

SOUTHERN FOODWAYS ALLIANCE

Center for the Study of Southern Culture Barnard Observatory University, MS 38677

Coordinates with ACCESSION #: _____

Interview Transcription:

Ron Shapiro, THE HOKA & MOONLITE CAFE

July 27, 2004 @ 6:30pm

Cocktail Party at the Kullman Home

Oxford, MS

Interviewed by Amy Evans

[Approx. 40 minutes]

www.thehoka.com

[Recording opens with a woman yelling]: OH, NO! OH, NO! HELP! GO HELP—[As the interview began, a guest at the cocktail party fell down about fifty feet from where the interview was taking place.]

Amy Evans: This is Amy Evans on Wednesday, July twenty-seventh, two thousand and four, at a cocktail party during the Faulkner Conference--Oxford, Mississippi.

[Recording stops as confusion spreads through the crowd. The person who fell is tended to quickly, and everyone goes back to the party].

[RECORDING STOPS FOR APPROX. 3 MINUTES] [END TRACK 1- 00:13]

[RECORDING RESUMES: BEGIN TRACK 2]

AE: I'm with Ron Shapiro. If you, Ron, wouldn't mind saying your name and birthdate for the record please, sir.

Ron Shapiro: Ah, Ron Shapiro, August twenty-seventh--birthday coming up. Um, I don't wear ties so don't give me a tie.

AE: [Laughs.]

RS: Uh, nineteen forty-three. I'll--

AE: Okay.

RS: --I'll be sixty-one.

AE: All right, happy almost birthday.

RS: Thank you.

AE: And so I'm here to speak with you about The Hoka, primarily, and also the, um, restaurant you had there--The Moonlite Café. Can you speak a little bit, um, first about where you're from and how you came to Oxford and then, how you opened the Hoka?

RS: Well I grew up in St. Louis, and in nineteen seventy-one I moved to, uh, Jackson Hole, Wyoming, where I first got involved in the movie business. And I--I wanted to have something to have, uh, to have something to work at night, but I wanted my days free, so I could ski, so I came up with the idea of movies. And then I had met a couple girls that had gone to school here at the University [of Mississippi]. Had spent--they were spending the summer in Yellowstone [National Park]. And I started seeing one of them, and I would come down here to visit her. And, uh, was ready to leave the winters of the North. And, um, even though we split up before I moved down here, I still--I still came down here anyway and, um, really liked Oxford and, um, opened up a movie theatre in nineteen seventy-five and ran it as a movie theatre only for a couple years. We just sold the normal popcorn and hot dogs and stuff in the lobby. But, somewhere along around seventy-eight or seventy-nine, um, videos came in. What--we used to pride ourself in the Hoka that we would show movies that no one could see any place else. And before video we, you know, we kind of had a monopoly on showing weird movies. Things like *Harold and Maude* and *King of Hearts* and, um, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Well, maybe *not Rocky Horror Picture Show* but, uh, other movies. And then when video came in I realized anybody could see those movies, and I was no longer unique, so I had always wanted to be in the food business, and we turned our lobby into a--a full-on café. And we would open right before the movies started, you know, like about six in the evening, and then we'd keep it open until about three in the morning. And, um, growing up in St. Louis, which is a really good food town, and growing up around tasty food in my family, um, I was determined that anything we'd sell would be made fresh everyday. And so one of the reasons that we were a success was because our food was good. A lot of places that were serving food---sand--sandwiches and so forth like we were---were--it was all prepared food or, you know, full of chemicals or the typical stuff. But we were baking turkey breasts everyday, and we made all of our sauces, all of our salad dressings, everyth--we made everything from scratch.

AE: Did you do a lot of the cooking yourself?

RS: Uh, I sure did. I--I didn't necessarily want to, but anyone that's been in the food business for a while knows that a--a lot of times people do not show up so, uh, you had to learn how to do it. And a--a-strange thing that happened was a girl that was a sorority girl from Connecticut came up to me one day, and said that, um, "My mother is a caterer, and we have an interesting recipe for a cheesecake." And I said, "Well, let's give it a try." And she started making cheesecakes for us, and they became so popular. It was incredible how many we would sell. And eventually, when she graduated, she, you know, turned the recipe over to me, and--and that and between this hot fudge pie that we would serve warm with vanilla ice cream, those two deserts, uh, I think, actually made us famous.

And it was funny because the, uh, one of our biggest clientele were the sorority girls. And it--it was at a time when people were *just* starting to be concerned about weight, I think then. And people would come in and order hot fudge pie and a Diet Coke. And, you know, we--we almost should not have served that. But that was--that was probably the most--that or cheesecake and a Diet Coke. And then--then Diet Coke was like the only diet drink, there was Diet Rite or--but, uh, our--our sandwich that we made with this fresh baked turkey breast was called a "Love at First Bite," and it had bacon on it.

