

Sonny Conrad
Barbecue Center - Lexington, NC

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Interviewer: Rien T. Fertel
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[Begin Sonny Conrad-Barbecue Center Interview]

00:00:02

Rien Fertel: This is Rien Fertel with the Southern Foodways Alliance. I'm on the North Carolina BBQ Trail. I'm at the Barbecue Center located in Lexington, North Carolina sitting down with Mr. Sonny Conrad; I'm going to have him introduce himself, please.

00:00:17

Sonny Conrad: Sonny Conrad, my birthday is December 24, 1938 and I'm owner of the Barbecue Center.

00:00:23

RF: Okay, Mr. Conrad; we—we just had a little recording mix-up so I think we're recording now. So thank you for sitting down with me. How long have you been the owner and operator here at the Barbecue Center?

00:00:35

SC: Since 1955.

00:00:38

RF: And 1955, what was your first role at the Barbecue Center?

00:00:42

SC: Well, mostly I just helped my brother-in-law with the operations of it and I did curb service work, and because mainly back in those days there was very few inside restaurants. There were a lot of curb restaurants. And that's where we got our start.

00:01:00

RF: Let me ask you about your brother-in-law. What was his name?

00:01:02

SC: Doug Gosnell.

00:01:04

RF: Doug Gosnell; can you spell his last name?

00:01:06

SC: G-o-s-n-e-l-l.

00:01:09

RF: And so you were—what was the family connection exactly?

00:01:12

SC: He was my brother-in-law.

00:01:14

RF: Uh-hm; and so you married his sister?

00:01:19

SC: [*Laughs*] He was my sister's husband.

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RF: Oh, sister's husband, okay. And what was your sister's name? I like—I like names. I like to have everyone's names.

00:01:29

SC: Jean Gosnell.

00:01:29

RF: Okay; and she was an older or younger sister?

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SC: She was older. She was a nurse.

00:01:36

RF: And so she married Mr. Doug Gosnell, right, am I pronouncing—?

00:01:38

SC: Gosnell.

00:01:42

RF: Gosnell, Gosnell, and what did Mr. Gosnell do? Was he always in the barbecue industry or did he—what was his back-story?

00:01:50

SC: He was a bread man delivering bread to restaurants and—and grocery stores. And this Barbecue Center became available in 1955 and he purchased it. And I helped him do that and then later on, after three years in the Army, in 1963, I got out of the Army and I came full-time here. And then he passed away in 1968 and then I took over full ownership at that time.

00:02:22

RF: Okay; so it was a restaurant before Mr. Gosnell came in.

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SC: It was a dairy bar.

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RF: Oh, it was a dairy bar. What is a dairy bar? It's not something we see nowadays anymore.

[Laughs]

00:02:31

SC: A dairy bar is something like Dairy Queen. They just specialize in ice-cream, nut sundaes, banana splits, and Coca-Colas and hotdogs and things of that nature.

00:02:42

RF: But not barbecue?

00:02:43

SC: No; no, very rare.

00:02:47

RF: Did—when did he—he added barbecue in 1955?

00:02:52

SC: He—there was another fellow, Perrell, man, that put pits on the—on the dairy bar, barbecue pits and we went from that point.

00:03:04

RF: What do you mean he put pits? Did he kind of build pits in the—?

00:03:07

SC: Well you—you make—pits are made mostly out of brick and mortar where you can have a fire. And like an oven—

00:03:15

RF: So when he adds—when—when barbecue was added to the dairy bar how many barbecue establishments were there in Lexington, North Carolina?

00:03:30

SC: There were probably ten or more.

00:03:34

RF: Ten or more, so—

00:03:36

SC: Every restaurant in Lexington and Davidson County had barbecue when it started because that was the main item and that's the only way you could make a good living is—is have barbecue.

00:03:49

RF: What were some of—well let me ask you this first; where were you born and raised, here in Lexington?

00:03:54

SC: Lexington and Davidson County.

00:03:58

RF: And tell us about your first memories of barbecue.

00:04:03

SC: Well, my first memories was down on East Center Street which is five blocks off of Main below the Courthouse and my grandfather cooked eight shoulders every Friday afternoon for

another restaurant in town. And I just—at that time I was probably about six—seven years old and I just hung around with him and watched him and had no idea I would be in the barbecue business, but it turned out that way.

00:04:27

RF: Oh, I've got to ask you about that. What was your grandfather's name and what was the name of the restaurant he cooked for?

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SC: Henry Lafayette Cecil.

00:04:39

RF: Henry Lafayette Cecil.

00:04:41

SC: And he cooked for Yarborough's Restaurant, which is down on the south end of town, which is still in operation.

00:04:46

RF: And how do you spell the name of that restaurant?

00:04:49

SC: Ah—

00:04:51

RF: We'll look it up. *[Laughs]* So, you said you started watching your grandfather and he—was he your maternal or paternal grandfather?

00:04:58

SC: Um, paternal I think.

00:05:03

RF: Okay; and you started watching at six or seven years old. What—did he ever let you help?

00:05:12

SC: Well he didn't—he let me carry wood and things like that, but not much.

00:05:19

RF: And so he—you said he didn't—he cooked kind of outside the restaurant and would bring the shoulders to the restaurant. How did that work?

