

MATTIE SMITH
Owner / Cook
Mattie's Place – Greenwood, MS

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Date: June 11, 2003
Location: Mattie's Place – Greenwood, MS
Interviewer: Amy Evans
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Project: Greenwood Restaurants

[Begin Mattie Smith Interview]

Amy Evans: This is Wednesday, June 11th, two thousand and three at 1:25 pm. I am at Mattie’s Place in Greenwood, Mississippi. Mattie Smith. And we are about to sit down for an interview.

AE: All right. I’m here with Mattie Smith of Mattie’s Place, a restaurant on Market Street in Greenwood, Mississippi. And would you mind my asking your age?

Mattie Smith: My age—

AE: For the record?

MS: Yeah, I was born in nineteen forty-five, the twelfth month, sixth day in forty-five, and I’m fifty-seven years old.

AE: Okay. And how long have you been open here on Market Street?

MS: I’ve been here ever since nineteen ninety-seven. June 6th.

AE: That’s right. I remember your anniversary was just the other day.

MS: Sure is!

AE: Well, did you have a café before this one?

MS: I left from [pause] Piggly Wiggly out on highway seven. I worked for them for seventeen years.

AE: What did you do at Piggly Wiggly? Cook?

MS: Cooked.

AE: It’s a grocery store. They had a café in the grocery store?

MS: They had a cafeteria in there.

AE: Okay.

MS: And a deli. And I managed it for four years there, but I stayed there [pause] nearly sixteen years. ‘Cause—correction, I had—would have been sixteen years if I had stayed there till September, but I left there in February.

AE: And what made you decide to open your own place?

MS: Well, I just always wanted something because—my own—because I love to cook, and I wanted to stay in the business and—What happened, I just came into a little money. My mother passed and my father and I came into a little money and I wanted to go out on my own. I tried—But I wished I'd had to done it when I was younger, but God just wasn't ready for me then, you know. But, because now I'm—I guess, tired. As age—years go by—you keep getting' up you're gonna be tired. You know?

AE: The restaurant business is a hard business.

MS: The restaurant business is hard. Very hard work. Cause if the employees don't do it, you have to do it.

AE: And you're here every day regardless, I know.

MS: *Every* day. Regardless.

AE: Where'd you learn how to cook?

MS: Well, my grandmother. I was raised by my grandmother [and named for her as well, Mattie mentioned before the interview began]. My mother was there for most of the time, but my grandmother would let me cook. And I started like cooking around eleven—ten or eleven. I don't exactly remember. But I *love* to cook. I would go to my aunt's house to

cook. Walk miles for just to cook. And—for her kids. And she would let me cook because she was kind of lazy—on the lazy side. Yeah—

AE: And so—

MS: And I love to eat too. I been about—I’m not a big lady, but I love to eat. Yeah.

AE: Well, I remember when I was in here for lunch the other day, you said you don’t cook with recipes ‘cause you’d just mess ‘em up.

MS: I just mess it up. I can’t follow recipes but just—I say guess—guess at it. And most of the time it turns out pretty good.

AE: I know, I have your menu right here that I am looking at, and you’ve got so many different things on there. How do you decide what to serve?

MS: I have the same menu that I had—I was using at the Piggly Wiggly. That was, uh, the same menu. I just went straight ahead—just left there and brought my menus on.

AE: And what do you call this? Soul food or home cookin’?

MS: SOUL FOOD.

AE: Yeah?

MS: That’s right.

AE: You have neck bones and everything on here.

MS: Oh, yeah. That’s—

AE: What’s your most pop—

MS: —back in the Southern.

AE: What’s your most popular dish?

MS: Tuesday menu. Meatloaf and chicken and dumplings. It’s the corn, broccoli
casserole. That it’s—that’s my populist day. On Tuesday.

AE: And, you’re open for breakfast too.

MS: Yes, I am.

AE: What time do you open?

MS: I open at seven for breakfast.

AE: What time do you get here?

MS: I get here at six. Six o'clock I'm in the door, and I open at seven. And I serve until ten thirty every day—breakfast. And from ten thirty is lunch.

AE: Ten-thirty to two?

MS: Ten-thirty to two-thirty.

AE: And how many people do you have working here?

