

Interview of: Florence Signa  
Interviewer: Amy Evans  
Interview Date: September 15, 2005

September 22, 2005

**Interviewee: Florence Signa  
Doe's Eat Place  
Greenville, MS  
September 15, 2005**

**Interviewer: Amy Evans  
Length: 31 minutes**

*This interview was conducted at Doe's Eat Place on a Thursday night, during regular service. Initially, the interview took place in the rear dining room before customers started trickling in. After a few of minutes, a large table was seated in the rear dining room, and the interview moved to the small dining room adjacent to the kitchen. Voices of servers and other employees can be heard in the background, as can the noise of box fans that cool off the restaurant*

**[Begin Florence Signa.mp3]**

0:00:00.0

**Amy Evans:** This is Amy Evans on Thursday, September 15, 2005. I'm in Greenville, Mississippi, at Doe's Eat Place, and I'm here to interview Aunt Florence. Aunt Florence would you mind saying your whole name and also your birthday, please ma'am?

0:00:18.1

**Florence Signa:** Florence Strazi Signa, March 10, 1926, or Mrs. Frank Signa. **[Laughs]**

0:00:28.7

**AE:** So you married into the Signa family; what year did you get married?

0:00:32.5

**FS:** Nineteen forty-eight; I married the most handsome man, Frank Signa, who is—who was—who *was* Doe Signa's [Senior] brother, youngest brother.

0:00:49.1

**AE:** How did you meet Frank?

0:00:52.3

**FS:** Well we went—some—from—some girls that we paled around with went to the Shaw Catholic Parish Fair and we were sitting there doing the usual, playing the games, and this good-looking man walks in and he turned around and he said, “Where are you girls going?” And I thought, “Who is this,” you know? So anyway we played around and played around. So then the next day, I get a phone call and he said, “I’ve got two tickets to the football game; would you like to go to the Greenville High football game? Would you like to go?” And I said, “When is that?” He said, “Friday.” And I thought, “Check back with me later on in the week.” I was playing hard to get. My girl—so I called my girlfriends and I told them, “Guess what? You know that good-looking man we were looking at? He called me and asked me to go to the ballgame.” “What did you tell him?” I said, “I told him to call back later.” They said, “What?” So anyway he did; he called back later. We had our first date to the Greenville High football game. That’s where he played football—Greenville. We both went to Greenville High. But since he was nine years older than I was, I really didn’t know him, but my brothers knew him. But—so that’s how we met.

0:02:23.3

**AE:** Well growing up in Greenville, what did you know about Doe's Eat Place before you met Frank?

0:02:30.0

**FS:** Well I lived out in the country and my daddy would take us by here to pick up tamales, and we would drive up on the levy and eat them—but had no earthly idea that I would be this part of Doe's. But—but anyway, I—I came to work a year before we married. My boyfriend—husband-to-be said that they needed some help. So he would pick me up after work on Saturdays at the furniture store where I worked, and I would come here and just fry potatoes. But if I wanted to see him it was either come and fry potatoes or go home by myself. And he opened oysters on the back porch, which it was just a window between us. I would fry potatoes at the counter and look over and he was opening oysters. So we did that and we—like I said started going together and then we married a year later—October. I had my first date with him Halloween night.

0:03:52.1

**AE:** What did you do for your date?

0:03:51.8

**FS:** That was a good trick-or-treat—went to the football game. [*Laughs*]

0:03:57.6

**AE:** Right; so I want to ask you about the hot tamales since you say that you came to Doe's to get the hot tamales before you met—even met your husband.

0:04:06.5

**FS:** Oh, way before; I was just a young girl.

0:04:08.6

**AE:** Yeah; so what is it about Doe's Hot Tamales and then also in general hot tamales in the Delta?

0:04:15.1

**FS:** Well of course—and naturally we always think that ours is the best. Now I've tried several other people's and—and I find that Doe's—Doe's tamales are the best.

0:04:25.8

**AE:** Why do you think that?

0:04:29.4

**FS:** Well they're seasoned better and—and that's—you know when you find a good seasoned tamale that's—that's really the main—and they're cooked in this real good sauce and it makes them good and soft and juicy.

