

Interview of: Nancy Newsom
Interviewer: Amy Evans
Interview Date: August 24, 2005

August 29, 2005

Interviewer: Amy Evans
Interviewee: Nancy Newsom Mahaffey
Col. Newsom's Old Mill Store-Princeton, KY
August 24, 2005

[Begin Nancy Newsom]

0:00:00.2

Amy Evans: This is Amy Evans on Wednesday, August 24, 2005 and I'm in Princeton, Kentucky at Colonel Newsom's Hams with Nancy Newsom. Nancy would you mind saying your name and your birthday for the record, please, ma'am?

0:00:18.2

Nancy Newsom: My name is Nancy Newsom Mahaffey, and my birthdate is June 11, 1955; so I'm 50.

0:00:27.0

AE: And you were just pointing to me at this brochure that you gave me about the generations of ham curing in your family and of the general store. Can you talk about that in a little bit more detail?

0:00:37.2

NN: Okay; the business--our business began in 1917 and it was a general store and it sold everything from goldfish to plants to pulled plants for the--for early planting to groceries,

crackers in barrels, and--and molasses in a sack believe it or not. It was put into a sack that was like a--a heavy nail--paper nail bag and that's what they used to put molasses in and he had an array of candies. He sold the hams that he cured--

0:01:12.0

AE: This is your grandfather?

0:01:13.0

NN: Yes; his name was H. C. Newsom and this was in 1917. He bought the business which is a vacant building right now here on Main and right next door to the--my existing building. And we've been down at this end of town for 88 years now. And he started the general store business; it was the only general store in the area. He sold all the things I mentioned plus he sold hams--country hams. He sold hams that he cured himself and he also cured them for his family to have for consumption, which was a thing that was done in this area anyway. And then he also sold country hams. And then my father came along; he changed the business somewhat and expanded upon the grocery business and fresh meat business and also bought hams from farmers and also cured hams himself out on a--a farm, a small farm--he cured a few hundred hams. Then in 1963 the federal government decided that they could no longer buy meat from farms without it having been inspected, so he at that time took an old process and put it in a new building he said; so he built this ham house facility which is the same one I use today and the same one I obtain all the molds out of today. And so he ran the--my grand-daddy, H. C., ran the business and from 1917

to 1933 and he passed away at age 49 and left my father who was 18 with two small brothers, one around eight years old and one eighteen months and a sister living at home with two small children, three and four, and a mother who had--had polio. Needless to say they didn't have any money. And so my father began running the store at 18 and began doing what his father had done, and then like I said expanded on the grocery business and the ham business. In 1975 James Beard our father of Gourmet Cooking discovered our ham and began to write about it in a syndicated--he wrote about it first in a syndicated column for American Airline magazine and then started using it in the Culinary Institute in New York and thus our mail order was born. So we had all of our cards--all of our names on three by five cards; we didn't have a computer system. And it went along like that and--and it gradually--the mail order grew by small bits here and there and then at one time we sold to Dean and DeLuca before they were ever a chain store and some other places like that. And then in 1987 we lost our old grocery business to a fire. It was--the floor and all was gutted by fire; we lost everything but the hams, my grandfather's chopping block and a meat saw and the ham files, so that told me where we needed to go--that we needed to expand more upon the ham business. And so I came over to--one door over to 210 East Main instead of 208 East Main. We still call it 208--not to confuse the customer though--and started a country store and a small gourmet food type business. So then I expanded upon the gourmet foods and then began to incorporate the country ham as the gourmet food that it was because it was a more aged product. It was more of a hand-handled product and more of a natural product. And so I added the things--things to it and my father would come in on Saturdays and keep the business for me because I was raising my family and he would--he's told me that the gourmet preserves would not sell. So after he would work on a Saturday, come Monday he'd say I sold some more of your junk today. **[Laughs]** I sold--no, I sold some more of

your junk Saturday. And--and so he began to see that the gourmet concept was work--going to work. Then about five years ago, we incorporated our internet business to it. The location of which I have my building in at present and which has been here since 1987 was built in around 1840 for a woolen mill and then it became a flour mill in 19--1892; it was--it was actually built and is a relic of the Industrial Revolution. After 1892 it be--it was still a flour mill for sometime until it became a grain operation and then grain storage for--for customers and--and whatnot housing grain and then--then later became a garden store for me and then became--became my exclusive store in '87. The ham business today is merging more toward internet and mail order all the time; the internet, like I said was developed five years ago. It has been developed upon writings of people that we've been more than blessed. Our--our blessings have been more than monetary--a lot more than monetary because it's not all about money for us; it's about the tradition and it's about keeping a true tradition and something the public is actually not misrepresent--we don't misrepresent our product. To claim you do something the old fashioned way and then you don't and you use artificial means is a deception of the public. My father and I once read this pamphlet that came from the Amish and it was talking--talking about the inherent dangers of doing business and one of them was deceiving the public. So that's always been something that you know my family has always believed--that you serve the public, you tell them the truth, they are not stupid; they know when you're doing your best for them and when you're telling the truth and when you're not and when you're trying to make a day's wages off of one and when you're not and it's been mainly based upon service and quality which I try to take my internet people and turn them into regular mail order people because my mail order people are people that are more closely with us more often and I like to call the internet people if I don't have something in--call them personally and tell them I don't have it and that kind of thing. So