AE: After the movie?

RS: Well, we would--we would show it, um, you know, we would serve it all--all the time but, especially late at night. It was one of—it was Willie Morris's--favorite food. But he would—

AE: Well I mean, was the sandwich named after the movie?

RS: Uh, it was not. It was named before the movie came out.

AE: Okay.

RS: Yeah. I gotcha!

AE: Touché, touché. [Laughing]

RS: Uh, another one was we had, uh, "Lana Tuna" named for Lana Turner the movie star. That was our—

AE: Okay.

RS: --our tuna sandwich. And "Yes Sir, Cheese My Baby--"

AE: [Laughing]

RS: --was our cheese sandwich.

AE: Um-hmm.

RS: [Clears throat] But, uh, Willie Morris would always get the "Love at First Bite" but he--he was one of those people that didn't like to eat in front of people, and he was always--he would always take it to go. And, um, somewhere between, you know, two in the morning and six in the morning he would eat it--somehow. You know, he would--he would gather up the, uh—he would gather up the, uh, he didn't like being alone at night, and he would gather up the people from the Hoka, and we--we wouldn't close until three [in the morning].

AE: Um-hmm. [COUNTER: TRACK 2 – 05:21]

RS: And he would--he would have a gathering at his house *every* night. And he did a thing where he would occasionally, uh, steal my dog, and I would hate--he knew that I would have to stop by on my way home to get my dog. He--he was just s--so desperate for company. So that would always be my last stop and, um, I'd always see that--that sandwich on--in his bag in his refrigerator. Because one of his lures to get people to come to his house, he'd say—he'd go by the tables at the Hoka, and he'd say, "Come on by my house. I have the coooldest beer in Oxford."

AE: [Laughs]

RS: Because he just--anything to get people to come to his house. And you'd show up, and there'd be one can of Old Milwaukee Light at the bottom of the refrigerator, you know. The coooldest beer in Oxford would always, you know--he would be--he would be lying just to get a group to come by his house. But, uh, he--he wrote us up a lot, which, um, we kind of st--struggled for a while, but once he started writing us up, anytime he had a chance he would write us up in the *Clarion Ledger* or the *Commercial Appeal* or *Playboy*, *Esquire*, whatever, and uh, we kind of became--kind of famous.

AE: He wrote about you in *Playboy*?

RS: He did.

AE: Yeah? What was that article like?

RS: Uh, he was just writing about Oxford.

AE: Yeah?

RS: And men—and, you know, mentioned the Hoka. And then he's got a famous piece called "My Two Oxfords." Where he compares Oxford, England, where he was Rhodes Scholar and, uh, Oxford [Mississippi]. And he compares a place where they had tea and crumpets in London and--to the food at the Hoka.

AE: [Laughs] Excellent.

RS: Yeah. So, it was wonderful. Another writer the--uh, Berry Hanna was trying to decide where he was going to live, and he came to visit a woman that he was seeing at the time--in Oxford. And, uh, he--he walked in the Hoka and he heard--it was raining, and he heard rain. We had a tin roof. And he said, "I know I'm home." And he--and he moved here.

AE: [Short laugh] Can you speak a little bit, to set the scene of where the Hoka was in downtown Oxford at the bottom of that hill—

RS: Yeah.

AE: --and what the space was like physically?

RS: It was, uh, it was at--at the bottom of the hill. It was probably a hundred yards from the main Square of Oxford. It was, uh, due East of the Square. And it was, uh, it was next door to a place called the Avent Cotton Gin, which eventually became the Gin Restaurant and Bar. And the building was built as a warehouse to warehouse cotton. And because they didn't care what it looked like, um, they didn't even level the floor and the--and the floor was pitched at an angle that turns out to be perfect for a movie screen. It had that slow pitch so that the people in the back could still see the screen--because of the way the land pitched. And--and that's the way the--the cement was poured. So, you know, you talk about a karma thing that was set up for a movie theatre. You know just--you--just everything about it was right.

Jo Dale Mistilis: Be careful, Amy! [Angelo Mistilis's wife, Jo Dale, speaks to us as she walks by the interview]

AE: [Laughs] Hey, Jo Dale.

RS: Uh-oh! She's warned. [To Jo Dale] *You* be careful. [To Jo Dale again] [Now, to interviewer] And I remember when we went in there my, uh--in nineteen seventy-five my rent was one hundred and seventy-five dollars a month.

AE: For that whole space?

RS: Yeah. And it was like three thousand square feet.

AE: How'd you find it?