0:04:43.7

**AE:** Do you have an opinion about how tamales got to the Mississippi Delta or how they stayed?

0:04:48.0

**FS:** Yes; this—Doe—this man gave Doe his recipe. They sold it—I remember—I don't remember whether they bought it or whether—whether it was just given to them and they kind of revised it a little bit and that's how—that's how he started. He started just selling tamales and—and the whites would come in the back door and the blacks would come in the front door and buy the tamales. And—and of course like the history tells this you know used to be a juke joint and—but—but that's how it all got started. And then after we married in between children I've been here 58 years.

0:05:40.7

**AE:** How many children do you have?

0:05:43.0

**FS:** I have four children—three queens and a king.

0:05:45.7

**AE:** What are their names?

0:05:47.6

**FS:** Frank, Jr.—Frank Signa, Jr., Mary-Francis Butts, Pearl Nelson, and Polly Jackson. Polly lives in Huntsville, Alabama. Pearl lives in Hattiesburg; she's a nurse. And Mary-Francis Butts and her husband live in Jackson or Brandon and they have an office supply in Brandon, Mississippi.

0:06:13.0

**AE:** How do you spell Mary-Francis' last name?

0:06:14.4

**FS:** B-u-t-t-s.

0:06:16.2

**AE:** Okay.

0:06:16.5

**FS:** And my son lives here; he's in the contracting business.

0:06:22.5

**AE:** Has he ever had anything to do with Doe's?

0:06:25.4

**FS:** Well, when they opened the Doe's in Jackson, he went down and opened it but it wasn't a very good location. So it just didn't work out. But he loved it; he really did. He loved it there.

0:06:40.7



**AE:** When you first started working here and were frying the potatoes, can you tell me what business was like and what kind of people would come through?

0:06:48.6

**FS:** Well now Doe's sister would—Doe and Mamie would be here and then when Doe's sister, Jay Signa got—when she finished work at this department store downtown, she would come and relieve Doe and Mamie, and she would cook steaks. Of course on that small grill, which—of course Doe cooks on a big grill and the small grill now when they're busy—but I don't hardly remember—well Bill Clinton came as Governor when he was Governor—not after he was President, and of course we've had Willie Nelson and Judy Garland's daughter. I can't think of her name—what's her name?

0:07:45.0

**AE:** Liza Minnelli.

0:07:47.5

**FS:** Liza Minnelli came in and—and we've had the Ambassador to Great Britain; I've got pictures of him and of course the Governors have been here, and—and Julia Reed. She's very famous, our Greenville girl; oh, Willie Morris, okay. You know when you get past 39 you kind

of have a tendency to forget. But we—we've had quite a few, probably and some that we didn't—  
didn't even know you know that they were here. We just have people from all over the world  
come and eat here.

0:08:31.5

**AE:** When did that—Doe's reputation start really gaining momentum? Do you have an idea?

0:08:38.1

**FS:** Well it's—it's been famous from the word go, especially for the steaks. But like you say  
word of mouth, you know. We've had people say they got on the plane in London and they've  
asked them, “Where's Doe's eat place? I'm going to Mississippi.” So it's really world-known; it  
really is.

0:09:09.5

**AE:** Yeah; well when you were frying potatoes, how did you learn to do that? Was it a secret?

0:09:15.2

**FS:** No, no; I pretty well helped my mother to cook at home, so it was just—you know just turn the fire up and get the oil hot and then throw the French fires in, stir them, and watch them turn brown. *[Laughs]*

0:09:30.3

**AE:** And then when you married your husband how did your responsibilities here at the restaurant change?

0:09:36.1

**FS:** Well I had our first child five years after I married him, and—no, I take it back—three years after I married him. I was 25. And well, then you stay at home. Well then—then we would have a—a maid to come in and—and take care of Mary Francis and then I would come and—come and—and work when they didn't have any—you know when they needed help. But then when Mary Francis was three years old, my husband was electrocuted. He got his head in a 13,000 volt line and he was in and out of the hospital all the time, which he survived, and—and then we had Frankie five years after Mary Francis. And like I say in between children I've been working here this long. So after my husband died 17 years ago, I—well I had been working, but then—but then I stopped working. So then I thought well what would I—what will I do at home by myself all this time? So Doe asked me if I'd come work a few nights a week. So I'm here working Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday and then Doe's wife, Shug works Monday and

Tuesday. And then if I have something to do like with—to see the grandchildren or play ball or homecoming or something like that then we swap. So it's—it's real—it makes it real nice.

