

ANNIE ISAIAH

[Daughter-in-law of Georgia Isaiah, Owner of Busy Bee Café, Oxford, MS]

* * *

Date: August 5, 2004

Location: Mrs. Isaiah's Home, Oxford, MS

Interviewer: Amy C. Evans

Length: Twenty-two minutes

Project: Restaurant's of Oxford's Past – Busy Bee Café, Oxford, MS

Amy Evans: This is Thursday, August fifth, two thousand and four. And this is Amy Evans at the home of Mrs. Annie Isaiah in Oxford, Mississippi. And we are here to talk about her mother-in-law's restaurant, Mrs. Isaiah's Busy Bee Café. Mrs. Georgia Isaiah, correct?

Annie Isaiah: Correct.

AE: All right, um--and Mrs. Annie Isaiah, if you wouldn't mind announcing yourself for the record and also, if you don't mind, stating your full name and your birthdate.

AI: [*Under her breath*] The year too? [*Short laugh*]

AE: Only if you want, really.

[*Sound of microphone being moved towards Mrs. Isaiah*]

AI: Okay. Hi, my name is Annie Ruth Isaiah. I'm the daughter-in-law of the late Georgia Lee Isaiah. My birthday is Sain—uh, September the thirteenth, [nineteen] fifty-eight.

AE: Okay. And could you just kind of take us back as far as you can and what you know about how she decided to start a café?

AI: Uh, I think, uh, she—well, used to work for the Chancellor [at the University of Mississippi]. One of the chancellors. I'm not sure which one right off the hand.¹ And she decided she wanted to go into her own business of—make—you know, of—a restaurant. And so she decided to open a restaurant of her own and call it Busy Bee. [Sound of screen door opening] She had a little bee that she always put her change in, and so she decided to name it after the little bee. [Sound of the front door opening and people walking into the house]

AE: Hey, y'all. How you doing? [To the folks walking in]

[Recording is paused for a couple of minutes. Mrs. Isaiah's son, Derek Campbell, and grandson, Deronita Campbell, arrive to deliver a black and white photograph of Georgia Isaiah. They hand the picture to Mrs. Isaiah, then walk into the kitchen, where they stay for about ten more minutes after recording resumes.]

[RECORDING STOPS: TRACK 1 – 00:01:23]

[RECORDING RESUMES: BEGIN TRACK 2]

AE: Okay. I'm sorry.

AI: *[Short laugh]*

¹ Angela Holloway. "Busy Bee Marks 20th Anniversary," *The Southern Register*. Summer 1992, p. 12. In this article that is an interview with Mrs. Georgia Isaiah, it is noted that from 1953 to 1982 she worked for two University of Mississippi chancellors, J. D. Williams and Porter Fortune.

AE: We're back again, and we just had, um, a black and white photograph delivered of the café. And I asked you, um, when we stopped [recording] if she—it she just named, correct [sound of Mrs. Isaiah's grandson running in the house] the café after the little ceramic bee—

AI: Bee. Correct.

AE: Just because she liked it.

AI: Uh-huh.

AE: And you have that as a souvenir—

AI: I do.

AE: --from the café.

AI: I do. [*Sound of grandson crying*]

AE: And so Mrs. Isaiah worked at the University—

AI: Correct.

AE: --as a cook for the Chancellor.

AI: She sure did. Uh-huh. And I'm not sure which chancellor right off of hand, but she worked there until she retired.

AE: Okay. And do you know when she retired? What year that was?

AI: I sure don't.

[Short pause]

AE: Um, do you know what year she opened the café?²

AI: No, ma'am. [Laughs]

AE: Okay. [Laughs]

AI: No.

AE: I'll--I'll call back and ask your husband about that.

AI: Okay.

² Ibid. The article notes that Mrs. Georgia Isaiah worked at the University of Mississippi until 1982, and that she opened the Busy Bee on Christmas Eve 1971.

AE: Um, and so what—you worked at the café, correct?