00:05:25

SC: Well at that particular time, my uncle ran a grocery store across the street and he was dealing with this other restaurant, supplying them with their meats and foods. And they would just bring them in on the truck and he would cook them at—start about eight o'clock in the morning and cook them 'til they got done.

00:05:45

RF: Okay; and what were his pits? What did they look like? Were they—?

00:05:48

SC: Well they were just opened pits. There was just a brick and mortar and a cement floor and just a shed like built over the top of it out of metal and steel rafters on it—little bit to stay in the dry is what it was.

00:06:09

RF: And how long did he cook shoulders for—your grandfather?

00:06:12

SC: That's—probably about eight—nine years.

00:06:19

RF: And were either of your parents in the barbecue or the restaurant business?

00:06:25

SC: No; my father was on the railroad and my mother didn't work.

00:06:29

RF: Were either of them home cooks? I'm guessing your mom was.

00:06:33

SC: Oh yeah; she was a cook. [*Laughs*]

00:06:34

RF: What did—what did she cook at home? What are your fondest memories of—of what eating in—you know, what came out of her kitchen?

00:06:42

SC: Country style steak, green peas, creamed potatoes, green beans, and just regular vegetables.

00:06:50

RF: And would your father ever make barbecue at home?

00:06:55

SC: No; he stayed on the railroad.

00:06:56

RF: What railroad did he work for?

00:06:58

SC: Winston Salem Southbound Railroad.

00:07:02

RF: Okay, and let me ask about growing up. Did you have—what high school did you go to here in Lexington?

00:07:05

SC: Lexington Senior High.

00:07:08

RF: Lexington Senior High. And did you have a favorite barbecue establishment growing up?

00:07:15

SC: Not—we didn't get out much. We didn't get out like we did today because we didn't have but one car and it was very little transportation around.

00:07:26

RF: And so you started—how old were you when you started working at the Barbecue Center in '55?

00:07:31

SC: Uh, probably I was just out of high school.

00:07:38

RF: And tell me about those first memories of those first weeks and months working in—I'm guessing—was that your first job?

00:07:45

SC: Well, yeah, [*Laughs*] other than mowing yards.

00:07:50

RF: And tell me about that. Tell me about how—how it was you know working here.

00:07:53

SC: Well it was very interesting. We had a lot of people, different people in town and all that—that come to eat barbecue and just talk. And at night, we had curb business at night; so we were very—cars and all that, teenagers would ride up and down Main Street. And at one time we were so busy on curb service that we had to have a policeman out here on Friday and Saturday night to direct traffic. And they would drive from—the Barbecue Center is here and drive all the way to the other end of town called—a place called Old Hickory. And they'd turn around down there and come back.

00:08:38

And they'd just ride back and forth all day and night.

00:08:40

RF: So would they—would they eat at both places or have a soda at both places?

00:08:43

SC: They didn't eat that much. They liked to drink beer. [*Laughs*]

00:08:47

RF: Oh so they would sell beer—?

00:08:50

SC: No; uh-uh, beer wasn't for sale but they would get it.

00:08:51

RF: Oh okay. And drink it in their cars?

00:08:55

SC: We never did do that.

00:08:56

RF: Okay; so how many cars could the—the original curb service fit?

00:09:02

SC: Let's see, about twenty-five or thirty.

00:09:04

RF: And is that a—that original structure is what is behind me now? I'm sitting at a corner table, I should say, in the Barbecue Center.

00:09:12

SC: It's a carport.

00:09:13

RF: A carport, and so you said fifteen to twenty?

00:09:16

SC: Right.

00:09:16

RF: Um, what was car culture like then? What was—I mean we see it in movies nowadays; what—what was it like?

00:09:27

SC: Well, very interesting; you know people sit out in the cars and they don't want to—some of them don't want to get out and get—wasn't dressed to come into a public place. They just—we just—we do a big business on the curb, always have. And it's been great.

00:09:45

RF: And so you still do curbside service?

00:09:46

SC: Still do curbside service.

00:09:48

RF: What's the percentage of business or how many people use the curbside service on a—on a given day?

00:09:55

SC: Probably forty-percent of our business is on—thirty or forty-percent on curb.

00:10:00

RF: And do you have a waitress that serves or a waiter that serves just the cars?

00:10:07

SC: We have car—yeah, curb boys.

00:10:07

RF: Curb boys.

00:10:08

SC: Not waitresses, curb boys.

00:10:11

RF: And how do they—I've walked around the curb service area, the carport; how do they notify you that they're there? Is there someone watching or—?

00:10:19

SC: The horn blows.

00:10:20

RF: So they honk the horn. And is the menu given or do most of these people already know what they want to order?

00:10:27

SC: They—most of them know what they want and they know the price. [*Laughs*]

00:10:30

RF: And they know the price. [*Laughs*] All right, let me bring up Mr. Doug Gosnell again, your brother-in-law and the founder of the Barbecue Center. What kind of man was he?

00:10:43

SC: He was just a young fellow just getting started in business and he had a problem with a kidney disease. And the first person really I knew that was on a dialysis machine, but he—he worked hard. And he had a good—good crew. We had about twenty or thirty people working and he enjoyed it and I enjoyed it, and we went to a lot of football games together and—.

00:11:12

RF: And did he—what was—did he just cook shoulders back then?

00:11:19

SC: Right; we cooked—that's all we've ever cooked is shoulders.

00:11:23

RF: And was there a pitmaster or was he his own pitmaster?