RS: Um, I just kept looking around, looking around, and some guy had--was renting it and he was a guy that had a grudge against the Gin. And his--his dream was that he was going to open up one day and sell beer for twenty-five cents just to put the Gin out of business. But he eventually got over his grudge and turned me on to the owner of the building. And as it turned out, the owner of the building told me the guy hadn't paid his rent in over a year. And, you know, it was--it was just a lot of property available back then. And I, um, took it over and a group of us got together, and it took us six weeks--there was nothing in there. There was no elec--electricity in there. Or plumbing. And it took us six weeks to, uh, from zero to when we opened up. We just had--it was like an old barn, uh, barn raising party, actually. Uh, there was a group--there was three other guys that became my partners; they all invested a thousand here and there. And we opened up the place for, um, with--with all the projectors and all the wiring and all the plumbing for a total of eleven thousand dollars.

AE: Wow.

RS: You know. Which today you can't even buy the projectors for, but I bought used projectors for like two thousand dollars and then did the wiring and—and we were open. And, uh, we started off with, uh, Charlie Chaplin was my--one of my favorite movie makers and his movie *Modern Times* was the first movie we showed, and we got a crowd and, um, from then on, you know, we held our own.

AE: What else was going on in Oxford during that time? Was there another movie theatre operating and another kind of café that was a late night late night--?

RS: There--there--there was two theatres that was going. There was one on the Square. It was a one screen movie theatre call the Ritz, which was next door to the Bottle Tree Bakery, which is now, I think, um, kind of a retirement home, or um, it's not necessarily a retirement home, as it just seems that a lot of elderly people live in it.

AE: [Laughs]

RS: And then there was a--a place down the street that had--was closed--it was boarded up when I got here--called the Lyric. And behind the Lyric is the Two Stick Sushi Bar, and the Lyric had a nickname of --of the Two Stick because they claim that it was in such bad shape, you needed one stick to prop the seats up, and you needed the second stick to chase the rats away. And it's funny that the, uh, Two Stick is a--you know, a chopstick--

AE: Sushi place, yeah.

RS: And it's—it's funny how things some—sometimes are meant to be.

AE: Um-hmm.

RS: And then there was a--a theatre out, um, across the street from where the Krogers was--shopping center--where there's a Big Star grocery store [now], and in the back of it is a Dollar Store, and that used to be another movie theatre--that had two screens. That was called East Gate Mall at the time. But they were all showing the brand new movies and we-- you know, we were showing the offbeat films, the foreign language films.

AE: Um-hmm. And some X-rated things from what I understand.

RS: We--we did X-rated thi--we did X-rated for a couple years and we—we did it, and we checked, and it was not illegal. At the time, Mississippi did not have a law against it and, um, if--if we would have only been an X-rated movie theatre, you know, it probably would have been wrong, but we were constantly showing really good movies at the early venues. We--we would only show the X-rated movies at midnight. And we had kind of an interesting formula in that we would show something like a film from France--like a [Francois] Truffaut movie at eight o'clock, at ten o'clock we would try to do something like a concert film or a concert from Bangladesh or Woodstock, and then at midnight we would do the X-rated. And, you know, it was, uh, it was kind of an interesting thing that worked. And it enabled me, um, to show the really good movies at--at that eight o'clock

show, which was really important for me. Uh, if I—if I couldn't have shown good movies I wouldn't have never stayed in the business.

AE: Um-hmm. [COUNTER: TRACK 2 – 12:12]

RS: Because, um, you know, I--I just couldn't do that. But, I--I was also really lucky, um, at the time when I was showing the adult films, um, it was the year that a lot of women had to do with the production of them. Before, uh, before [nineteen] seventy-eight, uh, the adult films were really horrible and, uh, the way women were portrayed in the movies was miserable. And these women, uh, a woman named Seka, S-E-K-A and woman named Gloria Leonard started producing most of the films that we showed. And they actually became romantic. And—and they had plots. And it, you know, it was actually a real revolution. And I've even read in feminist publications about these women and these films that came out during that time. So, you know, though I—I always did feel somewhat weird about, you know, showing adult films, I do feel good that the ones we showed, um, at least had some integrity behind it and were, um, you know, actually pretty well done and--and women had a lot to do with what was shown so-

AE: So how did the Café figure into all that?

RS: Well the Café was on the other side of the wall, and it was interesting, though, because, um, the café—be--being though—we—uh, my landlord was a Born-Again Christian and would never let have--serve alcohol. So because of us not serving alcohol, we were the only place in town at night that was kind of lively and exciting but didn't have alcohol. So we became, um, you know, from about eight to eleven at night we were kind of the hangout for the Christian students, which is wild because--

AE: That's ironic.

RS: --the Christian students would be there. Yeah, eating their fudge pie and Diet Cokes.