MS: I has a granddaughter helps me—helps me sometime. When she's out of school but, she goes to college so—And I have two more employees. Full-time employees.

AE: Both women I assume from—

MS: Both women. Yeah.

AE: Is there a reason for that or it just happened that way?

MS: No, it’s just—just one of those things. God sent me Vicki. She’s real sweet. To the customers is very polite. You know, she’s like a haard worker. She works for two—*two* peoples. She has—she does while she at work. But one of ’em is kind of slower. My Jackie, I call her. She’s kind of slow and so—but she sticks by me. You know, you can’t—things she thinks she can do, she’s always there for me. She do most of my running—errands. And I let her do that because, you know, she’s slow in the kitchen. But—I most likely—I—I do my own cooking. Most all my own cooking.

AE: So if there’s a day you can’t happen to be here do they stand in your place pretty well?

MS: Nooo, I—Most of the days I have to be here because they’ll call me like—I —once I was feeling kinda bad out of these six years and I went home to the house—they had—they had meant to go home. I gets to the house and before I could get to the house they had a message on the answering machine. Say, “You need to come back to the restaurant because we didn’t know how to season the beef stew.” [Laughs]

AE: Can’t live without you.

MS: So I had to come on back, and so I—I came on back and just sit here and listen to ‘em talk. But it’s hadn’t been a day that I cooked go and just rest in peace because I’m over that. I think I kinda feel like I should be there, you know. I’m really dedicated to my job. I loves it.

AE: And I can tell you like people too. Is that part of it?

MS: I *love* peoples! I was raised with a—with a big family. I was the only child my mother had. But I had plenty cousins and nephews and nieces—I had plenty of those raised around with us, and bad weather came—storms and things—my mother would go pick ‘em up and they’d all come to one house. We ate together every weekend like. Start on Saturday we ate together and Sunday we ate together. Both my—*my* aunts would get in the kitchen and my mother, and they’d fix up a meal. Didn’t matter what it was, but we—they prepared that meal and we was together all the time. And so I came from just—I would say—from a big family even though I was the only child. Yeah.

[Counter: 70]

AE: You—you get that feeling in here [the restaurant] too ‘cause—there are what? Six tables that seat eight people, so you kind of have to sit in a family when you sit down—

MS: So true.

AE: — to eat here.

MS: That’s right.

AE: But I’d imagine, too, you’ve got a lot of carryout business?

MS: I have a lot of carryout. Sure do. Business is—*has* been good. Now, I give the Lord—praises to the Lord. Because, you know, it’s just a blessing.

AE: Well, you have good food!

MS: Thank you.

AE: And, you cater a little bit? I know Dolly said—

MS: Well, I do, like wedding cakes. And I’m gonna have to get out of that because my hands—well, it’s like a finger. You know, I get ‘em some day—I get cramps in my hands. They call it arthritis, you know. So I’m trying to get out of that but I have—in the past years I have did a lot of caterin—making wedding cakes. Not just really catering, you know.

AE: What kind of wedding cakes do you make?

MS: Two tiered, three tiers, anniversary cake—

AE: Nice to meet you! [To a customer Mattie introduced me to before we got started.]

MS: Well—

AE: Are they flavored cakes?

MS: They are vanilla inside and most likely they got white icing and vanilla icing. And I makes groom’s cakes but—just like I say, lately I have tried to get out of that because—squeezing the bags, you know—my hands are—But, lot of people still call, you know.

AE: How many wedding cakes do you think you’ve made over the years?

MS: Well, when I was at Piggly Wiggly I had—had done a lot. But maybe something like—maybe—hmmm, I can’t exactly say. I say maybe [pause] three or four hundred cakes. From the time from Piggly Wiggly up to here, but you know—And there has been lots of ‘em here, you know.

[Interrupted by Vicki (employee) to ask Mattie a question.]

VICKI: Pardon me, I don’t mean to interrupt you all, but, the chicken—do you want it in the refrigerator or the freezer.

MS: Refrigerator. The bottom of the refrigerator.

VICKI: All of it?

MS: Most of it.

VICKI: Most?

MS: Half of it in the fridge—freezer. [Pause] Oh, yeah.

[Back to interview]

AE: And you mentioned that you’re having a family reunion. Are you cooking for that this weekend?

