

VICKY LATHAM
Latham's Hamburger Inn – New Albany, Mississippi
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Date: July 29, 2015

Location: Latham's Hamburger Inn, New Albany, MS

Interviewer: Sara Wood

Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs

Length: Eighteen minutes

Project: A Hamburger by Any Other Name

START INTERVIEW

00:00:00

Sara Wood: And I just need to introduce the tape. So it’s July 29, 2015. I’m here in New Albany, Mississippi at Latham’s Hamburger Inn and I’m sitting here with Miss Vicky Latham. And Vicky I’m wondering if you would start by saying hello and introducing yourself, telling me who you are, and what you do.

00:00:20

Vicky Latham: Okay I’m Vicky Latham. I’m the owner of Latham’s Hamburger Inn and I--but I teach school. So I teach third grade at the elementary school here in New Albany.

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SW: How long have you been teaching third grade?

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VL: This is my tenth year.

00:00:36

SW: And so Vicky could you also tell me your birth date for the record?

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VL: July 12th.

00:00:41

SW: What year?

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VL: 1958

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SW: And Vicky will you talk a little bit about where you were born and--and how you came to New Albany?

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VL: Uh-hm; I was born in Memphis, Tennessee but my family was from here, my mother and father. So they moved here when we were going into the--I was going into the fifth grade. So then I graduated at Ingomar [High School] and then went to college at Blue Mountain College and got my bachelor’s in elementary ed[ucation] and my master’s in elementary ed[ucation].

00:01:08

SW: And what were your parents’ names?

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VL: Billy and Doris Wood.

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SW: And can you tell me a little bit about what it was like coming to New Albany? What--what your first impressions were?

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VL: Well we had visited you know because my grandparents lived here, so it was kind of like home, you know home away from home.

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SW: And what are your grandparents’ names?

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VL: It was Leslie and Eunie Wood and then Mamie and Lacey Simmons.

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SW: And can you tell me a little bit about how--so did you teach for a while here in New Albany?

00:01:43

VL: No; I bought the Hamburger Inn. *[Laughs]* Okay; I bought the Hamburger Inn about twenty, twenty-two years ago from Josh [Latham]’s grandmother. So I ran the Hamburger Inn ‘til he got in high school and then I went back to college and decided to teach, so while he was in high school.

00:02:10

SW: Who is Josh?

00:02:11

VL: Josh is my son. I bought--I actually bought it from his grandparents, so it’s his namesake. So it’ll be his one of these days and his daughter’s.

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SW: Why did you decide to buy the Hamburger Inn?

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VL: At the time I was working in a furniture factory and Josh’s grandparents were getting older and I had been in the restaurant business before, so I wanted something that would give me the freedom to be able to raise him and spend more time with him, and--because I could bring him down here if I needed to or you know whatever. So I wanted just the freedom to be able to stay with him more.

00:02:51

SW: And what were you doing in the restaurant business before?

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VL: My parents actually owned a restaurant when I was in high school and then they owned like a little ice cream shop while I was in high school.

00:03:02

SW: What was the name of the place?

00:03:04

VL: The Sweet Shop was their little ice cream place and then the Rivermont was the restaurant they had.

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SW: Was it here in New Albany?

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VL: Uh-hm.

00:03:13

SW: Are the buildings still there?

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VL: No, uh-um, both of them have been torn down.

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SW: And Vicky would you mind telling me the name of the furniture factory you worked at?

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VL: Futorian [later known as Stratford]. It’s no longer there. *[Laughs]*

00:03:27

SW: I was asking Wally about this yesterday; he said that was one of the big industries here.

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VL: It was. It was one of the biggest furniture factories around.

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SW: What did you do there?

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VL: I was a clerk.

00:03:38

SW: So you were working at the furniture factory and you ended up buying the Hamburger Inn?

00:03:43

VL: Uh-hm.

00:03:44

SW: What was it like for you for the first few months of having the Hamburger Inn? What was the learning curve like?

00:03:49

VL: Well I had helped Ms. Fairy Latham off and on, you know like I would come down here on my lunch when she was busy and didn't--and needed help, so I was already used to it. So it wasn't--wasn't that different.

00:04:03

SW: Did you change anything about the Hamburger Inn, the menu or anything like that while you had it?

00:04:09

VL: When I first got it you could only get like cheeseburgers and hamburgers and ham sandwiches and egg burgers and hotdogs. And then you could only get it with mustard, pickle, and onion. So later I added tomatoes and mayonnaise and ketchup and then we added other things to go along with it.

00:04:28

SW: I have a question about that and I asked Wally and he--and I don't know if I've ever had anyone be able to answer this but I think it's still worth asking. There's--there's this tradition of the hamburgers that always have the mustard, pickle, onions; do you know where that comes from or--?