AE: [Laughs]

RS: And then on the other side of the wall would be, you know, Am--uh, *Amy does Abbeville*, you know, or—

[Both laughing heartily]

AE: Nobody is supposed to know about that!

RS: --or *Debbie Does Dallas* or, you know, a--

AE: Could people take food into the theatre?

RS: Uh, people could do whatever they want. Yeah.

AE: Excellent.

RS: And--and you know, the uh, you know, the sign--the sign on our door, which was at the time a thing that we actually came up with. It said, "No," uh, "No shoes. No Shirt. Who Cares." And, you know, our attitude was--was very relaxed and I—it's one of the reasons we were such a big hit because people--people walked in there and immediately felt relaxed.

AE: Um-hmm.

RS: And, uh, you know, people could pretty much do whatever they wanted. People would bring coolers in there. In fact, one time we had a--I remember--we had a late night show and some fraternity guys brought a keg in. I mean like, you know, how much can you drink during an hour and a half movie?

AE: [Laughs] A lot!

RS: But you know—Well, you know, it was just--it'd just be the--this, you know, uh, the scene when we were doing the--the adult films was so much fun. And, you know, people would be yelling at the screen and teasing one another it--it was, you know, as bad as those films may be, it--it was really a very festive thing, and it was kind of like a--a small United Nations, in that it was only time where you'd get the frat guys and the locals and the foreign students. You know—you—you know, it was interesting--it was such an interesting collection of people that would come to those movies.

AE: Yeah.

RS: You know. And, you know, in [nineteen] seventy-eight it was a bold thing to do and, um, you know we never--we never had trouble with the police because weren't doing any-anything illegal.

AE: Um-hmm.

RS: It--it wasn't against the law. I remember one time the sheriff came and said that he had got a complaint. And I said, "Well, you know, I've never, um--we--we don't hold a gun up to anybody's head that they have to come here. Everybody comes here on their own." And he says--he says, "I understand. I just, you know, whenever I get a complaint, I just have to follow it up." He says, "I don't care what you do."

AE: [Short laugh]

RS: So, you know. But I think--I think by showing them late at night we were okay. If--if it would have been a thing where--where that's all we showed--

AE: Um-hmm.

RS: --I'm sure we would have been closed down. But, you know, a lot of times we wouldn't even advertise it. It--people would just know that they were showing.

AE: Um-hmm. Well and I, um, read on your website about the café and it having like a big long community table in the--in the lobby area where it was? As I recall.

RS: We had a long counter.

AE: Counter?

RS: Yeah. And that was the counter where like, Willie Morris would like plant—

AE: Um-hmm.

RS: --himself after the bars closed and just sit there, and people would gather around him. It was a wonderful place for conversation.

AE: Willie would hold court at the Moonlite--

RS: He would--he would definitely hold court.

AE: --Café? How did you name the place? I've read how you named the Hoka, but you can repeat that here and then also speak to how you named the Moonlite [Café].

RS: When I first came here—when I was trying to figure out what to name the place, I was reading a history of Lafayette County, and I saw a Princess Hoka, who is the Chickasaw Indian who sold the land to the white man. And that's--that's when I came up with the, um, the Hoka. It was also during my, um, psychedelic days, and um, the initials for The Hoka Cinema were, um THC, which is the active ingredient in marijuana. So I—there was just a lot of--but it was mainly because of, uh, the Chickasaw Indian, Princess Hoka.

AE: Um-hmm.

RS: Um, and then the Moonlite Café I just, um, I--I just the-I just liked that name, and we were open late, and something about that name just really appealed to me. And, uh, we called the place the Moonlite Café, which confused people a lot because we would put an ad in the paper sometime about the Moonlite Café, and people wouldn't know where it was.

AE: [Laughs]

RS: And then we--and then, like a couple years after we did it, we--we were--someone showed us a--a sign, which is now where City Grocery has their catering [across South 14th Street from where the new Power House Community Arts Center is located]--

AE: Um-hmm.

RS: --there was a building down there that was named the Moonlite Café from maybe the [nineteen] twenties or [nineteen] thirties or—

AE: Really?

RS: --yeah. [Nineteen] forties, I don't know. And--and I've never found out anything-- I've never really researched it in the paper to find out about it.

AE: Huh, well—

RS: So.

AE: --we might have to do that research.

RS: Yeah, so—

AE: Definitely.

RS: --that was pretty wild.

AE: Well, tell me a little bit more about the food that you served and, um, maybe where you got some more of your recipes. Did you have some of your personal recipes that you cooked over there?

RS: Um, well I would--I was just famous for, you know, going to places and seeing things on menus and stealing them. But, you know, we would do a thing too where--a lot of times there would be years when we would do breakfast too. And just be open all the time. And—

AE: [For] years on a whim? [Laughs]

RS: Yeah. You know, we'd just, you know, we would start things and stick with it for awhile and then--then all of a sudden people wouldn't show up to cook. You know it's-- you know when you do breakfast on weekends you got to be there early, and seems as though most of the people that worked at the Hoka were party animals.

