

JOHNNY BELL
Employee of Giardina's for 47 years
Giardina's Restaurant - Greenwood, MS

* * *

Date: June 11, 2003
Location: Mr. Bell's residence, 323 Avenue F – Greenwood, MS
Interviewer – Amy Evans
Length: 45 minutes
Format: Analog Cassette
Project: Greenwood Restaurants

[NOTE: *This interview was conducted on an especially hot Mississippi day, and eighty-three year-old Mr. Bell wanted to keep his window air conditioner running during our visit. The hum of the unit can be the background throughout the entire interview.*]

[Begin Johnny Bell Interview]

Amy Evans: Okay. It’s Wednesday, June 11th, two thousand three, and I’m at the home of Johnny Bell, who worked at Giardina’s restaurant and we’ll talk about your employment there.

Johnny Bell: When I started working there, it wasn’t nothing but a drive-in. And we were selling hamburgers, hot—hamburgers, barbecue sandwich, cheeseburger, and ham sandwich. Course, inside we served meatballs, spaghetti and steak. And Sam Bayhackle who first bought WABG [local television station]—He’s—Every time he come through Greenwood, that’s where he stopped. Now, we don’t see him now—he’s a big wheel now. *[Laugh]*

AE: *[Short laugh]*

JB: I guess he retired now. He—we didn’t sell but on—Fri—Sat—Friday, Saturday, and Sunday only time we sell a steak. Everything was nothing but sandwiches. That was up to nineteen sixty—bout sixty—

AE: In the same location over on Park [Avenue]?

JB: Same location. Been there for nineteen thirty-six. Right there. In the same building. Same—that’s the—they enlarged it a little bit. But it’s the same building, same place—everything. The same people. The—Me and Mr. Joe—me and Miss Roina [Mr. Bell says the name Row-eee-nah, but Mrs. Giardina’s first name is Rosina], Mr. Brossi—ran it there while Mr. Joe [Brossi and Rosina’s son] was in the army. Miss Mary Rose [the daughter] was living in Tennessee. And all the same owners right there now.

AE: And what did you do for the Giardina’s over there?

JB: Who, me? I did everything. Work in the dining room, cook, and then wash dishes, when—like Miss Roina short—get—short of help. We didn’t close up ‘cause we short of help. *[Laughs]*

AE: *[Laughs]*

JB: Somebody just stood in and did it—we was mostly family—everything.

AE: May I ask your age, Mr. Bell?

JB: Eighty-three.

AE: And how old were you when you started working for the Giardina’s?

JB: Oh, I started there in nineteen fifty-six. And then the [pause] fifty-six, that’s, yeah, that’s sixty, fifty-three—yeah, that’s six—sixty, forty, forty-seven—forty—eh—is that right? Let’s see. Fifty-six and a hundred and three—three—That’s right, forty-seven.

AE: My goodness.

JB: That’s right, I been there forty-six years. I started in September when we was picking cotton. Now they don’t pick no cotton—now the machine—picked by hand then. They don’t do that anymore now and that’s the reason I know it was twelve because in Sep—cotton season was going, and I didn’t get on no cotton truck cause I didn’t —*[laughs]*—that wasn’t my style. I was—well, I been working there ever since.

AE: How did you know that they needed help over there [at Giardina’s]?

JB: Well, I didn’t know. I just asked. I can work, well—it’s work—I’d work—I want you to know I’d do anything. Wash dishes. I can do anything. If I can’t, I can learn. I don’t care what job you go on to, if you never did it before, you got to learn the first time. You got to learn. You don’t start at the top. You start at the bottom and work up. So that’s what I did—when I start—when I—when we closed up, there wasn’t nobody doin’ no cooking there but me. Mr. Brossi—he was doing all the—cutting the meat, getting the stuff up—ordering, buying. The only one cooking it was me.

AE: Did you learn to cook from them?

JB: That’s correct.

AE: Did you add some of our own style to what you made?