0:11:27.4

**AE:** And so what do you—what do you do here when you come to work? Do you greet people and what else do you do?

0:11:33.6

**FS:** I—I—well I answer the phone, take reservations, make salads, take orders to—to go out, like you say seat people, greet people and then after they're seated then I check on them and make sure everything is all right, and then—and then I cashier. So—but mostly mine is salad and cashier and answering the phone. [*Laughs*]

0:12:04.4

**AE:** That's a good amount of stuff to be responsible for.

0:12:04.8

**FS:** It keeps—keeps me busy but I love it.

0:12:06.8

**AE:** What do you love about it?

0:12:09.1

**FS:** I love it because I love people and I get to see people. I'm on my third—and almost fourth generation, and it's—it's just so rewarding to see all the people—all the people when they come in and of course I hug everybody that comes in and—and it's Aunt Florence, because they'll come in the front and they'll say, “Go back there and talk to my Aunt Florence.” So they'll come in, “Hey, Aunt Florence,” and I thought—I don't think he's my niece and nephew, you know.

**[Laughs]** But anyway I love it; I do and—and I work hard now, because when I go home I take me a good hot bath and nobody has to sing me a lullaby for me to go to sleep. **[Laughs]** And I get up at 6:15 every morning—5:15 and go to church. I go to church every morning. And—and that just starts my day off. I feel like if I don't go to church, I—I don't know what to do the rest of the day. I can't start my day off. But—but I do; I—I love it here. I really do.

0:13:12.7

**AE:** Do you intend to stay working here as long as you can?

0:13:15.2

**FS:** Well I'll be 80 in March, and I'll see. As long as I guess this—this head can still add one and one and my legs are still holding me up and I please my boss—that first; I should put that first—well then I—I'm sure I'll be—I might have to cut down on my nights, you know if I see I can't make it. But I know how to pace myself when I have to work. I try to do all my work Monday and Tuesday at home—washing and doing all those kind of—do cooking and all and then when I know I have to work well then I'll rest more. So I'll be ready for the night.

0:13:58.9

**AE:** Well can you talk a little bit more about when your husband was alive and Doe, Sr. was alive and what the restaurant was like back in the day?

0:14:09.7

**FS:** Well Doe and Mamie, who is Doe (Junior) and Charles' mother and daddy, they—they—they—they would be here in the daytime getting ready for the night and they lived—they lived in this—this part of the restaurant and then when the—the family got larger and the business got larger, well then they built a house on Cedar Street. But it was—and this is the family home back here next door. And Doe, my husband's brother, would come over and run errands for Doe and—and Mamie and—and then Doe's sister would come over in the daytime and help. And when we first started it was all—it was Doe's sister and sister-in-laws that was working here. Well then they got older and so then they had to start hiring some outsiders. But—but it was—it was just a fun place—just a fun place. People would go and come and—and customers would come for hot

tamales to take out and if Mamie was cooking—frying chicken or something, the customer would come by and get a piece of chicken and just home-like, you know—just everybody came here. It just made you feel at home. We liked everybody that come here just feel like they at home. As a matter of fact, when they come in and they'll say—I ask them, “Is this table all right? If it's not move it around, move the furniture around; make yourself at home.” **[Laughs]** But we do—we—we like to make everybody that comes in here feel at home.

0:16:08.0

**AE:** Well do I remember correctly that the family would have Sunday supper here in the restaurant and cook a big—cook a big meal?