MS: I’m cooking—for that family reunion. I does it every—two years.

AE: How many people do you expect?

MS: Well, so far we have a hundred and ninety-five been paid.

AE: Goodness.

MS: I have a large family on my dad’s side and my mom. Yes, I do. And it—yeah, but for now we have paid a hundred and ninety-five. Probably be something like two—We—We expecting something like maybe like two hundred. But it’s probably going to be more because, we have some family in Detroit. They ain’t never been, so they joining this year.

AE: And what do you cook for your family?

MS: Well on—Friday night we have, that's [ac]quainted night. Everybody gets together at the Hampton Inn. That's where they—they books they rooms at the Hampton Inn. They have twenty-two there. Rooms there. And they have, I think twelve at the Executive Inn. Ramada have six. And, but we gets together and, in the lobby at, the Hampton Inn on Friday night. That's drummettes, meatballs—Swedish meatballs—the little sausages with barbecue sauce, potato salad, chicken salad, and meat trays and *fruit* trays and vegetable trays. Now, that's on Friday. Okay, on Saturday which will be what, the fourteenth we will go to the—Whittington Park. We barbecue ribs, barbecue chicken, smoked sausage, baked beans, corn on the cob, spaghetti, and cole slaw, and homemade cake. Caramel—and chocolate and coconut. My aunts makes them because she been doin' it for years—homemade cake

AE: I love coconut cake. That's my favorite.

MS: And tea and pops, okay. And on Sunday we go to church at eleven o'clock. A service. And two thirty we're back at the room—Civic Center over there on highway seven for our banquet. We have roast beef, ham—baked ham—turkey and dressing, macaroni and cheese, green lima beans, corn—fried corn— purple hull peas, fried okra, peach cobbler, caramel cake, and lemon pie.

AE: I don't know how you do it.

MS: *[Laughs]*

AE: It’s a good thing you’re not open on the weekends!

MS: No! I close on weekends. Sure is. I started closing a year—about a year and eight months—about a year and seven months ago. A year and seven months exactly, I started closing on Sunday and Saturday.

AE: Why was that?

[Counter: 120]

MS: Because in—well, I was getting like—it’s hard to get employees to work on—on weekends, you know. Somebody promise and don’t never want to show up. So I end up doing the work myself so—It just got real hard on me. And then I wanted to go back to church. Get my life back into church. That’s what I have did.

AE: And I bet being here downtown you have a good lunch crowd. Local business—

MS: Week days. Because it’s not like it was when I was a kid—I was growing up. It used to be Howard Street was really popular. People from out the country would come up to Greenwood, and it’d be just—you—you couldn’t stir ‘em with a stick! But now it’s—changed a whole lot. It’s not anything down here now. Lot’s of people don’t come. The shoe department and all of ‘em moved way out. And it’s just slow down here. So it’s—it

really wasn’t working on Saturday and Sunday. And Sunday was real good with church peoples.

AE: And you just mentioned before we started that you might have to move from this location.

MS: Oh, yeah. I might have to because I been having problems with my landlord. He’s got the place—wanted me to sign an agreement—

[Interrupted by Senator David Jordan, who was eating lunch two tables away during the interview.]

Senator Jordan [To Mattie]: I’ll be talking with you.

MS: All right.

SJ: And if you know about—Excuse me.

AE: You’re fine.

SJ: I guess I can find—I just want to find young ladies or men to serve for a couple of hours.

MS: Like—I guarantee I can find you somebody. Somebody that I *know* can do this.

SJ: How much will it be for a couple hours?

MS: Just a couple hours? I don’t know. We’ll get together on that.

SJ: Okay.

MS: I just went and told them my prices. Uh-huh, well—

SJ: That’s what I thought.

MS: Yeah, well—I’ll get back with you on that too.

SJ: Okay, because we gonna have everybody seated in there—Just take it to the tables.

MS: Just take it to the tables. That’s right. We’ll we fix it and they take it.

SJ: That’s right. All right.

MS: All right Senator.

SJ: I’m gonna get Christine to come and talk to you because we would like to know—she got some things—I might get her to come by here and talk to you.

MS: I appreciate it.

SJ: Do you know Christine?

