
FULL TRANSCRIPT:

SUBJECT: Greg Cowman, bartender @
The Napoleon House
500 Chartres Street
New Orleans, LA 70130

DATE: April 1, 2005 @ 10:00 a.m.

LOCATION: Napoleon House front dining room

INTERVIEWER: Amy Evans

LENGTH: Approx. 40 minutes

NOTE: Various sounds occur throughout this interview. Rather than mention them individually and interrupt the flow of the conversation, they are noted here: the restaurant's staff can be heard in the background setting up for service, various voices can be heard in conversation, and there is music heard continually in the background [The Napoleon house is known for playing classical music during business hours, but the staff listens to the radio before the doors open. In this recording songs by Cher and Jimmy Buffet round out the background noise]. When the occurring sounds are an obvious interruption to the interview, they are noted in the transcript.

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Amy Evans: This is Friday, April first, two thousand and five, and this is Amy Evans for the Southern Foodways Alliance. I'm at the Napoleon House in the French Quarter, with Greg Cowman, a bartender here. And Greg would mind saying your full name and then also your birthdate for the record please, sir?

Greg Cowman: Greg Cowman. September fifteenth, nineteen forty-seven.

AE: All right. And, um are you from New Orleans originally.

GC: No. Born in Ohio, and raised in Michigan.

AE: Okay.

GC: Lived a lot of places.

AE: Okay. What brought you to New Orleans?

GC: My uncle, primarily. We were very close. I've been—I've been close to my uncle, well, since I was a kid. And we worked together in the sixties and seventies in his restaurants up north and -oh, in Florida too—and then, uh, the real reason I came down was he was having his knees replaced, which everybody in our family done. And I just—I'd helped my father through the

same operation, so I came to help him through that and just didn't want to go back to Los Angeles.

AE: Yeah? And what year—

GC: So I stayed.

AE: What year was it that you came down here?

GC: That was, um, eighty-nine.

AE: Okay.

GC: Nineteen eighty-nine.

AE: And your uncle is Tom Cowman—

GC: Yes.

AE: --who is a chef.

GC: Was.

AE: Was a chef. Can you give us just a little brief history of him and how he—

GC: Yes, Tom was my father's brother. Uh, not the youngest brother, but he started his career in New York City, and then really made a name for himself out in East Hampton on Long Island at the Maidstone Arms, which was his real feature restaurant there. Craig Claiborne reviewed him well there. Uh, he worked out there for quite a long time. I—I can't remember exactly how many years. Probably at least ten years. And, uh—during the summers. In the winters he'd go to Florida or else just not work. And I worked with him there in nineteen sixty-eight and nineteen seventy, I think it was. Seventy-one. And, uh, maybe—

AE: What did you do for him there?

GC: I was a cook, I was a waiter, whatever. Started out cooking.

AE: Okay.

GC: Pantry. So I know—the only thing I never did for him was wash dishes. [Short laugh]

AE: Yeah. So you know the biz, though.

GC: Oh, yeah. Been in the business a long time.

AE: So then you came to New Orleans to help him during his time that he was having surgery—

GC: Right.

AE: And then, where did bartending come into play.

GC: Well, I started bartending in New York, when I moved there. After, uh—after we quit working in East Hampton and we—everybody kind of split. And my girlfriend and I moved to New York City and, uh, she was working in a restaurant there, and they needed a bartender so—I'd never bartended before but [Laughs] how hard can it be?

AE: Yeah? What kind of—

GC: I would say bartending is—is ten percent knowing how to make drinks and ninety percent just knowing how to chat with people.

AE: Yeah.

GC: That's—that's the fun of it anyhow for me. So I worked at Charley O's restaurant in Rockefeller Center for, I think maybe—I guess about four years or so in the mid-seventies.

AE: Okay. And so then it was more or less like on the job training there behind the bar—

GC: Right.

AE: —mixing drinks and—

GC: Right, right.

AE: Did you serve a lot of cocktails there or—

GC: Oh, yeah. Very busy bar. Big—big Irish bar.

AE: Okay.

GC: Lots of, uh, well, it's right in the center of Rockefeller Center, so there's lots of tourists and [short pause] lots of regulars too. It was a very, very busy place.

AE: Yeah?

GC: And Saint Paddy's Day was nuts. [Laughs] You—you just couldn't move. It was like wall to wall—

AE: What did you serve a lot of there, as far as cocktails are concerned?

GC: Oh, gosh. I don't remember anything special, really. It was a typical bar, though. Nothing—we didn't have a special drink like we have here [the Pimm's Cup] but, uh, uh, it was basically—basically businessmen and tourists. A lot of beers and martinis and that sort of thing. Uh, nothing, really—I don't remember any extraordinary drinks. There was no house specialty or anything like that.