AE: [Laughs] **[COUNTER: TRACK 2 – 18:29]**

RS: And, you know, to be there at, you know seven to, you know, start making the pancake batter and everything. I remember getting a great recipe for pancakes from my aunt. And I--I still have the, uh, I recently retrieved the, uh--I was out of town when the Hoka was closed down. I would have never closed it down. But a friend of mine had retrieved the menu--the box that had all the menus in it--and this, um, this recipe that my

aunt had for pancakes had um, cornmeal in it. Not much cornmeal, but just enough--a couple tablespoons--that made the pancakes crunchy. Just a little bit of crunch. They were absolutely delicious. Um, and we—we had this excellent kind of bacon that we found that only restaurants were—it's—it was a Bryan [brand] bacon, but it was a real thick—

Female Guest: [To interviewer] Do you mind if I smooch with your friend?

AE: Not at all. Kisses are welcome.

[Kissing sounds heard in background]

RS: [To guest] How you be?

Guest: I be---I be good.

RS: [To the guest] Did you have a good trip in the uh, mountains?

Guest: Oh, did I!

RS: [To the guest] Was it cool? [Recording stops as Ron chats with his friend. Recording begins again talking about the bacon he used at the cafe]

[END TRACK 2 – COUNTER: 19:26]

[RECORDING RESUMES: BEGIN TRACK 3]

RS: It was this brand of Bryan bacon that—it--I never could--you know, because when we would run out of it, I would try to go to the grocery store and find it. And it wasn't--and the food purveyors do that a lot, there are certain things that they only sell to restaurants. And it was a--it was a really thick bacon, and we would--we would bake it in the oven instead of cook--cooking it in a pan. And it would really be crisp, and it was just wonderful. And it made that “Love at First Bite” an extra special sandwich.

AE: Um-hmm.

RS: It was just the little things like that. And then just instead of using regular mustard on the “Love at First Bite,” we would use that Zatarain Creole mustard. You know, we would just--we would come up with something that was just a little bit out of the ordinary. And—and it would make all the difference. We would--we--we had made a salad back then, and nobody else was doing it. We would--we'd put roasted sunflower seeds on it. And we were serving ranch dressing. And that combination of the sunflower seeds and ranch dressing just hit. And, uh, we--and that ranch dressing, I can't tell you how much of that we went through. You know, I think people if--if--if one would have had a syringe, I think people would have shot that stuff up.

AE: [Laughs]

RS: And, then again, like I've told you, um, the packages, uh, that we get from the food suppliers was better than what you could buy in the grocery store.

AE: Um-hmm.

RS: And--and it was the same thing where you would put the powder in and mix it with buttermilk and mayonnaise. But it was just--it was just better than what was store bought.

AE: Did you have any fruits or vegetables or anything that came from local growers?

RS: No, we did not at that time. No. We didn't. Uh, this is kind of—kind of before--we would have, you know, I--I'd talk to people about that and I--I was at a point where I was starting to really get interested in really healthy stuff, but we never, um, we never did that. I always wanted to do a juice bar, but I never did get to it. In fact, if I do open a place again--which I hope I do—it will def--one of the first things we'll put in there is a juice bar.

AE: Um-hmm. Well, and I've read that you had a, um, vegetarian chili on the menu. [Loud coughing sound in background]

RS: Yeah, we had a delicious--delicious vegetarian chili that we made up with, um, with black beans. I'm glad you--I had--I had forgotten about that. Um, another thing we did is, um, there was this Great American Harvest Bread Company. And they were at the time--there may still--still may be one in Memphis, but I'm not sure. But they had phenomenal breads, and I would--I would go once a week to Memphis, when I went go to pick up the films. [Loud coughing in background] And I would go by there and buy their breads, and I would also stop by a deli up there and get their bagels. We--we did introduce Oxford to bagels. I will--I will say that. Um, nobody was serving bagels. Um, the grocery stores didn't have them at the time. This was before those horrible Lender's Bagels were in the groc--those things are horrible. Um, but I—I would--I would always seek out things, and I would go to Memphis, and I would find different suppliers for things and it was--you know, sixty to seventy percent of a sandwich is the bread, and I would go there and get the this phenomenal bread from this American Harvest. And the—the bread was actually sweeter than most breads are, but it—it--it made a sandwich just so delicious.

AE: So I know you're really married to the--to the cinemas and film and movies and all that, and you opened the Hoka as a theater, but what is your feeling about having a café and being a restaurant over-owner and serving food and that side of things?

