

Interview of: Lionel Key-1 & Lionel Key-2
Interviewer: Sara [Roahen]
Interview Date: July 14, 2006

July 31, 2006

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Southern Foodways Alliance
Project: Guardians of Tradition

[Begin Lionel Key-1]

00:00:00

Sara Roahen: This is Sara Roahen; it's July 14th, 2006 and I'm in Baton Rouge, Louisiana with Mr. Lionel Key. If I could get you to state your name and your birth date and how you make your living.

00:00:20

Lionel Key: My name is Lionel Key, Jr.; birthday is November 7th, 1948 and I make a living by making gumbo filé.

00:00:30

SR: All right; can you start out maybe by describing to me what that is--gumbo filé?

00:00:35

LK: Gumbo filé is a thickening and a seasoning that we use for our gumbos here in Louisiana. It is made from sassafras leaves. I have--I employ mortar and [pestle] and I crush the leaves in to make it into powder--the old-fashioned way. Traditionally this was done by the Choctaw Indians. And they taught the settlers when they came over to this country how to make the gumbo filé.

00:01:06

SR: So it was the Choctaws, huh? And tell me how you got into that.

00:01:17

LK: I had a great-uncle that made gumbo filé and he taught me how to make it.

00:01:35

SR: Okay, so you were telling me that you learned this skill from your uncle?

00:01:41

LK: Great-uncle, Joseph Willy Ricard was his name.

00:01:44

SR: Joseph Willy Ricard?

00:01:46

LK: He was blind. He made mops and brooms for the Lighthouse for the Blind and he made gumbo filé. He raised four kids doing that.

00:01:56

SR: He raised four kids blind, huh; and so was he a big part of your life the whole time you were growing up?

00:02:04

LK: Yes; he was. I always knew that Uncle Bill made gumbo filé and in his later years when he got older he called me one day to come over to help him to get his mop up off the floor. He

couldn't pick it up; in other words, he used to get a mop in a spool like when you have thread or something and he would take a broom handle and go through it and pick it up and put it on--on a roller where he could roll it off and cut it. And he got too weak to do it, so he called me up and that--that was the day that I decided that I was going to ask him how to make the Gumbo filé before he passed on--on away from here.

00:02:46

SR: And had that been brewing in your mind or--?

00:02:49

LK: No; it hadn't, never--it just happened coincidentally that one day.

00:02:57

SR: And when you were growing up did you know other people besides your uncle who did the gumbo filé for a living?

00:03:06

LK: No, I didn't.

00:03:08

SR: And did it--did it dawn on you or did you talk in your family about how rare and sort of special it was?

00:03:14

LK: No; Uncle Billy and I sat down and talked about it a lot. You know he told me that--to stay in the back of the garage and just do it and let--let family members and people who already bought from him buy from me but I--I don't know; I took it out--out of the garage and put it out in the forefront so people could actually see what--what was--what was actually done.

00:03:41

SR: Right; so when he was doing it he was mostly out of the public eye?

00:03:46

LK: Yeah.

00:03:48

SR: I mean I guess it strikes me as a good way for somebody who can't see to make a living. How did he figure that out, do you know?

00:03:55

LK: No, he learned at an early age how to do it though from my--someone else. I never did ask him who taught him, who was his teacher.

00:04:09

SR: And that day when you went over to help him pick up the mop what did you say to him?

00:04:15

LK: I just asked him--I said Uncle Bill, would you teach me how to make the filé? He said yeah; my boy when I get ready to make it I'm going to call you up. So he called me one day about 5 o'clock in the morning and said he was getting ready to make filé and I told him, well Uncle Billy, I want to bring my two sons over there with me, so they can see too. And they hadn't gotten up yet, so I'll be over there when they get up. So I gave--I had to give myself a little time. He had no sense of time because he lived in the dark all--you know being blind. He never knew what 5 o'clock was or 2 o'clock in the afternoon was, so he started out real early in the morning. When I got there he was still making it and the first thing he did was told me to sit there and pound the filé. So I went to pounding it and he say you're not hitting it in the middle. I'm saying to myself how does this old man know I'm not hitting something in the middle; he can't even see? But it makes a distinct sound like a--a baseball hitting off the end of a bat or something like that. It makes a distinct sound when you hit it directly in the middle of the trunk of the--of the [pestle].

00:05:31

SR: Can you describe for the tape what that looks--looks like? So it's--it's a mortar and--and a [pestle]--or pestle but it's big, right?

00:05:46

LK: It's big.

00:05:48

SR: What are the dimensions like?

00:05:51

LK: Oh my God; I don't know. I never measured it.

00:05:55

SR: [Laughs] But when it's sitting in front of you like how tall does it come up?

