

VAN & MAXINE SYKES
Bob Sykes BarB-Q – Bessemer, AL

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Date: September 30, 2006
Location: Bob Sykes BarB-Q – Bessemer, AL
Interviewer: Amy Evans
Length: 2 hours, 30 minutes
Project: Southern BBQ Trail - Alabama

[Begin Van & Maxine Sykes]

00:00:00

Amy Evans: This is Amy Evans on Saturday, September 30th 2006 for the Southern Foodways Alliance. I'm in Bessemer, Alabama, at Bob Sykes BarB-Q, and I'm with Van Sykes and his mother, Mrs. [Maxine] Sykes. And if you would each please state your name and your birth dates for the record.

00:00:16

Maxine Sykes: I'm Maxine Sykes; my birthday is April 10, 1921 and I'm retired.

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Van Sykes: And I'm Van Sykes; my birthday is May 27, 1955.

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AE: Okay. And your—your father [Van] and your husband [Maxine], Bob Sykes, started this business. And I wonder maybe if, Mrs. Sykes, we could start with you, and you could talk a little bit about how you and your husband got into the business in the first place.

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MS: Well, first we wanted to work together. Bob's company had gone out of business—the one that he had worked for—for about twenty years, so anyway he and I was looking for something that we could do together and so we had a—pretty much of a go-around trying to find it. So we finally decided that we would just go in for ourselves and just see what we could do. So we put a—a house up for sale, and there was a little restaurant right down the road from us—just a little

small place, and he [the current owner] was wanting to get out of it. So he said he would take our house as a payment—first payment. And then we had a new car that was just one year old; we sold our car, and we barely got into the business [*Laughs*] by the skin of our teeth. And everything just worked real good. And Bob still worked some on his job that had not quite played out. So I did the dayshift and he did the nightshift, and he'd stay open 'til like ten o'clock at night. And so we both just really liked the business. And Van, our son, was—he was only two then—a little over two [years old]; so I had to pretty much work with Van on my hip, because back then we didn't have daycare. The only way we could—we could farm our child out was with a neighbor or a good friend. [*Laughs*] So I pretty much worked with him there, so he was in the barbecue business of learning it when he was two years old. And so when that—I don't know it just—everything seemed to work our way and we—we both liked it and we both you know—we—we just enjoyed having it and meeting people and it was just—it was just good for us—both of us. We really liked it.

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AE: Well and I have a few questions for you now. One, is your—your husband was in the bread delivery business, is that right?

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MS: Yeah, he worked to for Tip Top Bread, and they were going out of business. They were moving to New York, so he knew he was going to be without a job. So we had to start planning because we had just bought the—our house, the first house we ever had. [*Laughs*] And so we had—we knew we wanted to try to keep the house, but as it turned out the house come in real good as the payment, which we gave up to the man that owned that little old restaurant and he

finally—he had told us that we could live in the house—that he was just buying it for a—you know, for interest to have something, you know. And then he changed his mind, so we had to find another place.

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AE: So he ended up taking the house as payment?

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MS: He ended up taking our house, which it worked out too because they were building houses not too far from there—new houses and it ended up we—we got in with that and the man that worked our—our restaurant with—with—with what is it—Rockolas and jukeboxes and machines, you know, ball machines. And so he come in one day. And so he—he wanted to put them in there so Bob said, “Well it will be that much, so it will help out.” So it—it turned out he was one of the best friends we ever had. And so he started taking the payments that he would get from the ball machines and the Rockola and pay on the new house for us. He paid the—the note on the new house so we could get into it.

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AE: Now when you say—I know what a Rockola is but a ball machine, what is that?

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VS: Pinball machine.

00:06:17

MS: Pinball machine, yeah.

00:06:19

AE: Yeah? Got it.

00:06:19

VS: Uh-hmm. And skeet.

00:06:21

AE: And skeet, okay. And so this first business was that the Ice Spot in Birmingham?

00:06:28

MS: Ice Spot, uh-hmm. It was Birmingham, yeah.

00:06:31

AE: But your husband was from Tennessee, originally, is that right?

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MS: Originally he was from Tennessee.

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AE: Do you know how he got down to Birmingham?

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MS: He had a brother that was—that had come—older brother that had come ahead of him and was working—Hill Grocery Company—and so he wanted to get out of the country—Tennessee; he wanted to get out of the country and get to the city, Bob did, so he just come on to

Birmingham and started looking for a job, which wasn't easy to get then. Jobs were not real easy; they were scarce.

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AE: What year did he come down here?

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MS: He come down in about 19—let's see—uh—.

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VS: I'd say '30—'31—'32.

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MS: Somewhere along there.

00:07:32

VS: Uh-hmm, early '30s, yeah. He came in the early '30s from Tennessee because he was here before the [World] War [II] for quite a while, right? Correct?

00:07:42

MS: Yeah.

00:07:43

VS: Yeah.

00:07:44

MS: And TCI [Tennessee Coal & Iron] was going strong then, but it was still hard to get on over there but he finally worked his way in.

00:07:54

VS: Didn't he get a job at the barrel factory?

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MS: But then—that he got a regular job paying more—Fairfield Barrel Company.

00:08:03

AE: So he came down this way just right at the Depression looking for opportunity in—in the big city then?

00:08:08

MS: That's right—right at Depression time.

00:08:12

AE: Are you from Birmingham, originally?

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MS: Yes, I was raised in West End.

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AE: How did y'all meet?

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MS: We met through the [Tip Top] bread company. He was—I worked in the grocery store for my brother-in-law and—while I was in high school until I graduated—and Bob was the bread man. He brought the bread every day. **[Laughs]** And so that’s how I met him was through him bringing the bread every day. And we just got to talking to each other and so it wasn’t long—I thought he would never ask me for a date. But he finally did. **[Laughs]**

00:08:54

AE: Did he ask you one day when he was making a delivery?

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MS: Yeah. And my brother-in-law didn’t—he didn’t want me to date him. He was trying to keep us apart. **[Laughs]** But we finally got together dating pretty—pretty heavy so—.

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AE: Do you remember your first date with him?

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MS: Oh, yeah. We went to the drive-in theater—one of the first; then they wasn’t heard of too much. And I used to know the movie we saw; it come on the other night. It was on TV the other night. **[Laughs]** *Rebecca* or something. Anyway, that’s the first movie—outdoor movie we saw together. And he had to borrow a car for us to go; he—he borrowed his friend’s car and—so we could go to the drive-through—drive—drive-in. **[Laughs]**

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AE: What year did y’all get married?

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MS: We was married in, let's see, in 19—1942. We had to decide because he had already been—he already—

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VS: Drafted.

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MS: —drafted. So we knew he was going to have to go in the Army, so we had to decide if we were going to marry before he left or wait. And that was a hard decision. And we decided we would, and then we'd back out. **[Laughs]** And then he—he even had his brother, who was the preacher up in Illinois, to come down to marry us, and it was all set up and then—and we backed out. **[Laughs]** So while his brother was here—and we said no, we just didn't feel right about it. But then one week before he was to go in his—his date for him to go in the Army, we decided to get married. So we went to a—a little church up there and the minister up there just married us in the parsonage **[Laughs]**—just a quick-like wedding.

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AE: And where was he stationed during the War?

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MS: He was stationed in the states part of the time and I would, you know, go where he—you know wherever he was stationed. As soon as I'd find out, I'd take off, and so that way I couldn't keep a job. And I wasn't the only one. The girls my age—people wouldn't hire us because they

knew that we were going to follow our husbands as soon as we got a chance, so they'd always to see if you had a ring on your hand **[Laughs]** before they'd hire you. And they'd say, "No, you got that ring. You're not going to be around very long." **[Laughs]** And you wouldn't. I mean when you'd find where they were, you'd take off.

00:12:06

AE: Yeah.

00:12:06

MS: As long as you could. Of course, he finally went overseas, and he was overseas three years before he come back.

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AE: Where overseas was he, exactly?

00:12:20

MS: He was in Italy and—he was in China, mostly, but he was in Italy part of the time but mostly China—as far away as they could send him. **[Laughs]**

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AE: I'm telling you. So can you describe a little bit the timeline of when he retired from Tip Top, and then when y'all purchased the Ice Spot?

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MS: Let's see, he—he had some time—after we purchased the Ice Spot, I think he had about six or eight months left that he, you know, was supposed to work for Tip Top Bakery on the contract—whatever.

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AE: And what year was that?

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MS: That was, let's see, we went in business '50—1957; it was about '55, I guess. No, '56—1956, mostly—'56.

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AE: And then can you describe a little bit what the Ice Spot was like and what y'all served and what—what it was like working there—owning it?

00:13:47

MS: Well we were so new at it that we didn't know and in the first place, we financially had to serve whatever we could afford to. **[Laughs]** So it started out with hamburgers and hotdogs, and so then Bob got real good cooking grilled—grilling hamburgers and so he finally said he was going to have a special. So he said, "We're going to sell our hamburgers six for a dollar." He said, "That will get their attention." And it did. And then I had shirts made up with Bob—with "Six for a dollar!" on the back of the shirts. And so that helped advertise, so people really liked—they really liked that special. **[Laughs]** We found out that people really go for specials, and they still do. **[Laughs]**

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AE: Was Bob a big cook at home before y'all got the restaurant?

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MS: Yes, he always liked to cook. He was always cooking steaks or something at home. He really liked to cook.

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AE: Now Van, I remember the story that was in *Southern Belly* [by John T. Edge] about you talking about your dad learning to barbecue from a man in Tennessee?

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VS: Right.

00:15:15

AE: Can you talk about that?

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VS: Yeah, sure. Daddy was from a little—little tiny place called Cumberland City, Tennessee, which is right in the bend of the Cumberland River, a little small place—farming community—and the Sykes is one of the—you know, one of the families that spread out all out there in Stewart County. But back then I remember, like on a cold winter day, my daddy used to say, “Boy, this would be—be a good day to slaughter a hog. A good day to kill a hog.” So I guess that sparked the—you know, me asking and—and him telling me the story of how they would catch them and—and butcher them and split them and, you know, the family would get the—the farm

family would get, you know, the—the high end of the pig, and they broke it down and the back legs went for the ham. But the black families would always get the front legs because, you know, they weren't, I guess, as valued as the rest of the pig. So back then there was a—when they give them to the black family, there would be black men that would come around and barbecue and they were sort of good—known as good, you know, barbecue cooks and—and—and had good recipes and that—and—and one such guy—there was a guy around there, and I remember me and Daddy going back when I was a kid to Tennessee when he started [barbecuing] and realized he was not getting the same thing. And the guy's name was—well, they called him Buck. And his last name was like—I think it was Hampton or something. I remember going and finding him and he was an old, old black man with really white hair at that point. But apparently, that name had stuck with Daddy because, you know, when he remembered going and hanging with the black farm kids, you know, and they'd all be playing together and—and the barbecue over there, he remembered that, and I guess he remembered that name. And we went back up to Cumberland City and him asking and yeah old, you know, Mr. Hampton so-and-so. And I remember finding him. And what Daddy was doing was, for some reason he had this notion of cutting the skin off when he barbecued it and I—I guess someone had to told him that. And I remember that was the one thing he found from—from Buck was no, you leave that whole skin and you leave all that on there and you start it skin-side down. And that sort of, I guess, was the turning point, as far as daddy becoming a barbecuer, you know. Because, you know, he already knew how to make the fire because they cured a lot of tobacco and—and back then when you cured tobacco, you know, you put it in the barn and you split it and hung it upside down, and they built fires and smoked it and cured it. So he you know—he grew up making these hickory fires and coals and—so that part of it which is, of course, is a big part of it, you know. That kind of I think helped him when

he got in there and started barbecuing. But I do remember him cooking in the backyard on these makeshift pits because, you know, a pit to him was a pit in the ground. That's the way they cooked it. They dug a hole in the ground and put the sticks on there, and that's how they kind of cooked. So Daddy made these like cinderblock pits in the backyard and put a piece of wire over it and—but the—the revelation was the day he came in and it was kind of like **[Laughs]** the—the story Mom has always told me when he—he cooked a whole shoulder. Because shoulders aren't—weren't back then like they are now. You know, the hogs weren't grown up to 200-and some pounds. So he cooked a picnic and a butt, whole shoulder—but he cooked that thing and—and sliced it with a knife. And he had a gift for cutting the meat, too. Nobody could trim that meat with a knife like him. I mean he—of course Daddy was making sandwiches, and he would see the shoulders and count the sandwiches and try to figure out what he needed to pay the bills, you know. So believe me, when he trimmed one he got everything off of it and—and—. But the famous story is he cut that piece of meat and put it on a piece of light bread and put some of his old sauce on it and brought it in there to Mom. And the thing she's always said is when he brought it in, he said, "Now don't you know people would love to have a sandwich like that?" So we've always said the thing about Daddy is, it wasn't, "I can make a million dollars on this or—." It never was a money thing with him, you know. It was always, "Boy, wouldn't they like—wouldn't the people like that?" And so that was the thing that, you know, has sort of been our clarion call kind of thing, you know, is, "Boy, wouldn't the people like that?" So that's always you know in—in my mind, kept the product upfront. And I guess I've long left that question behind, but it was—that's where he learned, you know, the barbecuing art was from that man up there in Tennessee—black man and who obviously was a barbecue-for-hire kind of guy way back when. So that's kind of where the roots of the cooking style came from—something from