RS: I--I think that I—and the reason that I—I would like to get into the food again is I--I think it is one of the most cosmic, spiritual things you can do. And--and I was, uh, when we did the restaurant, I was very cocky when I would walk around town because I knew

my food was good. I was—um, you know, I see all these other place—these McAllister's and all these other places that open up--that all the food is prepared and all they do is slice it and, you know, there's hardly--there are so few restaurants that cook anymore. You know, they--they get everything--everything is made in the—in the boxes. It's all made up! And they come in and they-- and they just come in and thaw it out and warm it up. I was just--I was just really proud of what we did. And, um, that's why I want to do it again. I just--I just think that food should be c--cook, uh, cooked from scratch and--and I think that, um, I think it means something—spiritually. I really do. I--I um, I know it does.

AE: Well it's a great gift for one person to give another. And in that big mass quantity in that setting that it is a café it's a great--

RS: Oh, it is. It is. And that's why, um, I heard a thing on radio--public radio yesterday about this, uh, guy that has, uh, a bistro. And it—it--he's got a cookbook out that I'm going to immediately look up. I wrote it down, uh, *Bistro Cooking at Home*.

AE: Um-hmm.

RS: And I've always thought that, you know, even though I didn't know it at the time, that we were more like a bistro. You know, which is homemade food and--and that extra step and big portions. And, um—

AE: What were your prices back then?

RS: Oh, they were so cheap. Boy, when I see a menu I realize why--why we were always struggling for money. You know, we--our, um, "Yes Sir Cheese My Baby" was a dollar fifty. You know and, um, the "Love at First Bite" was, uh, four fifty. Um, our nachos were famous. We had—we had nachos and we had these, um--a girl came to work for us that had worked in a Mexican restaurant, and we took our--our homemade turkey breast, and we would mix that with sour cream and sals--homemade salsa and that would--we would mix that all together and then put that on top of the nachos and then heat it under the, uh--I can't tell you how many of those we sold.

AE: [Short laugh]

RS: We--we--we were famous for our nachos. I think that, uh, the Jubilee [Restaurant] sells similar where we--there was a lot of, almost like a salad put on top of it and everything, you know. [Short pause] So, you know, I would--I would go someplace and see something interesting and then come and just try to put a different twist on it.

AE: Do you cook much at home? [COUNTER: TRACK 3 – 05:50]

RS: I--I sure do. Um, mostly--like during the summer--I mostly make salads. And, um, I've started experimenting a lot with chicken because, if I do do a restaurant again, I'm going to do a, uh, rotisserie chicken. And I've been trying to come up with a, you know,

the perfect marinades. I want to do--I want to do a restaurant that, um, treats the meats as side dishes but really emphasizes the vegetables and fish. And just kind of snubs the--the beef and the chicken. I *will* have beef and chicken, um, but I just--I just want to really--really push the, uh, the vegetables and have those on the--big letters on the menu and then as the sides we'll list the meats.

AE: Um-hmm.

RS: Which is kind of a different take on it all, you know. Because—and--I think that's the way that people should eat. They should eat a lot more vegetables and fruits and, uh, I think meat should just be--be on the side. So that's--that's my goal.

AE: Um, well what year did the Hoka close? And the Moonlite Café?

RS: The, uh, it was [nineteen] ninety-six. And I was away; working in Atlanta, at a wonderful restaurant in Atlanta called R. Thomas [Deluxe Grill], which is still open. It's a twenty-four hour, uh, restaurant on Peachtree that at three in the morning you can come in and get fettuccini, uh, they have an all natural juice bar, uh, all free-range chickens. It's a wonderful--it's right at the start of Buckhead. It's a wonderful restaurant and, uh, you know, I--I have to be straightforward, the Hoka was not clean--not kept well, you know. It was a bunch of us drunks, you know, and we didn't really keep it that clean. But working for this restaurant in Atlanta, I learned so much about maintenance and cleaning and everything. And one of the reasons that I want to do a restaurant again is just to show people that I--I have learned how to clean.

[Both laugh]

RS: And, um, you know, the way food should be served to people. So--

AE: Well you have quite a legacy here, so I'm sure people would be anxious to see a reincarnation of that Ronzo [Ron 's nickname] restaurant endeavor.

RS: Well, it would be—it would be fun. You know, there is a reputation but, you know, like someone like you that has never eaten there, um, sometimes the hearing about it makes it actually better than it was.

AE: [Laughs]

RS: And it was really a dump.

