

**CHERYL LAY**  
**Daughter of owner, Roger “Rabbit” Smith**  
**Rabbit’s Bar-B-Q – Hueytown, AL**

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Date: October 5, 2006  
Location: Rabbit’s Bar-B-Q – Hueytown, AL  
Interviewer: Amy Evans  
Length: 26 minutes  
Project: Southern BBQ Trail - Alabama

**[Begin Cheryl Lay]**

00:00:00

**Amy Evans:** This is Amy Evans on Thursday, October 5<sup>th</sup> 2006 and I'm in the Hueytown area of Birmingham, Alabama, and I'm at Rabbit's Bar-B-Q. And I was to meet Mr. Roger "Rabbit" Smith today, but he's not feeling well, so his daughter, Cheryl is here. Cheryl, could I get you to state your name and also your birth date for the record please, ma'am?

00:00:24

**Cheryl Lay:** Cheryl Lay and my birthday is January 22<sup>nd</sup> [nineteen] 59.

00:00:31

**AE:** All right. And your father and your mother started Rabbit's Bar-B-Q. Could I ask you quickly first off how your father got the nickname Rabbit?

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**CL:** *[Laughs]* Well I'm not real sure. I know they call—that was his nickname when he was growing up. That was his nickname. And so when they opened the restaurant, they just decided they name it Rabbit's.

00:00:55

**AE:** So everybody knew where they were going when they were going to Rabbit's?

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**CL:** Right, right.

00:00:58

**AE:** And so you started telling me before we were recording about how your grandparents owned the—the store over there on Warrior River Road [which is adjacent to the original Rabbit's Bar-B-Q location].

00:01:06

**CL:** Right. And then daddy ended up being out of work in the plant he was working from, and they had always barbecued off and on at home, and so they decided they'd just open up a barbecue place. [*Rabbit's Bar-B-Q opened in 1980.*]

00:01:18

**AE:** What kind of plant had he been working at?

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**CL:** Pullman Standard. And I believe it was boxcars; I think he helped put brakes on them. And they finally just went out of business.

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**AE:** And so when you were saying that he barbecued at home a lot, do you have memories of him doing that and what he would do in your—at home?

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**CL:** Oh yeah, there would always be huge crowds around and—and they were still real young and—and they would barbecue and the whole family would come over.

00:01:49

**AE:** And you were saying earlier, too, that when your parents married that your father was older than she?

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**CL:** He was 20 and she was 16.

00:01:57

**AE:** What's your mother's name?

00:01:58

**CL:** Linda Smith.

00:02:01

**AE:** And so when he wanted to do barbecue as a business, do you have memory or an idea of how that really started? They wanted to do it adjacent to that store but things like building the pit and how that worked?

00:02:14

**CL:** Well not exactly, I don't. I know that there—there was a pit—they had been eating barbecue at one point at another restaurant, and they really liked the way the meat tasted, so they did ask them if they could duplicate their pit; they did do that. And—and since then when we moved over here into this new building we made sure the pit was built exactly the same as the old pit.

00:02:44

**AE:** Can you say what that other restaurant was?

00:02:46

**CL:** Rabbit's—it was Rabbit's, too. Oh, the other restaurant? I believe it was [Leo and Susie's] Green Top. I sure do. In Jasper. *[The mailing address for the Green Top is actually Dora, Alabama]*

00:02:55

**AE:** Because I went over to that old location after I left here the other day after I had lunch with you, and it's just a beautiful object with the brick and those—do you know anything about those cast iron [fire] box doors?

00:03:11

**CL:** No, I don't. I—I wished I did. I don't know that there's really any history to them. They just—whatever built the pit got the—put those on there.

00:03:24

**AE:** And so how was business early on when they opened, do you remember?

00:03:28

**CL:** There wasn't sitting room. I mean for years you couldn't even get in, and it's still like that at times. It's just a bigger building, I guess.