what I'm hoping to do here I'd guess you call me a traditionalist. **[Laughs]** I guess that's what I'm called; I don't know, but--. Anyway, I became a Kentucky Colonel. I forgot what year it was; it was in the '90s, which I was extremely proud of being. My father had been a Kentucky Colonel before me. Someone had noticed that I had been running this business for so long and they asked me how long I'd been curing the hams and I told them and they got a hold of the nearest Congressman who--who got the Governor me to give me that--that--.

0:08:15.8

AE: Can you explain that a little bit for the record?

0:08:18.5

NN: Kentucky Colonel is--in Kentucky if you have a specialty in an area or an area that you have excelled in, which was beneficial for the public or humanity as a whole then they issue--the Governor issues a certificate and a title of a Kentucky Colonel. So that's basically what it is; so--. But anyway, today we still do our hams with no sodium nitrate; we cure our hams with no sodium nitrate. We hand-handle all of them. I think we're the only national ham business that does not--that sells retail only. If my--if any restaurants buy from me they buy at my retail because they know what they're--they know what they're getting and this--probably the smallest ham producer in the nation; so--.

0:09:16.5

AE: And did I understand from reading somewhere that you stay to a pretty strict schedule of production--that you only do a certain amount.

0:09:22.4

NN: Uh-hm; I only do a certain amount of hams. We number them. I saw something on the TV the other day that was talking about the Parma ham. This actress had made a trip to Italy and she was coming up to a Parma ham and they were putting names on the hams. And I said well that's nothing like what we do. I don't put the names on the hams, but I always--always have a standing list of people waiting for a ham. There's only a certain amount of hams you can cure without losing your quality, and I haven't reached that maximum, but when I do reach that maximum then you know that's--that's as far as I'll go.

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AE: Can you say what you're producing now and what that maximum is?

0:10:04.9

NN: I'm producing somewhere around--under 2,000; my capacity is somewhere around I'm going to say 2,500. I could produce more than that without losing the quality but not a lot. The thing about adding ham houses--no ham house has the same mold. Each one has its own unique

mold and--and our hams--I allow to mold like that. I don't try to keep down the mold and allow them to take on that mold, which gives each ham from each producer a unique flavor.

0:10:45.1

AE: And so what is that--I have a few more--a few questions that come to mind about your family and I wonder if the hams that your grandfather was curing, how that cure recipe has changed over the years if at all, and if that was something that was written down or--?

0:11:00.9

NN: Well actually it came from--it came from an old will from the late 1700s. And the Newsom family moved to Kentucky from Virginia after the land was depleted from tobacco farming and they were giving a land grant of 1,600 acres along this--here in Kentucky along the Princeton, Caldwell County--oh well anyway, Princeton and Hopkinsville line--somewhere along there. And to my knowledge it hasn't changed any. I think that each family--it's pretty much true that way for anybody who still produces hams on a farm. They usually use what was brought to the--given--what was taught to them beforehand--before that because I've seen all kinds of cures come through here, you know people that wanted us to cut a ham for them and whatnot. I've seen cures that didn't involve smoking. I've seen them that involve black pepper and salt and I've seen them salt and brown sugar, which is--ours is an old-fashioned sugar cure and a connotation for "old-fashioned" sugar cure method. But the sugar is not your curing agent. Your salt is the curing agent with smoking a relative preservative in the ham.

0:12:34.9

AE: And then are you an only child?

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NN: No; I have a brother who is nine years older than I who lives in Cherry Hill, New Jersey.

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AE: And is he at all interested in the ham business?

0:12:47.0

NN: I think he was really worn out with it--he started working in the business at a pretty young age and I think he was ready to make sure he got his college education and moved on. He--he worked in the business. He helped cure hams with my father. He used to raise sweet--the way he worked himself through the University of Kentucky was through pulling sweet potatoes and he had sweet potato beds--12 or 15 sweet potato beds, in which he pulled the plants and sold the plants to my father and to other people and that's the way--one of the ways he worked his way through college. And so he's--I don't look for him to become involved in the business. I think his

roots are pretty well established there. He's--he's Deputy Director of EPA, so I don't think
[Laughs] he's going to come back this way.

0:13:39.7

AE: Uh-hm; well how did you develop the interest in curing hams and maintaining this kind of business in your hometown?

0:13:45.6

NN: Well I would say that I hated this business when I was small because it took my parents away from me and they were older parents and it--it just pretty well depleted their energy for having anything left for me as a selfish child wanting attention. And so I mainly--I became involved because my father was--his health was failing and I realized that my brother was nowhere around and that if something happened to him the ham business would fall on me--what stage of cure, if they were in salt--when would they come up? You know if they needed re-salt, how much to do you know; so I began to learn these things on my own without him recognizing when--when I was learning. And that was the only way that I really learned it. [Phone Rings]
Can you stop?

