric Velasco: Now, where is that in relation to some of these others, like Peleta and Tsitalia?

[Interviewer’s note: Numerous Greek families in metro Birmingham trace their roots to Peleta and Tsitalia, among the villages Mr. Graphos referenced.]

[00:18:19]

Pete Graphos: All right. Peleta and Tsitalia, they’re all in that same area. Some of them are higher because there’s some mountains there. Sykia is not far from Monemvasia, which is on the ocean, and all these areas are east of Sparta. That’s probably a point of reference. That is the biggest, most historical city. These are villages, just like farm towns.

[00:18:49]

Eric Velasco: Have you been there recently?

[00:18:53]

Pete Graphos: I was there in the sixties, so it’s been a long time.

[00:18:56]

Eric Velasco: What was it like in the sixties?

[00:18:58]

Pete Graphos: Well, they didn’t have electricity and they didn’t have running water. They had wells. They would have a large metal can above a small room that was built away from the house, and that would store water and heat, and they had a little shower spigot in it, and that’s where you took your shower. [laughs] So it was fairly crude when I was there. But I think it was in the mid-seventies that most of the villages got electricity and they started getting plumbing and that kind of thing.

[00:19:30]

Eric Velasco: Most people think of Greek housing and all that, the white and the blue buildings. Is that what it was like there?

[00:19:38]

Pete Graphos: Yeah, everything was pretty much white. It’s a stucco, and they had like a whitewash, not a real paint. I think it had lime in it or something that they would paint the buildings with. Most of them in Sykia had the red-tile roofs, you know. A lot of churches, for some reason, had the blue roofs, but most of the houses had the red-tile roofs.

[00:20:02]

Eric Velasco: What was your father’s name and when did he come here?

[00:20:07]

Pete Graphos: Okay. His name was Theodore Peter Graphos, and in the Greek tradition, the first male takes the father’s father’s name, which was Peter Theodore. My father was Theodore

Peter and I was Peter Theodore, and that’s how that—you keep the same names in the family. He came here, I think about—I want to say around 1918. He was a teenager, came by himself. But I saw the manifest. He was on the *Olympia*, which was the sister ship to the *Titanic*, the same White Star Line or something. Anyway, so I went online and found it, and I got the manifest, and they were all handwritten, the passengers. Had his name and about four names of men who they weren’t relatives, but they were from the same village, and I remember meeting most of them. So they came over with my father.

[00:21:17]

Eric Velasco: And they made their way down this way?

[00:21:19]

Pete Graphos: No. My father landed in New York. He had shorts on, because when he left, it was warm, and in New York it was freezing cold. And he was going to Traverse City, Michigan, because his two brothers were in Traverse City. So they had ladies, like Red Cross, when you went through Ellis Island, and they put a tag on you, your name and your destination, and they handed you a little box, had a sandwich, an apple, some goodies, and they would put you on the train. And he went to Traverse City, and when he got there, one brother had a restaurant and the other brother had a candy shop within two blocks of each other. So my father, obviously, couldn’t speak English, so he was the busboy in the restaurant, and when it closed, he’d walk down the alley, go in the candy shop and clean it up for the next day. That was his introduction to food.

[00:22:15]

Eric Velasco: Now, Traverse City is in the upper peninsula of Michigan. When did he get long pants?

[00:22:20]

Pete Graphos: [laughs] When he got off the train. But Traverse City is the northernmost part of lower Michigan. It’s before you go to the upper—

[00:22:32]

Eric Velasco: Before you get to the UP.

[00:22:33]

Pete Graphos: Yeah.

[00:22:33]

Eric Velasco: But still, cold. [laughs]

[00:22:36]

Pete Graphos: Oh, it’s cold. So the way he ended up in Birmingham, my mother was still single in Birmingham, and my grandparents are from the same village that my father came from, so there was some contact between the brothers and my grandfather. And, of course, you know, our brother’s still single and my grandfather said, “I still have a single daughter,” so my father came to Birmingham. Within three weeks, they were married.

[00:23:07]

Eric Velasco: That’s how a lot of people got married within the Greek community then.

[00:23:11]

Pete Graphos: That’s right. That’s right.

[00:23:12]

Eric Velasco: It wasn’t exactly arranged but—

[00:23:14]

Pete Graphos: But it was set up, so to say. Not arranged but, I mean, sort of. And back then, it took you two days to drive from there to here, you know. So they got married, obviously went back to Traverse City. By then, my father had a restaurant with his brother. They were partners. It was called the Wolverine.

[00:23:37]

Eric Velasco: What’s your father’s brother’s name?

[00:23:39]

Pete Graphos: Gus. One was Gus. Gus, George, Jimmy, Andrew. They were his brothers. But George and Gus were both in that area.

So what happened, my sister was born after my parents had married, about a year she was born, and then the next year, I was born, and the third year is when he decided to move us all back to Birmingham.

[00:24:11]

Eric Velasco: So were you in Traverse City when you were born and your sister was born?

[00:24:15]

Pete Graphos: We both were born—but I was like a year or two old when we moved back here. So all the way through school and everything, place of birth, Traverse City, Michigan. [laughs]

[00:24:25]

Eric Velasco: You’re a Yankee. [laughter]

[00:24:28]

Pete Graphos: They had just a handful of Greeks in Traverse City, and when you came here, we had a church in the Greek community, so that’s why he wanted to come back where my mother was from.

[00:24:41]

Eric Velasco: What kind of restaurant did he have in Michigan?

[00:24:43]

Pete Graphos: It was a nice restaurant. It was called the Wolverine, full everything, breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

[00:24:52]

Eric Velasco: It was a “restaurant,” not a “café.”

[00:24:53]

Pete Graphos: “Restaurant.” [laughs] And when he came here, his brother Andrew was still in Greece, so he opened a restaurant across the street from Alabama Power on Sixth Avenue and Eighteenth, their original office building. It’s a parking lot across the street, but that was his restaurant, and he named it Andrew’s, after his brother. Then after a while—

[00:25:20]

Eric Velasco: When did he open that?

[00:25:22]

Pete Graphos: Probably in like ’42, ’43-ish, maybe. And then the power company put in a cafeteria, so he sold that one, and he bought a cafe on the old farmers’ market, which was between Twenty-sixth Street, where the terminal station was, and Twenty-fourth Street and Second Avenue and Fifth Avenue. That’s where the truckers came in. It was all farmers in there selling all their produce, and there were markets around it and there were cafes on every corner.

[00:26:03]

Eric Velasco: That’s where Niki’s Downtown would open later.

[00:26:05]

Pete Graphos: There were two farmers’ markets. They opened on the second one, which is on Second Avenue North. That Niki’s opened there.

So anyway, we had the Farmers Cafe, it was my father’s, and he was busy. He had a steam table, and when we were young, we used to go help down there, especially we’d go on Sundays and help clean up. It was just primarily farmers, and he served all food homemade, and every day he had homemade beef stew, homemade hamburger steak. He had fried chicken, he had chicken and dumplings, those were staples, and then the vegetables were varied and some of the meats varied.

[00:26:52]

Eric Velasco: It’s what we would describe today as a meat-and-three.

[00:26:54]

Pete Graphos: That’s right.

[00:26:54]

Eric Velasco: How about Andrew’s? What was that like?

[00:26:59]

Pete Graphos: Now, see, I barely remember that, but I do remember it was more restaurant than the Farmers Cafe, whole different clientele. It was office workers and all. Farmers Cafe was mostly farmers. There were some scattered businesses, and those people would eat there. But it was really a unique—and I remember the seasons because the farmers would bring my dad, of course, in the summer, the watermelons and the cantaloupes and everything. And I remember Thanksgiving and Christmas, they would bring different fruits and nuts, and everything smelled different during that period. But I remember the seasons by the smells of the different products that we used to get.

[00:27:47]

Eric Velasco: Let’s back up a little bit and talk about your mother.

[00:27:50]

Pete Graphos: Okay.

[00:27:51]

Eric Velasco: What’s her name and her family name?

[00:27:53]

Pete Graphos: Now, my mother was Helen Derzis, that was my grandfather, and that name was shortened. The real name is Deriziotis in Greek. So my grandfather shortened it to Derzis.

[00:28:16]

Eric Velasco: Did he do it or did that get done at Ellis?

[00:28:19]

Pete Graphos: You know, I really don’t know. I think he did, but I really don’t know.

[00:28:24]

Eric Velasco: Because I know John Collins, that’s how he got his name, is he chose—well, he and his uncle Grammas chose that when I believe he was getting a bank account, opened up.

[00:28:33]

PB: You’re right, because he was Kalogiannis, and if you translate Kalogiannis, Kalo is good, and Giannis is John, so “Good John” was his Greek name. And they picked Collins, you know.

[00:28:47]

Eric Velasco: But Graphos was always Graphos?

[00:28:50]

Pete Graphos: Graphos, yes. Graphos in Greek, Graphos is like a writer, G-r-a-p-h, Graphos. And so I always told my friends I was an intellectual writer, growing up. [laughs] But that’s Graphos. And this might be off the path, but I found out through my relatives in Greece, there were two brothers, their name was Graphakis [phonetic], and they were from Central Greece, what is called Miney [phonetic], the state of Miney. And Miney—you know, the Turks dominated Greeks for 400 years. Miney was the only state in Greece that the Turks didn’t mess

with. They were known as warriors, and you can still see it today. Their homes were like towers. They were like little fortresses to protect themselves. So they had a reputation. You just don’t mess with ‘em. So my, I guess, great-uncles—I don’t know what you would call them, but they lived in Miney, and all the people there had just sort of rough backgrounds. Anyway, the Turks did not mess with them, and they were the only part of Greece that prospered during the Ottoman Empire, because the Ottomans would trade with them, and it was to their benefit for both sides.

But the Miney, after all that, when they started dispersing, a lot of them changed their names because the Mineys were not—I guess the association with the Turks gave them a bad name, so to speak. So I understand that one of the brothers settled in Sykia, changed his name to Graphos from Graphakis, and I believe the other one went to Crete, but I don’t have any contact or recollection. This is just through my relatives in Greece.

[00:30:51]

Eric Velasco: Wow. That’s a great story.

[00:30:54]

Pete Graphos: Yeah. [laughs]

[00:30:57]

Eric Velasco: Now, your mother’s side of the family, the Derzis family, was fairly big here in Birmingham, especially on the food side of things. Tell me a little bit about your mother’s family.

[00:31:07]

Pete Graphos: My grandfather had a fruit stand across from the terminal station.

[00:31:11]

Eric Velasco: And his name was?

[00:31:13]

Pete Graphos: Sam Derzis, and my grandmother was Maria Derzis, and my mother was Helen Derzis. She had four sisters and two brothers. There were seven of them. And I didn’t realize how popular fruit stands were. My grandfather—but there were several Greeks who had fruit stands through the city, and, you know, we don’t have fruit stands today. I guess we have markets that have everything, but, I mean, they just had fruit.

[00:31:41]

Eric Velasco: Kontos Produce. [Interviewer’s note: Kontos Fruit Co. was founded by Greek-born Alex Kontos in 1888 and is still in business.]

[00:31:42]

Pete Graphos: That’s right. There you go. Bananas. [laughs] But that’s what he did. Then he entered the restaurant business.

[00:31:49]

Eric Velasco: Do you remember what his restaurant was?

[00:31:54]

Pete Graphos: You know, I think it was on Eighth Avenue North, and I really don’t remember the name of it. I don’t know.

[00:32:02]

Eric Velasco: So, into fruit. And did your mother’s sister marry into any other local restaurant families? I’m trying—somebody else I talked to married Sam’s daughter too.

[00:32:19]

Pete Graphos: All right. That was my Aunt Alexandra. She married John Bonduris. He was one of the original Bright Star owners, and then when he sold his interest, he went to work for Jebeles at Jeb’s Seafood Restaurant across from the terminal station, and he was like the manager. He was there for a quite a few years. Then later when he left Jeb’s, he opened the Exchange Restaurant on the second farmers’ market, because that was called the Farmer’s [or Farmers] Exchange. So he opened the Exchange Restaurant, which was pretty big, and it was a meat-and-three.

[00:32:57]

Eric Velasco: About when would this have been?

