

HUGH KNOTH

Knoth's Bar-B-Q – Grand Rivers, KY

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Location: Knoth's Bar-B-Q - Grand Rivers, KY

Interviewer: Lisa Powell

Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs

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Project: Southern BBQ Trail - Kentucky

[Begin Knoth-Part One]

00:00:00

Lisa Powell: Okay; so today is August 3, 2009 and this is Lisa Powell. And I’m here at Knoth’s Bar-B-Q in Western Kentucky, and I’m interviewing Hugh Knoth. So just—could you restate your name for the recording, please?

00:00:16

Hugh Knoth: Hugh Knoth, fifty-three years old.

00:00:20

LP: Thank you. So how did you get started in the barbecue business?

00:00:24

HK: My parents opened it in ’65, and after I got out of high school, I dropped out of college and didn't have anything else to do.

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LP: And so where was the original location where they started?

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HK: Half a mile east of Barkley Dam in Lyon County, Kentucky.

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LP: And you were saying that the menu hasn’t changed too much, so what was the original menu like there?

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HK: Barbecue pork, beef—basically it—it’s been the same ever since.

00:01:00

LP: And so what was that original location like? How big was it?

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HK: Originally, it started, it was four tables and seven or eight booths. And then we added on where you—eventually we could seat about sixty-five over there, the same amount of pit space there as we have here. Here we can sit 100 people.

00:01:32

LP: And so when did you move to this new location?

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HK: Nineteen ninety-two. And there was a barbecue pit fire that burned the other restaurant down. I always thought if I had a fire if I was there I could take care of it, but I couldn’t. It—the pit caught afire and got up on the flat roof, and then it just burnt the whole thing down. Now our pit is separated from our building, so it’s—so I was renewing my insurance and one insurance agent said that they don’t insure buildings that are on fire, so—. **[Laughs]** So that’s—a part of the hazard of the way we cook is fires. After I burned the restaurant down and came over here in

'92, I was feeling bad. And Red Lee was in the barbecue business and he had said he had burned down four of them, so that made me feel somewhat better, you know.

00:02:36

LP: It’s a hazard of the business for sure.

00:02:39

HK: It is when you got a fire, a big fire going all the time, and grease, and it’s just going to happen. So just if you control the damage to it that’s what you shoot for, so—.

00:02:51

LP: So at the old building were the pits in the back of the restaurant?

00:02:56

HK: Yes; it was all together. Now the pit room is a separate building, about thirty feet away from our—the restaurant. Which—we’ve had that one on fire before but we were able to keep it—. We could—we could—we—if we had a fire down there to actually burn down that building back there we wouldn’t be down more than a day or two, because there’s very little wood in it and it would—it’s just a lot better; it’s a lot safer now that we have it separated.

00:03:26

LP: And do you have the same kind of pits that you had at the old restaurant?

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HK: Yes; it’s basically—they’re made of concrete block. There’s three blocks up. You’ve got your screen, a block, a brick, and then the lid.

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LP: And what’s the lid made out of?

00:03:45

HK: Plywood wrapped in sheet metal.

00:03:49

LP: And so how many pits do you have?

00:03:53

HK: We have five pits and each pit will hold about twenty shoulders, twenty to twenty-four shoulders, so basically on one cooking we can cook about eighty-five, eight-eight shoulders. There’s one pit that if you’re cooking on four there’s one pit you got to have to put them on, stack them up. You know, we have warmers in here we can put some of them on, but we can cook about eighty-eight shoulders at a time. But the key is—is the freshness, cooking what you think we’re going to use the next day. And the fresher I can buy it, the fresher I can cook it and give it to the customer, the better off we’re going to be.

00:04:40

LP: Okay; so is that the only part of the pig that you cook is the shoulder?

00:04:46

HK: Yes; it is.

00:04:49

LP: So what cut of beef do you use?

00:04:50

HK: The brisket.