0:14:46.6

AE: I sure can. So we were talking about you learning kind of in-secret under your father about ham curing. How old were you when--when you started doing it?

0:15:00.5

NN: My--my children were--let's see; I was in my 30s. Let's see--actually let's see; I was about 27 actually when I started learning and I--my children were needing school clothes and this and that and it was very productive for me to add to my husband's income at that time in order for us to have the seasonal clothing and the things that the kids needed. So I went to work part-time and went to work full-time after they went in school. And basically I think I grew to love the business. My father and I had a--kind of a unique love for the public, for serving the public and as my father said you're a public--public servant; we're public servants. And then my mother used to laugh and say we could have done something else with our lives but we chose to work hard, you know. **[Laughs]** But I would say that those kinds of things--and also I have a great joy in being a part of something that is true, traditional, historic, and that kind of thing. It is very--it's a very hard business to hold onto when you're not curing mass--when you're not going for mass production. I know I mean there--I would say there would be other people that could do what I do, but greediness would spoil that in the fact that then--then more production would you know--but my standard of living is--is not too--not too--I don't expect a whole lot of a standard of living as far as material things. And I choose to have more sanity and more energy than less, and I really don't feel like my ham--my ham in a wholesale realm would be--would be a very misunderstood product. If it sat along--if it was hanging along a rack in say Cracker Barrel or somewhere like that they would not identify that ham because most commercial grade hams that

they have don't have that aged flavor. When it has that kind of aged flavor and it's that nature a ham then they might not know what they had, you know. So I--I really do like the fact though that it's being placed in the hands of people that are food connoisseurs and people that can--that appreciate what the product really is. And most of those are gourmet cooks, they're--they're restaurateurs, they're just gourmet food lovers, gourmet food followers, and--and that's what I kind of like; that's why I like it, yeah.

0:18:08.3

AE: Do you cure much bacon with your hams? Is that something regular that you produce?

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NN: I don't cure regular--I don't cure bacon regularly mainly because the less labor intensive things I can do and you know focus the rest of that attention toward my hams, the better off I am that way; but I've--I've been entertaining the idea of a nitrate free bacon. In fact I have a customer that yesterday on the phone--he's a new customer out of Ohio said be sure and put me on the list for your--for--when you cure some nitrate free bacon. And I said--I told him okay; I said you're going to make sure I cure that bacon aren't you? **[Laughs]**

0:18:49.5

AE: Going to keep asking you. **[Laughs]**

0:18:50.9

NN: Yeah; I said well just stay on me 'til I get it done.

0:18:54.6

AE: Well and there aren't many--or are there many ham producers who make a nitrate--nitrate free product?

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NN: Uh-um, no; I think--I know of maybe--there's maybe two producers in Kentucky that cure without nitrate. I think there's maybe two and I only knew of one until I went to New York to the Fancy Food Show and I found out then that there's--there's--I think that there's one more--one more of us. I think that I'm the only one that does a straight ambient cure and that does--and I don't cure year-round. I--I--you know I know that other producers have other processes and some of them they do sort of like that in which they let them age longer and whatnot; to my knowledge I don't know of anyone that does it--of course all of us producers are different in some way or another as far as our cure goes.

0:20:03.8

AE: Can you explain your process and talk more about the ambient cure and what you look for in the ham and the white spots with the aging and that kind of thing?

0:20:11.6

NN: Okay; my ham process of course begins with--with the fresh ham. I cure two kinds of fresh ham. One of the fresh hams is from a free-range pig and is free-range pork and the other one isn't. I cure more of the--more of the one that isn't simply due to the fact that it's as not a knowledgeable subject by the general public; it's a more expensive product to start out with a fresh ham.

Anyway, we take--and I--I calculate the measure of what I use on my hams in salt and sugar certain--as proportionately to this old recipe that I have according to the total poundage and break it down that way and we--then we take and we hand rub them for an extensive amount of time because if you use nitrate you can do less rubbing on a ham than you can if you're not using nitrate. If you're not using nitrate, you have to make sure that your ham is beginning to drip and whatnot and--and that you're working up some form of the moisture in--into the ham. We hand rub each one for quite a length of time. In fact, I've measured--I have counted the steps which--all of the steps of movement with the hams and they're handled 18 times before they reach the box.

We then take and we--after we've hand rubbed them with salt and sugar mixture, and we do this in the coldest part of the--time of the year, we take and stack them on the shelves, lace them on the shelves, and then they stay at certain temperatures depending on their poundage and whatnot for a certain number of takes also calculated on their poundage. Sometimes the hams

may not stay down as long; it depends on the weather--what the weather is doing outside and how my refrigeration unit as far as--that's the only time I use refrigeration is while they're in salt, so that way I can sleep at night. Otherwise, when it starts warming up--the middle of winter that's not a very good thing for a ham producer if they don't have any refrigeration during that part. That's the only part I don't use any. If I could get by without using it I would, but sometimes we have winters today that warm up during the winter. I think that's one of the main reasons why a lot of producers on the farms quit producing hams like that because I think that they were losing them during the winter due to the weather warming up.

