

RUFUS BROWN
Johnston County Hams, Smithfield, North Carolina

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Interviewer: Sara Wood

Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs

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[Begin Rufus Brown]

00:00:00

Sara Wood: So Mr. Brown I'm wondering if you could start by saying hello and introducing yourself for the tape, tell me your name and where we are right now and what you do here?

00:00:10

Rufus Brown: Okay, my name is Rufus Brown and I'm the Plant Manager, Curemaster at Johnston County Hams in Smithfield, North Carolina.

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SW: And for the record will you tell me your birthdate?

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RB: September 25, 1967.

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SW: And Mr. Brown I'm wondering if you could start by telling me a little bit about where you grew up and how you ended up here in Johnston County.

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RB: It was a—well being born in 1967 it was that same year that—that my dad decided to take the job down here as Plant Manager. So I was less than a year old when we moved down from Tazewell, Virginia. And so that's how I grew up, I've been down here my whole life, so—.

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SW: You said Tazewell is where you're—?

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RB: Yes, it's up in the southwest part of Virginia next to the West Virginia line. My dad, he was curing hams up there on a small scale and then also he was selling fresh hams to a lot of the ham curers down here in the mountains and—and this is how they—the company, the—the—Mr. Richard Edmondson who was the Plant Manager then met my dad and decided to bring him down here to run the plant.

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SW: So had your dad—as far as you know had he always been working curing hams and in that kind of business?

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RB: Well he—yeah, he had always grown up like that. I think when he came—came back from World War II he went into—he took a meat class that taught him how to butcher and everything, so he actually worked up at that smaller slaughterhouse and then he also was—they said he was one of the best butchers. He traveled around. His sister was down in Miami and he had a cousin in Texas. He could go down and get a—a job anywhere working as a butcher, he was so good.

00:02:16

SW: So now where did he learn to—so he took the meat class you said when he came back from the war but in terms of learning how to cure and—and do all that how he did learn how to do that? Do you know?

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RB: Yes, he had an uncle on his mother's side that was curing hams up in Tazewell too, and that's where he learned. He—he took—he took his uncle's recipe and—and brought it down here.

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SW: And before I get too far along without asking this could you tell me your father's name and your uncle—both your parents' names but also your uncle's name who he learned—?

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RB: Yes, it's—my dad was—his name was Jesse Brown and then my uncle's name was Uncle Brett Brown.

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SW: Now could—do you remember growing up did your father ever tell you stories about how he learned to cure or stories along the lines of you know being around like traveling around to—all around the region butchering for people? Did he ever share stories with you about that?

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RB: Yeah, well he—he shared a lot of stories about—especially about going around to—going out to the Midwest and going to the different slaughter facilities out in the area. He had gone to Chicago Stockyards and buying hams and he said back then that the—that—that the owners of the slaughter companies would—would take him in and you know have him over for dinner at their house at nighttime. So he—he got to meet a lot of people in the meat business you know. And he actually started selling hams to—he was—he knew Colonel Sanders who started Kentucky Fried Chicken. He was selling them—he was selling Colonel Sanders country hams when he first started, so—.

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SW: Do you know why your dad started curing or why your uncle started curing or his uncle—just in terms of was it a necessity thing or was it more of a business? Do you know the story behind that?

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RB: Well back then there was a—it was starting at—the country ham business was starting to pick up probably back in the [19] '60s and '70s. They were coming out. They had first come out with the vacuum packs of country ham where they could actually display it in the store, so it was a—. And it was a—kind of a new market and it was kind of a growing market then. So that's— and the—and back then fresh hams were real cheap and the cost was down. So you know a lot of people were—were doing that.

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SW: And—and just to make sure I understand when you say that your dad was selling fresh hams to people was he actually—was he—so he would go to farms and buy them and then sell them or did he actually raise hogs himself?

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RB: No, no he just—he would—he would call up these—back in the [19] '60s and '70s and even in the '80s there was just a lot of small ham curers scattered out in the mountains of North Carolina all the way, not too much past Smithfield here. But he would take orders, it was just another way to make money, so he—he would take orders for how many fresh hams they wanted and then he would drive out to the slaughter facility and buy the fresh hams and then bring them back. And he got to meet a lot of people like that.

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SW: Did you ever travel with him when he was doing the rounds?

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RB: No, no. He did a lot of that before I was even I think even before he—he married my mother about right at the same time period. So 'cause—'cause when we came down here you know he was pretty much—you know was just working for Johnston County Hams.

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SW: Now growing up watching your father work did you—were you inclined to follow in his footsteps? Did you think that—did you know early on was the wheel turning “Well, maybe I’ll do this too?”

00:06:23

RB: Well I spent a lot of time here you know growing up you know coming around the plant and stuff and he would bring me in here to—on the weekends to check the plant to make sure the temperatures in the cooler and everything and you know it seemed like I was very interested in it, but then he brought me in here when I got old enough to work in high school. He brought me in here and I just really picked up on it and enjoyed it from then on. So I worked all summers in high school. I worked all the summers during college and then once I got out of—I graduated at UNC Wilmington and I came here full-time in ’89.

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SW: What did you love so much about it?

00:07:01

RB: Ah well a lot back then, it was just some of the older—there were several older guys here just you know neat to hear the stories of them and just you know working with them each and you know one day you’re salting the meat, maybe the next day you may be cutting hams up, the next day you may be washing hams and washing the salt off of them. It just—it wasn’t the same you know process all the time, so—.

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SW: How has that changed from you know in your memory from starting at a young age and I'm just wondering in terms of the curing process how—has that changed from the time you started working with your dad 'til now?

00:07:44

RB: You talking about the whole ham process? Yeah, we—we had to make some changes as far as the way we do it. I mean the same—we're still using the same salt form that my dad brought down but the—the way that we're stacking the hams and the salt, the amount of time and everything because the hogs have—the size of the hogs have kept getting bigger and bigger and bigger and the hams have gotten bigger and the—they—they did a lot of work with the genetics and made the hogs leaner. So we had to do stuff different and then—and then of course the—the USDA regulations have changed a lot the way we do stuff.