00:04:54

LP: And so you said that you started barbecuing because your parents were in the business, but how did they get started? How did they learn to do it?

00:05:02

HK: My dad wanted to—to operate one. So barbecue as we’ve got it here has been around here for a long time. And there was a guy by the name of Osborne [Farrin?] and he had a barbecue place in Old Kuttawa, and he came down to help my dad cook one day. So dad—he stayed with my dad one day and—

00:05:25

LP: That was when your dad was just getting started?

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HK: Yes; that’s right—that’s right.

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LP: And so how long did your parents keep working in that business before you took over full-time?

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HK: They went from '65 to '75, but they didn't—and I've been doing it—1975 to present, but they actually helped me a lot from say '75 to '82. And it—people would always ask me, even after my dad and mom wasn't there, they would ask me who would be operating and I would tell them my parents are because it would be better for an older couple to own it than it would be for some young kid. So that's why from—so say from '65 to 1980, my parents were involved quite a bit.

00:06:22

LP: And so did your parents kind of develop the—the recipe? I know you said that your dad learned—had someone come and teach him for one day but did they develop their own recipe and style of cooking other than that?

00:06:36

HK: No. No, same as they did in Old Kuttawa and our barbecue sauce came from a recipe in Old Kuttawa, too. And my mom and a lady named Lela Smith just changed it just a little bit, so—.

00:06:53

LP: And I know a lot of people are big fans of your sauce. Could you just describe a little bit what it’s like and maybe how it’s a little different than other sauces?

00:07:03

HK: It’s—it’s got a sweet-sour taste to it—very unique.

00:07:13

LP: And so Old Kuttawa, is that—how far away from that is—how far away from here is that?

00:07:17

HK: About seven miles.

00:07:21

LP: And is there still much barbecuing that goes on there?

00:07:23

HK: No; no there’s not. Matter of fact, I don’t even think there’s a barbecue restaurant in Kuttawa now. Kuttawa Springs up there used to be a big recreational area. They would have camp meetings and political rallies, and people would gather around the cool springs. And they had a lot of barbecue pits up there to feed the people that would come to those, I guess, summer things to escape the heat. There used to be a lot of barbecuing in Old Kuttawa. They’d say—they said this was before air-conditioning, you know those springs just came up out of the ground, a lot of cool water and it would cool and they said that sometimes some political rallies had been

as big as 10,000 people up there, Kuttawa. And that's a lot of people for Kuttawa. But I could understand with no air-conditioning and people wanting to escape the heat.

00:08:40

I've been told there were a lot of barbecue places up there, and that's where ours came from originally.

00:08:46

LP: And so what did the building that you're in now used to be?

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HK: It was the Diamond; it was a fish restaurant. When we burned we were mighty lucky to come to a building that had a good history. There was only one restaurant here before us, and they did a good job. People can come here without even thinking. They've been coming here since they were a little baby, and now they're bringing their grandkids here. So it's got a good history, versus when we burned if we had moved to a building that didn't have a history or had—even worse, had a bad history to it. But this had a good history as a good restaurant, so—.

00:09:31

LP: And so do you have a lot of regulars who come to eat here every week or every month?

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HK: Yes; we do. And we're busier than ever, even with these bad economic times, you know, I was trying to think you know why are we—why are we busier than ever? And barbecue might be a comfort food [*Laughs*]. You know, people look at their financial statements or something and

say, “Well, I’m going to eat me a barbecue to make me feel better.” But we are; we’re busier now than—than we ever have. Do you want to go—Lisa, we’re about to turn the meat if you want to go watch that.

00:10:17

LP: Yeah; we’ll take a pause.

00:10:18

[End Knoth-Part One]

[Begin Knoth-Part Two]

00:00:00

Hugh Knoth: For hundreds of years, and people are used to it.

00:00:03

Lisa Powell: Okay; we’re starting again, so let’s—you were talking about how long we’ve had the barbecue here.