his childhood that maybe went back to this older gentleman, maybe, on back to his childhood, you know. Who knows how far back that lineage goes. And so you know that—that's where Daddy learned the art of it. And—and he had a feel, just like she said, for cooking hamburgers. There's a picture of him out there standing there over that grill with a spatula in his hand and his hand on his hip. I call it the Hamburger Chef because he just—it was like he was just, you know, just had everything, like you turn it at this point and you—. And he—Daddy had big hands, not like myself, but Daddy had these—or at least I remember that as a kid, but he could—his hands probably wasn't no bigger than mine but you know how it—but he could form those hamburger patties in just a perfect circle by doing his hand like this [*Gestures to illustrate pressing his palms together at alternating angles*] and so he obviously had a—a gift for cooking and knowing when something was done and not too done. And—because he used to smoke hams. And that's another thing he learned. They had a smokehouse growing up and he—he knew how to cure hams and put them in the brine solution and then pull them up, and he'd hang them up in the barbecue chimney. And I remember, as a kid, it was twenty-one days, which was twenty-one—not twenty-one-and-a-half or twenty-and-a-half but almost to the hour he'd have it marked and he'd go up in the—the chimney and—and cut those things off. He'd have them hanging up there by twine or string or something. And man, he'd bring them things down, and they'd you know—you would just—ugh. But once he'd cut through it, you know, and get past the fat and the little green, you know, mold, I suppose, is what it was—boy, underneath it was—. So the rest of his life, I'm telling you, everywhere we went he was in search of the perfect country ham. And his complaint was that it's—and it was always—always too salty. It's too salty. So I don't know that he ever found one as good as what he could do. And I wish I had learned how to do that as you know—but I didn't. So thank goodness I learned how to barbecue. But I wish I knew

how he did those hams because they were really wonderful—just wonderful way that he did it and I don't know—have any idea. I really don't. I just remember that the twenty-one days, you know, and the big nails up in the flue. So obviously he had a gift for cooking, you know, and—

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AE: Was his—I mean, growing up in that culture that is so much about barbecue and country living and whole hog and tobacco farming, do you think that when he got in the restaurant business that—that was always a calling he had, or do you think that it was something he kind of came upon accidentally as he got older that he found out that he had a real knack for it?

00:24:11

VS: I think he found it accidentally. I really do. I think it went back to his roots because I think he had a lot of sisters he was close to growing up because they had eleven or twelve kids or whatever. Daddy said they weren't kids; they were farmhands is what he always said. But he grew up around those—a lot of sisters. He had brothers, too, but Daddy loved his sisters, so you know, I think they cooked and, you know, greens and so forth, and he was just always around that environment. And I think he would rather have been around the kitchen than perhaps out in the field or somewhere. And I think it was down inside of him, and he just never realized it. The—the thing that made it all work was the fact that they had—their skills were complimenting because Daddy was really good in the kitchen and the food and—and the employees loved him. And so, you know, we're—and Mom's family was from a family of entrepreneurs. There were a lot of little grocery store owners in her family and I mean, they sold meals back in the Depression, and they had boarders in their house. And her side of the family always had this business kind of thing. And then there was Daddy with the ability to make people like him and

then his food was—was good and so they just kind of blended together very well. Because, as Mother said, she was the worker; Daddy was the entertainer. So—and that—that’s a lot of truth to that. He—Daddy never fired nobody. He couldn’t fire nobody—didn’t have it in him so—.

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AE: Could you talk about that a little bit? Because I wonder, delivering a bread on a truck route is a lot different than interacting with the general public on a daily basis in the restaurant business.

00:26:14

MS: Well Bob never met a stranger. He could talk to anybody, and he loved talking to people—he loved people. And he—he used to think about you—about what they would like—not just fixing any kind of food, but he would think about a certain customer and say, “I bet—I bet he’d really like turnip greens.” [*Laughs*] And I’d say, “Yes, but we’re not having turnip greens.” And he said—he tried to think about, you know—and I never will forget, later—even later on in the business he would say the—the women they always liked his food and, of course, they liked him. So he had special women that would come just about every day from the business up in Central Park, and they’d come in and they’d always hug his neck. They—you know, and which tickled me. They would, you know—they loved him and they did—they loved him. And they’d come and hug his neck and he said—well one time this—this lady came in and she was pregnant, and I never will forget Bob saying—he was behind the counter and he said, you know, said, you know you just think about this. He said, “There this lady is coming into eat with us, and she’s expecting a child,” and said, “she’s depending on us to take care of her and give her the right food for that baby, too.” And that’s the way he thought. And he’s just real proud that she would

come in and take—take a chance on our food, being pregnant. And so he always thought about people and what they'd like. And, of course, some of the neighborhood men they got to saying, "Bob, why don't we have steak?" **[Laughs]** And so he'd try to do everything. They'd say, you know—He'd say, "Okay, we'll cook some steaks on the pit." So then it got to where he was getting steaks down at this grocery store that was day-old steaks, which they said was the best to cook on the pit; they were tender and everything. So he—he got to buying those day-old steaks and bringing them and putting them in the freezer. Well then a lot of the men customers, they were finding out where the steaks were stashed, so they just got to be family, you know, and just come in and they'd go back and pick them out a steak and bring it to Bob and say, "Bob, here's my steak. Put it on." **[Laughs]** And so it just got to be such a family thing 'til we wasn't making any profit. **[Laughs]** And so I told Bob, I said, "We can't—we can't keep doing this." I said, "We've got to make a profit." And he said, "Well I don't know we're going—how we're going to get away from it." I said, "Well now they're sending their kids," I said. The teenagers was just taking us over. And I said, "They—they don't buy much. They just get out and sit in the car and—and pet one another and that don't help us." **[Laughs]**

00:30:15

VS: Mom, I remember when she told Daddy, you know, "I'm walking my legs off." Coffee was a dime. "And they'll drink ever how many cups, and then they get up and leave me a nickel and this—I'm through with this. I'm not doing it." And so he allowed her then to charge for the—for the third cup. And I remember the day the whole gang was at the coffee table, and Mom went over for the third cup and she said, "That will be a dime." And you would have thought those men had just—it was the end of the world, "What do you mean?" And she said, "Well it—if you're not eating and you're just drinking coffee, you get two cups, and then you have to pay

again, and then you get another cup.” And it just started—this almost-revolt with those guys, where they just were so upset that you know—. But there again, if Daddy had been in charge, there wouldn’t have been no money; he’d just give—he’d give everything away. He just—he just wanted everybody to like him. But Mom, you know, had the practical and the business sense of you know, this—this—this is just not working out. Plus, she was really working hard, and he was too and—because restaurant work was hard. I mean sometimes I just think about how hard they worked. They’d do everything I did and then mop the floor at the end of the day, you know. And fortunately, I don’t have to do that, and I just think about how hard that must have been. And then you—if—at the end of the month, you found out you didn’t make any money. But I remember the great revolt of the—of the coffee refill and, you know, what—it just was—it was actually the turning point. It’s really where the barbecue could have died. I mean the barbecue could have been gone right then, because if they hadn’t have made it in business, you know, the way he barbecued and the way he cooked would have just [**Boom**]*—it would have been gone right there with it. But it’s just—in spite of all the ups and downs and the coffee refills and everything that somehow, some way that barbecue just seemed to go on and survive to—to pass their education of running a business. Because that’s what the first one was—that was the education. And then, you know, Daddy become a little more serious after that but at—at that point in time, what they had to do was just get out of it. Because like Daddy said, “If we run these teenagers off, well the parents ain’t going to never come back.” And—and our place had become the teenage kind of hang out. Now we had a good—we survived on breakfast and lunch, but at night, you know, we just had a parking lot full of teenagers and—and so there was only one way out and that was everything they’d struggle to build, they just had to sell it. And that was hard, you know, but it—it just wasn’t where they needed to be, and they both realized it, so*

they put it up for sale. And a guy—and why I remember all these names I have no idea—there was old guy named Charlie Jackson who had retired as a Birmingham firefighter, and I don't know why—I guess like Buck Hampton stuck in my Daddy's mind. But he came in and—and Daddy wanted to sell it bad and his idea—and this is something for people to learn right here about Alabama. He was going to bring Brunswick stew to Alabama. Alabamans have never had Brunswick stew. This is going to be the biggest—and that was his whole—and Daddy was like, “Yeah, I think you got something,” you know. “I think you're onto something.” So they sold it to Charlie. And he wanted it, and he got it. And—

00:34:09

AE: And this is the Ice Spot. just to clarify?

00:34:11

VS: This was—actually, it—it was—this was when we had been in the Ice Spot a year or so and then we had moved up the road and—and had sort of renamed this place Bob's—Bob's Drive-In—Bob Sykes Drive-Inn, wasn't it? Or Bob's Hickory Barbecue. So the Ice Spot was a little tiny place that lasted about a year, and then we went up the road. And it might have been the Ice Spot until they renamed it whatever we did. I just remember the sign was from Coca-Cola, and it had the word *biscuit*, and that's how I learned to spell the word *biscuit*. I would be sitting there just looking at that sign anyway but—. So anyway, they sold it to this guy. And let me tell you something: Brunswick stew does not sell in Birmingham, Alabama. And—it is a Georgia thing, and when you cross the [state] line, I don't know what happens, but something mysterious happens. Well my theory is when you cross it going back the other way, they don't know how to do barbecue, so for some reason Georgia just didn't get barbecue. And I'm sorry for the people

in Georgia but it's just—. And they come over here from Georgia and tell me that. I'm not just making it up.

So anyway, they kept the stew; we kept the barbecue. But he tried to make it work, and you know what? It didn't. But at that point we were long-gone, and for the first time since the War or whatever, they found themselves unemployed. So—

00:35:45

MS: We separated our jobs; he went to work for Kentucky Fried Chicken.

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VS: Well there was—there was a little lapse in between there. What happened was Daddy went—I remember he went up—back to Tennessee and visited for a week or two, and Mom finally took a job with a company called ARA and—and she filled vending machines with sandwiches in hospitals. And I remember this is—you know, this is not what I grew up in because I was used to being around all that shenanigans. I mean every day and night, you know.

00:36:20

AE: How old were you when you were—these memories of the Ice Spot?

00:36:22

VS: About eight to ten, eleven, twelve—somewhere in there. I'd—I mean I remember being at the store the day President Kennedy was assassinated in [nineteen] '63, so I was eight then. I remember—I remember that whole day and how strange it was and—but anyway, after a few weeks, Daddy had come back to Birmingham and was kind of looking around, and he came in and this was where—this is how it happened. He came in one day and told mom, he said, "I have

found what we're going to do. I have absolutely seen it." And she said, "What are you talking about?" He said, "I have found a place where they walk up to the counter and order, come back and pick it up, and then clean their table off when they leave." And—and because Mama hated the way people would walk you back and forth for butter, you know, and everything and then not even tip you, he said, "You won't even have to wait tables." And she said, "What in the world could it be?" He said, "Well it's a funny little man on the sign that's called Kentucky Fried Chicken, and I'm going to go get a job up there." And he did. He went up there and got a job and—and they liked him. You can imagine, you know, because he was a good cook and you know made just—everybody liked him. So he worked there for about a year or so, right, and became a store manager, and they were allowed to keep the chicken—extra chicken. And that's what we survived on was frozen—we had a freezer full of Kentucky Fried Chicken because they let the manager just take home whatever was extra. So—but what he was doing was going to school and he learned everything how they checked up, how they did bank deposits, how they calculated their prices, how the—you hired people. He just—so after about a year he just decided—he told them, "Well," you know, "that's it. I'm ready to go." And so—

00:38:36

AE: So even the Ice Spot was for all intents and purposes not a big success for your family—not a big moneymaker—he still was persistent and wanted to be in the restaurant business?

00:38:46

VS: Yes.

00:38:46

MS: Uh-hmm.

00:38:47

AE: When did—after his—and you were probably about to tell me this, but after his tenure at Kentucky Fried Chicken, when did barbecue become the thing?