00:08:27

SW: And when your dad started here at—as a plant manager do you know what kind of hogs it—are you using the same kinds of hogs or has that also changed?

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RB: Probably the same type of hogs ever used but—but when he was here the majority of the hogs were coming from, you know, small farmers where they were raising them on the ground. And the—the—the slaughter companies like Lundy Packing would have buying stations around and that they, you know so you were getting a wide variety. It wasn't just the same—same type of hog you know that you were getting—. And that—that was good as far as curing and it was—

it was a better hog that was on the ground, too as far as his muscle structure and everything. And then when it started going to the big commercial farms that's when we had to start making some changes. We saw some differences in the—in the pork now.

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SW: And what were the breeds before the commercial farms and I mean were there predominantly a couple types of breeds or—?

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RB: It—they were probably mostly Duroc. There was—yeah there might have been some Berkshire and stuff mixed in back then but it's predominantly the same one. But what you got, you got with the smaller farms, you got—you know different feed—they were feeding them different stuff so it wasn't—and it showed up in the meat and stuff too. So it's kind of neat, you wasn't getting the same—same hog being fed the same thing, you know like you do on these commercial farms.

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SW: What—what were they feeding them before the commercial farms? Do you know the different types of things that they were feeding the hogs?

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RB: You—they—mainly the main ingredient was you know somewhat was corn and stuff but you know they were turned—you might have been getting some—the hogs in the woods that might have been you know they were eating acorns, they were eating—you know they might

have been eating you know tables, you know table scraps or stuff you know. I know some of them—I used to see—we had a bread store down here and the—and the bread that went out of date I'd see hog farmers go in there and loading their trucks up with bread and so it—it—they were getting a mixture of stuff, you know whatever—a lot of them were just I wouldn't say cutting costs but they utilized what they had, so—.

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SW: And do you know could you talk—this is sort of a two-part(er), but when—just some names of the smaller farms that you were—you were buying hams from before—or hogs from before the commercial farms?

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RB: Well we—we never knew—we never bought hams you know directly from the small farmers. We knew a lot of them but we knew that they were selling to you know Lundy Packing Company and that's who we were buying—you know would buy from, so—. You'd be getting you know you would be getting—you couldn't tell where you were getting those hams but—but that's the way—you know we knew that those farmers were selling to there so we were buying from that. So and—and we would buy hams you know out from the Midwest too and you know different places, you know to try different ones. I know one load my dad got in from Canada and they were well—real pretty hams because the hogs were all wheat fed up there, so—.

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SW: Were they Durocs as well do you know?

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RB: Yeah, that—that's mainly the—you know the main breed that—that most people use, so—.

00:12:14

SW: And then—and in terms of the commercial farming, can you talk about—I know you've mentioned it in a few spots so far but can you talk about when that started—when the commercial farms like the timeframe of the commercial farms and how that's—that's changed your operation, how you do your job in terms of you know from A to Z?

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RB: There was a time, it was probably—I'm trying to remember back in the [19]'80s where just the hog market dropped out. The bottom of it dropped out and it just you know the hog—it put the small guys out of business and that's when the—the bigger commercial farms and there was the explosion of the commercial farms here in North Carolina down east and but we started seeing the change. We had—we used to have wooden racks in the salt room to where we would stack like forty hams and then we'd slide a shelf and stack forty more. Well we were starting to get I would say a little bit of spoilage and it was just right around in the shank part of the hams. And we could not figure out what the problem was because we hadn't changed the formula, we hadn't changed anything, and it was like a constant process. So we started stacking the hams right back in the cardboard box that they came from—from the slaughterhouse.

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So we got them—instead of stacking forty there was 100 and some. And we found out that the weight of the hams was actually helping you know push the salt into the solution. The

hams had gotten bigger and more muscular so it needed more weight you know as far as in the stacking process, so that—that was a big thing that changed for us.

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SW: Did you notice—I don't—I'm wondering if—if these two things are linked at all. When—when the hog business dropped in the [19] '80s did that change—I mean were people not eating as many country hams as they were before? Do you know how that affected—?

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RB: No, it—it was about—they had—the hog farmers that year had produced so many hogs and you know the demand was not out there, so really just you know the bottom dropped out of it. I mean it was like record—record lows. And so they—and that was a shame 'cause it put a lot of the smaller guys out of business.

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SW: Do you—did—so today where do you guys—where do you get your hogs from and what kind—can you talk about the breeds that you use here?

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RB: Um, we get some now from the—the smaller farms. We've—we've branched out into some of the specialty—the specialty breeds. We still have to get you know from the commercial guys because there's not enough of the smaller guys around that produce hams. But we—we started curing a breed that was brought over from Austria which is the Mangalitsa, also known as the wooly pig. We—we've cured some of them. We've cured some—some Berkshire hams.

We've cured some Ossabaw hams off the Ossabaw hog which is you know from Ossabaw Island down in Georgia. And—and we've probably cured a few more but we're starting going back—people are looking for the—the pork and everything coming from the small farms now.

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And we've seen a trend with that, a big—the biggest trend I've seen in years you know they want to know where you know where everything is coming from. They want to know the farmer. They want to know the name of the farm, the type of breed, they're really wanting you know their—everything, their vegetables, their meats, beef—everything coming from you know small farms, so—.

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SW: Does that make your job harder or easier?

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RB: It's kind of making it a little bit easier as far as us you know—far as trying to market. We've always tried to put out a quality product and—and specialize you know like in the specialty you know end of it, so it—it's made my job a little—you know a little bit easier. It sure has.

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SW: And can you—could you give me some names of some of the smaller farms that you work with?

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RB: I'm trying to think. There's a—I'm trying to think of the lady up at—she's up in Cane Creek [Farm] which is up in Snow Camp [North Carolina].

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SW: Is it Eliza [MacLean]?

