

JAMES LEMONS
Lem's Bar-B-Q - Chicago, IL

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Date: March 26, 2008
Location: Lem's Bar-B-Q
Interviewer: Amy Evans
Length: 1 hour, 2 minutes
Project: Chicago Eats/TABASCO Guardians of the Tradition

[Begin James Lemons Interview]

00:00:00

Amy Evans: This is Amy Evans on Wednesday, March 26, 2008 in Chicago, Illinois, on 75th Street at Lem's Bar-B-Q with Mr. James Lemons; and sir, would you mind saying your name and your birthday for the record?

00:00:15

James Lemons: James Lemons. Birthday: August 13, 1928.

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AE: And, as I understand it, you're from Indianola, Mississippi.

00:00:22

JL: Indianola, Mississippi, yeah.

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AE: And you moved here with your brothers when you were a teenager, is that right?

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JL: Yeah, teenagers—came to Chicago in 1942.

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AE: Now did you come with your parents or did y'all—your brothers just come on your own?

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JL: Came with my brother—my older brother.

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AE: And what are you brothers' names?

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JL: Miles Lemons, Bruce, Clyde, and Leon—.

00:00:52

AE: Okay. And so your oldest brother than you came with was—?

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JL: Miles.

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AE: And so what—if we can talk just for a second about your days in Indianola; you know, we know how things were back then, but did y'all know people up here in Chicago that made you come or was it just something that you wanted to get—?

00:01:11

JL: Well my daddy had a brother here. And that's the only reason I came is because my other brother came, you know. And then there's the reason. So then we came to Chicago and started working and me, I went in the cooking field, and my other brother, he was already one of them fellows like messing around in the kitchen. He's the one that started the barbecue sauce. He passed away in 1901—I mean, yeah, in 2001. 200—I'll get it together—he passed away.

00:01:51

AE: Yeah? So if you both came up here and started getting in the cooking business, were you cooking at home in Indianola?

00:01:55

JL: Well, my mother used to have food in the kitchen, but she had to have them because she had six boys, and she didn't have no girls. So we all had to—had cooking days and cleanup days and cook, cook, cook. Had weeks that we'd cook and, you know, and that trained us to be good too. Back then, that's what they say but now, you know—now days they don't look at it like that. The ladies have to do all the housecleaning. Mens do it to. [*Short Laugh*]

00:02:28

AE: So do you remember when it was your cooking day, what you liked to make for your family?

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JL: No. Well now then because my mother always stood over, you know, and coached us, you know. And then I had to do a lot of things, you know, in the kitchen young. You know, she was a very good cook.

00:02:49

AE: What did you like best that she used to make?

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JL: Hmm?

00:02:52

AE: What was your favorite thing she used to make?

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JL: Well not—I didn't have no favorites—just whatever she cooked back then; you ate what your mother cooked. [*Laughs*] Either you ate that, or you didn't eat at all.

00:03:04

AE: And so I imagine back then y'all were raising your own meat and had a garden and whatnot?

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JL: Yeah, had gardens and raised chicken, even a couple of pigs, yeah.

00:03:15

AE: Did y'all ever barbecue pigs down there?

00:03:17

JL: Yeah, we used to barbecue pigs—pork, you know. They'd always kill hogs around Thanksgiving time, you know what I mean. My daddy had a little—made a little brick pit outside the house and we used to barbecue smoke—smoke meat; we had a smokehouse, you know, and things—. We always fooled around with it, you know—smoking meat and—and cooking meat on the grill; that's what we called it back then. We didn't call it a pit; we called it a grill. So

that's how we got to working doing that, and when we came to Chicago we started working in restaurants. And mostly that was—most jobs back then and then the war [WWII] came, you know—came along so a lot of people went to the factories and we went to—my brother and I stayed in the cooking business. And years later, my younger brother came along, and that's when we opened up the barbecue place. They opened up the barbecue place; I came in on there later on.

00:04:28

AE: So they opened it in [nineteen]'51; when did you get involved?

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JL: Well I got involved in it right around '54, '55—somewhere along in there.

00:04:41

AE: And if I can ask you to back up a little bit talking about when your family would have hog-killings in Indianola, was there a sauce component to cooking that pig back then or—or not?

00:04:50

JL: No, a little thing my mother used to call spicy gravy and that's where they started with the barbecue sauce. And my brother he worked on it; he used to work on it all the time at his home, and he had a wife that she helped him with it, too, you know, but she passed away too. And then when my other brother, Bruce, came to Chicago, that's when my brother got involved in it—in with the sauce.

00:05:23

AE: And that would be your brother, Myer, who did the sauce?

00:05:26

JL: No Bruce and Miles, yeah. You mean Miles? They got—and they brought me in later on.

00:05:31

AE: So would you say the sauce you serve today that it—it's a sauce that was kind of based still—is still based on what your mother served?

00:05:40

JL: That's what they first started with, and we just spiced it up a little bit and with different types of spices. And as you eat, when you make something you—you taste it and then when you hit that taste, you know when—and that's what you stick with for a while. So it was a couple of years we was in business before we had any luck at that sauce. But we still used to make our own. From day one, we made our own sauce.

00:06:14

AE: Can you describe your sauce without giving too much away?

00:06:14

JL: Well it just—I don't know, just spicy paste, not real hot, just kind of—kind of hot but not like a lot of people want barbecue sauce. They want real, real—and they—and it ain't thick like gravy. It's—we try to make it smooth where it will be—stick to the meat. The sauce is sauce and gravy is gravy and they're both—and don't—don't taste the same, so that's why we call ours the

barbecue sauce. People say it's thin. Well, if you want gravy, then we can make it thicker, but it ain't going to taste the same, you know.

00:07:01

AE: And you—you have a hot sauce and a medium sauce here or just the hot?