JB: *[Laughs]* Nah. Well, we—you know—everybody got a different way of doing things to it. Ain’t gonna be no two person do it alike. But the basic fundamentals—tastes and everything are the same. You no di—you couldn’t tell the difference if I cooked it or he cooked it. Couldn’t tell the difference.

AE: Were you a cook before you started working there?

JB: Oh, I cooked—around home. Me and my grandmother in the kitchen. And I cooked in the Army. But not in no café. I never cooked in a café until I started cooking there.

AE: Were you born here in Greenwood?

JB: No, I was born in Granville, Louisiana.

AE: Granville, Louisiana. My goodness.

JB: And I got out of the Army, then I moved here. Followed a lady. A woman. *[Laughs]*

AE: Uh-oh! *[Laughs]* Did the lady stick around?

JB: No, this is as far as I got.

AE: *[Laughing]*

JB: She in—she in New York somewhere last time I heard from her.

AE: And she brought you here, and you're the one who stayed, huh?

JB: That's right.

AE: How do you like Greenwood? You must like it—

JB: I love it. I love it.

AE: Yeah.

JB: I been right here since, eh, September of nineteen fifty-six. In fact, I come through here on my way *to* New York, and this is as far as I got.

AE: *[Laughs]* Well, what did you like about working at Giardina’s the best?

JB: Uh. [Pause] I was there forty-six years [sound of Mr. Bell moving in his chair], I never heard [pause] Miss Roina use a curse word or—I seen her get angry sometimes, but she always kept that to herself. She’d never misuse anybody, she always—had something said to her, she listen. If you did something wrong, she’d tell you. But for her to snap at anyone? I never—never heard her do that. And I—that’s what I liked about her—she’d tell you—tell you something to do, you’d go and do it. She didn’t stand over to watch you. Like—I don’t like that. Tell me what you want did. If you want it, you want it. [Next sentence is unintelligible.] You don’t have to worry about it ‘cause I’m going to do it. If I don’t like it—what you’re doing—then I won’t do it at all. You ain’t going to do it right, don’t do it at all. If you don’t know *how* to do it, ask somebody. That’s the only way to work. There ain’t but one way, and that’s the *right* way. I told you, you can do it wrong, but the right way always—once you do it right, you ain’t got to worry about it.

AE: Did she have many other employees who stayed there as long as you?

JB: You know, this time *[laughs]* a few that—you ain’t gonna find—very few people that stay that long ‘cause they don’t want to work. They want the money, but they don’t want to work. You know how that is. Especially youngsters nowadays. All the old-timers, they done passed and gone. Bad—Mississippi—they stayed there a long time, but they died a long time ago. Like we had some—in and out, in and out. Three or four weeks at once. Maybe a year, two years— that’s about it. And like the one out there now [motions

toward the front of the house where a man sits in the front yard], he worked there about a year. Just before we closed up.

[Counter: 70]

AE: What's his name?

JB: Uh, George.

AE: George?

JB: George Reed.

AE: Reed.

JB: When, in fact, we'd been open right today if I'd been able to work. I got to for I couldn't—Mr. Brossi and I got old. I—Me and him the same age. Miss Roina—she ninety something years old. You know, we—only work till you fall out, so we just decided—I stayed there long enough. I couldn't do it anymore. And he couldn't do it by his-self. I knew that. That's the reason I stayed with him long as I did, because I know when I retired, they wasn't gonna find nobody else to do it. If you worked—like—see, they could go up town [unintelligible] or go up anywhere and wouldn't have to worry about it being dead right. It's going to be dead right. 'Cause I been doing it so long. Ain't a customer come in there that we didn't know—when they walk in the door [pause], I know *how* they like they food, what they want, if they make a reservation—who it was,