00:17:01

RB: Yeah Eliza, I've got some of her—you know I've cured some of her hams and the Mangalitsa, they—they were coming from Heath Putnam Farms and he was started out on the West Coast and then tried—he moved hogs eventually to the Midwest and then—and now some guys up in—up in Northern New Jersey in the mountains of New Jersey, Mosefund [Farms] have the hogs. So—so that's the ones and then there's—there's some more. We're curing some more hams here and I'm not—these guys are—they're here and it's—it's a group of farmers and they're here in Eastern North Carolina and I'm not—but they're raising hogs for like Whole Foods and stuff. So we're—we're getting some hams off of them too, so—.

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SW: And I wanted—before I forget to ask and I don't want you to give away any trade or family secrets but could you talk about the curing process because when I was looking on the website it—it says that it goes back to early colonialists, but I'm wondering if you could talk specifically about where—where your dad got the curing method and—and could you kind of talk a little bit about that and where it comes from?

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RB: Yeah, everybody's process is pretty much you know—they've got to go through three stages. It's not just ours but anybody who is wanting to do it. But it's—the first one is the salting stage where the hams are covered in salt and we do that twice. So each ham is hand-rubbed and they're rotated from top to bottom. We do that in the first five to seven days that we have received the hams in—from the slaughter facility. They stay—they stay in the salt room for like forty-two to forty-five days at thirty-eight degrees and then we bring them out and we wash the hams. We put them in stocking nets or nets. We hang the up like shank down. We move them into an equalization room which is like fifty degrees and they stay there two weeks. And then from there we move them into the aging room which is eighty degrees and they finish out their time period.

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The earliest that we can sell a ham with our formula under USDA is like ninety days but we keep a lot of them. We—we will keep some of them you know up to six or seven months. The Mangalitsa hams they're cured up for like two years, so—.

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What dad brought down here was a—just a formula, his mixture of you know salt, sugar, sodium nitrite, and sodium nitrate—that's the formula that he brought from his uncle down here and implemented here, so—.

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SW: Do you know that—do you know if when your dad first started curing in Virginia what—did your uncle—did his uncle have controlled environments or was it—was it just you just used the weather basically? Do you know?

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RB: Mostly what they did up in the mountains was ambient curing. So it was not in controlled—and actually when dad got—got down here and—and the ham industry was having a lot of trouble because they were—they were trying to equalize the hams. You had to—you know all we're doing is reproducing the seasons you know. The salt room is wintertime when the hogs were killed on the farm. Spring—and then they would go through the springtime temperatures which is around fifty to sixty. And then they go through the summertime heat and then the farmers would usually cut the hams you know in the fall of the year.

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So but the ham industry was missing the—when dad come down here they were missing the—the middle stage, the equalization. They were trying to do everything in the salt room and you know it was not getting up to the proper temperature and they were kind of stacking the hams in there. So dad came down here and really he implemented the—the middle stage down at this plant. So but—but also they were doing—they were doing a lot of work, I think Dr. Bloomer and Dr. Christian up at NC State [University], they were the ones that were instrumental in coming up with you know—helping everybody with that—with the middle stage, the equalization room.

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SW: Do you know about what timeframe that was, like period of time?

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RB: It had to be somewhere right around—I think in the early '70s 'cause dad—dad put some—he was one of the first ones to put some equipment in, some refrigeration equipment in there that also you know it was putting the cool air in but it's also called a heat reclaim system which would you know take heat that was actually being put in the atmosphere and put it back into the room to try to keep it—you know to save on energy and everything. And he—he was one of the first ones to try to you know to do that and everything in—in the room. So but it had to be somewhere right in the—the late '60s or early '70s.

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SW: And this just popped into my head and I wanted—I meant to ask you, you said the Mangalitsa was known as the wooly pig. Why is that?

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RB: They are covered in—in a thick wooly coat of hair from front—front to back, everywhere. It looks more kind of like a sheep kind of but they call them the snowy pigs, you know they were—they were breed(ed) and it was almost kind of you know—almost killed off and some people over in Austria and that area you know got together and kind of saved the breed. But it—the only thing—the big difference with the Mangalitsa and the hams we have today is they're—they have probably about three to four inches of fat on them. And that's the way—I can show you a picture downstairs but back in the '50s and '60s, '70s—that's the way our hogs were.

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And that—that's where your flavor profile is at in the fat and you know when we started breeding that away we lost a lot of flavor and everything, so it's—it's really—it's kind of an old-fashioned you know pig, but—. It just—the—the fat is an unsaturated fat so it's got more of a healthy fat 'cause of the diets. But it just—it melts in your mouth.

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SW: And I have more questions for you about, you know, your-learning curve here but I wanted to ask you since you brought that up—how have you noticed since when you started working with your father 'til now how has the consumer interest in country ham changed? Has it dipped and come back in your observation? I'm just wondering what you've noticed about the—the consumer demand for ham.

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RB: The consumer—used to you could go to the grocery stores you know back in the '80s—probably the country ham industry probably peaked maybe in the early '90s as a mature market and then it just—it's been on the down—you know the decline. You know we've lost a lot of ham curers. They've gone out of business because of the—you know the market. And you used to see it everywhere in the grocery stores but you know now it's really—it's shrunk up, you know they're putting it in refrigerated cases now. So but it—you know it's changed a lot, it has really—you used to see country ham, whole country hams hanging up in the stores. They were running the specials on them and you know at that time period and days, people started wanting to eat healthier, you know reduce the salt. But now it's become more of a kind of a, you know of a specialty item.

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Now—now the ham curers that—that are the real big ones like in the western part of the state, they're big in the food service. You know they're slicing and doing the portion business for McDonalds, Hardee's, you know food service, so—. You know there's still demand you know and volume in that part of it, but as far as retailing it, it just—it's—it's dipped a whole lot.

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SW: How do you weather that in your business? How do you weather that and—and how do you keep your unique—unique identity stamp on the product throughout that?

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RB: It's been hard—hard to weather. You know the—the—you know we're in a specialty item. What most people don't understand is that we do about forty to fifty percent of our business the last two months a year—November and December. The whole year is geared up. So you've got—you know before the recession hits you had you know these corporations and stuff. They would call up and you know want 100, 300 hams. We'd send them to customers. They wanted them for their employees and a lot of that you know is cut out. But we're just trying to right now whether it's through you know specializing and branching off like the different heritage breeds and—and working with some upscale distributors you know distributing the product, something you know that we can get a better mark-up for than just you know—.