00:05:59

LK: Maybe to about my knee--a little higher than--by my thigh.

00:06:04

SR: Uh-huh, and then you put it sort of between your knees?

00:06:05

LK: Uh-hm.

00:06:07

SR: Is that right?

00:06:07

LK: Between my legs--it's about--I'm using that as an example; I would say it's at least three-feet. I think it's three-feet high and maybe about 38--30--40 inches diameter.

00:06:25

SR: Right; so it's like about as big as you can make a circle with your arms holding them out in front of you?

00:06:29

LK: Yeah.

00:06:31

SR: And then what about the--what do you call that--the bat part, the long part?

00:06:36

LK: The maul.

00:06:37

SR: Yeah, the maul?

00:06:38

LK: [pestle] and maul.

00:06:41

SR: And how long is that?

00:06:44

LK: I had measured it one time when a guy made me a couple more of them but I can't--

00:06:49

SR: It kind of looks like a baseball bat, right?

00:06:51

LK: Yeah; about the same length of a baseball bat.

00:06:54

SR: And you gave those different names when I talked to you on the phone.

00:06:58

LK: A pilan and a pilé.

00:06:59

SR: Yeah.

00:07:00

LK: That's the other name that was given to it. The pilan is the [pestle] and the pilé is the--the
maul.

00:07:08

SR: And is that a Creole word or is that--

00:07:09

LK: Uh-hm.

00:07:11

SR: Oh.

00:07:12

LK: Pilan and a pilé.

00:07:15

SR: And so--so then when you started working with your uncle, I mean how long did that last?
How long did it take you to get the hang of it?

00:07:27

LK: Two years.

00:07:30

SR: Two years, huh?

00:07:31

LK: Well he did--he did all the work; I was just around there watching and--and grasping what he was doing you know.

00:07:38

SR: Uh-huh.

00:07:39

LK: He was still doing it his-self and when he passed away in '85 I had to go on my own and I-- I remember making the first jar I made by myself and it wasn't--he wasn't with me or his wife. His wife would help him also because she would be out there with him. And I made that first jar and I went over to her house and I said Aunt Sweet I want you to see if I'm doing it right. So she took the jar and she opened it up; she smelled it and put her hands in it and did that to it, closed the top and gave it back to me and she said you got it.

00:08:18

SR: She just smelled it, huh?

00:08:18

LK: Yeah.

00:08:19

SR: And touched it?

00:08:20

LK: Yeah, the texture.

00:08:24

SR: That must have felt pretty good.

00:08:25

LK: Oh that was a--a relief off of me because I--I kept saying Uncle Billy guide my hands and--
and am I doing this right you know.

00:08:35

SR: So he basically did it until he passed away?

00:08:37

LK: Yeah.

00:08:39

SR: Hmm; and what was his wife's name?

00:08:42

LK: Melody.

00:08:42

SR: Melody, but you called her?

00:08:45

LK: Aunt Sweet.

00:08:47

SR: Aunt Sweet?

00:08:46

LK: Uncle Bill and Aunt Sweet.

00:08:48

SR: That's a cute name. I don't even have to ask how she got that.

00:08:53

LK: Now they tell stories about my great-uncle you know. They say Uncle Bill--Bill you've been blind all your life, huh. And he'll say yeah. They say well how do you pick the prettiest girl in the country to marry then--and you're blind?

00:09:07

SR: Well what did he say?

00:09:09

LK: He didn't--no other people would be saying that about him.

00:09:13

SR: Oh behind his back?

00:09:14

LK: Yeah.

00:09:16

SR: Because your aunt was--or is--is she alive still?

00:09:19

LK: No, she's deceased too.

00:09:21

SR: But she was good looking?

00:09:23

LK: Uh-hm, yeah.

00:09:23

SR: And they had four kids huh?

00:09:25

LK: Four kids.

00:09:26

SR: Was he born blind or do you--?

00:09:29

LK: Yeah, he was born blind. He had two other sisters that were blind in the family too--13 of them.

00:09:34

SR: Oh really?

00:09:36

LK: Two other sisters were born blind too.

00:09:39

SR: What about his kids?

00:09:41

LK: No, none of them.

00:09:43

SR: Hmm.

00:09:43

LK: From what I understand about it--see if they had the modern medications or the medicines they have now he wouldn't--none of them would have been blind. It was something over their eyes and--that caused them to be blind when they had birth.

00:09:59

SR: Oh, and what was his--can you tell me a little bit about what his personality was like?

00:10:04

LK: Well he--he was a character. He--he'd joke and kid with you, you know. He would like to have fun, you know. He was--he was a person that if I brought you over there and I said Uncle Bill this is Sara and he heard you speak and he would take his hands and put on his--your head and--and feel your shoulders and then the next time you walked in there and spoke to him he knew exactly who you were.