00:03:37

**AE:** When did y'all move over here across the street?

00:03:39

**CL:** Oh, about three years ago. I guess it was 2003.

00:03:47

**AE:** And what precipitated that move, exactly?

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**CL:** Well when Mom was living, she had always wanted to build another restaurant, a larger one, and so Daddy had made her that promise, so that's why.

00:03:59

**AE:** She just wanted a newer nicer building, is that it?

00:04:02

**CL:** Yeah. And also they had leased the other side from my grandparents [J. C. and Lucosper Payne], and when they sold the store Daddy knew that—there wasn't any problem with it. The people were real nice; we could have stayed there forever. They begged us to stay. But he just knew it was time to go ahead and do it—to build this—to build this across the road.

00:04:22

**AE:** How long before you had that idea was this place finished?

00:04:25

**CL:** Oh, probably—and he had been thinking about it but probably twenty years. But it probably took us about two or three years to get over here; it was like leaving home coming over here [to the new location across the street].

00:04:39

**AE:** Can you describe the inside of the old place over there?

00:04:43

**CL:** Oh, it was half the size of this one, and the front was open. You could see us cooking; there wasn't a wall between us and the customers. It—it was—you could almost reach everything from right there at the grill.

00:04:57

**AE:** Now how old were you when they opened the first restaurant?

00:05:01

**CL:** I'm not certain; I believe I was about twenty-one.

00:05:06

**AE:** And you started working there and never stopped?

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**CL:** Well no, I never stopped. Well I quit for a little while when the children [daughter, Nathalie and son, Kyle] were little and stayed home with them. I probably stayed home with them for

about five years. I'd work a little bit—maybe one day a week, not—not much when they were real little. And then when Mama passed away, I just came back full-time.

00:05:26

**AE:** And she passed in [nineteen] '96, you said?

00:05:30

**CL:** [*Gestures “yes”*]

00:05:30

**AE:** Do you have any brothers and sisters?

00:05:31

**CL:** Uh-hmm, I do. I have a sister and—and she's worked off and on, too, through the years.

Right now she's—she had a little—another little girl when she turned forty, so she's taken off for a while herself.

00:05:44

**AE:** What's her name?

00:05:47

**CL:** Lisa Smith.

00:05:49



**AE:** So when you got back to working over there after you're—you had your children, did you know that you were going to be keeping the family business going after your mother passed and your father retired?

00:06:02

**CL:** Well I wasn't—yeah, I—I figured I would have to. [*Laughs*] It was—it was just kind of left up to me, so I—I just did it and I haven't minded. I've enjoyed it.

00:06:16

**AE:** When your father [Roger “Rabbit” Smith] was still working, was he overseeing all of the cooking of the meat and working the pit and all that?

00:06:23

**CL:** Yeah, he still works some now. He just—he just don't stay with us as much, but he still comes out just about every day and puts the meat on and watches it. And he'll stay through lunchtime sometimes and help through rushes now. He still—he still works—he still works, just not as many hours as he did.

00:06:44

**AE:** How old is he now?

00:06:45

**CL:** He is—he's sixty-seven.

00:06:52

**AE:** Can you describe a little bit how he works and what he likes to—how he likes to start a fire and his kind of style of barbecuing?

00:07:00

**CL:** [*Laughs*] He's the only one that can start the fire the way he does. I—that's what was talked about this morning. He—he just—sometimes it will be hot coals left, and he just can go out there and poke around and—and gets it going. I really couldn't tell you how he does it sometimes because I have a heck of a time [*Laughs*] trying to get it going. I can—I can get it going but it—it takes me a little bit longer than him. And—and if it goes completely out he—he don't use charcoal; we don't cook over charcoal, but he might take a little bit of charcoal and—and just get it started back up.

00:07:39

**AE:** So how early in the morning does he come to do that?

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**CL:** Oh, I guess he comes about nine and—and we cook all day long, and then we get them off before we leave. Well sometimes and sometimes he has to come back about ten at night and get them off.