And then after they've stayed down a certain number of days, I take them up and repeat the process all over again and we put them back down. They stay--they stay down another length of days. Then usually the first group is--is coming up by the time that it's almost spring and we hand wash them and give them a bath in the sink and net them and then take them over to the hanging house and from the point of the hanging house they--they hang there until their skins reach a certain dryness that I feel like is--is adequate and just it's kind of a--a feel you have for it of knowing okay, I need to get these hams smoked now because it may get too hot or this or that or the other or the skins are dry enough to smoke them. I do them in lots though of several hundred a lot--300 or 400 a lot, sometimes 600 a lot and do them in lots like that. Of course, all this is done according to the federal government standards of all the paperwork and everything that goes along with it.

And then after they've hung that length of time and their skins are dry and it's usually on up whenever the spring has dried them and they've drip-dried and I--I pass air over them and it depends on how hot it is, how much air ventilation they use and--and all that kind of thing. And then I usually--I build a fire in an iron kettle; I do it myself. I pride myself on doing that one

myself. And I always--I always kind of laugh and say I have some help with that. I had a fellow watching me one day who works for us and it was just amazing how fast that ham--that fire started blazing and then whenever I damped it down, you know how--how much it actually fills that place with smoke. It fills it so full with smoke that I have to be down low when I come out and--and I think the fellows laugh about the added help because I think they feel like that Mr. Bill is watching over us. **[Laughs]** That's what they feel like, you know. And I do that for several days and I do it until I think they're going to obtain a certain color or just prior to that color because you have to be careful. You over-smoke a ham and it will be black before--you know it--it darkens on its own somewhat.

And then when I get ready to cut them I'll look for the redness of the ham. I have a market for some people that like hams a little bit younger, so I can pull some quicker than others usually starting with the lot that has been down--been in--hanging the longest. Where they're located in the smoke house has a lot to do with it; that has a lot to do with my Prosciutto cure also. It's--it's sort of the same cure but it's a little bit different in--in some of the aging ways and that kind of thing and sometimes according to size and time. So age and time are the only two things that will make a ham red if you're not using nitrate, you know. If you're not using nitrate you don't necessarily have a ham that was put down in January ready for the Kentucky State Fair in August, you know. You just--you're not--I mean you're just not going to have one that's going to be ready enough like that. You can use one from a year before but you couldn't use one for that year if you're doing an ambient cure on them. It depends on how hot the weather is; the hotter the weather the better the ham in the end. And I always laugh and--and say that's the only damn thing I can think of that's good about hot weather is it is good for aging hams.

And the location of our ham house has a lot to do with the particular kind of mold that it has. It's--it's located near--it's not swamp because we don't have swamp here but it's in a very humid area--really humid and--but I could build a smoke house right next to it and it would have a different mold. It would be all of its own, you know. Each one--each one will develop its own mold in it. And basically I like to hang--hang my hams close to 10 months. It depends on whether my crop from the year before has run out or not. Most of the time a ham that is smaller, say from 12 to 14 pounds--may begin to show your aging flecks in it which are salt enzymes.

See, the first--after hanging the ham in the smoke house the first six weeks is the equalization period in which the salt is--penetrates to the bone. In other words it takes the cure, you know; it--and the weather goes along with that you know by being not as cold as what the environment it's been in. It's very tricky when you have hams in salt to keep a ham--to know what temperature you've got to have it at and in other words, if you don't have somebody knowledgeable about--about what you're doing that you know it's supposed to be a certain temperature and not above this and not below that and they think you're being too picky about temperatures, if you're two degrees within range you know there's such a short range that you need to be. [*Phone Rings*]

0:28:37.1

AE: Well I wanted to ask you what it's like being a woman ham producer in this region and in your business, too, in general and what people think of the ham lady.

0:28:49.3

NN: **[Laughs]** I really don't know what they think of the ham lady. I'm going to say that among the male specie that sometimes--sometimes it can be seen as a powerful position or a position that has some--quite a bit of expertise and knowledge and whatnot to it and to some gentlemen, they find that very intriguing and--and very attractive--an attracted to--to them and--and then in some areas of business being a woman in business in general, I find sometimes that it's still a man's world and I'm glad it is. I mean I--it can say it's a man's world. **[Laughs]** I mean I have no desire to take over you know things. In other words, what I'm saying is I think sometimes it's seen--I fell into this position; I fell into this position you know and I--well I chose it, but I'm saying I chose it because of my father's ill--his health because it gave me flexibility to take care of my parents who were elderly. I could leave on days and have someone come in and work for me and I could be room mother for my kids and I could do all the things that I wanted to do like that and it was--it's confining and yet it's not confining. And so--I think that--I hope--I hope that--that the public in general view what I'm doing as something that's very pure and a tradition and honest and I like to be viewed as a business woman of service which I think that I have done that in this community. I think that my focus is changing now quite a bit, you know on the--my business--I think my business is going toward mail order and whatnot, but I think that it's--I basically think I've been viewed that way. But I think that since my roles have changed--see I was married and I was raising children; now I'm not married and my family has grown. I don't know if they really know where to place me. I don't know if I'm considered an enigma sometimes or if--or--or exactly what it is. But I think most people consider it a unique--unique thing, you know.