[00:33:00]

Pete Graphos: Probably maybe the fifties. And it was a block from Niki’s. They were both on that Farmer’s Exchange. And then he later opened a restaurant on Third Avenue North called the Knotty Pine. Then it was there a long time, and he did very well there, and it was a meat-and-three, but it wasn’t a steam table. You went in and had table service. As a matter of fact, when I was in college, I worked there in the summer as a short-order cook. They didn’t trust me with all the meat-and-threes. I cooked the hamburgers. [laughs] I guess I was destined to own a hot dog stand because I didn’t know how to do the other stuff.

[00:33:42]

Eric Velasco: You could have been a steakhouse man, otherwise.

[00:33:44]

Pete Graphos: Yeah. [laughs] And then my Uncle Pete, my other mother’s brother, owned the Caswell [phonetic] Grill. It was a block from the Farmer’s [or Farmers or Farmers’] Cafe. It was on the market. He had a meat-and-three. And then his brother Gregory worked with my father, and then later when my uncle opened the Knotty Pine, Gregory joined him as a partner at the Knotty Pine. So they were always in the restaurant business.

[00:34:12]

Eric Velasco: It seemed to me that a lot of people got their start in the business as sort of being mentored by somebody who’s established.

[00:34:22]

Pete Graphos: Oh, yeah. That’s right.

[00:34:23]

Eric Velasco: It sounds like that’s what a lot of these relationships are, much like your father and brother Jimmy’s involvement with the Lyric Hot Dog.

[00:34:31]

Pete Graphos: That’s right. And then my Uncle Gregory, who came out of the Army in ’45, ’46, whatever, and that’s when he joined my father at the Farmer’s Cafe, and his brother Pete opened the Caswell Grill. They had just come out of the Army.

[00:34:47]

Eric Velasco: Just to be clear, these were all Derzises?

[00:34:49]

Pete Graphos: Derzises, yes. We’re the only—my father was the only Graphos in Birmingham, so he had four children, so that’s the extent of the Graphos family.

[00:35:07]

Eric Velasco: So how was your father and John Collins related?

[00:35:15]

Pete Graphos: All right. John Collins married my mother’s sister.

[00:35:19]

Eric Velasco: That was the one I was trying to remember.

[00:35:21]

Pete Graphos: So they were brother-in-laws. And then the other sister married John Bonduris, and he and John Collins were partners at the Steak Grill downtown on Third Avenue. They were in business a long time. I even worked there one summer.

[00:35:40]

Eric Velasco: We’re starting to get into something I really wanted to get into here. Okay. So you’re growing up here in Birmingham, you’re living in Norwood.

[00:35:51]

Pete Graphos: Right.

[00:35:52]

Eric Velasco: Talk to me about your early work history, because it sounds like you got a lot of good restaurant jobs with different people.

[00:35:59]

Pete Graphos: Yeah. Well, my brothers and I, we were young and we couldn’t work in my father’s restaurant because he served beer, alcohol, and wine, which was sort of unique back then, but the farmers, they wanted that. That was part of his business.

[00:36:19]

Eric Velasco: How old at the time did you have to be to be able to serve alcohol?

[00:36:22]

Pete Graphos: Twenty-one. But occasionally, when I got into Phillips, which was walking distance from the Farmer’s Cafe, after school sometimes I’d go down there and be the cashier. I couldn’t serve liquor or anything, but we would do that. And on Sunday afternoons sometimes we’d go down and help my father do things. You know, back then, you had the long cooler, and all the drinks were in bottles and they were stacked up in the cooler, you know, and you would open it. And sometimes, once a month, we’d have to take all the drinks out and wash it out, put ‘em all back in. And my father would tell us to see if there was any money laying on the floor under the booths, you know, and there was always change, and we think he just sort of threw it under there and made us happy by finding it. [laughs]

[00:37:15]

Eric Velasco: I was going to ask who got to keep the money.

[00:37:17]

Pete Graphos: We did, but, I mean, I don’t think people dropped that much change in the booths that we found. [laughs]

[00:37:26]

Eric Velasco: Were you paid otherwise?

[00:37:28]

Pete Graphos: No.

[00:37:29]

Eric Velasco: Because, of course, it’s a family business.

[00:37:32]

Pete Graphos: We were always given money. Sometimes we would walk from there downtown, which he was on Twenty-fourth Street, so it was four or five blocks, you’re on Twentieth Street, you know. My mother, once a week, she would take us downtown to Britling Cafeteria. We thought, boy, that was the ultimate, all those pies and all that food. And she would take us, maybe three or four of our cousins, we would eat at Britling and go to a movie and then ride the bus back to Norwood.

[00:38:07]

Eric Velasco: Britling was a big deal. That was a destination at the time.

[00:38:10]

Pete Graphos: Oh, yeah, that was big time, yeah.

[00:38:12]

Eric Velasco: Describe it for us, please.

[00:38:14]

Pete Graphos: Well, main [entrance] was on Twentieth Street, I think between Third and Fourth Avenue, maybe.

[00:38:20]

Eric Velasco: North or South?

[00:38:22]

Pete Graphos: North. And then it L’ed, and then they had another entrance on, I think, Third Avenue, so it was like an L, had two serving lines and all. They also had one on First Avenue, next to the Woodward Building, First Avenue North. There was a Britling there. But then sometimes she’d take us to Joy Young, the Chinese restaurant, and that was beautiful. You know, it was like two-story, had a balcony all the way around that you could go sit and eat, and that was a treat because there were no Chinese restaurants. There was a Shanghai that a lot of people don’t remember. It was even before my time. It was on Third Avenue North, Shanghai. And Joy Young, that was—I don’t remember the Shanghai, but I do remember Joy Young.

[00:39:11]

Eric Velasco: Everybody remembers Joy Young around here. If you lived here in a certain era, everybody talks about Joy Young being one of the great restaurant experiences of that time.

[00:39:22]

Pete Graphos: Oh, it was, and their waiters were all dressed up, like black tux-looking outfit and white aprons. It was probably one of the more cosmopolitan places for Birmingham, because we were pretty much traditional.

[00:39:39]

Eric Velasco: It was pretty exotic stuff.

[00:39:40]

Pete Graphos: It was.

[00:39:41]

Eric Velasco: I’m not talking just Sukiyaki and Egg Fu Yung, but they had some pretty interesting [unclear].

[00:39:49]

Pete Graphos: And their original eggrolls were the—that was what everybody wanted to copy, was their eggrolls. I think the Chinese place on Green Springs Highway, I believe that they have

their Joy Young eggrolls. [Interviewer’s note: He is referring to the Chop Suey Inn; Joy Young’s opened in 1919; the original closed in 1972, but versions lingered for year afterward.]

[00:40:04]

Eric Velasco: That’s what I keep hearing. I need to explore that.

[00:40:06]

Pete Graphos: My brother Sam lives in Homewood, but he goes there all the time. I probably haven’t been there in years, but I used to go more often, but I haven’t been there in a long time.

[00:40:17]

Eric Velasco: So where were some of the other jobs you had [unclear]?

[00:40:19]

Pete Graphos: I went to work for Melrose Ice Cream on Twenty-sixth Street North, and it was next to the big icehouse, and across the railroad tracks was Ed Salem’s Drive-in. But I went to work at Melrose as a carhop before I was sixteen, and you had to get a work permit if you were under sixteen to get a job, so I remember I got that. They paid us once every two weeks, and the pay was like, what, eighteen, twenty dollars every two weeks. But back then, on Saturday night we’d close at eleven, and I would walk home from there to Norwood Circle, where I lived, and I would probably have twenty to twenty-five dollars from tip money. That was a lot of money back then. So I worked Friday, Saturdays, and Sundays. Sunday was a big day, and I would make like twenty dollars a day. That was a lot of money.

[00:41:18]

Eric Velasco: Carhop. Did you have to skate?

[00:41:20]

Pete Graphos: No, no. [laughs] Had diagonal parking on Twenty-sixth Street. We would put the tray on the window, you know. Busy, though. I remember they had a big walk-in cooler, and they used to get fresh strawberries in barrels, and they had some kind of water that they were in to keep them fresh, but they were fresh. Like their strawberry sundaes, oh, they had the best—their hot fudge sundae. All their stuff was homemade.

[00:41:53]

Eric Velasco: Now, was that when the rock ‘n roll station was down there? They had the deejays in the booth over at Ed Salem’s?

[00:41:59]

Pete Graphos: That was on Seventh Avenue South and Twenty-ninth. That’s where the Sky Castle was.

[00:42:09]

Eric Velasco: It seems like that was the era, that particular era, the drive-in was the big thing.

[00:42:16]

Pete Graphos: Oh, yeah. Ed Salem’s was—I mean, you cruised through there on the weekends at night, just a stream of cars just going through, you know, showing off your car and your date and all that. [laughs] But anyway, I worked there and I worked at my father’s when I was in high school.

Then I went to Alabama and sometimes I would—I didn’t have a car, and they had a place on University Boulevard in Tuscaloosa, a little pull-off like, and had a sign, “Give a ‘Bama Student a Lift.” So I’d go there on Friday afternoon, just hold my thumb up, somebody’d pick you up. And I would get off in Bessemer because our neighbor in Norwood, Mr. Joe Virciglio, had Food Town Grocery in Bessemer. [Interviewer’s note: Bessemer and Birmingham are sixteen miles apart in Jefferson County.]

So I’d get off Friday afternoon, had to walk there, he’d see me, wave to me, and direct me to start carrying out groceries, and I would carry out groceries till like three-thirty, four in the afternoon until nine, when they closed, and he would take me home, and he would stop at Ed Salem’s, and we would go in and get a barbecue, piece of lemon icebox pie, and a 7-Up. And here I was, all the friends and they all had dates and cars, and here I was getting off of work. [laughs] But, you know, I thought that’s what you did. It didn’t embarrass me or whatever.

So we would go home, and at six o’clock I would walk out of my back door over to Mr. Joe’s house. We’d get in his car, we’d be in Bessemer at six-thirty, and I’d work all day Saturday, and he would just let me carry out groceries, because that’s when you made your money. But on Saturday morning, I’d do a lot of, you know, put the milk and the eggs in the dairy case until they really got going, then I would just carry groceries out. Then I’d get off about six o’clock, I’d get on the bus, it’d take me to downtown Birmingham, I’d get a transfer,

and then get the bus to the 15 Norwood and go home. And that was my weekends when I was in school.

[00:44:29]

Eric Velasco: What were you studying at Alabama?

[00:44:31]

Pete Graphos: I was a business major.

[00:44:33]

Eric Velasco: When was this that you were at the school?

[00:44:36]

Pete Graphos: Let’s see. Fifty-eight through the early sixties. Then when I got out of Alabama, you know, then you were going to get drafted. There was no two ways about it. So some older friends had joined the Navy, and when you did, you joined for six years Naval Reserve, but they immediately signed up for active duty so you got your two years over with, and that’s what I did. I went down to the Graymont Avenue one Monday night to their meetings, and I joined the Navy, signed up for active duty, and two weeks later, I was gone, went to boot camp in Great Lakes.

[00:45:13]

Eric Velasco: And where were you posted?

[00:45:15]

Pete Graphos: I got out of boot camp, I was assigned to a brand new sub tender. It was not finished. And I went to Newport News, Virginia, to the shipyard, but there was no naval housing, so there were several of us, we got an apartment and we got per diem. We went to an office building every day and we were what they called the pre-commissioning detail, and I was a yeoman, which was the office part. We were there about probably six months, and then the ship was completed and we went through the commissioning, which was quite an experience. It was fun.

Then we cruised down the James River to Norfolk, and they supplied our ship, and we had nuclear missiles for the Polaris submarine program. Went to Cuba, had the Cuba Missile Crisis, which really scared me. If you were in the military at that time, especially the Navy, you know, embargo and we couldn’t get off the ship when we pulled in. It was—we were really frightened that we were going to war.

[00:46:18]

Eric Velasco: Where were you in Cuba? Where did you ship sail to in Cuba?

[00:46:24]

Pete Graphos: What happened, we sailed there for what they call a shakedown cruise. All new ships go there and play war games and everything. And that’s when the crisis started, so we had to leave. We went back to Charleston, which was a big submarine base.

[00:46:38]

Eric Velasco: This was '61?

[00:46:40]

Pete Graphos: '61 yeah. [Interviewer’s note: The sixteen-day standoff between the United States and Russia over its nuclear missile bases in Cuba was in October 1962.]