00:10:30

SR: Hmm.

00:10:31

LK: He was real sharp; by--by him being blind his other senses took over--were real sharp.

00:10:41

SR: Right; they say that happens with blind people. And--but none of his kids wanted to do the gumbo filé?

00:10:49

LK: No, he had one son and he lived in California. He's deceased now too, and he had three other daughters and none of them were interested in doing it. But they all--they all said they're proud of me--of--continuing doing what he did you know.

00:11:09

SR: I bet; how old were you then--I can't do the math in my head--when you started--?

00:11:17

LK: I was in--I was in my 30s, maybe about 33--34--35, somewhere up in there.

00:11:21

SR: And did you have a career doing something else at that point?

00:11:25

LK: I was driving trucks for UPS.

00:11:29

SR: And now do you--is the gumbo filé pretty much--

00:11:33

LK: That's it.

00:11:34

SR: --the only way you make your living huh?

00:11:35

LK: I make walking canes, too.

00:11:37

SR: Oh you do? I see there's a collection of canes in the corner.

00:11:41

LK: I've been picking that up trying to do that but I haven't been working at it hardly lately. I got to get back into it again.

00:11:52

SR: And so tell me about--tell me about your year. I don't--I'm not sure how this works; there's a harvest season I understand?

00:12:01

LK: Yeah, once a year there's a harvest.

00:12:04

SR: And when is that?

00:12:05

LK: Oh that's a family secret. **[Laughs]** Uncle Bill told me don't tell nobody unless I tell somebody in the family.

00:12:13

SR: Okay.

00:12:15

LK: But it's once a year. Say for instance, I'm just going to use this as an example; January 15th to February 15th is when you can harvest. After that period of time you can't harvest anymore until next year.

00:12:33

SR: Okay, so it's basically a secret month?

00:12:36

LK: Yeah, about a month.

00:12:39

SR: And is it the same time every year?

00:12:40

LK: The same time every year.

00:12:42

SR: And--and what do you harvest and how do you harvest it?

00:12:48

LK: I go to the sassafras trees that I'm able to get a hold of and I--I use a pruner and I prune--I prune the limbs off of the tree, like you would be pruning a tree to help it to grow. And then I take the leaves on the branches--I don't take them off; I wash them and then I take them and put them in--in the garage outside--inside and let them dry for a period of time. And then once they're dried--good and dry I go and I hand-pick all the leaves off all the branches and that's a lot of work--a lot of man hours involved in that. And then I cure them for a period of time before I start harvesting--I mean processing them.

00:13:33

SR: And so you hang them out in the garage; how long does it take them to dry or is this a family secret?

00:13:42

LK: All those are secrets.

00:13:44

SR: What about the curing time?

00:13:45

LK: That's--that's all--all that's secrets.

00:13:48

SR: What does curing mean?

00:13:51

LK: Just aging it--aging it.

00:13:54

SR: And so do you then like once they're dried and cured do you process them all at once? Do you make them into powder all at once or can you--

00:14:06

LK: No.

00:14:07

SR: --do it over the course of the year?

00:14:08

LK: I can do it over a course of the year.

00:14:11

SR: Okay.

00:14:12

LK: Normally I have enough leaves to carry me through the years to do festivals all over the State of Louisiana and normally I--like right now I've still got two sacks of leaves left, and I have to get rid of them before I get my new harvest in.

00:14:28

SR: How big is a sack or how heavy?

00:14:33

LK: Hmm; the sacks are not that heavy. They're real light because leaves are real light.

00:14:39

SR: Do you have any idea how--you know how much you process over the course of the year in volume or weight or anything?

00:14:50

LK: I don't keep up with that.

00:14:52

SR: It's all intuition?

00:14:54

LK: Because I--it's a touch in the hand and feel to know what I've put in there. I process sometimes 60 sacks of leaves in a year to--as an average.

00:15:06

SR: Hmm.

00:15:10

LK: But I never get into weight and volume or nothing like that. I don't--I know I should sit there and do all that but I--I just do what's in front of me.

00:15:22

SR: And what do you sell them in? What kind of containers?

00:15:25

LK: In jars, a--a clear hexagon type jar with a gold top on it with a lock and seal top on it. I sell them a small jar which is an ounce, which is a 45-mil; a medium sized jar, which is a 55-mil which is two ounces, and a four-ounce jar which is 110-millimeter.

00:15:53

SR: And about how much--if you were making a batch of gumbo about how much of that would be put in there?

00:15:58

LK: Maybe about a tablespoon.