0:31:46.5

AE: Uh-hm; what did your father think about you being interested in the business?

0:31:52.4

NN: He tried to talk me out of it. **[Laughs]** When the--when the store burned, he tried to talk me out of it. He--he--he did not want me to work that hard and someone said what about your daughter running the business? It's almost too hard for a woman; it's physically almost too hard for you. Really it's almost too hard--it's almost a pretty big order for one person to take it on and be their own support system and their--and the--and the only boss and the only whatever, and when you're small enough you play all hats of it. Of course, you know everything that's going on and every phase. Nobody calculated something and said this is what you did for the year. You went through the whole process and you know the--all the way along the way; you saw it go down on paper--why this figure was that, you know and all like that. But I'm just rattling on about it, but I think that all in all my father was very proud of the--of what he watched me do because when we lost our business in '87, we lost the whole business. We had the hams, but then we had to gain back our local people. And--and the local people were what made me want to continue. I couldn't stand for us not to be on Main Street. We had been on Main Street since 1917 and I couldn't stand for our store not to be here.

Well I had been selling mums at that time; so I took some mums that I was selling and we had pulled them over here in this--210 East Main that night before the fire, and I--the next morning took some mums up the street and put them in front of the door as if to say this is the

grave of what has just ended. I felt it was the end of an era; I felt it was the end of the way of doing grocery business, you know that no longer is it done that way. And I felt that the day of the chain store was on. And I sat those mums down and somebody came up and wanted to buy them.

And I'm a big person on symbolism and you being a writer, you can understand that. And so I sold them and I went down the street and I got two more, and before I could leave there those were sold.

And then at Christmas we make the make-shift store out of this garden store here at 210 East Main that we were and the public just wanted us to stay. They were trying to find anything they could find to buy. Of course, now my emphasis is changing some like I said. Here we are again, I'm needing to reinvent the wheel again; it's going through another change where people don't cook as much, they don't eat as many vegetables, they don't--they don't want to cut up fruit, you know and--and that kind of thing. The chain stores, Wal-Mart stores and whatnot have taken over the rose bush business I used to have, the bulb business I used to have, but they can't take over Newsom's Hams. **[Laughs]** So my father told me once and I said daddy did you know what you were doing when you started running this store? And he said no honey; I just had to pretend like I knew what I was doing and that's what you have to do. You have to pretend like you know what you're doing until you know what you're doing and--and he said--he told me--he said I don't know how you did it raising your family and looking after a family and running this business at the same time. And he felt it had been a blessing for him to watch, you know. And I desired to--one of the reasons--another reason I took over this business was my desire to make him proud of me, which I later realized I did not have to do anything; he already was proud of me, you know. So I think he was proud of it but I think he hated seeing me work that hard.

0:36:16.0

AE: Uh-hm; and he passed in '99--is that right?

0:36:18.1

NN: Uh-hm.

0:36:20.3

AE: And your mother?

0:36:20.1

NN: She's still living, yeah; she's 88. She's under 24-hour care. She took a fall hard--long--a pretty long-distance fall last--a year ago last year in--well it's been over a year now and lost her equilibrium during that. So she's able to be out of bed but she's lost her equilibrium.

0:36:48.3

AE: And what does she think of you working so hard and being in this business?

0:36:51.3

NN: Well you know it was such a shock to find out really whenever--after my father died that he and I were really the only two that loved the business. I really didn't think of it that way you know until then. And mom has always said that business has always been a headache. **[Laughs]** But then at the same time I think she's you know been proud of--been proud of me in it but it has served its purpose well for me being able--because my parents--I had both parents sick a whole lot and my children, I got to do the things with my children that I wanted to do. I might have had to work longer hours sometimes, but--I once sold Mary Kay products. I was--someone decided I need to wear makeup; so they made my face up with Mary Kay. Well then I thought about selling it because I wasn't working outside of the home at that time. So I began to read the concepts of Mary Kay. One was--is that if you're--when you're a woman in business you put your family first then your business second and that's what I tried to do--I tried. Now sometimes the demands of the business over-shadowed my home a little bit, but then I always remembered I was going--I switched it back; so. I guess that's about it.

0:38:30.1

AE: Well let's talk about the store that you have here now today. When we were chatting on the phone a week or two ago you were talking about how it was an old-time store and a lot of people--it generates a lot of memories for people who come here and have memories of being in a general store and then also that you found out that you had some Mennonite in your family?