00:38:54

VS: Well, then we went through and I—I'm—chronologically, I'm hoping I have this in the right order, but after he left KFC then—then we went through the partner phase, where we didn't have no money, and so we took on partners and—and that's when they did a little stint with the root beer Company. It was Frost Top—Frost Top Root Beer. There was a local franchise here and a—a nice man named Mr. English that I—I just remember very well, a very nice man, and he helped Mom and Dad. [*To his mother, Maxine*] And I think we ran one for him didn't we? We didn't really own it, but we ran one and managed it for him and then had an opportunity to go in with another family and own one in Five Points West, which was, you know, sort of a—the hotspot—. [*Phone Rings*]

00:39:51

AE: I'll pause this for a moment. Okay, we're back. Van had to step out for a minute. But Mrs. Sykes, if you could maybe fill in some of what Van was talking about—about when your husband was kind of learning about different businesses and then decided to do the barbecue thing on his own?

00:40:09

MS: Yes. This was where we run—let’s see, we managed Frost Top Root Beer until we finally had a chance to buy into it and they—we finally had a chance to buy it out. So then we went to Five Points West [in Birmingham] and this man that—that owned this restaurant he had been in it like thirty years or something. And anyway, he was right on the corner of Five Points West—one of the best locations you could get—and he had a number of people wanted to buy his place but for some reason he—he wanted Bob to have it. He had met Bob and knew his background and knew how well, you know, he could cook his food, and so he wanted Bob to have it. So he sold it to us and, of course, it was in a shopping center. It was in Five Points West Shopping Center, so we, of course, had to go along with the real estate and manager of the shopping center. And so we had started closing on Sunday and I had—Bob and I agreed, you know, that—that we thought we should close on Sunday. So—because I always went to church, and I missed going to church and I said so—I said, “How can I go to church and have employees that have to work for us and don’t get to go to church?” So I said, “We should close so they can go to church, too.” So that’s when we started to close on Sunday. And it wasn’t long until the—the manager over the Five Points Shopping Center came in one day, and he told us that we couldn’t close on Sunday. He said, “It’s—it’s in your contract that you’ve got to be open so many days, which is seven.” And so I said, “Well how about the—the total profits, the total sales?” He said, “Well you’d never make it on six days.” And so I—I just let him go. But anyway, later on I did go over to his office and just let him know that we would close on Sunday. And he said, “Well,” you know, “you got so much sales to do in the six days.” I said, “I know that. “And I said. “We’ll make it.” I said, you know, “We got a third partner.” He said, “No, I didn’t know you had another partner—you and Bob.” And I said, “No, we have a third partner.” And he said, “Well who is it?? And I said, “It’s the Lord.” And I said you—you know—. He said, “Oh, I know him, too.”

[Laughs] And I said, “Well, good.” I said, “I’m so glad to hear that. Now I know we’ll get along fine with you.” So that was it; so **[Laughs]** that’s when we started really closing on Sunday. And we were blessed from then on—from there. We went to—went back to Central Park to our—one of our older locations, where we had to move from because of getting away from the teenagers, and built a new—brand new building and bought property next door. And all of this come out of that one place, Five Points West.

00:44:34

AE: So was that—I’m a little confused with the timeline. Was the—the place, the Five Points West in the shopping center, was that a Frost Top?

00:44:42

MS: No, we have moved from Frost Top to Five Points West.

00:44:50

AE: Okay, so by that time you had—it was your own restaurant? Was that Bob’s Hickory Pit—that restaurant then?

00:44:55

MS: Yes, that—then we had a pit at Five Points West and a—remodeled the building where it looked—it looked brand new, put in a new barbecue pit, and it just looked fantastic. It was right on the main—Third Avenue, where everybody could see the pit, and we had our name on the outside of the chimney and it was just the—something that might not happen in another 100 years but that—I just call that one of our good blessings.

00:45:32

AE: So when the man who wanted to sell that business sold it to your husband, was it—it was already a barbecue restaurant then?

00:45:39

MS: No, it was an ice-cream place. He had been in the ice-cream walk-up—walk-up ice cream for about twenty—twenty or twenty-five years. He had been right on that corner.

00:45:55

AE: And so your husband just had the idea to start with barbecue and barbecue only and installed that pit there at that Five Points location?

00:46:05

MS: That's when we really, really—just barbecue only. I mean, of course, you know, you have your side items but the barbecue was the main—. And that's when he started working on his sauce. He wasn't satisfied with the barbecue sauce that we were using, so that's when he really started analyzing, traveling—we traveled all over Tennessee and tasted every barbecue sauce, I think, in Tennessee [*Laughs*]. And he would get samples and bring them back to our business and set them up in a jar and—and line them up on the counter and get the customers to taste each one and—and they would make down which one they liked the best. And the one that, you know, got the most marks, of course, won out. [*Laughs*]

00:47:03

AE: And he would try to recreate that sauce himself?

00:47:06

MS: He did, yeah. That's the sauce we're using today.

00:47:10

AE: So I'm wondering, Van, maybe if you could fill in kind of how he—he really wanted to commit himself to barbecue and also, if there was no barbecue in Alabama that he liked or that folks liked, and how Tennessee influenced what he did here in Alabama.

00:47:28

VS: Well I think the thing was—the thing that he took out of the KFC [Kentucky Fried Chicken] experience was the—the word they used to use over and over was *specialized*. We *specialize* in barbecue; we had that on our menu. They had it on signs—we *specialize* in barbecue. And—and so that's what he was looking around—and there was everything else, but there wasn't anybody doing just barbecue and concentrating on that. And if you look at the menu, it was set up just like KFC. I mean they had a box, a bucket, and a barrel; and so we had a—feed five, a ten, and a twenty-five. Because Daddy used to say—well when they'd come in and say they wanted a barrel, the first thing they'd say was, “How many does it feed?” So he just called it a five, a ten, and a twenty-five. And then the—the special—that was Mom's idea. And it was kind of like the snack-box, you know. It was the chicken, a side item, and a—and of course she put the drink with it, which made it really enticing. So they got into that single-mindedness, really, by realizing that Kentucky Fried Chicken was selling nothing but chicken. And they wasn't doing hamburgers and chicken; they wasn't doing—I mean that was their specialty. If you wanted chicken, that's where you went. But they were willing to take the chance that if you didn't, you'd just go get it somewhere else. Where everybody else in the food business at that

point was trying to be everything to everybody—breakfast, vegetables, you know, steam tables and then car—. I mean every—everybody—but the idea that I thought was revolutionary was he—he was willing to take a chance and say, “Okay, if you don’t want barbecue, then fine.” But he diversified enough—he learned to put in the—the hamburger, which he was famous—kind of had a following in that specific area for hamburgers, as well as barbecue. So he had that on there. But he had goofy things on the menu, like we had shrimp and fried shrimp. And Daddy had this—these fish fillet things. But really, that was smart because what they were doing was they were catching the veto vote, the one that says, “I don’t want barbecue. What else they got?” So you know, he learned—they put enough variety on there to keep it where—. And then realized we had—as you always do in a restaurant—people that come every day. I mean I have them—to this day, I have people that come in here—I’m telling you the truth—every single day. If they don’t come in, I need to call the family; something is wrong, you know, so—Well they had that, too, and they saw the need for a little diversity. His barbecue was different because he—he cooked it a little faster than other people. A lot of people back then, you know, it was, “Yeah, I’ve cooked this for twelve hours,” or whatever. Now—now the pig was a lot fatter then. We weren’t terrified of lard [*Laughs*] and fatback then like we—the Americans—are now. So they—he had more to cook out. But where he was a little different, to me, was his fire was a little hotter. He cooked them just a little bit quicker. And I’m not so sure if he didn’t fall into that by just, “I need to get—we need some food—we need to get it done.” But I think that was one of the things that—that he did with his that was so different and—and I think it was actually something born from up there was the direct fire, as opposed to off to the side. The depth of his fire-box, which I remember the old men that built them pits, Daddy thought three feet was too much, so it was about two-and-a-half feet from the bottom of the fire up to it and then his—Daddy’s whole

thing was the ashes. You know, he—which—which really adds to the flavor, you know. But he wanted a bed of ashes in there, so by the time he had that two-and-a-half feet and that bed of ashes he had—he had a fire under that meat and—and we always used a lot of wood. So I think that's what made his different and—and who knows, some of it might have been cutting the skin off. I still say to this day, you know, now I—I cook a picnic because I can't cook a whole shoulder, they're just—they're just too big for hand-turning. So but I still say the skin is what makes ours different than the general one out here; I still think people are cooking the wrong end of the front leg, but they're welcome to keep doing it. But—but back then, I really think that was the difference. I think it was the—the skin on, the—the salting, you know. We weren't afraid of salt back then either, you know, like we are now; everybody is terrified of salt. But Daddy would—he didn't just salt that meat. Mom will tell you this, he'd just take his hands, and it was just like he was massaging the stuff, but that's the way he did them hams, you know. He was working that salt as it opened the meat naturally, which is what it does; it's a tenderizer—as it was doing that, he'd just kind of work it in with his hands. And this barbecue just had a flavor that other people's didn't have. Plus, you know, let's face it, a lot of people, they had meatloaf and barbecue and—and they had, you know—. Yeah, that was another thing he said, which is true to this day—he wanted the pit on the front. But you know, he was—since he was taking a chance on doing just barbecue, he was selling it quickly, and it was coming off the pit and getting cut and served, and I think a lot of these other places, it was sitting in a steam table. I mean because a lot of the magic of barbecue is what the heck you do after you get it off, you know. I mean, if you're not selling it right away, man, you've got a problem because you've either got to chill it, freeze it—you're out of something. I think one thing that made his so good at that point was that he was running a lot of volume with it and—and had calculated out, if

they're coming in for lunch at 1eleven, then I need to have this on and—and he didn't do a lot of reheating. And when he did, he made a different fire because we did end up having carry-over, and you can't just throw it away. But what he did is he had this—I don't know how he made this fire that would warm that meat back up without just burning it because that's your dilemma. You've cooked it—the daylights out of it, and now it's cold, and you've got to reheat it. How are you going to not dry it out? Well he just—he just had ways that not even I have. I don't—I mean I—I supervise cooking and I know how to cook, and I can move them out of the way and do it if I want to or need to, but I don't have the—you know, he just had the perfect way to reheat and do everything. But that's the answer; that's what made his barbecue different.

And—and the sauce was just really unique. And—and it was his own concoction. Now what I remember is he'd make a twenty-quart pot, and he'd taste it, and it wouldn't be no good, and he'd throw the whole thing out because he said, “Listen, if I start pinching that and adding that and adding that and then I hit on something, how in the world am I going to know what I made?” So country boy logic told him well, you got to start over every time and write it all down, and if it don't work, you have to throw all that out and wash the pot out real good and do it again. **[Laughs]** So that's what I remember about him and that sauce is it—it wouldn't be right—he'd throw twenty quarts away, you know so—.

00:55:52

MS: In the meantime he—he was thinking about the drive-thru—driving around to pick up your food. At that time, there was not one, and he would keep saying these women that like to come and pick up barbecue early, it would—they would really appreciate it if they didn't have to get out of the car. And he said there's—we had a man that was in communication, and had speakers and he brought an old speaker up there and he said, “Bob, let's put this speaker on the side of

the—on the side of the building here where the—,” it’s a door and said, “when they drive up, let them talk through this speaker. And then tell them to come up to the window, and they won’t have to get out of their car, and so together this man is helping Bob to get the speakers together—that’s the way the drive-thru barbecue started. There was not another one, not even McDonalds; we was before them.

00:57:11

AE: What year was this that Mr. Bell came with a speaker and helped your dad out?

00:57:15

VS: It would have been 1966—about ’66 because Daddy had a ’67 Volkswagen when we were there. I’d say it was about ’65 to ’66; it was a World War II surplus awful looking—it actually had a button that had *Talk* and *Listen*. I mean it was way back. But Mr. Bell was one of them guys who could just wire up anything and make it work. He come—he was one of them that come in every day, and him and Daddy would talk and—and that’s where this idea—Daddy, like she said, he would—. See, there again he was—Daddy had the ability to transform—he used to tell me—you have to transform yourself to the other side of the counter and be the other person and think now, what would I want to do here? That was a gift that he had. So he—in talking to him, Daddy thought the carhop thing was just silly. I mean you—you backed in, you read the menu, you turned your headlights on and off; the person walked out and, you know, this whole process was twenty, twenty-five, thirty minutes. And then they would turn their lights on, and you’d go back and get the tray and the whatever, and then you had to take the money and get the change and go back to the car. And he was—I remember him talking about the fascination of the two-minute egg and people are living faster, and so he realized well, what if they didn’t even

have to get out of the car? But—but people were so new to it that, I'll tell you the honest truth, they would park over here [points to the left] and get out and walk to the thing [points to the right].

00:59:01

AE: [*Laughs*]

00:59:01

MS: I had to train them.

