

LAWRENCE E. “SHINE” THORNTON
Owner, Maria’s Hot Tamales
Greenville, MS

* * *

Date: June 30, 2005
Location: Mr. Thornton’s home – Greenville, MS
Length: 1 hour, 42 minutes, 23 seconds
Interviewer: Amy Evans
Project: MS Delta Hot Tamale Trail

NOTE: Various sounds occur throughout this interview. Rather than mention them individually and interrupt the flow of the conversation, they are noted here: Mr. Thornton walks with an aluminum cane, which he can be heard using from time to time; Mr. Thornton wears a hearing aid, which can occasionally be heard making a high-pitched squeal. When occurring sounds are an obvious interruption to the interview, they are noted in the transcript.

[Begin Shine Thornton.mp3]

0:00:00.4

Amy Evans: This is--do you know the date today, sir? Is it the thirtieth?

0:00:06.7

Shine Thornton: Huh?

0:00:08.6

AE: Is the thirtieth of June?

0:00:10.4

ST: Let's see, what today [looks at a wall-calendar]--today is Thursday, the thirtieth, the thirtieth of June.

0:00:20.2

AE: All right. And I'm in Greenville, Mississippi, with Mr. Shine Thornton, and this is Amy Evans. And we're in his home in his kitchen, and he just pulled out a stack of photographs. And this one is you and your wife on your--?

0:00:31.6

ST: This is my wife and myself on our fiftieth wedding anniversary. That was in 1999, I think it was. We were born in 1940--I mean, excuse me. We were--we were married in June--June eleventh 1949, so that's 1999.

0:00:53.0

AE: Okay, and what's your wife's name?

0:00:54.1

ST: Her name is Mary.

0:00:55.4

AE: Mary?

0:00:55.7

ST: Uh-huh. I call her--I call my hot tamales after her. I named them Maria's--Maria's Famous Hot Tamales.

0:01:02.8

AE: Okay, I saw that on that building outside [the out-building, where there is a special kitchen Mr. Thornton uses to make his hot tamales].

0:01:04.6

ST: This is [looking at another picture]--this is my two sons and myself. That was--that was taken in the backyard out here. My son who lives in--lives in Ozark, Alabama, right here. He--he works for a rural electrification company. He and his wife both work for the same company, but they split up in two different towns. He works in Florida--the north part of Florida, Bridgeville, Florida; and she works in Ozark, Alabama, but it's the same company it's just two different locations. And this is a wild--*Phone Rings*]--excuse me just a minute. Let me catch that.

0:01:43.2

AE: You want to catch that--sure thing.

[Short pause as Mr. Thornton takes a phone call from his son. About two minutes]

0:01:44.0

[Recording resumes]

ST: He--his little boys, he has to watch his little boy. His wife has gone someplace.

0:01:54.3

AE: Yeah, what are your son's names?

0:01:55.6

ST: Now we can get back started again. This is the boy right here that--that bought my violin from me and his name is Brian.

0:02:05.0

AE: And you were just telling me that you started trying to learn the play the violin about four years ago?

0:02:10.1

ST: Well let's see, the nineteenth--I think it was about 1998. See, I had a finger [shows interviewer his right hand]--it was--I cut it when I was real--real small, about four years old, and when it wound back up it was like that [crooked].

0:02:22.5

AE: Got stuck like that?

0:02:22.1

ST: Crooked like--like an *S*, but I had Doctor Gober to operate on this finger and see if he could--if I could play a violin. So that's what he done, but it never--never will be straightened out; it will be like that for the rest of my life. But anyway, I could play the violin a little bit--better than it used to be. And this was another--another picture of me. And this is my--this is my bride here.

0:02:50.4

AE: Beautiful--what year did y'all get married? [Nineteen] forty-nine, you said?

0:02:54.3

ST: Nineteen forty-nine.

0:02:56.2

AE: Are you both from this area?

0:02:56.3

ST: Yeah. Now she--her--her--she's Italian. Both her father and mother came from Sicily.

0:03:04.7

AE: Okay.

0:03:04.7

ST: [Looking at another photograph] And this is me playing the violin--my violin, yeah.

0:03:10.8

AE: Do you know when her family came from Sicily?

0:03:13.6

ST: Yeah, Palermo.

0:03:16.3

AE: Palermo.

0:03:16.2

ST: Yes, ma'am.

0:03:16.5

AE: Okay. Do you know what year?

0:03:18.4

ST: No. Let's see, she--he came over here twice. He [her father] came the first time by himself and he worked until he made enough money to send for her, and then he brought her and the two boys into here, both them over here, and I don't know what year it was. But he got into the vegetable-type business and grocery store type, and he had a wagon and he used to go out in the country and carry things in the back of his wagon and sell them. And that--and they were Maniscalco. That's--that was his name, Vincent Maniscalco. And he got--I think they had eleven children, I believe. Anyway, my wife was--my wife was one of them.

0:04:06.3

AE: How did y'all meet?

0:04:08.2

ST: She's--she's eighty--she'll soon be eighty-three years old the twenty-fifth of October this year. [Looking at another photograph] And this is me playing the--I used to play a violin in a band.

0:04:25.6

AE: How did you meet your wife?

0:04:27.5

ST: Beg your pardon?

0:04:27.2

AE: How did--?

0:04:27.9

ST: Yeah, how did I meet her?

0:04:29.7

AE: Yes, sir.

0:04:30.0

ST: Oh, I was playing on the radio. Well I'll show you a picture right here. This picture right here, we were playing on WJPR. We was advertising flour.

0:04:40.0

AE: Which one of these men is you?

0:04:39.7

ST: Mother's Best Flour.

0:04:41.4

AE: Is that you?

0:04:43.0

ST: No, keep looking, you'll find me.

0:04:47.7

AE: Oh, my goodness. I don't know. Are you holding—oh, you're right in the middle, okay.

0:04:52.1

ST: I played bass violin.

0:04:53.7

AE: Look at you.

0:04:54.8

ST: But I've been--I've been a musician just about all my life. My mother put me in--in bands when I was real young. I got a picture in here of--of us. [Finds picture] But this is the same--same group. We used to broadcast flour on WJPR radio station. That was in 1943. And well,

these all boys just--just a couple of them passed away, and I don't know what happened to him, to Jimmy; I don't know what happened to Jimmy. This boy died and the rest of these--they're still living. This--Pee Wee Altamare, he lives in--in Texas and he plays the accordion. And this is Red Phillips--I mean excuse me--Red--Red Tatum and he--he--he--he is still living but he's retired. He used to be a locksmith.

0:05:55.5

AE: Was he like the bandleader? He looks kind of like he's--.

0:05:57.7

ST: Well we didn't have a bandleader. We just--we just all cooperated together.

0:06:02.4

AE: Did you call y'all--yourself something?

0:06:03.5

ST: Huh?

0:06:04.4

AE: Did you have a name for the group?

0:06:05.7

ST: Well we called it the Hot Biscuit Boys and we called--we were advertising for Mother's Best Flour. We called it Hot Biscuit Boys and this--this is another picture here of me playing my violin. This is me and my violin.

0:06:25.1

AE: [*Laughs*] What great pictures.

0:06:25.9

ST: Me and my violin. This is--this is--this is me and my--.

0:06:32.3

AE: Oh, look at that.

0:06:32.1

ST: I was in the Navy in 1944, 1945, and 1946.

0:06:39.1

AE: That is a sweet picture [one of he and his wife together].

0:06:41.0

ST: Thank you.

0:06:41.7

AE: Oh, my goodness.

0:06:45.9

ST: This is my brother-in-law and his girlfriend. We were making hot tamales. [Picture of them sitting at a kitchen table, rolling tamales.]

0:06:50.2

AE: Okay.

0:06:52.1

ST: Yeah, this is my wife--this is a real late picture right here. This one was done made last year, I think.

0:06:58.6

AE: What--when is your birthday?

0:06:59.3

ST: My birthday is November twenty-third, 1925.

0:07:05.1

AE: Okay. Were you born in Greenville?

0:07:08.4

ST: No, I was born in Shaw, Mississippi. You heard of Boo Ferriss [David "Boo" Ferriss, famous Mississippian and Boston Red Sox pitcher]?

0:07:13.7

AE: Yeah.

0:07:13.2

ST: Uh-huh. Boo Ferriss--my--my daddy used to manage his father's [William Douglas Ferriss, Sr.'s] plantation, and I was born on his daddy's plantation--Boo Ferriss' out there west of Shaw—Shaw, Mississippi.

0:07:27.1

AE: Okay. Yeah, I just drove from Shaw this morning.

0:07:29.1

ST: Huh?

0:07:29.6

AE: I just drove from Shaw this morning.

0:07:31.2

ST: Is that right?

0:07:32.3

AE: Yes, sir.

0:07:31.1

ST: [Showing another photograph] That's me when I was--with my hot tamale machine and making hot tamales.

0:07:40.0

AE: Now how did you get into the tamale making business?

0:07:42.7

ST: Well, I'll tell you, It's a long--it's a long story. I used to work for the Delta Electric Company. I worked for thirty-seven-and-a-half years rewiring electric motors and they--they finally sold the business. My boss died and so he--he wanted to--to get rid of the business. He couldn't handle men like his daddy could, so he--one of his sons--so they sold the business. And I had a liquor store. But I knew I couldn't make enough money out of it to live on, so I started worrying about trying to learn how to make some hot tamales, and a friend of mine knew how to

make them long years ago, but he forgot the seasoning to put the seasoning in for--you know, for the--for the seasoning for the--for the hot tamales. So I kept throwing hot tamales out the back door. I tried to make some and--and they wouldn't taste good, so I'd throw them out. I'd make some more. And the man upstairs is the one who gave me my ideas. Well I got--I got over to making hot tamales, and he gave me some ideas here and there as I went along, and the first thing--you know, it was a man told me--he—an old darky, a black man from Metcalf, Mississippi. Every Saturday he used to make hot tamales during the week and on Saturday he would bring them to Greenville and sit there and sell his hot tamales, and he would never leave until he sold all of his hot tamales. So this man told me--he said, "Shine, you've got a hot tamale that tastes just like his hot tamales." And [he] said, "If I were you, I would do nothing else to them. I'd leave them just like they are." So that's what I did; I left them like they are. But every time I make them it--I try to improve it, but I guess I can't go no farther than I am now. But anyway that's what I do. And I always used to tell folks, making corn--or hot tamale is like making corn whiskey. You never get the same thing out twice. Makes no difference what you do, it won't never come out the same twice. But anyway, I look back through the years, and that's the way I make them today. I've been making hot tamales now about--about twenty years. But about the first five [years] I had to throw a lot of them out, because I kept trying to make them better as I went along. [shows another photograph] Here's--here's my sister-in-law--this is my sister-in law and this is--this is his sister right here; this girl is his sister right here. That's me and--we was rolling hot tamales.

0:10:26.3

AE: Yeah, you look happy about it, too.

0:10:27.7

ST: [*Laughs*] Yeah, yeah.

0:10:30.8

AE: Well so when you got your hands on that very first recipe from a friend, you say?