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One problem that hurt the country ham business it turned into like a—with all the grocery store business back in the '80s and '90s it turned into like a commodity item.

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SW: [*Phone Rings*] Do you need to get that?

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RB: Nah, the lady will get it downstairs.

00:27:18

SW: I'll make sure we're still rolling here. I always—I'm always afraid that the tape has stopped or something.

00:27:24

RB: Oh okay.

00:27:25

SW: I'm wondering also could you talk a little bit about in terms of who you supply—. Or actually, country ham, could you—for somebody, when you—when you use the term country ham could you describe for somebody who maybe wouldn't completely understand what does country ham mean to you? When you say country ham, what does—could you describe it?

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RB: Country ham to me you know means a dry-cured, a salt-cured ham. That's because I've grown up in the business. Now to other people maybe from Minnesota or Wisconsin where you got some of these plants—that little small people out in the country making it, you know what I

call a pumped ham, you know kind of like a spiral ham, they use the term country ham you know for that and—. Another thing that is deceiving is a marketing term that the country ham people used was called sugar-cured back in the—you know and that was to help make the ham sound sweeter you know. And—and a lot of people now are coming in, you know they talk, “Well I want a sugar-cured ham.” Well they’re talking more about the honey, the spiral sliced ham now you know. And they say, “No, well I want a country ham that’s sugar-coated.” Well you—you can’t cure a ham with just sugar. I mean but it—it was just a big marketing technique.

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But the problem we run into now—we try to educate consumers that there’s still a lot of people that—that you know will buy these hams or they get one as a gift for Christmas. They’re serving it for their Christmas dinner. And you know it ruins everything because they’re—they’re getting a ham that they don’t understand and they think it was going to be a sweeter type ham. So but you know country ham to me means a salt-cured ham.

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SW: Can you describe the taste of it, describe the taste of the best ham you’ve ever had? Do you remember what that was and if you could talk about what it tasted like?

00:29:27

RB: The best ham I had—and—and I’ve been a judge for country hams at the Kentucky State Fair twice. I was—been ham judges, you know and I’ve got to taste a lot of hams around that—the best ham like that I have ever tasted would—would—right now would have to be the—the Mangalitsa ham, you know sliced thin and eating like prosciutto. It’s just that—it’s just a fat—

it's just a type of hog you know well it's just gone back to what—you know what the hogs were you know back in the '50s and '60s. That—that's the best. I've tried a lot of them. I've tried the Parma ham and I've tried the Serrano but that—that Mangalitsa is special.

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SW: And is that something that's unique to the—to what you do here? I mean you do the Mangalitsas or do you know other ham curers that are—are using the wooly pig so to speak?

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RB: They're—we're—we're the only one that has—has done it and really marketed it and been you know I might say a large scale. They may—you know there were some other hams and stuff sold and—but most people you know it's a high dollar product. It's like you know a fresh ham off a Mangalitsa is like six times the price of a—of a regular commercial ham. So it—and you know you got your money tied up for two years in that so—.

00:31:05

Not everybody is wanting—you know wants to do that, so—.

00:31:10

SW: I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about the idea. You know I started reading about ham curing because I didn't really know a whole lot about it, but I'm wondering—it just seems to me, I mean you have your whole life's work in it and it seems like it takes so much patience and it's about waiting. I mean could you—could you talk a little bit about that? Is that what it feels like to you? I mean how does—how does that process feel like because it seems—

you're so invested in it and then you just kind of have to wait. And does that—could you talk about—?

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RB: It is—you know there's some different ways that you can shorten—shorten the time period up and it really—it comes to the—in the aging house. We run eighty degrees there. Some ham curers—the USDA has regulations for every five degrees you go up you knock seven days off of it, so some of these guys are running ninety to 100-degrees in there. And they're able to turn the hams out in seventy to eighty days but it—you really—the country ham process is not something that you know you can rush.

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It—you can push it out in that time period but it's not really you know dried out—what I—to our specifications. And it is a long—you know it's a long process going through there. And if you've got a problem or something you know maybe in your curing or something or something you're trying to work out you're not going to find out whether you've corrected until about thirty months later. It's not something you're going to find out the next day or next week. So it—it is, it's a process of just you know just waiting.

00:32:52

SW: What is—can you talk about what it was like to work with your father when you first started and what the learning curve was like if you have any stories about working alongside your dad?

00:33:03

RB: When dad—when—when I got into the plant dad was primarily—he didn't go back in the plant much and all that back then. He—he would go back and help slice or do some big orders, something—wrap them up but—but mainly it was you know me learning from the other guys that had been there so long, you know about salting the hams and cutting the hams and stuff. You know and I learned a lot, dad taught me a lot about curing and stuff but it—you know we—. And then—and then when I moved up into the office after college you know I worked beside of him every day. We shared like a little tiny office. It was maybe half as big as this one. And it—it was good days and—and there was bad days. You know he—dad had his way of doing stuff and if I saw something better or something that we could change and do faster or something it was—it was hard getting it—getting a new idea past him. But it was—you know I cherished that you know moment.

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But I got tired of hearing the stories all the time, the same ones, but I'd give anything to hear them now, so—.

00:34:09

SW: Could you tell one of those stories, something that sticks with you?

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RB: Lord I can't—there was so many of them, he—just his travels around and you know my dad never got married until he was forty-six, forty-seven and he had me at forty-seven and my sister at fifty. So you know my—and there was like eighteen years difference in—in my dad's age and

my mother. So dad had almost lived a whole other life by the time he got married. So I can't— and just listened to—just the stories of himself you know going around visiting everybody and you know meeting Colonel Sanders, you know and all that stuff. But it—I can't—you know and he had been in World War II in the Battle of the Bulge so he got—he had been all through Europe and France and you know he—he had done a lot, so—.

00:35:05

SW: Do you know—I know this is a—this is a strange question but I'm just wondering when he was in Europe did he have any experience with ham in Europe and brought—and did he bring back anything? I know he's obviously in the war but—.

