

WILLIE BURSON
Eunice Superette & Slaughter House, Inc. – Eunice, LA
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Date: February 17, 2009

Location: Eunice Superette & Slaughter House, Inc. break room

Interviewer: Mary Beth Lasseter

Length: 27 minutes

Project: Boudin Trail

[Begin Willie Burson Interview]

00:00:01

Mary Beth Lasseter: Hello; this is Mary Beth Lasseter with the Southern Foodways Alliance doing interviews for the Boudin Trail. I am in Eunice, Louisiana and if you would please introduce yourself, sir.

00:00:14

Willie Burson: Yes; I'm Willie Burson. I was born and raised in Eunice. I'm 28 years old and been doing this all my life. My grandfather opened this place about 40 years ago and I just come to it. I started when I was about 16 years old and been here ever since. I take care of the--the front counter and make boudin in the back sometimes and that's about it.

00:00:44

MBL: Can you tell me about your grandfather and the history of how he started this place as much as you know?

00:00:49

WB: All I know is he--he started out raising cattle and he was part owner of a sale barn and he just got into it and him and a couple of his buddies got together and opened a--a kill plant 'cause the people wanted to have fresh meat in the town. So he opened a little slaughterhouse and then he opened a meat counter in the front and they started cutting and wrapping. Back then they did a lot of custom-wrapping and then they started making boudin and ever since then it just keeps getting better and better. *[Laughs]*

00:01:24

MBL: Can you tell me what custom wrapping is for those who might not know?

00:01:27

WB: Some people who raise their own cattle and their own animals and they bring them here for us to slaughter them and cut them and wrap them and so they can put them in the freezer and instead of going to the big supermarkets they got their own fresh meat at home.

MBL: Can you tell me a little bit about your background and growing up around this business?

00:01:48

WB: Well we went to school and then as soon as we got out of school we were over here and holidays we were over here. They--they asked us if we wanted a little--little job for the summers and we got started here. My cousin always worked outside but I was always on the inside. I liked to meet and greet the people, so--.

00:02:11

MBL: Where did you go to school?

00:02:13

WB: At Eunice High School.

00:02:14

MBL: And what sorts of jobs were you allowed to have as you grew up at the different ages?

00:02:20

WB: I worked for the--for the City, a couple of--a couple of summers as a lifeguard and I didn't like that. It's too hot, so I cut grass off and on during the summer like any kid would do.

[Laughs] And then I just started here and working for my uncle at his farm.

00:02:41

MBL: When you started here did they immediately put you in the kill plant or in the--the butcher shop? What sorts of work did you have here?

00:02:48

WB: First job I had over here my grandfather put me in the smokehouse and gave me a bucket of water and a rag and said get to wiping. **[Laughs]** And then after that I--I didn't start on the kill floor. I started in the back in the processing room just boning out and then from there I went to the kill floor and from the kill floor I went to actually making the boudin. And then now I help out with making the boudin and I do all the--the custom--the retail cutting, the cutting for the customers that we sell in our display showcases--I do all that and do a lot of specialty meats.

00:03:37

MBL: So slaughterhouses are fewer and further between these days; could you describe a kill floor to many people who may not know what that is?

00:03:45

WB: Well we--we see about processing animals. We--it comes through; we--we slaughter it and clean it up real good and we've got State Inspectors that are--that are always here watching us and you know we just--we skin the cattle and hang them--split them, chill them, and the next couple of days we start cutting them.

00:04:10

MBL: Where are you getting your animals from?

00:04:13

WB: We have our own cattle on feed--at feed yards and at our--our property.

00:04:18

MBL: Tell me a little bit about your job now making the boudin.

00:04:27

WB: It's interesting; it's interesting when I started. I never thought so many people ate boudin in my life. **[Laughs]** And there's so many different kinds of boudin; everybody puts their own little twist to it. I mean we--for a small town like this I think we--we have a big boudin business.

00:04:47

MBL: How much are y'all selling?

00:04:49

WB: Oh anywhere from 3,000 to 5,000 pounds a week.

00:04:53

MBL: And can you tell me a little bit about the recipe you use to make it?

00:04:59

WB: A whole lot of fresh meat [*Laughs*]--meat, rice, and onions and a lot of seasoning, a lot of good Cajun seasoning. Try and use as much local produce as we can too.