00:59:02

VS: And they had to train them. Daddy and Mom would say, you know, “Get back in the car,” you know. “Drive up to the speaker.” And then it was like, well, hallelujah, you know. And so that’s how that started, wasn’t it? Yeah.

00:59:16

AE: Was this at the Five Points location?

00:59:17

VS: That was at the Five Points location, which became a prototype for our next education, which was franchising, but that was a prototype. People loved it, what they had created. We specialized—it was a short menu, you didn’t have to wait for a waitress, you walked up and ordered at the counter and—and it was just, you know, a new spin that people had just—. So naturally, people thought well boy this would be—you know, and at that point I’m sure McDonalds was franchising and so forth so—.

00:59:57

AE: How long did it take for—when you had that first foray into the drive-thru thing—for it to become its next incarnation and be more established as a drive-thru?

01:00:06

MS: Well the next place we moved was where—let’s see—.

01:00:10

VS: It would be down here [to Bessemer].

01:00:13

MS: The next place that was built—and that’s one thing that he—Bob really watched to be sure the drive-thru was on the right side, and we built next door to Kentucky Fried Chicken. **[Laughs]**

01:00:32

VS: Well that, if you’ll notice in their history, he always put himself next to a chicken place because he said, “Their national marketing and recognition is pulling them close enough that if I go spray that fire—put that barbecue smoke out there, we’re going to get some of them.” And they used to pull up at KFC, and he’d run and wet the fire and, you know, put—and you were just like the pied piper; they’d just come in over there. So they had a history of always being around a chicken place, which was really—I mean it was kind a cluster thing now, like you see a McDonald’s; there’s a Burger King and a Taco Bell. So Daddy was just clustering and didn’t realize really, I don’t think, how really smart that was to do that. And listen, he built those buildings. They were the cutest thing. We’ve got a few pictures. But he built them like a barn—a

barn-shaped roof with a hayloft in the top—or a fake hayloft—and the chimney looked like the silo. So he really had, I'm telling you—. And his—their original idea, which later on got messed up, but their idea was to have twenty seats in the little drive-up window and do a lot of carryout. And you know what? That would still work today, but as they got deeper into the franchising, they were talked into bigger dining rooms and so forth. But when we came to Bessemer in 1967, that was a ten-year lease and we left in '77. We—they built the drive—I wouldn't even call it a drive-thru; I'd call it a drive-up almost. But—but it was on the right side of the building and—and, you know, you could put two cars in it. And I remember on Friday and Saturday night they would line up down the building, out and down the highway, and Kentucky Fried Chicken would call and complain that we were blocking their driveway. And the police were like, "Well what can we do, you know? I mean there are people that are wanting to go in there and eat." But see we only had—see they still didn't have no money, really.

01:02:53

MS: We only had about four tables—

01:02:56

VS: Yeah.

01:02:57

MS: —and the rest, you know, they had to pick up or come to the drive-thru, but we loved that drive-thru. [*Laughs*]

01:03:04

AE: So in '67 is when the franchising started in the Bessemer—this location in Bessemer was the first franchise location, is that right?

01:03:12

VS: Well it was their own store but then the first franchise, I think, was Jasper, Alabama, and—

01:03:23

MS: That's when it, yeah. Bob just started the franchise. He was talked into it.

01:03:28

VS: Yeah, well see up there—that's Walker County. That's where he delivered bread and everybody up there remembered him and a couple of those men had made some money in the insurance and grocery store business, so they wanted to try to franchise and they hired a man who was a grocery store manager—that he had worked before—named Charles Davidson and then some other fellows backed Charles and they opened the Bob Sykes in Jasper just like the one with the very small dining room and it was just a phenomenal success. I mean it was just huge; it—it did more than the Bessemer store, which—which was really a big success for them. Listen between that Central Park and Five Point Store I know of—Adventure at Bluff Park that didn't work up on the mountain because daddy decided that those people have—their home mortgages are too big and they can't afford to eat out. But we never did \$100 in that restaurant in a day, never did \$100—never forget that; he—he'd do \$60, \$70, \$80. Well look the first day they come to Bessemer there was a paving machine in the parking lot, and Daddy was starting to cook because he was big about having that bed of ashes, and so he was curing the pit, as he called it and—and people got to smelling it and they piled in there, and he couldn't stop them. And so

he's—they started just selling food and the first day they just unlocked the door and crawled over the paving machine and he did \$500 and so he—he knew, then that he had found an area that was blue collar enough and had enough disposable income and enough working class people that loved barbecue, that he knew he had found one then, you know. And so and, of course—

01:05:34

MS: And he loved doing it; I mean we loved our work. We was really having fun. **[Laughs]**

01:05:39

VS: But Daddy, you know, to go back to originally what she was saying was that when we came down here this was a—a segregationist town and I'm telling you, we had a lot of black customers and—and black employees in one or—or two that had worked for them at this, probably fifteen, seventeen, eighteen years, and I remember so well Daddy, you know—I—I—he said, “You say *sir* to the black man and *ma'am* to the black women,” which was fine, you know. I mean I was raised to wait on customers, and I remember the man that come in up there; he ran the plant over here. And I'll never forget, when I gave that black man his change and I said, “Thank you, sir.” And he called Mama down at the end of the counter and he said, “I just—I just don't think that's right. I don't think your boy ought to be doing that.” And—and so Mama told him, “Well you know what? That's the way we run it,” and everything. And then I remember Daddy telling him—you know, Daddy come over there and said—found out what was happening and Daddy said **[Laughs]**—told that guy, he said, “You know what? The funniest thing—I go back there at night and count that money, and I'll be doggone if I can find out which come from a black man or a white man, but I need it all.” **[Laughs]** And so that sort of started our thing with the black people in this community because they waited in line and—and we took them in order and we

didn't favor nobody and we treated everybody and—and it motivated, you know, the black help then, you know, realized.

01:07:33

MS: I had to tell—I had to tell the Mayor one time to step back because he got ahead of this black man that was standing there, and he just walked on ahead, and so I just come around the counter and told him—I said, “You need to step back. This man was here before you.” He looked at me, you know, but he—but he did it; he stepped back. *[Laughs]*

01:07:55

VS: You know what—you know what my Daddy told me and I remember this and to this day he influences me, but he used to tell me,” That man worked harder for his money than that man does, and I'll be doggone if I'm not going to give him his money's worth because I was a working man and,” he said, “I'd rather go back there and take that ditch digger and make him a bigger sandwich because I—.” And when—and he told me, “When he comes in here and spends his money, you think about how hard he worked to get that money to come in here and buy that. And that's why you got to do a good job because it's a respect thing.” See that's the way he approached it; it was like, you know, thinking of that—what is that other person thinking you know? That's—that's the thing that—that drove his thought process was what's the other person—what can I do to make this a little easier for them or what can I do and—and, you know, all those little things, the reason they're important is that's why the barbecue is still here. You know, it wouldn't be here if he couldn't have survived segregation and competition from big giant corporations. And that's why that—all that is important is because all of that changed but the food—the barbecue didn't change, you know. And it would have been so easy to change it; I

mean he used—they used to tell me, “The hardest thing you’ve got to do is keep doing what works.” I mean, you know, just like with the invention of the smoker, you know. I mean that was to make barbecue easy. But I remember being over there with him and—and had blisters on your fingers and old back fingernails from handling the coals and—and Daddy would be sweating and he’d say, “A-ha! You’ve got to work for good barbecue. If you’re not working, your barbecue ain’t no good,” you know. You’ve got—it’s something you work for. You don’t just, you know—he used to say or Mom used to say, “What—what you’ve got on your plate, that started three days ago when somebody went out there and cut the wood down,” you know so—.

01:10:16

AE: So is that part of the franchising—the difficulty with the franchising? Is it there was no quality control, and he couldn’t really have a hand in the product?

01:10:25

MS: That’s—that’s exactly right because you—you don’t have control, and they will not follow anything that’s slow. It—they wanted to do it fast and barbecue you don’t do it fast, but we couldn’t seem to get that across to the franchisees. So we just never could—felt like, you know, that it could go anywhere, really.

01:10:53

AE: So what was the window of the franchises when they started up and then when they kind of faded out?

01:11:00

MS: It’s a long story to that because I don’t think Van likes to tell it but—.

01:11:09

VS: What?

01:11:10

MS: His daddy had a stroke and that, you know—he couldn't walk, he couldn't talk, he couldn't even sit up for months and months and—but I kept—I was determined to keep the business going because I knew I wanted to keep his name going, and so I worked hard to take care of him, take care of Van, and keep the business going.

01:11:40

VS: And there was like four—there was like fourteen of them at that particular time, and they were all run by those men from Jasper because they were trying to drive mom because Daddy was just bad about giving everything away and just shaking hands and no contracts. And they're sending her bills for rent in places that she's, you know—doesn't go to. And he couldn't say nothing. He couldn't tell her what he had done and so, you know, I suppose then you just have to realize providential, that that's just the way it worked out because as we learned you—you just can't—some things can't just be duplicated and done over, you know. But him having the stroke, which incidentally, the window of that was [nineteen] '68 through, I would say we were done with that by '73—'74 somewhere in there. I had done three years in the Air Force from '72—no '73 through about '77—'76; I was in the military, but they were phasing out then and—and I had got in the Air Force and had gotten, believe it or not, picked as a purchasing agent for the Government and—and because I was—couldn't pass the radio test. I wanted to be an Air Traffic Controller, but the radio test was just beyond, I guess, my ability to—all the beep, beep. Finally I

just—so they made me a purchasing agent, and I fell in with Harvard graduates that were the attorneys in my office and—and man, you talk about learning. So they taught me that Mom should sub-lease some of that property and we suggested—and I suggested that. And there was a couple of stores—one in Auburn, where she was actually able to get a sub-lease and quit paying the lease but the—the story of that is how she made it through that. I—it’s just unbelievable. There again, barbecue could have been gone right then.

01:13:58

MS: In the meantime—in the meantime, the one from Jasper, the manager that owned the Jasper franchise, he talked me into opening some more stores, which we opened about—how many—five or six more. And I don’t know why—I don’t know why or how I got through it, but I had the store here in Bessemer to look after, too, besides Bob and—but I managed to keep them going long enough that I would let their names phase out, and they’d put their own name up and take the Bob Sykes name down. Because they were not following our—our menus like I wanted them to. The food was not what I thought it should be. So I was gradually getting our name out. But I was in there with—fighting that for about two years or more and I did it. I don’t know—**[Laughs]** But I was determined **[Laughs]**—and to keep it—keep going and not lose my store in Bessemer.

01:15:15

VS: Which almost happened because this lease ran out a block up—up here. Well the building is still there, and it’s still built like a barn, and it’s still got the window, but it’s an Italian place. But it was a ten-year lease, and it was running out, and I was coming home from the military and decided that I would work with—with this and, I guess, I really always knew I would but—.

01:15:38

MS: I didn't. [*Laughs*]

01:15:39

VS: But I had worked, obviously, for other people and realized that I was an entrepreneur-type person and would never be happy any other way. So anyway, I came home and we left that place and the guy sued us—the landlord over about—yeah, they tried everything to stifle us because he wanted to sub-lease it to someone who would—people would assume we were still there. And so he did everything in the world to squelch us. And we'd still had basically not a lot of money, and the local Greek restaurant [The Bright Star] here in town, the Koikos family had been in business this—next year is their 100th anniversary. And he [Jimmy Koikos] knew of our situation, and he owned this piece of property [on 9th Avenue in Bessemer, where Bob Sykes BarB-Q stands today], and he came to mom and said, "I'll sell it to you." So there again, you know, it was almost gone—there again and there the door was opened and she—you know, then had a problem with—. Women in business, see, was not a popular thing then and—and the bankers didn't really care to loan money to women and it was just, you know, a difficult thing. But there was a man in town from the bank that realized—

01:17:08

MS: The manager over—the manager at First Federal—

01:17:11

VS: Yeah, Mr. Davis.

01:17:13

MS: Mr. Davis came to me and said, “I heard you might need some money.” *[Laughs]* And I said, “Boy, do I.” He said, “Well I’m here to lend you some.” And I said, “What?” *[Laughs]* He said, “Yes,” he said, “you—I heard you need to build a new building.” And I said, “Well that’s it. I don’t have the finances.” He said, “Well you will. Just come over to the bank, and we’ll talk about it.” And I just couldn’t hardly believe it. I said, you know, “I’m a woman. Don’t you—?” And he said *[Laughs]*—he said, “Yeah, I know you’re a woman. And I know your reputation, and I trust you.” *[Laughs]*

01:17:58

AE: How long had y’all been in Bessemer by this time?

01:18:01

VS: Ten years.

01:18:02

AE: Ten years?