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JL: No, we just have medium sauce, but we take hot sauce to make it hot, make it a little spicier than what it is. You know, because now days you know people have so many types of sickness, and you can't have it too hot, you know. They can take a little hot sauce and throw it in, and it'll make it hot.

00:07:29

AE: So when you—when you came up to Chicago and you were working in a restaurant, was that first job you had?

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JL: Well when I first started working, it was in—I worked in the Greek restaurant on the north side—Bryn Mawr Avenue—and I started out washing dishes.

00:07:45

AE: What was the name of the restaurant?

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JL: Lakeside—Lakeside Restaurant and it was on Bryn Mawr right—right at the “L” station on Bryn Mawr, yeah. That’s where I started at.

00:07:56

AE: Did you learn some stuff about being in the restaurant business from the Greeks at that point?

00:08:01

JL: Learned something about cooking, you know, because, well, I used to say to myself, “Greek people really knew how to cook.” Yeah, yeah. And they reminded me [*Laughs*] kind of my mother—my mother, you know, because she could throw some things together, you know. And I guess it just run in your blood.

00:08:25

AE: So was this like a Greek diner or—or what kind of Greek restaurant?

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JL: No, a restaurant; it wasn’t a big restaurant. It was a small restaurant and my brother—some strange thing about it, he was the chef at a Greek restaurant but this restaurant was on—on Madison Street—Cicero and Madison, Highway Restaurant. And he worked there for about eighteen, nineteen years.

00:08:54

AE: And which brother would this be?

00:08:55

JL: That's the oldest brother [Miles], the one that started the barbecue.

00:08:58

AE: So do you have an idea of what made them—what made your brothers want to get into the barbecue business and have a place of their own?

00:09:05

JL: No, I don't have the idea of what made him—I guess he wanted his own business, and he had a friend that was saying barbecue would be about the best thing to go into, you know, and when that—at that time, they didn't have very many barbecue places in Chicago. They had a few.

00:09:23

AE: Now do you think it was something that, you know, growing up in Mississippi and doing barbecues with your family, that it was something that he knew more about and—and could start his own place?

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JL: No, I couldn't say. I couldn't say that because he—he was a very good cook in the Greek restaurant because the man that he worked for didn't want him to leave. You know, he told him—but my brother said, “Well, I want to see if I can do something for myself,” you know. But then he told him, well, he wished him all the luck in the world, you know. Surely—his name was Howell. I can't think of his first name now but anyway his name was Howell. He wished my brother luck, so my brother had it, you know, and it took about five—about six, seven years

before the business really worked out. And then that's—by that time, all of us was into it, you know.

00:10:24

AE: So and I understand, over the years, there have been two locations of Lem's. Is the original the one that we're in now?

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JL: It's the only one. The one on 59th Street had problems with—with the property and I don't know. I'd say the city run us out of there, and they wanted to put a fire department—a fire station there, you know. So they couldn't have a fire station and a barbecue place next to each other.

[Laughs] So they found all kinds of complaints with the building and things. You know so—

00:10:56

AE: So then is this one the original one or was that one?

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JL: The one on 59th Street was the original one. That's where they had the place.

00:11:03

AE: So then was there a time when both were open at the same time at all?

00:11:07

JL: Uh-hmm, yeah. Yeah, in 19—we opened out here [on 75th Street] in 1967—'67—and that one opened down there in 1952.

00:11:19

AE: Okay, so you had—when this one opened in '67, you had already been in the business for ten years or so?

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JL: Yeah, uh-hmm, yeah.

00:11:27

AE: So tell me about the name Lem's Bar-B-Q. Is that just a shortened version of your last name?

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JL: Well everybody used to call—well my last name is Lemons, and we just took it from the name that people done gave my older brother. They used to call him Lem, you know. He used to like to play golf, and the fellows that he played golf with, they called him Lem for—his name was Lemons and they called him Lem, so we just took the name and put it as Lem's Bar-B-Q.

00:11:56

AE: So was that building up on 59th Street, what was it like—the original one?

00:12:03

JL: Mostly just like this but it was a bigger store, you know what I mean? It was—it was great; and it's still there. They got—I don't know what's there—things that really stayed open—just something and they've got meeting quarters upstairs.

00:12:22

AE: So it wasn't a—was it a freestanding building, or it was more like a row of storefront?

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JL: No, the building been there for years. I don't know. I don't know how long it been there, and the building been there for a long time.

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AE: And what was the pit like over there? Was it one of these aquarium pits or was it a brick pit or something else?

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JL: No, no. We—we always had this—this type of pit [an aquarium-style pit]. I'm trying to think of the man that, when we first went in business, built this pit.

00:12:59

AE: Was it Leo Davis?

00:13:00

JL: Yeah, Leo Davis. Yeah, Mr. Davis.

00:13:04

AE: Yeah, because we were talking earlier about *Smokestack Lightning* by Lolis Eric Elie, and he said that in 1951 Leo Davis started making these aquarium style pits and then Lem's—the

first Lem's opened a year later, so these were already kind of the popular way of smoking meat at the time.

00:13:23

JL: Yeah. Well they had a couple pits out like this. Well the fellow that used to be in the barbecue business, he was in there for a long time; he's passed away now. His name was Harvey Collins; he's the—him and his brothers, they had barbecue places, and we all come from Indianola. They—they came from Indianola, too. And it was about six brothers up—and all of them had barbecue places except one, Stoop—Stoop Collins. He was the Big Shot, we called him. He—he had a lot of property he had bought here and, you know, because he had been here for a long—well he's much older than we were you know—had been in for a long time.

00:14:09

AE: And so see I have note, too, about Caesar Collins.

00:14:11

JL: Caesar Collins, he was—he was one of the brothers, yeah.