0:38:49.2

NN: Yeah that's right; my--my mother's people--my grandmother was a Mennonite. Her people were named Whistler, W-h-i-s-t-l-e-r. Her grandfather's name was Joseph, J-o-s-e-p-h Whistler, and they lived up in Bloomington, Illinois and mom told me one day she said you know your grandmother was a Mennonite. I said I didn't know that and this store to me looks like an--an old Amish store or I've seen--I've seen one store similar to it, but it's more or modern order called Dutch--Dutch Merchants or something like that that's over in Murray, Kentucky. [*Interruption*]
My grand-dad's people were Quaker, so I had Quakers and Mennonites. I visited a Quaker church when I was in London, England. I--I went in one and got some literature and whatnot for my mother because I knew she'd be interested in it. My grand-dad's grandmother was a Quaker preacher and they--they believed--they believed a lot in no violence, you know. And for both my mother and my father, they--they neither one were--they were pretty gentle. My father a little fiery temper every now and then but on mom's side and his side they both were--I don't like to use the term religious, but they had a lot--they had great faith and a great faith that went down through the generations for them. I don't know how my mother used to do it. She used to cook--cook dinner before she went to church, went to Sunday school on Sunday morning--I mean had dinner ready. By the time that we came home there was very little to do by the time we came home from church, you know. It was--it was amazing and this store here is an array of--it's a place where people come; then when they pass their kids come and their kids pass and their kids come, and I've seen it happen, you know. I still know a few of my customers that knew my father--my grand-daddy I mean--knew my grand-daddy that I still have a few customers of those. But it--it kind of passes down; it's just comfortable here. It's the kind of place that a person comes when they first find out they're critically sick and their family comes after they're gone,

you know. It's--I don't know; it's--I guess it's just a comfortable place. You know it's--it's kind of like my second home. I--I rev up for the holidays with a lot more gourmet and country foods than I have right now and we do a lot of gift baskets and I made this quote one time. I don't know; it was funny and I didn't realize it was funny 'til after I made it. I said that we work throughout the night before Christmas 'cause we'll work starting the first--after the first week of December, we'll start working at night and we work day and we work night. And I said the store looks like Santa's workshop at night with gift baskets shred and candy strewn and nuts strewn all over the floor from making the baskets and we're just like Santa's elves. We check our list; we check it more than twice because we can't remember having checked it the first two times we're so tired. **[Laughs]** And that's the way it is, you know. We have a tremendous business during the holiday. I'm noticing it changing now to some of the things that--that we've been selling on the every day level. So I'm not sure which wheel--wheel is being reinvented right now. I'm praying for wisdom on that one right now; so. **[Laughs]**

0:44:06.0

AE: How did you get into developing all these products that you have your name and likeness on them?

0:44:12.4

NN: I don't--I don't really know other than I started--I started dealing with gourmet food products and then of course they always send you the notification that if you want to endorse that

product then they--they will put your name on it. But mainly where I started doing that from and I only do it with products that I know, one company I've been with for--one company we've been with for 30 years and one company I've been with since 1988, and that's basically the only two companies that I private label with. And I will always tell them I don't make this; I call them and they make it for me, you know. Some of it is Amish kettle cooked and some of it leans toward more gourmet and you know some country items now and country foods that they used to can are now considered gourmet, you know. Like they used to pickle okra, pickle squash, pickle green tomatoes and all like that and it wasn't a gourmet novelty and now it is. Anything that takes time to make anymore is a gourmet food. Any food that's a natural food that takes time to make is slow food. It's in the slow food realm; that's just--I think that's the way that it--that it pretty well appears to me. I still sell the garden seed and plants in the spring--bulk garden seed. I deal with Bunton's Seed Company [in Louisville, KY] and some other companies but Bunton's we've been with since 1917. I deal with one flower company that we've dealt with since 1917, and I deal with one other flower company that we've been dealing with 70 years. My main produce company--and we've dealt with for 30 years and so these are people that you know have quality things that we've stayed with for a long time.

0:46:13.6

AE: With the peaches you got in Nashville today, is that a regular jaunt for you?

0:46:17.9

NN: Uh-huh; we've been dealing with those people for 25 years or so. I go to a Farmers Market and get them and I took my father when they--when they did the redid the Farmers Market and they had these great big plans and they did away with the nostalgia; they did away with any writing that could have ever been done on the place, you know and they put up this--erected this concrete Farmers Market--concrete--in the concrete on the pavement and you know it was not at all like the little shacks and this and that--that they had before at the other Farmers Market. And I took my father there and he--and I said dad this is the new Farmers Market and he looked at it and he said [*Laughs*] country boy gone to the big city [*Laughs*] and he laughed. But I don't know; like I said this is--business is still changing some more. It's almost turning into a half museum, you know because I have a lot of pictures and have articles and this and that. I wish I had a whole room I could put all the articles in that have been written about the business through the years. You'd--it would take more than that whole wall; it really would. It would take quite a bit. Anyway I like to put things that mean something to me up on the wall. I've got my focus up on the wall, all my favorite quotes and family members and articles and pictures. Most of the pictures a friend of mine did--the same friend that she and I did the website; so.