0:16:15.8

**FS:** We've had—we've had lots of reunions here, the family; all the family gets together and of course Doe's mother and daddy really could cook. Oh, they could—they were real good cooks and they really could—really could. Yeah; they—they all gone now; I'm the only aunt that Doe has left. My husband was from a family of 12 and I was from a family of six, and I'm the only one left in my family and the only one left in the Signa family.

0:16:50.5

**AE:** My goodness.

0:16:51.8

**FS:** So God has got to be keeping me here for some reason. **[Laughs]**

0:16:52.8

**AE:** I'd say. So tell me a little bit about your husband. What was he like?

0:16:56.4

**FS:** He was a jolly man. He loved to joke. He loved to dance, loved music, loved people and we—we had a wonderful life. We traveled; we used to go to his Army reunions. They'd have them every—every other year and we'd travel all over the United States to go to his Army reunions. And—and we—they would have the big bands—Tommy Dorsey out at the American Legion and we'd always—and when the music started he was ready to go; he was ready to dance. As a matter of fact, the ladies would line up and want him to dance with them. He was a wonderful dancer. He loved music. And even after his accident when he lost half of a foot, you'd never know it. He'd still get out there and just dance away. He just loved dancing and of course, I loved dancing, too. But—but I haven't danced since he died. I can't find a partner to dance like he did. **[Laughs]** But anyway, that's not here nor there.

0:18:16.2



**AE:** Do I understand that he had a nickname also?

0:18:17.8

**FS:** Jughead.

0:18:19.8

**AE:** Uh-huh; can you tell me about that?

0:18:21.4

**FS:** He got that in high school playing football and so that's—that's how he got that—that name. As a matter of fact, people would call him Jug or Jughead and—and but he—he liked—he liked that name; he sure did. He loved that name.

0:18:45.8

**AE:** So he shucked the oysters here for Doe's?

0:18:46.5

**FS:** Yeah; he sure did.

0:18:50.5

**AE:** Was that most all of his responsibility or did he do some other things as well?

0:18:53.6

**FS:** Just—just whatever—whatever needed to be done—whatever needed to be done, but mostly he would open oysters.

0:19:01.1

**AE:** Did he like doing that or was it something that he just—?

0:19:02.5

**FS:** Oh, he loved it 'cause he'd put two in the plate and one in his mouth. He'd always slip one and as a matter of fact, we still have people that were little bitty that come in now that are grown and married and tell that he started them eating oysters on the half shell when he—when they were real little. They'd go back on the back porch and watch him open those oysters. Yeah; those were the good old days. I love to talk about them. They really were.

0:19:39.9

**AE:** Tell me some more stories. What else do you remember from the good old days?

0:19:47.7

**FS:** Well on—on Sundays right after my husband and I married, we didn't—we didn't own a car. So Doe would come pick us up. Well I'd—I'd go home after—we'd go home after—we were walking distance from the church. So we'd walk to church and walk back to our little apartment right on Broadway and I'd start lunch and Mamie would call, “What you doing?” “Fixing lunch.” “Turn everything off. Doe will be by to pick you up; you're going to have lunch with us.” So I'd come and I'd help her cook and I'd—I'd sit right at this table and make her favorite pies. I haven't made one since, but I—one of these days I'm going to make it. It's fruit cream cheese pie, but I'd make the pies and then—. [*Interruption*]

0:20:46.3

*[Recording is interrupted when a large group is seated in the room where the interview is being conducted. The interview moves to the dining room directly off of and behind the kitchen.]*

**AE:** Okay; so you were talking about the pies.

0:20:47.2

**FS:** So we would—we would go and come over here and we'd eat right here, because this is where they lived. And—and then Doe would take us home, take us back to our apartment. We ate—we ate too much to walk back; so. But we—we—we just had—the Signa family just took me in and I loved every one of them. They—they—I have never had a misunderstanding with them. They were all—they were just—they were every one of them—all 12 of them were just as nice to me as they could be. I couldn't have married into a more wonderful family—sure did.

0:21:34.5

**AE:** What did you think about marrying into the restaurant business? What did you think about marrying into the restaurant business?