0:10:34.6

ST: Well he--he told me how to make--the principle part about making hot tamales--he showed me how to make them, but he didn't know the seasoning. He forgot what seasoning he put in them. So I kept making them, and I tried different seasoning and--and I've used his--his expertise, I guess, is how to make them. I kept doing that, but along the way I've dropped some of it and picked up some myself. And--and but that's how--that's how I learned how to make them.

0:11:06.0

AE: Do you have any idea where that man learned how to make them or got the recipe?

0:11:09.7

ST: No. I think--I think a black man told him how to make them. He told me he did--a black man he--he told him how to make them, but I never did--never did get the--I--strictly how he found out how to make them but originally the--the hot tamales was made by the Indians in the south part of the United States down in South Mexico---down in the southern part of Mexico and they--they used to make hot tamales and wrap them up in banana leaves and things like that. And--and of course it's a different variation of how you make hot tamales. A lot of Mexicans make hot tamales now, and they do it in--in a method by hand. They take the shuck, the--the cornhusk and lay it out in their hand and take a masa that they--that they grind up corn real fine like flour. They call it masa, m-a-s-a—masa. And they'll put it up onto--onto a shuck and then they put the meat in the center of it and then spread it out, and it's kind of like a little round ball, and--and they roll it up like a jelly roll. And then they put the--fold one end together and--and that's how they make--make hot tamales--the Mexicans make them like that. I had a niece that lives in Arizona and she--she came over here one time, and she showed me how the Mexicans make hot tamales. They--they use pork and they pull that pork; they take it--after they cook it they pull it--what you call pulling it, and then they take this broth that they get out of cooking the meat and they put it in the masa and make it into like a--a cake, a real thick cake and then they put that masa out on that shuck and put the meat on top of it, and then they roll it up, and that's how the Mexicans make--make hot tamales. Of course, the seasoning--of course she told me the seasoning that they--that she--she knew about, but there's--ain't no telling how many ways you could make seasoning. Sometimes they--they even make like a cake; they make a cake and--and wrap it up in shucks just like you would at Christmas time. They like to make them at the

holidays. But the way I make hot tamales is I don't use masa. I use regular cornmeal, and I take the broth off--off the meat when I cook it, and I put it in the cornmeal and mix it up, and then I take and run it through a machine [an extruder]. I got a machine and I--the--the meat, I cook it and I grind it. I put it in a grinder and--and grind it up real fine. Then I'll put the--my machine has got a divider in the center of the--the tub of it, and it's about eighteen-inches tall, and it's about six or seven inches in diameter, and it's got a partition in between it. One side you put the meat in; one side you put meal in it. And it's got two compressors they go down--I got a little electric motor on mine and it pushes the--pushes the compressor down on top of the meat and the meal. And at the bottom of it--it's a container down in it that holds the meal and the meat. And when it comes out through this circular part--I'll show it to you a little later--the meat comes out right at the center, and the meal comes out around the--the outside of it. And you break it off ever how long you want it; you make it that long [holds his hands about four inches apart]--that long or whatever--whatever you want to make it. And a lot of machines--they've got electric machines that's got a little turntable at the end of it and it rotates, and it's got a belt on top of it and it runs and--and as the hot tamales comes out of the machine, they flop down on top of the belt, and it carries it to the end. Somebody is standing down there and taking it, and they fill up a tray with it. When I get the tray filled up, they usually put in a--in a cooler and it kind of solidifies the hot tamale, so you can roll them with these corn shucks. And that's how--that's how you do it. [Showing another photograph] This is my brother-in-law and his--and his girlfriend. That's his girlfriend there.

0:15:51.4

AE: How long were you making hot tamales before you got your hands on a machine?

0:15:55.3

ST: Oh, well I couldn't--I couldn't make them. I couldn't make them without that machine. I had a nephew that lives in El Paso, Texas, and he--he run an ad in the paper asking to see if he could find me a machine. The machine I got is made in 1937. And once you buy one of them, if you take care of it, it'll last you a lifetime. But this machine--about [nineteen] eighty-four or eighty-five is when I got the machine. But he shipped it to me from out there in El Paso, Texas, and he was--he was a National Guard, and he was a Warrant Officer, and he run an ad in the paper and advertising for--for a hot tamale machine and some guy--some Mexican from over in Mexico across the Border was there--they finally--that advertisement, they--he brought it over there to him, over to El Paso, and that's how I got it. And I wouldn't take nothing for it, but you can't buy them no more; they stopped making them. They're made in San Antonio--San Antonio, Texas. And I'll show--I'll show it to you in a minute.

0:17:15.2

AE: Well I have a couple questions for you, too, if I could just back up a little bit.

0:17:19.3

ST: All right.

0:17:21.5

AE: And one question is [that] you mentioned the African American fellow who tasted your tamales and said they tasted like his?

0:17:27.5

ST: Yeah, uh-huh.

0:17:28.5

AE: That they tasted the same. Would that have been the Scott family out of Metcalf, do you have any idea?

0:17:32.9

ST: No, no, no.

0:17:33.6

AE: No?

0:17:33.6

ST: No. No, this--this man used to have a restaurant in town. I can tell you--I can tell you his name, if I can think of it in a minute. [Short pause] I--I done forgot his name but anyway, I'll think of it--I'll think of it before we leave here, and I'll tell you who he was. But he--he retired; he had a restaurant down there on the--on the lake, and he had—had a--had a nice business, but I guess he got tired of it, so he sold it. And--and he--he took a part-time job, had--had a--he was working with a tree service--a man that worked on trees and--and--I'm trying to think of his name, but I'll--I'll think of it in a minute--P.B. Griffin. His name is P.B. Griffin.

AE: Griffin?

ST: He had--had a--a restaurant down on the lake, and he sold it--sold the business.

0:18:41.6

AE: But then he would peddle hot tamales downtown?

0:18:44.5

ST: I used—yeah. I used to have a--a--I had a van, and it was an old telephone van and a woman had it down in Jackson and she was--had a sno-cone machine in it.

0:18:57.4

AE: Is that the van that's right out here? [In his backyard]

0:18:59.6

ST: The one in the back out there, yeah.

0:19:01.3

AE: Okay.

0:19:01.2

ST: But it played out on me. The old engine quit, so I haven't--I haven't bought me another one yet, but I've been thinking about buying another one.

0:19:10.2

AE: Where would you take it in town?

0:19:09.6

ST: Well I--I was down on the corner of Cedar and [Highway] 82--Cedar Street and [Highway] 82; I stayed down there about almost ten years, and that's how I got--I used to--well I had a liquor store and see my head? [Takes off his hat to reveal a large concave area near the top of his head.]

0:19:27.3

AE: Yes, sir.

0:19:27.7

ST: I had--I got--I got robbed.

0:19:30.3

AE: Okay.

0:19:30.6

ST: And the guy hit me in the head and liked to kill me. And it liked to got me. And I had to get out of the whiskey--the whiskey business. But I was making--I was making hot tamales, and I parked my truck out there in front of my liquor store. That's when I first started selling them like that.

0:19:48.3

AE: Well now, did you--did you want to do it just for fun, or did you think it was a good moneymaker or--?

0:19:53.8

ST: No, I was doing it out of necessity. I did that--at my age--I was fifty-nine years old, and at my age I couldn't find a job and did try to look for one. Of course I had the liquor store, and then, of course, after I got hit in the head I had to get out of the whiskey business. It was about six months before I could do anything after I got--Doctor Frothingham operated on my--on my head for me. And he told me--he said, "I'm going to have to operate on your head, and I don't know whether you can come out of this alive or not." He said, "But if you do come out of it alive, it will be through God's help—that's the reason, if you live through it." He said, "I can't guarantee you nothing." And--but I did. I come out of it alive. And after I got to where I could go back to making hot tamales, well I--I was making them. That's the reason I bought that van, but of course I had bought the van before then. But that's the reason I went back to selling my hot tamales out of my van.

0:20:58.7

AE: So you were--were you first selling hot tamales from the liquor store, and then you got the van and you sold them from there?

0:21:05.7

ST: No, no. I was selling them out of my van at the liquor store. I backed into my liquor store, and people was coming in to buy--some of them was buying whiskey, and some of them just wanted hot tamales and coming in and telling me they wanted a dozen hot tamales. Well, I locked the door and would go outside and get them out of the back of my--the back of my van, and I'd sell them.

0:21:25.6

AE: Who painted on that van for you?

0:21:27.8

ST: Beg your pardon?

0:21:28.4

AE: Who painted that van for you?

0:21:29.4

ST: Well it was--it was like it--like it is now, because that lady--they painted it from down in Jackson. She used to sell sno-cones with it, and I had--I had some--some canvas that I put on the side and advertised hot tamales on both sides of the van. But I still got one of them out there. One of them just completely disintegrated. It stayed out there so long. But I still got one back out there. I had--had hot tamales written on the side of it--Maria's Famous Hot Tamales, and that's what I done.

0:22:08.2

AE: You named the hot tamales after your wife, huh?

0:22:09.8

ST: Yeah, I sure did.

0:22:10.5

AE: And what did she think about that?

0:22:12.6

ST: Well she helped--she helped me along, you know, until she got sick and had to go to the nursing home. She used to help me. I got a picture of her; I'll show it to you in a few minutes.

0:22:24.1

AE: Okay. And you built that building out there specifically to make your hot tamales?

0:22:27.6

ST: Huh?

0:22:27.9

AE: You built that building back behind the house?

0:22:29.6

ST: Yeah. You know, I was making them in the house and--and the--the Health Inspector came over and he--but about three years he came over and inspected it, and all of the sudden he told me, he said, "I'm going to stop everybody from making hot tamales in their house. They're going to either have to build a house or build a place or either rent a place. You can't make them at your house no more." So it cost me over twenty thousand dollars to build that place out there.

0:23:00.3

AE: That little building, huh. Wow.

0:23:01.5

ST: Yeah, and I got--I got permission from the City to build it back there and permission from the City to sell--to make my hot tamales back there. And so--but the man told me a fib about it. It's still people--people are *still* making hot tamales in their houses right now. And I *know* they are, but I had already built it so I said, "Well I got it here, I might as well continue to make them." So that's what I done.

0:23:30.3

AE: Do your sons know how to make them?

0:23:33.3

ST: I'm trying to teach--teach my son. This is him here. [Showing the picture of the all of them together].

0:23:36.0

AE: Okay, what are your sons' names?

0:23:39.2

ST: His name is Larry--Larry Thornton; he works for the [Greenville] Post Office. But he's had--had some trouble with his neck, carrying that Post Office sack around so long it messed his neck up and right now he--he's trying--trying to see if he can get off--get off on disability because they don't want him to drive a truck and work for the Post Office. And he hadn't worked now a little over a year. So a lot of people say, "Well, why don't you get Larry to help you make hot tamales and teach him how to make them?" They said, "Something is going to happen to you one of these days, and we want them hot tamales. We want somebody to know how to make them." So what gave me the idea of--and I asked him, I said "Larry, if you're not doing anything, why don't you come, and I'll teach you how to make hot tamales?" And so he--he works once in a while with me. And--and that's--that's my wife, too. That's the same picture as outside. That's--that's the picture--put the hot tamales on trays like this and then put them in the freezer and let them get hard.