00:04:43

VL: I don't. *[Laughs]* I know it's been that way for years because Mr. and Mrs. Latham had it for twenty-something years, almost thirty years and that's--you got it that way or not at all. *[Laughs]* You know with nothing on it, so it's just--that's just the way they always did it.

00:05:03

SW: And I have one more question about that for you Vicky. I'm wondering when you started adding other things to it, like so you could get tomatoes if you wanted or lettuce, how did people react to that? Were they happy about it, were they like "Oh you can't do this; this is mustard, pickle, onion"--?

00:05:19

VL: No. A lot of them wanted those and that’s why I decided to change. And but most I’d say probably seventy percent still just got mustard, pickle, and onion.

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SW: Now do you eat hamburgers?

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VL: Some. *[Laughs]* Not a lot; I just--I’m just not a hamburger person, but yeah I will eat them.

00:05:37

SW: And I want to ask you a few questions about the dough burger. Do you have any memories of--I mean you know here they’re called hamburgers and people who are from here know them as hamburgers, but it seems like people from the outside have--you know *oh these are doughburgers or slugburgers*. And I’m wondering if you could tell me a little bit about your history with the dough burger, if you grew up eating them, if you, you know--I’m wondering if you could tell me a little bit about the doughburger.

00:06:07

VL: I had never had one ‘til I started dating Josh’s father. And I was like *what are these?* *[Laughs]* But I mean you know that’s what people liked around here and I think it was because you know people couldn’t afford to make just real hamburgers so they mixed things with it to make them, so that was the first though. And I was out of high school before I had ever had one.

00:06:33

SW: And did he tell you that you were eating it or did he just say, “This is a hamburger,” and then you--?

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VL: He just fixed it and I ate it. *[Laughs]* So and then I asked him about it.

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SW: And do you know--okay; so his--his parents, Josh’s father’s parents, what is his father’s name?

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VL: Steven [Latham].

00:06:52

SW: Did they--Wally was telling me a little bit about this yesterday but they bought--how did they end up with the business? Did they buy it from somebody?

00:07:00

VL: Yes; they bought it from Grisham(s), Mr. and Mrs. Grisham had it and then Mr. and Mrs. Latham bought it. It was actually in a little trolley car across the street.

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SW: So when the Latham(s) bought it they moved it over here to this building?

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VL: Uh-hm.

00:07:15

SW: Do you know what year that was--?

00:07:17

VL: Hmm.

00:07:18

SW: I don’t mean to jog your memory.

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VL: No because--I really don't know how long they were here.

00:07:26

SW: And could you tell me a little bit about--and I told Wally this yesterday and he swore to secrecy so we--we don't ask people recipes, but I know with the doughburger, you know there is--just from talking to a few people and reading about them you know they started back in the Depression. And some people put potato flakes in them. Some people now put soy in them. Do you--do you know what some of the filler is that--what the burgers are mixed with?

00:07:54

VL: The ones here? It's a secret recipe, a family secret recipe.

00:08:00

SW: Do y'all fry them in the skillet or a cast iron--?

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VL: Black skillet, black cast iron skillet.

00:08:07

SW: Because you know there's--there's the slugburgers in Corinth and they--and I'm not trying to sound like a restaurant critic here but I love these burgers here, the slugburgers in Corinth look--they're nothing like a burger. It almost looks like a chicken patty or something like that. *[Laughs]* So I just wondered because they're really crispy here and they're thick, and I'm wondering if you-- I mean in terms of the time that you had it here, if people--like what are-- what were people's--do you have any stories to share with the customers who came in here with the doughburger if people would talk about them or tell you memories of growing up with them or anything?

00:08:52

VL: Oh yes. It--you know people talk about eating here with their grandparents and I actually had a guy that came from Alaska and every time he would come he would get like fifty of them to take back with him. And people that had gone--like would go visit family in Texas would take them with them. So I actually had a little man that had been eating here for gosh twenty years; he would come in every day and sit where you're sitting [*Laughs*] and eat every day. And he was like ninety I think when he passed away.

00:09:32

SW: And do you remember what he ordered?

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VL: He would get an egg sandwich. And then some days he'd get a hamburger depending on what time he came in and if he'd had breakfast or not, so--.

00:09:47

SW: And so could you tell me a little bit more about--I mean if there were any--like you said you had this for almost twenty years. What--why did you decide to stop doing it?

00:09:57

VL: I wanted to teach. Teaching has always been my passion and Josh was older and didn't need me as much and so I just decided that's what I wanted to do.

00:10:12

SW: Is that when you went to--?

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VL: Blue Mountain, Blue Mountain College; uh-hm.

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SW: What was that like going back to college?

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VL: It was rough [*Laughs*] ‘cause I mean I was older. In fact, the year I got my master’s, Josh graduated high school so we--we both had caps and gowns the same year [*Laughs*], but it was just something that I had always wanted to do. So I--but I knew I didn’t want to sell because it was his namesake, so I was very blessed when Wally decided to take over.

00:10:47

SW: And how did you meet Wally?