00:16:02

SR: Uh-hm; how about--can you tell me where the trees are?

00:16:09

LK: Well they're all over. They've got trees here--right here in Baton Rouge I can get leaves from. I got a tree on a relative's property in Sunshine, Louisiana but the storm got a hold of that and another one is sprouting up but it's real short--real small right now, so--but I--I got my sources.

00:16:30

SR: And oh so the one on your relative's property is gone? Did the storm totally take it out?

00:16:35

LK: Just about.

00:16:37

SR: Oh.

00:16:40

LK: But I got--I'm always meeting people that tell me oh I've got plenty of sassafras on my property. When I'm making it--I'm being at a festival or at a--at a Saturday market that I do--farmers' markets on Saturdays that I do, I'm always meeting people and they--they will say well I know where plenty of trees are now. And I said well give me your name and your number and we need to get together.

00:17:04

SR: Yeah.

00:17:04

LK: You know and I'm always running into people who--who have leads. So I--that's how I never run out.

00:17:12

SR: Right; well tell me what a sassafras tree looks like. I don't think I know.

00:17:17

LK: Well a sassafras tree is--looks something like an oak tree but it's not as--as dark.

00:17:25

SR: It's that big as an oak?

00:17:27

LK: They grow to be 80--90-feet tall.

00:17:33

SR: Hmm; when you were growing up what kinds of things did you eat with filé in it besides gumbo--anything?

00:17:45

LK: No, but I know that you can use it for soups, sausage, gravies, stews--anything you want to thicken up.

00:17:53

SR: Have you ever used it for anything else?

00:17:56

LK: Yeah, red beans--

00:17:57

SR: Oh really for red beans?

00:17:59

LK: --potato soup, shrimp and corn soup.

00:18:06

SR: We have Christian, Mr. Key's son in the room also. You like the taste of filé?

00:18:15

Christian: I love it.

00:18:16

SR: You love it?

00:18:17

Christian: I love it more than--I love it more than red beans and rice and I really like red beans and rice.

00:18:22

SR: And you love it more than red beans and rice? Do you like it in your red beans and rice? And so when you put the filé in some--well let me--starting with gumbo, is your style to put it in with your seasoning vegetables?

00:18:40

LK: While you're cooking it.

00:18:41

SR: While you're cooking it?

00:18:42

LK: Right; and then after it's dished up I'll put some more on top of that--double dip.

00:18:48

SR: Oh, so when you put it on--well tell me if I'm right. My--my understanding is that when you put it in as you're cooking it that's to thicken?

00:18:55

LK: Uh-hm.

00:18:57

SR: Whereas if you put it on at the end it's more of a seasoning?

00:19:01

LK: No; it will make it rope like okra if you put it in at the end when it's boiling like that.

00:19:05

SR: No, but I mean at the table?

00:19:07

LK: Oh yeah.

00:19:09

SR: And that's more for seasoning, huh?

00:19:11

LK: More seasoning and thickening it; it thickens out some.

00:19:13

SR: Can you describe the flavor to me?

00:19:18

LK: It's--it's--it can't be described I don't think. It has--you know you have to taste it. In other words it has a distinct taste and flavor of its own so there's nothing that I can think of that comes close to what filé tastes like.

00:19:34

SR: Yeah; it seems pretty illusive to me too. I understand--I understand that there's some chefs in New Orleans that buy filé from you.

00:19:46

LK: Uh-hm.

00:19:47

SR: Could you name a couple?

00:19:48

LK: Well he's deceased now but Jared--I mean what's his name--?

00:19:55

SR: Jamie?

00:19:56

LK: Jamie Shannon, who used to work at Commander's Palace used to buy it from me and he's deceased now but Jared Tees is one of the other chefs that works there. He--he gets some from me. Leah Chase from Dooky Chase, she buys it from me too.

00:20:15

SR: One time I was--I had the pleasure of cooking with Mrs. Chase and we were making gumbos z'herbes.

00:20:22

LK: Uh-hm.

00:20:23

SR: And I--it was at my house and I had some of your filé and she said oh this is the fresh stuff.
We don't need to put as much in.

00:20:30

LK: You don't.

00:20:31

SR: Yeah, well I had first made a gumbo on my own and I think I put so--I put--I didn't feel like I was putting a lot in but it thickened up a lot. So it--so--so tell me what's the difference between your products and like a commercially packaged product?

00:20:51

LK: Just knowing--you don't know when they harvested the leaves. They didn't harvest the leaves at the right time that's going to be one thing; secondly they use commercial grinders that grind everything up, the stems of the leaves, the vein of the leaves, and all that and it doesn't--it's not fresh, because mine--I do it; I don't do it all at one time where I got it piled up. I--I keep a fresh supply at all times. Like right now I need to make up some more fresh filé

00:21:24

SR: Is--can you tell--

00:21:27

LK: And it--the texture is--is different; the smell is different. The--the thickness is different.