00:14:17

AE: Okay. So what was the name of the barbecue places they had?

00:14:19

JL: Collins. That—they always used their—their name—Collins Barbecue—Caesar, Argia B. [*creator of Mumbo Sauce*], Stoop, Earl, and had one other brother; he was on the west side. He

was much older, and I can't remember his name, but they had another brother on the west side that used to have a barbecue place on the west side, too.

00:14:43

AE: Now were they competition for y'all, or were you just happy to all be in business?

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JL: No, we all just happy doing the barbecue business. And they would, you know, if you'd call them and ask them some type of favor, if it was within reason, then they—they, you know, give you everything but their sauce. [*Laughs*] So, you know what I mean. But they were—they were good people.

00:15:05

AE: Were y'all doing anything different or—or kind of the same, as far as your meat goes?

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JL: Well about the same way but—I guess it come with the cooking, you know, who you got working for you and who handled the cooking at the time, you know. And I mean if you don't watch it—you got to—you got to take somebody and teach him how to cook, you know. Once they learn, you try to keep them, you know. You can't just change—change and put, you know—cooks like they do, you know—people say, “Well, you got a recipe.” They can go around—. And they all the time ain't going to do it like the recipes say. You have to keep up with it; you got taste it every day, see if it tastes the same, and see if they using the same ingredient or—. And people have a lot of ways of playing little tricks with you. So—but—but we've been lucky so far.

00:16:04

AE: So and I read, too, that Lem's was the first barbecue place to serve rib tips in Chicago.

00:16:12

JL: Rib tips, yes. At that time back then, they was throwing them away. Yeah. Yeah, they used to throw—they used to—I'm trying to think—I'm getting old. If you had called me a couple years earlier, I could have, you know, told you all this stuff, you know, real good. Used to—all the barbecue places, they used to just cut part of the tip off the rib and cook the rib, and they'd throw it away. So my brother said, "Well," he said, "I'm going to take that tip and cook it and see how it do." So then we started selling them.

00:16:51

AE: They did awfully well, evidently.

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JL: He started selling rib tips in 1952—'52—'53—'53 they started selling rib tips, you know, and they started cooking, and they cut the meat and they found out that you could take that tip off of the slab, and the slab wouldn't be so bony, you know what I mean? And that's when they started taking the tip off and calling the rib the St. Louis-style rib, you know, and now they got all kinds of names.

00:17:27

AE: I'm just watching your pitmaster here [Donnell Walker] load the smoker with a bunch of pork sparerib tips that come in there in their own—their own box here.

00:17:32

JL: Yeah, well that's Moo & Oink brand there. They—they come up fancy and say they done got it—make the tip so big now, you know what I mean. And I been trying to get them to cut them a little smaller because they too hard—. [*Phone Rings*] [*To Donnell*] Don, answer that phone. They too hard to cook, you know, when they great big, you know, and they get a little—it makes them a little crunchy and tough, you know what I mean. If they medium-sized, they cook better. Them great big tips is hard to cook, you know what I mean.

[Short pause, while Mr. Lemons takes a phone call.]

00:18:13

AE: All right. So we were talking about your ribs. Do you just sell pork ribs or do you sell beef ribs also?

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JL: Just pork ribs. No—no beef.

00:18:25

AE: And so tell me about, you know, the small end and—and the center cut and rib, tips and—and what people like to get and prices and things like that.

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JL: They buy it all, you know. Some peoples, they like some rib tips. Mostly people like rib tips—sell more tips than we do anything. But the ribs, they small-end, large-end, they—some

people like it. They're thick meats; they have—some like them lean, no—no fat and you know—hey listen, just—it's kind of rough sometimes, but it's a good business, a good living.

00:18:59

AE: So how much was an order of rib tips in—in the [nineteen] '50s?

00:19:06

JL: How much an order of rib tips was back in the '50s? I think it started out \$1.25—dollar—dollar and a quarter.

00:19:20

AE: And what would a slab have been back then?

00:19:21

JL: A slab of ribs, \$2.25.

00:19:27

AE: And today I'm looking at your menu; a slab is \$19.50 and a small order of tips is \$8.00.

00:19:34

JL: Yeah. And believe me, fellows used to—*[Laughs]*—[they'd say], “No rib tips? Oh well.” I think—no, rib tips back then an order was—what? An order of rib tips was seventy-nine cents when I first started—sixty-nine or seventy-nine cents, an order of rib tips when they first started selling them. Because they used to didn't have nothing but—they had the big slabs with the big bone, you know, and I don't know—kind of rough cooking, you know, because part of it gets

real done, and the other part will be medium done, you know. So they start cutting the tip off of it and selling the tip by itself. And then, well, tips didn't start selling good until you could always—you could add enough to come off your ribs and buy a few boxes of tips. They do—now they eat more tips than they do ribs because you get a lot for your money.

00:20:44

AE: Yeah. So tell me when—when your brother opened the first Lem's in '51 and then—and then you joined your two brothers, were y'all manning the pits or did you have other people doing that from the beginning?

00:20:55

JL: We had other peoples running the pits. We had one fellow up there on the picture; he died. He worked for us—he worked for us for about twenty-five years. And then we had another fellow, he—he done retired, Mr. Bowman. He worked for us for about thirty years.

00:21:16

AE: And what was the name of the first man you mentioned who was here twenty-five years? The name of the first man that you—?

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JL: Daniel Pelham.

00:21:21

AE: Pelham?

00:21:23

JL: Yeah. *Pelham*. And he passed away. And young fellows like this—they come—I've had quite a few of them that work for—and they seem to trade away on their own, yeah.

00:21:38

AE: And so tell me about the cooking here in this aquarium-style pit you have. You use a combination of wood and charcoal?