like Dr. [unintelligible] or someone—I know what you’re gonna get when you get there. ‘Fore they get there I knows what they’s gonna order. How they want it cooked. Like maybe Mr. [unintelligible] and his wife, Dr. Carter and them, I know exactly what they’re gonna get. When they call—when they make a reservation—for six of them, I knew what it was. They didn’t have to tell me what they was gonna get. I know what they’re gonna order when they—‘fore they get there. I know how they want it. But that makes a lot of difference. You ain’t got to worry about it. It’s gonna be right. Yeah. So, like most— like Ms. [unintelligible], she don’t want any sauce on her fish. She ain’t—She ain’t eat nothing but snapper—that’s all she going to get. Dr. Carter, he don’t get nothing but broiled chicken. And, uh, he want his dry. Some of them want the sauce, and some of them don’t. Dr. [unintelligible] want his—he ain’t gonna get nothing but flounder. And he want *his* dry, sauce on the side. Some of ‘em do. Like them ladies that—I know they ain’t coming down there though [the new Giardina’s on Howard Street]. *[Short laugh]* It ain’t worth them going down there—‘cause ain’t nobody gonna put up with them like we did. We had ‘em spoiled.

AE: Yeah.

JB: And so it was like a [unintelligible].

AE: And the new restaurant’s a lot different, huh?

JB: Beg your pardon?

AE: The new restaurant’s a lot different?

JB: Oh, it’s gonna be a lot of difference. Now they [pause]. In fact, they have—I don’t know whether they have their [pause]—customer—*our* customers is—we spoiled them.

AE: Hmm.

JB: They been coming there twenty-five, thirty years. The *same* customers come every week, twice a week. That makes a lot of difference. But they ain’t gonna go down *there*. They ain’t gonna do what—they ain’t gonna—they ain’t gonna serve them like we did.

AE: Mm-hmm.

JB: They ain’t gonna put up with what we put up with. [Pause] It wouldn’t—it hadn’t—it couldn’t—It wouldn’t go out of the kitchen if it wasn’t right. That’s the main thing. Always serve it and do it right.

AE: You really cared about he customers.

JB: That’s right. If it wasn’t right I wasn’t gonna—I wasn’t gonna serve it to nobody. It was going to be hot when I—If it’s going—the waitress be saying, “Oooh, it’s hot!” I say, “I want it hot.” Tha—that’s what side towels for. Don’t serve it—we don’t serve hot

food on a cold plate. You don't serve cold salad on a *hot* plate. If we serve cold food, we serve salad. That comes out of the pantry, but out from the—out from the kitchen. That makes a lot of difference. People—they *knew* that. We had peoples come all the way from Jackson, Indianola—to eat nothing but our chicken. And Dick Cavett—you know Dick Cavett? The Saturday Night show? There—he come all the way from New York.

AE: Really.

[Counter: 108]

JB: Eat nothing but our chicken. His wife [pause] Mississippi girl. I think her home *here*. Either here or Oxford, one. She was born in Mississippi. Every time they come they'd be six of them. That's a long way to come eat chicken.

AE: It sure is. Do—

JB: Must be—must be doing something right.

AE: *[Laughs]*

JB: Did it all these years and have the same customers—been eatin' in there.

AE: Do you remember other celebrities that came through?

JB: Jack Nicklaus been there three or four times.

AE: The golfer?

JB: Yeah, the golfer, Jack Nicklaus. [Dog barks]. [Pause] I can't think. There are so many. Got Mr. Harold Smith. The general—the president of the—of—Baldwin Piano Company.

AE: Um-hum.

JB: He used to bring—he usually came in on Mondays then—he used to bring a lot of celebrities there, but it's —it's been so long. After they closed up. After they—Baldwin closed up, and Irving Industry—he moved it—moved to Mexico [pause] and [unintelligible]. Anyway, they used to bring a lot of celebrities there. And Bell—Bell South Telephone Company? We used—Tuesdays and Thursdays—two of them was there. Sixteen—you know, third—we had sixteen ladies. A third—eight ladies. All of them work in the office there. All of them—now they'd bring their brown bag, but the Bell Telephone Company was paying—

AE: Um-hmm.