AE: Did you know anything about New Orleans cocktail—

GC: Irish coffees, maybe. Irish coffees. Lots of Irish coffees. [Laughs]

AE: Did you know anything about New Orleans cocktail culture when you came down here to New Orleans?

GC: Not really, no. I wasn't really planning on it [coming to New Orleans]. I had been working with my sister in a car parts business and, uh—Well, my uncle was working at a restaurant when I came here, and I really [short pause] I don't know if I should say this, but I really didn't like the owner. And, uh, so I knew I couldn't work with him there. There would have been—eventually, there would have been friction, I think. A falling out one way or another. And he was too important to me to jeopardize that so—so, um—and right before I came down here, too, I was in a bad car accident. So I couldn't work for a while. And then when I got better, I had to work [at] something, and I was working a horrible job uptown. Just awful, where I'd walk out making three dollars for the day. And plus the—the manager, was stealing tips from everybody. It was not a nice place. It was a great place, actually, but the people that ran it didn't know what they were doing, and it was not good. And I just drifted in here [to the Napoleon House] one day and, uh, poured my heart out to the bartender, saying, "God, I really just hate this place [where I'm working now]." And he said, "Hey, man, we got a place here." So he was—because he was actually moving up to management, so he was quitting so—

AE: Okay. **[COUNTER: 05:10]**

GC: So I took his place.

AE: And who was that?

GC: That was Roger. Roger Willis.

AE: Okay.

GC: And, uh—

AE: How long ago was that that you came into the bar—

GC: Here? It was, uh, nineteen ninety-one, I believe. Pretty sure. And, uh, and I worked—I worked a full shift then—a full week then. I just work part-time now. But, uh, it was—it was full-on then. And I worked for about—I think about four years, and then I tried to do some other things. Well, that's—I think that's when—no, that's when my uncle died and all this other stuff started to happen. And, uh, so that's when I started putting the cookbook together [Greg published a cookbook of his uncle, Tom Cowman's, recipes]. And I just got—got distracted with that for quite a while, actually. Took me about four years from start to finish to get that done. And I worked here and there, and I would still fill in working parties upstairs. But I—once in a while take a[nother] shift here. Basically, I think I stayed off for about four years. And then I came back for another two years or so and worked kind of part-time like I do now. Like two or three days a week. [I'm] still working parties. The parties upstairs I like to do. And, uh, and then I quit again trying to hopefully—always kind of trying to do something else with my life. I do website design and—and, uh, I've always wanted to be a painter and that sort of thing. I've painted since I was a kid but, uh—well, not since I was a kid, but since school. And, uh, so whenever I get a little chunk of money or a little bit ahead or something I drift out of [bartending].

AE: [Laughs]

GC: But then I come back, but to tell you the truth, I miss it when I'm not—staying at home working in front of the computer all day is not much fun.

AE: You miss the social interaction?

GC: I miss the s—yeah, I really do. I don't miss making drinks ever.

AE: Yeah.

GC: And working—this bar can get tearfully busy on the weekends and, uh—I mean, all I do is make just drinks as fast as I can for eight hours. That—that doesn't appeal to me, and it just wears me out too. And I'm getting kind of old now so—so it hurts. But, uh, I do miss—I do miss the interaction. So that's why I work during the weeks now, when it's not so crazy. You know, I don't work on weekends, generally. Unless somebody needs a day off. But, uh, I like it better that way. I just miss—miss meeting people and—

AE: Well and is there something about this bar that's different from any other place that you've worked? That's kept you here?

GC: Oh, I think this—yeah, I think this place has got—it's just got to be one of the most charming places. And, uh, the [short pause]—it's always busy. You make decent money; you don't make great money. But I think to make

really great money, you'd have to work at a place [that] I wouldn't want to work. Like a Bourbon Street bar or something like that.

AE: Right.

GC: And I would—would hate that. Plus I would probably [short laugh] drink half the money I made back there just to calm down. I do that sometimes here when it's a busy day. But, uh, you know, the owners here are real—real fair. And it's a family-owned business, which appeals to me because of my uncle and that sort of thing. I was pretty close to my family. Unfortunately, most of them are gone but, uh—they're very fair. And Sal [the owner of the Napoleon House] has taken me back a couple of times now and, he's just, uh—they're very straight forward and, uh, very honest about—oh, I don't know, they just treat—treat people pretty well here. And that's rare. That's pretty rare. The other thing I like about the busi—the family here is [that] they all work hard. Sal particularly. He works [as] hard as anybody, and he'll do everything. He'll mop the floors, do, you know, anything that anybody should do. And I respect that. There's a lot of them that just don't. You know, they just sit back. And I hate it when you see guys counting the money. All they're thinking about is the money. So, most of the people that work here have been here a long time I think because of that. They can come and go pretty much as they want to. Like last—last week I had to go make a quick trip out to California to help my sister and, "Well, just make sure you've got it arranged and got yourself covered and no problem." A lot of places wouldn't let you do that either.