0:24:51.6

AE: And what is your other son's name? You have two sons?

0:24:52.8

ST: Yeah, his name is John Earl. That's him right here. [Points to the photograph again] He went to school at Mississippi State. He finishes school over there. And he's working for a rural electrification company down--down in--down in Florida.

0:25:13.0

AE: Now is the hot tamale--?

0:25:14.8

ST: That's the awards I won--hot tamales.

0:25:15.5

AE: Those are hot tamale trophies? Really?

0:25:19.4

ST: Yeah, I've one five or six--five or six trophies.

0:25:26.3

AE: What kind of contest was it?

0:25:28.6

ST: It's WWISCAA [Warren, Washington, Issaquena, Sharkey Community Action Agency. Pronounces this "Whiska"]. WWISCAA, you know WWISCAA. That's five different food companies--people that--that operate in Sunflower, Washington, I can't think of the name of the towns now, but it's--it's all--it's all made out of--it just starts with a *W*, Sunflower County, Washington County, Issaquena County, I can't think--it's five of them and they're going to have another contest coming up July twenty-fourth.

0:26:06.0

AE: Okay, yeah, I know about that.

0:26:08.5

ST: And WWISCAA--WWISCAA is the one that sponsors it.

0:26:11.6

AE: Okay. Are you going to enter in that one this year?

0:26:12.8

ST: Let me get these belt buckles that I won. Let me show it to you. [Gets up to go into another room to get the awards]

0:26:17.3

AE: Okay, you want me to follow you or--?

0:26:19.0

ST: Well it's back there. No, it won't take but a second to get it. I'll tell you, my house is kind of messed up because I'm here by myself. I do the best I can.

0:26:27.1

AE: Oh, you do fine.

0:26:30.3

ST: I had--I had a lady coming over and cleaning up for me but she--she wants to take advantage of me, so I said no. But the trophies--maybe you're tired of looking at these pictures.

0:26:45.6

AE: No, they're beautiful. I especially love to see the one of the two of you {Mr. and Mrs. Thornton together}. That is such a sweet picture.

0:26:48.9

ST: But anyway--that is me right there. I got a--.

0:26:54.9

AE: Look at you.

0:26:55.9

ST: I've been a musician just about all my life. [Showing the picture of the Hot Biscuit Boys again] That's--that's the Burt Taggart Orchestra. This is Burt Taggart, this man is dead; his name is Boolah [?] Woods; this is me and this Claude Satchfield; he's dead. This is a boy from down in Louisiana; he was up here working for Sears and Roebuck and I don't know where--I don't know whatever happened--happened to him. This is Jimmy Peters. I don't know if you ever heard of Jimmy Peters. But he's--he's a songwriter in Nashville. He just died about two weeks ago.

0:27:32.9

AE: Oh, really?

0:27:35.3

ST: Yeah. He just built a home and he told me that house cost three million, five hundred thousand dollars. And he--he wrote a lot of nice songs. You ever heard of the song *Kiss an Angel Good Morning, Before the Last Teardrop Falls*? He wrote all of those songs. He wrote a bunch of songs. And this is Sonny Lee Ingram, he's still living. This is his nephew. This--this man is--is--is his uncle, his

0:28:05.7

AE: Ingram you say is the last name?

0:28:06.1

ST: Huh?

0:28:06.2

AE: Ingram is his last name?

0:28:09.7

ST: His name is Sonny Lee Ingram--Ingram.

0:28:13.4

AE: Okay.

0:28:13.8

ST: And his name is Boolah Woods. His--his sister is this boy's momma.

0:28:19.0

AE: Okay, where was this picture taken?

0:28:21.5

ST: Well it was taken out at Mink's Supper Club way back in 1957; I believe that's when it was taken. I thought I might have it in here. No, it ain't--but anyway--I'll let you--I'm going to let you read something here.

0:28:46.8

AE: Okay. [*Reading a formal business letter*] Okay, from the Mississippi Cooperative Extension Service--it's just saying that you make a really good hot tamale and all of the public health regulations you're upholding.

0:29:10.3

ST: That's pretty nice isn't it?

0:29:11.4

AE: That is very nice.

0:29:13.5

ST: That's Doctor Brooks--he's dead now but he--he--he wrote that up for me. He came over and got some hot--hot tamales. He broke down everything computer-wise, and he told me exactly how much it cost for this, that, and the other--ingredients, it took to make--make hot tamales. So--but I mean, I couldn't understand it. I--I don't know too much about a computer. But anyway, he broke it all down for me.

0:29:42.6

AE: How did you get the nickname Shine?

0:29:43.7

ST: Beg your pardon?

0:29:45.5

AE: How did you get the name Shine?

0:29:47.6

ST: Well, I'm fixing to tell you. I'm going to show you--I'm going to show you. Here I am right here. [Showing a school picture]

0:29:53.0

AE: Oh, how old are you there?

0:29:56.0

ST: That was 1936. That's in the--that was in Leland, Mississippi. That's where I first started school. And I'm going to show you this is my--this is my sister. My brother--my brother is back here playing the bass horn. But you can't hardly see him, right--right in between there.

0:30:14.2

AE: Yeah, I see him.

0:30:14.9

ST: That's my brother and this is my sister right here--the saxophone, playing the saxophone.
There were three of us; all three of us was in the band.

0:30:25.3

AE: Wow, that is a great picture. You sure have been a musician for a long time.

0:30:30.5

ST: A bunch--a bunch of these pictures of--people are always worrying me about pictures and--and I got--that's the reason I got so many of them. But they were--they want to copy--copy them pictures. I'm trying to see--I don't think nothing else--.

0:30:50.6

AE: That's a great picture of you with your violin.

0:30:53.0

ST: Yeah.

0:30:57.0

AE: [*Laughs*] What is this? Sunshine? [The photograph is autographed “Sunshine.”]

0:31:01.6

ST: Yeah, that's--that's where we were playing on the radio and people used to--they wanted a picture of me, and so I had some pictures of me. They used to--I used to tell a few jokes. Of course, I don't know--know jokes no more [*Laughs*] but that was a long time ago. And--and they'd dress me up like a clown.

0:31:21.6

AE: With freckles all over your face? [*Laughs*]

0:31:24.2

ST: [*Laughs*]

0:31:24.7

AE: And so your name was Sunshine as a musician back in the [nineteen] forties?

0:31:28.3

ST: Well, yeah. I'll tell you--tell you how it was. My daddy was--was always a plantation manager, you know. He was--he was managing the plantation up there at Boo Ferriss' father's this--where I was born on his place and--but we moved around a lot, you know. We worked--we worked a plantation two or three years, and then they'd move us off. One--the one we lived in Leland, we stayed there about twelve years. But that's how--that's how--we got to Greenville and my father managed the plantation down where the big power company is down here. It's called Highland Plantation and it's--it's owned by Percy Belle and his--his mother was the one that owned it, and she hired my daddy to come manage the plantation. That was nineteen--nineteen--latter part of 1942 and the first part of forty-three. So I started school. I went to five different schools before they finally kicked me out in Greenville. But anyway, I had just moved to Greenville and started school at the middle of the semester right after Christmas. And I walked out--out of the hall and walked--I--I stepped out there and sat down on a ledge they had. I was waiting on the school bus, and this boy come up to me and he said--he didn't even know me--I just been going to school about four or five days, and nobody didn't even know my name. So he said, "Hey, we're going to have a dance this coming Friday night. Do you know anybody who can play a bass fiddle?" I said, "Yeah." I said, "I can play a bass fiddle." He said, "You're

kidding me.” I said, “No, I ain’t kidding with you; I can play a bass fiddle.” I never had my hands on a bass fiddle in my life. So he said, “Well listen, we’ve got--we’ve got a man that’s supposed to play the bass but he’s going to--to Dallas, Texas, and he’s got a bass fiddle, and I can get the bass and bring it up there--at that time they had a library. It was across from City Hall and it’s now--and it was upstairs. “And we’re going to be up there at the library Friday night,” he said. “Can you come and play--play at the dance?” I said, “Yeah, I think so.”

So anyway, I went and played the job, but while I was playing it, we took an intermission. And they had a piano up there, and I used to pick out on the piano [the song] “You are My Sunshine.” That’s what I used to play, “You are My Sunshine.” I didn’t know anybody and nobody didn’t know me, so I was by myself and took an intermission. And all the bands quit and they left and went on. So I sit there picking out “You are My Sunshine” and the first thing you know a--a--one person come up to the stage and standing there watching me and the next minute another one--the first thing you know, the whole group was up there and they didn’t know my name so they called--started calling me *Sunshine* because I was picking out “You are My Sunshine.” And that’s how I got my nickname. So later on they--they just started calling me “Shine” instead of “Sunshine.” That’s how I got it. But anyway, I want to show you this--this is my belt buckle.

0:35:03.4

AE: Oh, man. [Reading the inscription] First place, L. E. Shine Thornton, Greenville, Mississippi 2003 World Champion Hot Tamale Contest.

0:35:13.8

ST: Let me get this other thing over here.

0:35:15.6

AE: That is some kind of prize. Look at that. Do you have an idea how long they've been doing that contest?

0:35:39.7

ST: Wait just a minute and let me get back around here. I'm hard of hearing, too. I tell you it's bad when you--when you get old and you can't--can't function like you used to. Can you take a picture of that? [Of the belt buckle and ring]

0:35:57.3

AE: I'm going to try. That's most impressive this--yeah.

0:36:05.3

ST: You got it?

0:36:05.2

AE: Yeah, I sure did.

0:36:07.0

ST: Okay, yeah, I--I'm hoping to win first place again. I--I don't know whether I will or not but I'm going--I'm sure going to try.

0:36:15.8

AE: Well I'm going to be back down here for that, so I'll--.

0:36:16.3

ST: Huh?

0:36:17.1

AE: I'm going to be back down here for that, so I'll look forward to seeing you there.

0:36:19.5

ST: Well, I want you to come out there and see it.

0:36:22.4

AE: I will.

0:36:21.8

ST: I'm--Frank Carlton is the one that's--he is the--well the President of it and I won--I won this--this trophy the same time I won that one. But after you see it, you might want to take a picture of it or something. [Showing off his trophy] This is--this is a World Class Hot Tamale Contest.

0:36:50.8

AE: Wow, that is something.

0:36:53.9

ST: You know that little old trophy costs a hundred dollars.

0:36:55.3

AE: The trophy does?

0:36:56.8

ST: Ma'am?

0:36:57.8

AE: The trophy costs a hundred dollars?

0:36:59.8

ST: This here—yeah. That little thing cost a hundred dollars. The reason I knew it, a girl up there that makes them trophies, she looked at it, and she showed it to me in a catalog she had. She said, “That--that little old trophy cost a hundred dollars.”

0:37:18.9

AE: Well they're not messing around with their Tamale Contest. That's impressive.

0:37:21.8

ST: No, I got a bunch--I got a bunch--bunch of trophies.