JB: —paying the bill. I don't know what happened. They stopped doing that about—about ten years ago. I know when it happened—when it broke up. [Pause] The old—when it broke up, AT&T and then—they had been wanting—wants [unintelligible] you

know, Ma Bell was broke up. Had—now South Cent—South Central—South Central Bell, it's —it's—it's South Central Bell now. Like the Pacific Bell and all the different—AT&T had it. All of it. They paid all the bills and send them here— eat twice a week. Sure did. In fact, it ain't never been right since they broke it up.

AE: *[Laughing]*

JB: Maybe something's wrong.

AE: *[Laughing]*

JB: Yeah.

AE: When you first started working there [at Giardina's], did they have a lot of other black employees? Back in the day?

JB: No. Just two. Was more, maybe some more. That was [Pause] three. Sue, me and another worked there. It was a drive-in then.

AE: Mm-hum.

JB: Wasn't no—in fact, wasn't anything on Park Avenue but Giardina's, Lusco's—not Lusco's. Giardina's and Carnaggio's and Mid-South Dairy. Wasn't nothing out there but

a cotton field—rattle snakes, rabbits, and all that. All out there where the—shopping center and town market? That was swamp. All—what over there? Sears. That—they went out of business about a month ago—well, Sears building—Sears building used to be in on the corner by that filling station. All that was swamp.

AE: Mm-hum.

JB: Doctor—Doctor Pilfore had a horse stable down there. Where Sears is now. Sears appliance store? And that—that's where he kept all his horses. There wasn't anything over there but—

AE: Lot of changes, huh?

JB: Giardina's and, uh—Carnaggio's You know. And Lack—Lackey was over there. And then the Dairy over on Park Street. And it been a long time ago.

AE: Um-hum. Park Avenue is something else now.

JB: Oh! Everything has moved out there now. And everything downtown—that big hotel down there [the Alluvian].

AE: Um-hum!

JB: Everything else done moved out there now. Yeah.

AE: Well, what was it like, Mr. Bell, when you were working for the Giardinas in the sixties in Mississippi? With the Civil Rights Movement and all?

[Counter: 157]

JB: I ain't—I ain't known anything about that. They ain't never changed. I'll tell you the truthful—the honest—been the same ever since I been there. I ain't known—in fact, like I told you while ago, I worked there forty-six years. I ain't never heard Miss Roina curse a word. Something like feeling—and if she did, she didn't know it. And if she did, she'd thank you for it. And they didn't fire nobody. Only way to leave there is if you quit. They don't fire any body. If you're sick, they'd help—they help you. And I don't mean just now. Back then. In fact, that's the reason I'm saying—they're the nicest people. The first suit my son wore, she [Miss Roina] bought it at Fountain's.

AE: Hmm.

JB: And—we—take down so much a week. My son—he bought [unintelligible] for everybody. Fountain's. They been out of business. Oh, they been out of business about twenty-five, thirty years. Maybe longer than that. Right across the street. Right next to this building to where this hotel [The Alluvian] is now [on Howard Street]. At—on the corner. That...right on the corner there. That was Fountain's—Fountain's Department Store. Right downstairs.

AE: Yeah.

JB: That's one reason—

AE: You think that had anything to do—

JB: That's one reason I stayed there so long.

AE: You think that had something to do with the fact that they were from Italy? That they weren't from here?

JB: I know you couldn't work for better people. In fact, I'm just the same as one of the family. That's the way they treat me.

AE: Yeah, I remember you said that the other night when I met you.

JB: That's right. That's the—they just treat me the same way. I tell you, he come by here.

AE: Yeah?

JB: When they go to dinner, they come bring me a plate. If they don't go, they don't bring me dinner. A paper out there, they bring me the paper. Something.

AE: Hmm, good people.

JB: Couldn't beat 'em. Course I'm fortunate. I hope—I hope I don't ever need anything. But I tell you what, if I ever need it, call 'em—they mean that. They really do. My daddy died and, my—they helped me. In fact, that's one of the reasons I stayed there so long. Ain't no use if you're satisfied and making an easy living—what you gonna change for?