00:11:25

SC: He was his own pitmaster. We're not used to that term.

00:11:27

RF: Oh you're not? What is that word—what does that term mean here or not mean?

00:11:33

SC: It doesn't mean anything to us because we don't have a pitmaster. We just have cooks.

00:11:37

RF: And is that a City of Lexington thing or a—something to do with your establishment, the non-use of the word “pitmaster?”

00:11:47

SC: I think it's the—Lexington, I've—I really hadn't heard that name mentioned; maybe people that come down here from Kentucky, [*Laughs*] those type of people.

00:11:55

RF: Right.

00:11:56

SC: They'll have cook-offs and they—I guess they had a pitmaster.

00:12:01

RF: So you purchased the Barbecue Center in '68, right.

00:12:07

SC: '68, '69 it was.

00:12:08

RF: '68, '69 and what sort of—what were those first days like running a restaurant as your own
—owner?

00:12:18

SC: Scared to death. [*Laughs*]

00:12:19

RF: Tell me more about that. [*Laughs*]

00:12:22

SC: Afraid—afraid I might lose it, because we didn't even know what—you know, we were on
like a weekly basis and we bought stuff by the week and we paid for it by the week and, you
know, it—the weather, good weather was always good business. And of course, we were right

across the street from the Lexington Senior High and Lexington Middle School. And that got a lot of business up in this area. And it—it just became a hangout.

00:12:53

And about five or six years ago, I guess you're familiar with Bobby Flay? He sent his crew here, and they filmed about four hours—three hours one afternoon and—and the girl they sent had never seen curb service and she couldn't believe what we were doing. And so we had to set up a deal outside for curb. We got some old cars and put out there and then run a banana split or something out on the curb and that's been on TV now for several years.

00:13:27

RF: What—do you like watching yourself on TV?

00:13:30

SC: Well just—it's just a thing that happened. I mean our Festival is twenty-eight years—twenty-eighth last week, last month and I've been on TV with every—I think every year with the Festival, advertising and coordinating everything.

00:13:51

RF: You mentioned cars and cars and—and car service keeps coming up. Did you have a—a favorite old car back then?

00:14:00

SC: I had a '61 T-bird. [*Laughs*] That was my favorite.

00:14:05

RF: And did you have a favorite model that you—that you just dreamed over when you saw it pull up?

00:14:09

SC: No; I just like them all.

00:14:12

RF: So I want to ask one more question about Doug Gosnell. Did he—who was his teacher? Who taught him how to cook barbecue?

00:14:18

SC: Warner Stamey.

00:14:22

RF: All right; so Warner Stamey is a kind of maybe the most famous name in North Carolina barbecue history. Tell me—

00:14:27

SC: Yeah; he was.

00:14:28

RF: —tell me about him.

00:14:30

SC: Well, I can't tell you a whole lot about him, but he was a fine fellow and I—I talked to him quite a bit a few years before he died because he'd come up and sit at the counter and just kind of a lonely look and wanted to talk. So we talked; he—he more or less started the barbecue from a man named Sid Weaver and Jess Swicegood. Now they had a tent-like thing down behind the Courthouse. And that's where it got started in Lexington. And they would cook barbecue down there and they'd get it about like you saw it back here on the pits. It would be smoking and the Judge would—at—at the Courthouse would say, "I smell the barbecue cooking." I said—he said, "I think it's about ready; let's go eat."

00:15:18

And so that's where it all got—at the Courthouse it got started and those two are—were the main people in it. And then they sold out or somehow Warner Stamey picked it up from them.

00:15:33

RF: Did you know either Swicegood or—?

00:15:37

SC: They were before my time. They were—my granddaddy I think helped them some. But that's before my time.

00:15:45

RF: That was my next question. Do you know of a connection—because it sounds like what your grandfather did and what Weaver and Swicegood did were very similar and around the same time. Did they have a connection?

00:15:58

SC: They probably did because it was a small town and everybody knew everybody.

00:16:04

RF: And tell me a bit more about your conversations with Mister—with Warner Stamey.

00:16:15

SC: Well, we would just talk about business, and he had a barn over here close to somewhere where he lived. He had some equipment in it and he was always wanting to sell some and he'd bring a piece up and we'd look at it and talk about it and all. Just sit around and shoot the gab, just like we do with everybody else.

00:16:35

RF: Would he eat barbecue here?

00:16:36

SC: You know I don't remember. I—I'll figure he ate some.

00:16:44

RF: Um, let's—let's talk about—well let me ask one more question. Do you consider Doug Gosnell your teacher? We're talking about teachers.

00:16:58

SC: I think so.

00:17:02

RF: What kind of teacher was he? Was he—did he instruct you directly or did you watch him?

00:17:08

SC: I watched him and he just—he would tell me how—how to do it and all. They had a—a cook at that time, and I didn't need to do much work. So they were more or less taking care of it.

00:17:19

RF: Did he have any employees that lasted for a decade or more, a long time?

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SC: Well, we've had a few that lasted that long, I believe.

00:17:32

RF: Who has been the longest employee in the history of the Barbecue Center?

00:17:34

SC: Oh gosh; you're getting deep now—me. [*Laughs*]

00:17:39

RF: [*Laughs*]

00:17:42

SC: Lord, I can't remember. We had a John Ames[?] that worked here; he and I worked—he worked the back and I worked the front for several years. And we had a Lacy Craver that worked here and he was a good barbecue man and several others. They—they're kind of like other people. They come and go. They'd work here for a while and go somewhere else and come—come back. It depends.