0:37:26.5

AE: So what is it, do you think, that makes your hot tamales championship tamales?

0:37:31.7

ST: The taste--the taste and--and the presentation of them. A lot of people--a lot of people don't--don't pay any attention to--when--when they make hot tamales, they just--they slam them around any kind of way. But I pay particular attention to the--in other words, when I wrap a string around them, I try to be--be sure that all the hot tamales are even on the bottom and level on the top. If they're not level on the top, I got scissors and I cut--cut the shucks off for them to be level. And--and a good presentation of product--that's what--that's what I try to do.

0:38:15.5

AE: It makes a difference huh?

0:38:16.4

ST: Yeah, I think so. I think so.

0:38:19.2

AE: Now are your tamales beef tamales?

0:38:20.5

ST: Beg your pardon?

0:38:22.0

AE: Are your tamales made with beef?

0:38:22.4

ST: Yes, sir. I don't--I'm scared of pork. Pork--pork is all right, but I'm scared of it because it's--especially in the summertime, pork is easy to spoil. It's very easy to be spoiled. But my beef--my beef hot tamales, I've never had any problem with them. And you got to keep hot tamales up above 140-degrees heat-wise or less than forty-degrees cool wise. You've got to do that. That's--that's one stipulation the Health Department requires. And you've got to have a thermometer to check your water, and I cook my hot tamales in water. But a lot of people put them in a little container and put the water on the bottom of them and--and steam them. But I don't like to steam them because it seems like to me I have a better fix out of mine when I cook them and let them boil.

0:39:24.5

AE: Yeah, in the water.

0:39:25.4

ST: Stick this [belt buckle] back over here out of the way. Well am I--am I holding my own with you pretty good?

0:39:36.2

AE: Yeah, you sure are.

0:39:38.0

ST: Well I don't--I don't want--

0:39:37.6

AE: I'm enjoying myself.

0:39:38.8

ST: I don't want to misrepresent nothing. But I'll tell you, hot--hot tamales--hot tamales is--is something that--that I--I do--I love--I love to make them. I really love to make them and--and it seems like the more you make, the better off--come here just a minute, and I'll show you a little something.

0:40:05.6

AE: Okay. [Following Mr. Thornton through the house] What is it that you like about making hot tamales so much?

0:40:09.0

ST: Well one thing is--is [*Laughs*] what you call--what do you call it--?

0:40:19.5

AE: I don't know.

0:40:20.5

ST: [*Laughs*] I'm trying to think of the word. I want to show you something. [We end up next to the living room in a bar and storage area] You have to excuse my shirts here, Amy.

0:40:28.7

AE: No problem.

0:40:31.4

ST: It's kind of nasty--you probably know that guy right there, though. [Points to a photograph on one of the shelves]

0:40:38.6

AE: Oh, gosh. He looks like a—oh, you're testing me now, and I'm going to be embarrassed that it's not coming to my brain. It looks like a Manning.

0:40:47.8

ST: That is--that is a Manning.

0:40:52.0

AE: Okay, okay. [*Laughs*]

0:40:52.6

ST: [*Laughs*] That's Archie [Manning], yeah. Yeah, he came to Greenville. See Larry—Larry, my son, got--was playing football when he was just a young kid, and he got hit in the side, and he busted his kidney. And I thought we was fixing to lose him. And thank God they--of course, they operated on him and patched his--they put some kind of something over the top of his --to congeal it I reckon, whatever. Anyway they had three doctors that operated on him and--and he just--just come home from the hospital and—a man at—at the--the bank, Mr. Smith--Ray Smith, he--he--he was with him [Archie Manning] and he brought him over to the house to see my boy, Larry.

0:41:39.9

AE: Oh, that was nice.

0:41:41.1

ST: Yeah, that was nice, real nice.

0:41:42.8

AE: That's something to be proud of for sure.

0:41:45.1

ST: But he was--he made a talk at Saint Joe's School and--and that's when I had that picture made when he talked to--got through with it, because Larry he--man he was hurting something terrible, but when Archie walked in there his--he had a smile on his face from here to yonder [ear to ear, basically]. [*Laughs*]

0:42:07.3

AE: I bet--I bet.

0:42:08.6

ST: So this is--this is some of the things that I won. This is a cutting board.

0:42:13.4

AE: Oh, okay with a little plaque on it.

0:42:15.4

ST: There's two of them: one here and that's a big one over there. And this boy here, that's an old boy that played the fiddle. You might know him.

0:42:22.8

AE: Sure is.

0:42:23.2

ST: Well, I got a bunch of whiskey up here but I--I don't--I don't monkey with no whiskey no more. I got whiskey up there and there's that boy, Jimmy--Jimmy Peters I was telling you about [points to a photograph]. See them all them records?

0:42:34.0

AE: Okay, he just passed. Yeah.

0:42:35.2

ST: He wrote all of them records--all of them records. That's just a portion--a portion of them. But anyway, he collapsed. He won--he won an Emmy somewhere. There it is right there. Can you see it?

0:42:48.5

AE: Yeah, I sure can. A Grammy [award] he won.

0:42:51.6

ST: Yeah.

0:42:51.8

AE: So you stayed in touch with him all these years?

0:42:54.5

ST: Yeah. There he is right there, pointing to his Emmy. Oh, he used to play in the band with us, yeah.

0:43:00.6

AE: Yeah, yeah. But you stayed in touch with him when he went up to Nashville?

0:43:03.1

ST: Huh?

0:43:03.5

AE: You stayed in touch with him when he went to--?

0:43:04.5

ST: Yeah, but I didn't stay at his house, but I went to see his house twice. But I didn't see the new house. This house that he got here--there's a big fat girl that used to be on [the television program] *Hee Haw* called Lou-Lou? She got to monkeying with that dope, and they took everything away from her. And Jimmy bought her a house. He bought her a house. And that's when he had won--won that Emmy.

0:43:28.8

AE: Wow. Well this is a great little collection of things that you've saved all these years.

0:43:32.0

ST: Well it's a shame that he died. He wasn't but seventy-one years old.

0:43:36.9

AE: Yeah? Wow.

0:43:38.0

ST: Seventy-one years old and here's--here's some of my Navy Reserve stuff there. I used to be in the Navy Reserve long years ago. And this is--this is my--my father-in-law's--my father-in-law's--right here [pointing out a framed document]. It comes from Italy. That's when he got to be a citizen--citizenship.

0:44:01.5

AE: Oh, okay. His citizenship papers. Huh. That is a wonderful thing to have. 1924, wow. [Looking at another framed document now] And your wife got a certificate for a twelve-week course in retail sales of diamond jewelry.

0:44:22.9

ST: Oh yeah—yeah. She's--she--she's a--she used to work for McCrae's [Department Store].

0:44:28.7

AE: Okay. Wow.

0:44:30.0

ST: She worked for Pearle and Lowenstein, and she worked for Bush--Bush's Jewelry Store and worked for McCrae's.

0:44:37.3

AE: Huh. Wonderful. Well thanks for walking me in here to show me all these things.

0:44:43.9

ST: And come up in this [room] a minute, and I'll show you--but you have to excuse this house now. It's--

0:44:50.2

AE: Oh, you have a lovely home--no apologies.

0:44:53.5

ST: It's kind of messed up in here but it's--this is my father here. [Pointing to a photograph hanging in the hallway] That's my mother and that's my wife. That was--it was in my liquor store. And this is my grandchildren--some of my grandchildren. That is--Larry and John--that was his--he used to work for Washington--in Washington with Congressman [David] Bowen--you ever heard of Congressman Bowen? Well anyway, he was a Congressman.

0:45:23.6

AE: And John worked with him?

0:45:25.5

ST: And he worked with him up there for--for five or six years. I wanted--I wanted you to see my--my thing here that my--my--my oldest son fixed that for me.

0:45:35.9

AE: Oh, all your medals. That's lovely.

0:45:40.8

ST: Uh-huh. That's me and my wife up there. [Pointing to another photograph]

0:45:48.7

AE: Another great picture.

0:45:48.5

ST: But of course we wasn't married then.

0:45:51.4

AE: No? Well you sure did look happy about being with her then. *[Laughs]*

0:45:55.0

ST: *[Laughs]* Yeah, that was my medals I had when I was in the Navy.

0:46:02.3

AE: Yeah? And you served in World War II, obviously. How long?

0:46:05.2

ST: About two years.

0:46:07.4

AE: Yeah? And you got married when you came back or--?

0:46:10.7

ST: Yeah, yeah, yeah. She wanted to get married before I--before I went in the service and I said no--no; I--I--I was scared something was going to happen to me and--and there I'd be--you know she--she wouldn't have nobody and she had to go find another--another husband somewhere. [Pointing to another photograph] That's my house and that's my--that's my oldest son's house up there—Larry. I got one of his house here. He's just over by the tennis courts. You know where the tennis courts is over next to the harbor?

0:46:41.1

AE: Yes, sir.

0:46:42.8

ST: Right across the street from the tennis courts, right on the corner.

0:46:44.2

AE: That must be nice.

0:46:45.5

ST: Yeah, that's Larry. All right.

0:46:48.6

AE: All right. Well thank you for the tour.

0:46:52.7

ST: I'm--I'm going to show you--have you got a minute? I'll show you--. [We walk on into the living room]

0:46:55.3

AE: Yeah.

0:46:57.5

ST: Show you--I got this--you can't hardly see but that's--that's my oldest son--oldest son's family and this--this--he gets [*Laughs*]*--he's been married three times; this is his third wife. The second wife is the one he had all his children with. He got--that's five of them right there.*

0:47:27.1

AE: Oh, my land--handsome family.

0:47:28.5

ST: Yeah. And then she's got--she's got three children herself, but this is her three children. But this is--this is John's--John's youngest daughter. She was--she got Miss--Miss Washington County that's down there in Florida.

0:47:51.0

AE: Oh, okay.

0:47:51.3

ST: And she was--she won that last year.

0:47:54.9

AE: Do your grandchildren have any interest in making hot tamales?

0:47:57.7

ST: Huh?

0:47:57.9

AE: Do your grandchildren have any interest in hot tamales?

0:47:59.4

ST: No, they live too far away. And I got one that got a--got a scholarship--Larry's--Larry's oldest son got a scholarship to Moorehead Junior College to play soccer. So he's going to be going over there for two years and then he's going--he's either going to Ole Miss or going to Mississippi State--one or the other. He--he's taking after his uncle. He wants to go to Mississippi State I think, but I don't know what he's going to do.

0:48:30.4

AE: Well college is an exciting time; I'm sure he'll figure it out, and it will be the right thing for him.

0:48:36.2

ST: Yeah, well he--he's young and, you know, he's got to find out something. My daughter-in-law give me that picture. My people is the Indian people. They're [pointing to a photograph]--my great-grandmother was a full blood Choctaw Indian.

0:48:54.0

AE: Okay.

0:48:56.1

ST: I look like an old *gordoruse*. You know what a *gordaruse* is? That's a redneck [in Italian].

[Laughs]

0:49:01.4

AE: **[Laughs]** Okay. Yes, I have heard that before but pronounced a little differently.