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**AE:** So the meat you would have started cooking this morning is the meat you'll serve tomorrow, is that how it works?

00:08:00

**CL:** Uh-hmm, yeah, usually.

00:08:03

**AE:** And so back at the old place again, what was—what was a regular day like over there?

00:08:10

**CL:** It was hectic; you didn't have time to sit down. You just went all day long and—and it was busy. We sell about as many hamburgers as we do barbecues.

00:08:23

**AE:** And you've—have you always had a diversified menu like that and just things other than barbecue?

00:08:27

**CL:** Just hamburgers and barbecue—that's—that's really all we have. We have a lot of people asking for different things, but that's all we have.

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**AE:** Have you added anything new since you've been in this new place—any sides or anything?

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**CL:** Just a salad—just a barbecue salad is all we've added. And chicken—or a grilled chicken salad.

00:08:48

**AE:** And we were talking earlier about your mother and how when she died you figured—you found out all these things that she did that you didn't know how to do or something to that effect. Can you talk about that?

00:08:59

**CL:** Well I had paid a little bit of attention, thank goodness, but she was the—she was really the backbone of the place. She kept everything going. And I don't know how she went the hours she went. I've wondered often but she—yeah, I just had to learn how to do it. She did leave us recipes, and I had watched enough to where I just started doing it and just—we've tried to keep it as much like she did as we possibly could. Sometimes I don't think it's exactly like she did it, but it's as close as we could get.

00:09:35

**AE:** Are the recipes that she left behind, were they her own or did she get them from somewhere, do you know?

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**CL:** Everything here is her recipes.

00:09:44

**AE:** Even like the sauce, for example?

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**CL:** Uh-hmm, the sauce and everything.

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**AE:** Do you have any idea how she came up with that?

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**CL:** She just always liked to cook, and any time we asked for something she—she fixed it. If we didn't get it that day, we got it the next day. I mean and I don't know how she knew how to do it but she just did. She would just taste and—and work at things until she got it right, and it was always delicious.

00:10:09

**AE:** Can you describe your barbecue sauce today?

00:10:10

**CL:** Well I don't know if I can describe it. It's—it's good; I guess it's different than some. It's—I can't really describe; it's just real good. We—we cook it, we have a sauce base, and then we put different ingredients in it and mix it after we cook it and—and it's just—it has a good flavor to it.

00:10:35

**AE:** Would you say it is more tomato-y or vinegar-y or sweet, spicy?

00:10:41

**CL:** I would say it's more sweet than vinegar-y or spicy; it does have vinegar in it but I—I would say it was more a little bit sweet.

00:10:50

**AE:** When I was in here the other day I saw a man come in here with just a little Mason jar, and all he wanted was a little jar of sauce. Do you sell a lot of that—sauce like that?

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**CL:** Yeah, we do. We sell quite a bit of sauce, and a lot of people ask for extra sauce.

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**AE:** Has anybody ever asked you for the recipe for the sauce?

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**CL:** Jokingly but I've always just taken it as a joke [*Laughs*] and we haven't never given it to anybody.

00:11:13

**AE:** So has—has business changed at all since you've been in this new facility, or has it made a difference in your business?

00:11:22

**CL:** Oh, it's about the same I would—I would say; sometimes it might not seem as busy but that's because it's bigger, and we have a few more people working than we did at the other place.

00:11:32

**AE:** Are there any people working here that did work at the old place?

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**CL:** Uh-hmm, there sure is. We still have two girls with us that have been with us probably for fifteen years.

00:11:43

**AE:** And what is it like to be a woman in the barbecue business? It's predominantly a—a man's world, the barbecue world.

00:11:51

**CL:** [*Laughs*] I always say my daddy should have had a son; I've said that more than once. [*Laughs*] It's—it's all right; it—it can be hard work at times and you are ready to go to bed when you get home. You are tired.