AE: Yeah. [You have] lots of leeway. Well what's a typical day like here? You have, um, you know a ratio of tourists to regulars or something of that sort?

GC: Mmm [short pause] When I first started working here it was about—well, I don't know. I'd guess maybe fifty-fifty. It wasn't quite as busy back then, but then, uh—

MAN: Excuse me. Can I get in here? I just want to get—

[Reaches into a closet that is next to where the interview is sitting]

AE: Oh, sure, no problem. Okay.

MAN: That's all I wanted. Thank you.

AE: Mm-hmm. Sure thing.

GC: The, uh—I think about, uh, maybe a year or two after I started here—well, no it was maybe not that quick but—I think the owners had to kind of make a judgment call on how they were going to direct the business. Whether they were going to try to hang on to the locals and the local color or just shoot for the tourism, and I don't—there was no choice, really.

AE: Yeah. **[COUNTER: 10:14]**

GC: It was going to happen, regardless. And, uh, then they got the computers in. So I—I'd say maybe fifty-fifty, forty-sixty maybe back then. But now it's probably ninety [to] ten. Not very many regulars—locals.

AE: Yeah.

GC: The ones that you have are *very* regular. But, uh, not so many. I think there are other bars that—well, like Tujague's has a real local crowd. And, uh, the smaller bars. And maybe not so—this is a pretty turnover—high turnover place. Do a lot of business here. And I think that turns off tourists—uh, locals too. They like to sit and hang out and that stuff. Plus, we don't have any of the—the catches of, uh, poker machines and TVs and that kind of stuff. Thank, God!

AE: No, but you have the Pimm's Cup. I mean, how many of those do you think you serve in a day?

GC: Oh! Yeah. I hate to think how many Pimm's Cups I've made.

AE: [Laughs]

[Short pause]

GC: I may have told you that before but the [Pimm's] distributor once told me that the Napoleon House does about ninety-percent of the southern region's sale of Pimm's. Total sales. So I would think—I think it wouldn't be far off the say that, uh, Pimm's is—you make more Pimm's than you make do other things put together, except for beer and wine, maybe. But—

AE: And you like to make the Sazerac, [like] you made for me the other night. [When the interviewer visited the Napoleon House three days before this interview, Greg was working the bar. When asked what drink he liked to make, he said the Sazerac. The interviewer ordered one right then and there.]

GC: Well, I don't *like* to make them.

AE: [Laughs]

GC: I don't know that—it's—it's time consuming, but it *is* such a good drink that it's—it really does taste good.

AE: Do you have a lot of people that come in a request those old-school cocktails like that?

GC: Oh, yeah.

AE: What else do they ask for?

GC: Uh, brandy milk punch is big on the weekends. We serve a lot of Bloody Marys too. We don't have—we don't have too many, uh—I can't think of any really extraordinary drinks. Drinks are pretty much self-explanatory too. Luckily we don't get much of the trendy kind of stuff either. Uh, dirty martinis, I'll never understand why people like dirty martinis. Especially when they get call brand, you know? A top shelf dirty martini, what's the point? Just doesn't make any sense to me but—Cosmopolitans, we serve a lot of those. But, uh, it's—it's your basic gin and tonic, beer and wine, Pimm's Cup place here. It doesn't—it doesn't stray too far. And—

AE: Do you have—

GC: Thank Heavens!

AE: Do you have an opinion about the tr—the trendy drinks like the Hurricane and the Hand Grenade and how that drives people in to—

GC: Oh, I think they're trash drinks, and they're only for—for people that just want to get drunk as fast as they can. For college kids, I guess. I don't know, I've seen—I've seen grown men on their knees at noon drinking Hurricanes. And it's just—it's just [short pause] It's just for getting drunk. It's a sweet, sweet drink. You don't realize there's four ounces of rum in the thing! If you have one, that's enough! If you have two, you're toasted, and you're like ready—ready for bed I'd s—I would be, you know. I don't have a high tolerance for alcohol. I've never had a Hand Grenade [and] probably never will. I don't have any idea what's in it.

AE: Do you have—

GC: I don't know, I like social drinking better. I—I don't—that's why I don't like making—I don't like making or getting really strong drinks. I don't think most people like to have a really strong—they want to be social, they want to pace themselves, they don't want to just get drunk in half an hour. They want to stretch their evening out for a couple of hours. Be able to walk out and go someplace else. So, uh, yeah. Those drinks, I guess—obviously they have a place because they sell thousands of them every day to tourists and the, uh, college kids mostly. You know, people come in and ask for Hurricanes here, and I just say—

AE: Really?