00:05:13

MBL: Where did the recipe come from, the recipe you use here--is it a family recipe or one that a manager developed?

00:05:22

WB: One that a manager and an old owner developed together.

00:05:30

MBL: And how did they teach it to you?

00:05:32

WB: Just handed it down, generation--this company is actually in the third generation so it's-- the recipe has been around for a while. [*Laughs*]

00:05:41

MBL: And I was talking earlier today with your co-worker, Andy. He had expressed that there are fewer and fewer people going into the butcher trade because it's a hard line of work. You are a relatively young employee here. Can you talk to me a little bit about that?

00:05:59

WB: Well it's a lot of--a lot of time involved you know. It's--I get here at about 5:00--6:00 in the morning and leave here about 5:00--6:00 in the evening but I like it just you can't find many young people. It's--it's some heavy--heavy animals you pick up on. It's not as easy as taking something out of a box and just going--slice it you know. We--we do it all from scratch; we pick everything up and break it down in front of the customers so they see it. It's not something that's been hanging up in the cooler for a month or been all around the world traveling in a box. It's all fresh and just got a lot of time; it takes a lot of time to--to do some of this stuff. Some people think you can just bring an animal, kill it, and in an hour it will be cut, but it's a long process.

00:06:54

MBL: You're in this business because your grandfather was in this business. Did you have any friends or classmates who considered work like this?

00:07:02

WB: I did; I had four or five of them that had--had come and helped us out for a little while but they--they didn't care for it. They said it was a little too much for them. *[Laughs]*

00:07:15

MBL: Talk to me if you will a little bit about your family and--well let's start; tell me about your family.

00:07:21

WB: I'm married and my wife is going to school to be a teacher. I have a little boy who is six years old and he's in school and he loves to talk about cows and bulls. *[Laughs]* He loves to come over here with me and unload the animals and feed the animals sometimes on Sunday and just get out here. He likes that; so I guess he'll be another outsider. *[Laughs]* He don't like to be inside but he likes the outside.

00:07:53

MBL: And your grandfather, how many children did he have?

00:07:55

WB: He had two--a boy and a girl. His son who is the--the owner right now and he had a daughter and she's a retired school teacher, which is my mother.

00:08:09

MBL: And can you tell me a little bit about the food traditions for your family? What sorts of things do y'all cook and eat when you're home?

00:08:16

WB: A whole lot of rice and gravy. *[Laughs]* We have rice and gravy about five times a week.

[Laughs] We might go out to eat once a week--once every couple of weeks but it ain't often. We like to do everything at home.

00:08:32

MBL: Who is the main cook in the family?

00:08:34

WB: My wife--my wife and my grandmother; my grandmother is a real good cook. She--when my grandfather was alive she would cook lunch for us every day of the week. We'd all leave here together and go eat lunch and come back together.

00:08:49

MBL: This is the wife of the grandfather who opened the slaughterhouse?

00:08:51

WB: Uh-hm; yeah.

00:08:54

MBL: Tell me a little bit about those lunches. What would she cook for you?

00:08:56

WB: Whatever--whatever we brought home 'cause a lot of times it was just some--some kind of beef meat and a gravy, sometimes a little pork roast or something but most of the time it was like a chuck steak or some beef ribs and fresh produce. She--she liked her mustard greens. *[Laughs]*

00:09:18

MBL: Can you tell me where your family is from, where you grew up, and whether or not y'all consider yourselves Cajun?

00:09:28

WB: We all--me, my brother, and my mom we were all born and raised in Eunice and been here all our lives. I would say we're Cajun; we do everything the old-fashioned way. We don't go out and buy this and buy that; we try and do everything ourselves and we--we're not--we're not living in the big city over here. *[Laughs]* *[Phone Rings]* So--

00:10:00

MBL: Many Cajuns in the area speak French. Do you have a history or a tradition of French language in your family?

00:10:06

WB: My mother does--my mother and my uncle both speak a little bit of French but mostly my grandparents spoke it but I don't know very much *[Laughs]*--not much French.

00:10:17

MBL: Did they just speak it with each other or with everyone?

00:10:18

WB: With a lot of people; a lot of their friends all spoke Cajun French but I don't even know school French too good. I didn't take that--that class too good.