00:21:35

Christian: The taste is different.

00:21:37

SR: What do you think--Christian what do you think filé tastes like?

00:21:42

Christian: Hmm; I don't really have a taste. I know a bunch of food kinds but it might be a food kind; I don't know.

00:21:55

SR: It tastes like filé huh?

00:21:56

Christian: It just tastes like filé I think.

00:22:00

SR: Is there--I don't know if this is a secret--it might be--how you know when it's the right time to harvest the leaves.

00:22:11

LK: Yeah; that's the--that's the big thing in the--in doing it is knowing when to harvest.

00:22:17

SR: Are you allowed to tell me?

00:22:19

LK: No. [Laughs]

00:22:21

Christian: He can't tell anyone his big secrets 'cause then it will ruin the surprise and then we'll have to stop making filé and never make it again. And he's been making filé almost since he was a little baby.

00:22:35

SR: Right. You can't let the secret get out.

00:22:39

LK: Can't let the secret get out.

00:22:39

SR: Although I have a feeling that your technique would set you apart?

00:22:44

LK: And also the technique you know is--is by far the best way of--to do it, because I'm able to

process it; I'm able to sift it out and get all the stems and all the veins of the leaf where you don't have nothing but a fine--fine powder left and it--that's the--that's the whole thing--is getting that—that filé and sifting it out and getting just the fine powder from it.

00:23:13

SR: So after you pound it you sift out the vein?

00:23:16

LK: I triple-sift it and go through three sifters.

00:23:19

SR: What do you sift it through?

00:23:20

LK: I take a flour sifter first and that--that way I'm able to shake it off and get all the big pieces of the stems and everything off of it, and then I take a splash screen which is real fine and I go through that process and it's able to get all the little fine pieces out and then I--I got another screen that it goes through and that's it.

00:23:46

SR: I see, right; and so the commercial brands might not do that. I've also noticed that the commercial brands have a different color.

00:23:52

LK: Yeah, the color is different.

00:23:54

SR: It's not as bright?

00:23:55

LK: It's not as green.

00:23:57

SR: Does--has anyone in your family ever bought a commercial brand of filé?

00:24:01

LK: No.

00:24:01

SR: [Laughs]

00:24:02

LK: They know they better not. My mother, she knew about filé all her life too but she never did like filé she said until a couple years ago, she--she got to taste some with some gumbo and she said oh that tastes pretty good. I want some of it, so she--you going to give me a jar of filé, so I had to give her a jar of filé. And now I got a new person on the list.

00:24:32

SR: She's a recent convert?

00:24:33

LK: Yeah, a recent convert.

00:24:35

SR: And how old is she now?

00:24:37

LK: My mother is 82.

00:24:41

SR: That's impressive that she could change her mind at that point.

00:24:45

LK: Uh-hm.

00:24:46

SR: And so now she puts it in her gumbo?

00:24:47

LK: She puts it in her gumbo now.

00:24:50

SR: Do you make gumbo in this house or who--?

00:24:53

LK: Yes, I do.

00:24:53

SR: And what kind do you make?

00:24:55

LK: Chicken and sausage and shrimp and maybe a few crabs in it.

00:25:00

SR: So altogether--do you have any--I've heard a lot of rules like some people don't believe in putting filé in seafood gumbo; some people believe that you do; is there a filé rule?

00:25:17

LK: No, I don't think there's a rule or set way of--that you do the filé just as long as it's done--put in the pot at the right time. I find that it works.

00:25:33

SR: And so when--let me go back to your uncle for a minute. When he was doing it in his garage, who were his customers?

00:25:42

LK: Just the ordinary people that he knew.

00:25:45

SR: They would come by and buy some? He would--was it in stores?

00:25:48

LK: Uh-um.

00:25:50

SR: Is yours in stores?

00:25:52

LK: No.

00:25:59

SR: Let me see. I have--can you think of any questions that I should be asking that I haven't?

00:26:04

LK: No. You're doing pretty good.

00:26:08

SR: [Laughs] Well can you describe to me--I mean you described a little bit the technique of--is that what you call it--pounding it?

00:26:19

LK: Pounding it.

00:26:19

SR: So when you pound it--but from what I understand or when I've seen you it's not--it doesn't look to me like it's quite as aggressive as that. It looks to me like you're more like dropping it.

00:26:34

LK: No, I'm--I'm--

00:26:35

SR: Are you putting a lot of pressure?