00:35:17

RB: He—you know he got to see that over there some I think. I don't know if he—he—I know he tasted the product and stuff over there. I don't think he brought in anything—you know back. The guy that he came to work for, one of the original owners, Richard Edmondson, him and two more owners of different ham companies, there was one down in I'm trying to think where he—that was down in Sanford, [North Carolina] Dan Lawrence and then Waitus Worrell who started WayCo Hams they all took a trip and went over to Italy and Europe and went through the ham houses you know over there—prosciutto companies and stuff. And dad, I don't think dad ever got a chance to go—you know go through those.

00:36:07

SW: Was he—in a sort when he started do you know if he was more of a traveling salesman or did people want him to come to them because he was so renowned for what he did?

00:36:17

RB: He was more of a salesperson. He—I mean he had that charismatic personality. He could just—he never met a stranger, so—. He did real good on—you know he brought a lot of his accounts, ham accounts down here, you know that he was selling to. So back then dad—he didn't really start getting the recognition until I think that magazine article came out and I think the Neal fellow, [Bill Neal] and I think he's passed away now, he was from up in Chapel Hill—he wrote about dad being the Ham King, you know and that really kind of put him—you know put him on the map there, so—.

00:36:59

And then also he was involved in the *Southern Living*, they did a big article I think in the '80s on country hams and they actually used his ham for the—the cover shot on the magazine, so—.

00:37:14

SW: Do you—did you notice any changes in your father after those stories came out and he was known as the Ham King?

00:37:20

RB: Well yeah, I just—I mean he—he would take that and run with it. You know I asked him, I said, “Dad you know—I said are you the Ham King of the South, of east of the Mississippi, or United States?” and he said, “No, son—the world.” And I said, “Okay.” So that—. It fit—it fit right in with his personality so—.

00:37:46

SW: How—I mean I know your father passed in 1996?

00:37:51

RB: Ninety-six.

00:37:52

SW: How—how have things changed for you since he passed in terms of the business?

00:37:57

RB: It—it has gotten a lot harder, it's not—I would say in '96 that—that also was about the same time that USDA started implementing a lot of—you know the—the HACCP process and the recordkeeping and the testing of your product and stuff. And I—you know I don't think dad, you know I'm almost glad that he passed away before that process come, because I don't think he could have you know—. It used to be the inspector told us what to do and we fixed it and did this. And then all of the sudden that process comes in there and you know it puts all—you know everything back on the plant and all the paperwork and the—. You know we used to didn't have to take temperatures or you know nothing. I mean and so that—that's the biggest thing. You know it put a big financial burden on you know on the company—on all companies, so—.

00:39:01

That—that was the biggest thing I would say that changed.

00:39:08

SW: Do you know why the regulations became so stringent?

00:39:11

RB: It all had to do with that incident—you know that Jack-in-the-Box. I don't know if you remember that, it was out in California with the hamburger chain and undercooked hamburgers and the e-coli and then they just, you know they implemented that HACCP after that. Really the crackdown, you know and there was a lot of plants that you know cut corners and—and would do other stuff, you know they shouldn't and you know probably some plants that were not as clean as—or open because the inspection system was—. You could go to—you could probably go to a different town. There was probably not the consistency that there needed to be so they went in there and just you know really tried to you know put the regulations in and help clean up stuff. And it—it—it's been good to you know a certain extent but it—it's—it's made you know—running a meat plant you know a whole lot—a whole lot more headaches, so—.

00:40:16

SW: Do you have here at Johnston County Hams do you have like one specific inspector who comes to visit or is it sort of like a—?

00:40:26

RB: I have one. This is his home office. His office is actually right next to mine. He comes here. He's got several more places he visits, so he may start off here in the morning and he may stay one hour and he may stay all day, it's hard to—. You know when I first started in the business we had what you call a—I'm trying to think what they call that inspector but he—you never knew when he was coming. You might not see him for a week and then he might show up the next week. You know you had to really—you know that kind of kept you on your guard, too, you

know so—because you didn't know when he was coming, so—. You did not see him—see an inspector a whole lot back then so—. But—but yeah, you've got a—these places that work and federally, they'll have an inspector every day now.

00:41:16

Some other states have what they do—the inspectors will rotate like every six months but not—not down here, not in North Carolina.

00:41:23

SW: Has that changed your—how you produce your product in terms of the quality of it, in terms—like from you know say before your father passed 'til now has the actual—has it affected the taste of the ham? I know that's a strange question.

00:41:39

RB: Well it—we—we cook a lot of country hams here and due to the regulations and the testing and stuff we've started going to a cooking bag. And that has actually helped really the quality and taste of our cooked product because the juices are, you know are trapped in the bag with the ham and we're not losing the juices down through the cooker drain. So it—you know there's been some—you know some good things that come out of it and that's one of them, so—.

00:42:13

SW: Do you have time for a few more questions?

00:42:15

RB: Yeah, yeah I got plenty. This is our slow period of time.

00:42:19

SW: Yeah, it's after the first of the year. I'm wondering if you—I always forget to mic myself—I'm wondering if you could talk about you know I was reading Sara Camp [Arnold]'s interview with you and there was this idea of the marketing shifted here. And it was the term curemaster was made.

00:42:39

RB: Yeah.

00:42:39

SW: And I'm wondering if you could talk about your initial feelings or what—what Curemaster means and your initial feelings toward that and how—if that's changed at all over time?

00:42:52

RB: Um, my dad would have took the term and—curemaster and run with it. You know I'm not as vocal or probably—you know I'm more humble than him, so—but it's a—it kind of gives you a—I'm trying to say, it's more of a marketing term but it's also you know consider the guys that do it on a smaller scale like—like us and Edwards [Edwards & Sons] up in Virginia, Sam Edwards [III] you know we're all—we get kind of termed the curemaster because we're you know—it's a small company and we're hands-on with it and—. But yeah it's changed over time, you know people really you know look up to you and they—. You know I'll go to these food

shows and they'll come up and say, "Oh my god!" You know, "I'm here talking to the curemaster!" you know. Johnston County Hams and stuff and these—the chefs and stuff it's—have really taken hold of it and—but yeah it's changed some. And when it first come out you know we were using it to market some, you know kind of a line of hams and stuff, but—but it's changed.