0:49:06.0

ST: Yeah, come on over to this--you see some pictures--you know Doctor Suarez? You don't

know him?

0:49:11.4

AE: No, sir.

0:49:12.1

ST: Well anyway he's--he's retired now but he had--we had a little group--we had a little group together of--called--called it the Re-Treads, the Re-Treads, and--and that's Doctor John playing his saxophone right here in the middle.

0:49:34.5

AE: Yeah, I see him.

0:49:37.3

ST: And that Wyatt Smiley, he went to school over at Ole Miss. And that's Miss Mary Hall. Her husband--her first husband died and she married Mr. Frank Hall and he's the one that--that was the engineer over across the Greenville Bridge, back in 1940. And that is Larry; that's my--that's my--my son and that's me back there playing the bass fiddle.

0:50:03.4

AE: Look at you.

0:50:06.1

ST: Yeah, we used to play a lot--a lot of--around--at--at the Country Club and places like that.

0:50:17.3

AE: You want me to set that back for you? You got it?

0:50:18.4

ST: Yeah, I can stick it back up there.

0:50:22.8

AE: Well can we go to your hot tamale house back there?

0:50:24.3

ST: Yeah, come on.

0:50:24.5

AE: Can we do that?

0:50:26.2

ST: Yeah, we'll look at it.

0:50:29.8

AE: Do you want to sit down for a spell?

0:50:31.0

ST: Huh?

0:50:33.3

AE: You want to sit down for a little bit?

0:50:34.4

ST: No, I'm not--I'm all right. I brought a violin in here from Miss--this lady--I got a book here on that thing. Miss Moore--she's--she calls herself Miss Miller now, but she was a Moore to start with. Go ahead and sit down at the counter here.

0:51:01.9

AE: Okay, that would be good. My hands are full [with the recording equipment].

0:51:03.5

ST: Sit at the counter where you could sit it down. She was a concert violinist.

[Recording is paused for a while, about twenty minutes, as Mr. Thornton shows me his violins.]

[When recording begins again, we are walking into Mr. Thornton's tamale kitchen, which is in the building behind his house.]

ST: **Inaudible** [Talking as he is walking] --and it takes about thirty-five, forty minutes to cook them and you take--you've got a little time, do you?

0:51:16.2

AE: Well, I actually need to get back in Greenwood by about five o'clock.

0:51:20.6

ST: Oh, well I--I'll put them on now. It's what—what, two-thirty?

0:51:25.2

AE: Yes, sir.

0:51:28.0

ST: Come on. Come in right--I'll put them on--it won't take long.

0:51:29.3

AE: Let's hop to it--okay. [*Laughs*]

0:51:31.5

ST: It won't take long.

0:51:33.5

AE: So what--what kind of schedule do you keep of making them anymore? Do you make them a lot still?

0:51:37.8

ST: Huh?

0:51:37.9

AE: What kind of schedule do you keep of making hot tamales?

0:51:40.9

ST: Well, I'm making them about once a week here, lately.

0:51:42.5

AE: Yeah?

0:51:44.4

ST: Here's--here's something--I'll show you right here. It's--my daughter-in-law she got a divorce. Anyway she--she made--put that on that board for me [with copies of articles posted on it]. If you had time I'd let you look at that, and it tells you about me making my--my bass violin. That's the reason I told that man I could play a bass violin because I made one out of--out of an apple box.

0:52:10.4

AE: Oh, did you?

0:52:11.2

ST: Yeah.

0:52:13.7

AE: Okay, this is from 1983. That's a big write-up. Huh. And then you were--just appeared in the DDT [*Delta Democrat Times* newspaper] on Sunday, we were talking about earlier, for you hot tamales.

0:52:26.6

ST: Huh?

0:52:27.6

AE: You appeared in the *Delta Democrat Times* on Sunday for your hot tamales?

0:52:31.7

ST: Oh yeah, yeah. That--that is my--.

0:52:31.4

AE: Is that--who's that?

0:52:33.5

ST: That's my father and my mother.

0:52:37.1

AE: Okay.

0:52:36.7

ST: That was made way back in 1917—eighteen, somewhere along in there. That's way out in the country somewhere. I don't know where it was.

0:52:48.8

AE: Somewhere in the Delta?

0:52:47.8

ST: Yeah, yeah this is my wife's daddy and mother and this is her--Miss Maniscalco, this is her daddy and mother here. They was in Italy when they had that picture made.

0:53:07.2

AE: Another handsome family. Nice pictures to have.

0:53:10.0

ST: Yeah. All right, let's go out here and turn this light on for you. I'll go out here and check this--check these hot tamales out right quick. [Heading out of the house's back door to go into the tamale house.]

0:53:21.9

AE: [Mr. Thornton holds the door open] All right. Thank you, sir

0:53:22.5

ST: [Shuts and locks the house's back door behind us] I tell you it's--it's done got to the point now, if you want to live, you better lock--lock your door.

0:53:38.6

AE: Don't lock us out, though, now. We want to be able to get back in, too.

0:53:40.7

ST: Huh?

0:53:42.7

AE: As long as we can get back in.

0:53:43.7

ST: Yeah, I got a key. I wished you had parked your car around here [behind the house].

0:53:48.0

AE: Oh, no. That's okay. I didn't want to block you in or anything.

0:53:53.6

ST: Well, I'll put these hot tamales on right quick and cook them for you and leave them in a can and--.

0:54:03.9

AE: So when you make them today, do you make them by yourself or do you have help?

0:54:08.9

ST: No. No, it takes me three days to make about 100--100--well I made 100--122 dozen yesterday.

0:54:18.3

AE: Yesterday? Wow. And then you have regular customers who come pick them up?

0:54:22.5

ST: Huh?

0:54:24.7

AE: Do you have regular customers who come pick them up?

0:54:26.6

ST: Yeah, but--but they call me in advance. Come here and I'll show you what we made yesterday.

0:54:32.7

AE: Okay. [Mr. Thornton opens his freezer] Oh, my land. You made all those yesterday?

0:54:35.1

ST: Uh-huh, that's 121 dozen.

0:54:36.6

AE: That is a lot of tamales. So who all helps you?

0:54:42.6

ST: Well, I got my brother-in-law, his girlfriend, and my sister-in-law, and Larry helped me yesterday and myself. And here's some more here. [Opens another freezer]

0:54:52.8

AE: Wow. How much do you sell a dozen for?

0:54:56.3

ST: They're six dollars a dozen.

0:54:57.6

AE: Have they always been, or have you hiked the price up over the years?

0:55:00.7

ST: Huh?

0:55:02.9

AE: Have you hiked the price up over the years? When you started how much were you selling a dozen for?

0:55:06.7

ST: No, when I started I--I was using somebody else's price. I was going by Doe's--Doe Signa [owner of Doe's Eat Place in Greenville, Mississippi]. I was going by his price. I don't--I don't know what he charges for them now, but we started selling them for four dollars a dozen, and then it jumped up to four and a half and then five dollars and then five and a half and six, and that's where it's been for the last couple of years is six dollars.

0:55:34.4

AE: Well, I think you could ask for more because they're so much work.

0:55:38.4

ST: Yeah, it's a lot of work.

0:55:37.5

AE: I think you could charge a lot more than six dollars.

0:55:39.3

ST: That's my machine right here. [Points in the corner of the room] Let me get these hot tamales on and let them be cooking.

0:55:44.8

AE: Sure thing.

0:55:45.4

ST: And I'll show you that machine.

[Recording is paused for a few minutes as Mister Thornton opens the tamale house and turns the lights on.]

[Recording resumes, as Mr. Thornton is finishing a thought.]

ST: --main--main thoroughfare.

0:55:51.7

AE: King Street in Hawaii--your tattoo--what? *[Interviewer is confused about what Mister Thornton was referring to; he had just mentioned the tattoo on his right arm.]*

0:55:53.8

ST: *[Talking about the hot tamales again]* That's salt.

0:55:54.7

AE: Oh, that's that salt okay.

0:55:56.9

ST: It's salt.

0:55:58.0

AE: That you're putting in the water with the hot tamales, okay.

0:56:01.5

ST: Now this is--this is granulated--granulated garlic.

0:56:15.8

AE: Does the lady on your arm have a name? [*Speaking about the tattoo on his right forearm*]

0:56:18.1

ST: No. *[Laughs]* No, I didn't have no name.

0:56:25.4

AE: Just a long night in Hawaii with your buddies, huh?

0:56:27.1

ST: *[Back to tamales]* You know, when--when--you like them real hot or spicy or--?

0:56:33.8

AE: I like them with some good spice, yes, sir.

0:56:35.5

ST: Well I want to make them plenty--make them plenty hot for you. This is red pepper. That's what they call sixty heat--that's sixty heat units in red pepper.

0:56:49.1

AE: Okay, wow.

0:56:52.0

ST: Now see they're ready to put on the stove now.

0:56:55.4

AE: I see. So you added a lot of seasoning to the water there.

0:56:58.9

ST: Huh?

0:57:00.8

AE: You added a lot of seasoning to the water. Do you add--?

0:57:05.2

ST: What that's for is--is--the hot tamales has got seasoning in them. But if I put naked water in there it will rob the seasoning out of the hot tamales. But when I put some more seasoning in the water, that kind of levels it off to keeping it from robbing out the hot tamales--it's already saturated, so it can't--you can't comment either way--one way or the other, so that's the way you keep--you keep it like that. Now a lot of people take that--that juice when it gets--gets to cooking

and take some crackers and like a soup and put some crackers in there, and they eat it like that, and it's good.

0:57:48.7

AE: Does the fact that you season the water, does that have an effect on how you--how much you season the tamale?

0:57:56.4

ST: No, no. That's what I say--if I put them hot tamales in there without putting some seasoning in the water it--the water—naturally, it's going to take some--take some of the spices out of the hot tamales, and that robs the hot tamales of their spices. But if I put--put some more spices into the water then it--it's--well I can't take nothing over there because it tastes the same to me like it is here as it is over there. So it just leaves it like it is. So you put that--put that seasoning in the water and that makes a good juice when you get through with it and cook it in that juice, you see. It takes a little while for it to cook but put this--put this [a piece of tinfoil] over top of it so it keeps the heat in.

0:58:51.6

AE: Have you--being a native of Greenville, have you gone to Doe's all these years?

0:58:56.6

ST: Oh, yeah. Since my brother-in-law--a lot of people taught me--my brother-in-law and Doe Signa--this boy's [Doe Signa, Junior] daddy [Doe Signa, Senior], they used to be big buddies--good friends, and back--back--way back on the--back in the early [nineteen] thirties across the lake over there that's--that used to be the river. Across the lake--that's a lake now. Across the lake it's an island over there, and they used to go over there and make whiskey--corn whiskey. And times were tough back in the [nineteen] thirties, so they--they—if--they got a way to make a little money some kind of way, but without stealing from somebody or robbing them. So anyway, they were good buddies and--and so my--my brother-in-law went to California and lived in Fresno, California, and he used to buy olive oil and ship it back here--somebody come from here over there and coming back. Well he sent them a truckload of olive oil, and you could buy a whole gallon of olive oil for about two or three dollars over there in Fresno, but over here it would cost you about fifteen or twenty dollars. So anyway, a lot of times he would come from California over here and he'd bring--bring that olive oil and it would be enough to pay for his trip over here and back, you know. So they were big buddies, and that's--that's how--that's how they knew it. And that's--that's how he and Doe got to be good big buddies, but--but--you know, working like that. But they used to be big friends.