AI: I kind of helped [sound of grandson talking in background] out in the afternoons sometimes as her little hostess. [Short laugh]

AE: Yeah?

AI: And helped wait table--tables.

AE: Were you already married to her son when she opened?

AI: I—yes. Um-hmm.

AE: And her son's name is—

AI: She was already open. Her son's name is George.

AE: Your husband.

AI: Um-hmm.

AE: And did he ever spend time working over there?

AI: Not really.

AE: Yeah?

AI: Nuh-uh. No. [*Short pause*] He—you know, he used to be in the service, and he cooked in the service—in the Army at least—and, uh—but he never did go over there and help her cook in the restaurant. [*Laughs*]

AE: Yeah. Do you have any idea what kind of food she served when—or cooked when she was at the University?

AI: [*Short pause*] She said their favorite thing was tomato soup—homemade tomato soup and sandwiches, so [*starting to laugh*] I'm not really sure what was they—what she really cooked at the University.

AE: Um-hmm. Was she born in Oxford?³

AI: Uh, yes.

AE: Okay. And the café was—can you describe where it was physically over where the Kroger is now.

³ Ibid. According to the article, Mrs. Georgia Isaiah was born in 1920.

AI: Over where the new, uh, Krogers is now on University Avenue.

AE: Okay. And what did the place look like?

AI: It just looked like a little [*short pause*]*--a little country café. [Sound of son and grandson moving dishes around in the kitchen]* And it was small. It seated at least—I'd say about ten to fifteen peoples. [*Sound of grandson running*] And, uh—and most—sometimes she was kind of busy. [*Short pause*] She was open Monday through Thursday. Some Fridays. But she really did enjoy it though. She really—

AE: Did she cook three meals a day or just one or two?

AI: Uh, she only did supper at night. Um-hmm.

AE: Okay. [*Short pause*] And what kind of things did she serve for supper?

AI: [*Laughs*] Uh, she always had plenty of home [*cooked*] vegetables. She would do a meat and two vegetables. Consis—uh, pork chops, turnip greens, black-eyed peas, um, mashed potatoes—homemade mashed potatoes. And especially—was that—uh, peppermint iced tea. It was really good.

AE: People have been telling me that she only served one set supper a day. Is that right?

AI: Correct. Uh-huh.

AE: Was there a regular day for a certain thing? Like fried chicken every Wednesday or pork chops every Tuesday?

AI: Um [*short pause*] yeah. I'm not sure which day it is, but seemed like to me her special would be like maybe meatloaf on maybe Monday. And maybe Tuesday was pork chops. Thursdays was, uh, chicken. [*Short pause*] And, uh, Wednesday—I'm not sure right off hand now. But you always got a—a meat and probably two vegetables and a salad and dessert.

AE: Um-hmm. I've heard about her pound cake.

AI: Yeah. It's really—

AE: Is she famous for that?

AI: Yes. A pound cake, uh, a lemon sponge cake [*short pause*] and had sweet potato pie. [*Short pause*] I think that's it.

AE: So would she just spend all day over there cooking and preparing for supper?

AI: She'd starts--when she gets up in the morning, she started preparing. And I had a full-time job [of] my own, so I didn't get there—I didn't do any of the cooking, now. [Short laugh] So but she does all the cooking and, when I get there at at least [sound of something in the kitchen] three-thirty, she's open about [short pause] I'd say five, and everything is ready for the customers.

AE: Hmm. And what if she ran out that day? Just people were out of luck, huh?

AI: They just out of luck! [*Laughs*]

AE: [*Laughs*]

AI: [*Laughing*] Just out of luck!

AE: Because I—from everybody who talks about that place still, it—you know, it sounds like she had nothing but regulars.

AI: Exactly.

AE: Yeah.

AI: Exactly. Um, Charles and his, uh, wife was regulars. I'm—I'm not sure of Charles's last name. I can't remember. He was at the University.

AE: Charles [Reagan] Wilson?