GC: "No, we don't make them here. Try our Pimm's Cup." Or I'll make them a rum punch, which is a very good drink. It's not—it's not going to set you on your you-know-what for—in ten minutes.

AE: Um-hmm. Do you have a cocktail that you like to drink when you—

GC: Ah, I like pretty much everything.

AE: [Laughs]

GC: [Laughs] I used to be a dr—I used to drink a lot of beer, but I'm getting away from that now. I drink, uh, depending on the season—I like gin and tonic in the summer and rum and coke all the time. And I like martinis when I go out. I like it all, really. Tequila is my real downfall, though. When I get into tequila—I spent a lot of time in Mexico, though, so that brings back all those—those kind of memories. I love tequila. Some good tequila is—if you can get a—well, they're so expensive now, good tequilas. It used to be a bottle of Cuervo was like twelve dollars, and now it's like twice that, at least. So I don't, uh—I don't get it as often as I used to.

AE: Did your uncle partake in New Orleans cocktail culture and bar hop?
[COUNTER: 15:09]

GC: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. No, he didn't—he didn't bar hop, but he did go out to restaurants a lot.

AE: Yeah?

GC: In fact, Tom Fitzmorris, the—one of the [local] restaurant critics. I'm sure you've heard of him. He has a—he has a quote in the very last page of the [cook]book, where he used to see Tom, and he couldn't remember—quite remember who he was at the time. And then he remembered. Because Tom was always dressed to the nines, and he just—he loved to go out to restaurants. And he was one of the few chefs that he knew that did that. And that was our fun time was to go out to different restaurants and sample things. No—no, he loved his cocktails too. [Laughs]

AE: What did he like to drink?

GC: He was mostly a gin guy. He liked gin and orange juice and martinis, and he liked wines. He liked everything pretty much, but I think he stuck mostly to gin and tequila. Of course, tequila too because—he went to Mexico a lot more than I did. He—I don't thin he'd—well, he'd have a cold beer on a hot day, maybe.

AE: Yeah.

GC: Everything else was, uh, pretty much gin. And I never saw him drunk.

AE: Yeah?

GC: He could really drink. He was a big man. He was, uh, probably two [hundred and] fifty [pounds], two sixty. And, uh, he could just—and—was one of these people that it just never really seemed to change his personality. Maybe I saw him tipsy a couple of times but—I mean, it just used to drive me crazy when back in the Hamptons we—all of us we'd—we'd work till like one o'clock in the morning, and we'd all pile in a couple of cars. Of course, we'd already had a couple of cocktails—drive out to this little dance bar in the middle of the woods, and we'd all dance until the sun came up. And just drink our faces off and just have a grand old time. And, uh, and the rest of us would b—just barely be able to make it in [to work] by two o'clock in the afternoon. We'd be dragging our butts in. And he'd been in there at nine o'clock in the morning making bread. And he never seemed to be hung-over. I never figured out how he did that. [Laughs]

AE: [Laughs] Damn him!

GC: Yeah! Well, I guess he had such a tolerance and [short pause] he—he was pickled all the time, I don't know. But, uh, yeah, he liked his cocktails.

[Short pause]

AE: Well, being here in New Orleans and talking about cocktail culture again and all of these drinks that people come here to have that can't seem to fine anywhere else, like the Sazerac. Well, not anywhere else, but people come to New Orleans for certain things: brandy milk punch and Hurricanes and things like that.

GC: Sure. Sure.

AE: Um, are you familiar with all the—the history of those drinks here in New Orleans and the history of the word "cocktail" starting here and Southern Comfort starting here and all that?

GC: Not really. No. I guess I know the history of the Sazerac just because it's—it's a pretty common story of being invented at the Sazerac bar. Uh, the other drinks, I don't really know—no, I don't really know their history, and I'm not—I guess I should. And now we've got this—this, uh, this cocktail museum right next door. I need to visit that, actually. A little sidelight there, too, it's interesting, he—there are two guys that, I think, put that together. And it turns out he—he was one of my customers at Charley O's in New York.

AE: Oh, really! Get out. Oh, my goodness.

GC: And he went on to make—he's written books, and he's like a celebrity bartender.

AE: Yeah.

GC: I remember him. A really nice guy. I had no idea he was a bartender, but he—he and another guy put that together so—

AE: Yeah. Chris McMillian you're talking about?

GC: Uh, Dale DeGroff.

AE: Oh, Dale DeGroff. Yeah, okay.

GC: And he, uh, [short pause] he came down twice to do promotional things for it and, unfortunately, I was out of town both times, so I didn't get to get—to get together with him but—

AE: Wow, small world.

GC: —that would have been fun. Yeah, it really was! It was interesting to find out that people—he and, uh, I guess about four or five people used to come in [to the bar in new York] every Sunday and kind of just control the room and have the—bring in special people and—

AE: Hold court in your bar?