00:10:31

MBL: Talk to me a little bit about the customers here at this store. Who is shopping here and-- and maybe tell me some stories about your--your longest or most loyal customers.

00:10:45

WB: I have a lot of customers who come every day, every couple of days just buying--instead of filling a freezer up they just buy something for a day or two days you know. They--they're pretty faithful; I can't--can't say they--they leave us hanging and come in once a month, once a--a year or something. They all take care of us over here. That's our--that's our boss over here, the--the customers; they keep us going. If it wasn't for them we wouldn't still be here. We do a lot of specials; a lot of them buy special and to last them a week you know like 10-pounds of leg quarters with some rice and gravy meat, a little--we mix it up for them a little bit. Jeez; I don't know--I'm not a talker. *[Laughs]*

00:11:35

MBL: Tell me a little bit about how long the retail store has been opened as opposed to the--the slaughterhouse.

00:11:44

WB: About the same amount of time, I mean it was just--it was real small back then. We've expanded a lot. When it first started it was just a real small place and now look at it; I mean it's--we're big. We've--we've put trucks on the road five days a week now; it's not just over here. We--we supply a lot of little markets all around the area with--with fresh meat.

00:12:07

MBL: Can you tell me a little bit about maybe how and why you're supplying little markets? My understanding is that the slaughterhouses are becoming fewer and farther between.

00:12:17

WB: Well there ain't many slaughterhouses left around this area. We've got little towns all around here; they all have some little mom and pop stores that they sell fresh meat just like us and--and we help them. We bring them cattle and pigs for them to cut and sell for their town. And we're not the only ones that want fresh meat you know. Everybody else wants a little bit and they keep us going.

00:12:47

MBL: So when you supply the smaller stores, you're supplying them with the slaughtered animal but not necessarily prepped steaks.

00:12:53

WB: Right, right; we send it in the quarters. We--we'll cut the animal in four big pieces and--and they'll do the cutting. They'll process it the way they want. They'll make sausage and do all

that good old--they'll cook rice and gravy and cut roasts and display it just like us; they do everything themselves. We just bring the--the animal before it's processed.

00:13:16

MBL: Tell me a little bit--let's bring it back to boudin; tell me a little bit about the process of making boudin. Can you describe a typical day?

00:13:27

WB: Well we get here early in the morning and we'll start cooking rice and put our meat cooking and it takes a couple hours to get all that done and then we'll start mixing everything together and grinding everything and mixing it. And then we'll--we'll start stuffing it. We make on average of--in one day probably about 900 pounds in one day and then we'll skip a day and then we'll make another 800--900 pounds. We'll do that three or four times a week.

00:14:02

MBL: Are the people who are buying all this boudin buying it hot to eat on the spot or are they taking it home?

00:14:08

WB: Some people travel with it; some people bring it to relatives and bring it to gatherings out of town but most of it is hot. Most of it is hot and take it home and eat it; some of them don't even take it home--they eat it in their car on the way home. People say drinking and driving over here, but I think eating boudin and driving is worse. *[Laughs]*

00:14:29

MBL: Yeah; how does one eat boudin while they're driving the car?

00:14:31

WB: They all make us cut it and that's it. *[Laughs]* Find the wrappers outside.

00:14:38

MBL: *[Laughs]* Tell me a little bit about the name of this place. How--how did your grandfather come up--is Superette something that's common to the area?

00:14:48

WB: I have no idea--no earthly idea; I have none.

00:14:57

MBL: Well let's go back then to the conversation about boudin. So y'all make boudin which people buy and take home. Do you make other kinds of specialty meats?

00:15:05

WB: Specialty meats--we do like stuffed pork chops. We do a lot of marinated meats and like stuffed and seasoned roasts. Some people inject them; we--we do the old-time way. We stuff them with onions, bell peppers and garlic and put some seasoning on them. But we do a lot of--a lot of roasts and marinated meats, fish; we do--we buy our fish but we do pre-packaged in smaller portions for the normal size family.

00:15:40

MBL: Are most of your customers sort of the walk-up retail customers or are they the mom and pop stores who are buying from you?