01:18:03

VS: Uh-hmm. The name was well-known in the town, and everybody liked the product and they liked them and—but the struggles that you know—the thing that—that Mama always put in it was, I’m telling the business side of it, and she learned that from those little grocery stores and—and we’d never made any money ‘til Daddy was out of it. I mean we have to just face the fact that he just didn’t care about the, you know—the necessary evil, which was the money. And we never made anything ‘til he—he quit making decisions and making—

01:18:39

MS: Had the stroke.

01:18:38

VS: Yeah, I mean and it's—there again, boom, it could have all just fallen to the wayside but, you know, it's—it—it didn't because her family history of being entrepreneurs and—and you know, when Daddy came back from the war, she had saved enough money to buy a little grocery store. Because see Mom was a Rosie Riveter in World War II. She—she worked for Belcher Macomb and actually ended up that head wiring inspector for the B-25 and she started in the—in the cockpit and they ran the wires in because the women built the planes and the war machines, and so she got a taste of making good money. A lot of women did. And then all of the sudden the men came home and, “We don't need you no more, bye.” But it created the women entrepreneurs that we know today. I'm telling you. That was the seed right there was in the four—four-and-a-half years of war, she made excellent money and got a taste of it and saved the money and—and she always would have never been a housewife because she had that—. But had the war not happened, and she had stayed home and raised babies or whatever—but there was a lot of women that were forced out to work and then—and then it became a proven ground and it—it wet their appetite for making a living. And I'll tell you right now, that's where it started. And there again it was just the blending of her having that experience, him having his experience, and—and her, you know, wanting to make money. Because, you know, you have to make—you don't have the money. The barbecue wouldn't be here without the success of running a business around it. So and there again, see, that ties back into the franchising thing. People get in there and they see what you got and they think, “Boy, I'd like to have that.” But

they don't realize everything that went with it and made it work. So then they say, "Well let's try this and try that." And pretty soon, boom! It's either that or you have to regiment them down so tight that—I'll just tell you this right now, and you can carve this in a rock. If you're going to franchise barbecue, you're going to compromise the way you cook it. There is no way you could have forty-seven of these and have that same thing out there; it just will not, cannot, will never work. Now if you want to go out there and put a natural gas valve on it or—or something, then fine. You know, you can have a Sonny's Barbecue, but you will never franchise what's out there. I've tried. I wish I had the money I lost trying to do it, but I was just like him. They drew me into it, offered me a lot of money and—and I said, "Go with it," and was ready to absolutely murder them within thirty days. And so not feeling like I could get away with that, you know, I just got out of it so—.

01:21:52

AE: Well and now that billboard that I saw coming into town here [in Bessemer], it says on there "Some people have branches, and we have roots," and so—.

01:21:58

VS: Well, you know, a franchise came in on us down here, and it dawned on me, you know, that—I—almost like, "I dare you; we've been here thirty years," you know. So I—this idea came that, you know, where others have their branches, we have our roots and—and so that's exactly right and—and people say, you know, where you ought to move down here and move over there, you know. This is a sacred piece of ground. I'll just tell you, you know, it's just—there's something about that pit, I—I just—I mean you have to get over there and work it right, but there again, the layman's view is, you know, well just pick it up and move it down there. Well it—uh-

uh, it—it don't work that way. Just because it's sitting right here working today, there is no guarantee you're going to move that eight miles down the road and have the same thing. I'm funny about it and so, you know, like people say and ask me, do I want—do you want to buy a franchise? I say I'm too old and too smart. I will not—.

01:23:08

AE: Been there.

01:23:08

VS: Been there, done it, it didn't work out. And like I say, if you want to compromise what you're doing and you're happy with that, and it's a money thing, do it. But otherwise, you'll have a lot better life just doing this like this so—.

01:23:27

MS: Van is really fortunate in ways of—you know who his partner is? My grandson—

01:23:36

VS: Third generation.

01:23:36

AE: [To Van] Your nephew, right?

01:23:38

VS: That's where we get the—

01:23:40

MS: Third generation. And he's got two girls, and Jason has got one; they already like to come behind the counter and watch—of course, work the cash register. *[Laughs]*

01:23:52

AE: Well can we talk about your evolution in the business, Van, to growing up and learning from your dad and—and owning the business?

01:23:58

VS: Well, you know, my break came to me when I went into the military because there was a guy that sat across from me—an old troop, I suppose, named Mr. Burns, known as Pappy Burns. So he set an example for me; he was the only guy—we're going into the [nineteen] seventies, okay. This is the only guy that could look at me and say, "You need a haircut," and I wouldn't argue with him. I'd just go get my haircut. He could tell me anything. But early on, for whatever reason—now the Air Force has one guy who is a Chief Master Sergeant of the whole Air Force, and he's got so many stripes he looks like a zebra, but right in the middle there's a star. Well there is only one; that was him, and—and he liked—for whatever reason, he liked me and told me the first week I was there—told another guy, "Clean your desk and move over there. You move over here." And he moved me right across from him. And the lessons that, gosh, that man taught me over the next three years about, you know, just being smart and being on time and being above things and not involved and just, you know—I used to like, for example, everybody tried to wash their own clothes; I sent mine to the cleaners. You know, and my clothes looked good and I got—you know, I learned a lot from that guy, so that when I came back home I had another couple of—an old Sergeant that just didn't like me for whatever reason and—and so that was another lesson learned is I just—that guy, you know, he finally told me when I got ready to

leave there in his office one day he said, you know, because we had just—Argh, and he said— finally told me, “Well what I don’t like about you is everybody likes you and they just don’t— you know, I try to be hard on people and—and get them to respect me but, you know, everybody, they like you and that just makes me mad.” I mean he finally told me that, and I learned from all that. And there was a major in the office that told me, “You don’t need to reenlist; you’re not the military type.” And so all that—I began to listen to all that. And when I came home, you know, I had all that from them inside of me of, you know, how to do it and—and then I suppose this is a great time to mention that it wouldn’t be here without a lady named Dot Brown. And so Dot Brown **[Sighs]** you know, I just get emotional thinking about that. **[Emotional]**

01:26:53

AE: Yeah. I understand she developed a lot of your sides and the famous lemon pie and—?

01:27:00

VS: She developed a lot of me, too. **[Laughs]** Because she’s just—I don’t know; she was wonderful.

01:27:09

MS: I could have never made it without her.

01:27:11

AE: Did she come to y’all, or did y’all seek her out?

01:27:15

MS: She came to us when we hadn't been in business but just a—about a couple of years; she just come in looking for a job.

01:27:26

AE: And this was in the early [nineteen] sixties, is that right?

01:27:28

MS: Uh-hmm, yeah—early '60s and she was with us forty-three years. And she was just like my partner, during my hard time that I was having, you know, without my family help; and she was just like my family. I could, you know, trust her, leave her with the business and all that; so we all just, you know—she's just a loveable person and a smart one.

01:28:00

VS: Yeah, that's for sure. She—she was the—she had carte blanche to spank me. Yeah and—and she did. And if I acted up, I'm telling you, she'd put—it rained down hard. And she was just like a mother, I'm telling you. But the most talented person I've ever seen with food. Because the day came when I had to catalog some of this stuff and Lord, you know, trying to get a recipe out of her—little of this, a little of that, and a hunk of that and, you know. “Well Dot, we need the—.” So I thought, “Well, we'll just put it all on a scale and weigh it; I don't even care if it's a liquid, we'll just weigh it.” So, you know, I realized then that it's just not writing it down and throwing it in a pot; there was just something—it was just magic, you know. But she run the thing—I remember she'd run that mixer with this hand and crack and separate eggs with the other hand just non-stop. And then I'd just, you know—now I look back and realize that was just talent. God.

01:29:15

AE: Do you know what she did before she came to y'all? Did she work in a restaurant or just was a home cook?

01:29:20

VS: No, she was a home cook. She grew—her mother was a huge influence on her. She spoke of her a lot. And Dot was married a man good bit older than her named Dan. I used to call him “Dan the Barbecue Man” because he actually was not working in the coalmine, and he came down and helped Daddy barbecue some, but he didn’t—Dan didn’t know anything about it. Daddy told him everything but—and—and they raised hogs on the side. And she just was out looking for work. You know, back then it’s really kind of strange, now that I think about it, but you could go over to—to that side of town and just find people to work. And now it’s just occurred to me how people go up these Latinos, I suppose, but it was kind of—that’s really the way it was then and—and that’s—Dot—we had Dot and her sister and they lived in Ensley [Alabama] and—and there’s a lot of days we went and got them; they didn’t have a car. And if they didn’t ride the bus, or if the bus schedule didn’t accommodate what they did—their time—then we took them back and forth. And that was the birth, though, of the—the slaw, that potato salad, which is just so Southern. But you know—you know, I’ve looked back now at her recipes, and if you look at them, the ingredient lists are short and simple basic: salt, pepper, flour, milk, eggs. You know there’s no cilantro and all that. I mean because that’s what her mother had, who taught her to cook. What they had was eggs, milk, sugar, flour and lard and bacon grease and every other thing we love, so that, to me, once again is—is not just the barbecue—is the side items kind of have survived through all this too because they’re the same way today. They’re just

real simple, but what they are is they're fresh. You know, the eggs are fresh, the milk is fresh, the—everything is mixed and made fresh and, you know, so—and—and you know, she was one of them women that, I'm going to tell you what, when she was running that mixer and breaking them eggs, she had a Kool cigarette in her mouth and that's what she was going to do. And Mama would just, oh, have a fit. But we had a wooden—as everyone did, we had butcher-block tables in the kitchen; there was not a one that didn't have a cigarette burn halfway up the table. But that was her—God love her—that's the way she was and—.

01:32:09

MS: Can't change it.

01:32:10

VS: No. And who knows, maybe the cigarette ashes was the secret ingredient. Who knows? God forbid that but, you know, she was—she was a one of a kind, too, you know. There's just never—I just, you know, to treat me like, you know, the way she just—just took me over, you know, and man that's just an integral part of this whole thing. And speaking of my evolution, you know, that's what I recalled at her funeral was just how she, you know—me too. **[Laughs]**

01:32:47

AE: Yeah. What year did she pass?

01:32:50

VS: It was mid-'90s—probably '94—'95; she had been on dialysis for a number of years and her—her—back—old, you know. I think about, especially with young people today, I think about how hard they were. Her feet would swell and her ankles but—but she just worked right

on. [*Phone Rings*] Just worked right on where—never complained, you know. Just worked right on and always the same, you know.

01:33:29

MS: She raised a bunch of kids. She raised—she raised several—.

01:33:36

AE: I'm sorry, say that again.

01:33:38

MS: She raised her nephews and her nieces—a couple of sets, one set of twins; their mother died. She raised them. She raised two more that I know of besides her own three children.

01:33:52

VS: Yeah, and she had—there were a lot of—she was good with boys. Her sons were very good guys, and she was very good with—with raising boys. [*Laughs*] Yeah.

01:34:05

AE: When did she stop working at the restaurant? Did she retire for a while?

01:34:09

VS: Probably in the late '80s or '90s—somewhere in there. We knew the day was coming and, you know, yeah, it was a bad time.

01:34:19

MS: I couldn't believe it was happening. But, you know, she said, "Well just—this is going to be my last day, now." Boy it was hard to take; I just couldn't believe she really, really was going, but she knew it was time. She couldn't, you know—her legs had got to hurting her so bad, she knew it was time she had to quit.

01:34:43

AE: Did she still come in or y'all go visit her or—?

01:34:46

VS: No, she came in some and—and her kids would bring her to the Christmas parties and so forth and—and of course there's a lady back there today that's been here forty-two years now, and mother hired her forty-some years ago. But she worked a lot with Dot, and they all had a good relationship—working relationship together. And so Dot would come and visit occasionally, but certainly if we had a Bob Sykes event or get-together, But she—she—. I remember the way, you know, she could just make a barbecue. She was another one—just make a sandwich just—oh, man just—yeah just—. That was her thing was we'd bring somebody in and me and her used to laugh because she would put the meat on it. She worked with two hands but somebody could just—and Dot would just say, "Well I'll just tie the other one behind your back because you're not using it," and she'd teach people how to do it with two hands. And I remember getting on the grill line with her and just man, we would fly because she would—we would count them up, you know. We'd have a stream of tickets, and she'd say, "Count them up," you know. She always said *boy*, but you know she just—that's what she said. "Count them up boy; tell me what you got." You know, and so I'd count them up and that's how many she'd put on the grill. And she'd say, "I land them, you wrap them," and—and it was up to me to wrap

them and figure what went where. And she was just slinging them things off that grill. But she, you know, made—but she still made them one at a time, you know; I mean they were just—boy, she could make a sandwich.