00:18:11

RF: And have you worked both the front and the back of the house?

00:18:14

SC: Both of them, yeah.

00:18:16

RF: Which one—which one is your favorite?

00:18:18

SC: Well, I like the—I guess where the money comes in but where the—the people out front are more interesting to talk to and you get a lot of information about what’s going on in town. And you know what’s happening and—

00:18:36

RF: Let’s—I mean we’re talking about the front of the house. Let’s talk about customers. You seem to have a customer base that’s here often. I think I recognize people from yesterday.

[Laughs] Do you—how often do some of your best customers eat here?

00:18:51

SC: Well, morning customers, they come every day. The breakfast or like that, and they usually eat her once—two or three times a week and when Coble Dairy was in operation up here they had a crew that worked twenty-four hours a day and they would come down here three times a day and eat. So things have changed though. **[Laughs]**

00:19:19

RF: And let’s talk about the food. You said you—you sell shoulders only.

00:19:22

SC: Right; we cook shoulders. They start off about sixteen pounds and we cook them on one side for four hours. We turn them over and cook them on the other side for four hours and let them drain and that takes about eight hours to cook them on the pits.

00:19:41

RF: When are—what time are they put on the pits?

00:19:44

SC: Usually about 5:30—6:00 in the morning.

00:19:47

RF: And are they—are they seasoned at all?

00:19:50

SC: We just put salt on them is all; we don't put any seasoning.

00:19:56

RF: And is this the exact same process or has it changed from earlier?

00:20:01

SC: Same process.

00:20:03

RF: Where do you get these shoulders?

00:20:07

SC: Olde World Packing Company out in Tyro, North Carolina; we buy from them mostly.

00:20:14

RF: Do you know are they from North Carolina pigs?

00:20:18

SC: Well for forty-some years we dealt with Lundy Packing Company, and they sold out. And then somebody else bought them out and it ended up Smithfield, so right now the majority of them are coming from Smithfield which is down east.

00:20:34

RF: Okay; so these—these shoulders are cooked on a pit. Is it the—let's talk about the pits. Is it the same pits that were built when the Barbecue Center opened?

00:20:49

SC: Well the pits are—what you saw in the kitchen were—were built but the fire box, where the fire box is, we've had to redo that several times. It burns out quicker. The bricks burn and fall down and we have to rebuild that.

00:21:04

RF: And how many pits do you have?

00:21:06

SC: Well we have two that can cook about thirty and then we have a set that cooks about 150.

00:21:13

RF: A 150 and what is—what is that for?

00:21:14

SC: Festival time and Christmastime and special occasions. We got a big catering job or something like that we use it.

00:21:26

RF: We'll get to the Festival in a bit. I want to ask about that. I was just in the kitchen with you and we watched one of your cooks take a shoulder out. Can you—can you tell me the process of what he did?

00:21:42

SC: Well we—after we finish cooking today we put them on a warmer and the Health Department requires you to keep them at a certain temperature, 135-140 degrees. So we have to put them on a warmer. Sometimes that doesn't work the best like it used to because we leave them on the pits. And we let them drain on out.

00:22:02

But we take it out of that warmer and put it on the meat block and take the skin off of it and take the bone out of it, take the gristle out of it, all we can get, and then chop—either chop the shoulder up or slice it or coarse chop. Coarse chopped is just a little coarser than the regular chopped meat but—and then we put it on the bread or tray or a plate and serve it. We put our dip on it; our dip is—we've been doing that same dip for forty years too, fifty. **[Laughs]**

00:22:36

RF: And I want to ask you about the dip in a moment, but there's—so there's three ways to get a—a sandwich, an order of barbecue: chopped, coarse chopped, and sliced.

00:22:45

SC: Right.

00:22:47

RF: How are they ranked in popularity?

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SC: Well, chopped is the most popular kind. It's the fastest and people can eat it easiest and that's the best way to go. People like it better that way.

00:23:04

RF: And tell me about the sliced.

00:23:05

SC: Well the slice is nice, good, lean meat and it's real tender and it tastes—it's a good-tasting sandwich.

00:23:14

RF: So the sliced has less fat?

00:23:16

SC: Has very little fat in any of it. It's a little hard—you have to chew it a little bit more, and chopped just, you know, you just put it in your mouth and it's about gone.

00:23:26

RF: And tell me about the flavor of your barbecue; how would you describe it?

00:23:29

SC: Well it's—we cook with hickory wood all we can, either hickory or oak, and the eight hours it cooks on there just gives it the flavor and then the dip and the slaw, they kind of just complement each other and make it a good—a good product.

00:23:49

RF: So you use hickory wood. Where do you get the hickory wood from?

00:23:51

SC: Oh a fellow out here at the—towards Reeds [Crossroads] and Tyro, Reeds I believe; he brings it—. I think he might get it out of Statesville and then cut the—cut it in short pieces for us.

00:24:05

RF: And how often do you have to order wood or how much wood do you go through?

00:24:07

SC: A pickup-truckload maybe three a week or four. He just keeps us supplied. That's all we—
we do. *[Laughs]*

00:24:17

RF: And you mentioned dip which is I think a unique name used in North Carolina. What is
dip?