00:00:08

HK: Well people—people have had barbecue the way we cook it in this area for probably hundreds of years. And different areas of even the state, they don’t have it. And these people were going to come to Lexington—Hamill and McKinney, this architect firm, told me—and they cooked mostly with gas, and they used just a little bit of wood. And the health department up

there at Lexington was awful concerned about them getting ashes on the meat. And they didn't come.

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So take it at that. You know, but up at—you know up North—

00:00:55

LP: Okay; so we're back from watching the shoulder being turned on the pit. Okay; so could you tell us a little bit about the charcoal and the type of wood that you use?

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HK: We use hickory wood, which makes a good charcoal. Any hardwood will do good the way we cook, but charcoal makes the best briquette. And so we use—the wood we primarily got 'til about five or six years ago would come from ax-handle places, which was about the right length to burn and the right thickness to burn in the pit. But that's got pretty scarce and pretty high, and that's why we've had to go with that slab wood back there. That's very plentiful and it does well for us if it's seasoned out good.

00:01:57

LP: And so what do you mean by seasoned?

00:02:00

HK: Time; get it and let it sit out there four or five months, but all the—a lot of the moisture will get out of it and it'll—it'll burn better.

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LP: And does your—do you—roughly where does your slab wood come from now, the hickory?

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HK: The slab wood comes in neighboring counties here, probably a fifteen-, twenty-minute drive from here, which makes it cheaper. When you start having to haul the wood a long ways, especially to burn, it gets expensive. That little wood that you saw out there that I showed you that handle wood, it's—it comes about three hours and that's what makes it so expensive you know. By the time we have to hire a semi to bring it down, and it's just expensive.

00:02:55

LP: And so you showed me sort of two different processes outside by which you burn the wood to make it into charcoal. Could you talk a little bit more about those?

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HK: One is strictly a chimney, a flue; when we're not cooking very much, one or two pits. And then we've got one set of dog irons outside that we burn the big slab wood. When we burn it outside, we don't have to cut it. We can throw the whole slab on and then when it burns in two, we can throw it back on top. So we can build a big fire out there and get a lot of coals.

00:03:42

LP: And about how long do you burn the wood to make the coal before you actually use the coal in the pit?

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HK: With burning the wood outside, the big slab wood, he’ll have to—we’ll have to get it going about two hours before we need to fire up. If we’re burning it in the flue, then it’s anywhere from thirty minutes to an hour.

00:04:05

LP: All right. So could you talk a little about what you do to the meat before you cook it—if you do anything?

00:04:19

HK: No; we just put a little salt on it. But the key of that is to get it the freshest that we can get. There used to be a lot of little—little meat packers spread throughout the country, and it was a lot easier for people to get the freshest meat then. But it’s a little bit harder now that all those small packers have gone out of business. And that’s why we use a small-jobber. Because I can talk to the owner and—and I can—they can help me out a little bit more with the freshness on that than a big company can. A big company I’ll get whatever they got; a little company like them, I can pretty well specify and they do a good job.

00:05:08

On buying the meat, the price doesn’t mean that much to me because basically it—there’s not going to be that much difference between the big companies and the little ones. But the freshness is the main thing. The fresher the better.

00:05:27

LP: So we saw you turn the meat while you were cooking it. What else goes on during the time that the meat is on the pit?

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HK: Nothing; just keep it at 300-degrees, and when he needs—when the temperature drops down to about 260—275, he’ll put a few more coals under there to get it up to 300. And then he’ll do that—he got them on at 7:00 and he’ll do that ‘til about—he only had ten shoulders on there today, so he’ll do it about 2:30. And then probably about 5:30 this evening, I’ll check it. I’ll look inside to see if they are done when the temperature drops from that 300 down past around 200. And then it will take it three or four hours to do that, so—.

00:06:16

LP: So do you put any more seasoning or any more sauce on your meat before it’s served?

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HK: No. Well yes, we put a sauce on it after we get it done and make the sandwiches or plates and we put the sauce on it.