00:12:04

**AE:** How old are your children?

00:12:07

**CL:** Nineteen and twenty.

00:12:08

**AE:** Do they have any interest in the business?

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**CL:** My son doesn't really; but my daughter, she's been helping some.

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**AE:** So it will stay in the women in the family, maybe?

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**CL:** I hope so. I hope so. That's up to Daddy, but I hope so.

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**AE:** Can you describe what a day is like for you here now?

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**CL:** It's—it's pretty pleasant; it's hectic. We—we work but it—it's nice. We have some good help now, so it's not as tiresome as it used to be. But and you see a lot of customers that you've seen over and over and you—we have friends that come into see us. I enjoy it.

00:12:51

**AE:** But as far as you know like when you get here and—and setting up and the schedule of the barbecue and turning it and all that kind of thing—?

00:13:00

**CL:** That keeps you real busy. You have to keep wood on the pit constantly and—and you have to take the meat off and when it gets done. And we cook it about twelve hours every—every—every time we cook, it's twelve hours. So and then we don't just slice ours; we take it off and we pull all the fat off and throw that away, and then we'll slice it or chop it—however the customers want it.

00:13:26

**AE:** And you'll serve the inside meat or mixed or whatever?



00:13:30

**CL:** Inside, outside, mixed—however—try to however you want it; we try.

00:13:36

**AE:** Do you have any customers that come in here and request odd things or—or combinations of things?

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**CL:** Well, of course, I guess every place does. [*Laughs*] Oh yeah, we've had people—we've had people come in and want barbecues with lettuce and onion and tomato on them. It's just—just different things; you never know what some—a customer might want. Or, somebody might come in and order a—a hamburger and not want their mustard next to their tomato. You just don't ever know.

00:14:11

**AE:** What did you—what have you learned from your father about barbecue over the years?

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**CL:** Well what I have learned I've learned from him about the meat. Daddy has always done the meat, and Mama did the—the sauces and the—and the slaw sauce and the slaw and all that. Well when—like I said, when I've learned I learned from him. But I learned how to build a fire, I've learned—and we only—we only cook with hickory—and I've learned how to—I make sure they're good and done and what else? I've learned—I had to make sure they're good and done and—and tender when you take them off. And I guess that's about it. And how not to burn them.

I have burnt several pit-fulls and learned how not to burn them and not to put too much wood at one time; so I guess that's all I've learned. That's what I've learned from him.

00:15:05

**AE:** Do you think you do anything different from what he does?

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**CL:** Oh, I'm sure but I try not to; I try to keep it like he wants it. He comes through here every day to kind of check. If—if I do it too different he mentions it. **[Laughs]** But yes, I'm sure I do some things different but I—like I say, I try not to.

00:15:24

**AE:** Now when your mother passed is that when your father retired?

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**CL:** Well now he—he didn't really retire, you know. He's—he's been with me—I guess the last maybe year he's not been here as much but up to the past year—up to just the past year he's—he's been here mostly.

00:15:42

**AE:** Has he been enjoying the new facility?

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**CL:** Yeah, but the other I think he may miss our old place at times because that—that was like home to us. I know you're supposed to be excited about moving in a new place but it was kind of—it was mixed emotions.

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**AE:** Do you think the barbecue is different at all with the different pit and newer—newer pit?

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**CL:** I don't think so. I think it's the same because we tried to build the pit exactly the same. At first we were real nervous about that, but I don't think so. A lot of the customers say it still tastes the same, and that's what we wanted to hear. So no, I think it's all still the same. It took a little while to get used to a new pit, and I'm sure it did cook a little different to begin with but it's supposed to be built just like the old one, so it—it's all worked out.

00:16:34

**AE:** Did a local person build the pit or did you have someone come in?

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**CL:** I believe it was a local person. But now Daddy took care of all of that, and I do not know the name of them or anything. I'm sorry.