00:24:27

SC: Well, I guess where you came from it was sauce. But we call it dip because we're always
dipping stuff in it, and it's made out of water, vinegar, and sugar and salt and pepper and brought
to a boil and we have some for sale in bottles over here. And it's a good item. You can use it for
things other than barbecue. You can put it on steak. You can put it on fish or anything else. It's—
you can—I got some customers that even drink it, so—. But it's a good item.

00:25:01

RF: Well how do they drink dip?

00:25:05

SC: *[Laughs]*

00:25:06

RF: I want to know about that.

00:25:07

SC: Well, I had a young boy that had an operation. This just happened yesterday; had an operation on his jaw and they wired it shut. And his daddy took him a pint of dip and put a straw in it and he drank it. But now I got another one of the City Council people and he comes up and puts dip on his barbecue salad. And what he gets left over he just drinks it. *[Laughs]*

00:25:34

RF: And how far back does this—does your dip recipe go?

00:25:36

SC: Goes all the way back.

00:25:40

RF: And I recently saw your dip recipe, I think you shared it with John Shelton Reed and Dale Reed and—and they published it in their book *Holy Smoke*. And they have a quote where you're quoted and I'll paraphrase it where you say you, "Don't believe in secrets." Or—or tell me about that.

00:25:56

SC: Well, it's no use to try to keep it hid because your—your help turnover is so that they might be here one day and another restaurant the next day and you—you can never keep it hid, so we don't try to hide it. So we just make it what our customers want to use and—. We just let it go with that. If they want to—the one thing we do with the slaw, somebody said, "How do you make your slaw?" And I said, "Well, the first thing you do is you get a fifty-five-pound bag of—"

of cabbage and then you cut it up.” And that—that will stop that conversation there because nobody is going to go to that trouble.

00:26:39

RF: Right; and—and tell me a bit more about your slaw? Is it red slaw or white slaw?

00:26:44

SC: Red slaw. It’s made basically the same as the dip. You—we put ketchup and sugar and vinegar in it.

00:26:54

RF: And what’s the difference between red and white slaw here in North Carolina or in Lexington, North Carolina, I should say?

00:26:58

SC: Well, the only thing I know about white slaw mostly it’s got mayonnaise in it. And mayonnaise has never been an item you can carry out because it spoils. So that’s—that’s one thing about the—the dip, it doesn’t have any spoilage factor to it.

00:27:15

RF: And tell me, how many—how much slaw and dip do you go through in an ordinary week, or how often do you make it?

00:27:27

SC: You ought to have asked me that the other day so I could have time to figure. We use about —100 pounds a week in slaw and probably 100 gallons of dip. We got a twenty—twenty gallon pot and we make it three or four times a week.

00:27:48

RF: And how many shoulders do you cook on an ordinary business day and—and weekend?

00:27:55

SC: Well we cook fifteen at a time or either fifteen or thirty. We cook every day.

00:28:02

RF: When is the busiest part of the week for the Barbecue Center?

00:28:05

SC: Friday and Saturday.

00:28:07

RF: And when is the busiest time of year?

00:28:10

SC: Oh, right now Festival is—brought us number one on the—it's in October, we have the most business. We got people coming from all over the United States.

00:28:24

RF: Let me ask you about the Festival. What Festival is this? What—what is the exact name?

00:28:28

SC: Lexington Barbecue Festival. It's on the fourth Saturday in October normally, and we have it uptown and we have—of course barbecue is the number one thing but then we have crafts and music and shows and entertainment all free.

00:28:52

RF: And how many years has the Lexington Barbecue Festival been—?

00:28:57

SC: We just finished the twenty-eighth.

00:28:58

RF: Twenty-eight years and how long have you been involved?

00:29:00

SC: Twenty-nine. *[Laughs]*

00:29:05

RF: So you were involved in the planning?

00:29:06

SC: Yes; we were in—I remember the first time, Channel 2 had a newsman, Charlie Harville and I know we got up one morning at the—the lady that was Director of the Pageant, we went over there and talked to him on the news about six o'clock in the morning in Greensboro. That was twenty-eight years ago. *[Laughs]*

00:29:31

RF: Oh, to promote the Festival?

00:29:33

SC: Yeah.

00:29:35

RF: Who—was there one person or several people involved with the idea of the Festival, twenty-nine years ago?

00:29:42

SC: There was a little kin to me—there was Joe Sink. He was the Editor and Owner of *The Dispatch*, his family. And he talked a guy from BB&T in with *The Dispatch*, and BB&T would back—sponsor the Festival. And if anything went wrong they would pay for it, or say it rained or something they'd be responsible for it.

00:30:14

But later on then we took responsibility of it and took it over and so those two did it. And then we had a lady, Kay Saintsing; she passed away a couple of years ago, but she—she worked

hard and she got that thing rolling. And it's—it's just been unbelievable the people that come in here. First one we had about—they thought maybe 10,000 but it come up to either thirty—around 30,000. And last—this past year they've estimated 200,000. So, I don't know where it'll stop but—. **[Laughs]** It's a hard day's work.

00:30:57

RF: Do you work the Festival that—your tent or booth at the Festival?

00:31:01

SC: Haven't missed one yet.

00:31:02

RF: And how many shoulders did you go through this past year?