[00:46:43]

Eric Velasco: And not just worried about going to the war, I mean, they were shipping nuclear weapons to Cuba.

[00:46:48]

Pete Graphos: Oh, I mean, it was big time, yeah. So then we left Charleston, had a liberty call in New York Harbor, went in, and when it’s a new ship and the fireboats sprayed the water over us, it was quite unique, and we were there for three days, which is liberty call.

We left there on New Year’s Eve and went to Holy Loch, Scotland. That’s where our base was. Took us over a week, I think, but for two days we were in a storm on the Atlantic. I thought the ship was going to sink, really. Our ship was 600 feet long. It was big, tall.

Anyway, we got to Holy Loch, and because we had nuclear weapons, we couldn’t dock. So we’re out in the middle of Holy Loch. I mean, you could see the town and everything, and we had to ride these little liberty boats back and forth, you know. But that was the best duty. We had a little apartment in Dunoon, Scotland, and on the weekends we had to decide whether to go to Edinburgh, Glasgow, or get a standby flight to London. It was tough duty. [laughs] I

always told my kids that it was my job in Holy Loch to go from pub to pub and listen for subversive conversation, and they said, “You did that?” I said, “I sure did.” I said, “Scotland is free to this day because of my service.” [laughs] Oh, man.

[00:48:29]

Eric Velasco: That’s the kind of active duty I think most of us would like, yes.

[00:48:33]

Pete Graphos: I tell you, that was probably—at that time, Polaris program was new and everything was first-class, the food, the travel, you know, all that. So what I did, I saved up my leave days, had fourteen, and took off in July and I went to Frankfurt, Paris, Rome, and I spent eight days in the hometown of Sykia. I went back to the village, to my father’s village, saw all my relatives. What was interesting, when I got there, they were expecting me, so we got to the family house and I walked in and all my cousins and their kids were all sitting around the room, and I sat in a chair and they were all looking at me. [laughs] I looked around, and every picture we had ever sent from America, they use a pin, and the pictures were just pinned on the walls.

[00:49:37]

Eric Velasco: How many people were in that room waiting for you?

[00:49:39]

Pete Graphos: Oh, probably twenty.

[00:49:41]

Eric Velasco: When you walked in that door, you were aware of what you were going to find in there?

[00:49:48]

Pete Graphos: No.

[00:49:49]

Eric Velasco: When you saw those pictures, what went through your mind?

[00:49:52]

Pete Graphos: How much they loved us without even knowing us, and how important family was to them.

[00:50:02]

Eric Velasco: That’s incredibly touching. And that’s something that I’ve enjoyed exploring in these interviews, is the depth of family connections within these people I’ve been interviewing. But that speaks so much that people who never even laid eyes on you and hadn’t seen your father in who knows how long would have that kind of connection.

[00:50:33]

Pete Graphos: It was amazing. And while I was there, they wanted to be so hospitable, you know, and they would ask me what I wanted to eat. Well, I knew they didn’t have—they didn’t

eat lamb every day or chicken. You know what I mean? They ate mostly vegetables, cheese, bread. So my uncle said, “Would you like some lamb?”

I said, “Sure,” you know. I was there about three days before a Sunday. Well, they didn’t have stoves. You know, they cooked on a fire. So we went to church that Sunday morning, and coming back from church, he stopped at a little bakery. Well, the baker had ovens and he would cook for people. So we stopped there and he picked up a big pan, had lamb and potatoes in it.

[00:51:24]

Eric Velasco: Sounds like a feast.

[00:51:27]

Pete Graphos: Ooh. Then they also make what we call Hilopites. They are egg noodles and they’re fresh. They just cut ‘em right there and cook ‘em. They’re not hard, you know. And my cousin said she wanted to cook chicken, tomato, and Hilopites, the egg noodles. So they went out of their way to let me eat to some of—what I grew up eating in Birmingham, took it for granted, you know, over there it was a big treat.

[00:51:58]

Eric Velasco: That was one of the things I wanted to ask you. Growing up—first of all, how did you mother come to the country? Was she born here?

[00:52:05]

Pete Graphos: My mother’s parents came from Sykia, from Greece, but she and her siblings, they were all born in Birmingham and never left, didn’t move away. They all were born here and died here.

[00:52:19]

Eric Velasco: Both of her parents were Greek? Both of your grandparents Derzis were Greek?

[00:52:24]

Pete Graphos: Yes, they’re all Greek.

[00:52:25]

Eric Velasco: So what did you eat growing up in your household?

[00:52:28]

Pete Graphos: Oh, my goodness. We ate a lot of vegetables. My mother was great at fried chicken. [laughs] She loved pork chops. But we ate a lot of Greek food, you know, stuffed peppers and tomatoes in tomato sauce, Dolmades, stuffed grape leaves, a lot of lamb, a lot of chicken cooked Greek style. They used to do a fish during Lent. It was called Marinato, which is rosemary, and they would fry the fish, like big pieces of snapper, they would fry it and then they would layer in the pan with rosemary, fish, rosemary, and vinegar, cover it up and put it in a cold place, sometimes in a basement or something, and let it, like, age for a few days, and just take it out. They didn’t heat it. But it was so tasty, real flaky. I don’t know that anybody does

that anymore, but I remember it. [The dish is commonly called Psari Marinato. It was a method to preserve fish.]

[00:52:28]

Eric Velasco: It’s kind of a Ceviche kind of approach.

[00:53:33]

Pete Graphos: Yeah. And then you know what was funny, you know Pastitsio, the macaroni layered with the Béchamel on top, they would make that for like if you’re—my name is Peter. On the Saint Day of my name, you would have an open house on Sunday, and all the Peters would visit, the families, and they would have Pastitsio and lamb and the pastries. They would have everything. Of course, they’d drink their whiskey and smoke their cigars, and that was a big thing going to somebody’s Name Day. But I remember we would go to school next two or three days, and we would take our lunch and we would have Pastitsio and Dolmades, and all our friends are eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and bananas with mayonnaise. [laughs]

[00:54:21]

Eric Velasco: How would they react?

[00:54:23]

Pete Graphos: They would ask us what we’re eating, and we’d have to explain it, because, you know, people didn’t have that. It wasn’t in restaurants, it wasn’t regularly available, and they didn’t even know what it was.

[00:54:32]

Eric Velasco: But was it curiosity, or was it “Ugh. What are you eating there?”

[00:54:36]

Pete Graphos: Probably a combination, you know, when you’re in elementary school.

[laughter]

[00:54:40]

Eric Velasco: When something’s different.

[00:54:42]

Pete Graphos: Yeah, but, you know, it’s interesting because there was so many Greek families, Italians, some Jewish families, and, of course, the Anglo-Saxons in Norwood, and they sort of fed off each other. We loved their country cooking, their fried—we liked all that. So there was quite—Italian food. So we were probably quite a mixed neighborhood going back that far.

[00:55:10]

Eric Velasco: In a way that most people would not think of in the South, especially outside of the biggest cities in the South.

[00:55:19]

Pete Graphos: And another interesting thing is most of the Greeks, the cooks, like Catherine, a black lady that cooked for my father everywhere he was, she was like our family, you know, and she did all that cooking, homemade chicken and dumplings, homemade—you know, they would take the beef and cut it up and [unclear]. Nothing was canned. It was fresh that they did.

[00:55:44]

Eric Velasco: That’s one of the things I wanted to get into, is that we’re talking—your lifetime covers an era of segregation, of Civil Rights Movement, of desegregation. You’re coming on the back end of a time when Greeks and immigrants in general in the area weren’t always looked upon kindly.

[00:56:06]

Pete Graphos: No.

[00:56:08]

Eric Velasco: When you were growing up and then when you were going into business in the sixties, how were Greeks perceived, first by the white community, and then by the black community?

[00:56:16]

Pete Graphos: Well, by the sixties, the Greeks were much more acceptable in the white community. But my grandfather and my mother and aunts and all, when they were kids, they lived off of 24th Street near Phillips High School, and they said back then occasionally there was

a Ku Klux Klan march down the street, and my grandfather would make the kids get under the bed because he didn’t know what was going to happen, because they were Greek. They didn’t like any foreign groups at all. It wasn’t just blacks, you know. That’s how it was back then. It wasn’t like that when we were coming along.

[00:56:54]

Eric Velasco: This would have been about the twenties, somewhere in there, that your grandfather was experiencing.

[00:56:58]

Pete Graphos: Twenties, thirties, yeah, probably up till the war. But then segregation was a way of life. I mean, we didn’t think anything was wrong or different. We just thought everybody had that. But we had a lot of blacks as part of our extended family—that’s the only way I can put it—that worked in the restaurants, and just about everybody either had or shared a maid, Margaret, Celine, Catherine, and they would come to your house and to the laundry, iron, and visit. They would cook. So it was not—and you know what was interesting? They all had families. We didn’t have any kind of government assistance. Everybody seemed to be doing okay, because, see, we weren’t wealthy by any means. Our parents made a living. They certainly didn’t get rich in restaurants. There was some exceptions, like John’s Bright Star, Jeb’s. Now, those were more upscale tickets. But meat-and-threes, they made a living. But we had one car. Everybody had one car. Not just Greeks; everybody. [laughs] Had one car. You rode the bus, but the buses ran every ten or fifteen minutes. You could go anywhere.

But I will tell you one of the darkest days I ever had. I was a yeoman in the captain’s office on the ship, and I was his talker when we were under way, you know. So in his office, I had duty that weekend, so I couldn’t get off the ship in Scotland, and I was working. It was a Sunday, and BBC used to broadcast throughout the ship; it would pick it up. They had a bulletin and they announced the bombing in Birmingham that killed the girls. Whew.

[00:58:59]

Eric Velasco: Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. [Interviewer’s note: Four young girls died in the bombing by white supremacists on September 15, 1963.]

[00:59:01]

Pete Graphos: I was so embarrassed, you know, because I was from Birmingham and I was removed from the whole situation. I wasn’t here during the fire hoses and all that stuff, you know. So that was probably the first time that it really hit me as to what was happening to blacks.

[00:59:23]

Eric Velasco: What went through your mind when you heard that?

[00:59:25]

Pete Graphos: Oh, I was just devastated. Then, you know, all my friends on the ship knew I was from Birmingham, they started asking me questions, and I was honest with them. “You

didn’t have any blacks in your school?” I said, “No.” So I had to answer how I grew up in the segregated South, and I never gave it a second thought until then. That was interesting, though.

[00:59:50]

Eric Velasco: And then how did that affect your thinking on the whole subject?

[00:59:54]

Pete Graphos: Well, I got out of the Navy, I came back, went to work at Social Security, and it was integrated because it was a government facility, and that was the first time outside of working in restaurants and cafes with the black help that I worked with blacks in a job setting.

[01:00:15]

Eric Velasco: Equal capacity.

[01:00:16]

Pete Graphos: Right. Then when I opened Sneaky Pete’s, once we started franchising, we had a lot of black employees in our different stores, good ones. I mean, they were good people.

[01:00:27]

Eric Velasco: And the marches and all that weren’t really going on in your area of town in the sixties.

[01:00:33]

Pete Graphos: I was in the Navy, and my brother was working at the Lyric, so he was like in the middle of the marches and the fire hoses. Kelly Ingram was only a couple blocks away.

[Interviewer’s note: Kelly Ingram Park, adjacent to 16th Street Baptist Church between Fifth and Sixth avenues North, was the site of many civil rights demonstrations in the 1960s. It now has several statues marking the era. Images from those protests, broadcast on national television, were pivotal in changing public opinion in favor of the Civil Rights Movement.]

[01:00:45]

Eric Velasco: And this is Jimmy.

[01:00:46]

Pete Graphos: Jimmy. So Jimmy saw a lot of that. He said he was never threatened by it because it wasn’t as violent as it appeared to be at the time. I mean, it didn’t—people watched from a distance, but it wasn’t life-threatening or anything. But he knew a lot more about that because he was in the middle of it, so to speak.

But I remember we rode streetcars, then electric trolleys, and then the buses, and they had the sign halfway back, “white” on one side of the sign, “colored” on the other, and they would move it. If there were more blacks, they’d move the sign forward. If there were more whites, they’d move it backwards. And that’s the way it was. Of course, then we were young, so we just—we thought that was life.