0:48:04.7

AE: When you were talking about how anything that takes time anymore is a gourmet food product, what do you think the future of ham production in this part of the country and in Western Kentucky specifically is going to be? You think a lot of people will stick with it or will it disappear?

0:48:23.2

NN: I think the country ham--"country ham business" is on its way out. I think that gone are the days when it's daily consumption. Most of it's holiday consumption, which that can--you know that can be a country ham business' whole business, you know if they do enough--if they do enough mail order and internet and--and if they have a retail store and they sell enough hams at Christmas and whatnot. I don't think that--I think that the fact that first was--first was the issue about blood pressure and salt and then next was the issue about fat and I don't care how many hams you try to produce they have a better fat, you know because the hogs are fed a different way. People are not going to want to eat "fat." They're just not going to want to eat it. And they've been taught not to eat it. I think the generation of people that understood and appreciated the ham business and that kind of thing are gone. I think that people that--I think it's only going to be like a specialty thing--I really do. I think that they're always going to sell enough for the country ham producer that sells ham in restaurants and this and that and it's--it's a Kentucky nostalgic thing. Yeah; they're going to stay in business but as far as them counting on hams as an--you know as an every day consumption product on large order, I think it's on its way out. I said--I said 20 years ago that the ham business one day would be a dying business. I think it depends on what direction a country ham producer takes their business and in what light they start looking at it as, you know and what market that they continue to try to approach.

0:50:49.8

AE: Do you foresee the day when you will want to hang up your last ham?

0:50:56.7

NN: Well the day could come and it could come sooner than later, but that's always--a small business person, they're here today and gone tomorrow like the vapor. I mean that--they're just-- it could come and if it does then it was meant to me and I'll move onto the next thing for what's in store for me there. For--I don't believe that--I think if you fight hard and long enough at trying to stay in business I think that sometimes you can butt your head up against the wall too long, you know and you're really not getting anywhere with it and then you're not seeing the sign on the wall that says hang up your hat. **[Laughs]** You know--but I don't know what's happening for me right now and I can't really--I really don't understand it. But I'm being asked to do an awful lot of speaking engagements and--and I'm not saying it's bringing my ham to light by leaps and bounds but something is heading somewhere; I just don't know where it goes and I don't have to know. I don't have to know where it's going. That's the thing about it; it can just go however it's going to go. As far as my retail business itself, I don't know. As far as always having a retail store, I don't know about that in the way of full services we've been because there's a reason why there's no more full service small stores is that it's labor intensive and it takes too much money. So I don't really know where I'm headed with it right now.

0:52:38.3

AE: Is the ham cure something that you'll pass onto--I know you have a daughter; do you have any other kids?

0:52:44.1

NN: I have a son; he already halfway knows how to do it. He--he doesn't know the particulars about how long they stay down and--and--and how long they're supposed to--you know. But he has--he has done the actual rubbing the hams, mixing the salt, hanging the hams, smoking the hams; he's done a little of all of it and that's all that really takes. It's you know--and some advice here and there. The only way that--that business would be a business that would be for him is if it more than doubled in size because by the time that he gets ready to have a family and whatnot, he's 25, which it won't be that far off but it takes a whole lot of money for a family anymore.

0:53:34.3

AE: Uh-hm; and what are your children's names?

0:53:36.2

NN: Alicia and John--John is 25 and she's 28.

0:53:41.2

AE: And she's in Virginia you said?

0:53:42.3

NN: Uh-hm.

0:53:43.4

AE: And where is he?

0:53:44.6

NN: He's here in Princeton. Uh-hm, yeah; he's working for a contractor right now. He worked for a tree service before that and right now he's still finding himself.

0:53:54.9

AE: Yeah; well is there anything else that you'd like to add?

0:54:03.3

NN: I don't guess; would you like to see my hams?

0:54:03.4

AE: I would love to see your hams.

0:54:04.6

NN: Okay.

0:54:05.5

AE: Yeah.

0:54:06.2

NN: Yeah; they're at a different location. They're not down here.

0:54:09.1

AE: Yeah; actually Leslie Scott was--was telling me yesterday about your ham house. Is it in town?

0:54:14.8

NN: Uh-hm.

0:54:16.2

AE: Did I remember that right, yeah?

0:54:17.0

NN: Yeah; most people in town don't know where it is.

0:54:19.8

AE: Really?

0:54:23.7

NN: Isn't that right, Herbert? Most people in town don't know where my ham house is?

0:54:31.0

AE: He was laughing about you trucking hams or not hams yet but the hogs in wheelbarrows back there in the middle of the neighborhood.

0:54:39.2

NN: You know why? My mother--I wanted to put a drive down there so that a truck could back down there. And my mother didn't want her back yard disturbed. She wanted grass in her back yard. So in other words, she didn't want her place made into a commercial ham operation

[Laughs]; so.