00:26:37

LK: I'm putting a lot of pressure; it's wood on wood.

00:26:42

SR: Uh-hm.

00:26:42

LK: And that's what causes it to turn to powder--pulverizes it.

00:26:47

SR: The constant sound huh?

00:26:50

LK: I'm putting pressure in it.

00:26:53

SR: Okay.

00:26:53

LK: It may not look like it but I am.

00:26:55

SR: Yeah, I think you make it look--

00:26:57

LK: I make it look like it's easy and people will say oh that's easy to do. I--I've had people to tell me that--at the Jazz Festival, oh that's easy to do; anybody could do that. And I say well

come on, have a seat, here you go. And then they start pounding and the next thing you know-- this is hard. And I say well you said anybody could do it -- try it. It looks easy the way I do it. I've been doing it 20-some years now so it--it's easy for me. It's not hard. I don't--you know when I first started doing this I used to have backaches, shoulder aches, arms aching you know.

00:27:34

SR: Really?

00:27:35

LK: But now that I'm--I do it pretty often it doesn't bother me. You know I just had to be careful with my back--that's all. I had back surgery in '87, so I--I just be careful what I be doing you know. I kind of make sure I got the right posture and everything. I don't want to be slumping in the chair and all that--sit straight up.

00:28:02

SR: Have you--has anyone ever apprenticed with you?

00:28:05

LK: No.

00:28:09

SR: It looks like you might have a little sprout that's interested in filé. He seems very proud.

00:28:16

LK: They--they are--they're both--of them like to do it. See that picture in the center there?

00:28:22

SR: Uh-huh.

00:28:23

LK: That's when they were real young.

00:28:26

SR: So for the record, Lionel--Mr. Key has two sons here right now. One is Christian who we just heard talking and how old is Christian?

00:28:36

LK: Nine.

00:28:37

SR: And Colton is--?

00:28:39

LK: Seven.

00:28:39

SR: Seven, and there's a picture here when they were both very small in Mr. Key's lap. They like it huh? What about--and you have older sons also?

00:28:52

LK: Yeah, I have two older sons--one 28 and one 30. But the one that's 28, he--he said he knew what he's doing already; he don't need to do it or nothing. He knows everything but he doesn't know everything. He's never been out with me harvesting leaves.

00:29:09

SR: No?

00:29:11

LK: No, he doesn't--that's why I said he doesn't know everything. And he don't know what kind of money is involved in this. It's real profitable to do this you know. I mean I don't make a ton of money. I make enough just to get by you know. It's paying for my gas and my time and my effort and my knowledge, but you could make a nice little sum doing this. I go to plantations and I demonstrate at plantations. I go to festivals all over the state you know. I'm always invited--somebody saw me somewhere and they gave me a call and we want you to come over here and do our festival. So I'm always adding on stuff. I got like a little list I--I put together of all the festivals I do and what time of month that they normally are scheduled and I normally do those things every year.

00:30:14

SR: And there's not--I guess there's not a lot of overhead.

00:30:18

LK: Uh-um.

00:30:19

SR: Where do you do your processing--in the--in your garage also?

00:30:22

LK: No, I do it outside the garage--I like to do it outside the garage.

00:30:26

SR: Outside?

00:30:27

LK: But the only overhead I have is I buy jars and tops and you know labels, business cards, which I--I make all those things on my computer myself. I make my own labels, I make my own business cards, so that's where my overhead is in--in making labels, the business cards, and the jars and--and tops.

00:30:51

SR: I was wondering if you've ever talked to any Native Americans about this. Do you know any Native--any like Choctaw people who carried on--?

00:31:03

LK: Not Choctaw. I've never met any Choctaw but I've met other Native Indians like the Houma Indians. They always like to buy it from me when they see me at festivals and they--they going to come and buy it--purchase it.

00:31:15

SR: Do they consider it part of their heritage?

00:31:17

LK: Uh-hm.

00:31:21

SR: Do you know--have you met any Native Americans that do it?

00:31:24

LK: No, never have.

00:31:25

SR: Have you met anyone who does what you do?

00:31:28

LK: No, never have. I've heard people talk about other people but I've never met them.

00:31:36

SR: Hmm.

00:31:36

LK: Or usually they'll say one--somebody in their family did this when they were growing up but they don't do it anymore you know because they--they're old and deceased now and nobody picked it up.

00:31:50

SR: It's really a rarity.

00:31:53

LK: An art--it's an art form.

00:31:57

SR: Yeah. What about you know--we gave out 13 Guardians of the Tradition awards last summer and it was shortly before Hurricane Katrina and I know that the people from the Southern Foodways Alliance who were involved in the weekend we had in New Orleans--New Orleans, you know the people that they met on that weekend and learned about--you and a few others--that's who they thought of when Katrina was you know--when Katrina happened down here. What--what is--what is your Katrina story? How did that affect your livelihood if at all?