1:00:50.3

AE: Do you have an--do you know through talking--how Big Doe got his hot tamale recipe?

1:00:59.3

ST: They--they used to tell the story that somebody give it to him. They used to start it [Doe's Eat Place] off selling hamburgers and stuff like that and had--had a black juke joint inside of a store. And that's where the store is now, but back in them days they probably didn't have enough money to buy no groceries or something so they--they started with a little small hamburgers and stuff like that. And then they got--Doe's--the doctors and lawyers who were right down there on Washington Avenue, they would get Doe to fix them a steak once in a while. So from then on, he kept a bunch of food and built it up and built it up like that and that's how Doe got into the--got into the hot tamale business through--some--somebody come over there and bought some--some black guy coming in and got something. And--and they told--they told one of Doe's--one of his sisters, I think, what they ought to do is have some hot tamales. Well she said, "We don't know nothing about no hot tamales." So somehow or another they got the recipe from the black folks. And that's where they started on them. That was way back in the early [nineteen] thirties. One--one Greek fellow told me he helped Doe with hot tamales but whether he did or not--I don't know. But he's still living; he's ninety, ninety-two years old.

1:02:30.1

AE: What was that fellow's name?

1:02:31.6

ST: His name was Johnny Pelezo--Pelezo. He's a Greek fellow.

1:02:37.5

AE: Pelezo, okay.

1:02:40.2

ST: Johnny Pelezo and--but he said he used to help Doe and I asked--I asked him about helping me--giving me some, you know--getting myself set up so I can make a hot tamale. He said, "Shine, I love you like a brother but" he said, "it wouldn't be right for me to try to tell you what I told him about making hot tamales. That wouldn't be right." He said, "I can't do it." So he wouldn't give it to me. He wouldn't help me; he was a good friend of mine, too. He wouldn't help me do it. So I go over here and yonder, and I get a little information here and a little information over yonder. And the man upstairs kept telling me you know--first thing you know I come up with my recipe, and that's how I done it. But I've been knowing the Signa's--in fact it's one of my brother-in-law's--one of my brother-in-law's was named Jack Signa, but he was a cousin to Doe Signa. But he was no kin to me--just my brother--my brother-in-law.

1:03:43.0

AE: Did you used to go get food from over there when they had--?

1:03:45.1

ST: Huh?

1:03:47.0

AE: Did you used to go get food from Doe's in those days?

1:03:48.4

ST: Yeah, I still go up there once in a while. Yeah, we--we're good friends. We're good friends.

1:03:53.7

AE: Do you like their hot tamales? Because they're pretty different from yours.

1:03:58.2

ST: Well, his daddy made good hot tamales, but just personally between you and me--now I wouldn't want them to know it but I--I don't like--I don't like--it ain't nothing but a bunch of seasoned meal to me. Now to him and to other people that's been buying them over the years--but it's a lot of people that tell me they say well--they said his daddy used to have a good hot tamale, but they said the hot tamale we [they] got now ain't no good.

1:04:28.5

AE: Did Big Doe used to use shucks or has he always used--?

1:04:31.1

ST: Yeah, he used shucks. He started using paper before he died--not altogether but he'd make some with paper. But after the boys [Charles and Doe, Junior] took over, that's when they started using that--that paper. And I--I said I was going to try some one time, but of course, since the manufacturers are making them, they do pretty good because it's all uniform in the paper and--and it rolls up good. But it ain't like the shucks. Shucks--shucks is--well shucks--one of them is one size and one of them the other size and they--they're not all the same. But paper is all the same, so you can sit there and put like that [makes gesture of rolling a tamale] and it's gone. But a shuck, you've got to monkey around with it and--but these now--they're getting now--they cost like the devil. They're two hundred and twenty-six dollars for them--them seventy bundles. But they're pretty--pretty well uniform. But see, some of them--see if I can--in fact I might have got some back here in the back that ain't frozen. Let me see if I can--.

[Walks toward the back storage area, interviewer follows.]

1:05:57.0

AE: They're just irregular, huh?

1:05:59.2

ST: I'll show you--I'll show you. It's kind of hot back here.

1:06:04.2

AE: Yeah, I'd say.

1:06:08.3

ST: You can see what I'm talking about. [Holds up a small bundle of shucks, maybe about one hundred or so to a bag.]

1:06:12.7

AE: So do you like shucks better--obviously?

1:06:15.5

ST: Yeah, I--I like these shucks better. Now they make--they make all kinds of shucks but these--these are what they call select shucks. In other words, you start--you start with these things and--and you see, they come like that. [Points to a fully intact shuck.] But they ain't all pretty like that. Some of them got wrinkles all in them, and you got torn places like that [points

to a torn shuck], but you have to use them. You know, you have to use them. But see, some of them, what you do is you lay your hot tamales down about this long right here [holds fingers apart about three inches]. You lay it in there and what you do--you take and start rolling them up and roll them up like--like a cigar, and when you get--when you get over here [almost to the opposite side of the shuck] you take this end [pointed end] and pull it up like that [into the main part of the shuck] and roll it on up like that [with the pointed, smaller end of the shuck rolled inside the tamale].

1:07:02.6

AE: Okay, I've not seen anybody roll them like that.

1:07:04.1

ST: Huh?

1:07:04.7

AE: And tuck that end inside.

1:07:06.6

ST: See, you got one end open, and one end is closed.

1:07:10.7

AE: Okay, because a lot I've seen--they roll it like a cigar, but they don't fold it in halfway.

1:07:15.5

ST: Yeah.

1:07:16.3

AE: Halfway through rolling it--they leave that flat. You fold the flap in.

1:07:20.5

ST: Well you have to use--you have to use your judgment about the length of it. You see, the hot tamale will come about one and a half inches from the end of it about like this [points to the area on the tamale].

1:07:30.9

AE: Yeah, and so then your tamale is like three or four inches long or so, would you say?

1:07:35.7

ST: No, I'm trying to show you. The hot tamale was laying right--like--like right here, all right and when--when you roll it up and put it in the water and cook it that hot tamale will rise; it will rise up. And sometimes it will come up to the edge of this [the top of the shuck]. Sometimes it will come out--come out of it. But that's--that's how you fix it. But I make mine with self-rising meal and that's--that's the reason it--it rises up like this.

But see all of them shucks ain't the same. They're--they're all different--different sizes. But--but when you--when you take them like this right here; they're [the shucks] crossed [stacked] like that. That's hard now, but you grab this--zip; get the next one on the other side--that--like this [grabbing sucks, as if he were rolling tamales].

1:08:23.0

AE: Okay, so they're packaged like that so they're easier to grab.

1:08:26.3

ST: Makes it faster, you see.

1:08:26.7

AE: Interesting.

1:08:27.3

ST: You save time and labor by using these things.

1:08:31.6

AE: Okay, now wait a minute though. Do you--do you arrange them like that or do they come like that?

1:08:35.3

ST: No, no, they're made--.

1:08:34.7

AE: Okay.

1:08:34.8

ST: That's the reason they cost so much for them. They're select--what you call select and they--they do that--the man where I buy these shucks from, he's got two--two farms down in Mexico and--and they do all this down there in Mexico. They fix--fix them shucks and stack them like

that and most of them just have them straight up and down. And you--when--they'll have what you call silks--silks--you know what silks are?

1:09:06.8

AE: The strings from the corn?

1:09:08.0

ST: Yeah, that's a part of the inside of the shuck. They'll have that on--inside there and you got to stop and pick all that junk out. These are clean; they're ready to go. But that's the reason they cost so much. But you--you save time and labor by doing that.

1:09:25.1

AE: And you said--how many tamales did you say you could make out of a whole box of those?

1:09:28.3

ST: Each--each one of these would be--would be ten dozen.

1:09:32.6

AE: Ten dozen out of one bundle?

1:09:33.0

ST: Each one--it's enough there for ten dozen; that's 120 shucks. That's what--we got 120 shucks here.

1:09:43.9

AE: And how many bundles come in this box?

1:09:46.0

ST: No--huh?

1:09:47.7

AE: How many of those come in a box?

1:09:50.2

ST: It's seventy--seventy of them.

1:09:50.6

AE: Seventy of them, okay. Golly.

1:09:52.4

ST: That's what I say--it's seventy of them and it's two hundred and twenty-six dollars. And it's supposed to be two fifty-three, but they give me some discounts because I buy all my shucks from them.

1:10:01.4

AE: Yeah? That's nice of them.

1:10:03.2

ST: Yeah, that's the way that goes.

1:10:06.3

AE: Wow. Well you've perfected your process out here, I think.

1:10:09.2

ST: Huh?

1:10:09.3

AE: You've perfected your process out here.

1:10:11.0

ST: Oh, yeah, yeah. You got to have--got to have these freezers to put them shucks--the shucks--
-.

1:10:22.3

AE: Now is--is your recipe something you've written down or do you just keep it up in your
head?

1:10:27.8

ST: Scared to write it down.

1:10:29.3

AE: Are you?

1:10:29.5

ST: Yeah, I'm scared somebody--somebody going to steal it. [*Laughs*]

1:10:34.9

AE: Uh-oh. Well have you--have you told it to your son--is it Larry who is interested [in making tamales]?

1:10:39.5

ST: Huh?

1:10:40.2

AE: Have you told the recipe to your son who is interested?

1:10:43.8

ST: Oh, yeah. He--he knows what it is but he--he--he don't really know. He comes and helps me when I make the seasoning up. And--and I done made it up fifty times, I guess, but every time he

says, "How much you say this was?" And I have to tell him again. But this--this is a tray, and I cut paper--I cut paper to put over this--butcher paper and then put the hot tamales on it and--.

1:11:12.1

AE: As they come out of your machine there?

1:11:14.8

ST: Yeah, I'm going to show you here.

1:11:17.6

AE: Okay. Now this--this machine is from the [nineteen] thirties, you say?

1:11:36.5

ST: You see--you see this cylinder over here?

1:11:40.0

AE: Yes, sir.

1:11:41.3

ST: We got that oh-two, thirty-seven [reading off of the machine]; that's [nineteen] thirty-seven and that's when it was made, 1937.

1:11:52.1

AE: Okay, so maybe February 1937--February?

1:11:53.6

ST: Huh?

1:11:55.6

AE: Since it's oh-two, thirty-seven, might that have been in February 1937?

1:11:59.3

ST: I don't know--it might be January. I didn't find that out, but the man told me that [nineteen] thirty-seven--that--I gave him the serial number, and he said the 'thirty-seven on there--that's when it was made--1937. It might be--the second might be--might be the--the month it was made. You see here? [Pointing to a paddle inside the cylinder that separates the area in half.]