MS: I really do. I’ve seen her.

SJ: Yes, ma’am.

MS: You know, I used to live on Bird Lane. I’ve seen her but I—

SJ: We’re trying to get the Governor here too then.

MS: The Governor here too? I say send her over—Just like I say, send her on and I’ll talk to her.

SJ: All right.

[Phone ringing.]

MS: Yeah.

SJ: Good seeing you, now.

MS [To interviewer]: Cut it off, baby. I’ll be right back. [Mattie takes a phone call from a relative about this weekend’s family reunion. Recording stops for a few minutes.]

AE: All right, we’re back with Mattie, and you were talking about your landlord.

MS: Well, we been having a problem with—he don’t want to fix anything much. I’m just losing that. So I’m havin’, he been just like, with, “You don’t sign an agreement I’d just much rather for you to move.” But I wouldn’t sign it because I’m not going to be responsible for fixin’ something that I’m paying rent on, not buying. So, I called and I’ve gotten—I got some information on it. There’s a man told me that long as I was renting, that I wouldn’t have to sign an agreement that I will—and I been here six years this June the —June the sixth was six years. And all that’s certain, you just get up and ask me to sign an agreement. I’m not going to sign something that I know I can’t hold—you know, hold to. Just can’t sign it. Uhm-mm. And so I—I don’t know. We gonna work it out I—hopefully. Yeah.

AE: I’m sure you will. So, how about your clientele here? Did a lot of people follow you over here from Piggly Wiggly?

MS: It's a lot of people's followed me from Piggly Wiggly. I bet—sure did. Peoples have been good to me. Sure have. In fact, I know everybody around here. So it's—it's been nice, you know.

AE: And did you say you were born in Greenwood?

MS: No, I was born in Minter City. Little old town called Minter City. Yeah. Down here about eighteen miles from here.

AE: When did you get to Greenwood?

MS: Oh, I came here in nineteen eighty-four. I moved here.

[Counter: 164]

AE: Really?

MS: Um-hum. I moved here in nineteen eighty-four. Yeah. Sure was.

AE: Well, I'm looking at your menus now over here. Have your prices changed much—over the years?

MS: No. My prices been the same like three years now.

AE: Yeah? A plate lunch—

MS: Sure have.

AE: —is five fifty.

MS: Except some of the things like—Tuesday combo has went up—went up. But, most of my prices are still the same.

AE: Do you sell very many hamburgers with these good plate lunches?

MS: Sell *lots* of hamburgers. Yes we do. Have a good old country hamburger. Pure meat. One hundred percent pure beef. Yeah.

AE: What’s your favorite thing that you serve?

MS: What’s—what’s my favorite thing? Well it—Guess, like I say, I likes to cook. Tuesday—like I told you, Tuesday’s my favorite day. [Chair drags across the floor.] ‘Cause everybody like the dumplings—Sam, y’all come back! [Yelling at a customer as he walks out the door.]

AE: Do you advertise at all, or do people just talk about you?

MS: No. When I first moved here, I was advertising—a little bit. But I haven’t advertised something like four years now. Mm-hum. People knows me. Yeah, from Piggly Wiggly and—just every person, you know, because, I was—just like grew up here. You know. Round me. ‘Cause I have people from the rural—they come to me too. Yeah.

AE: Well, something else you’d like to add?

MS: Not really, because I really don’t have the time, but I just sit this time to, you know—

[Another chair drags across the floor.]

AE: And I sure appreciate it, and I know you’ve got to get your glasses.

MS: Yeah. Sure have. Well yeah, and I got to go back to the dentist. Come back Mr. Lynn! [Mattie says goodbye to another customer.]

AE: Oh, one thing I was going to ask you: The Senator was in here earlier, and he’s getting food from you?

MS: Oh, yeah.

AE: Yeah?

MS: They be getting’ food on the twenty-seventh. For two hundred peoples. And Mike Espy is speaking at the Civic Center.

AE: My goodness.

MS: Well—

AE: That’ll definitely get advertising for you right there.

MS: *[Laughs]*

AE: A lot of work, though too, I know.

MS: Lot of work. That’s so true.

AE: All right. Well, I appreciate you taking this time.

MS: Okay.

[Counter: 190]

[End]