00:32:46

LK: Well it didn't affect my livelihood because I had already made my harvest. I had my leaves in process; the only thing that I found out is a lot of people in New Orleans lost everything in the--in the hurricane and they wanted to re-supply their filé in their--in their cabinets, you know.

00:33:07

SR: So that's good actually?

00:33:08

LK: That was good--something, always something good comes out of the--something that's bad. I always look at things that way.

00:33:16

SR: So you got the final harvest off of that tree on your relative's property?

00:33:20

LK: Uh-hm.

00:33:22

SR: That's good. What--what does it mean to you to be considered a Guardian of the Tradition?

00:33:29

LK: I'm real--I'm real honored, you know. I feel real humble about that you know. I'm not--I'm not no big star or nothing. I don't have no restaurant or nothing like that. I'm not a--a chef and I'm not a curator of a museum. I'm just a--a person that enjoys doing what I do and putting my heart and soul into it.

00:33:54

SR: I would say you're a curator of a sort [**Laughs**]--of the sassafras leaf. Let's see, yeah, I wanted to ask you about your tools, your pilan and your pilé Where did you get those?

00:34:11

LK: My great-uncle had those and when he made filé and when he passed away his wife, Aunt Sweet, gave them to me. She gave me all his cans, all his mortar and [pestle]; she gave me everything that he had.

00:34:27

SR: And do you know where he got it--the mortar and pestle?

00:34:30

LK: His uncle made it for him, my great-great uncle made it in 1904 for him. It's 102 years old.

00:34:37

SR: Wow and is it still--it doesn't wear out?

00:34:42

LK: It's made out of cypress--out of a sound piece of cypress lumber, a tree.

00:34:50

SR: It makes me wonder if there were a lot more people doing that then--if somebody even knew how to make that.

00:34:57

LK: They had--everybody had one in their family at one time; that was the original way of grinding and processing corn, red pepper, knocking the husks off of rice. Everybody had one of those. It just--when the food processors and blenders came in they did away with them; they didn't--but I was lucky enough to have one that was being used all the time and I still use it today.

00:35:27

SR: Huh, well that's an honor to have inherited that?

00:35:30

LK: Uh-hm, that's the treasure.

00:35:32

SR: Yeah. Hmm did you have to evacuate for the hurricane--no?

00:35:38

LK: No.

00:35:38

SR: People evacuated here, huh?

00:35:40

LK: No, I didn't have to--I had a pecan tree that fell down a block away from here and had the lights out for about five days--that was all.

00:35:48

SR: Hmm. I was thinking that if you ever would have to that would be something you'd probably want to take?

00:35:54

LK: Oh yeah, can't leave that behind.

00:35:57

SR: No.

00:35:57

LK: I have people that come up to me and say oh that's so beautiful. I'd love to have that. Oh man this thing is beautiful. I say the bidding starts at \$4 million and goes up a million every

second. I couldn't depart with it, you know. I just couldn't depart with it. I wouldn't have nothing to work with and wouldn't--how would I feel selling something like that? So I--I let people know it's not for sale.

00:36:27

SR: That's good. I was wondering if maybe I could see it.

00:36:34

LK: Uh-hm.

00:36:34

SR: Do you think we could maybe get some of the sound on the--on--on the recorder of you doing it?

00:36:43

LK: Yeah.

00:36:47

SR: That would be good.

00:36:51

LK: See.

00:36:52

SR: That was his chair huh?

00:36:55

LK: I just put a cushion on it to keep my tushi from getting hot.

00:37:00

SR: [Laughs] Wow, it's beautiful, so we'll try to--oh let me see that.

00:37:13

Colton: Daddy?

00:37:14

LK: What?

00:37:16

Colton: Look at my toy.

00:37:21

SR: Lemon lime?

00:37:21

LK: Yeah, lemon lime aroma.

00:37:21

Colton: Smell it?

00:37:23

SR: Yeah, it does have a lemon lime aroma. What do you think it smells like Colton?

00:37:26

Christian: And these are not no regular leaves.

00:37:31

Colton: I think it smells like salt and pepper.

00:37:34

SR: Salt and pepper?

00:37:36

LK: Yeah.

00:37:37

Christian: If you eat salt and pepper.

00:37:41

SR: So now we're outside. We have everything set up. Mr. Key is putting some dried and cured leaves in the--what is that--the pilan or the pilé

00:37:55

LK: Pilan

00:37:56

Christian: Dad don't stomp all of it. I'm going to show you.