00:16:46

**AE:** And what was Hueytown like when you were growing up in the early days?

00:16:53

**CL:** Huh? What was it like when I was growing up? Well a lot of people were going to the [Warrior] river, and they would stop and get barbecues. And secretly, I would wish I was headed to the river with them. **[Laughs]** But it was—it was nice; we enjoyed seeing—you know, you'd see your friends come in and out and it—it—but it was busy.

00:17:15

**AE:** So were there a lot of people right here close by the restaurant that are regular customers, or do people come from a wide swath of—of area here?

00:17:23

**CL:** There's a lot of people close by that are—are our real regular customers, but yes, we get river traffic during the summer months that come. And we have several people that—that come from out of town that eat with us; every time they say they're around this area they—they stop.

00:17:42

**AE:** And you said that you won an award for hamburgers, right? The best hamburgers?

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**CL:** Uh-hmm, we sure did. We won an award, I think for the—I don't know—yeah, for our hamburgers. I think it was second place even for best—for best hamburgers. And I guess in the Birmingham area. [Rabbit's was voted #2 hamburger in Birmingham by the *Birmingham News*.] And then I think we were in the top thirteen barbecue contest, I think, twice. I don't know what number we were, but I know we were in it. [Rabbit's has been voted one of Birmingham's Top 10 Barbecue Restaurants by both the *Birmingham News* and the local NBC affiliate Channel 13.]

00:18:11

**AE:** And when was that, do you have an idea?

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**CL:** No, I don't. I know it's been probably about ten years ago—something like that with the barbecue. It's not been that long, I don't think, for the hamburgers.

00:18:26

**AE:** And some of the other things on your menu—you have a BLT and a slaw dog and chilidog and things like that. Do you sell much of those things or primarily barbecue, or would you say that there's a more popular thing?

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**CL:** Well probably the hamburgers and the barbecue are the most popular. But in the winter months we make homemade chili, and we sell a good bit of that. And we sell chilidogs then, and that—we sell a good bit of them.

00:18:53

**AE:** Now do you just do the barbecue sandwiches? You don't have ribs—I'm trying to look at that big menu, and I'm not seeing it. **[Laughs]**

00:19:02

**CL:** No, we don't sell ribs, and I've been begging Daddy for years now to let us sell ribs. He cooks them for the family and—but he won't—I don't know why he won't cook them for the

public. He says that—that they're hard to fool with and he—he just won't do it. But they—but he cooks them delicious, but he won't sell them. I can't talk him into it. And we do get calls for it all the time. And I've tried to talk him into letting me do it—but now he did have some on there for the family one time, and I did scorch them so *[Laughs]*—but I'm still working on him about it.

00:19:38

**AE:** How often does he cook for the family now still?

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**CL:** Well he'll cook them on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July and all the holidays—he'll cook them for us.

00:19:46

**AE:** And now is that you and your sisters and your children and—?

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**CL:** And aunts and uncles and my grandmother and—.

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**AE:** Your grandmother is still living?

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**CL:** Uh-hmm, she sure is. She's eighty. It was her that—it was her—it was her that had the—the—when they first started that had the store that they built onto. It was—well actually, I think it was her idea to get them into the business and—and so, yeah. And then where—where this building is now was some of their land so—.

00:20:21

**AE:** And what is her name?

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**CL:** Lucosper Payne.

00:20:25

**AE:** And what was your grandfather's name?

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**CL:** Mr. Payne—J. C. Payne.

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**AE:** And so did your grandparents barbecue at all, do you know, before your father got into it?

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**CL:** I think Daddy mostly did the barbecuing at all the gatherings. They might have furnished some of the meat but [*Laughs*]—but he mostly did the barbecuing.

00:20:44

**AE:** Has there—in the years that you've lived here in Hueytown and the area, has there been another barbecue place close by, or is this pretty much the only one serving the area?

00:20:54

**CL:** Well since we've built, there's been some come up right up the road, but no—right in this area we're about the only ones. Well we are the only ones right here, but there's been like—is it Johnny Ray's? Yeah, Johnny Ray's, you know, a chain that's built up the road from us but it—like I say, it's not that close.