AE: [Continues laughing]

RS: You know, it was an old cotton warehouse, you know, there was--the floor was on a slant, and occasionally old cotton seeds would drop on your head, you know. And, um, but it did--it did--there was no doubt about it did--it did have a--there was something--it did have a spirit there. It was, um, it was a magical place because just-- you know, to me

it was an everyday gig, and I never realized it was so magical, but just to see the way people reflect upon it, and the way I'm—there's—there's not been more than two days that go by that someone doesn't come up to me and--and tell me about a story from it or [says] please to open it up again. And every time somebody says, "Please open it up again." My pat answer's become, "Just cut me a check--

AE: [Laughs]

RS: --and I'll open it tomorrow." [Laughs]

AE: Well what do you think when you pass by that building, that space now in that neighborhood?

RS: Well it--just 'cause it's still there and nothing is going on, I don't feel bad. But I heard just recently that it has been sold for condos.

AE: Mmm.

RS: And we, you know, the day before they go to start tearing it down I'm going to have a party down there. There's no telling how many hundreds of people will come for that party. And we will have a—

AE: Yeah.

RS: --we will have a ho-down. But I am so glad that we have a website that keeps memories of it, and people have such good memories. And like you're—you're going to, you know, write this up or talk this up, you know. It's wonderful that it--that it gets to stay, so, I--I'm thrilled.

AE: Sure. Yeah. Well, when people are still talking about it on the streets, and it's been gone for eight years, it's worth remembering and putting in the archives at Ole Miss so—
[COUNTER: TRACK 3 - 09:38]

RS: Well, that's—Yeah. I'm flattered, you know. And you know who—uh, Bill Ferris, who helped start the Center there for Southern Culture?

AE: Mm-hmm.

RS: He was a big fan, and he would come there a lot. And, um, one time he had come back from Spain, and he was so interested in paella that I even tried to cook it. And, you know, he would [say], "Oh, we had this wonderful paella." I, you know, I would try to do anything--I would try to do a lot of things and sometimes when there was, um, movies like *Babette's Feast* and movies that emphasized food—[Like] *Water for Chocolate*--I would try for the weeks that we were showing those movies to try serve something that was—that was from that movie. That's the advantage of having a kitchen, yeah, in--in with a movie theatre.

AE: Definitely. Well, we talked a little bit before we started recording about the other cafés in town that were around: Mistilis and, um, B&B Café and Mrs. Isaiah's Busy Bee. Can you--can you speak briefly maybe about your experience or an experience at one of those places?

RS: Yeah, uh, I--I loved Isaiah's Busy Bee because if you would call her up and ask her what—what she was having tonight--she would only have one thing--you--you--you know. It was like going home, you--you got no choice. It wasn't like, uh, where you got to pick your vegetables or your meats and everything. She just had one thing, and there – there was a time I remember, that I had called to ask her what she had and she hung up on me.

AE: [Laughs]

RS: But it was wonderful. And, you know, every meal included this wonderful pound cake that she would make. And she made--she made wonderful fried chicken and always had great vegetables. I *loved* it. I loved Busy Bee. And then, um, I spent so much time at Mistilis's because he would be open early in the morning, and there was a while there that I lived within a mile of it, and we would actually walk down there. I know there was one summer that we ate there every morning. And he would make great--great omelets, and he had those big French fried potatoes like, uh, Proud Larry's serves, that I love. And he had--and, uh--he had great fried chicken. He was known for his hamburger steak and smothered onions but I, um, I always pretty much did the fried chicken. I--I uh, didn't eat a lot of red meat back then, and I loved his fried chicken. And I loved going there. It was a--the place had so much character--so much soul, and he was always so friendly. In fact, one time—

AE: This was the place up on College Hill?

RS: It was on College Hill, uh, now it's Arden's or Aden's or whatever it is. In fact, um, when I was--I started going there before I opened the Hoka, and then when I was going to open the Hoka I needed a heater, and he had one in the back sitting there, and he just gave it to me. So he gave me my first heater.

AE: He told me that. And then you gave him a--a lifetime pass to the theater. Is that right?

RS: And then I gave him a lifetime pass, you know.

AE: [Laughs]

RS: And I think he won out on that one because he came--he came to the movies a lot.

AE: [Laughs]

RS: Actually. His, uh--his wife, Jo Dale, loved the MGM musicals--*Singing in the Rain*--so yeah, they came a lot. So it was--it was--I love—I love the barter system. You know, this was back in [nineteen] seventy-five and the barter system and the--the hippie mentality was alive and well.

AE: Um-hmm.

RS: You know, it was a wonderful opportunity to be able to share that.

AE: And it meant something. Yeah.

RS: It sure did. I just never grew out of that--that feeling that went on that saw in the [nineteen] sixties and seventies. And I know a lot of people that have changed, moved on or whatever--become corporate or whatever. But--but I never did. And it's--it's either a remarkable thing and a good thing on my side, or it's a failing. I tend to look on it as a good thing. Um, I've always been proud of my lifestyle and, you know, I like life everyday.