AE: Um-hmm.

JB: Ain't no need to run from this job to that job. You don't [phone rings] you don't accomplish anything. Now, excuse me.

[Recording is stopped while Mr. Bell answers the telephone.]

[Interview resumes.]

AE: Well what was—what was downtown Greenwood like in the sixties, when you were coming up and working there [at Giardina's].

[Counter: 189]

JB: For me, it's always been nice to be here. 'Cause I'm—I been right here.

[Unintelligible] In fact, I never did go no place but back home from Greenwood. And—it's always been a—in fact, I know from experience—it must be for myself. I ain't never experienced a—any [pause] hardship or—trouble... Try not to put myself in that

position. But now, I—it was some people that had hardships. I understand that. I knew it, but for *me*—I never did because I didn’t put myself in that position. I come, home, go to work, go by a picture show, go o that cafe right there [gestures like it’s down the block], have a few drinks, come home. That’s all I know about it. When I go downtown—I go to shop. If you didn’t have what I want, if you didn’t like—if you didn’t want my service, I wouldn’t to in there. ‘cause I won’t spend *my* money anywhere on earth that I—that’s not—that act like you don’t appreciate me spending it. I think everybody else should be the same way. I’m not going in—in any place and spend my money, and you don’t want me *in* there. What I’m go in there for?

AE: *[Laughing]*

JB: It don’t make sense.

AE: Um-hmm.

JB: I think everybody else the same way.

AE: Um-hmm.

JB: You can—you can *make* trouble if you want to make trouble, and you could—and if you don’t want it you can avoid it. I avoided—My grandmother always told me, eh—keep your money in your pocket and it won’t spoil.

AE: *[Laughing]*

JB: So I’ve tried that. That’s the way I lived.

AE: Do you remember in the sixties, when that waiter Booker Wright, who worked over at Lusco’s—

JB: Yeah.

AE: —and he was all in the paper and on TV.

JB: Yeah.

AE: You remember when that happened?

JB: Yeah, I remember it. I was working right down there where I’m working now [meaning Giardina’s]. He was working at Lusco’s.

AE: Mm-hmm.

JB: He had a café right down there. It just closed about a month—about a month—about three weeks ago.

AE: That’s what I just heard. [Pause] What was this café over here that you said you went to?

JB: Right there? It’s gone. It’s a church now.

AE: Yeah.

JB: Simi—it was Charles Rhodes—It was called the Simi, but it’s Charlie Rhodes. That’s his name, but the ...place—that’s the—

AE: Mm-hmm.

JB: He own that but he bought that from Sam—Sam Ciro. Closed the grocery store. Was a grocery store and a café before he bought it. Everything. He ran that place. Till he wasn’t able. He real sick now. In fact, I rode down to see him Friday—I mean, last week. Can’t get out the bed. You get old and everything happen to you. That’s the reason—I *wished* I’d of kept working now. St—[pause]. Stiff. Don’t get out the bed. Watch television. Watch television. Get in the bed. That bed ain’t no good.

AE: *[Laughing]*

JB: They talk about—the doctor always tell you—I can’t make no three blocks. I can’t get one block. I can hardly—I’m out of breath. So I don’t go anywhere. I go and sit right out there [points towards the front of his house].

AE: Well, how did you get to work when you worked over at Giardina’s?

JB: Oh, I got a ride. Pick me—they didn’t pick me up every day. At night—I had somebody pick me up. Or I’d pay for a ride. Over in that—over there in that—they pick us up and bring us home too. After got—business been gotten down, it’d be so late—at night when you get off. Pay somebody—pay somebody to bring us home at night.

AE: What was that? You said the business you’ve got now?

JB: Huh?

AE: You said the business you have now.

JB: I mean that business—picked up. What I mean, from the drive-in business has changed.

AE: Oh, I see.