00:44:08

I've learned to appreciate it now, so—.

00:44:12

SW: So when someone says, "Mr. Rufus Brown, Curemaster," you—you feel proud as opposed to when you first—when you first heard the phrase and you were like, "Oh I don't want to really use that?"

00:44:21

RB: Well you know I was always proud of it. I just didn't—you know I don't like the—you know to make a really big deal out of it, so—. But yeah, some people they want me to go down there and sign the ham bag and stuff where they buy the ham and date it and stuff like that. So it's—you know I've learned to get—you know to accept that and—so—.

00:44:44

SW: And Mr. Brown could you talk about the—the different types of products that you produce here? I know there's something called the Curemaster's Reserve Ham. There's a country ham.

And then there's the—is the Mangalitsa something completely different? Could you talk about that?

00:44:58

RB: Yeah, the—our—just our regular country ham line, we've got—we've got two brands of whole hams, Johnston County Ham and the Tar Heel Ham and the Tar Heel is more of a younger type ham, you know and then the Johnston County would be the one that's you know aged a little bit longer. The curemaster would be the Johnston County Ham that's been hand-picked and they've aged even longer.

00:45:27

The Mangalitsa we've—we've kind of put that underneath the curemaster line too because it's a specialty type ham and we also do a dry-cured bacon off of the cure—off the Mangalitsa. But we've got a lot of other different—we do a lot of cooked country hams. We've got boneless cooked. We've got a little buffet ham, which is like three pounds which is boneless cooked. We got cooked slices. We do like a prosciutto boneless. We do prosciutto slices. You know we do dry-cured bacon and slab bacon. We got all—you know a lot of different products.

00:46:05

SW: I think I saw on your website that you smoke turkeys. Is that true?

00:46:09

RB: We—we do, we do about—it's more of a holiday type item so we do some whole birds and—and some you know—some bone-in breasts and then we have a line of spiral hams and

stuff which we get you know produced for us. But—but yeah, I have done in the past smoked duck, smoked goose here, you know as kind of a—I had gotten in—I had gotten a recipe from Dr. [Dwain] Pilkington who was up at NC State [University] on the smoked turkeys and stuff, so—.

00:46:44

SW: Could you talk a little bit about what that process is like?

00:46:47

RB: Yeah, it's a short process. You get the—you get the whole birds in. You mix up a brine solution which consists of the salt, little bit of sodium nitrite, some sugar, you soak the birds for so many hours like forty-eight and just bring them out and put them in the nets and hang them in the cooker and cook them up to 165 degrees and smoke them at the same time. It probably takes about eight to ten hours. It's kind of a slower-cooked process but it really kind of traps some moisture you know in the bird. It's a—it's not like one you do in the traditional—in the oven which would be you know a lot of people get those too dry. This one here you can slice—slice it but it will have a more of a—a pinkish tint to the meat, but yeah it's pretty—you know it's a neat—whole lot shorter than you know the country hams, so—.

00:47:45

SW: And do you—where do you get the birds from? Do they come from somewhere in North Carolina or does it just depend?

00:47:50

RB: Yeah, we get some—most of them from North Carolina. You know we've gotten them from Butterball, House of Raeford—I've gotten in some specialty all-natural birds from you know and I've gotten in the Joyce Foods. They're the ones who produce a lot of these specialty birds. Now the ducks and the geese I got through them.

00:48:17

SW: Who—who are your customers and what do they buy? I mean in terms of somebody who would buy a cooked ham versus you know selling to maybe a restaurant, I mean could you talk about your—your array of customers that you sell to?

00:48:33

RB: Well we've got our traditional holiday customers that order just once a year for—for Christmas or Thanksgiving. We've got some other regular customers that will order I say three or four times a year. These are individuals. The rest of them are—would be distributors that's going into these high-end restaurants selling boneless prosciutto or we make a fully cooked country ham deli loaf which is in like a rectangular shape. We sell a lot of those, they—they—people—caterers and restaurants can just put them on a deli slicer and slice them right up. A lot of—you know the food—we've got several food service distributors. We got some other guys, we—we sell some older hams up into the Northeast where they eat them like prosciutto. We got—we—we sell them all over. We got one—we got one distributor in Portland, Oregon who sells to Pine State Biscuits and they have been on the *Food Network* and plugged us. They were some NC State graduates who were working out in the textile industry that wanted to start up

something like Bojangle's. There was nothing on the West Coast so they started a farmers market and now I think they've got like three restaurants. And they have just—just good people.

00:50:02

But we sell—we got you know—we sell all over the United States. We got mail order. We're on Costco.com and they—they sell a lot of our whole hams.

00:50:15

SW: You're everywhere.

00:50:16

RB: Yeah, yeah.

00:50:17

SW: How does that feel to you? I mean—

00:50:19

RB: Well it's good. We've—we've really you know it used to be when I first started here it was just mainly on the East Coast as—as our customer base, but over time it has really you know branched out across the West Coast. You know a lot of you know chefs and stuff—the high-end, these high-end, these Michelin star restaurants order these Mangalitsa hams, so we ship those all over. But we've also seen our customer base at the holiday time and stuff have really—you know has shifted over. I don't know if people are moving over you know to the West Coast. I've seen a

lot of growth there some from individuals and you know Montana, Wyoming, so evidently people are retiring or moving you know out in that area, so—.

00:51:10

SW: Could you talk about or just give me some names of some of the restaurants that you—that you supply to?

00:51:18

RB: I'm trying to think. Let's see, a lot of them go through the distributors. One of the—one of the ones who is using a lot of the Mangalitsa hams and they say—it's up in Asheville [North Carolina]. It's the Seven Sows [Bourbon and Larder]. And we have other—I'm trying to think of some of the other restaurants around. I think there's—I'm trying to think of some of the—some of the more—but we have a lot of them out in Los Angeles, California and out—out you know out in California and some down around the Atlanta area. We've sold hams down to Husk Restaurant down in Charleston, so—and—and there's a lot of them going to restaurants and stuff. You know I have no idea 'cause they're going through distributors.