0:21:42.6

**FS:** Well I wasn't thinking about that; I was thinking about that good-looking man I was marrying. *[Laughs]* He worked for the Mississippi Power and Light Company. And—but—but I had no idea when I first was standing up there frying those potatoes that I'd still be here 58 years later, but I do—I love it. I really do.

0:22:03.1

**AE:** So what about the community of Greenville? What was it like when you were first working here?

0:22:09.9

**FS:** Well, it has changed a lot; Greenville has really changed a lot. But I guess we just have to go along with the times, you know. When you get my age it's kind of hard to change, you know. But—and some things that I see that go on that I don't agree with 'cause it didn't happen like that 50 years ago, but we got to accept the fact that things do change and we have to change with the times.

0:22:42.5

**AE:** Can you talk about—you said that you make the salad when you work these nights. Can you talk about how you construct a Doe's salad?

0:22:53.3

**FS:** Our salad is lettuce, onion, and tomatoes. We rub the bowl with garlic and when it's—and—and the dressing is fresh-squeezed lemon juice—not that bottled stuff, fresh squeezed lemon juice and olive oil, and you just toss it good. You've got to toss it real good for that oil and lemon to mix in with that garlic, and salt and everybody loves it. We sell a—we make a many a bowl of salad here at night. We really do.

0:23:29.5

**AE:** Is there a certain ratio of lemon juice to oil that you use or do you just eyeball it?

0:23:35.1

**FS:** Yeah; no, this—this we've got a measuring cup that we measure. It's three-fourths cup of fresh-squeezed lemon juice and a cup and a half of olive oil. And I'm sure they don't mind me telling our secret. It's no secret 'cause I tell customers that come in and they'll say, "I've tried that but mine didn't taste like that." And I tell them, "Don't feel bad; mine didn't taste like that at home either."

0:23:57.2

**AE:** What do you think it is that makes it taste different here?

0:24:02.7

**FS:** I—I really don't know. I just kind of am picking at it, but I—I mean I can't—but I make it at home and it—it does taste like this. You've got to—you've got to tell them something. [*Laughs*]

0:24:15.0

**AE:** Well then I understand, too, that people bring their salad bowls in here to be seasoned by y'all?

0:24:19.4

**FS:** We had this man send one; it's—it's here now from Indianapolis. I think it's up Indiana; I think it's up the country somewhere. He mailed it here and I'm seasoning it for him and then we got to mail it back to him.

0:24:34.9

**AE:** How long are you going to hold onto it for?

0:24:36.9

**FS:** Oh and—and we have an attorney here that brought his bowls in for us to season and he came by and picked them up. I don't know; it's really ready now. I don't know when Doe wants to mail it back to him, but I try to make—it's a small bowl.

0:24:53.2

**AE:** How long have you had it for?

0:24:56.4

**FS:** Probably about four or five weeks. But I don't make all of them in that but I do try to make as many as I can.

0:25:05.1

**AE:** So what's it like when it gets really busy in here?

0:25:08.3

**FS:** Oh, Lord. It's people standing out front. Doe has got lawn chairs out front for them to sit in and they'll come in and get a beer, or maybe Doe might put some tamales out there for them to munch on to wait while they're waiting. And I'll go out there and tell them, "Y'all are having such a good time out here, I don't think y'all want to come in and sit down and eat," and they—they do. And it's people—and they meet different people. Like one night I had two groups of fours and—and conversation—one was way up the country and one was somewhere in Mississippi. They got to talking and they said, "Can we sit together? We've become such good friends." That's how it is here at Doe's. They—they—they make more friends here; they really do. They really do.

0:25:56.9



**AE:** Do you get a good amount of time to visit with the customers when they're here or are you usually too busy?

0:26:00.9

**FS:** When I catch up with my salad and I'm not cashiering I'll go around and pat them on the back and want to know if everything is all right and want to know if it's their first time and kind of say something silly or whatever, you know. Like when they come to pay their—for their meal with a Visa [credit card] and they'll go off and leave it, well I'll chase them to the front door and I say, “Are you going to take this or do you want me to take this to the mall tomorrow?” “Well it's better in your hands than it is in my wife's hands,” just little things like that to make them feel at home.