JB: The—to the—café business. See, when it was a drive-in [pause] we'd have about for or five people eat—eat steak and, uh, spaghetti. See, we didn't sell spaghetti—now. Then we sell spaghetti, meatballs, and we wouldn't serve chicken. They had meatballs and steak, t-bone—t-bone and strip. But now they won't sell spaghetti. Sell everything, but won't touch—they won't sell no sandwiches—don't—talking about hamburger like it run away. *[Laughs]*

AE: *[Laughing]*

JB: [First sentence unintelligible] So it's—they sell everything now.

AE: So you—

JB: Pompano, flounder, snapper, catfish, shrimp, oysters—fried or baked—shrimp cocktail, oyster cocktail... broiled chicken, fried—fried—we served about one fried chicken a year. All our chicken was broiled. So—in fact, most all our—but sometimes people come in there—not our regular customers—people passing through, you know—want fried fish. We serve it if they order it, but I say, we broiled everything. Catfish, flounder, snapper filet. We used to have [pause] trout—trout. Speckled trout. Didn't have that much 'cause we didn't have no call for it. Mostly call for flounder and pompano. Couldn't keep 'em up there. Catfish. We'd sell whole red snapper [unintelligible phrase] snapper filet but didn't have no call for it. It's so hard to keep. We don't—don't sell it—it'd go bad.

[Counter: 265]

AE: Do you have a favorite memory from your days working at Giardina’s?

JB: What?

AE: Do you have a favorite memory?

JB: Oh, let’s see. I just enjoy it. In fact, I ain’t been working twelve years—I just enjoy it. I been my own boss. That’s what I like. Just tell me—when you order something, I fix it. It—cut it, below it, and weigh it, cut it—I’ll fix it and that’s it. I don’t like no body standing—“Do that. Do that. Do that.” That ain’t—never get anything did that way.

AE: Yeah.

JB: The help—the help not happy, you won’t have no business.

AE: Very true.

JB: I don’t care—I don’t care if it’s General Motors, or—Ford Motor Company—if the help ain’t happy, they ain’t going to make—sell no cars. They ain’t going to sell any automobiles. How a small or large business depends on the help. The greatest asset of any business is the ones that punching a card. Not the one that’s sitting behind a desk. The one that’s punching the card. That’s your business. If you don’t—you can’t need—

you don't need nobody sitting behind the desk, no—ain't nobody punching a card. That's the same thing—if you ain't got nobody to wash the dishes, clean the floor, they don't need no cook. That's the same thing, just a different style.

AE: Yeah.

JB: That's about it.

AE: You mentioned you had a son. Do you have any other—children?

JB: Naw. My son live in—only time he been out of Las Vegas was in Vietnam. He went to Vietnam [next couple of sentences unintelligible]. I hear from him every now and then. And my daughter—my stepdaughter. Just—she call me all the time. Well, she called me Sunday. I think she call me every other Sunday. She don't call me, I call her. My son, he—don't call.

AE: Do you ever eat at this barbecue restaurant down the way?

JB: Beg your pardon?

AE: Have you ever eaten at this barbecue restaurant down here?

JB: Naw—not—not—I don’t eat it. Been suffering heart trouble. In fact, I don’t eat meat. That’s me. I can’t stand—can’t stand that seasoning.

AE: Mm.

JB: Salt, pepper, egg and sugar and, uh—doctor told me to be—I can eat anything I want twice a week. I kind of follow the instructions. I cook for myself.

AE: Well, I think we might be close to done. Do you have something you might want to add about your days at—

JB: No.

AE: —Giardina’s?

JB: No, no. I just enjoy working. Fact—fact, you couldn’t have a better place to work—work and retire.

AE: Sounds like it.

JB: That’s right.

AE: Uh-huh.

JB: In fact, I never would have stayed—I don’t believe I—I *may* have—I don’t know where I’d stayed in a place that long. Because I enjoyed it. The—the whole family. Yeah, they been nice to me. In fact, we were nice to each other. That’s the we that goes. Put it that way.

AE: All right. Well, that’s a good note to end on. Thank you, Mr. Bell.

[Counter: 308]

[END]