[01:01:36]

Eric Velasco: You didn’t know anything different.

[01:01:38]

Pete Graphos: Nuh-uh.

[01:01:39]

Eric Velasco: There probably weren’t a whole lot of black people around there in Scotland except if they were on your ship.

[01:01:44]

Pete Graphos: Just our ship, yeah. But anyway, that’s the way it was. I know that—but you know what was really interesting? There was no crime. I mean, maybe some crime by anybody, blacks, whites, whatever, but it wasn’t like it is now. You get up in the morning, every morning somebody got shot. It was not like that.

[01:02:08]

Eric Velasco: Doors stayed unlocked, you don’t lock your cars, everybody’s in and out of each other’s houses.

[01:02:14]

Pete Graphos: That brings me to another story. Back then, you didn’t buy yogurt in the grocery store. They didn’t have yogurt; they didn’t have phyllo dough; they didn’t have feta; they didn’t have Kalamata olives. They were all imported, and there were a couple of people who had little import stores. That’s where you bought it. Well, you make yogurt, you have to

have yogurt to make it. And I remember my mother would say, “I’m going to make some yogurt today, but I don’t have the yiaoupti.” We called it yiaoupti. She’d give me a cup, she’d say, “Go across the street to Mrs. Koutroulakis and go get me some yogurt.” So I’d walk over there, just walk right in the house, and she’d put yogurt, and I’d take it back, and my mother would make a big pot of yogurt.

[01:02:56]

Eric Velasco: Traditional southern thing is to borrow a cup of sugar.

[01:03:00]

Pete Graphos: That’s right. [laughs] Or cornmeal. We’re borrowing yogurt. [laughs] Oh, me.

[01:03:06]

Eric Velasco: That was one of the things I wanted to ask earlier. Where did you get your lamb back then? Because it’s not like you could hop down to the A&P and get a package of lamb.

[01:03:18]

Pete Graphos: Well, there were people who raised lamb, and I remember during Easter we fasted forty days. You didn’t eat any meat. And my father would always find a place and he’d buy—maybe during Holy Week he’d buy a lamb and let it graze in the backyard a little bit, and then he would butcher it, you know. I remember the first time we did it. It didn’t bother us. We

did it. We went down in the basement, the stairs, and he laid that poor lamb on the stairs with the head hanging over and—you know.

[01:03:51]

Eric Velasco: What he—axe?

[01:03:53]

Pete Graphos: Cut the throat, and then he would hang it up, and there was a drain there, and he’d wash it and skin it.

[01:03:59]

Eric Velasco: Would he save the blood or was that [unclear]?

[01:04:01]

Pete Graphos: No, but he would save all the innards.

[01:04:03]

Eric Velasco: What would he do with the innards?

[01:04:05]

Pete Graphos: Well, you take the intestines, and my grandmother and my mother would clean ‘em. You have to clean ‘em real good. And they would plait ‘em, like a woman plaits her hair, and they would cook ‘em, sauté ‘em. Then once they got cooked, they wouldn’t come apart, you

know, and they would cut ‘em, and they would take the liver and the lung, and they would sauté that, and then they would make soup, and they would use eyeballs and tongue. It just sounds so crude.

[01:04:37]

Eric Velasco: The head?

[01:04:37]

Pete Graphos: Head. They would make soup. But, I mean, they ate everything, and then they would cook the whole lamb on a spit outside. They didn’t have electric motor, you know; they’d just turn it. As a matter of fact, my brothers and I do that today. We have a homemade that we turn it. We don’t have an electric. So whoever’s there to eat, they have to give us twenty minutes of turning, or they can’t eat. [laughs]

[01:05:01]

Eric Velasco: Did your dad have a pit out back?

[01:05:05]

Pete Graphos: They just might put some bricks around, build a fire, and then they had like a couple of metal poles and they—

[01:05:15]

Eric Velasco: Y-shape on the top so you could turn it?

[01:05:18]

Pete Graphos: Yeah. But it was aboveground. They didn’t bury it or anything.

[01:05:22]

Eric Velasco: How long would it take to roast a lamb? Now, we’re talking, what, about a 20-pound lamb?

[01:05:30]

Pete Graphos: Probably about 30 pounds. It would take four to six hours, but you had to watch it. You couldn’t stop turning it. It’d catch on fire, you know.

[01:05:38]

Eric Velasco: And the rule was twenty minutes turning or you don’t eat?

[01:05:42]

Pete Graphos: Got to have twenty minutes. [laughs]

[01:05:47]

Eric Velasco: So when did you and your brothers start doing that, and for what occasion?

[01:05:50]

Pete Graphos: We started doing it—we revived it in the seventies, because my father was still viable and everything. We decided to. Then we just started doing it every year. We’ve done it. My brother Jimmy, God rest his soul, had a place at Logan Martin. We did it there for a few years. And what was funny, we would do it, and there was a little road by his house, and we’d be turning the lamb, and somebody would stop and say, “What is that?”

We’d say, “Lamb.”

“Lamb?”

“Yeah.” They’d drive off.

Then on the Fourth of July, we did a suckling pig. That same guy stopped. He said, “What is that?” [laughs]

We said, “That’s a pig.”

He said, “Oh, Lord.” He said, “Next time I stop, no telling what y’all are going to be cooking.” [laughs] Oh, me.

But that’s fun. You know, we drank a few beers. And we also will sometimes somebody that gets a fresh whole lamb and slaughters it, they’ll share some of the innards with us, and we’ll cook that with our lamb, you know, just for the taste, just for the tradition.

[01:06:56]

Eric Velasco: Now, I understand a precursor to the Birmingham Greek Festival were Dimitri Nakos and some other men getting together, grilling a lamb. Then there was the Athens Night, I believe.

[01:07:12]

Pete Graphos: Night in Athens. Yeah, that was big.

[01:07:14]

Eric Velasco: Tell me how all that came about, because that’s—you were very active. Your family was very active in the church, I believe.

[01:07:20]

Pete Graphos: Yes, uh-huh. Well, the Night in Athens was a way for us to get exposed to the community as a whole in Birmingham, and we realized that Greek food had gotten popular, and anytime there was a wedding or baptism and we invited non-Greek friends, they just loved it, you know. So that’s how that Night in Athens started, and it was big. We actually had it at the Civic Center several years.

[01:07:48]

Eric Velasco: This would have been when?

[01:07:52]

Pete Graphos: I would say probably seventies, eighties, through the eighties. Of course, we started the festival—the ladies started the festival, and it was small at first, but it grew real fast. Of course, today it’s—

[01:08:04]

Eric Velasco: The Night in Athens was in addition to the early Greek festivals that the ladies put on?

[01:08:11]

Pete Graphos: It was. We had both of ‘em. But then the Night in Athens, we realized that by having it on our property, the Greek Festival and cooking our own food, because when we had it at the Civic Center, it was very expensive, so we didn’t really—I hate to say make a lot of money, because the money we make goes to ministries, but we didn’t make near as much as the time and effort and everything that went into it. But the Festival does. It allows us to generate a lot of money that we give back to the community.

[01:08:44]

Eric Velasco: Tell us about the Greek Festival.

[01:08:47]

Pete Graphos: Oh, it’s amazing. We had a meeting Monday night. My son and I are in charge of the kitchen, of the cooking, you know, the chicken. We do the rice. We do the Spanakopita, the Tiropita, the green beans in tomato sauce, the Pastitsio. That all comes out of the kitchen. We’ll do probably 10,000 pieces of chicken in three days, 500 pans of Pastitsio, about 2,000 pounds of rice. It’s big amounts of food.

[01:09:21]

Eric Velasco: How long are you guys cooking to get that ready?

[01:09:24]

Pete Graphos: We do not cook anything until the Festival starts on Thursday. We start at six o’clock Thursday morning. Everything is—the Pastitsio is already made and frozen, and we took it out the night before, let it thaw, and then we have to bake it for an hour. So we’re cooking Tiropitas. [Interviewer’s note: Tiropita is a filled pastry.] Everything gets cooked. The green beans are already cooked in big containers with tomato, so we put those in the ovens. So everything is fresh. The rice we start at six o’clock Thursday morning, and we have two guys that cook rice from six in the morning till about nine at night for three days.

[01:10:07]

Eric Velasco: This goes Thursday, Friday, Saturday?

[01:10:09]

Pete Graphos: Uh-huh.

[01:10:10]

Eric Velasco: What time of the year?

[01:10:12]

Pete Graphos: It’s usually the third weekend in September. I think this year it starts on the 21st, 22nd, 23rd. And like our meeting, it’s gotten pretty sophisticated. Like I have the kitchen, they have the takeout crew, they have the gyro crew, they have the kebobs, the ladies who make the

Loukoumades. We call them Greek doughnuts. So everybody has the part that they do. And what’s interesting, like the people that volunteer in the kitchen, they can’t wait for every year. I mean, I don’t have to beg ‘em to come in there and sweat all day, you know. But it’s a lot of fun.

My son’s always been involved, but about two years ago he pretty much took over what I do. I’m there and I help, but this past year, he made all the decisions, when to cook, how much to cook, you know, we need this, we need that. So probably this year, I would think in the next two or three years, I’ll be more of a spectator.

[01:11:15]

Eric Velasco: What’s your son’s name?

[01:11:17]

Pete Graphos: Peter. He’s a junior.

[01:11:19]

Eric Velasco: And what does he do?

[01:11:21]

Pete Graphos: He works for an enrollment company, benefits company there on Eighteenth and Second Avenue South by Railroad Park. They’re in the Parkside Building. He’s a vice president of the company, it’s locally owned, and they go to big companies and they handle all employee

benefits. The company doesn’t have to fool with it and it doesn’t cost them. Their fees are generated by all the business they do for the employees.

So last year, the first day of the Festival, Thursday, we’re all excited. That Monday, his company said, “We’ve got thirty people flying in Wednesday night, and you’ve got to do your presentation Thursday.” And they know how dedicated he is to that Festival. And they actually brought those people in. They stay in a hotel. So they moved their meeting up Thursday morning so Peter could do his thing and get on over to the church. [laughs] But everybody involved looks forward to it. It’s a lot of work, and our kitchen’s not air conditioned either.

[01:12:29]

Eric Velasco: It is a big deal. I mean, how many people would show up for this?

[01:12:32]

Pete Graphos: Probably 25, 30,000, I would think.

[01:12:34]

Eric Velasco: It’s got to be the premier event in the city of Birmingham [unclear].

[01:12:39]

Pete Graphos: We’re trying to—Teddy Hontzas, he and his brother own Niki’s on Finley. [Interviewer’s note: Niki’s West on Finley Avenue.] He got involved a few years ago on the serving lines, speeding everything up, and each year he tweaks it more, and so it’s a lot less waiting time. Some people used to wait an hour and a half. I’m not sure *I’d* do that, you know.

In the Monday night meeting, he’s even tweaking it a little more. We’re actually going to move some areas away from the serving lines so we can serve more people.

[01:13:13]

Eric Velasco: Now, he’s the one supervising the line at Niki’s West, is that correct?

[01:13:16]

Pete Graphos: That’s right. That’s right.

[01:13:16]

Eric Velasco: So he knows how to keep a line moving.

[01:13:17]

Pete Graphos: He knows, yeah. He’s amazing. Yeah, the Festival is—and the pastries. Those ladies bake pastries, and it’s a big job. Like I say, we started meetings probably two months ago, and here we are not out of March, and we’re moving forward with the Festival.

[01:13:37]

Eric Velasco: What’s the name of the church?

[01:13:39]

Pete Graphos: It’s Holy Trinity-Holy Cross Greek Orthodox Cathedral.

[01:13:44]

Eric Velasco: And the original was founded, what, 1906?

[01:13:49]

Pete Graphos: '07.

[01:13:50]

Eric Velasco: '07?

[01:13:50]

Pete Graphos: '07, I think '07. My grandfather was one of the founders, and they bought a small—I think it was a Methodist wooden structure where our cathedral is. And I grew up in that church, and in 1959, they tore it down and built the cathedral. We’ve been on the same corner since—

[01:14:13]

Eric Velasco: And Holy Cross was—where was that?

[01:14:16]

Pete Graphos: It was on the north side on Twenty-fifth Street between Seventh and Eighth Avenue North. It was Holy Cross, and they had a Youth Center next door. Then in the fifties, they merged the two churches. That’s why we have two names, Holy Trinity-Holy Cross.