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LP: So what’s—what’s probably the most popular meat that you sell? Is there one thing that one of the—the two, the pork or the beef that people seem to go after the most?

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HK: It's pork, and pork is what we're here for. We'll sell ten to one or maybe more than that for the pork to the beef. If we run out of beef, it's no big deal. But if we run out of pork, more than likely, we close. And that happens, well we do sell out sometimes, because you—we're—we've got—what he's got on right now is what we'll use tomorrow. And if we use more than that, you know, a lot more than that in—then we just sell out, which is good for business, too. When people want something real bad and they can't get it, it makes them want it even more, so—.

00:07:36

But we don't sell out that much. Probably in a season's time, maybe seven or eight times. But it does happen, because of—you can't read the future, you know.

00:07:49

LP: When are your busiest times?

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HK: For us the lake area season, from Memorial Day to Labor Day and during those holidays, Memorial Day, Labor Day and 4th of July. Our—right now it's slowed down quite a bit right now. School is about ready to start around here. And all those kids are eating in the cafeteria—or will be, you know, so—.

00:08:15

LP: So you—well I guess when we went out to—to see the meat being turned we were talking about your regular customers and if you have people who come in here and eat just on a regular basis. Do you have a lot of those?

00:08:28

HK: Well we have one customer that comes in just about every day. That’s good for barbecue; I mean that—even after a while I get tired of it, you know [*Laughs*]. But yeah; we do. That’s what keeps us in business. We try to do a good job and—and you know, you treat people right and give them a good deal and they’re going to keep coming back, you know.

00:08:58

LP: And do you also have a lot of people who are visiting Kentucky Lake—you were talking about your big season being the lake-visiting season? So a lot of those folks come by too?

00:09:10

HK: Sure; yeah, a big—big vacation area. We’ve got some beautiful lakes up here, as you know, Lake Barclay and Kentucky Lake. And this is a prime season for it except it’s winding down because of school starting, so—. Good lakes.

00:09:28

LP: Okay; so you were talking about you cook about twenty shoulders on a regular day. And then what kind of special events do you cook for, and about how much might you cook for those?

00:09:42

HK: Right now Monday through Thursday, approximately twenty shoulders a day, and on Friday about thirty, and then Saturday forty-five to seventy. It all depends what we have going. Last Saturday we went through sixty-eight shoulders and we had a—a—we do off-premises

catering, too, and we had an event at Adventure River for Bremner. It’s a cookie factory in Princeton. So they took about thirty shoulders for themselves for that thing, so—. But that’s the key is the freshness of it—cooking what you think you’re going to use that day and hoping you have one shoulder left at the end of the day or a half of one.

00:10:31

LP: And that’s what you eat for your dinner? [*Laughs*]

00:10:32

HK: Yeah; that’s right—that’s right. That’s the key. I mean sometimes you’d be surprised on how—how we have to throw it away sometimes. But it’s better for somebody—it’s better for us to eat the expense and throwing it away—if it’s not top-notch, better for us to eat the expense of it than getting somebody saying, “Well this is just average.” You know we—when somebody eats here, we want them to say, “Boy that’s good.” You know, and then you can’t go wrong there, you know.

00:11:03

Sometimes that happens—if we run out sometimes we have too much you know.

That’s—

00:11:12

LP: And so what else do you serve to go along with your barbecue?

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HK: The—the—we have hamburgers and hotdogs here for the kids, and then our side items are slaw and French fries. That's it. We've got a very limited menu which makes it more simpler, and that's—you know one reason we've lasted so long, that we've been here so long, because it's so simple, you know. And we're able to do these off-premise caterings for these bunch of people because it's so simple here anyway. The more you add to the menu, the more complicated it gets, and the more harder it is to keep everything good. The less you have and you keep that top-notch, and you're going to be—be in good shape.

00:12:05

LP: So how many people do you have who work with you here at Knoth's?