GC: Yeah, exactly. And they were, uh, big into advertising and, uh, really nice people and, uh, I always had a good time with them. And he was part of that crowd.

AE: Yeah?

GC: And most of those people are still alive and still doing the same thing, probably. I think. God, they've got to be in their seventies or eighties by now. But, uh, so at least I got to catch up a little bit with that. I should contact him. But anyway, back to your question. No, I don't really know the history. I guess I should.

AE: Don't get much call for it, probably.

GC: [Laughs] I guess I should.

AE: Well do you know some other kind of old-line career bartenders around town that you hear about or go visit and know about.

GC: That I visit? No. Like I say, I don't go out to bars very much. I go out to lun—to dinner and lunch but, uh—Creole bartenders? Golly. That's a tough one.

AE: Not Creole but career.

GC: Yeah. Oh, career! Okay.

AE: Yeah.

GC: Uh [short pause]

AE: Just people in the industry you know about that have just kind of been fixtures in places or—

GC: Mmm, yeah. Not really. I know—I know Mike works over here at the, uh, at the, uh, Rib Room. [Greg is speaking of Michael Santucci, who works at both Touché Bar and the Rib Room and was also interviewed. See the Michael Santucci transcript.] But I—I’ve never been there either. Like I say, I’m not really a—first of all, I don’t like to take a chance driving. After I’ve been driving—I like drinking. If I’m going to drink, I’m going to drink most of it at home, where I know I’m safe, and I don’t have to worry about too many other crazies. It’s hard enough driving around this town.

[COUNTER: 20:46]

AE: Right. [Laughs] Do you have any good stories about people coming through the bar or just funny things that happened or famous people coming through or—

GC: [Greg turns to greet an employee who just walked in] Hey.

OSCAR: You working the bar today?

GC: No. [Back to interviewer] Uh, there’s been quite a few famous people. I waited on Harry Anderson here one day. He was—he was a nice guy. I hope he gets his thing together. He’s trying to open a magic—I think a club and a store down here. And, um, I waited on Billy Joel one time. [Begins speaking in a whisper] He was not a very nice person. And—oh, gosh. Famous people? I don’t know. Probably the best example of that would be—just because they rented this room—this space for a scene in [the movie] *JFK*. That was interesting. Got to, uh, watch that process. That’s what kind of got me going into the—the, uh, film thing and the commercial thing. [Short pause] A little bit. Got it started.

AE: What do you do for that?

GC: Oh, I just—well, today I’m going on an audition for a [New Orleans] Saints commercial. Who knows.

AE: Oh, okay.

GC: Last year I did a commercial for, uh, one of the local hospitals, pretending I was a man that had had a heart attack and was not going to

dance at his daughter's wedding. So I go to this hospital and they, of course, keep me alive, and I dance at my daughter's wedding.

AE: [Laughs]

GC: And that was just a—you know, things like that are fun to do and—and pay really well, so—

AE: So do you think you'll keep bartending? Keep that a part of your regular schedule?

GC: Yeah, I think so. I think so. I—part of me wants to *not* because I—I'm fifty-seven, and I'm getting kind of tired, uh, to work that hard. And this is not a particularly easy bar to work. You don't—you do it all.

AE: Yeah.

GC: You don't have a bar back, and you have to get everything.

AE: Yeah. You serve the bar and the restaurant?

GC: Right. We serve—yeah, you make every drink in the place. But it's, uh—yeah, I—I think on a part-time thing, yeah. A couple, three times a week is fine. And it keeps enough—a little—enough money just to make sure I've got the rent covered and that sort of stuff. And it gives me time to do my other things too.

AE: And y'all serve food at the bar, I know.

GC: Oh, yeah. Mm-hmm. I do. Not all the—I don't think they all do. I don't think Paul does at night. [Paul Gustings, who was also interviewed. See Paul Gustings transcript.]

AE: Oh, really?

GC: It depends how busy it is.

AE: Yeah.

GC: So—I kind of like it because then people sit and, uh, then—then I get to chat with them and that sort of thing. But, uh [short pause] When it's just really crazy busy it— it's not—it's not really good for business either because then you have too much time away from the bar picking up food, and you need to, uh, pay attention to making the drinks—more. I mean, that's your job, so you better be making drinks. And the waiters get mad at you [laughs] if you're over there chatting.

AE: [Laughs] Um-hmm. Have there been any—or many—women who work here, or is it primarily a male—

GC: That's a—that's funny you should ask. [Short laugh] I think he's [short pause]—I don't think they have any problem—what is this fly?! [Greg swats a fly that has been hovering around him] I don't think they have any problem with it—I asked Sal [the owner] that one time, I said—so he said, "Yeah, well, we've had women." I don't think—I think they've had waiters. They've never had a woman bartender. But they have women in the kitchen. And he says, "They just—people don't apply for it. Women don't apply for waiter jobs."