This things goes up--goes all the way up to the top. And then--then you got to put the thing right here. This thing right here--undo this and it--it swings around and that leaves--leaves this open. This is where the meal goes, back in the back. And this is where the meat goes [in the front of the cylinder]. You fill it up to the top and you leave them about maybe a quarter of an inch--just exactly from the top--not quite to the top. But anyway, you pull it back around and lock it down. Then you start the machine back down and it's got--it's got like a plunge on the end of this that's a half-moon down here. It comes up and attaches to this and comes all the way up to the top, and you fill it up with the meat and meal. And then when you come back down you reverse it down here and you switch. And it--it goes back the other way and you push it back down and push the meal out. The meal comes out [is extruded] around the outside edge and the meat comes out in the center of it. Look down here in the bottom and you can see; see that little hole in there [at the bottom of the machine, where the meat and meal are extruder together].

1:13:31.4

AE: Oh, okay. Yeah, so--

1:13:32.6

ST: That's where the meat comes out.

1:13:32.7

AE: The meat comes out of a smaller hole in the middle?

1:13:35.0

ST: The meal comes out around the outer edge of it.

1:13:36.6

AE: Okay, that makes sense.

1:13:40.7

ST: This is what you call a reservoir, and you got to fill that up first.

1:13:45.6

AE: Can I get a quick picture of that?

1:13:47.7

ST: Yeah, you want me to take--take--raise it up to the top?

1:13:52.2

AE: No, you don't have to do all that. I just--this is a good illustration of how this works, I think, because up at the top since it's--it looks like it's half and half at the top where you load it.

1:14:04.6

ST: It's approximately half and half, but you see how this thing is bowed like this?

1:14:09.6

AE: Yes, sir.

1:14:09.6

ST: Right here inside?

1:14:10.8

AE: Yes, sir.

1:14:11.7

ST: It's--it's more meal than it is meat. But the--the two plungers are equal. They come down together. Let me see this. Let me see something just a minute.

1:14:27.7

AE: Okay. Sure.

ST: I'll--I'll show you how it works right quick. [*Sound of reservoir being taken out*]

1:14:32.0

AE: I can smell those tamales already; they smell good.

1:14:32.9

ST: Huh?

1:14:34.8

AE: I can smell the tamales already. Is that a foot pedal? [*Sitting on the counter next to the extruder.*]

1:14:57.2

ST: No.

1:14:59.4

AE: Okay.

1:14:59.7

ST: No, this is what my foot pedal is like. That's the foot pedal, but I use it up here. The foot pedal--[*Sound of machine running*]. I used to have a hand-crank, see. A hand-crank. Let me turn this thing down [the stove]. The water is--the water is boiling--turn it down some. [Short pause] Yeah, it won't be long. You can cook them in those cans, see, and they don't take long. [*Machine turned back on. Loud grinding noise*] They take about thirty-five, forty minutes. This [mechanized action] presses it all down. Now, I've got—let's see if I turn around this--see that?

1:16:58.1

AE: Oh, okay.

1:16:58.8

ST: You see. [*Looking down into the bottom of the empty cylinder*]

1:17:04.9

AE: That makes sense.

1:17:07.1

ST: There's the bottom. This is--this is where the meal goes. Let me get my pliers. My pliers are over here, I think.

1:17:24.9

AE: You've taken good care of this machine all these years.

1:17:27.5

ST: Huh?

1:17:27.6

AE: You've taken good care of this machine.

1:17:30.4

ST: Oh, yeah. Yes, sir, nothing happens to this. You see right here? That's what the meat--the meat from down here comes out of--comes out right through there. And the meal--you got to put--

1:17:52.7

AE: It has a much bigger reservoir.

1:17:53.6

ST: And you see, it goes down through that hole--the meal. You've got to fill this--fill that all completely up before it starts coming out the bottom--the meal.

1:18:04.3

AE: Okay, and so when you load the machine full of meal and meat--

1:18:11.0

ST: That contains--will come down and it will compress--they'll come down on each side of it and force the meat down in the meal--force out through--through them holes [at the bottom].

1:18:20.9

AE: Do you know about how many tamales it will make? Do you have to load it often?

1:18:23.0

ST: Well, each one of them will make--a little over six dozen. Each--each time I fill the machine up it makes about--a little over six dozen.

1:18:32.2

AE: So you have to fill it up a lot during the course of the day?

1:18:35.1

ST: Yeah, it takes about--it takes about ten times for a hundred dozen.

1:18:44.2

AE: Yeah. Huh. Well I've seen all kinds of machines but not one like this.

1:18:52.3

ST: Huh?

1:18:52.2

AE: I've seen a few different kinds of machines and extruders, but I haven't seen one like this.

This one is neat.

1:18:58.6

ST: Yeah, they--they got some--some that's got two containers--one for the meat and one for the meal. And it probably--probably will do about twice as much as I can do with that one.

1:19:08.8

AE: I saw one like that but it was a hand-crank. It wasn't electric. You say you used to have one that was a hand-crank also?

1:19:18.8

ST: Yeah, they make them electric, but I had--I had--a friend of mine put that on there for me--that little electric motor?

1:19:24.5

AE: Oh really? So it came originally as a hand-crank and you--?

1:19:26.0

ST: With a hand-crank on it, yeah.

1:19:27.7

AE: Oh, okay. So you upgraded it?

1:19:30.5

ST: Yeah, that's where the meat--the meat comes out right through there, the hole right there, and the meal comes out through here.

1:19:39.8

AE: That's a smart little machine. Thank you for taking it apart for me to see.

1:19:47.0

ST: Yeah, put it back through there, and you put this back in there.

1:19:52.4

AE: And then when you--when you cut the tamale, do you cut it right at the spout [as it is being extruded]?

1:19:55.7

ST: Yeah, when it comes out you--take your hand like this [holds his hand up to the spout] and while it comes out like this [about as long as the palm of his hand] you break it off [just by pulling your hand up] and lay it on the tray.

1:20:02.2

AE: Okay, so you just pull it up with your hands.

1:20:03.6

ST: You push this down and another one--it's like that and that's how--that's how you do it. Now watch this thing now when it comes back down.

1:20:11.1

AE: Okay.

1:20:13.4

ST: It will reverse it and make it go back the other way. **[Demonstration]** You've got to kind of guide it down until it gets back in there. **[Demonstration]** And when that comes down it goes **[Demonstration]**. That's the way you do it. About that--about that long for that thing to go **[Grrr]** and that's the way--that's the way you do it, **[Demonstration]** all the way to the bottom and when it gets around along here. **[Audio Stops]**

[The mini-disc's recording capabilities come to and end, and we decide to walk back into the main house. As I change mini-discs and Mr. Thornton closes up shop in the tamale house, we have an informal conversation about how tamales got to the Delta. Recording resumes inside the main house in Mr. Thornton's kitchen.]

1:22:39.8

AE: **[Audio Resumes]** All right. So our mini-disk ran out when we were in your tamale house back there, and we were just talking about how tamales got to the Delta [Mr. Thornton figures they've always been here, that the Native Americans made something like a tamale] and sharecroppers cooking them in the wintertime and--.

1:22:51.1

ST: Yeah.

1:22:51.9

AE: And then you started telling me about that friend of yours--you talked for a minute about going into business with.

1:22:57.8

ST: Oh, yeah. His name is--his name is on this--on this--on that copy of that thing I had a while ago. I don't what I've done with it now. His name is Bubba--I'm trying to think of his name. But I always called him Bubba--Bubba Hubbard.

1:23:15.2

AE: Hubbard?

1:23:16.3

ST: Yeah, here it is right here. L. L. Hubbard, L. L. Hubbard.

1:23:23.6

AE: Hubbard, okay.

1:23:25.5

ST: Yeah. L. L. Hubbard right there--L. L. Hubbard.

1:23:28.9

AE: But he decided--or found out that it was too much work to make hot tamale, and so he wasn't going to be a good partner.

1:23:34.0

ST: Well he knew how much work it was because he--he had a bunch of blacks--he had a little restaurant over there and they sold short-order stuff, you know--sandwiches and milkshakes and stuff like that. But he knew what the work was but he--he **[Laughs]** whenever they wasn't doing too much in the afternoon, well he would put them to work making hot tamales. And--and how to make them and--and put shucks on them and all that kind of stuff. So he knew what the work was to it, but he just--he--he just **[Laughs]** he found other things to do besides that.

1:24:12.5

AE: And did you say he wound up in Texas or--?

1:24:14.4

ST: Well he--he worked over there for about--about two months, I guess--approximately two months and finally came back to Greenville, and I told him that it just wasn't enough money in it for two of us to make anything out of it, and what he needed to do--he'd get some help to make hot tamales, and I'll let him borrow my machine, and he can have it one week, and I'll have it one week, and he could make--make his own tamales for himself, and I could make mine for myself. He lived in Leland--Leland, Mississippi. And--but I guess he--he probably couldn't get the help that he needed and stuff like that. In the meantime he'd gone out of that--that sandwich business. It wasn't doing--it wasn't doing nothing--doing much of nothing. But he still is playing. He's a good--he's a good--in fact, his wife, I saw in the paper last night, he lost his wife. They got a divorce. But anyway, she had cancer, and she passed away. They buried her yesterday, I guess it was. They might have buried her today, and I didn't know it. I didn't know it until yesterday. I read it in the paper last night. But anyway, he--he--because he is the onliest one I could get to tell me anything. Everybody else knew how to make hot tamales, and you start talking about what--what do you do? Well how do you go about making them? And they'll turn their back on you and walk off. They wouldn't talk to you about them. I called people down in Louisiana trying to--trying to find out, you know how--how to make them and they'd hang the phone up on me and wouldn't talk to you. And I couldn't find anybody who could show me nothing. But Bubba is the onliest one that showed me something, but he forgot about what kind of--how to go about making up the spices--the spices to put in the--in the hot tamales. He said, "I--I can tell you everything but the spices. I don't know. I done forgot what I put in them." So I had to start that myself. I had to do that by myself. And I had to get that going by myself. And I finally come up with that recipe, and I just left it like that. That's the way I left it.

1:26:43.6

AE: Do you like eating hot tamales yourself?

1:26:44.3

ST: Do I ever eat them?

1:26:46.0

AE: Uh-hmm.

1:26:46.4

ST: Yeah, I check them out every once in a while. My wife she--she liked--she liked to take that meat, when I put the seasoning in them. She liked to taste it, but—yeah, we--we--I check them out every once in a while and make sure that--like I say, when you make hot tamales, it's like making corn whiskey. No two batches ever come out the same, so you keep trying to make a better hot tamale. You try--try to do a better job and you try to take shortcuts when you can and it's just--that's the way of doing things to--to get by with it, because the less time it takes you to make them, the better off you are. You can stand around and rest a while, you know what I

mean? And I don't blame Bubba sometimes for not wanting to monkey with them hot tamales, because they're--they're a pain in the neck. They sure are.

1:27:40.6

AE: But you think it's worth it, huh?