00:21:45

JL: Yeah, wood and charcoal—wood is to do most of the cooking. The charcoal is to give you the heat because if you just used wood alone, it would take you a long time to cook that—cook them tips and things, you know. You have to have—you have to have—

00:22:06

AE: I'm sorry.

00:22:09

JL: That's all right.

00:22:14

AE: Say it again.

00:22:15

JL: And it takes—it would take a long time to cook, you know. The ribs cook fast; tips it takes—takes a little longer to cook and you have to kind of—see the fire. There's the fire.

00:22:33

AE: Yeah, it's burning hot, for sure.

00:22:33

JL: Yeah.

00:22:34

AE: So what kind of wood is this that Don [pitmaster Donnell Walker] is bringing in?

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JL: Oak and hickory, yeah. And some people, they got different—they got all kind of wood now and some people use—we don't ever try—I only tried oak and hickory. They got a couple more other brands of wood they say is good, but I never tried them. And I just use charcoal and the hickory and the oak mixed, so you can get your flavor.

00:23:07

AE: And when I pulled in this morning, you were getting a wood delivery. Is—is wood hard to get these days?

00:23:15

JL: No, not really.

00:23:19

AE: And so you were talking about the cooking times for the ribs and for the tips. What are—what are the differences in the cooking times for those two things?

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JL: Well the tips take about hour—hour and twenty minutes; the ribs take about forty—thirty-five to forty minutes, you know.

00:23:37

AE: And so how early does Don get here to load the pit?

00:23:41

JL: He get here in about ten o'clock every morning.

00:23:47

AE: And then this—everything he's loaded on there just now [the meat], will this last all day or is this just the first round of stuff?

00:23:52

JL: No, it won't last all day, you know. Because now like we try to—we try to *[short pause]* we try to cook up enough stuff to take us through the day, you know, so when people come in, it don't take so long for them to get waited on, you know. But it won't last—not all day; he will be putting raw [meat] on there all day, turning it and then the next thing we do—we cook enough stuff where we can have something to start out with the next day too, you know what I mean—where we can just reheat it and start out.

00:24:39

AE: So do you have an idea how many slabs of ribs and—and rib tips you go through in a day?

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JL: No, I don't have no idea. But we go through about, I'd say, about [*Phone Rings*]*—*we don't go through that many slabs; we go through a lot of tips. We might go through about ten, twelve boxes of tips a day—thirteen, maybe fourteen boxes of tips. And on Friday and Saturday—that's the days—that's—Friday, Saturday, and Sunday we have a good day.

00:25:14

AE: And what are your hours? You open at 2:00 and what time do you close?

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JL: Close at 2:00 in the morning.

00:25:20

AE: So you're a busy late-night spot?

00:25:23

JL: Yeah, they have a pretty good business and on weekends and—just sold up. And things is now, you know, people—people in the world is crazy. [*Laughs*]

00:25:36

AE: Uh-hmm. I guess that explains your wall of Plexiglas you have here.

00:25:40

JL: Yeah. And it helps out, you know, because I wouldn't want nobody who worked for me to get hurt. I wouldn't want none of my customers to get hurt, you know.

00:25:51

AE: Have y'all always had that wall up, or how long has that been there?

00:25:56

JL: Well we've been there—we put this up in the '70s, I think '75—'76—'75 or '76 we put the glass up.

00:26:15

AE: Were things rougher back then, or you just had an idea you wanted to do it?

00:26:18

JL: Well, it wasn't as bad as it is now. You know, but it was a rough, you know—you know and it saves a lot of wear and tear on you, you know, have to try to watch everybody you know because peoples, you know their minds play tricks on them and think they got an armful and don't have nothing, you know. But that's the only thing about it is it's kind of dangerous sometimes, and that's not only in the barbecue business. That's in any business. You know even the restaurant business, you know the sit-down restaurant, you know people getting crazy ideas and kids and things now days doing things they never did before, killing one another and all that. I hate to talk about it because it hurts my heart to see—see peoples like that, you know, that wants to take another person's life for nothing, you know. But that's the way of life.

00:27:30

AE: So have both of your places been just kind of walk-up, takeout barbecue restaurants?

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JL: The other place we had sit-down; we used to have tables in there. And they'd take the tables out there. Got later up in the [nineteen]'80s we had to take the tables out because they got so you know [*Laughs*]*—*wanted to dance and tear up everything. [*Laughs*] And we used to have tables to sit down in at the other place on State Street. And I think in the '80s—'82—'83—'82 or '83 we had to take it out, you know, and build the counter up a little higher and stuff you know for protection of the people that are working, you know what I mean. It worked out all right; we didn't—but we never had too many incidents, a couple incidents, you know. I guess we was luckier than a lot of other places, you know.

00:28:36

AE: So how has this neighborhood, in general, changed over the years?

00:28:41

JL: Well the neighborhood is not—it's not that—not that bad; it's—it's a pretty good, decent neighborhood. It's always been fair—equal with—with the white and black, but we've had white customers for a long time. They come in and nothing happens, and nobody pick at them or bother them you know—you know what I mean. I got some fellows that come in here now, and they don't come but once a year but they come from Arizona and Texas and different places. And I used to have a couple—white couple that come here from Texas. They drove in; they used to have a little old spoke-like car and they would drive in every summer in this state—they go out there and stand right—right—and eat but I wouldn't advise them to do that today because peoples—I don't know what they give them, but whatever they taking it's rough, you know. They like to pick at you, you know what I'm saying? I don't know what—peoples just—not only do they do it among colors and race, they do it among the—among the black folks, you know.

You can't—they can't stand out there and eat in peace, you know. One time we—wondering why we used to talk about putting tables outside in the summertime but then couldn't do it, no. So we just let it stay like it is.

00:30:11

AE: Was this building something before y'all took it over?