00:15:48

WB: Both--both; they--I have one that is a big, big wholesaler as well and buys from us and resells it to other mom and pop stores. And then we--we have a lot of smaller ones in--in smaller communities you know--little smaller towns like us. Fresh meat hopefully is coming back; I think it is. I really do. A lot of people are tired of getting stuff in boxes that's been traveling all over the world. Fresh meat had got away for the last five years. You hadn't seen many.

00:16:22

MBL: The few that I have seen, lots of them are in this area. Do you have any idea why Cajun country, Louisiana has been so hospitable to boudin and small mom and pop butchers?

00:16:38

WB: Well the small mom and pop butchers want--want everything fresh. All this boxed meat comes in and it doesn't have a bone and the bone is what makes the gravy they always say. You can't eat the bone but you can use it to make the gravy [*Laughs*] and the flavor and that's where the flavor comes from you know--the bone.

00:16:57

MBL: I'm trying to think what my next question will be. I think--tell me about how you like to eat boudin.

00:17:14

WB: Oh man I love boudin. I've been around it for a long time. Every Saturday that was our breakfast. My--my uncle and my mother and them would bring boudin home every Saturday. That was our breakfast. And I like it; and I like to try other people's boudin too just to see what we--we're competing with you know. Everybody has got a little something different to put in it, but I like it and I like--some people don't eat the casing, the outside, but I like the casing.

00:17:46

MBL: Now where are you getting your casing? Are y'all washing it here or do you order it separately?

00:17:50

WB: No; I order it separately. We--we wouldn't be able to keep up if we--we got to do it over here. *[Laughs]* We order it from a company that cleans them and pre-flushes them.

00:18:02

MBL: Can you tell me a little bit about Eunice since you grew up here--about the City? What's it like; what do people do here?

00:18:10

WB: They go ride horses and four-wheelers a lot *[Laughs]* 'cause there ain't much to do in town. But they--we do have a good little community. We have--all the schools have their own little athletic teams and in the summer the kids got you know summer baseball, softball, and

started doing soccer now, tennis. I like to play tennis, so that's a good pastime, but yeah we do a lot of hunting--hunting and fishing.

00:18:46

MBL: Are there a lot of restaurants here? Is there a food scene?

00:18:51

WB: No, no; that's why so many people cook I think. They really don't have a lot of restaurants around here. Matter of fact, I think the closest place with a big variety of restaurants is Lafayette and that's about a 45-minute drive, so not too many people want to get off of work and drive 45-minutes to eat to drive back. But we have a couple; we do. We have a couple but most of them close early. We have a--a few that--that stay open late but most of them are actually just around for--for lunches; they do a lot of plate lunches.

00:19:27

MBL: We're a week away from Mardi Gras. Can you tell me about the Eunice Mardi Gras celebrations and--and how this community has dances or parades? How do they celebrate?

00:19:40

WB: Well they have--the Mardi Gras over here, they start Thursday night over here and they have bands and street dancers on 2nd Street Thursday night, Friday night, Saturday night, Sunday night, Monday night. They--the Mardi Gras for almost a week over here and it's good; you know it brings a lot of tourists in. We have a few campground sites that they stay at and they just go visit all over. They go see the Museum and they go to Liberty Theater over here which is a place

where they do Cajun French dances and we get a lot of tourists that come through here. They--
matter of fact, this--every Saturday before Mardi Gras we get a few tour buses that actually come
over here and--yeah to the yard and they sit and eat boudin in the parking lot and drink beer.

[Laughs]

00:20:38

MBL: Is--there's a tradition of costume I believe with your parade. Do you participate in it or
do you know about it?

00:20:44

WB: Yeah; they have--it's a mandatory costume. It's the--you make them yourself or you can
buy them but it's just the old raggedy clothes with the fringes on the side and the--the big
capuchin, the hat, the mask. It's the one day you can cut up and nobody knows who you are.

[Laughs] So it's--it's interesting; we see some characters around here. **[Laughs]**

00:21:09

MBL: Do you have a costume?

00:21:10

WB: Sure do. **[Laughs]** It's--it's about 10 years old and it's a normal purple, green, yellow--
Mardi Gras colors with a capuchin cap. I think this will be the first year I'll skip out though. So I
got--I got kids growing up now, so I'm going to bring him. Instead of me going to tear up I'm
going to bring him around.

00:21:33

MBL: Where did you get your costume originally?