AE: Yeah.

GC: And, uh, I don't think he'd have a problem with it, if they were—if they were good at it. It just doesn't seem to happen for some reason. I think the—the staff may have a problem with it.

AE: Yeah?

GC: Yeah, the—the guy—you know, it's a—I don't know. Maybe not. It depends. If they're—if she's a good efficient person, why should it make any difference.

AE: Um-hmm. Right.

GC: It would be a hard job, I think. It's a hard job for everybody. It's—it's draining. Every day these waiters are—if it's a busy day, they're fried by the end of the shift.

AE: Yeah, sure.

GC: I mean, you do—you do twelve, fifteen hundred dollars worth of sandwiches and cocktails in six, seven hours, that's a lot.

AE: Um-hmm.

[Short pause]

GC: Especially when, you know, it's not a particularly expensive place, so—it's a lot of running. And you run, God—how many hours—how many miles you must run a day, these waiters.

AE: Yeah.

[Short pause]

GC: But back to your question. No, I—there haven't been—I don't think—in my time—in my tenure here I haven't seen a [short pause]—a waitress. We have people that—have women that seat people and in the kitchen but—

[COUNTER: 25:29]

AE: It just hasn't worked out that way, huh?

GC: Yeah. It would be interesting! [Laughs]

AE: [Laughs]

GC: It would be interesting.

AE: Well, um, behind the bar from a business kind of standpoint, do you have a certain way you like to keep the bar or perform behind the bar or stock your bar?

GC: Yeah, well, I'm a Virgo and—

AE: [Laughs]

GC: —a pretty good one at that so—

AE: Organized to the "T"?

GC: Organized and clean. I can't, uh, I can't handle certain dirty glasses.

AE: Yeah?

GC: So when I come in, I generally wash most of the glasses every day. Just—just—I don't know. It disgusts me to see some of the glasses, you know, lipstick and—

AE: Um-hmm.

GC: I understand lipstick you can't get off. You have to wipe that off to get it clean but, uh, [buzzing sound appears on the recording] I guess that would be my—my thing: that I'm neat and organized.

AE: Yeah?

GC: And that—and this is—it's—it's hard to—hard to be that way here too. And at night you—I'm sure—you know, I don't—I think part of the daytime bartender's job and responsibility is to clean up the place and make sure things are stocked, so I try to do that as much as I can too. And, uh, for my own purposes and for the night guy. [Buzzing sound ends] He shouldn't have to come in and have to look for stuff.

AE: Yeah.

GC: It should all be right there and, uh—as much as I can. If I get too busy to get something or make something then, I'm sorry. I'll tell him at least. You know, "You don't have any whiskey, you don't have any of that." You know?

AE: Mm-hmm.

GC: But, uh—yeah. That's my style, I guess.

AE: Yeah? What is the worst thing about bartending, if you had to say?

GC: Here or in general?

AE: In general.

GC: Worst thing? Oh, gosh.

AE: And then we'll work up to the best thing, so it will be balanced.

GC: [Laughs]

AE: [Laughs]

[Car horn in background]

GC: Oh, gosh. I guess, uh, geez, I don't know. It's hard to think of any really bad things. I've only had to throw out one person. Well, two. In all the time I've worked here. [That's] another reason I don't work at night, because I think there's a chance of—of, uh, problems at night—more so. During the day people are a little bit more sedate. The worst thing? I guess, uh—I guess when you just get so busy [sound of car horn] that you don't have time to pee. And you're—you know, you look up, and you're making drinks. You've got ten drinks in front of you and you're making them and you look up, and there a line out the door and you just say, "Am I ever gonna get a break here?" And, uh, like I say, I'm getting older, and it hurts more now. You know [Laughs] about five or six hours in, I'm ready to sit down, and I don't get that chance either. So I think that's probably the [short pause] hardest part to it.

AE: I'll buy that. [Short laugh]

GC: Eh, when you have a—when you have a lousy waiter or somebody bugs ya too much. Or a customer. If you get a customer that's a—a jerk and, uh, you can almost guarantee they're not going to tip you very well when they're demanding. It sets you off. It sets you off. I had a guy, uh, about a month

ago, before we were open he was banging on the front door. I said, "We'll be open in ten minutes!" Two minutes later he starts shaking the doors like this [Greg puts both fists out in front of him and shakes them back and forth]. "Hey, man, we open in five minutes. Give me a break! We're not ready yet." And then he started kicking the door. And I mean, kicking it hard. And went over and I said, "What is your problem?" And he flips me the bird and walks away, thank God. I never let him in, obviously. Stuff like that. But that upset me for about an hour.

[COUNTER: 29:24]

AE: Um-hmm. Got you off your game.