01:36:30

MS: And he [Van] used to tell in the kitchen, “Everybody should have to work for their mama.” And he’d stay mad at me half the time, you know, because I’d be on the front and he’d be in the kitchen with Dot, you know, and I’d—trying to get the food out. And so one day he said, “I quit.” **[Laughs]** And so he turned around and he—he went out the back door. Well Dot was right behind him, and she followed him out the back door and she got him by the hair of the head and she pulled him back **[Laughs]** and put him over there in line and said, “Now I mean you stay in this line,” and said, “don’t think you’re going—you’re going to ever quit because you’re going to stay here and help your mama. She needs you, and you’re going to stay here, so just make up your mind to that.” **[Laughs]**

01:37:20

VS: Yeah. And then she’d already been whipping me for, you know, fifteen years so—and I didn’t want no more of that, so I came on back in. But that’s what we did, we worked in the kitchen and I cracked eggs for her and I mixed—we made the sauce then, and you know now I go through so much I have somebody that makes it to our recipe, which really works good. And they’re actually probably a little more consistent than we are sometimes because we have so much to do. But we’d put on a forty-quart pot and her and Daddy would stand me up on a stool and it—it would have lemon halves and onion floating in it and right at the top her and Daddy would put a big old pound of Oleo or butter—probably butter back then—and he’d put that

pound up there, and he'd say, you know—she'd say, “Now boy, you stand up there and stir that ‘til the butter melts.” And—and you know, all these years I thought how smart was that because when the heat got to the top and melted that butter, well, it had cooked thoroughly. It wasn't thirty minutes; it wasn't forty-five minutes. “You stir it ‘til the butter melts.” And I remember watching that disappear and thinking, man. And I'd hold it on the bottom, you know, trying—so I could get up out of that stool, but I had to keep stirring it ‘til—. And she'd come over there or Daddy would come over there and say. “All right, the—the butter is melted. You—you can quit now.” So I had—Daddy had a boat paddle, and we stirred it with a boat paddle until the butter melted. But that was her thing was she'd put me up there standing on a bar stool over the stove stirring.

01:39:14

MS: And your daddy told you—told—said, “Don't be telling the customers what's in the sauce.” So the customers would—he—he was about two or three—said, “If they ask—.” And so the customers would ask Van and say, “Van, what you got in that sauce?” And he'd say, “Oh, you see that right there?” He said, “That looks like an onion, don't it?” And he said, “Yeah, that is an onion.” He said, “No, it isn't; that's not an onion.” Of course, it was. **[Laughs]**

01:39:47

AE: Cute. Can you talk about when we were talking about that picture of you out front of you taking orders with that dishtowel wrapped around your waist?

01:39:52

VS: Yeah. My Daddy was a prankster, you know, and used to put me up to stuff, and so he'd tie that bar towel on me like an apron and send me out there with a pad, and I'd get the paper you know—the Arnold *Happy Days* paper hat and—and he'd put the pencil behind my ear and send me out to get orders. So there was no, you know—there was—if I—if, you know, I didn't—some people I knew, some I didn't, but that's where they taught me to—you go out and, you know, “How you doing,” and, “Take your order,” and, “Can I help you.” And so that's where all that started was, you know, going out there as a kid. And then I went to the curb hop and—and I waited on people at—at the curb. And all the time, you know, just didn't realize what all I was soaking up, but I realize how there's different kinds of people, you know. Some want you to take their order, and some want you to leave them alone; some want to talk to you, and some want to say hi, and some don't want nothing. And, you know, I've just learned how to figure all that out by going out to those tables—even when you didn't want to. Because when I was young, there'd be like a girl or something, and I was bashful, and I didn't want to go out there but he'd—get out there, you know. And I'd, you know, have to go out there and take the order and—but all the time learning, you know—learning stuff and like—like Mother, I didn't like waiting on tables, but I liked running it from behind the counter. And then I began to get the big picture, you know. I began to really—really understand that. And I tell my nephew this, “They'll tell you why they're coming in here, if you'll sit there and pick it out of them.” You just—but you have to listen to the way people phrase their words and what order they say things in, and pretty soon you begin to realize there's a theme here; there is a reason that they come in here, you know. And I learned to pick up on that. And then like—like my daddy said, I'd get—“Now let me transfer myself to the other side of the counter. Now what—what can I do now, knowing why they come here? How can I make it better?” And so that's when some of my ideas took hold, like

working the phone orders and—and you know, making sure that when they call in, they don't want to be treated like somebody that walks in because they feel like I'm ahead of that person. So I built a station over there just for phone orders and—and but all those experiences—all that comes from the experience of learning to read people way back then just as a child and—and you know, realizing that everybody was different and wanted something different. And because it, you know, it's just so beyond serving food. Once you've done this long enough, it really becomes just a people thing. I mean the food is kind of the—the common denominator of the place, but there's so much more to it than just—just the food part. So being a kid, learning to work the curb—Lord, the curb hopping was something else because you just walk yourself to death and—.

01:43:27

MS: He went out one time, we had a couple that come in and—Bobby and I—and tell us, said, “Did you know that man come out and told us that we—we couldn't pet out there? That his daddy didn't allow it.” *[Laughs]*

01:43:39

VS: Well I remember the first time I—I got a bad whipping for asking for a tip, but I hated waited on these people and told, you know—and they said, “Oh, he sure is cute,” and all that. And I said, “Yeah, but you know, I'm working and you know—.” And so anyway, I said something about, “Yeah, well hard work, and I'll just deserve a good tip.” And the guy gave me like 50—a 50-cent piece, which was huge. So, you know, Mom asked me how I got it and I said, “Well I just told him I had waited on him good, and I thought, you know, that I deserved it.” And boy, oh boy. She told me, “You don't ask for a tip; you earn it.” And I got a whipping, and I

went back out there and gave the 50-cents back, and I was just crying, you know, and boo-hoo(ing). And I said, “I’m sorry that I asked you for a tip, and I wasn’t supposed to, and I’ve got to give your money back. And my mama said I had to earn it.” And he—he got it back and he looked at it and he said, “Son, I think you earned this one. **[Laughs]** You can have it back.” And he gave it back to me. And I remember going to the candy store, and I couldn’t spend it all. I had—could not—I had so many bags of candy.

01:45:00

AE: How old were you when this happened?

01:45:02

VS: Oh, probably eleven or twelve. Just, you know, I just—growing up around, you know, learning what made people happy and—and you really do earn a tip and—and I was surprised people waiting on tables now haven’t figured that out that, you know, it’s—you know, if you’re rude and short to people, it may come back to bite you in the end, so—but I learned that when I was about eight or ten years old. And Daddy said, “You catch more flies with sugar.” And so that’s what I’d try to, you know, be nice and—and well, it was just part of the whole thing, you know. It was learning from Mr. Burns in the military about doing things right and, you know, that was just—just—how in the world did I get hooked up with that man? I don’t know. And then the other people around me were attorneys and so, you know, and I was 1seventeen. Because I went—after Daddy had his stroke, I was kind of lost. And so I ended up just—I didn’t want to go to school because I worked. I mean all of the sudden, you know, they’re telling me, “You got to stay in school.” And I had—I had money; I had worked; I had made money, and I just didn’t—so I quit and took a GED and then messed around and Daddy, you know, wanted—

told Mom in his charades, which we became very good at in twenty-two years he couldn't talk, but he could gesture and grunt and so forth, and we communicated that way. But anyway, I went and worked for somebody, and that didn't work. And then they had a [Bob Sykes] franchise in Auburn [Alabama] that wasn't doing well, and so she sent me down there at sixteen, seventeen to live and run the store, which I was very capable of doing but—. And it worked out good for three or four months 'til then I discovered the—the college girls, and that was it. I just lost my focus and just lost it, you know. And so had to come back home, and that's when I decided, "Well I'm just going in the military." And then in like 1972 or 1973 in Vietnam and being seventeen, eighteen, that wasn't a popular thing but they had—. [*To interviewer*] You want me to [hold the microphone]—?

01:47:23

AE: Sure, yeah.

01:47:25

VS: They had the—the GI Bill was good then, you know, and so I wanted the GI Bill benefits. I wanted the college paid for and the housing benefit, and so I joined. And what a wonderful place to have been from seventeen, eighteen, nineteen—almost twenty—the wild years, you know. I was tethered by these influential people that I worked with every day that just wouldn't let me do anything less than, you know—you know, be the best you can be was Mr. Burns' thing so—and how fortunate to be there with those guys and—and learn all that at that age and then come back here and be able to apply all that together. But to me, the—the best thing about where I've landed and ended up is this. [*Laughs*] All that food out there, I'm telling you, from the counter to that back door, I'm just telling you, it ain't—it's not any different; it's the same, you know. It's

the—the eggs, the milk, the sugar, the—but from the front forward, you know, I've been able to bring it into modern times and—and do things that people have to have. If you can't take their order and feed them lunch in ten minutes, you're out. You're out. I mean there will be no barbecue; it wouldn't work. You've got to fit their lifestyle and, you know, the drive-thru, the phone—all that fits their lifestyle and being able to print the orders on the computer and send them to the back and then have them understand what they want because, you know, you can make a barbecue about 500 ways—inside, outside, chopped, sliced, mixed, whatever—and—and you know, we've kind of gotten—gotten them spoiled, you know, where it's mix-sliced, but just a little more outside, you know, and—and people that come from other parts don't know it—. It's like a Southern lingo; it's like ordering coffee at Starbucks. I mean somebody that is not a common person would [say], “What in the world did they just order?” Well that's the way northerners feel when they come in here and the boy—the good old boy says, “Give me a mixed slice and a—,” you know. Or a, you know, “I want a—a mixed chopped,” or a—and they're like, “What is an inside chop? What does that mean?” Remember? They don't even know, and we have to explain to them that, you know, inside—inside and outside, what's next to the fire, and so, you know, we've got them that spoiled that, you know—. But all of that see has—has survived all of this other and—and you know, Southerners love it, and I think they always will. And to me, that's the greatest thing about what we've been able to do is we haven't changed the old cooking, but we've made it fit everybody's lifestyle now. You know the—the problem I face now is, I look at fast food because that's what they were, but the way I cook, I can't survive on fast-food prices. So that's the dilemma that I work with even today is how to get more money for the food. See, barbecue has always been traditionally a cheap food like chicken legs or something, you know. It was—well actually, when I grew up and when they started, you know,

chicken was the cheap stuff, you know. It was cheap, cheap, cheap. And pork and beef and—. Well now, you know, the chicken is more than the pork, you know, and the demand is higher, but you know it's still—I still sell a whole lot more pork than chicken. And I know a lot of places on the other end of town that barbecue that sell a lot more chicken than pork. But you know, I—what I want to serve is just what I've got, you know. It's—nothing has changed. Skin on, you know. [The pig] It's a lot leaner animal [today], unfortunately; it doesn't taste like it used to. And I have people say—but for the most part they're like, "It's just like your mother's and daddy's." But you know what, it's just not the same, and I have to tell them it's—it's our old friend, the pig—it's not me. I mean I know what I'm doing, but the animal is different, you know. It's just a different—.

01:51:59

MS: What in the world is going on out there? [*Loud Voices in Background*]

01:52:01

VS: Well they're—if it's like that, then everything is fine. I've learned that. I mean as long as that is going on [*talking about the loud voices coming from the kitchen*] every—they're fine. But when they—you know, when it gets real quiet back there, that's when you want to see what's going on so—. Sharon, that's her, she reminds me a lot of—of Dot. She really, really, really does. And she can make those pies very much like Dot, you know. That lemon pie—see, what's really helped was in 1978 Jane and Michael Stern were traveling through the South and they were looking for—it was called *Road Food* and you had to be less than seven miles off the exit or something—parameter and they came through and a trucker—they got on a CB radio and said, "We're traveling from New York, and we're looking for Southern barbecue. Can somebody

recommend something?” And I’m telling you, it must have been—it was directly from God—gets on the CB and tells these people to go to Bob Sykes BarB-Que. And they came in, and they wrote a story. And it made the book [*Road Food*] and then all of the sudden I noticed people coming in with these books, and they’re all ordering ribs and lemon pie and asking for—because they miswrote it and put “Bill Sykes” and so people would want to know where Bill was and—and I realized you’ve got that book, you know, and so it later got corrected to Bob and Maxine, but that’s what started us as getting some recognition outside of just here because they went on a little tour and the local papers would pick up and do a little story. And I’ll never forget, a guy came in carrying a *Boston Globe*, and it had their article in there and she talked about how they had traveled through the South and she had gained sixty pounds in search of the perfect lemon pie. And the reporter asked them, “Well did—was it worth it? Did you find it?” And bless her soul, she said, “Yeah, in Bessemer, Alabama. There is a black lady there—perfect—perfect lemon pie.” Well that article hit that paper and boom! Before I know it, we had people coming from everywhere. And that’s what got us, you know, past just a little place in Bessemer, and then we started getting a little recognition and then they did a reprint of the book and so that was an evolution. That changed a lot of things for us because all of the sudden, you know, we were known and—and I started getting people and—and—. Even though I realize now my daddy had a big following because Johnny Apple from [*The New York Times*]—that comes to these things, he was reporting on the Bull Connor days in the early ‘60s and told me that his only salvation was eating at my daddy’s place in Five Points West and remember how good that was and—and Lord, it was. It was good. It—you know, we had a nice piece of meat to cook and, you know, it—it really wasn’t—you didn’t have all these goofy Health Department things that we have now that are just silly, you know—all this temperature mess and stuff. It’s just silly. It’s just, you

know, a justification to charge us for a food permit and stuff. But I've tried not to let it ruin my barbecue by coming in early and cooking it and cutting it and serving it. Because these holding cabinets and all this mess they make you use will just suck the barbecue flavor out of it. So, you know, who would think I'd be battling the Health Department.