AI: Yes. Charles Wilson [director of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi] and his wife was regulars. Uh, Bill Ferris [former director of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi] was a regular. Um [*short pause*] the, uh, DeBords was a regular and, um, she had several more regulars. I'm not sure of their names at the moment, but I can remember their faces—they was regular customers. If they wasn't there Monday, they sure would be there one day of that week.

AE: Uh-huh.

AI: And sometime—some was there every day.

AE: Yeah.

AI: At—yeah. And, uh, the Williams was one of her regulars.

AE: How do you think people heard about the Busy Bee? Just word of mouth?

AI: I think word of mouth.

AE: Yeah?

00:05:54 - TRK 2

AI: Um-hmm, word of mouth.

AE: And I assume, too, there were a lot of neighborhood customers that—that she had?

AI: Well you know, she didn't really have too many just neighborhood customers. A lot of them was, you know, students from the university. Word of mouth, like I say. And a lot of professors—you know, professors, teachers, whatever. And—that was a lot of her regular customers.

AE: Um, was still married or her husband still alive when she had the restaurant.

AI: Yes, um-hmm.

AE: So did she cook for him at home at all?

AI: [*Short laugh*] Yeah. I guess she usually cooked—you know, because her husband was kind of sickly. Because he, uh, he had cancer so she would, you know, prepare a meal for him. Sometimes he would eat before she would go to the restaurant. Sometime he would wait until she come home at night, you know, to eat. And it was only open from five to eight so—eight o'clock, you know. I guess he was probably ready for a meal then.

AE: What was his name?

AI: Willie. Willie Isaiah.

AE: And your hus—is your husband, um, Mrs. Isaiah’s only—

AI: uh-huh.

AE: --only son?

AI: Uh-huh.

AE: Okay.

AI: Um-hmm.

AE: Um, well and I’ve also heard—I’ve been hearing a lot so—

AI: [*Big laugh*]

AE: --pardon me, I hope it's all true! Um, that your mother was a big—or your mother-in-law, rather, was a big churchgoer and would take time off from the café to tend to people at church who—who were sick. Members of the church.

AI: Yes, she would. Mm-hmm. She was, uh, a like a secretary in the church—she was a, like you said, if there were any sick members in the church or whatever, she would go and see after them. And she was in an organization called, uh, you know, the Eastern Star and all that [*sound of screen door opening*]. And she would have her meetings. She would go to that. And then, if they were out of town or wherever, she would—had to close up for a little while and go do that.

AE: Church came first.

AI: Yes. Yeah.

AE: Which church did she attend?

AI: Uh [*short pause*] it's called Christ Temple. Here in Oxford.

AE: Okay.

AI: On Jackson Avenue.

AE: Okay. And do I remember correctly also that she lived next door to the café?

AI: She did. She lived next door to her café. [*Short pause*] So she didn't have anything to do but just walk out her front door for a few steps and over to her café.

AE: [*Short laugh*] So would you say, um, maybe that when she retired from the university, she just wanted to be around folks again and keep cooking and—

AI: Exactly.

AE: --and have the café she--

AI: Have the café and—and still be able to, you know, do some of her things where she wouldn't just really go down [*in health*] really easy.

AE: Um-hmm.

AI: Because when—after she finally, you know, started to close the café up for good, you know, her health went really bad, and she started getting Alzheimer's and then [*short pause*] she—I had to move her in with me because there was one point in time a room in her house caught on fire, so then—then at one point someone had to be with her twenty-four [*hours a day*] seven [*days a week*]. And I couldn't quit my job to do that. Excuse me [*turns head to sneeze*]

AE: Um-hmm. You're fine.

AI: [Coughs] Excuse me.

AE: Bless you.

AI: Thank you. And, uh, so, uh, she was in a nursing home, and that's where she, uh, [short pause] she's—that's where she deceased at.

AE: Okay.

AI: And, uh, she's been dead a year and a half now, I think.

AE: Is that all?

AI: Um-hmm.

AE: What year did the café close?

AI: [*Short pause*] You know, I guess it's been closed now about—I would say four to five years now.