[01:14:37]

Eric Velasco: And how big were the two churches?

[01:14:39]

Pete Graphos: Holy Trinity was the largest church, but Holy Cross was significant. I don’t know what happened. They were all one church and they split. You know how Greeks are.

[laughs] You get three Greeks in a room, and you end up with seven political parties. [laughs]

Anyway, something happened before my time, and then in the fifties they realized—you know.

And when we merged, we would have certain services during the year at Holy Cross for a few years until we totally—and I think they sold that property to the state, part of that interstate or something. I don’t know.

[01:15:18]

Eric Velasco: So what now is Holy Trinity-Holy Cross is expanded upon where the original Holy Trinity was?

[01:15:26]

Pete Graphos: Yes.

[01:15:28]

Eric Velasco: So the same general area.

[01:15:29]

Pete Graphos: Yeah, it was a small wooden structure, tore it down, built the new one, then we had the merger, yeah.

[01:15:35]

Eric Velasco: Then after the merger, that’s when the names combined and it became a Cathedral.

[01:15:39]

Pete Graphos: Yeah.

[01:15:41]

Eric Velasco: Is it a certain size church you have to have to become a cathedral?

[01:15:44]

Pete Graphos: I think that has something to do with it, and we represented the whole state, the largest Greek community. I think it was designated in the seventies as a cathedral.

[01:15:55]

Eric Velasco: Now, what role did the church play—you mentioned that Sundays kind of revolved around the church and that’s when you tended to see everybody.

[01:16:07]

Pete Graphos: Right.

[01:16:08]

Eric Velasco: Tell us more about that, please.

[01:16:09]

Pete Graphos: Well, that was interesting. After we got out of school at Norwood Elementary, three days a week at three o’clock we got on the bus and went to church, the building next— educational building, and we went to Greek School till six o’clock, then rode the bus home. So we learned Greek, I mean reading, the writing. We used to do plays in Greek, songs, poems. We probably spoke about as much Greek as we did English. Then my grandmother lived with us, and she spoke all Greek, and so my parents spoke Greek with her, and Greek was a big part of our language, really, both. That went on till probably when you started to go to high school. They still have Greek classes on Wednesday, beginners, intermediary, and advanced, and it’s not well attended, but some people do go. It’s not like—it was imperative that we went, and we had classes, we had friends. But it’s not like that today, but it is still available.

[01:17:16]

Eric Velasco: Why was your generation going to Greek School?

[01:17:21]

Pete Graphos: Well, we were first generation born American, so our parents felt like it was very important to continue the tradition that they brought from Greece, primarily the faith, Orthodox faith, and it was all in Greek, so you had to understand Greek. You know, the English

language was not introduced into our church until maybe probably during the seventies, and we still have Greek today in the liturgy, but it’s probably eighty percent to twenty percent. And the fact that we have *so* many non-Greeks now who are Orthodox Christians, that Greek will probably eventually go away. It’ll still be there, but not like it was when we grew up. I mean, it was all in Greek. The problem, we learned modern Greek and it was classical. It was the ancient Greek in the faith. And even though it sounded Greek, we really didn’t understand it like the modern Greek. [laughs] It’s a wonder we survived. [laughs]

[01:18:34]

Eric Velasco: It’s like some person who’s learned Castilian Spanish trying to talk to a Cuban and going, “Okay, we’re speaking the same language, but somehow I’m not quite picking up what you’re saying.”

[01:18:44]

Pete Graphos: That’s exactly right.

[01:18:48]

Eric Velasco: But in addition to understanding the religious aspect, which, of course, was primary in people’s lives, it seemed like in the Greeks, especially in your dad’s era and in your era, there was this balance of assimilation of becoming a good American. You had the Hellenic Center and all those kinds of things where you took the English classes, you learned all the different things you do in America you don’t do here. One guy said he learned the hard way about income tax being taken out of your paycheck. He was budgeting out a certain amount, and

then he finds out, “Oh, wait. I don’t quite get that amount.” But at the same time, in the Greek community I’ve seen more so than a lot of other immigrant communities I’ve talked to, there’s been preserving that culture. Why is that so important, do you suppose?

[01:19:41]

Pete Graphos: Well, it’s probably more important to me than my son, you know. It was important to me because I grew up with all the Greek festivals and the Greek School and all that. Well, he’s removed from that, but he loves the Greek culture, he likes a lot of our traditions, the food and everything, but he might know twenty words in Greek, you know, and his children might not ever know any Greek. So we were first generation, our parents and grandparents came from Greece, so we were still Greek, so to speak. The language was spoken in the home, the food, everything. During Lent, forty days you fasted, I mean everything. You didn’t eat anything, you know, vegetables, couldn’t have dairy products, couldn’t have meat, chicken, and you don’t eat fish during Lent in our church. You can have shrimp, clams, but fish is a bloody—you know, has blood in fish. Anything with blood you can’t have during Lent. Now, there are exceptions. Like Saturday is March Twenty-fifth. That’s Greek Independence Day. It’s like our Fourth of July. So we can eat fish Saturday. They make an exception for that. You can have wine, you can have cheese, you know, that kind of thing.

And that brings me to another thing. Our parents, July the Fourth was a huge holiday for them.

[01:21:14]

Eric Velasco: Why?

[01:21:16]

Pete Graphos: Because they’re in America, they’re free. America was good, is good to them, but to them, I guess, coming from being dominated by the Turks for 400 years and they had Greek Independence Day, they could appreciate an Independence Day. This was America’s Independence Day, and to them it was—they were all closed, restaurants, cafes, and it was a huge holiday. They took a lot of pride, had their American flag out. I remember back that it was a big, big—and all the relatives got together, and they didn’t cook lamb or anything. They had hot dogs, hamburgers, you know.

[01:22:00]

Eric Velasco: Because you’re Americans.

[01:22:00]

Pete Graphos: That’s right. But I remember Fourth of July was very important to the Greek community.

[01:22:05]

Eric Velasco: Now, Greek Independence Day in March, how would that be celebrated?

[01:22:12]

Pete Graphos: It’s big. Now, Saturday, as a matter of fact, I volunteered to cook. I’m going to cook fish. We’ll have fish, vegetables, and all, some pastries, and they’ll have somebody that

will have some Greek poems, a couple of guys that’ll sing a couple of Greek songs. We’ll sing the Greek national anthem. They generally have a speaker who speaks a little bit about the history of March Twenty-fifth, and there’ll be probably about maybe seventy-five to 100 people there. I like it because it takes me back to when I was kid, because that was a big holiday in the Greek community, and we always took part, either play or poems or dance or something, you know. So I like to go that. It just—you know.

[01:22:56]

Eric Velasco: Is this at Holy Trinity-Holy Cross?

[01:22:57]

Pete Graphos: It’ll be there. We’ll have a service at nine-thirty, liturgy, be over about ten-thirty, and then we’ll go to the banquet hall and drink a little wine and eat a little food and listen to some poems and sing. [laughs]

[01:23:10]

Eric Velasco: That sounds great. Then it’s back to Lent.

[01:23:13]

Pete Graphos: That’s right. [laughs]

[01:23:17]

Eric Velasco: One of the things I neglected to do was that—I’m trying to kind of build family tree here with some of these interviews. Let’s go through your siblings.

[01:23:26]

Pete Graphos: Okay.

[01:23:28]

Eric Velasco: Your sister, you have one sister?

[01:23:31]

Pete Graphos: One sister, Pauline, rest her soul, she died about four years ago. She was older than me. It’s me and then my brothers, the twins Sam and Jimmy, and, of course, we lost Jimmy about a year ago. So there are two left. But my sister worked here, she got married in ’59, I think, and in, let’s see, 1970, she and her husband moved to Pensacola Beach, so we visited there. When she was with us, we went there all the time. My kids were there in the summer, you know. So Pensacola Beach became like a second home to us, and they have an active Greek community there, too, a church.

[01:24:11]

Eric Velasco: Did she marry a Greek?

[01:24:11]

Pete Graphos: Yes, she did.

[01:24:13]

Eric Velasco: What was his name?

[01:24:14]

Pete Graphos: Louis Pihakis. [laughs] You know Nick Pihakis?

[01:24:18]

Eric Velasco: Every time I ask you a question, I peel back another layer to this onion. Okay, tell us about the Pihakises.

[01:24:26]

Pete Graphos: Nick Pihakis, Jim ‘N Nick’s, his father, Jimmy, and my brother-in-law are first cousins. [Interviewer’s note: Jim and his son, Nick, founded Jim ‘N Nick’s Community Bar-B-Q in 1985.] They’re from Canonsburg, Pennsylvania. They came here in the sixties and married a lot of local ladies.

[01:24:41]

Eric Velasco: Was he in the insurance business too?

[01:24:44]

Pete Graphos: Mm-hmm, he was, yeah. Then he got into mortgage brokering, stuff like that, you know, but he passed away about maybe two years ago, I think. So that’s part of the Pihakis.

[01:24:59]

Eric Velasco: Did they meet at the church?

[01:25:01]

Pete Graphos: Here, yes. He had moved here in the insurance business and met my sister, and his brother met another friend of ours on Norwood Circle, a young Greek lady, married her. So they started moving from Canonsburg to Birmingham. [laughs]

[01:25:17]

Eric Velasco: Another one of those “You’re single. I’ve got a single daughter. Let’s introduce them.”

[01:25:22]

Pete Graphos: That’s right. And then Jimmy Pihakis, Nick’s father, I think they were married when he moved here to join—

[01:25:29]

Eric Velasco: Nick was born up in Pennsylvania before they moved here.

[01:25:31]

Pete Graphos: Yeah. I think his sister Barbara was born here, I believe, and they lived in Tuscaloosa. They were there when I was in college. That’s where I met them.

[01:25:43]

Eric Velasco: Did you interact much with them when you were in Tuscaloosa?

[01:25:46]

Pete Graphos: Mm-hmm. Because he was my brother-in-law’s cousin, and they were all close, and we were students. We didn’t have any money, and they would have us over for dinner. They would sort of look after us a little bit.

[01:25:59]

Eric Velasco: Now, one of the Koikos boys was over at University of Alabama while you were there too.

[01:26:03]

Pete Graphos: Jimmy. Uh-huh, Jimmy was there when I was there. His brother Nick went—

[01:26:06]

Eric Velasco: They’re associated with Bright Star. [Interviewer’s note: The Bright Star in neighboring Bessemer, which was established by Greek-born Tom Bonduris in 1907, is Alabama’s longest continuously operating restaurant. Tom brought over brothers and other in-

laws from their home village of Peleta to work at The Bright Star. Peleta-born brothers Pete and Bill Koikos took over in 1925. Bill’s sons, Jimmy and Nicky, have run it since each graduated from the University of Alabama in the 1960s.]

[01:26:08]

Pete Graphos: Yes, his brother Nick is younger. He went later. Helen, his sister, I want to say Helen might have gone to Birmingham Southern, but I don’t remember.

[01:26:18]

Eric Velasco: Did you interact much with Jimmy too?

[01:26:23]

Pete Graphos: Oh, yeah, yeah, because Jimmy lived in Bessemer, and his mother would say—he was somewhat into things when he was young, you know, mischievous. And she’d say, “Jimmy,” she’d tell him in Greek, “if you be a good boy, I’m going to take you to Norwood Sunday.”

And he would say, “Yes, ma’am.” He said he would be the best kid for a week. He thought going to Norwood was big time. [laughs]

[01:26:50]

Eric Velasco: I guess that would be going to see a bunch of family.

[01:26:52]

Pete Graphos: Oh, yeah. My cousin Sam Bonduris lived on Norwood Boulevard, John Bonduris’ son from the original Bright Star. Sam and I, same age, and we were very close, like brothers, and he and I and Jimmy Koikos were at Alabama, so we were together an awful lot.

[01:27:14]

Eric Velasco: You were your own Greek fraternity.

[01:27:15]

Pete Graphos: A real one. [laughter]

[01:27:20]

Eric Velasco: How did you and your wife meet?