00:30:15

JL: Yeah, this was—it was a fast food—hamburger place, you know. They used to—called it—something like McDonald's but not—they built—they had windows, you know, like a window—most like a summer place, you know. And the fellow that I bought it from name is Scott—Maurice Scott. He built it for his kids, yeah. And come to find out the kids didn't want to be bothered with it, you know.

00:30:59

AE: What are you going to do? [*Laughs*] Well now tell me about the other things that you have on your menu here. You have fried chicken and livers and gizzards and fried shrimp?

00:31:06

JL: Yeah, uh-hmm.

00:31:09

AE: Have you always had that on the menu?

00:31:11

JL: Yeah, yeah, always give them something to choose from. Oh, let me—excuse me a minute.

00:31:19

AE: Sure. [*Short pause while Mr. Lemons tends to some business*] So we were talking about all the other things on your menu. Do you sell a lot of fried chicken and fried shrimp?

00:31:26

JL: Uh-hmm, yeah, we sell—well we sell about ten boxes of chicken a week—ten boxes of wings, forty-pound boxes. Yeah, we sell—we sell quite a bit of chicken.

00:31:39

AE: Do you have a secret to your fried chicken?

00:31:43

JL: Just fried like my mama showed me how to fry. Try to get them to do it the same way; that's—we go through quite a bit of chicken.

00:31:59

AE: So let me ask you this: Being from Mississippi, you know, I've noticed since I've been here there are a lot of restaurants and—and food stands and things that advertise you know “Mississippi seafood” or “Mississippi fried chicken.” Do you think that there is, you know, that—Mississippi being used as—as a kind of signifier of where the food is coming from is a popular thing here in Chicago and why?

00:32:24

JL: Well it might be, but that's where mostly peoples—you see, it's a funny thing; that's where I'll say seventy-five percent of the people that comes to Chicago come from the state of Mississippi. Because back then when the War was—broke—first broke out [World War II] that's where most of the people came from—came to Chicago because they could get jobs, you know, or get better jobs, you know. You know, how things was back then; don't have to tell you. You know—you—you read about it, you know, if you don't understand—that they came to Chicago to get better jobs. They tried to make their life better. And 75-percent of them come from the State of Mississippi and Louisiana and Arkansas and they come to Chicago. Now the other states like Tennessee and maybe Louisiana, they went to New York and them places. Then over in Arkansas and them things. People, they went to California, you know. I'm speaking the black peoples, you know. They treaded different ways, and seventy-five percent of the peoples came to Chicago. That's why it's so many different little businesses, you see, that say Mississippi, Mississippi, Mississippi because that's where they originated from; that's where they came from. The only reason they came there from—left that is because they couldn't get work or they wanted to find something better here in working. Because back then, you know, everybody don't want to keep picking cotton and trying to have us a better living, you know. You know how the Depression was, so I mean it's nothing you had to do with it or nothing I had to do with it. We can't hide it; it was there and it worked its way out. People worked their way out and went and did what they had to do to try to get out of it, you know. And through all of it—found a lot of good things and sweated away a lot of bad things, you know. You know what I mean? But then it just—bad that as people that we had to live and go through them kind of things, you know, but that's—that's the way of life, you know, and give you something to look forward to, you know, seeing something better or seeing something being done better, you know. I mean it's just like I

tell people they say, you know—I said, “If it wasn’t for the white people, if they didn’t like you or some of them didn’t care about you, you wouldn’t be here.” So we was outnumbered from day one. So somebody cared about somebody—wanted you to be—do good, you know what I mean. So everybody can’t be bad, you know; you have to push the bad to the side and step over the good and try to keep walking, that’s all, you know what I mean. Because everybody ain’t bad, you know. Everybody ain’t hateful. I mean everybody don’t hate one another, you know. But in the end you got to say not only that—I said you have that in your own race. You go, “Oh, I’m better than you just because I got more money than you got.” But it’s not true. It don’t make you better. What’s in here who—is what makes you better, you know, the kind of heart you got, you know. That’s life, you know, and you have to live—you have to live through it, so—. The only thing I can say is just ask the man upstairs to live better—hear the way God—.

00:36:16

AE: So how did—how would you say that those sentiments translate into the restaurant business and feeding people?

00:36:23

JL: What?

00:36:23

AE: About being good to people and not everybody is bad and—and being in the restaurant business and—and being around the public all the time.

00:36:30

JL: Yeah, then that ain't bad. Amen. You know I—I meet a lot of peoples—fellows coming through here. I meet a lot of bums—fellows calls here; you call them bum—you call them bum because they don't want to work. Call them bums because some of them don't want to get a job; they don't want a job. They want—they likes the way they're living some of them. Some of them wants to live like that, you know. We got a lot of fellows, you know, that come through here and I feed them and just the only reason I feed them is because I figure, if I give them something to eat, I keep them from knocking somebody in the head out there to—to get something. You know what I mean? If you're hungry, if you get full you can change your mind, you know. You won't—you won't bother nobody out there. You know. But if you're still walking and you're hungry and something and you see something, and it makes you do things that you wouldn't do otherwise. That's the way I look at it, you know, but just—I guess it will always be like that. That's the way the world is built. You know, it's going to be always some—some kind of problem, some kind of dislike, some kind of whatever, you know—hate or whatever, you know.

00:37:52

AE: So what do you think makes good barbecue?