GC: Now I laugh at it but, uh—

AE: [Short laugh]

GC: Yeah, well you know, it ruined the first part of the day. [Short pause] But I guess that's about the worst of it.

AE: What are the best parts?

GC: Best parts of bartending?

AE: Yes.

GC: Oh. [Short pause] Like I say, I think the interaction with people and, uh, I've lived enough places in my life—I guess, met enough people that it's almost—it's almost impossible not to have a connection somehow with somebody. They come in and are from Connecticut. Well, I know people who in Connecticut—friends that I visit. Or they come in and they're from San Diego or someplace I've lived before. And it's easy—it's easy to get something going with them, that's—that's—like I said before, that's what I really like about it. That's what I miss about it. If I don't have—if—just making drinks all day long doesn't appeal to me. The money is, like I say, not really great here, but it's enough and it's [short pause] it's not the reward. At the end of the day it's—you just make what you make and—

[Employee approaches the table where we are sitting to ask if the interviewer would like more coffee. Greg asks the interviewer.]

GC: [To interviewer] You want some more coffee?

AE: No, I'm good. Thanks, though.

EMPLOYEE: [To Greg] Do you need anything?

GC: Thanks, though. No, thanks.

AE: Well, if you weren't in New Orleans and in this bar, do you think you would still be bartending?

GC: Mmmm. [short pause to think] Good question. Before I came back this time I, uh, was contemplating where else to work. And I tried just one other place, but it didn't work out. Uh [short pause] maybe, maybe not. I think it depends. I think I'm screwed down for life here. At least for a while. Until my girlfriend's daughter goes away to college, then things might change. But, uh—uh, I don't know. When I lived in California I never did [bartend], and I lived out there for maybe eight or nine years, I guess, and I never worked in a bar there. But I was working—I was worked with my sister then, and I had some other business, so—that's when I started doing the computer stuff. Probably. I don't know. I think I would miss it, probably.

AE: Yeah.

GC: And, uh, I guess I'm not good enough or promoter—self-promoting enough to really make my website stuff work as a—as a business. But it's getting better a little at a time.

AE: Do you have a website of your own?

GC: No.

AE: Okay.

GC: No. Well, I have one for the cookbook, and I probably should have another one too. I really should.

AE: And the cookbook, by the way, is called *Secrets of a New Orleans Chef: Recipes from Tom Cowman's Cookbook*.

GC: Mm-hmm.

AE: And you parked that on the cash register during your shifts, I notice[d the other night, when I was at the bar]. Does that open up a lot of conversation with customers.

GC: It does. I try to sell them.

AE: Yeah. [Laughs]

GC: But, uh, yeah. It's surprising how many people notice it and—I find—it's funny with a cookbook. I find—I would bet—a high percentage, actually—of people that buy cookbooks don't cook. They just like to read the stuff.

AE: Um-hmm.

GC: They like it. I mean, they may get ideas and things. I—I've met people that have massive quantities of cookbooks—hundreds—and they just never cook. I think it's kind of weird but—

AE: Do you still cook a lot at home?

GC: Not too much. Ah, I've been getting back into it a little bit.

EMPLOYEE: [Heard talking to another employee in background] Hey, Nick!

AE: Do you miss that side of the business ever?

GC: Mmm.

AE: When you spent time in the kitchen with your uncle.

GC: Oh, yeah. Sure. Yeah. We had a—I enjoyed—it one summer when we worked together—when I cooked with him—that was—that was very rewarding. I remember one night in particular. I forget what the circumstances were exactly, but for some reason it was only he and I running the whole kitchen. Oh, I mean the whole hot—you know, plating up the—

AE: The line.

GC: —hot dishes. Which is usually like three or four people. And we served like four hundred people that night, which is a lot—[laughs] a lot of people. And we didn't have one thing come back. Everything went out perfectly. No complaints. I mean, it just was clockwork. We were like one person. He moved to the left; I moved to the right. We worked perfectly. And when it was all over he said, "Damn, that was great." And he threw a couple of lobsters on, and we sat down and had lobster and a bottle of champagne together. Hmm. That I miss, yeah.

AE: Yeah.

GC: Cooking in general, no. I—I—I like baking.

AE: Well, and the dynamic of the back of the house and the front of the house is so different that—

GC: Oh, yeah.

AE: Is that something that, um, you prefer the front of the house now?

GC: Yeah. I prefer the front.

AE: Okay.

[Short pause]

GC: I—I think another reason I like bartending, probably, is [that] you really are your own guy. You don't have to rely on somebody else to come up with something. Uh, or breakdown. If something doesn't work[Car horn honk in the background], it's my fault.

[COUNTER: 34:26]

AE: Um-hmm.