00:12:10

HK: That's another good thing; we have very good people—very good people. We have fifteen altogether, of course part-timers too. But very good people; that's a key, too, of it. When we have people here, they want to be here, and that makes a difference in, you know, the drudgery of having to go to work. It's—we really have a policy here you work when you want to. We have—except me and a few other ones, so that way when people—we—as far as restaurants go, we have less turnover than I'd say about any restaurant in West Kentucky, Lisa, and—and the reason is because of that. And this is not a high-paying thing, so if somebody wants off, we'll—we'll oblige them to it. So anybody that wants to be here—.

00:13:19

LP: Okay; so we're getting started up again. So in terms of your brisket, are people ever surprised to see brisket on your menu since it's not so standard in Western Kentucky?

00:13:35

HK: Yes; they are. We sell very little of that though, Lisa; we'll sell today about twenty shoulders. We'll sell maybe two pieces of it, which is equal about to two of the shoulders. As I say, we run out of beef, it's—it's no big deal but if we run out of pork we usually close. Because that's what people come after. Beef is good, though. But—and that's another thing too, like around the 4th of July when we're at capacity, we've got everything going that we can out there and the beef has to take a second burner because we can't—we can't do everything, you know. So I think the 4th of July I think we were out of beef, because we didn't have any choice. Because we was at capacity. You know something—we had to give up something, you know—. Pork is what we're here for.

00:14:38

LP: And so what kind of—what do people eat their barbecue on, what kind of bread do they like to eat with it?

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HK: We just—we just have white bread here, and buns.

00:14:57

LP: And do you also do a lot of take-out business, or are you mainly here in the store?

00:15:01

HK: Now that’s half our sales. For every person we have here, there’s one going out. Half our sales are take-out. Everything we have on the menu, you can either get it here or to go, so—.

00:15:17

LP: And so do you—does any of the rest of your family still work with your business at all?

00:15:26

HK: My wife helps me some, and my daughter, my sister-in-law, cousins. And then the rest of them are like family, so—.

00:15:37

LP: And what do you see—what do you see as the future of Knoth’s in the coming years? Do you see making any changes or is it going to stay the same pretty much?

00:15:50

HK: If we make any changes, that shows we’re going out of business. It’s been the same since ’65, and it’s—like I said, we’re busier right now than we’ve ever been. So if you see us make any changes, you figure we’re going out of business, so—. No; no changes.

00:16:08

LP: Is your—is your daughter interested in carrying on the family tradition?

00:16:13

HK: No; no. No; as a matter of fact she got a realtor license where she can sell it if she ever gets it. [*Laughs*]

00:16:28

LP: [*Laughs*] Okay; do you think that—so we were talking just a little bit outside, but we'll talk about it now for the recording, do you think that Western Kentucky has a particularly unique style kind of barbecue that's a little different from some other places?

00:16:49

HK: They do. They do; and I think we got the best here in West Kentucky. Of course, I haven't been everywhere else, either though, Lisa [*Laughs*]. So—but it—it is. When I—when I'm at other places here in Kentucky I try them out, so—to see if they got something better than me, you know. And yes; it is unique.

00:17:17

LP: And how do you—or how—how have you been told or how do you think it's different than some of the other places?

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HK: Well, Memphis is ribs. Texas is brisket. Kansas City is ribs. North Carolina, they have the pulled pork like we do. Their sauce is different though.

00:17:52

LP: So—

00:17:53

HK: But I've never been too many places though, Lisa, so you can't—I can't tell you; it's just what I've been told, so—.

00:18:00

LP: And so talking about the pulled pork, what's that process like getting the meat off the—you know once it gets off the pit what happens to—how is it pulled off?

00:18:10

HK: We just pull it as orders come in and cut it off. The longer you can keep it whole, it'll keep in the heat and the moisture. So as—as the plates or the pounds or the sandwiches come in, we just do one shoulder at a time except—oh Danielle, I'm going to be famous.