1:27:41.9

ST: Well it's worth it if you need to--if you need a way to make a living, yeah. But a lot of people--I used to think making hot tamales was just something somebody wanted to do. I used to think that Doe was doing it because he could make a--make a little extra money like that, but he was trying to get people to come up there to eat them big steaks. And what I thought the reason [was, was that] he liked to make them. He makes spaghetti, makes hot tamales, he makes salads and cooks steaks. While he's--he's set up like--that's what he likes to do. And I thought when--when he made hot tamales it was just something to go along with them steaks, but he talked about making twelve hundred dozen in one day and all that kind of stuff. I don't know; I don't know whether that's true or not, but he said he could do it. He sure had to do--he can't stand in one spot and do it, I'll tell you that for sure. It takes me three days to make a little over a hundred dozen but I--I done got to the age now where I can't do it. If I was working for somebody else, I probably would get--do what I need to do in a day's time, but I make so-and-so one day, and then another day I do something else, and another day I do something else, and when I get through I'll be made--it took three days to do it. Yeah, I used--I used to do it--do it all in one day. But when I

do--I said I've got to peel garlic, you got to cut strings, it's a lot of preliminary work that you got to do before you start making them--making hot tamales. You got to go buy the meat, and I buy-- I buy chuck meat. That's what--that's what I put in my hot tamales--chuck, ground chuck because it's got a good flavor to it. Round steak is all right. T-Bone steak is good, but you can't afford to make no hot tamales out of T-Bone steaks. You'll be **[Laughs]**--you'll be eating bologna and sausage from now on, instead of eating something decent.

1:29:59.1

AE: Well, how is it in Greenville there are so many people who make and sell hot tamales?

1:30:02.0

ST: I don't know. I think when I--when I found out that I could make a halfway decent living with it, it looked like everybody and his brother wanted to get on the bandwagon then. So I started making hot tamales. And there's a bunch of people that's made hot tamales in the past that quit. Because they got old. They couldn't do it.

1:30:23.4

AE: And they didn't want to pass on the recipe, I guess.

1:30:26.6

ST: Well I--I--I could probably sell my recipe, if I wanted to, if I--of course, I have sold it, but I don't like to talk too much about that because it's--it's--you sell it for ten dollars and all just— just--just whatever else you want to call it--the beneficiaries from that. But it--it's better--a lot of people is in the hot tamale business that have sold their recipe, but I know a man one time told me he bought one from somebody in town, but he lived in Memphis, Tennessee. That's where--if they want--if they want--it will take me about a week to show them how to make them, but if they want--if they want to buy it, they're talking about the automobiles costing so much and everything. Well they know--they know it takes a lot of people to make an automobile, but I can't see how an automobile can--can cost twenty-five or thirty thousand dollars, when half of it seems like it ain't nothing but plastic. But it's a lot of people that put up a lot of work to put that machine and--and stuff in a--the way they can make an automobile. But I tell them, I say well you'll pay twenty-five thousand dollars for a car, but you ain't going to pay nothing that sticks in your mind as long as you live, and you could make a living out of it as long as you live and teach your son how to make them, and he can teach his son how to make them and be--be perpetual and just go from now on, if you wanted to do that. And I said this ain't--what I'm charging ain't near about what an automobile cost, but you take what I'm telling you and you can make a living out of it from now on.

1:32:34.3

AE: Have you felt much competition in Greenville with there being so many people who make tamales?

1:32:38.2

ST: Well it--it looks like it's more and more trying to get into the hot tamale business, but if I was going to get in the hot tamale business--if I was a young man, I wouldn't stay in Greenville. I would go to a town where they don't have hot tamales and set up an establishment and--and you could get rich--get rich. But you have to hire a lot of people to help you make them. You have to hire a lot of people. There was one man who used to make hot tamales--of course, he passed away--but he--he give them so much--so much a dozen to--to wrap them, to make them, you know. And of course he done--he done all the work like me. He done all the--all the making of the hot tamales. But you got to put shucks on them, and you've got to tie them. That takes time and he give them fifty-cents a dozen to make hot tamales. And that's the way--that's the way he made his money. He's making his money off somebody else working for him. But I--I give my hot tamale makers pretty--pretty good. I give them pretty good--pretty good money to help me make them.

1:33:53.3

AE: Well then, when you sell them, do people come and carry them away hot in a container or they take them frozen?

1:33:58.1

ST: Well usually they--they come when--they tell me in the morning. I tell them to call me at night, and I'll fix them for them the next morning. And they come and bring their own containers and put them in the container and take them with them. But I--I got one--one place that sells my hot tamales for me and the name is Brother--they call him Brother. He's over at Stareka. You know where the Stareka is? It's over on Main Street [in Greenville].

1:34:28.2

AE: I'm not even sure what—

ST: Stareka Grocery.

AE: Oh, okay. Okay.

1:34:28.5

ST: It used to be the--the Faber Brothers Grocery. And he sells my hot tamales over there. So if you want some hot tamales, you can go over there and buy them from him or call me, and I--I can walk out there in the street and sell you all I want to sell you--just go out there, you know, and sell them. I got--I got a license to go anywhere in town I want to and sell them.

1:34:57.3

AE: Do you miss taking your van out?

1:34:58.3

ST: Yeah. I used to take it, but it's broke--my engine broke. I got to get me another--another truck. I'm going to have to buy me another truck.

1:35:05.1

AE: But do you like doing that? Do you like standing--?

1:35:07.3

ST: I don't mind doing it, no. I ride up and down the street. They see me coming, and they will wave--like a--like a sno-cone truck, an ice-cream truck. They wave you down. That's the way they used to do. But I used to be up there on the corner of Cedar and 82 Highway, and that's where people are coming up and down the Highway. They see me and I--I worked up a lot of--lot of good clientele by that. I sold hot tamales to Hawaii, some to Alaska--that's the most--the farthest away I've sold some. I sold some all the way down the bottom of Florida, Seattle, Washington, San Diego, California, Los Angeles, California; I sold some in New York City, Chicago, Washington, DC and Atlanta, Georgia. I sold them all over the country. I put them in a truck and sell them overnight in an airplane. It costs like the devil to do it but people they--they willing to pay it, you know.

1:36:11.7

AE: Got to give the people what they want.

1:36:12.6

ST: That costs a lot more than the hot tamales cost, sure do.

1:36:18.7

AE: Do you think most of those people are people who have heard about you or people who used to live here in the Delta and moved away?

1:36:23.4

ST: Well I've been in the hot tamale business twenty years, and a lot of people have moved away from here. They used to live here. And a lot of them still want hot tamales. They still writing and calling me and telling me to send them some. I had a friend of mine who was--was in my class and lives up in North Carolina. He used to get me to send him thirty or forty dozen hot tamales in--in a Styrofoam container, like you buy these steaks out of Kansas City and then fill it up--fill it up, send it to me. I got a thing down here--thing here, he's--he's a veterinarian. He was

a veterinarian. I don't know where it's at now. Anyway he--he bought some hot tamales not too long--here it is--here it is right here. I kept--every time he sends me orders I keep them.

1:37:30.5

AE: Yeah, so you know what he likes to get?

1:37:33.2

ST: Yeah.

1:37:33.4

AE: You're organized.

1:37:36.4

ST: Dave Newman.

1:37:50.7

AE: [Reading] His name is Newman in Fletcher, North Carolina--okay.

1:37:54.3

ST: He's--he's a veterinarian and he's done retired now.

1:37:58.6

AE: Okay.

1:37:59.7

ST: All--all these orders he sent me. He'll send me a letter--this--this is from--and it costs me to send them to him. I send them to him in an airplane one time, and it cost so much he said, "Send them to me by Freight Express." So I sent it to him by Freight Express, and it would be sometimes three days before it would get to him, but I put hot ice on top--top of the box and put them in Styrofoam and put that hot ice on top of them, and they'd still be froze by the time he gets them, yeah.

1:38:44.4

AE: Wow, well he really likes his hot tamales, doesn't he?

1:38:48.8

ST: Yeah. So I--I sent hot tamales a long way.

1:38:53.4

AE: Do you have a lot of customers who have been buying from you for the whole twenty years you've been making them?

1:38:57.6

ST: Yeah, I got--I got a lady now that--she called me this morning on my cell phone. She wants me to send--she wants nine dozen next--next Wednesday. Next Wednesday she's going--she's got two sons who live in St. Louis, and she's going to take them up--up to St. Louis. She's going--she wants nine dozen frozen. So I sent them frozen and then I--I got a brochure on how to prepare them, and it ain't no trouble. If you [can] boil water, you can cook hot tamales.

1:39:33.7

AE: And you tell them how to add all the spices to the water?

1:39:36.3

ST: Yeah, I send some spices to them and then--they take a tablespoon full--a lot of times they'll cook two dozen at a time and keep the rest of them froze, so I tell them how much spices to put

in the water and that's--that's one tablespoon in there and put them on the stove and boil--the water comes up to a boil, turn the fire down low and let them simmer there for about twenty--fifteen, twenty, thirty minutes, and they'll be ready to eat--ready to eat.

1:40:07.2

AE: Huh. Do you ever hear any stories from your customers about funny ways of eating tamales or what they put with them like--I know a lot of people eat them with crackers.

1:40:15.1

ST: Yeah, a lot of people tell me about they make hot tamale pies and all that kind of stuff. But I don't--I don't get into that myself. I let them do their own thing when it comes to that. But I don't--I don't--I don't get into that because I don't know too much about that--that part of cooking. It's a man down here that's got a restaurant, and since he saw that thing in the paper he told me the other day--he said I've been thinking getting some hot tamales and put them in the restaurant. And--and today I went up there and got me some coffee and he had a--he had on his--his--his menu had some kind of seasoning over the top with some chili and I--I told his--his brother. He left and I forgot--I didn't--hadn't seen him again but I saw--while they left and it said--and it was going to be part--part of his menu and some kind of seasoning—red or--or something he called it--with putting chili over top of it. I said, “That would be a good idea for him to use them hot tamales and put about three of them hot tamales and put some chili over the top of them and” I said “with some vegetables and stuff like that on them. That would be a good--a good idea for

him to sell his hot tamales like that.” He said, “Well you got to talk to him about it.” I said, “I will talk to him. I didn't know what you were doing with that.” But anyway that's the way--that's about--about the size of it.

1:41:57.3

AE: Well that's a good number of years making hot tamales and I've--I've learned a lot sitting and visiting with you.

1:42:01.5

ST: Well it ain't--it ain't too much to learn about it. It's--it's so many steps you have to go through with to make them. You want to take one of these with you and keep it [a receipt for tamales]? You got--.

1:42:14.4

AE: I don't--I don't need to take that from you no. That's fine. I'm fine.

1:42:17.0

ST: Okay.

1:42:19.0

AE: Well thank you for your time Mr. Thornton. You're very nice.

1:42:21.3

ST: Well I want to show you my fiddle right quick.

1:42:22.1

AE: Okay.

1:42:23.6

[End Shine Thornton.mp3]

[Mr. Thornton brings out his fiddles and plays a few tunes. After about twenty minutes, we both walk back to the tamale house, where he wraps the can of cooked hot tamales in newspaper to keep them warm for travel. A few more pictures are taken of Mr. Thornton standing outside of the tamale house.]