AE: Well, and you've stayed in this small town, um, and you've changed it, and it's changed you, I would imagine. What has—what has kept you on here [in Oxford]?

RS: I—I like--I left for a couple years, but I just realized how much I like small town life. That I can't do the cities. Even though I grew up in St. Louis, and I like--I love cities. And I love to go to them, and I love hanging out in them. But, um, I just—I just like the quiet of a small town, um, I like--I like the number of readers and writers that come here. You know I'm, um, fortunately interested in literature, and I love that, um, that it seems that every writer because of Faulkner and because of Grisham, uh, every writer in the world wants to come here. And they do. And I remember going out to eat with Billy Collins, you know, the poet and he--we were sitting at the--having a few drinks and he realized, he says--he says, "I know why you live here," he says, "because eventually everybody comes here. You don't have to go anywhere. Because everybody comes to Oxford." And it--it, you know, it's kind of an exaggeration, but it's really kind of true.

AE: Um-hmm.

RS: Uh, we--we--this is one of those towns that people are very curious about, and we get a lot of attention. And, uh, we back it up because it's, uh—it's got an intellectual feeling here. And—and it's--and it's for real. And, um, everyday it seems as though a different artist or a musician or a painter or writer moves here.

AE: Um-hmm.

RS: And even though the town is changing tremendously and getting urbanized and yuppy-sized--yuppy-ized, it, um, it's--it's still--it still is wonderful. And still remains, um, a great feel to it. It's still down-home.

AE: Yeah. I hear you. Well, do you have any final thoughts about, um, the Hoka or the Moonlite Café, specifically, that you would like to share with our Southern Foodways audience?

RS: Um, I'm proud that it [The Hoka], um, was named for a Native American [clears throat], and I'm proud that we, uh, we served real food to real people. And I'm--I'm fortunate that people accepted it, and I'm, um, really lucky that so many wonderful people worked with me there, that kept that spirit going. I always had um--

AE: Who were some of those people? [COUNTER: TRACK 3 – 15:28]

RS: Well, Blaine that owns the Jubilee worked there. And **Jamo** that cooked at Yocona [River Inn], who Paige says is the best grill cook she's ever seen, who was just an amazing cook. Uh, Jim Dees worked there. It, um, uh, Chad who owns the Two Stick worked there, you know. And that--I see the Jubilee and the Two Stick as reincarnations of the Hoka. Except that they--they serve liquor and keep it clean, you know, it's--

[Both laugh]

AE: Well, and they reminded me to ask you about live music. I know you had a lot of live music in the place.

RS: Um, yeah, I did, um, we'd kind of be--I--I would do a lot of blues. I would seek these Mississippi blues guys--or any blues guys--and we would have them there. Um, I would try to do music that wasn't being played elsewhere. And the beauty of it is--is [that] we didn't serve alcohol there, but people could bring their own in. It was really a party. And the real parties were when the Beanland, who was a popular local band, they would play, but they wouldn't start until midnight. And then people would bring coolers in, and it was a party! And every time they ever played, the place was so--was so, you know, as many people as you could possibly get in there. And then of course we would sell so much food cause, you know, a lot of the people would be hungry. And we would, uh, those--those things would go until dawn. Um, tonight there's a band playing on--in town, uh, the Stockholm Syndrome, which is people from Widespread Panic. Uh, JoJo, um, was our house piano player when he first moved to the South. Uh, the guy in--in Stockholm Syndrome that's playing tonight, the guitar player, Jerry Joseph, came one time and played at the Hoka. Um, he had a group called Little Women, and their van broke down, and they ended up staying for two weeks. And they were our hot--they played every night for two weeks. They were kind of a, uh--kind of a reggae--reggae band. And they became famous playing in the parking lots of all the Grateful Dead shows. [Short pause] So yeah, the music thing, uh, was just another addition that worked well.

AE: A little bit of everything, huh?

RS: Just everything, you know. It just--it just seemed like whatever, uh--

AE: Were you open on Sunday?

RS: We were open, yeah. That was one of--that was one of our biggest nights because so many places close in a college town, which is so ridiculous. And, you know, it's a— it's a night when--when everyone's looking for something to eat, and it--it was definitely one of our biggest nights.

AE: Yeah.

RS: Yeah, we did--we did a lot of business on Sundays.

[Short pause]

AE: Excellent. Well, anything I've left out or anything you want to add?

RS: Um, I'm hungry now.

AE: Yeah! And the bar is closing so—[Laughs]

RS: Because--Yeah, it's closed. [Laughs]

AE: All right, Ronzo. Well, thank you—

RS: Yeah, my pleasure.

AE: --for sitting here with me. I appreciate it.

RS: Thank you. I'm flattered.

[COUNTER: TRACK 3 – 18:03]

[END]