00:31:06

SC: For the Festival we cooked 150 times five, five restaurants did—we did 150 and they did 150 and they did 150; 15,000 pounds really.

00:31:19

RF: And everyone sells out with 200,000 people?

00:31:24

SC: Yeah; we were sold out by six o'clock.

00:31:27

RF: So, Lexington, where we are where the Barbecue Center is—is—is, the town of Lexington is one of the great barbecue cities in America. Tell me what you think—or why that is or what barbecue means to Lexington.

00:31:44

SC: Well, it was just something that got started years ago and our granddaddies, I was fortunate, I guess in the long-run, to have my other granddaddy lived out—he was a farmer and they had corn shuckings. Well they would barbecue chickens, when they'd have a corn shucking and get the corn shucked, and they'd have barbecue chicken out and tobacco, curing tobacco, and they cooked chickens. And then it came on up to Lexington and what we do downtown, and so Lexington it's just been giving people what they want, I think. And you just can't name the people that come back to visit their relatives and all and the first place they stop is the barbecue place. So we shipped it all over the United States and it's just we're—we're just noted for it and we keep a good product, we think. And as long as we do that we—the people is going to come.

00:32:51

RF: Do you ship—how often do you get those shipping orders?

00:32:54

SC: We ship as—whenever they order it.

00:32:59

RF: Have you ever shipped internationally?

00:33:03

SC: Seemed like we did one time towards the Mid[dle] East but I forgot where it went.

00:33:08

RF: And tell me about the area that the Barbecue Center is in.

00:33:15

SC: Well, we're in the Piedmont in North Carolina and then Davidson County and we're in the Piedmont section, and it's a whole lot of people in this area.

00:33:28

RF: Well tell me about its location in Lexington in the Town of Lexington.

00:33:32

SC: What location?

00:33:33

RF: Well like where are we in the city?

00:33:37

SC: Well—

00:33:38

RF: The neighborhood or this street?

00:33:41

SC: We're at the north end of the city. And there's a south end. There's—the barbecue place on the south end and there's one on the northeast side up here, Speedy's and then they got several down—Smokey Joe's on the South Main and then they got—used to be—Terry—Terry Harvey's, Harvey's Barbecue [Interviewer's note: He refers to Jimmy's Barbecue] on Number 8 going down where y'all stayed last night. You passed that? And so there's one in—at one time there was twenty-two barbecue places in and around the edge of Lexington. And that's back when the Festival started.

00:34:19

RF: Okay; and there's less now, you're saying?

00:34:22

SC: Well, several of them has died and a couple has gone out of business. So we've been up and down. We've—the most we've ever had was seven and then some—we lost one by death and— or two died and so that—we're staying with five right now with—

00:34:44

RF: Oh, five participants in the Festival, you're saying?

00:34:45

SC: Right.

00:34:47

RF: Why do you think there's less barbecue restaurants in Lexington today than twenty—thirty years ago?

00:34:54

SC: Mean old word: *competition*; you—when we started there was no McDonald's, there was no Burger King, there was no Hardee's and now we got, gosh, I don't know how many. They're just everywhere.

00:35:08

RF: Last night you—you mentioned you—well actually you told me—you said, you know, when this—when the Barbecue Center opened it was kind of “a time before restaurants.” Can you say something about that.

00:35:19

SC: Well, the—when it first opened up it was—we didn't have many seats inside because most people it was built for curb service. And the curb service kept growing and growing and growing but then the inside started growing. So we had to expand a little bit and take care of that.

00:35:36

RF: Expand the building you're saying. And I want to ask a few questions about the building. It's—it's kind of shaped like—like an ice-cream shop right or a dairy bar, you called it?

00:35:49

SC: Well not necessarily. It's shaped like a barn, I think. *[Laughs]* It was just a design that— when the building was built it was a flat roof, and we couldn't keep it from leaking, and so I had some friends that were in the construction business and they came up with a barn-type thing. And it's been a big help. We haven't had any trouble with leakage since then.

00:36:14

RF: And I want to ask about some other items on the menu. You mentioned a barbecue salad. I also saw a barbecue soup.

00:36:23

SC: We have a vegetable soup with barbecue in it. It's the closest thing you're going to get to Brunswick stew and that's a popular item around here. And on the salad we just add about four or five ounces of barbecue to that, and it's—it's a good seller.

00:36:39

RF: And do you sell hushpuppies?

00:36:41

SC: We make our own hushpuppies and we sell hushpuppies.

00:36:44

RF: And how do you make them?

00:36:46

SC: Cornmeal and self-rising flour and buttermilk. I'll have to hold off on that recipe because I don't know what it is.

00:36:54

RF: And well, how are they formed? Are they handmade or are they formed in other ways?

00:36:59

SC: We put them on a spatula and smooth them out about a half an inch thick and cut them with a spatula into the grease. I thought you saw that. [*Laughs*]

00:37:11

RF: And [*Laughs*] does—did—when did hushpuppies join the—the menu?

00:37:18

SC: It's hard to tell on that because it's—it's been a good forty years I know because we had a machine that fit on the wall that cut them back then.

00:37:34

RF: And what's the proper way to eat hushpuppies? I've seen them eaten plain. I've seen them—

00:37:38

SC: Your fingers. [*Laughs*] Fork or fingers; it's—it's really a replica of cornbread, like the old people, everybody made cornbread, you know. And it came off of that, I think.