AE: Oh, goodness.

AI: Um-hmm.

AE: Now see, that's the—the good and the bad thing about doing these projects is that, you know, a year and a half ago we could have seen her.

AI: Uh-huh.

AE: I had no idea.

AI: Um-hmm.

AE: Well, can you tell me a little bit about her personality, and what kind of woman she was?

AI: Uh, she had a wonderful personality. She would—never met a stranger. And she was—loved to talk, now.

AE: Hmm.

AI: And, um [*short pause*] she just had all—good conversation about from when she was growing up until the point of time now, when she was working at the university—all the

different people she'd seen there. And then especially all the ones that came into the restaurant. But she had a wonderful personality. And loved peoples.

AE: Um-hmm.

AI: [*Sniffs*]

AE: Um, what did it look like inside the café? Was it decorated at all?

AI: Uh, she used to have a—she had a—a map of the city of Oxford on the wall. And I think it was—it was red inside, and she had, um, some little brown tables with little cushioned brown chairs. And she had a china cabinet in there, with little whatnots in it. And—but like I said, it was a little small place that—just felt like home in there, though. So—

AE: Where's—

AI: Felt like you was at your mama's kitchen table.

00:10:55 – TRK 2

AE: That's what it sounds like. Was the place itself just a dining room, and she cooked at her house? Or was there a different kitchen?

AI: Well, no. There was a dining area. There was a kitchen area too.

AE: Um-hmm.

AI: So, uh [short pause] because she would cook some of her food at home and cook some of the food in there because she had a warmer—after she got it all prepared—to keep it warmer.

AE: Okay.

AI: And then we had to wash dishes at night.

AE: [*Short laugh*]

AI: [*Laughs*] So she used real silverware—real dishes so everything had to be washed, you know, at the end of the night.

AE: Yeah.

AI: And real glasses and all that.

AE: Were the dishes, um—somehow in my mind I imagine that they might be mismatched like they are in someone's house and—like you really are eating in someone's home. It's not just like this—

AI: Uh-huh.

AE: --generic dinnerware.

AI: Well, you know, had a lot of them s—alike, but eventually they started being mismatched. And, you know, that's like home, you know.

AE: Yeah.

AI: Um-hmm.

AE: Yeah. Did she ever have, um, people who she would take meals to or people who came late that she would let in after hours?

AI: Oh, yeah. If you was running late, if we had—*if* we had more food, we would—she would open the door, and let you come on in and get something. Or you want to get it—carry it to go, she would make way for that too.

AE: Do you remember what the prices were like?

AI: I think it was five seventy-five the last—well, before we closed I think it ended up being six dollars, though. But it used to be, like I say, a reasonable price for, like I say, a meat and two vegetables, salad and dessert and your bread and—and a tea.

AE: Do you know where she learned to cook?

AI: She said that she was an only child, and she was always in the kitchen with her grandmother. And so she learned to cook from her grandmother. [*Short pause*] And by that, she, uh, learned a lot because I—I couldn't do all that cooking she did! And she--

AE: [*Laughs*] Did she use recipes?

AI: Sometimes she did. But you know, you put a little pinch of this and a little pinch of that, so you never know how much—

AE: Um-hmm.

AI: --it was or whatever. [*Sniffs*]

AE: Did she teach you any of her recipes before the café—

AI: Oh, no.

AE: --closed.

AI: [*Short laugh*] No.

AE: No?

AI: No, we was always too busy to do that.

AE: Yeah. Are there things that y'all try to recreate now [when you cook] that she served?

AI: [*Short pause*] Well, I'd--I'd love to have that sponge cake recipe that she had but—I tried looking through the cookbook, but I don't know if someone picked it up or what, but I cannot find it. But it was a really good lemon sponge cake.

AE: Oh. Did she ever do special event catering or anything like that?

AI: Um [*short pause*] now when she—for her church, they had like some kind of convention here or something—

AE: Um-hmm.

AI: She would like cook and feed the pastor and some of the delegates. I remember her doing it one day at her house.