01:56:15

AE: Can we talk about the process real quick? We've been together a long time, and I've been enjoying it, and I hope y'all don't have to be anywhere. Okay, about the process of cooking and Alonzo Scott who's—was your pitmaster for a long time and kind of the schedule of what you do and how you do it?

01:56:32

VS: Yeah. Well he—Alonzo was a great pit guy, and we've had a few. He was here fourteen, fifteen years. His people skills was as good as his cooking, but the thing that was good about him is, he could make a good fire. And you've got to be able to make a good fire. And, you know, there's no temperature knob; there's no set way. And if it's raining one day, it takes more wood; and if it's dry, it takes less. It's just the wind is blowing—and Alonzo learned to work with all those variables because he and I just had a friendship, where I first met his brother, who was wonderful, and then he moved to Houston and he sent Alonzo. And as any small businessperson has done right out of the box, you know, I helped him buy a car and—and just kind of helped him, which he, you know, he needed. So he got a respect kind of for me and—and it allowed him to learn how to do things with the—with the emphasis of, "I'd like to learn to do this right." And he helped me a lot with things down—later down the road, as far as how to scrape the grill clean, and he had a few things that he did that was really good. But with him being here fourteen years,

I was able to get the process down of—of making the fire and—because I knew he'd do what I said, and so he was a big part of getting to—to the next level. See, they always—Mom and Dad always ran out on the Fourth of July, and people were always inevitably disappointed. But poor Dot could only cut so much meat, and we could only cook so much meat. I remember cooking as a kid and fell asleep one year and burnt it up and had to call home and tell them. Oh, it was bad. I said, “Daddy, I burnt the meat.” And he said, “I’ll—I’ll cut around it.” “No, you don’t understand. I mean I burnt the meat.” **[Emphasis Added]** He said, “What do you mean?” I said, “Well it melted all the bread, if that tells you anything.” Oh, my goodness. Well I paid for every bit of it. Like I said, you don’t want to work for your mother because they control your paycheck. If you do something to your mother, and she writes your check, it will come out. It’s kind of like Dot used to tell me the story when her—one of her boys would be out and she’d want to—they’d call her on the phone and she’d say, “Boy, when I get home I’m going to whip your you know what.” And I’d say, “Well Dot, he ain’t going to be there. You done told him you’re going to whip him. He ain’t going to be there.” And she said, “Got to eat, don’t they?” And so she’d come in at supper, and it was kind of the same thing so—. But I forget what I was talking about with Alonzo. But he allowed me to get to the next level because we—we were able to cook quantities of meat to keep the store opened and get everybody satisfied and when—when Dot and mom was here for that period of time, they just did what they could do and went home. But I saw the need that more people wanted it, you know, and they were disappointed; and I was afraid they’d find another place to go to. So I had to fill the demand. So the greatest role that he filled while he was here was being consistent enough to allow me then to say, “Well let’s do this and let’s cook all night this night and then the next night, you know, we won’t have to cook and just—.” I was able to do that because I had somebody I could count on to be here in the clutch

times, you know. So that—that was a huge thing, because what I wanted to do—what I still do on the barbecue holidays is I don't cook ahead. Now I'll cook picnic [shoulder] ahead, but I don't cook ribs ahead. We start at midnight and just cook them all night. And I know places now that cook them and freeze them and reheat them, but you know what I say? I'm not here to set a quantity record; I'm here to set a *quality* record. Yeah, I'm not here just to see how much of this can I serve. I'm here—how much can I serve the way I serve it. And so, you know, I didn't change or compromise anything. But you know, Alonzo was key in helping me, you know—who else had come in here at eleven o'clock at night and stay all the way until three o'clock, four o'clock the next day in front of that thing [the pit] the whole time? And I've done it, and it ain't—it gets to—it ain't backyard barbecue. And what's so bad is they're [the customers] all standing up there wanting it and they're just—and it's not like you can go turn the knob up. I mean, all I can do is stand there and watch him cook, and it's nerve-racking, but he did it year-in and year-out. And then finally his—his health and—and some family situations kind of ran him out of it, and he finally had to leave so—. Of course, the most famous thing with him was the guy getting caught in the chimney. And he discovered that—come in that morning and the guy's shoes were hanging over the grill kicking. And Alonzo was here for that, and that story went all over the world; it was on Paul Harvey; it was on Bill O'Reilly; it was just—because when they got the guy out of the pit—out of the chimney—the way they had tugged and pulled on him, all he had left on was his underwear. And he was just covered in grease. And Fox TV was here to film it, and so it just went all over the syndications. It was on John Stewart; it was on everything.

02:02:51

AE: He was trying to rob the place?

VS: Yes, he was going to break in and slide down the chimney and—and it—it hit the—. Well forty-six Fox affiliates picked it up that night and ran it, and then CNN hit it and then—then Paul Harvey did one of those “*The rest of the story*” deals, talking about the Nike shoes hanging over the grill. So Alonzo was famous for that; he was on the front page. I still have the paper and all over there, holding the boy’s pants up. And we just had a great time—great time, you know, that—that we laughed because and—and which, of course, sums it all up is that it was his cousin [who was trying to rob the place]. Oh, yeah. So, you know, and that’s why he was hollering his name when he came in. And Alonzo couldn’t figure out, “Who is calling me?” And then he come in far enough to see the shoes and he said, you know, “Leroy, is that you?” And he said, “Yeah.” “What are you doing?” He said, “I tried to break in, and I’m stuck.” And so Alonzo had to call me at home and tell me, you know. And he told me, you know, I heard my cell phone go off and I said, “I’m not answering it.” And then my home phone went off, and I thought, “Something is wrong.” And I answered it, and it was Alonzo, and you hear what every business owner wouldn’t want to hear. He said—I said, “What’s going on, man?” “Turn on your TV.” And I said, “Why, what’s on it?” He said, “You won’t believe it.” And I said, “Well I—I probably will. I mean, I’ve been there. What is it?” He said, “I’m telling you, turn on Fox 6.” And there we were. There was the store, and they’re bringing this guy off the roof and—and I said, “What happened?” He said, “That was Leroy. He tried to break in, and he got stuck.” So it—it just—and I mean it hit the Rick and Bubba and John Boy and Billy and it just went around the country, so Alonzo was famous for that. He really was. They interviewed him on TV so—.

AE: So when did your nephew, Jason Jewel, come into the picture?

VS: He, just like me, was raised in it—the same thing. My sister is ten years older than me, and by the time she married and had him, I was probably at the point of what, fourteen [years old]—about the time my Daddy had a stroke. So Jason spent a lot of time with me and Mom and Dot and Mildred and the whole cast of characters just like me. I mean honestly, except that we weren't in a carhop—we were already into what we do now and—when he came along. So he took right to it. And just as good fortune would have it, now I'm the entertainer, and he's the worker. **[Laughs]** So but he's a good numbers, computer-type person and—and so his skill compliments mine, which I've yet to figure out. But just being out there and talking to people is about what I have to do now. Now I, of course, can do anything, but he's in it just like I have, and when he got out of college he had valedictorian in high school, you know—graduated with honors from Birmingham Southern and it just—[he thought] what am I going to do? And I told him, “There's nothing like running—being in a family business. You're going to work for somebody else?” And I think there's a bit of entrepreneur in Jason, and so he decided to join me and—and do the greatest thing you can do, which is work for yourself and then to be able to serve food to people that they enjoy. I mean you wouldn't believe, I have people come in and honestly tell me, “My poor daddy is up here at UAB [University of Alabama at Birmingham] dying and I'm—Daddy, is there—what can I do for you?” He said, “What can I do?” “Well if you would just go down to Bob Sykes and get me another barbecue.” I mean how—I mean how touching is that? I mean, they're—I mean, the people—I mean, it just shows you, you know, what you're really doing here. And Jason is beginning to get the big picture now and realize you're not just throwing food across the counter; you're really involved in somebody's life. They're laying thinking, “Well, time is winding down, you know, but you know what? I think I

want a barbecue.” So it’s a morbid story, but it just tells you how, you know, we enjoy food and—and—and you’re laying there and well, you’re thinking, “What do I enjoy in life? Food is what I enjoy and—.”

02:07:48

MS: The older people—

02:07:49

VS: Yeah, so—yeah.

02:07:51

MS: Older people enjoy the barbecue because, as you get older, your tastes change, and there’s a lot of food you can’t taste. But you can taste the—the barbecue because of the herbs and all the, you know, different flavors of the barbecue and that’s—you notice we have a lot of older elderly people, couples and so on that come—.

02:08:21

VS: Well I’ll tell you another reason, too: they’re getting homemade food, and they know what homemade food is. There’s people that come in here that are so used to—with all due respect—Applebee’s and O’Charlie’s and what I call Sam’s Wholesale Food that when they finally get something that was actually made that day, it’s like a revolution, you know. Hello! Well older people—I think it’s the Pavlovian deal, you know. I mean, they’re getting food that they have eaten for fifty years that’s harder and harder to find and—and I think that’s why so many older customers come in here and just really like it, because it really is about food at that point.

They’re not going out to have a margarita, you know; they’re going out to get food—good food

and so we do have—. Now I wonder on the opposite end of that, if the younger people—but I do, once again, see the phenomenon of, “Man, this is really good. This tastes good. This is not just something on a plate,” you know. It—and so I hope the younger people will appreciate, you know, it’s—of course that’s the whole thing about it. I just feel like now there’s just—people are afraid to eat and it’s just a shame—just breaks my heart to see people out there just wrestling with, you know, “Boy, I’d like to have that pie, you know, but arghh,” you know. Just—and it’s a shame, you know. It really is. And so I just tell people, “You know what? The food is here to enjoy, and you don’t find this everywhere—thank God—so—.”

02:10:06

AE: And it stood the test of time so that—you know, that, in itself, is good advertising.

02:10:10

VS: It really has. It’s—like I said, it has outlasted segregation. It has outlasted food bars and salad bars and car hops and this and that and, you know, this is the last—one of the last havens were an entrepreneur can still compete against the giants because they don’t have what I have, and they never will. Now they’ve single-handedly killed mom-and-pop hamburger. I mean, you just don’t see that because how you going to sell a hamburger for 39-cents? You—Italian mom and pop—you—I don’t see it. Barbecue, that is the one thing where the independent has the advantage over the giant corporation because of what we do, and it has outlasted all of that, and I always think it will. I really do. I—because as long as I do what I’m supposed to do—see, that’s where Southern—SFA [Southern Foodways Alliance] has been instrumental to me. And I realize that it was something that John Egerton, when he got me involved in this, what a gift it was because all of the sudden I realized that I have something that’s almost a higher calling, you

know? I began to realize, “You know what” You’ve got something pretty unique and—and you’re—.” It’s like Mama used to say, “Your locals will take you for granted; it’s the tourists where you get the measure of what you’re doing—the passer-by, that when you’re standing behind the counter he motions you over and you go, ‘Oh, man, what’s coming,’ and he says, ‘That’s the best lunch I’ve ever had.’” And so that’s where your measure comes from. Your locals, you know, well, they think this is their place. This is not my place and I can’t—.

02:11:59

MS: They don’t like travelers to come in, the local people. They’ll say to us, you know, “Where do all these people come from? It looks like—why don’t they get out of the way?” **[Laughs]**

02:12:09

VS: Oh, yeah, it’s interesting because, like I say, it really is their place. I can’t change anything out there without [them thinking], “He’s sold out. He’s gone.” I started using a printed piece of wax paper [to wrap sandwiches in, et cetera]—oh, immediately, “He’s—Van’s got them. It’s changed, it’s different.” No it isn’t, the paper is different. “Well, the sandwich is different,” you know. I honestly have had people tell me, “Well it just don’t taste the same, if you’re not here.” You know, so it—it is—it is a unique thing. That’s when you begin to realize, you know what, I can’t duplicate this. Why am I even trying. So I’m past that, but at the same time, I’ve learned through Southern Foodways [Alliance] and being involved in that, that this is very important, what I’m doing. This is very, very important. This could be lost. It could have gotten lost a dozen times along the way.