00:37:54

RF: Okay; and I think besides the shoulders, besides the barbecue, your Barbecue Center is famous for its ice-cream which I saw a lot of tables eat last night. Tell me about that.

00:38:08

SC: Well, when the Barbecue Center was built it was—it was built right across the street from a dairy, Coble Dairy. And it was one of the largest dairies in North Carolina. At one time they had twenty-some dairies, I think. But—and the—the dairy bar was built right across the street. But you couldn't make any money except June, July, and August. And so people would go in business and sell ice-cream for four months and then they wouldn't have any business, so they'd leave.

00:38:43

And so somebody came by and put pits on—on it, the building and tried barbecue. And then we took it over from them and it's gone real well since then. Of course, especially again with the school over there and ballgames on Friday nights and basketball games, I mean, you just had a good draw-in card and good—people close by.

00:39:08

RF: And tell me about that banana split.

00:39:10

SC: What about it? [*Laughs*]

00:39:13

RF: It's—

00:39:14

SC: We've become famous for banana splits several years ago. And it's got three big dips of ice-cream. It's got wet nuts and chocolate syrup and a cherry and whipped cream and it takes about three to four people to eat one sometimes. So, it's a good item and we sell a lot of them and it keeps us on the go especially in the summertime.

00:39:37

RF: And where is the ice-cream from? What brand is it?

00:39:41

SC: We're using Pitt right now. It comes out of Greensboro.

00:39:46

RF: I've met several members of your family, who also work here, last night. Can you tell me about that. How—how much of a family-run business this is?

00:39:56

SC: Totally; I got two sons. One, Cecil, he's here mostly in the daytime and does the ordering and the planning stuff. And Michael, he works at night mostly and closes up for us and all. And Nancy and I are here all day.

00:40:13

RF: And Nancy is your wife?

00:40:14

SC: Yeah.

00:40:16

RF: How did you meet your wife?

00:40:18

SC: Here. [*Laughs*]

00:40:19

RF: How long have y'all been married? And tell me about that.

00:40:21

SC: Well, she worked over at the hospital and she worked with my sister over there and—Jean. And she brought her—Jean brought her up here and she—Doug hired her to work, so she was a waitress for several years. And so we met and got married in 1969.

00:40:44

RF: So she was a waitress here, so you—two employees that met here. That's wonderful. Does she still work here?

00:40:51

SC: She's the main cog. She keeps it rolling.

00:40:55

RF: And does she ever work in the kitchen or she is in the front of the house or—?

00:40:57

SC: She'll work anywhere and mostly cleaning. She does a lot of cleaning.

00:41:02

RF: Did you encourage your two sons to follow you into the Barbecue Center business?

00:41:09

SC: No; I just kind of laid back and let them decide what they wanted to do. One graduated at NC State and one graduated at Guilford College and UNCG in Greensboro, and they just decided to stay.

00:41:26

RF: And so you've worked at the Barbecue Center for over a half-century. When you were young did you ever think that you would be doing this now still?

00:41:39

SC: When real young in high school I was in the Army for three years in 1960—'59 to '63 and when I came home I really didn't have any plans of anything. I just started helping my brother-in-law, and it just picked up from there.

00:41:56

RF: Where were you stationed in the Army?

00:41:59

SC: I went to Colombia, down there, and then went up to Fort Benjamin Harrison and studied accounting and then went down to Fort Bragg and stayed down there.

00:42:12

RF: What's the most difficult part about running a—a busy restaurant?

00:42:18

SC: Well, to keep the—keep the food stocked up and because you can't turn around and be out of half of stuff, you know, and keeps out—and keeps the employees going and keeps them happy. That's the main thing.

00:42:34

RF: And why do you think the Barbecue Center has remained so popular over—over such a long period?

00:42:39

SC: Well, one thing I guess because we stay with it. I mean ninety-percent of the time it's open we're here.

00:42:50

RF: How has people's barbecue eating habits changed over the past half-century or the past couple decades?

00:43:00

SC: I don't think they've changed a whole lot. Hogs are a whole lot leaner now so there's no fat; it used to be you could cut six—five—six pounds of fat off of a shoulder. And now it's—they're clean and it's leaner and it's less trouble on your heart and you have less problems of doctors recommending it. And because they call it the “white meat,” you know, “the other white meat,” and so I think that's—people are still eating the same thing, eating the trays and the sandwiches.

00:43:32

RF: When that change started happening in fat content in shoulders were you for it or against it?

00:43:38

SC: Well, we were for it because it was a waste of money and easy to catch on fire because when you turn them over, halfway through the grease starts falling down on those hot coals you saw. And that's when the danger comes in.

00:43:55

RF: Have you ever had a pit fire?

00:43:57

SC: We've had one. [*Laughs*] Small ones, but one—that one up there burned down one time.

00:44:05

RF: Did it burn the whole outside structure?

00:44:07

SC: Uh-hm; well at that time it wasn't much of an outside structure. It was just mostly wire.

That was back when we first started and didn't have all the health laws like they got now.

00:44:21

RF: Right; I mean how—how cautious do you have to be with—?

00:44:25

SC: Very cautious; you got to stay with it. People that cook on cookers, that's all right now, because they can put them on there and turn it on and walk off and leave it. But you can't leave a pit.

00:44:36

RF: And even with leaner pork shoulders, is the danger still there?