AE: Really?

AI: Mm-hmm.

AE: Well and—take me back a little bit, too, to when that café was there in that part of Oxford. Because Oxford—I’ve been here three years, and it’s changed so much.

AI: [*Short laugh*]

AE: And I—I know that that part had to have changed a LOT. And--

AI: Mm-hmm.

AE: --since that place is no longer there, maybe just talk about what else was going on in that part of town.

AI: It’s—okay, where--where she lived and where the restaurant was, there was a radio station right down the hill from her, so the people from the radio station always come through and get their supper at night, you know. And then, let’s see. There was a little—

nice little store across the street from her. [*Short pause*] And I guess—that's all I can think of that's righ—right in the neighborhood there from her.

AE: Um-hmm. What kind of store was across the way?

AI: It was just a little country store.

AE: Okay. [*Short pause*] And so what happened when she closed the store [café]? Was it just because of her health that she closed? Or because of the development of that area?

AI: Well, it was because of her health, and her husband had got really bad then. Somebody had to be there with him at all times.

AE: Okay.

AI: Um-hmm.

AE: So they stayed in that house until—

AI: Right next door, um-hmm.

AE: Okay. And the café just kind of stayed empty?

AI: Yeah.

AE: Yeah?

AI: Kind of stayed empty. I wish I could have picked it up and moved it somewhere out this way! [*Laughs*]

AE: Yeah. That'd be nice.

AI: I know.

AE: Do you have ant idea who painted her sign? Or did she paint her sign?

AI: I'm not sure who painted the sign.

AE: [*Short laugh*] It's nice. [*Interviewer is looking at the black and white photograph of Georgia Isaiah standing in front of her Busy Bee Café*] Nice looking place. And that front porch—did a lot of people hang out on that front porch?

AI: Oh, yeah. And it was a big old, uh, pecan tree right in front of the restaurant—

AE: Um-hmm.

AI: --so you can sit there on the front porch, you know, and get you a cool breeze. It'd always be so cool there. And, you know, she didn't have an air-conditioner in there. She had window fan—fans there.

AE: Um-hmm.

AI: So it was never hot in there because of the breeze from the tree that was outside. Right in front of the café.

AE: Did she ever play music inside or—

AI: No. No, she never did play music inside.

AE: Just conversation, huh?

AI: Mm-hmm.

AE: Would she sit at tables with people or just—

AI: No, she would never, uh—she would just stay in the kitchen. Unless someone was wanting to meet her or something, she would go into the door there. Or either they'd come to the kitchen--

AE: Um-hmm.

AI: --and say something to her. But she would never go in and sit down and have a conversation with them.

AE: Do you have some fond memories or specific memories of things that happened in the café while you were there?

00:16:35 – TRK 2

AI: I just think it was a wonderful joy of her just being able to, uh, feed so many peoples. And so many people *enjoying* her meals. That's what I think the joy and the—the exciting thing I see, you know--remember from it. Because, like I said, I couldn't have cooked for that many peoples. [Laughs]

AE: Um-hmm. Well, you say that you were the hostess there--kind of like.

AI: Uh-huh. Yeah. Welcome you in and, you know, tell—you can sit wherever you'd like or whatever. Unless you want to—sometimes people just want to come in a sit outside, you know. That was fine too.

AE: Uh-huh.

AI: She would put a little card table out there, let them sit out there just like home.

AE: Would people ever play cards or anything on the front porch?

AI: No, mm-mmm.

AE: Would you interact with many of the customers after you seated them? Because I would imagine playing hostess in a place that sits—you know, seats thirteen people—

AI: Yeah.

AE: --your hostessing doesn't take that long. [Laughs]

AI: [*Short laugh*] No. I would welcome them in, then I would, like I say, you know, get their plate and carry it to their table, you know. And then, um, sure—I—you know, I would go back to their table, you know. Sometimes some people want seconds, you know, on something, and she's able to do that, you know. We may have to, you know, add a dollar or something to your b--bill, but it's no problem, they said.