00:37:58

SR: And he's pounding. Did you call it stomping Christian? Stomping--

00:38:08

LK: Pulverizing Chris.

00:38:11

Christian: Same thing.

00:38:11

Colton: What are you doing?

00:38:13

Christian: Pounding it. Pulverizing it and then he has to mix it up--all the leaves break. I want to break some.

00:38:26

Colton: When you get older, Chris, when you get older.

00:38:28

Christian: No, I was four years old when I broke it and I'm nine, so don't tell me that. I won't break it.

00:38:39

LK: Just wait a minute, okay?

00:38:40

Christian: Okay. The hard side now. You got medium of those--mediums?

00:38:52

LK: You hear that sound--that distinct sound?

00:38:53

SR: Yeah.

00:38:53

LK: That's hitting in the middle.

00:38:55

SR: It's sort of a hollow sound.

00:39:00

Christian: Now let me--.

00:39:14

Colton: I think it's all chopped up.

00:39:16

Christian: I'm going to do the rest. I'm doing the rest.

00:39:21

LK: Oops, did I hit you in the hand?

00:39:23

Christian: No.

00:39:24

LK: I thought I did. I felt something.

00:39:26

Christian: It wasn't me.

00:39:28

SR: So now it's pounded into a powder and you scoop it with a community coffee cup?

00:39:37

LK: With a community coffee cup.

00:39:42

SR: Into a flour sifter.

00:39:45

LK: No, that's enough. I got it all. I got it all.

00:39:51

Colton: Here.

00:39:54

LK: You see the flour sifter is used to get the big pieces out.

00:39:56

Christian: You can get--you can get any cup like this.

00:40:00

LK: See all the stems and everything come out?

00:40:01

SR: Yeah.

00:40:02

LK: With the flour sifter?

00:40:04

SR: You just discard that?

00:40:05

LK: Make potpourri out of it.

00:40:07

SR: You make potpourri out of the stems?

00:40:10

LK: Get out of there. Your hands are going to get green. Get out of there.

00:40:17

Colton: I got a different Colton. My name is spelled C--

00:40:20

LK: And then the fine pieces come out with this green. See that?

00:40:25

SR: Right; so that's the screen--the splash screen.

00:40:29

Christian: Come on down--

00:40:30

LK: And then it goes through the final screen--. And then after that it's ready to be jarred up and--and sold. See?

00:40:42

SR: Beautiful.

00:40:45

Christian: Daddy?

00:40:45

SR: And so you--you really make potpourri out of the stems?

00:40:48

LK: Uh-hm.

00:40:49

SR: Oh, do you sell that?

00:40:50

LK: Yeah.

00:40:50

Christian: Are you famous? How come--

00:40:55

LK: Get some leaves--

00:40:56

SR: Well I want to--I'll stop taping here but I want to thank you.

00:40:59

LK: Okay.

00:41:00

[End Lionel Key-1; Begin Lionel Key-2]

00:00:00

SR: Okay.

00:00:04

LK: Don't go up there.

00:00:08

SR: I'm with Lionel Key again and we're just going to--one thing that we--got left out of our conversation is the difference between the two ends of the maul. Could you describe that to me?

00:00:18

LK: One end is flat with a piece of ash on the end of it to distribute the weight evenly and the other end is rounded. And it's made just like the bottom of the [pestle] so when you're hitting it, it's wood on wood--to pulverize the leaves.

00:00:33

SR: And so you use the heavy end first?

00:00:37

LK: The heavy end first to break the leaves into smaller portions.

00:00:41

SR: And then how do you know when to flip it around?

00:00:44

LK: You can tell when everything is--is gathered in the bottom pretty much.

00:00:49

SR: Uh-huh; and then it pulverizes it a little more finely?

00:00:54

LK: Yes.

00:00:54

SR: With the rounded end?

00:00:56

LK: Uh-hm.

00:00:57

SR: And is the ash part--the ash part of it was that there when your uncle was using it too?

00:01:01

LK: Yes; it was.

00:01:04

SR: Oh and then one other thing; your uncle you told me when we were just chatting was a twin?

00:01:09

LK: Yes, my grandmother and he were twins--October 2nd, 19--I mean 1894.

00:01:18

SR: And she was born with sight?

00:01:20

LK: She was born with sight and he was born blind.

00:01:23

SR: And were they close?

00:01:24

LK: Oh they were real close. They used to celebrate their birthday together every year--eating gumbo and filé.

00:01:32

SR: Huh, that's what they would have for their birthday?

00:01:33

LK: Yeah.

00:01:35

SR: That's great. Okay, thank you.

00:01:38

LK: You're welcome.

[End Lionel Key-2]