00:44:41

SC: Well, there's—they still have quite a bit of grease in them.

00:44:46

RF: And do people eat as much barbecue as they did back in the day?

00:44:53

SC: I think they do. We—everybody—a lot of people come back from—to visit their people from out of town and they come and eat and are very well-satisfied. But, I think they are and as long as they keep happy, we keep happy.

00:45:13

RF: Oh, we can finish up soon. I want to ask, do you—do you—how long do you plan on kind of being here at the Barbecue Center?

00:45:27

SC: I'm getting on the short side. *[Laughs]*

00:45:29

RF: I mean, do you think about retiring? Do you—do you love—?

00:45:31

SC: Well, I think about it but I—I contracted a little ailment a couple—several years ago and probably, I don't know, one of these days. I'm not going to do much work, but I'm going to hang around.

00:45:46

RF: Right; do your sons or wife encourage you or do they—?

00:45:50

SC: Well, she wants to retire. *[Laughs]* The boys, they just need some more help that they can trust to keep it going. It's hard to find.

00:46:01

RF: And do you want your sons to continue the Barbecue Center?

00:46:06

SC: Well, I would like for them to as long as they can. And but if they want—decide to go another way that suits me fine because I think we've done our deal. And we've done what we were put here to do and—and somebody else wants to take it they can have it.

00:46:24

RF: And you mentioned a couple changes in barbecue culture here in Lexington, how there's a few less restaurants, how pork has changed—the fat content. Where do you see barbecue ten—twenty years from now?

00:46:39

SC: I doubt if you'll see much of it.

00:46:41

RF: Really, why is that?

00:46:42

SC: Well, because of the competition and if—if I wanted to go build a new place and I'd go up here and buy a piece of land and put up a restaurant, like we got now, I would spend \$800,000 to get that done. Now how long is it going to take me to get that back? You know, and that's what all your Hardee's and McDonald's and those type places, they're doing that. They're—they're moving down the street and building a new building. And that way the health man stays off of them and come on us because we got an old building. So, they've always got things they think we ought to do. So, I don't know if it'll be here or not. But with the way the laws are going and—and the diseases and—and trouble with them, it's hard to tell.

00:47:43

RF: So, if there's less barbecue as you think in Lexington in the future, can Lexington, North Carolina still be Lexington without barbecue?

00:47:57

SC: It will be hard but it might survive. If you keep enough other stuff coming in too it might help out a lot but you never know.

00:48:07

RF: Do you see younger people getting into the barbecue culture either—and that’s either working in the industry or—or eating, you know continuing to eat it?

00:48:17

SC: Well the place—the place you went yesterday, Tar Heel Q, now that’s got younger people in it because one of them worked here one time, the girl. And there’s another one down on [Highway] Number Eight that came out of Salisbury, and they got younger people. But they’re not going to stay with it too many years. As long as they can fool people with these cookers and—versus pits that’s the easy way to do it and they might enjoy doing it more.

00:48:49

RF: I think you just stated what you think about cookers. What did you think when they first came on the market? And—and did a cooker representative ever show up on your doorstep asking you to change?

00:49:02

SC: I guess they did in time, but we knew when it came out—we knew what it was doing. And they were doing it; our customers were the main people that said, “Don’t you go on them cookers.” **[Laughs]** They said, “You stay with the pits.” And so we—we hear that every day. And so—of course, there was a man from NC State one time that said the barbecue, the taste of barbecue was all in the dip; it wasn’t in the meat itself. But we don’t believe that, so—. **[Laughs]**

00:49:34

RF: Did he say that to you directly?

00:49:37

SC: No; we just—it came through the grapevine.

00:49:38

RF: Oh, okay. Let me ask you; do you eat your own barbecue?

00:49:44

SC: Oh yeah.

00:49:46

RF: How often?

00:49:47

SC: Usually about twice a week.

00:49:48

RF: And how do you order your barbecue?

00:49:50

SC: Well, right now I'm mostly getting chopped but sometimes I get sliced on Saturday night and—.

00:50:00

RF: And do you dip?

00:50:01

SC: Oh yeah.

00:50:04

RF: And red slaw?

00:50:05

SC: And red slaw. That's a good vegetable.

00:50:09

RF: All right; well I want to thank you. If there's anything you want to add—

00:50:15

SC: Well, I don't know what else we could—. You've covered a long—long way back. You about made me forget a lot of stuff, so. We did have the—I told you the Bobby Flay people; well about a year after they were here the Travel Channel came here and they filmed in the inside and they had pictures of the Festival and up and down Main Street. And that's been running on there for several years. So, I get people come in and say, "I saw you on TV last night." I say, "Well, good." I said, "What channel were you watching?" So I try to keep up with it that way. They've been good to us.

00:50:58

RF: Do any other kind of really interesting stories stick out in your time here at the Barbecue Center?

00:51:04

SC: Wish y'all asked me that yesterday so I'd have thought about. Well, we just have a lot of fun and try to make the people happy. Hmm; I don't know of any particular stories right now.

00:51:25

RF: Okay; well good. All right; well I want to congratulate you on your success here at the Barbecue Center.

00:51:29

SC: Thank you.

00:51:31

RF: And thank you.

00:51:31

SC: Thank you.

00:51:33

RF: All right; thanks.

00:51:33

SC: Would you like to have a poster—?

00:51:41

[End Sonny Conrad-Barbecue Center]