02:13:05

MS: I thought it was after a while.

02:13:07

VS: But it survived for a reason. I mean it really has for a reason. There's a reason the barbecue outlasted bad debts and partners and—and fires and theft and—.

02:13:24

MS: Prayer.

02:13:25

VS: Yeah, well a lot of that, there is no doubt. Because it wouldn't just happen without the higher power. There is no question. Their first place in Five Points, they were going to force them to be open on Sunday—

02:13:38

MS: Yeah, I told her about that.

02:13:39

VS: You know, so I mean, there again you can see, to me, there was something working there. But now at the point I'm at in my career, what I know now is this: I look at the—the people are the story. The Dot Brown, the Mildred, Alonzo. I began—I'm passed so much in this—I've reached the point now where, to me, it's just—it's the people. I always tell my nephew, it's the relationships—not, you know—not just the customers but the vendors, the—the employees. It's a relationship and—and when you get to that point where you strictly see this as people, I think that's when you realize that, "I'm getting—yeah, I'm getting up the mountain," you know.

Because, I mean, I know it's the food, but it's the people. And I said—you know, what I tell people now? [They say] "I wish you'd open one of these in Meridian, Mississippi." And I say, "You know what? It isn't me; it's them [pointing to the people working in the kitchen]. And if I could clone all them people, I'd take them over there and do it. But if I can't do that, it won't work because it's not me." I mean, I'm past knowing that's what it is. It's a bigger thing. It—it's—I mean it's—it's just real—it's just real barbecue. It's a generation—it's a trans-generational thing in Southerners about food and—and, you know, now-days let me tell you what everybody does now. Well let me tell you where they're falling off. Nobody appreciates—not very many—the dynamic of just salt, meat, fire—that's it. I would love to have some convoluted thing that I could tell you I'm doing out there. I'm not. I mean it's just—it's a time-honored thing. But you know what? It's almost too simple. By gosh, I wish it was just—you know, rub this for two hours and turn this over but it's—it's just real simple and that's the genius, you know.

02:15:47

MS: Let me tell her this about—since I've been retired, I mean, you know, I come in frequently and try to taste the food, and I kept tasting—I tasted the barbecue every so often and I was tasting it. I kept tasting the barbecue, and I think I told Van, I said, "There's something—something I don't know what, Van." And finally I said, "Is he—is—is Alonzo salting this meat—or whoever was on the pit?" He said, "Well, yeah." Said, "He's supposed to salt it before he puts it on." And I said, "Van, I don't believe he's salting it. I think that's what it is." And he said, "Well I'll tell you, I can find out." He said, "Let me go see if there's been any salt ordered lately." So he goes back and checks the orders, and they hadn't—there hadn't been any salt

ordered in, I don't know, a week or something. He said, "No, they hadn't been salting it. That's what's wrong." I said, "Yeah, I detected it. It was a little something, I knew."

02:17:00

VS: Most people don't understand the salt. I mean, I've had people come in and I put the salt—I work it in there like my daddy, and they're like, "Excuse me, but I know you're the expert, but isn't that too much salt?" I say, "No, it's—it's not going to make the meat salty. It—it opens it up; it makes it drip, so that when you put it up there, you get a drip. And once you get the drip to the fire, then you're—you're home free." But we used to sit—me and Dot and like, you know, wait for the dripping. Because the worst thing you have to do is put all that meat over there and pull it off and make another fire, if you don't make the fire right, because you can't—if you put paper in it, you're going to smut it and turn it black. There is nothing—so that was always the you know, "Oh, please start dripping." And once you'd hear that tssshhh [*sound*] hitting that fire, you knew; then close the doors, choke it down, come back in twenty minutes and turn it over. But that was always the time, you know. Now I've—I've since found a better way to make a fire; they didn't have it back then, but I use a propane torch, and I can light wood on fire now with no impurities and I can be cooking in twenty minutes. So I've actually found a better way to do it, which I stumbled upon. Some redneck told me—. I got hired by a food channel(er) or whoever to cook in Montgomery [Alabama] for Teddy Gentry. And I went down there and told them, "I don't cook offsite." Well the brought me a grill because he just wanted—John T. [Edge] was involved in this somewhere because Teddy Gentry was just insistent that I be there, so I know John T played a role somewhere. But anyway, I'm down there cooking, and I brought my kindling and my cooking oil, which is what I used—just a little cooking oil. And this boy sitting over there said, "You want me to show you how to make a fire?" And I said, "Well with all due

respect, I've made a few." And he just laughed, and he said, "I can have it burning in five minutes." And he came over there with that propane torch and lit that thing on fire, and I said, "How much you want for it?" "Well I'll make you one." I said, "Please do." So he made me one and—and it's a great way to make a fire. So here I've been doing this what, fifty years, but I was able to open my ears and go, "You got me. You got a better idea." **[Laughs]** And it's helped the barbecue tremendously. And it's—I don't have to take out ashes quite near as much as I used to, when I used a lot of kindling and paper. But I had better sense than to use natural gas, anyway.

02:19:48

AE: Well and what year did your father pass?

02:19:50

VS: Nineteen ninety-two. He was seventy-seven [years old]. And to the day, I'm telling you—to the day he went out, he just had a way of making people like him even though he couldn't even talk to them.

02:20:05

MS: The first two years—the first two years that he had—after he had the stroke was—was terrible, horrible. But we got through it but we learned—the family—I've got a big family and my family started coming in and helping, you know, when they could. And we learned that we could enjoy him, and it got to be where, if I couldn't understand something that Bob was saying, and he'd just get real frustrated. Well somebody would come in and say, "Let me see if I can tell what he's saying." And then Bob was starting to get a kick out of it. And then he just started having fun, you know **[Laughs]** and so the—after the—about two years he started just doing—

learning how to do with what he had left. And he got to where he—he would just love to be—still loved to be around people and he could make them laugh, even though he couldn't say a word; he could make them laugh. [*Laughs*] So it just got to be in the last years that he—you know, we learned to—I could just about read his mind.

02:21:28

VS: Yeah, yeah.

02:21:30

AE: Well now 2007 is going to be your 50th anniversary, so what—what do you think your father would say about the business today?

02:21:39

VS: He would be just astounded, I think, to see how it's held on and continued to grow. I mean I'm doing as much or more than I've ever done and, of course, I've had to get creative with some things, but I think that would be the single best thing what—is that I actually made it where I could make a living off of it and—and do pretty well with it and then bring, you know, the grandson in and let him make a living and—and I think that—that would be the biggest surprise to him is that it's grown because I know it used to back—of course, he died in [nineteen] '92. I'd show him sales figures, and he would just shake his head. He just couldn't believe, you know, what I was able to—the volume I was able to squeeze out of just one place, you know, with no alcohol and no breakfast and closed on Sunday, which was all the things that we wanted to do. We didn't want alcohol and we didn't want it—we wanted to go to church and—and we had done breakfast, and it ain't fun, so we didn't want to do breakfast. So I've been able to do

those—not do those things and still, you know, have a really big business, you know, from just local people. I—I think the next 50 [years] will be interesting, I’m sure. But I’m trying to make it go on. My mother always told me: work yourself out of a job. So now my nephew run things. I’ve got a General Manager that’s been here fifteen years and—and, of course, the kitchen today back there, there is probably ninety years of experienced combined in the kitchen today, so you know I’m trying—that’s what I’m trying to do is work myself out of a job. I’m facetiously—I mean I will always be here, but that’s how you keep it going, see. You know, if I were so afraid to leave and not trust, then it wouldn’t go on. And now, through the historical thing, I’ve learned with people that appreciate barbecue like people at Southern Foodways [Alliance], now I realize it really must go on. And it’s time for me to look at that perspective of how does it go on and—and don’t y’all ever put a gas line on that pit because I’ll come back and haunt you. **[Laughs]**

02:24:08

AE: Are you doing anything specific? You showed me this patch here for your 50th anniversary; do you have any big things planned?

02:24:14

VS: Yeah, going to do some tee-shirts—commemorative tee-shirts and—and I’m in a thing called “Buy Alabama-Made Products” through the grocery stores, so I’ll push the sauce a good bit and—but you know, there won’t be any franchises on the 50th [Anniversary], so we’re just going to play it up and let the people enjoy it, you know, and then I—I may take one day and roll the prices back to 1957 ‘til I run out—something like that, you know.

02:24:48

AE: Is there something, you think, about this town of Bessemer and it being a—a working-class town that has been able to support the Bright Star for 100 years and Bob Sykes for 50?

02:24:59

VS: Yeah, yeah, I do. It's—because Lord knows we've been in other places with franchises, and our own experiences that it's the other people around here in Bessemer, they really are just good hard working—like Daddy used to say, “That man works for that money. He should get something for it.” And they've supported—and they've recognized good food. You know, just like at the Bright Star. I mean, he's sitting over there doing probably what he's always done, but I think that they're just good hard-working people that, you know—people's notion now days is not—is I mean we're past the Depression intellect now where people are like, “I work hard, and I deserve to have something good.” Where it used to it was, you know, “I work hard, and I need to save every dime because the—the stock market will crash or—.” But I think now people want to spend their money on what they really enjoy and—and so that's—that's what kept it going, to me. And I think barbecue needs a certain blue-collar element to survive. I just—I mean I see it in you know maybe Buckhead [area of] Atlanta or somewhere, but I just still think you need an attachment to the blue-collar working person or neighborhood because barbecue—it's a working man's food. I mean for the most part this is a man place. I mean, I got stuff up there for women, and women like barbecue, don't get me wrong. But you know you—and just like Daddy, I mean, I've got enough variety. I have a barbecue salad and enough to, you know, kill the veto vote, as I call it; but still it's all about, you know, just—they recognizing what good food is. I mean, the Bright Star—he [owner, Jimmy Koikos] asked a year or two ago, he had a vertical cutter machine he wanted me to look at—Jimmy. So I went over there, and on the way back I passed these three black ladies sitting in a chair with an apron spread across their legs snapping beans.

And we come back out and I said, “That machine is wonderful, but right there is why you’ve been [in business] 100 years.” **[Laughs]** They were over there snapping green beans. How many restaurants are you going to go in and see three ladies sitting there like we used to do on the front porch snapping beans? So the—I think the people recognize real food and appreciate it and—and they work hard for their money, and I think that’s what it is, yeah.

02:27:39

AE: Well we have covered a lot of territory here, and I have really enjoyed all of your stories. It’s been really special.

02:27:44

VS: I hope we haven’t drug it out too much. **[Laughs]**

02:27:46

AE: Oh, gosh, I don’t—

02:27:48

MS: That’s the only way I know to tell it is like it is. **[Laughs]**

02:27:51

AE: Yeah. Well I wish we had another two-and-a-half hours to sit here, but I don’t want to take your whole day. But I wonder if there’s any—a thought you’d like to end on or anything that I didn’t ask you that you’d like to make sure to cover?

02:28:04

VS: Do you want to—?

02:28:06

MS: No, I don't know of anything we haven't, you know, covered that I would want to put in.

02:28:11

VS: Well, I still say my main thing, I—which I've said earlier but I just—to me the main thing is we're serving a product that is decades, if not centuries, old in a modern environment that people can—because like I say now, they can have what you want. I mean, you can have what they want, but if you can't serve it to fit their life, you're out because there's too many other things to choose from. I mean we live in such a [*Ning-Ning-Ning*] everything is just all over the place that to snatch their attention and to get that, as the marketing people say, top-of-mind awareness with all that other out there, the only thing I can get it with is the quality of food. I don't have an ad budget like McDonald's. I can't buy billboards. Yeah, Daddy used to say, “Your best advertising is that sandwich you just wrapped and put over that counter. There is your advertising right there.” So that's what we hold to and—and so like I say, my greatest thing that I think I've been able to do is—is bring it into a modern merchandising fashion, without obliterating the root of the thing, which is the fire and the meat and the salt, the eggs, the milk, and the butter. And you know, all that has survived and so to me, that's the greatest thing and—and I really appreciate Southern Foodways [Alliance] for making me realize that this—this really does have a deep meaning. It really—[*Shew*], I mean I had to get around people outside of my area to realize that, so I'm just real thankful that, hopefully, I've got a lot of years left. And I've grown to appreciate this and the importance of the preservation, so that's what I want to do is just preserve what's been around for so—so long. So that's—that's it, I guess.

02:30:20

AE: Well here's to another 50 years.

02:30:22

VS: Well, thank you. Thank you very much.

[End Van & Maxine Sykes]