00:52:08

SW: Do you think that—I mean I'm wondering if there is a rhyme and reason, are most of your customers in the—in the Southern Region or would you say that it—that it just depends, I mean as opposed to say the West Coast?

00:52:21

RB: It—still the bulk of our business is probably in—with the wholesale and everything it's still probably in like two states, North Carolina and Virginia, up in there. We sell a lot up in the Richmond area, Smithfield area up there, Williamsburg area and—but you know and then we've got distributors all the way down through South Carolina and—and down there but it's—it's still—the bulk of it is still lodged here on the East Coast. And that's really you know from—you know from Kentucky over that's where the—you know the—the country ham. You can look at Tennessee, Kentucky, Missouri, Virginia, and North Carolina, you know just kind of wrapped around—right in there. That's where the bulk of the country ham's business was developed, so—

00:53:14

SW: Why—why is that?

00:53:16

RB: I think one thing it had to do with was—was kind of with the—some of the, you know the temperature requirement, you know temperatures and stuff. And it just—you know and I know they started curing hams all the way back, you know the Indians really showed I think some of the first colonists you know how to salt the hams down here. And so I think that kind of developed up in the Virginia area and just kind of spread. But—and I think a lot of people in the mountains—you know a lot of the—I think probably some of the first—the states that were probably colonized first is—is the ones where some of the country hams were developed then, so—.

00:53:57

And then probably in some of the more rural areas, you know places to, you know up in the mountain regions and stuff, so—.

00:54:05

SW: Do you know—if someone asked you why—why do people cure ham could you—could you explain that or answer that question like why cure ham? Why cure at all?

00:54:15

RB: One of it is you know it's—it's—as you're getting—you're preserving the meat, shelf—you know shelf-stable, you know it was done in older days so much because there was no refrigeration. So the—that's really you know—and now we're—we're getting a lot of these people who are calling up. Let's say—I reckon you'd call them “preppers” or “dooms day-ers” or you know looking for the end of time or whatever, you know a lot of them are—you know that's a big business now. They're you know they're storing stuff for—you know for long periods of time.

00:54:57

SW: Really?

00:54:58

RB: Yeah, yeah there's people that are really—got bomb shelters and I mean that's really big now. I mean they're—they're—you know they call them preppers 'cause they're prepping for the end, so they—you know you can buy a lot of these Army rations and stuff now in big

containers and they're selling them at you know sporting good stores, Wal-Mart, everything now, so—. But you know really you—you end up with an item that's—you can keep a lot of—a long time without refrigeration.

00:55:30

SW: Do you—do you like to eat ham, Mr. Brown?

00:55:33

RB: Um, I do. I've seen so much of it. You know I don't—you know we eat more probably chicken and turkey at my house. It's more of a holiday time, too, I mean I take it—we do a lot of—I'm involved in the scout troops so we cook a lot. You know we'll—we'll cook on the camping trips and stuff, and cook the ham slices up or—so you know we do that. But I—you know it's not something—I grew up eating it—seemed like every Sunday we cooked it. Mom would cook it for a Sunday breakfast. So you know we had—we had plenty of ham growing up.

00:56:09

SW: Do you remember how she cooked it?

00:56:12

RB: Just—just pan-fried it in a skillet. She'd do the center slices and then she would—we didn't go through—I can't never remember maybe once or twice they—they—they baked a ham in the oven because dad he started—he had a little cooker built here that run off of steam, probably back in the '80s and so he started cooking the whole—the whole hams here. So there was no need to cook them at home anymore if we needed one for Christmas or whatever, so—. But

that's a process in itself, you know a lot of people still do that and it takes like twenty minutes per pound for like you know—it takes probably about eight hours, so—.

00:57:00

SW: And how do you—how do you cook ham now? I mean do you cook it the same way your mother did or—I mean when you're cooking for the Scouts?

00:57:05

RB: Well we cook on volume now, we got a—we got cookers that will hold like 180 hams at a time and we—so we put them in there, so we're using a combination of steam, heat, and gas in there. You know we're getting that steam in there to put some moisture in there kind of like with the ham being in the roasting pot in the oven. You know it's got—you've got you know like an inch or two inches of water down there with it cooking. So you know, so it's pretty much the same process.

00:57:42

SW: And—and I'm also wondering—in terms like I'm going to go back to you know talking about when you first started working in the plant, and the guys who were working in the plant, and I'm just—I'm curious in terms of the hams—the curing ham business, do you see—is it mostly and especially with the small curers do you see—is it mostly Caucasian—Caucasian males curing or does it—do you see different backgrounds?

00:58:08

RB: As far as your workforce? Back—back then when I started it was Caucasian males. It was guys—farmers, guys who—there was another World War II veteran here working, just some—just some real tough guys that were hard-working guys. But now pretty much you know every—everybody is Spanish descent now that's working in the plant. We had to go to more people that knew how to bone so we had to pull from some different other plants around here but mostly the guys I've got working here are from down in Central America, Guatemala, Honduras, Costa Rica, so—.

00:58:53

SW: And I'm curious, this is just a shot in the dark here, but did they—do you know are they bringing any traditions—ham traditions from that region of the world here do you know?

00:59:03

RB: No, not really. You know you're probably—that's probably one area of the world that probably never did a lot of you know curing meats, you know. They're down there in a really almost tropical environment and stuff, so—. You would probably need to pull probably either somebody from Europe or you know somewhere in that—that area if they were going to pull some type of ham you know curing. But no, that—I've got one guy that's worked at thirty-some different meat plants boning, boning beef, boning hams, you know and what—what he's brought is his expertise in you know boning.

00:59:45

SW: And I'm curious because I don't—my knowledge of this is very slim so I wanted to make sure I asked you, when you buy hams are we talking—when you get it here do you—is it just the shank that you're curing or do you work with all different parts of the hog? How does that work?