AE: That's great.

AI: So—and, you know, and I'd refill the tea glasses. And I'd, you know, like I said, talk away. Because I like to talk, now. Because I work—

AE: [*Short laugh*]

AI: --in a preschool with children.

AE: Yeah?

AI: So you have to *[laughs]* talk. But, um, it's been a lot of fun.

AE: Do you have some memories of some specific customers? Uh, you mentioned Charles Wilson and Bill Ferris but—some other regulars who came through there?

AI: No. Those are the two that names really stands out right at the moment. And I see Charles—you know, I s—last time I saw him was a couple weeks ago at some kind of—something. I'm not sure what, but I just ran into him and, you know, was speaking to him. Well see, like Bill Ferris, he had moved on, you know, so—

AE: Um-hmm.

AI: --I don't see him anymore.

AE: Yeah.

AI: Hmm.

AE: Well, there are a lot of people around that definitely miss that place.

AI: Yeah. A lot of peoples missed it when she decided to close the doors. That was a sad time.

AE: Did she have a printed menu at all, or did people just know what to expect?

AI: She used to write the menu up on a chalkboard.

AE: Okay.

AI: In the restaurant when they come in, they would see it. Um-hmm.

AE: Okay. Was there anybody who went there and like got their meals on credit or something? Some kind of arrangement she would make with certain people?

AI: I don't know of any that have done that.

AE: Yeah?

AI: Mm-mmm. I mean, they would even leave wonderful tips there for her. When we'd finish at the end of the night, you know.

AE: Would people, um, bring her things? Gifts or—

AI: Bring her gifts, um-hmm. Exactly. And sometimes, you know—at Christmastime she bakes, uh, homemade cinnamon bread, so she gives that to some of her customers too.

AE: Wow.

AI: Uh-huh. And then some of them she bakes, uh, her little pound cakes—loaf pound cake--and give that to g—give that for gifts.

AE: Really?

AI: Um-hmm.

AE: That's a woman who loved food and loved giving it away, huh?

AI: Exactly! Exactly.

AE: Wow.

AI: Exactly.

AE: Well, I'm not sure what else to ask you or what else you can answer. Is there something I've left out—that you could add?

AI: I think everything has been well touched. [*Short laugh*]

AE: Yeah? [*Laughs*]

AI: [*Laughs*]

AE: Any final words about the kind of person she was or a memory you have about her?

AI: I just remember her being a wonderful mother-in-law. She was a really sweet and nice mother-in-law. And like I said, you know, when her health got bad, you know, I tried to take care of her, but I couldn't, you know, quit my job to do it, so I put her somewhere where somebody could be with her twenty-four [hours], seven [days a week].

AE: Sure.

AI: But I did go and see after her there, you know. When my—when I was able to. And, uh, like I say, it was all good memories.

AE: Did she express, when she was in the nursing home, that she missed the café?

AI: Mmm, she just talks about it sometimes.

AE: Yeah.

AI: Mm-hmm. Well she—when she used to cook there, she used to talk about it.

AE: Yeah. Well that's a good legacy to leave in a town is--

AI: Oh, yeah.

AE: --giving people food.

AI: It is.

AE: Wonderful.

AI: It is because a lot of people don't cook like our older parents and stuff do.

AE: Um-hmm.

AI: Give us a sandwich or something, and we go on! [*Laughing*]

AE: [*Laughing*] Do you or your husband cook at all?

AI: I do. He don't cook that much like he should. [*Short laugh*]

AE: Yeah. [*Laughs*]

AI: [*Laughing*]

AE: Didn't get passed down, huh?

AI: [*Laughing*] No.

AE: [*Laughs*]

AI: No.

AE: All right. Well, you've given me some wonderful memories about your mother-in-law, and I sure appreciate it. Um—

AI: Okay.

AE: And I—I'm very thankful, so thanks for your time.

AI: Oh, you're welcome.

00:21:31 – TRK 2

[End Annie Isaiah Interview]