00:21:18

**AE:** So what would you—how would you explain your longevity in the business here?

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**CL:** I guess just hard work and—and trying to do it right. That's all I can explain. And Daddy, he works real hard at trying to make sure the meat is just right and—and we all do and—and trying to be good to the customers. *[Laughs]* Because you can't make it without them.

00:21:48

**AE:** And what do you think having a barbecue place locally has meant to the community here?

00:21:54

**CL:** Well, I don't know. I guess—I guess they've enjoyed coming here to eat because—because they do support us, and they do come in on a regular basis. And I've heard—we've been here for a while; I've had people in their twenties come in and say, “Well I used to eat there all the time when I was a little boy,” that might have moved and come back.

00:22:18

**AE:** So you've served a couple generations here now barbecue?



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**CL:** I guess we have. I didn't realize how old we had gotten until just recently but yeah, we have. *[Laughs]*

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**AE:** Do you like barbecue?

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**CL:** Oh yeah, I do.

00:22:32

**AE:** Do you taste some of your own barbecue from time to time?

00:22:34

**CL:** Well you have to—to make sure it's still right. *[Laughs]*

00:22:38

**AE:** Have you tasted much other barbecue around Alabama or the South?

00:22:43

**CL:** Oh, yeah. Yeah, we still eat other places. It just—you get hungry for other people's because sauces are different and—and you get to wanting one maybe with more vinegar and taste and you—you like to taste different barbecues.

00:22:57

**AE:** How would you say yours is different from others?

00:23:03

**CL:** Well it's better, certainly. *[Laughs]* I guess it's just—it just has more of a sweet taste to it. It's just in the—it has the hickory taste to it. It's just—and it's cooked so slow. It's just—and we—we try to make sure we get all the fat off it before we serve it. And—and we do try hard at that, so I guess that's how it's different.

00:23:22

**AE:** And what—what part do you like to eat on your sandwich?

00:23:27

**CL:** Well, when it first comes off the pit, I like the outsides; but if I go outside somewhere to eat, I usually get the inside [meat]. I like both of them, but if it—when it first comes off the pit, you can't beat that outside [meat].

00:23:44

**AE:** So you said that your daughter has some interest in the business. What do you think the future of Rabbit's Bar-B-Q is?

00:23:51

**CL:** I just don't know what the future for Rabbit's is. That is still kind of a question mark. It's just, I guess, whatever interest she shows in it. I'm going to stay here as long as Daddy needs me to stay and wants me to. As long as he wants to keep Rabbit's going and I'm able, I'm going to be here. And then the rest is up to her.

00:24:14

**AE:** What would you want people who have never been to Hueytown and have never eaten here, what would you want them to know about Rabbit's Bar-B-Q?

00:24:22

**CL:** Well I'd want them to come taste it and—and know we were trying—trying to cook it the way that—that—well I just want them to come taste it and know that we've worked hard to make it—make it good.

00:24:36

**AE:** Can you tell me quickly about these things that are in the—the front yard of Rabbit's Bar-B-Q? These old farm tools and the wagon?

00:24:43

**CL:** They don't have one thing to do with anything to do here, really. My husband got them for us; he was out of town working. I don't even remember where. It was out west, actually, and I saw them and I just wanted them to sit out front here. Usually, I put flowers in them, but I just didn't get it out there this summer. But soon I'll put hay out there for—for the October and decorate them for the holidays.

00:25:13

**AE:** Well what do you like best about being in the barbecue business?

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**CL:** Well I guess it's a living. [*Laughs*] I don't know; I really don't know the answer to that.

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**AE:** Well any final thoughts you'd like to add?

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**CL:** No, not really. Just thanks for showing interest in us.

00:25:45

**AE:** Well I appreciate you sitting with me, Cheryl. Thank you so much.

00:25:48

**[End Cheryl Lay]**