GC: Uh [short pause] and I think people respect bartenders more than they do waiters. They don't give you a hard time. You see people at the tables, you know, snapping fingers and really making demands on waiters. And, uh, another uncle, uh, in particular, it's just—he runs his waiters ragged and then he doesn't tip them and it's like, "What is your problem? You should know better!" But I think at the bar people, I don't know, they just treat you better. Generally. Not all of them. Some people. And I think they, uh—[man sneezes in background] most people want to get a decent drink so—

AE: Yeah.

GC: —if they treat you badly, they know—you're not gonna get another one for a while—

AE: Right.

GC: —or you'll get a short one the next time. So—

AE: And also [there's] the chain of command with a waiter and the kitchen and the—

GC: Oh, right. Yeah. Yeah, once the—and if I don't—if I get a customer that I don't like for one reason or another, well, I might not pay very much attention to them. I try not to be too judgmental but—I tell you, after all these years of doing it, I'm pretty good at it. I can pretty much tell—

AE: Read a person.

GC: —in the first minute or two what this person's gonna be like. And that works a lot of ways too. You work, uh—uh, if people just want to be by themselves, they don't want to chat, or they want to meet other people or something? So you leave them alone. Some people really want [to] talk and they—some people want to talk *too* much, so then you have to—like that guy—that jerk the other day, you know.

AE: [Laughs] [When the interviewer was at the bar a couple of nights before this interview, a man was harassing her for a time.]

GC: That's Bourbon Street trash, you know.

AE: [Laughs] Right.

GC: But, uh—so you can make those calls and, uh, where at the—at the tables you can't do that. You've got to—you got to buck it at every—to everybody. Well, [sly laugh]—the Napoleon House is not known for their sweet, uh, waiters sometimes. Their known actually to be surly. [Short laugh]

AE: Yeah.

GC: So—see, like I wouldn't like that. I don't like that. Here over at the bar, it's easier. And it's pretty much a one shot deal. If it doesn't work out, then they're done and move on to the next one. You don't have to waste an hour or two with the same person.

[Short pause]

GC: Is that the question?

AE: Yeah. I think—

GC: Is that the answer?

AE: Yeah. We got it.

GC: [Laughs]

AE: Well, is there anything else that we didn't talk about that comes to mind that you'd like to add?

GC: Mmm.

AE: Any final thoughts to end the interview on?

GC: [Laughs] Final thoughts. Well, I don't know, I just—I hope I don't drop dead here [at the Napoleon House], but I guess it wouldn't be a bad place.

AE: [Laughs]

GC: And, uh [laughs] Uh [short pause] I don't know. I guess one—one thing I wanted to say was, when you go back to loving the Napoleon House, I guess [taps knuckles on table]. Sunday nights—I used to work Sundays. It was a long day, and at the end of the day it's—we also close early. We close

at seven [at night]. So everyone is gone at seven o'clock, and by eight o'clock it's just usually—Michael, the manager, and I are sitting down, and you can just feel the house settle and feel good, you know. That's what I like about this place. I don't think I've had—I've never felt that place—that way about a *place* before. So that's—that's nice. That's a good thing. You've got to take the good stuff. Enjoy it. Because—like a lot—other places are just—you just go in, you make your money and leave. This place is special. There's no question. I think you've felt it. Don't you? You feel it.

AE: Oh, yeah, I love it here. It's got a great vibe about it.

[COUNTER: 38:07]

GC: I think people come in here and look at the walls and say, "Ooh, why don't you paint the place?!" I don't get that!

AE: Yeah.

GC: I mean, how could you not feel the charm of this place? Yeah, it's gritty and it's old, and it's not, uh—we're not—we're not serving slushy daiquiris and stuff. That—That whole sports crowd? I mean, man, if you can't feel how special this place is. Every time I leave New Orleans or just go away for any reason—sometimes I get tired of it, I guess. Tired of New Orleans in general, I get tired. The trash and the [short pause] just kind of the pace sometimes. You get tired of people just not doing things quickly enough. But then when you say, "Who cares." You know? "Why do I care about that?" You got to get back on Mexican time. So when I go away and I go someplace else, I can't wait to get back, you know? [Laughs]

AE: That's great.

GC: [It's] a good place.

AE: Excellent.

GC: You come back!

AE: Oh, I will! You can count on it.

GC: Don't come back for business, come back for enjoyment.

AE: I will, I will. Well, I'm a lucky girl that this business is enjoyment so—[Laughs]

GC: Yeah, I envy that. I envy you, yeah. It's a good gig you've got here.

AE: Yeah, yeah. I have no complaints. Well thank you, Greg—

GC: Okay. You bet.

AE: —for coming here on your day off.

GC: My pleasure.

AE: And, uh—[interviewer talks to subject about getting a few photographs of him in the bar]

[COUNTER: 39:29]

[END]