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VL: Wally and I have known each other gosh [*Laughs*] how many years Wally [*talking to Wally Rakestraw, who’s standing in the back of the restaurant while Ms. Latham is interviewed*]?

00:10:54

Wally Rakestraw [*off mic*]: Honestly it’s since childhood.

00:10:57

VL: Yeah. So we’ve just been best friends for years--years, so--.

00:11:04

SW: And so when you were getting ready to sell--or to get out of the business did you have Wally in mind or how did that happen?

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VL: No; I actually had another girl running it for me at the time. And Wally and I had talked about it but I just--kind of hard to tell somebody you know I want you gone. And he and I

came by here one night and it was not being kept up the way that I would have kept it up, so we decided that night that he would start running it.

00:11:44

SW: And do you still come in here a lot and eat or do you visit?

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VL: Oh I come and visit. I have to come and get my Wally fix. *[Laughs]* Yeah; I come in. I still come in a good bit. I think Josh comes in probably more than I do to eat lunch but--yeah. Until he decides what to do with it, it'll always be in the family.

00:12:09

SW: And--and I'm wondering what you think of--what you think of--'cause Wally has been here for what seven years, eight years?

00:12:18

WR *[Off mic]*: Seven years next week.

00:12:19

SW: What do you--how do you think--I mean just from the environment, I mean what--what has Wally brought to this place?

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VL: Oh I couldn't be more blessed to have Wally in here. He's kept the Latham heritage but then upgraded it to make it you know more comfortable and more inviting. So but still kept what Latham's was all about, so I'm just very blessed to have him here.

00:12:48

SW: And I'm wondering if there's anything--I mean when you bought it from the Latham(s) if you know--I know that there's a lot of history you know both in this building and

from when it was a trolley car--do you know of any stories that the Latham(s) told you about this building or anything? Is there any folklore around the--the business that you want to share?

00:13:11

VL: Just that this used to be an alleyway for wagons and mules to come through. So it wasn't always a building. It used to be an alleyway.

00:13:25

SW: And I'm--I wondered if you could talk--you know for somebody from--who is from Nebraska who is maybe reading this story, if there's something that you could talk about in terms of this town and place, like if you have to describe it to someone who wasn't from here, how would you describe New Albany?

00:13:44

VL: Oh it's a very friendly town. People try to help each other. When you can go just about any--any store, anywhere and you're going to be greeted with friendly and--we've got a lot of things to see, like the museum and the new walking track and it's just a very quaint little town.

00:14:08

SW: How has it changed since you had the business here, the town--in terms of the town, like what--what are some of the changes you've noticed in New Albany?

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VL: Well when I first started running it we didn't have like McDonalds and Burger King so it has really, really grown over the last several years. But you didn't have--we didn't have that many eating places, especially fast food. So it's--it's really changed a lot.

00:14:35

SW: Has that helped--I mean has--has the--the increase of fast food, has that affected the business here at all that you guys noticed?

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VL: No because we’re so unique, what we serve, and the atmosphere. So I can't--when they started coming in I couldn’t tell a difference because once--people will say you know you— “You’ve just got to have your Latham’s burger.” You know it doesn’t matter how many fast foods it’s just a different burger and so--.

00:15:03

SW: How do you think having this place for more than twenty years, how has--how did that change you as a person?

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VL: Well you take pride in owning it and that was one of the reasons that Wally and I had discussed is the fact that it wasn’t being taken care of. And it’s something that I can leave my child and his--his daughter. So to have that heritage for all these years from his grandparents to his father and now to him and then to pass down to his daughter is very unique.

00:15:41

SW: Josh, do you think Josh will take over? Does he ever talk about that?

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VL: Probably not. [*Laughs*] I just can't see--he’s an outside person. And I just can't see--now if he ever marries, his wife might. But as far as him doing it I just--right now I don’t think he would.

00:16:00

SW: What do you think this place has meant for people here in New Albany in terms of a place and space?

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VL: It’s just something that they can--when they come in here they remember going with their grandparents. It brings back a lot of fond memories for them. And you know going with their grandparents and going with their parents and now they’re bringing their children in here, so it’s just something that’s passed down from generation to generation.

00:16:28

SW: And Vicky I--I guess I don’t really have any other questions for you but if--is there something that you’d want to add that you think is important for people to know about this place or about the doughburger or about your history here?

00:16:41

VL: No; just if you’ve never tried it, I mean there are people here that have never tried it as long as it’s been here. You just need to come see Wally and get you a good ole Latham’s hamburger.

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SW: Well thank you, I really appreciate your time Vicky.

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VL: Thank you.

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SW: And I’m just going to--if we can sit here. We have to do this again. I did this with Wally yesterday. It’s kind of awkward, but if we could just sit. I just need to get the sound of the room with us just sitting here for about twenty seconds. [*Room Tone*]

00:17:25

END INTERVIEW