00:37:54

JL: What makes good barbecue is you got to try to move it and try to sell it and don't overcook it and don't cook it too long and don't move it off-hand, you know. Try to get your stuff—keep fresh stuff moving; keep—keep it moving, you know. Yeah, and then you can—you have to watch what you buy because some of these companies, they supposed to be good companies and they'll sell you the—some bad stuff, you know. There's so many things you have to look for, you know. And, as I say, all of my customers is precious to me, you know. I done seen a lot of

families grow—lot of families; I see kids—kids—kids and I even got great-grandkids, myself. And so—so you know, I've seen a lot of kids grow up from—from little kids to a grown man to families and—and some of them is grandfathers right now. So I'm eighty years old you know—almost eighty—don't take long. And I love people; you know, I don't care what color they is. Listen, the best man they ever had was a Jew man I used to work for—before I went in this business. His name was Batz; he—he was really—he was good to me, you know. He treated me the way I felt I'd like to be treated or I would treat someone that was in my shoes. And that's all just—you know and—and I'll go to my grave remembering him. He was in the restaurant business. He used to have a place called Mama Batz on 22nd and Michigan, where they're tearing the hotel down now, yeah.

00:40:26

AE: So what is your role here now? You're here every day, from what I understand.

00:40:29

JL: Yeah, well, I come every day. I can't do too much work no more because I got old, but I just watch things and try to keep an eye on things, so they don't take advantage of it. I try to keep it so it will stay the same, you know—you know tastes and, you know, sometime I just have—have to leave it alone because it—you get too old. That barbecue, you can't—you know it's good once in a while but when you got to do it every day, it's kind of different—different habit.

00:41:15

AE: Now what is the future of Lem's Barbecue? Is one of your—your children going to take it over, you know, think in the future?

00:41:20

JL: Well my daughter, she's going to try to franchise it. She's working on it, so I wish her luck with it.

00:41:30

AE: What your daughter's name?

00:41:31

JL: Carmen—Carmen Lemon.

00:41:35

AE: Does she want to franchise it within Chicago or nationally?

00:41:37

JL: She wants to go as far as she can go with it, I guess. Another young lady I got working for me—her name is Walker—Emma Walker; she been about twenty-seven, twenty-eight years. She's like my daughter. I love her. I love her just like I love my daughter because she done gave me all she can give and all she—you know, and she's a good lady. Her and my daughter, they—they'll make it work.

00:42:13

AE: Did you and your brothers ever imagine that there'd be fifty-plus years in the barbecue business when you opened that first place over on 59th [Street]?

00:42:22

JL: My older brother did—the one that passed away, Lem. He just—you know he—he used to say, “Well maybe I waited too long before I started.” But he was proud of it, you know.

00:42:42

AE: Were there ideas in the community that people knew that y’all were from Mississippi, so they—they came to you because of that to have your barbecue?

00:42:50

JL: Well I don’t—I don’t know whether they came because—because we were from Mississippi, or—I hope they came because the food was good. **[Laughs]** That’s what I’m hoping, you know. You know what I mean? And I think they came because the food was good.

00:43:04

AE: Have you been back to Mississippi over the years?

00:43:06

JL: Hmm?

00:43:07

AE: Have you been back to Indianola over the years?

00:43:09

JL: I’ve been to Indianola—19—1902.

00:43:16

AE: Two thousand two?

00:43:17

JL: Two thousand two. Two thousand two I was down there. And I still have some relatives there. Yeah—in 2002. It done built up so it's—I call it a little—little Chicago, a little city. It done built up and growed. It's did well.

00:43:39

AE: And so your parents stayed in Indianola when you boys came up here?

00:43:44

JL: Uh-hmm Yeah, uh-hmm.

00:43:46

AE: And what were their names? I don't remember if I asked their names before?

00:43:48

JL: Lemon.

00:43:48

AE: Their first names?

00:43:49

JL: My—my father's name was William. He worked at Kimbrough Hardware there in Indianola, and he worked there for thirty-some years. And my mother, she's a housewife. She didn't have no job, you know. But she did cleaning and whatever, you know. You had to do different things to make things work—work out, you know. She did what she could do.

00:44:17

AE: And what was her first name?

00:44:18

JL: Anna. Yeah, Anna Lemon.

00:44:22

AE: And now Indianola is home to B. B. King, and he goes down there every summer for his homecoming. *[Every summer as part of his homecoming, B. B. King puts on a late-night performance at Club Ebony, a well-known Blues club that has been in operation since 1945. Mary Shepard, who owned Club Ebony from 1974 until 2008, is cousin to Mr. Lemons. This came out in conversation after recording was finished.]*

00:44:27

JL: I know him. Yes, I know him real—real well, yes.

00:44:33

AE: Does he come see you in Chicago?

00:44:35

JL: No, he haven't been here in—oh, in a long time but, you know, he's—that's another world, you know. But I'll tell you what he did one time in 1971 or '72. I was in Las Vegas and he—I went to the hotel where I was staying at—the Sands Hotel—to see him do a show. And he had

me come up on stage [*Laughs*]. Well my knees was weak; I couldn't hardly walk. [*Laughs*] You know, I'd never dreamed, you know, he going to call me to come up on stage, yeah.

00:45:22

AE: So y'all are about the same age, so y'all came up together in Indianola?

00:45:27

JL: I knew—well, BB is a little older than I—him and my older brother was along together. See, and they was along together, but I knew him, yeah.

00:45:38

AE: So what do you think about—with the Great Migration we were talking about the—the big push of—of blacks in from Mississippi and the South coming up to Chicago and—and bringing barbecue and Blues and, you know, Muddy Waters coming up here and all that. What do you think about that cultural flow—flow of culture that came up with folks from the South?