0:55:01.0

AE: You can't blame her really. **[Laughs]**

0:55:01.8

NN: No, no; I can't really blame her either--not really. But--but that's what--you know she'd say where is my fan? I can't find my fan and where are my scales? I know where they are; they're down there in that ham house. **[Laughs]** Isn't that funny?

0:55:19.0

AE: That is.

0:55:19.8

NN: Are you married?

0:55:20.4

We left the Old Mill Store to visit in the ham house a few blocks away, and this short interview is from that tour.

[Begin Nancy Newsom-2]

0:00:00.0

Nancy Newsom: I got the wrong keys, Amy; I'll be right back.

0:00:04.3

Amy Evans: Okay, okay. Okay; so we're at the ham house, and this is the house where you grew up, right? [The house Nancy grew up in is in an old neighborhood in Princeton, and the ham house is in the backyard behind the family's house.]

0:00:14.1

NN: Yes, uh-hm.

0:00:15.1

AE: Do you live here now or does your mom stay here?

0:00:17.3

NN: Oh, no, no; I don't live here now. My mother is the only one that lives here right now.

0:00:21.2

AE: Okay.

0:00:24.4

NN: This room, we salt all of the meats in this room. I've got to revamp all this before we get ready for curing season. But basically it's a lot clean--but that--during another time, but anyway this is the place where we hand wash our hams. We put them on that table and we'll net them and hang them. In here is the place where [the meat sits to cure]--I left this door open because they've got to clean from top to bottom. We have a long table in here, and we'll hand rub the hams. We'll put them all on those shelves, and then they're there for so--long time and then after they've been re-salted they go over here [points to wooden shelves along the left wall] and the second group comes over down here [points to wooden shelves along the right wall]. And then the third comes, you know and they just go like that; so--

0:01:07.3

AE: Okay; when was this building built now?

0:01:09.9

NN: Sixty-three.

0:01:12.6

AE: Okay.

0:01:13.8

NN: I told my inspector, I said I'm going to do you know a lot of work in here before they get started [this year]. I may wind up tearing all my doors out this time, you know tearing all these out and redoing all them.

0:01:42.2

AE: Seeing it in this neighborhood--it actually looks like a very contemporary building. It's--it blends in so well.

0:01:47.6

NN: I know. Yeah; it--it's kind of a little safe haven around here, you know. Nobody really knows that it's back here. Not very many people do. [Nancy walks into the aging room.] Come on in. Shut the door behind you real quick.

0:02:15.6

AE: Okay. [Looking at the racks of hams from floor to ceiling.] Beautiful.

0:02:18.0

NN: Here we go. [Walks in and turns on lights] **[Laughs]**

0:02:20.4

AE: Beautiful.

0:02:21.3

NN: I don't know that they're beautiful. They're aging. **[Laughs]** Well they're really not--they really have--see the pits of those hams up there? They really cleaned up well. I cleaned up a couple of them, and they really clean up real well.

0:02:36.7

AE: And so how do you tier them as far as aging is concerned? Is there an organization to that?

0:02:42.6

NN: Well most of my Prosciuttos will go in a--go up higher at a certain point. They'll go up higher; you know, heat rises. And usually they're a different size, too. Like I said, I let them mold. One time the *New York Times* did a piece on our hams. They've done a piece several times. One time was during the nitrate issue and another time they did it--they did something on us and it said--and they called it *The Ham from the Crypt* because at that time--at that stage, the ham was black--nearly black it was so old. But now I don't--I don't smoke most of them that long. We--I hang them in this fashion and that keeps their shape, see.

0:03:42.6

AE: With the hock down?

0:03:44.2

NN: Uh-huh; Now in Peter Kaminsky's book [*Pig Perfect*] he speaks of the ham--how the mold will cling to it, how it looks like the head on a beer; they do get to that stage when they--[walks towards other end of building and stops talking while she's looking at a ham]. I've got some all

natural hams here; these are done with free-range pork. See how red that is up there? [Points to a ham near the top tier.]

0:04:15.1

AE: Yeah.

0:04:19.3

NN: Those are all--those are all done with free-range pork--no antibiotic and no growth hormone.

0:04:32.9

AE: Did your father build these hanging slats?

0:04:37.3

NN: Uh-hm.

0:04:37.9

AE: Yeah?

0:04:41.9

NN: Like I don't have it at full capacity right now. Last year hams were higher; they were higher and it was going to take me probably 13 more thousand to put down the needed amount I needed to, so I'm planning on putting down a few more this fall. But then it's going to take some--see, by not using nitrate, you don't come up with a ham that's red inside. By not heat-treating the ham, you don't come up with a ham that's aged as quick, you know. That's where people come up with the term a quick cured ham, is when they mock the temperatures and all.

0:05:17.7

AE: Okay; could I snap a picture of you in here?

0:05:20.7

NN: Yeah; if you'd like to.

0:05:22.5

AE: Yeah.

0:05:22.8

Interview of: Nancy Newsom
Interviewer: Amy Evans
Interview Date: August 24, 2005

August 29, 2005

[End Nancy Newsom-2]