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WB: I bought it at one of the Cajun stores down 2nd Street in Eunice. They had an elderly lady that was making them and she made one for me.

00:21:48

MBL: And when you--when you dress up in your costume what do you do--what do you do for the day?

00:21:51

WB: Oh man; I don't know if I can say it on the radio [*Laughs*] here. I might get in trouble.

00:21:59

MBL: Just give me a general description of a Mardi Gras Tuesday if you're in costume. What time do you wake up and what time do you open your first beer?

00:22:06

WB: We wake up at about 3:30 and we actually start drinking our first beer at 4 o'clock in the morning and we start lining up because the parade and everything--the run has gotten so big on Tuesday we actually get there and start registering and getting in line at about 4:30 in the morning. And the run doesn't start before 8:00. They--they go on about a six mile walk or horse--some people walk; some people horse ride; some people ride trailers. They go through all the

countryside and they just--they--they go chase the chicken, they go dance for the--certain people, the elderly people. They--they go by the nursing home and they just--it's a long slow ride. Some of them walk and usually they get back to town at about 3 o'clock in the afternoon and they--they have a parade down 2nd Street and at about 4:30--5 o'clock they go and they cook a big gumbo. So it's--it's a long day; it's a rough, rough day at work the next day though.

00:23:20

MBL: Who is riding through the countryside? Is it a social club or is it anyone who signs up?

00:23:24

WB: Anyone who signs up; I believe last year we had 2,500 people sign up. They had about 1,800 horses. It's--it's getting pretty big; it's getting real big. They only have about 30 trailers, so they have a lot of people walking.

00:23:40

MBL: Are these all locals or people coming in from out of town?

00:23:42

WB: People come in from out of town. I've seen people come from Canada I met, but the majority of the people come from around the Baton Rouge area. A lot of people who grew up here who just moved away, they--they still come down for Mardi Gras.

00:24:00

MBL: As we bring this interview to a close I want to bring it back to--to boudin and--and the food traditions. You said people don't eat out a lot here; they cook at home. Can you tell me about your family's cooking traditions? Your grandmother and your mother--what did you cook; what did you eat at home, especially how were their menus influenced by the fact that they had a meat market at their disposal?

00:24:26

WB: Well--well a lot of times what we tended to eat was--what--what you had left at the end of the day. Instead of throwing--throwing it or doing this and that with it, we'd bring it home and we'd cook it, so we had a big family to feed, so--us, my grandparents and my uncle. We had three families to feed, so a lot of times we--we ate what was left and what didn't sell that evening, you know. It wasn't a lot. **[Laughs]** But it was good; it was nice. That's who taught me how to cook was my grandmother, watching her growing up, every Sunday we had a family dinner. After church we'd all go there and she'd cook a pork roast or a gumbo. So we'd all be there, but that's who taught me how to cook and--she can cook. **[Laughs]**

00:25:17

MBL: Are--pending your son's interest in this business is this something you'd like to--a line of work you'd like to see him go into?

00:25:25

WB: Oh I would. I would; I really would. I'd like to see it go--go through another--another family you know. I'd like him to have something to hand his kids eventually you know but I

think he would but I notice that he loves to be outside. So I really think he'll be--he'll be the one to be on the horses. *[Laughs]*

00:25:46

MBL: Is the slaughterhouse still family operated?

00:25:48

WB: Yeah; it sure is. I take care of a lot of the inside and I have a cousin who takes care a lot of the outside. He sees about all the cattle; he--he actually drives one of the big trucks we got and he hauls all the cattle in and out and sees about all--all the repairs outside. He's got an important job; without him it wouldn't work. *[Laughs]*

00:26:11

MBL: Well as we wrap up is there anything about your family or the business or boudin that I haven't asked that you think people would want to know about?

00:26:23

WB: No, not really; I believe we've covered about everything.

00:26:31

MBL: How do you eat your boudin?

00:26:32

WB: I eat my boudin--I eat it all the way through. Some people just squeeze the--and bite the meat out of the casing. I eat--I eat the casing and all. I like it all.

00:26:44

MBL: You eat it plain--no, no mustard on it?

00:26:46

WB: Just like that straight out of the wrapper.

00:26:50

MBL: Well thank you very much for sharing your time with me today.

00:26:53

[End Willie Burson Interview]