[01:27:24]

Pete Graphos: I met her when I went to work for the Social Security Administration, she was working there, and we dated. Then I opened Sneaky Pete’s, and a year later, she was still working at Social Security, we got married. I was the person. I didn’t have any—my uncle worked with me, I had a kid that went to Ramsey that worked part-time after school. So she and I got married on a Friday night at seven o’clock, I closed early, drove to Atlanta, stayed in the Hyatt Regency, had just opened with elevators, you know. Sunday afternoon, came back. Monday morning, went to work.

[01:28:06]

Eric Velasco: What’s her name?

[01:28:07]

Pete Graphos: Josie.

[01:28:08]

Eric Velasco: Josie what?

[01:28:09]

Pete Graphos: Josie Hays Graphos.

[01:28:12]

Eric Velasco: So she’s not Greek.

[01:28:13]

Pete Graphos: She’s not.

[01:28:16]

Eric Velasco: Your children, we’ve been introduced to one. Do you have any others?

[01:28:19]

Pete Graphos: We had a daughter that we lost. She was twenty years old. But anyway, we did have two children. But Josie, when we got married, she was Methodist, but we got married in the church, you know, and after—

[01:28:35]

Eric Velasco: And “in the church,” meaning the Greek Orthodox Church?

[01:28:37]

Pete Graphos: Greek Orthodox. And I don’t know if two years later, three, I’m not sure, but she converted. And actually, my mother’s cousin, Christine Sepsas—you know Nik Sepsas, his mother—she taught non-Greeks Greek in her home, and my wife went over there for about a year and learned some Greek, not fluent, but she learned enough to understand it. At that time in church it helped her. But my children didn’t go to Greek School. They went to Sunday School and everything, but they didn’t go to Greek School.

[01:29:17]

Eric Velasco: Did she have to do anything in preparation for getting married in the Greek Orthodox Church as a non—

[01:29:25]

Pete Graphos: No. She was baptized. Once you’re baptized, no matter what church, you’re fine. Then two or three years later, she wanted to become an Orthodox Christian, and you go

through about a six-week course, orientation kind of thing. We jokingly say when they finish that, they know more about our faith than we do. [laughs]

[01:29:49]

Eric Velasco: It’s kind of like naturalized citizens. When they take the test, they know more than many Americans about how the government works and everything.

[01:29:55]

Pete Graphos: Yeah. And Josie has two sisters and a brother, but I think they were all Methodists.

[01:30:07]

Eric Velasco: Now, your family, were you regular at the church?

[01:30:10]

Pete Graphos: Oh, yes. From the time I was a kid, we had to go to church. Well, I mean, we went to church because our parents went every Sunday. We were altar, we sang in the choir, we did everything, you know.

[01:30:23]

Eric Velasco: Your friends were all there?

[01:30:24]

Pete Graphos: Oh, yeah, yeah.

[01:30:25]

Eric Velasco: So your son and daughter would go regularly?

[01:30:30]

Pete Graphos: Mm-hmm. My son was an altar boy.

[01:30:33]

Eric Velasco: Now, how did the Greek School discussion go with them? Did you try to get them to go and they wouldn’t go?

[01:30:42]

Pete Graphos: It was not that—it was not like the Greek School we had three days a week or anything. I think it was like on a Wednesday afternoon. My son was always involved in sports, and I never really pushed them to go to it, you know. It was just a different time, different era.

[01:30:58]

Eric Velasco: What did your son play?

[01:30:59]

Pete Graphos: He played basketball, baseball and basketball. I used to coach baseball, his, I guess, five or six years of baseball, and now our grandsons, they’re eleven and nine, they’re

playing baseball now. They play baseball and basketball, but they’re playing baseball. They’re both good baseball players. Their grandfather, J.C. Ranelli, on my daughter-in-law’s side, played baseball at Alabama, he got drafted by the Pittsburgh Pirates, he played for two years until he tore up his knee, but he’s their coach. He’s the one who is hopefully going to get a scholarship out of one of ‘em. [laughs]

[01:31:44]

Eric Velasco: That sounds good. Now, let’s go back to Sneaky Pete’s and the growth of it. You started in ’66, you had that store down there near UAB, or near the medical aspect of UAB. What happened from there? How did it go from there? You said instant hit.

[01:32:07]

Pete Graphos: Right. My brother Sam was working in a grocery store, so I invited him over one day and I said, “You know, we have an opportunity to open a store downtown,” and he immediately signed on as a partner, and we opened a store next to John’s, the original John’s Restaurant. [Interviewer’s note: John’s Restaurant was founded in 1944 by Greek-born John Proferis.]

Then I had an opportunity to open the one in Homewood, and we felt like we couldn’t handle three, so we sold the one downtown as a franchise to my cousin Tony Ippolito, who is the son-in-law of John Collins, Steak Grill, and Tony had that years. Then my brother Sammy and I opened Sneaky Pete’s in Homewood, and then we really started growing with franchisees.

[Interviewer’s note: John Collins owned Steak Grill before he opened the Lyric hot dog shop.]

Then when we sold the company, Sammy kept Sam’s, and Jimmy—we had one on Sixth Avenue South, Sneaky Pete’s, he kept that and named it Jimmy’s Hot Dogs. [Interviewer’s note: Sam Graphos rebranded his location as Sam’s Super Samwiches.]

[01:33:07]

Eric Velasco: Now, the Sam’s location opened in 1970, was it?

[01:33:12]

Pete Graphos: Seventy, I think ’70, yeah. He’s been there over forty years.

[01:33:17]

Eric Velasco: Now, when you were starting at Sneaky Pete’s, then when Sam came along, was Jimmy at Lyric?

[01:33:24]

Pete Graphos: He was at the Lyric.

[01:33:25]

Eric Velasco: And was your dad at the Lyric then?

[01:33:26]

Pete Graphos: He was there for a while, but not long. Then Jimmy joined us in the seventies at Sneaky Pete’s, and then we were together, and that’s when the company really started growing.

Then when we sold, I think there were twenty-four stores, yeah.

[01:33:47]

Eric Velasco: Some well-known names in Birmingham food worked for you, came through those restaurants.

[01:33:55]

Pete Graphos: Oh, yeah.

[01:33:56]

Eric Velasco: Tell us who some of them were.

[01:33:57]

Pete Graphos: My cousin Sammy Derzis, Golden Rule in Irondale; his brother George Derzis, who used to be with the Golden Rule, he’s retired now. [Interviewer’s note: Golden Rule BBQ was owned by Greeks for some four decades starting in the 1970s.] Gus Pappas, he owns Norton Flowers; Greg Pappas, who owns Pappas’ in Vestavia. Let’s see who else. Tommy Constantine. You know Tommy or have heard of him?

[01:34:20]

Eric Velasco: I do not know him.

[01:34:21]

Pete Graphos: He’s not in the food business. He’s in charge of the takeout during the Festival, very colorful character, but he worked in the Mountain Brook store when he was in Mountain Brook High School. It was just a lot of kids, and I really don’t remember all of them, but the ones I mentioned earlier, they all have done well in their businesses, that came through our store.

[01:34:47]

Eric Velasco: Was it one of those things where you remember getting opportunities when you were a teenager, so you were trying to—

[01:34:54]

Pete Graphos: Yeah, I did. I knew they wanted to work, especially part-time. Now, they were either in college or different stages in their lives, and they sort of came through Sneaky Pete’s, you know. I always had a job, especially for, you know, somebody in our Greek community or their friends. Like I had several kids that my son grew up with in Mountain Brook who worked for me, great kids, but they came through and you could depend on them. They were from good families. They had work ethic. You didn’t have to worry about anything, and they could pick it up in a day. I mean, it doesn’t take a scientist to make a hot dog and a hamburger. [laughs] It’s just our procedure, and they could pick that up pretty quickly.

[01:35:44]

Eric Velasco: Tell us about how Sneaky Pete hot dogs were made. Build it from the bun up, please.

[01:35:49]

Pete Graphos: Oh, my goodness. Well, we were all—you know, things started evolving. Originally we bought Zeigler coney, because that was *the* coney of all the hot dog stands. I call ‘em coney.

[01:36:00]

Eric Velasco: This is Alabama-made.

[01:36:01]

Pete Graphos: Yeah, made in Bessemer. As we grew, I learned about counts of hot dogs, like a pound of wieners, you can have ten to a pound, which is a bigger wiener, or you can have twelve to a pound, which is the one we prefer. It was a little thinner and longer, fit the bun better. As time went on, as Sneaky Pete’s grew, we were using so many wieners, we had companies that came to us, “Buy our wiener.” So we contracted with Lauderdale Farms [phonetic] out of Florence, Alabama, and they were a branch of Kahn’s out of Cincinnati, K-a-h-n. They do a lot of kosher wieners and all. So anyway, we went up there, we told them—they built the kind of wiener we wanted, the seasoning, the length, the size, everything, the color. We worked with and they finally got it right, and they made our wieners, and all of our stands used that wiener.

[01:37:02]

Eric Velasco: Beef? Pork?

[01:37:04]

Pete Graphos: It was a combination, and we found out when we went to all-beef, they were tougher, chewier. The pork gave it a little bit more—probably a little more fat, but it made it easier to eat, and tastier, really. And in the South, all-beef was not that popular. People like their pork, you know. So we compromised; we had both. Zeigler was a combination. So that’s how we had our own wiener.

[01:37:33]

Eric Velasco: Then would you griddle ‘em, grill ‘em?

[01:37:36]

Pete Graphos: We put ‘em on a flat grill, you know, it was around 300 degrees, roll ‘em, get ‘em good and hot, some little brown on ‘em, and we steamed the bun. That was a big part of it. That bun had to be steamed, real soft, warm inside. And we put mustard, chopped onions, kraut, and our sauce that we made. We also made a hot beef sauce that we put on there. That’s called the Special. We made our chili and our hamburgers, but that was pretty much it then. We later got into what we called a Hunk of Ham, shaved ham. We had roast beef. We got into the grilled chicken. So we somewhat expanded it, but you didn’t have a lot of space, so you didn’t have room to put a lot of stuff in there.

[01:38:29]

Eric Velasco: What made these Greek hot dogs so special?

[01:38:35]

Pete Graphos: The sauce. Grilling them. A lot of places boil ‘em or steam ‘em or whatever. Steamed bun, the grilled wienie, and that sauce. That sauce is probably very similar to all the downtown hot dog stands, Pete’s Famous. You know, there’s a variation of ‘em, but the basic ingredients and taste is pretty much—I call it the Greek-style Birmingham hot dog sauce. That’s pretty much—

[01:39:04]

Eric Velasco: What would go in that sauce?

[01:39:06]

Pete Graphos: Well, you know, a lot of things. [laughs] Obviously, it’s tomato-based, but we probably use about twelve different spices, and then the way we cook it, we cook it a long time. Onions, celery, and then a number of spices, and we add a little cornstarch to it to give it a little body. But it’s pure sauce, and it was always fresh. We had a commissary behind the Green Springs store, and my father, my father-in-law, my cousin’s husband, and Selema [phonetic], a black lady, and another lady, they would go every morning, they would make the sauce, the beef, the chili. They would shave the ham, they would cut the roast beef, they would chop the onions, and we would send that out to the stores.

[01:40:01]

Eric Velasco: And the sauce and the chili are two different things.

[01:40:03]

Pete Graphos: Yes, uh-huh.

[01:40:05]

Eric Velasco: So the chili part of it, all meat, ground meat?

[01:40:09]

Pete Graphos: The chili does have some beans. Our chili had some beans, and it’s probably not as obvious because they’re pretty much when you cook it, you sort of mash them into the meat and everything.

[01:40:20]

Eric Velasco: So it’s thickening that sauce as well.

[01:40:22]

Pete Graphos: Right. And the beef is pure ground beef. It’s cooked with onions and spices, and we have a beef on bun, on a hamburger bun, but we also put in on a hot dog and the sauce, and that’s the one we call the Special.

[01:40:39]

Eric Velasco: Was your company bottling the sauce and selling it when you were part of it?
When did that start?

[01:40:46]

Pete Graphos: Yes. We cooked it and bottled it in Green Springs, and then it got so big, we had to truck it and ship it and everything, so we got a contract with Webbpak out of Trussville. Webb Vinegar, you’ve seen in grocery stores?

[01:41:04]

Eric Velasco: Yes, sir.

[01:41:05]

Pete Graphos: He would make our sauce, and he would bottle it, and it didn’t have to be refrigerated. We refrigerated ours. And then later when Sneaky Pete’s sold, they contracted with a company that makes the sauce and also the sauce for sale in grocery stores.