00:46:01

JL: Well, I don't know. I don't know whether they carried the same kind of peoples. You know, all them people that came to Chicago back then really—my hometown wasn't—wasn't a bad—as bad as people say the South was. I—I couldn't see it, and I was a young boy, you know, but it was—because I guess we had people that—that was good; you had good peoples, and you had bad peoples, you know. You had peoples that didn't care, and you had peoples that did care, you know. You know, so I never—I never had any racial problem or nothing because I knew—well I can't call people's names now that came to Chicago—in the furniture business—lots with their name, you know what I mean. One of the brothers came here and you know how, I guess, you try

to play around and mess around. And he came—and they came up in the truck to buy used furniture, I guess, or buy furniture to ship back to the furniture company. And they got in trouble; the police stopped him, and he had a gun on him. And he just happened to had my card in his thing and—and you know, this was back in [nineteen] '60—in '70; he had one of my cards. And he called me and told me they had him locked up in the police station over there. So he called me and I said well—I went over there and it just so happened I was lucky enough to catch the lieutenant on that night on the floor. He was a friend of mine and he said—he said it's—
[Laughs]—well I ain't going to say what he say(ed). I said, “Yeah.” I said, “Yeah, we from the same home town,” you know and he went on. And he said, “Well he's in the car.” And you know and they got hotels—but he was mad and I guess he—he really didn't want his wife to find out. You know he was messing around, you know, and—but anyway, I gave him the money to get him out of jail, and he went back to Indianola. We stayed—stayed in touch with him until after my mother died; and then after my mother died, we kind of lost touch with him. And you know—but just you know—just a little incident, you know, let you know that everybody ain't—ain't bad.

00:49:07

AE: Well I want to ask you about your barbecue again because I didn't see Don there season the—the rib tips at all or anything before he put them on the smoker?

00:49:15

JL: **[Phone Rings]** No, they seasoned already. Yeah, we—we—see that red?

00:49:22

AE: Yes—yes, sir.

00:49:23

JL: See how red they are? Well that's the seasoning; we done sprinkled them and they put them back in the box and let them set.

00:49:31

AE: So—so the—the meat is seasoned like the night before, then?

00:49:36

JL: Yeah, when we—before that. We—we do it when it first comes in, and we got coolers and freezers across the street [in a warehouse] where we keep it, and we bring it over here and put it in the cooler and then use it as we go along. And it—sometimes it will be seasoned four or five days, you know. I mean the longest it takes the better—better it tastes.

00:50:00

AE: Now there's—when I ate with you on Sunday, there was a sweetness to the tips. Can you share what that is?

00:50:08

JL: That comes from the sauce because none—the only thing sweet is the sauce. The sauce has got sugar in it.

00:50:16

AE: Can you share what some of the spices are that you—you put on the meat before you put it on the smoker?

00:50:22

JL: Sprinkling mix. [*Laughs*]

00:50:25

AE: I knew I wasn't going to get that out of you. Well what else can you tell me about being in the barbecue business all these fifty-plus years?

00:50:33

JL: It's a lot of work—a whole lot of work. Like I tell people, they say, "Well I want to go in the barbecue business"—friends of mine. I say, "Well I tell you what, I'm going to tell you about the barbecue business." You got to be able to work, and you got to want to work because if you don't, it's the wrong business to go in. Otherwise, I don't think you're going to do well, if you don't like to work or if you don't mind working. You have to make up your mind that, you know, that you have to work. Your money you invested—if you don't work, you ain't going to make it. And if you're not the type that's going to give it your all, leave it alone because it's just money you're throwing away. Somebody else will make it.

00:51:28

AE: Have you been around—traveled around to have other barbecue around the South or in Memphis—?

00:51:34

JL: I—I have went to other cities and tried barbecue, you know. You like you go places; you try it. Now I’m—lately I just stopped trying because mostly of my age and, you know, after you get past sixty-five you just can't eat any—any—eat any and everything; you have to eat what will agree with you. **[Laughs]** You know—.

00:52:01

AE: So would you call Lem’s Bar-B-Q would you call it Chicago-style?

00:52:05

JL: Well, yeah. It would have to be Chicago-style now. It would have to be Chicago-style.

[Laughs]

00:52:12

AE: And what makes it Chicago-style, would you say?

00:52:15

JL: Because it’s where it’s been the longest. **[Laughs]** It’s where it’s been the longest. It was created from Mississippi, but it’s Chicago barbecue.

00:52:26

AE: All right. Well I have a question that’s not related to barbecue, but since you’re from Mississippi, do you remember when you were coming up and having hot tamales in Indianola?

00:52:32

JL: Having what?

00:52:34

AE: Hot tamales?

00:52:35

AE: Hot tamales, yeah. Shucks—the shuck hot tamale, yeah. [*Laughs*] Used to have a man named Mr. Finch that used to make it; he used to make the best hot—I say he made the best hot tamales in the world—corn shuck, yeah.

00:52:54

AE: Now I've—I've seen a couple places here that—or at least one that has Mississippi-style hot tamales.

00:52:58

JL: I never ate hot tamales like that; I've been all over the city. I mean I've been all over. I've been—I've been three-quarters around the world, and I ain't ate hot tamales like I eated [in Mississippi].

00:53:15

AE: What do you know about here in Chicago—the hotdog stands? They have a sandwich called the Mother-in-Law sandwich that's a hot tamale in a bun.

00:53:25

JL: No, I haven't tried that one.

00:53:26

AE: No?

00:53:28

JL: No, no, I haven't tried it.

00:53:32

AE: I had one yesterday. It's real different. It's—the Delta tamales, like you say, are a totally different—different ballgame.

00:53:37

JL: Yeah, but I haven't tried them but hot tamales—yeah. I remember—we made them at home and put them in corn shucks [*Laughs*] and—but you can't find them like that. I used to try to buy them and they just—never found nobody that could make them like he made them.

00:54:00

AE: Well there's—there are a lot of tamales still in the Delta. We have another project that's the Mississippi Delta Hot Tamale Trail, and we've got about thirty or more vendors [documented] who still make them.

00:54:11

JL: Yeah. Yeah, well I guess they know what they're doing.

00:54:18

AE: Well Mr. Lemons, is there anything that you want to—final thoughts you want to add or something I didn't ask you about that you want—you want to talk about?