0:26:33.2

**AE:** Uh-hm; do you have folks who come to eat here just on the nights that you're here just to see you?

0:26:40.6

**FS:** Well they tell me that; now I'm not sure it's that. I don't know whether they're trying to make me feel good or what but I have had people tell me that. But anyway—.

0:26:52.1

**AE:** What do you like best about working here and still being a part of the Doe's tradition?

0:26:58.8

**FS:** Like I say, it's—it's—I enjoy it. It gives me something to look forward to and I love people. I enjoy seeing everybody and—and I've had some people say, “Well when are you going to retire?” I say, “Just think; if I was retired I wouldn't be able to get to see you.” So you know—but anyway, yeah it's—it's a fun place. I work hard now; it's a lot of work here.

0:27:27.6

**AE:** I know—I know you do.

0:27:30.1

**FS:** But I enjoy it; I really do.

0:27:32.1

**AE:** Well do—speaking of work, do you need to get back to work you think? You got some customers trickling in.

0:27:41.4

**FS:** Are we finished?

0:27:41.6

**AE:** We can be; I don't want to keep you from your responsibilities; so.

0:27:45.9

**FS:** Well, do you have anymore questions you want to ask, or—?

0:27:49.8

**AE:** I don't believe so.

0:27:51.4

**FS:** Okay.

0:27:51.6

**AE:** Do you have anything that you haven't mentioned that you might like to—to add?

0:27:59.5

**FS:** No, well I mean, of course, you know Charles and them in Oxford?

0:28:02.5

**AE:** Yes, ma'am.

0:28:04.4

**FS:** And I haven't been to see that place yet, but Maryanne said she's going to pick me up one day and take me to see it.

0:28:09.5

**AE:** It's very nice, their new space.

0:28:13.8

**FS:** But you know Charles and Doe are like my sons. Their mother died when Doe was just a small child. And I really see them more than I see my own children. And I love them and their wives just like they belong to me. They really do. They're two wonderful boys.

0:28:37.3

**AE:** What do you think about the future of Doe's?

0:28:40.3

**FS:** Well as long as this building will hold up I think it will continue. It will continue—I sure do.

0:28:47.7

**AE:** What would your husband and your brother-in-law, Doe, what would they think about this today?

0:28:54.8

**FS:** Oh, they would just be beaming. I'm sure they're up there looking down on us guiding us right and—and I'm sure they're both talking and—and just discussing—there might be some things they might see up—from up there that they don't approve of, but anyway I'm sure they

would be well-pleased. I'm sure they would be well-pleased. I wish my husband was here to see our 12 grandchildren. But anyway, I have one—one and a half great-grandchild. But—but anyway—that was God's wish to take him, so—and I'm sure one day I'll meet him up there—I hope. I hope I get to get up there.

0:29:41.6

**AE:** Well is there anything that you'd like to say to somebody who maybe hasn't been to Doe's and—and hasn't come here—what they're missing out on?

0:29:50.4

**FS:** Just tell them that we have wonderful food and we have wonderful waitresses and if they haven't come—if they have not been here, they need to come, because we love everybody. We like to make everybody feel at home and we'd just like for them to come. It's just a quaint place; there's no other place like it anywhere, and we're world-famous. So that ought to speak well for us.

0:30:18.1

**AE:** Well all right; well I'll let you get back to work.

0:30:20.6

**FS:** Well, I enjoyed it. You just brought back more memories for me.

0:30:23.5

**AE:** Well, good.

0:30:26.5

**FS:** And I don't usually talk with anybody else. I haven't got many people to talk to. I mean I take that back—my children, my children. “Mother tell us about that.” So I try to tell them about a lot of things.

0:30:39.8

**AE:** Well I'm really honored that I could get this visit in with you; so thank you.

0:30:40.8

**FS:** Well I'm honored that you came. I really appreciate it.

0:30:44.3

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**[End Florence Signa.mp3]**