[01:41:28]

Eric Velasco: When did y’all start bottling the sauce for sale?

[01:41:31]

Pete Graphos: You know, I’m trying to think. Probably in the mid-eighties, yeah.

[01:41:38]

Eric Velasco: And then I guess fairly soon it went to the Trussville people?

[01:41:41]

Pete Graphos: Yeah, we went there before the mid-eighties. They put it in gallon jars for the stores.

[01:41:51]

Eric Velasco: Oh, I see. They do it for your store in-house purposes.

[01:41:53]

Pete Graphos: And then later started bottling the ones you see in grocery stores.

[01:41:57]

Eric Velasco: I see. Okay.

[01:41:59]

Pete Graphos: Because we just had an institutional label. It was not a fancy label. It was just for our use. For a time there, before we found the Trussville, Varallo out of Nashville, it’s an Italian family, they were in the chili business, and they canned their chili, and they came of us and for maybe a couple of years they did our sauce, our beef, and our chili in the large No. 10 cans, but it became logistically too far away and too expensive. That’s when we found Webb.

[01:42:34]

Eric Velasco: With a fast-growing company, too, I would imagine you’d have to go through a series of suppliers just to have people who could give you what you need, the quantities you need.

[01:42:43]

Pete Graphos: We did. It just sort of evolved. We worked closely with Central Paper. They’re a great local company, and they did all the printed stuff, bags and cups, and they were great to work with, and we were pretty loyal. Golden Flake, you know, Lay’s tried to get us for years. We started with Pepsi. I think today they’re with Coke. But when I had it, I was loyal to Jimmy Lee because he helped us a lot as we grew with equipment. [Interviewer’s note: The Lee family founded and still operates the Buffalo Rock soft-drink company, founded in Birmingham in 1927.] I mean, he did everything for us. We started a campaign in the seventies with Looney Tune glasses. My gosh. And Jimmy Lee used to ship ‘em in here, trailer truck full. He was on Oxmoor [Road], and we had our warehouse on Oxmoor. We had a store there, and behind it we had a warehouse, big walk-in cooler and freezer, for our wieners and everything. And this trailer truck would come down the back of the alley there, and he would send a Towmotor down West Oxmoor, out in the street, and it would pull back there and they would unload those glasses for us because we were on the ground, you know, just fill ‘em up. But, man, we sold thousands of glasses, and each week was a different character.

[01:44:04]

Eric Velasco: By the time you sold, about how many hot dogs were you selling, say, a week?

[01:44:10]

Pete Graphos: Golly, I don’t ever think I really calculated that.

[01:44:14]

Eric Velasco: Because twenty-four stores, that’s got to be a lot of hot dogs.

[01:44:17]

Pete Graphos: I would think probably, if you averaged, maybe 300 a day per store, so it gets up there. I remember we had an anniversary sale in the seventies, I guess it had to have been tenth anniversary, didn’t have that many—we had a few stores, and we had a quarter hot dog that day. My gosh, we sold—I mean, I don’t even know how many hot dogs we sold. But, you know, in the seventies, for a quarter, we had probably, I don’t know, seventy five cents by then.

[01:44:50]

Eric Velasco: Because that’s going back to your original price.

[01:44:52]

Pete Graphos: Yeah, right.

[01:44:53]

Eric Velasco: Do you remember how many hot dogs you ordered, thinking that was going to get you through that first week back in 1966?

[01:45:00]

Pete Graphos: Oh, gosh, I don’t remember. I do remember this. Just a few days after I opened, I took in \$100, which is a lot of money, and I remember I couldn’t wait to call my wife. Then maybe before that year was out, I took in \$300 in one day. That was a *lot* of money, you know, and then it just started, just started going.

[01:45:31]

Eric Velasco: Tell us about how the gyro sandwich came to Birmingham.

[01:45:36]

Pete Graphos: Well, that was part of—The Festival of Arts every year saluted a foreign country, and this was in the seventies, and they wanted to salute Greece. [Interviewer’s note: The Salute to Greece was in 1976.] The International Fair, as a part of that, was at Boutwell Auditorium.

[01:45:54]

Eric Velasco: Here in Birmingham.

[01:45:55]

Pete Graphos: Mm-hmm. They were saluting Greece. The gyro was getting popular, but it was not available in Birmingham, so since I had Sneaky Pete’s, one of our purveyors got in touch with a distributor in Atlanta who carried the gyro meat, and back then it was a big cone,

turning, slice it off. So he came to Birmingham. So I got with the committee and I said, “We can introduce the gyro in Birmingham to the public.” So this guy brought the equipment.

[01:46:31]

Eric Velasco: The committee is what?

[01:46:31]

Pete Graphos: The International Festival Committee and all, and saluting Greece, that committee. They said, “We’d love to have it.” On the stage at Boutwell at one end, he brought in about four of those machines and got the product shipped in and everything, and that was the first gyro in Birmingham. I actually took it from there, and I had it in a couple of my stores and people started getting used to it. We didn’t expand it, because it came in frozen, and once you put it on there and started cooking it, you had to either use it all or throw it away. You know what I mean? It was hard to control. It was hard for the employees to get their heads around it, so to speak, so we didn’t. But then later, the gyro came already sliced, you just put it on the grill and serve it. That’s how they do it today. It didn’t come like that. You either bought the cone or that was it, you know. So we didn’t pursue it, but that’s how it was introduced to Birmingham.

[01:47:38]

Eric Velasco: You had it at your store, I believe.

[01:47:39]

Pete Graphos: Mm-hmm, yeah.

[01:47:40]

Eric Velasco: And then Greg Pappas’ store at Eastwood?

[01:47:43]

Pete Graphos: Eastwood Mall, yeah, we both had it, because Greg worked for me, and then he opened that with his brother-in-law. [Interviewer’s note: Pappas owned a Sneaky Pete’s franchise at Birmingham’s Eastwood Mall from 1974-1986.]

[01:47:49]

Eric Velasco: Then I guess that’s—they just kind of morphed from there over to the Greek Festival. I believe Blanche Pappas was running the Festival.

[01:47:57]

Pete Graphos: She sure was, initially.

[01:47:58]

Eric Velasco: And that’s Greg’s mother.

[01:48:00]

Pete Graphos: Right. Then, later years, Jimmy Dikis and his brother do the gyro at the Festival every year, because it’s a big—you know, they have to cook all that meat, put the bread on the

grill, and make ‘em. I mean, they sell thousands of those things in three days. Well, their grandfather’s name was Papadikis. That’s where the Dikis came from. But he used Dikis.

[01:48:36]

Eric Velasco: So I guess a lot of these names just got shortened down from—

[01:48:39]

Pete Graphos: Anytime you hear Papadikis or Papathanosiou, Papa is the father of Thomas. So it was Papathanosiou.

[01:48:51]

Eric Velasco: It would be P-a-p-a-i?

[01:48:52]

Pete Graphos: No, P-a-p-a.

[01:48:56]

Eric Velasco: P-a-p-a as in Papa. Okay.

[01:48:58]

Pete Graphos: Yeah.

[01:48:59]

Eric Velasco: So when did Sam and Jimmy part ways with Sneaky Pete’s? Didn’t they split off before the sale?

[01:49:10]

Pete Graphos: They both did before the sale, yeah. When I sold it, I was the last one there, last one standing. [laughs]

[01:49:21]

Eric Velasco: Why did they split off?

[01:49:24]

Pete Graphos: Well, Sammy lives in Homewood, and that was his baby, so to speak. Jimmy had the chance to buy the property on Sixth Avenue South. That’s how that transpired. And at that time, that was when I was gearing it up to sell, so that’s how that came about.

[01:49:43]

Eric Velasco: And I guess one of Jimmy’s main roles as you were opening up the franchises was go out and open up the new stores.

[01:49:49]

Pete Graphos: Jimmy was the opener with the franchisee. He trained ‘em and he worked with ‘em up to two weeks before he turned ‘em loose. They would work in our stores, and then he would work with them and set ‘em up and teach them how to do everything. That was his—

[01:50:04]

Eric Velasco: So Jimmy’s kind of became his way to come home again.

[01:50:06]

Pete Graphos: Sammy was more in charge of the cooking side.

[01:50:12]

Eric Velasco: So how’d you come to sell?

[01:50:16]

Pete Graphos: Well, it’s interesting. At that particular moment, it had gotten big, labor had become a problem, it was just overseeing it was almost overwhelming, and somebody came along and, you know, we negotiated for a while, and he made a decent offer, so I elected to go ahead and do it. I had already gotten my real estate license. I used it when we were doing leases, so it was sort of a natural thing to move into real estate.

[01:50:48]

Eric Velasco: Is that why you got the license, so that it’s part of building your company?

[01:50:51]

Pete Graphos: Yeah, I got the license when I still had Sneaky Pete’s. And real estate always intrigued me anyway. So when I sold, I was into it.

[01:51:05]

Eric Velasco: Well, I’ll bet at the end of the day you smell a lot better in real estate than you would in a hot dog stand.

[01:51:11]

Pete Graphos: Oh, my gosh. Our clothes just smelled like a hot dog stand. [laughs] Used to stand them up in the corner when I took ‘em off. [laughs] Oh, me.

[01:51:21]

Eric Velasco: Now, you had some other restaurants, I believe, after you sold Sneaky Pete’s?

[01:51:31]

Pete Graphos: I had a cafeteria for about three years, which, you know, that was not a good fit for me.

[01:51:37]

Eric Velasco: What was that called, and where was it?

[01:51:38]

Pete Graphos: It was an old Britling location in Mountain Brook Village, and I named it—I think it was the Village Cafeteria at that time. Or, no, it was Matthew’s, maybe, and I named it the Village Cafeteria. I was there about four years, and then I sold my lease to Rite-Aid, they

moved into that location, and that was it. Now, I do have a hot dog cart I occasionally pull out for different functions, sometimes a charity event or whatever.

[01:52:12]

Eric Velasco: Tell me about that, please.

[01:52:14]

Pete Graphos: Well, it’s a stainless steel hot dog cart. It’s got a propane gas. It’s got a burner. It’s got compartments to keep everything hot. It has a small grill on it. Our office here, Realty South, on Euclid, on Halloween I bring the cart here and we have a big Hallo-wienie party.

[laughs] We have the whole—all the businesspeople, we have all the agents, their families, and we serve hot dogs. Then they have the parade here half a block away on Church Street. They have the Halloween parade, which has gotten to be a big deal, you know. So I do that once a year, and sometimes on occasion for a special event I’ll take it.

[01:53:01]

Eric Velasco: Do you take that down for the Rickwood Classic?

[01:53:03]

Pete Graphos: No. I do take hot dogs already made, you know, big Styrofoam cooler full of ‘em, but I don’t take the cart. [laughs]

[01:53:11]

Eric Velasco: Why did you go into real estate to make a living at that point? You already had the license [unclear]?

[01:53:23]

Pete Graphos: Well, I had the license. I went through the cafeteria, which was just—I thought hot dogs were hard. That was tough. Had good food. I think on Thursday night I would feature all Greek foods, you know. But had the opportunity to get out of there, too, with Rite-Aid. But anyway, that’s over with, and I’ve just been full-time real estate.

[01:53:47]

Eric Velasco: Do you cook much?

[01:53:49]

Pete Graphos: Oh, if I want to eat. [laughs]

[01:53:53]

Eric Velasco: What do you like to cook?

[01:53:54]

Pete Graphos: I’m not a big meat eater anymore, but I do like chicken, seafood, a lot of Greek food cooking, you know. I do like a lot of fish. Pretty much everything I do is what I might call the Greek-style cooking, vegetables, a lot of tomato sauce, grilling, a lot of garlic. I do like to mix herbs and spices, and I have a mixture that we use for the Greek chicken at the Festival, and

so I put that in little jars, and occasionally people will buy that from me. It’s a combination of—I call it Greek Spice Blend, but salt, pepper, obviously, garlic, oregano, and lemon, like a lemon zest. And you can put that on chicken, seafood. It’s great on—it’s got oregano—on like a Greek salad, just one shake and you’ve got everything on there, you know.

[01:55:07]

Eric Velasco: It’d be good on grilled vegetables, it sounds like.