00:54:26

JL: Well just being anything you want to ask me, you can call me if you need me, you know.

And I'm going to keep your card.

00:54:39

AE: And I wanted to ask you about your desserts. You have cakes and pies that—that you offer here; tell me about those.

00:54:44

JL: We—we not fancy with desserts. I buy cakes and pies from this lady—I used to have a lady that used to sell me pies but she—I don't know whether she went out of business or not, but she made the best sweet potato pie that I ever—you know I bought thirty years from her. And all of the sudden she called me one time and said she was having problems with her license. And I asked her what did she need, and she borrowed some money from me, and then she kept on, you know. I told her whenever she gets it, she could pay me back, and so finally she just stop bringing pies. I didn't pressure her for the money; I didn't pressure her for—I still wouldn't pressure her for it, if she called me and said, "I'm straight now and I can make—." Because she made the best sweet potato pie, and I sold them pies then for thirty years. I've been selling them every since she went in business. And—and I got customers that come right today in this business—eight—nine months—ten months—yeah, about ten months—her name is Miss Mohamed. She made the best sweet potato pie that I—I've never—I just never eat, you know. Everybody makes sweet potato pie and—but hers was just that—like Mama made.

00:56:16

AE: Can you describe what was so good about it?

00:56:17

JL: Hmm?

00:56:17

AE: Can you describe what made it so good?

00:56:22

JL: Yeah, I don't know. It just—her pie was just different. Her pie tasted different than any sweet potato pie that you eat. It just—yeah, I don't know. I don't know what it was that made it. But she—she made a good sweet potato pie. She used to have to bake it—the bakery be out south of here. I don't know. I don't know whether—I know it couldn't be the money that she owed me because it wasn't that much—that kept—broke up—I don't know what happened to it. She didn't call me no more. But when she went in business, I'm the one that helped her—when you know—and she made the pies for me from—started in [nineteen]'68. I bought—no, '69—I bought pies from her up until about a year ago. She had good sweet potato pie, and she had the best that I've had. She just stopped calling, so I called her three or four times, you know. I can't make her see it. I called her old number and she—she wouldn't answer it, so I said, “Well, hey, listen, I ain't got time to look for her.”

00:57:48

AE: And the other day when I was here I saw some—some cakes up there [on the counter].
What kind of—what kind of cakes do you usually sell?

00:57:52

JL: I don't know. Lynn, the young lady, she got—a lady—got a bakery outside—she makes good cake.

00:58:03

AE: What kind are they, like lemon or caramel cake?

00:58:05

JL: Yeah, she makes different—different—she makes all kinds. But the ones that she buys, she buys the lemon cake and sour cream cake and some other kind of cake she buys. I don't—I don't deal with the sweets too much, yeah. *[Laughs]*

00:58:24

AE: All right then, well I appreciate you sitting with me, sir. This has been lovely.

00:58:26

JL: She makes a good cake, yeah.

00:58:31

AE: Well thank you for your time.

00:58:33

JL: I bet you're pretty good too.

00:58:32

AE: What's that?

00:58:35

JL: I bet you're a pretty good cook.

00:58:35

AE: Oh I'm—I might be. I'm okay. I do like to bake, though, and I especially like to eat so—.

[Laughs]

00:58:43

JL: Yeah, well **[Laughs]** you know—Mississippi—Oxford, Jackson—. Oh, man.

00:58:56

AE: Well thank you very much.

00:58:57

JL: So. Well I wish there was something I could tell you but it's—it's a good business, been good to me; let's—let's put it like that. But it's—it's a rough business, too.

00:59:18

AE: Here's to many more years of—of Lem's Bar-B-Que

00:59:23

JL: Thank you. Hey, listen, let's face it, I ain't got that many more years. I just wish I could get around good like I—you know—because I—I love waiting on the people, and I love the peoples I have been waiting on because I watched a lot of families grow. See that young man there?

[Meaning Donnell, the pitmaster]

00:59:43

AE: Yes, sir.

00:59:44

JL: I know his whole family. His sister worked for me; he had three other brothers work for me. And I watched him grow from, you know—not only him, but it’s a lot of other ones, you know. I got a young man, he’s some kind of vice president or somebody up there in New York—some company up there in New York; I watched him go start the grammar school, you know. And it—it just is amazing how sometimes some people, they never forget they just—and they’ll finally call you or tell you, “Hey—.” And I don’t know about the other people, but it makes me feel good. Yeah, it touches my heart, you know, that—that you can go back that far and touch peoples, you know. You know what I mean? And like I say, it’s been good to me, and I had some good brothers. I had—I had a good family, you know.

01:01:01

AE: Have your other brothers passed?

01:01:01

JL: Huh?

01:01:03

AE: Have your other brothers passed?

01:01:06

JL: Yeah, yeah. I got three—two other brothers still living but they wasn't in the barbecue business. One brother lives in Kansas City; he retired from the banking. He's Vice President of the Douglas State Bank there in Kansas City, and he retired from there. I had another brother who worked for UPS [United Parcel Service], and he been retired ten years from UPS. He retired—I don't know—he was a big shot out there with UPS. That's what I call it because you know—but—so you know—. They all wasn't in the—in the barbecue business.

01:01:45

AE: But all the Lemons boys have done good?

01:01:48

JL: Yeah, all turned out pretty good. Yeah, I go out there and look at my mama's picture at night and I say, "You did a good job. You did a pretty good job," you know. Yeah.

01:02:06

AE: Well that's—that might be a nice note to end on, thinking of your mama.

01:02:11

JL: Yeah, yeah.

01:02:13

AE: Well thank you for your time, sir. I appreciate it.

01:02:14

JL: All right. All right, Amy.

01:02:18

[End James Lemons Interview]