00:18:32

Danielle: Again?

00:18:34

HK: Again. [*Laughs*] So except like Saturday when we had that catering, we had—we had about six people pulling and then we had to fix up about 150 pounds, 160, but as the orders come in today, we'll just be pulling them one at a time. We've got about seventeen shoulders to use today, and we won't pull them all up to get them ready. We'll just pull them as we go. It keeps it moist and hot, so—.

00:19:03

LP: So people hand-pull the meat off the bone?

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HK: Yes; that’s right, right.

00:19:11

LP: All right; well is there anything else you’d like to tell us about Knoth’s?

00:19:22

HK: Well I can't think of anything, Lisa. You’ve pretty well asked everything I know. [*Laughs*]

00:19:29

LP: Okay; all right, if we—if we come up with anything else if we’re talking here in the next few minutes, we can start recording again. [*Laughs*] But all right; thank you very much.

00:19:40

HK: You’re welcome.

00:19:44

[End Knoth-Part Two]

[Begin Knoth-Part Three]

00:00:00

Lisa Powell: So we’re asking one more follow-up question here. Just tasting your sauce again, and you were talking about it being sweet and sour. What is the base of the sauce? You—I’m not asking you for the recipe, but just kind of generally what’s it made—?

00:00:17

Hugh Knoth: Apple cider vinegar; it’s got more of that than anything.

00:00:23

LP: So that’s what makes it so special. Does it have some tomato also or—?

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HK: Tomato ketchup.

00:00:29

LP: All right; it’s definitely different than most of the other sauces. [*Laughs*]

00:00:32

HK: That’s right. But it’s got more cider vinegar than anything.

00:00:37

LP: All right; thank you.

00:00:38

HK: Thank you.

00:00:39

[End Knoth-Part Three]

[Begin Knoth-Part Four]

00:00:00

Lisa Powell: All right; today is August 3, 2009 and we’re at Knoth’s Bar-B-Q, and I’m talking with Hugh Knoth. So we’re about to look at the pit, and he’s going to tell me about the construction of the pit.

00:00:15

Hugh Knoth: Okay; the—the barbecue pit is three blocks up, and then you’ve got your screen, a block, and another brick. And the older these pits get, the more creosote that’s built up on them, the better they are. In other words, we burned in ’92 and we moved over here and had to build some pits in ’92, and they wasn’t as good until they got the creosote built up. And creosote acts as insulation and just does a better product.

00:00:48

Let me see; now this is some of the cooked product right here, Lisa, that we’re going to be using on today.

00:01:04

LP: Can I get a picture of it?

00:01:11

HK: And the older these pits get, the better they’re going to get with the creosote built up on them. Of course we have to knock some of it off, but still that’s an insulation, and it’s a pit. The older the pit the better, you know.

00:01:28

LP: Thank you. When we get inside we’ll talk a little bit more about the history of the business when we sit down and—

00:01:39

HK: Okay; but that’s basically it. The fresher we get it—the meat and the fresher we cook it and sell it to the public, the better it is.

00:01:46

LP: So and you said you had gotten your meat this morning and you put it straight on the pit?

00:01:49

HK: Straight on the pit and Tuesday and Wednesday it’ll come out of the walk-in to the pit but then Thursday we get another batch and they go straight to the pit and then Friday and Saturday it’ll go in the walk-in. But that’s the key to it; the freshness of it. And that’s why use a small-jobber, because I can talk to the owner.

00:02:16

LP: And for the recording—we talked about it before but who—where did you say your meat came from again?

00:02:21

HK: It’s a small-jobber in Hopkinsville named Hampton Meat. The product that we use is either a Swift product—it’s Hormel on Monday and Swift on Thursday. And it’s the freshest—I ask for the freshest dates, so—. That’s why there’s two different ones. You want to get out of here Lisa; it’s hot? I mean I basically showed you—.

00:02:49

LP: Okay; so—

00:02:52

[End Knoth-Part Four]