[01:55:09]

Pete Graphos: Oh, vegetables, yeah, really. The other thing is a lot of people put seasoning on top of meat or chicken. The key is to turn it over, season it, and then turn it over and season the top, because if you just put it on the top, it cooks into the oven, but what’s underneath when all that juice starts coming out, it gets up in the product. That’s when your spices work. On top doesn’t—it’ll give it some flavor, but it doesn’t do what it does underneath. That’s one of my secrets. [laughs]

[01:55:42]

Eric Velasco: Thank you for sharing that. I’m going to use that.

[01:55:45]

Pete Graphos: That’s one secret I’m giving you.

[01:55:47]

Eric Velasco: I notice you’ve not been giving up too many of your secrets along the way.

[01:55:51]

Pete Graphos: Oh, me. [laughs]

[01:55:55]

Eric Velasco: So if someone were to stop you and say, “I keep hearing about these Greek restaurateurs in Birmingham,” how would you summarize the impact that Greeks have had on the city, in terms of food, but also on the city in general?

[01:56:12]

Pete Graphos: Well, I think—what I like to think is the work ethic was instilled in them. They came from an agricultural society. You know, you get up before it gets daylight. If you’ve got any animals, you get whatever milk you can get. You cultivate. You go through these hard winters when you’re not growing anything, trying to survive. So they’re like survivors, you know, and they just keep—and their goal was to get here, make enough money, and go back to Greece.

Well, Pete’s Famous, who was Mr. Gus Koutroulakis, had Pete’s Famous Hot Dogs, he *did* go back to Greece, and when I went to visit, he was there and he treated me—the last night I was there, he and some of my male cousins, only the men, went down to the seaside, and he treated me to fried fish and Greek vegetables and salads and wine, and that was the last time I saw him. [Interviewer’s note: Pete Koutroulakis, the founder of Pete’s Famous Hot Dogs in

Birmingham, returned to Greece in 1948 due to health issues. His nephew, Gus, took over and ran Pete’s Famous until his death in 2011.]

But anyway, they had this work ethic and ultimately go back to Greece, so they turned whatever success they had into educating their children to do better than they did, and that’s why so many of the first-generation Greeks have done well. They had that same ethic instilled, and education, and so many attorneys and doctors, professional people, that none of their parents were. That was the next step.

So I think that was the effect that the immigrants had on American society. They created intelligence. They created opportunities that is a big part of this country. That’s what everybody wants to do it. We’ve seen it from—so we’re somewhat sympathetic to immigrants, but we’re sympathetic to the immigrants that instill all these values in us. They came over here from family, from a Christian community, from the Greek culture, which is a big part of American culture, in education and language and all. Like we said, “the root of the word in Greek”—so anyway, so that sort of evolved. That’s why we want to see immigrants succeed, but we want to see them succeed within the American culture. Is that the right word? And that’s why the Fourth of July was always so big to them, because it was freedom, it was opportunities in this country.

[01:58:56]

Eric Velasco: There was room to maintain that cultural identity, and yet it was all-important to be a good American.

[01:59:04]

Pete Graphos: True. So we’ve got a lot of wonderful memories from all the families, you know. What’s interesting, when we were little in the Greek community, every lady in the Greek community—“Thea” means aunt. Instead of Mrs., it was always Thea Tasia, Thea Maria. We had more Theas than you could count. [laughs] Or Theo, the uncle. It was like one big family back then.

[01:59:35]

Eric Velasco: Regardless of whether you’re related by blood or marriage.

[01:59:38]

Pete Graphos: That’s right, yeah.

[01:59:39]

Eric Velasco: I want to go back to something you brought up. You’re back home in Greece. I guess it would have been the mid-1960s. You see Mr. Pete, and he had been back home about twenty years at that point? I think he left in the forties.

[01:59:59]

Pete Graphos: Yeah, about twenty. And there was another, Pete Gikas [phonetic] who was from Birmingham, originally from Greece, he was back in the village. So there were two Birmingham Greeks that had gone back.

[02:00:09]

Eric Velasco: What kind of questions were they asking you? How did the conversation go? I’m curious about that.

[02:00:13]

Pete Graphos: It was more about the individuals, “How is so-and-so?” than it was about business, because they kept up with the news. But it was more about people, “How is so-and-so? How many kids has so-and-so got? What happened to—?” It was that kind of conversation more than anything.

[02:00:33]

Eric Velasco: The way you would if you ran into a relative in town.

[02:00:36]

Pete Graphos: That’s right.

[02:00:37]

Eric Velasco: The conversation you had with the twenty people in the house with all the family photographs tacked to the wall.

[02:00:42]

Pete Graphos: And what was funny, that last night that he wanted to treat everybody, it was my uncle, cousins, the two Petes, a couple other men. It was all men. The women didn’t go—they didn’t do that. They weren’t part of the—

[02:00:56]

Eric Velasco: That’s Greek society there. [laughter] What did Mr. Pete do when he went back to Greece?

[02:01:00]

Pete Graphos: I don’t think he did anything.

[02:01:02]

Eric Velasco: Because he had a heart attack or something, I believe.

[02:01:03]

Pete Graphos: I think he had some heart trouble, yeah. I’ve got another Peter Graphos from the village, my first cousin, my Uncle Andrew’s son, and his brother George and his sister, and they went to Montreal, because in the fifties, you know, there was a quota, only so many from Italy, only so many from Greece could immigrate to America. Well, Canada was wide open. They needed people. So a *lot* of Greeks went to Montreal. I mean, they might have 200,000 Greeks in Montreal. They have a Greek section, restaurants, theatre, everything, radio show, newspaper. But anyway, they all went to Montreal, and we have visited with them too. But he’s Peter, just like me, but he’s Peter Andrew and I’m Peter Theodore, and my grandson is James Peter, and the other grandson is Winston, from my wife’s side, and his middle name is Theodore from my father. So we’ve tried to keep some of the Greek in there, you know. [laughs]

[02:02:11]

Eric Velasco: What am I missing here? What did I fail to get into?

[02:02:14]

Pete Graphos: Well, you know, you probably got me talking more than I thought I would about things. I remember more than I realized. But I feel like we have been successful. We’re still like we used to be. If you take the Greek background and couple it with Norwood, that’s the best— [laughs]

[02:02:39]

Eric Velasco: Let’s just say your brother Jimmy was still here. If you, Jimmy, and Sammy had a hot dog-making contest, who’d win?

[02:02:56]

Pete Graphos: I would think Jimmy.

[02:02:57]

Eric Velasco: Why?

[02:03:00]

Pete Graphos: Well, he was doing it longer than we were, but Jimmy—you don’t know Jimmy and his personality, but that had a lot to do with him making a hot dog. [laughs]

[02:03:10]

Eric Velasco: I hear he was quite a character.

[02:03:11]

Pete Graphos: Oh, yeah.

[02:03:12]

Eric Velasco: Describe him to us, please.

[02:03:14]

Pete Graphos: Jimmy was a jokester, in a funny way, I mean literally funny. He was so quick. A lot of times Jimmy, Sammy, and I don’t wear socks, and so I’ve never thought about it. People might point it out. Somebody pointed it out to Jimmy one day, and he says, “Yeah, we’re from Norwood. We didn’t have much. We had one pair of socks, and my brother Pete’s wearing them this week.” [laughter] Things like that, you know. But he was a jokester. He was so quick and so funny. When he worked with my father at the Lyric, a lady, one of their customers, came in every day, and she had a problem with her eyes, and they—is it cockeyed, where they look—

[02:04:06]

Eric Velasco: And you try to figure out which eye to look at?

[02:04:09]

Pete Graphos: And he said she came in, she came in every day, real nice lady, and my father, in Greek, told Jimmy, he said, “She’s talking to me, but she’s looking at you.” [laughs] Well, Jimmy used that joke for years, you know. But he was just a character. Jimmy loved life. He was a slow-pitch pitcher on our church team till he was in his sixties, because it doesn’t take a lot. He would just stand there. And they were known to have beer in the dugout, things like that.

But, yeah, I miss Jimmy. I guess Jimmy and I, he got out of the business and wasn’t doing anything and had a place at Logan Martin, and he and I spoke every day, more so than with Sammy. Sammy was still working and all. Jimmy was readily available. Then he had some bad health for a couple of years, so I was trying to keep close tabs with him. He really is the one who started redoing the whole lamb. He’s the one who—

[02:05:19]

Eric Velasco: He’s the one who brought that tradition back?

[02:05:20]

Pete Graphos: Yeah. We did it at my house for years, and then we did it at his house, and here, did it at Sammy’s house, then he started doing it at the lake. Then my son lives right down here in Crestline, he’s got a swimming pool, so he’s done it there a couple times. Our nephew lives at Inverness, he has a pool, and we’ve done it there for a couple years. We’re going to do it there this year. But I’ll tell you something cruel. My daughter-in-law was not real fond of this whole lamb thing. [laughs]

[02:05:46]

Eric Velasco: The neighbors weren’t too crazy either. [laughs]

[02:05:49]

Pete Graphos: So here we are, six o’clock in the morning, drinking beer. We got the lamb going, you know, and my brother Sammy took the head and he put it on a platter, and he put some parsley around it, and he floated it on the pool. And Stacey, my daughter-in-law, came walking out, and I thought she was going to have a heart attack. She wouldn’t talk to us for four or five hours.

[02:06:15]

Eric Velasco: That’s got to be like right out that scene in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* where they’re cooking the lamb on the front lawn and the WASPS come up, “What is going on?”

[02:06:26]

Pete Graphos: But it’s funny that sometimes, you know, our Easters aren’t the same date. This year they are, which poses a problem because when they’re different dates, we have American Easter, Easter bunny, Easter eggs for all the kids, Greek Easter, and the kids love Greek Easter, it’s all about food and family and partying, you know, drinking some wine and all. They love Greek Easter. And, you know, we have the traditional red eggs and you say Christos Anesti, which means “Christ is risen,” and you hit the eggs, and the white shows, which means he has truly risen. Well, the kids know Christos Anesti and Alithos Anesti, and they do the eggs, and even though they do it as a fun thing, they at least have learned the tradition in Greek.

[02:07:18]

Eric Velasco: Why red?

[02:07:20]

Pete Graphos: The blood of Christ, and then the white is the resurrection. That’s the tradition. And they try to see whose egg makes it through all the crackings. Well, my brother Jimmy painted a marble egg red when we were young, and nobody knew it, and he used to go all day long with that marble egg, cracking everybody’s egg. [laughs]

[02:07:44]

Eric Velasco: Was there a reward for being the final one?

[02:07:49]

Pete Graphos: The only reward was the fact you had *the* egg.

[02:07:52]

Eric Velasco: Bragging rights.

[02:07:53]

Pete Graphos: Oh, yeah. My little grandson last year, he went through about an hour. He was so proud. Then finally somebody cracked it. He was crushed, you know. But that’s a big thing is to survive all the hits.

[02:08:08]

Eric Velasco: Now, how did it get out that Jimmy had a marble egg that year?

[02:08:11]

Pete Graphos: I’m not sure. I’m not sure.

[02:08:14]

Eric Velasco: Is that something he confessed years later?

[02:08:15]

Pete Graphos: He probably ended up having to tell people, because nobody believed you could have an egg that would last three hours. [laughs] Oh, me.

[02:08:28]

Eric Velasco: [laughs] That is very, very funny. Listen, I do appreciate you taking the time with me. This has been an absolute joy. I’ve really enjoyed talking with you today and hearing these stories. We’re going to pause now. We’re going to do that thirty-second pause.

[02:08:49]

Pete Graphos: Okay, Eric. Thank you very much. I’ve really enjoyed it, and you’re great. You brought out a lot of things I didn’t know I was going to be talking about. [laughs]

[02:08:57]

Eric Velasco: Well, thank you very much. This has been a fun project to work on, and doing this deep dive into a part of history that not many people are aware of and that has a danger of vanishing is very important to me, so I’ve really enjoyed this.

[02:09:13]

Pete Graphos: Well, thank you. We’ll leave with Christos Anesti.

[02:09:16]

Eric Velasco: What’s the response to it?

[02:09:18]

Pete Graphos: Alithos Anesti. Truly he has risen.

[02:09:22]

Eric Velasco: Alithos Anesti. Thank you very much.

[*END OF INTERVIEW*]