01:00:03

RB: Well you know the hams are the—are the two back legs, so they've been cut out and trimmed out to our specifications. And they're probably weighing in the twenty-pound range. It—the only other—we will cure some shoulders and stuff, too sometimes. We sell down in the—the Caribbean they use a—a dry-cured what I call a picnic shoulder for—for the holidays instead of a ham. It's—it'll probably cure out four to five pounds or something like that, so—. We do some of that but the only other thing that we cure—the majority of what we cure more than hams would be the—the bellies for bacon, so—.

01:00:52

SW: The—the picnic shoulder is that a relatively new thing or have you guys been doing that for a long time?

01:00:59

RB: We've done it on and off. It's something that kind of like Smithfield, Virginia had started I think years ago selling down into the islands down in there and they kind of backed off of the market some. We had some people contact us so we started you know doing that so—. Just something you know developed, you know a little bit more market, so—.

01:01:20

SW: I'm—I'm curious as you know we're here in Smithfield, is there—is there confusion on the part of consumers about the whole Smithfield thing, you being in Smithfield but not related to the Smithfield *company* at all?

01:01:36

RB: Oh yeah, we'll we've sold thousands upon thousands of hams over the years from people 'cause Smithfield, Virginia is not accessible you know off the interstate. So when people come in here and they see Smithfield they just pull right in here you know and want to buy a ham, but we always tell them that we're not related to them and—. With the internet part of it's really gotten bad now because they get us confused and I get—especially at the holiday time I get tons of complaints where they've bought hams at—at Wal-Mart or they've bought a Paula Deen ham and you know they just send me pictures and they want refunds. And you know that—that part of it has—has probably grown more the past couple years.

01:02:22

And then when they sold out to the Chinese I got tons of hate mail you know everything on there, so—. We had to come up with our own thing that this is not us and you know they're never going to buy us—you know our products again but you know they had us confused.

01:02:41

SW: Did you get any customers through that though? I mean did they—did they—people who may have like written in or called and complained and that was explained and then they started buying hams from you?

01:02:53

RB: I think we've probably have picked some stuff up here over—over the holiday time. I think we picked some customers up from that because they were just not going—that really disturbed you know a lot of people. The Paula Deen incident you know and that all happened at the same time, so we got a lot of Paula Deen complaints too. They were not going to buy her product you know so—I think we did pick up—'cause I think some—a lot of their—maybe their individual ham companies were just you know—we're not going to buy from them anymore, so—.

01:03:32

SW: Jeez, I—I just have a couple—let's see. I've taken about an hour of your time. Can I ask you a few more questions?

01:03:41

RB: Yeah.

01:03:42

SW: Okay, I promise I'll stop after that.

01:03:44

RB: No, that's fine.

01:03:45

SW: I'm wondering, you know I was reading about the tradition of hog-killing as part of the curing process. Did your dad ever—was he ever—when he was like living in Virginia or even

here is—do you see that happening anymore in terms of the whole hog-killing? I imagine everything when the smaller companies kind of folded up, I'm just wondering if you have any memories of that or if your dad told you anything about that.

01:04:14

RB: I remember going to some, you know he would help people you know cut some—cut the hogs up you know—hog-killing. I remember going back to my granddaddy's in the—on my mom's side in the Shenandoah Valley at—at—during the holidays and they were having a big hog-killing there and cooking everything up and everything. What was kind of neat about the Mangalitsa, when the guy started promoting the breed he brought the—the man and his wife who was head of the Mangalitsa Breeders Association in Austria brought them over here and they were doing a series of—well it was hog-killing. They called—instead of Woodstock they called it Pig Stock and like Pig Stock 2011. I went up to the one they did in New Jersey, it was like a three-day class and these people paid big money to come in and you had different options of whether you wanted to take part of the hog home with you or you just wanted to be in on the class. And but that was kind of neat. I mean they did it the old-fashioned way. We were—we were out at the farm, snow on the ground, they had an old bathtub there with the fire underneath it for the scalding vat. Killed the hogs, you know hung them up in the barn. I mean you had airline pilots. You had chefs. You had people that had never even seen a hog killed you know show up.

01:05:47

The next day they took all the different parts of the hog and—and put on a cooking demonstration—how to make blood sausage. They took—they were making everything with it.

01:06:00

The third day which was the neatest thing that I had seen that the guy from Austria he had the—the—the hog, the Mangalitsa was—they were cut in half. He took the Mangalitsa and he cut the whole hog up with using just a knife without—not using a saw at all, he did everything—what you call seam butchery which is—I don't know many people in the United States who could do that anymore, you know 'cause that's a lost art, you know to know where everything is connected and—and that—that's what I you know enjoyed. But it was fun being in—in on an old-fashioned hog-killing.

01:06:41

They had a—they had a tradition that we drank some vodka before we started you know that morning about six or seven o'clock so but—it was pretty—that was cool. But it was just fun watching people who had never been around something you know like that. Some of them took it okay, some of them—they had their favorite parts and stuff of it, so—. That—that was a good thing to be you know—that was kind of fun being involved in that you know especially with that you know that Mangalitsa and stuff, so—.

01:07:15

SW: And I know that you talked a little bit about this earlier but I'm wondering how did—the Mangalitsas from Austria do you know how it got here to Johnston County? I mean was it just a matter of—was it something like that in New Jersey or did somebody come directly to you?

01:07:32

RB: How I found out about the pig was my—my good friend, a distributor in Richmond, Virginia he had—he sells—or they use their hams, the Country Club of Virginia in Richmond which is a prestigious country club, well he sent a picture of the wooly pig over to my buddy. He said, “Do you know what kind of pig this is?” I said, “Well it looks like a poodle to me.” He said, “Well he’s looking for some meat off of it. Can you find—?” I gave it to the girl that was working downstairs at the time and I said, “Wow about researching that and see if you can find that pig.”

01:08:08

Well when we did it popped up a story on Heath Putnam and he was living out in Seattle. And I—you know and I got looking and I got reading and I saw the—the ham, the meat and stuff and I said, “Oh my god. I said that’s—that’s hams like used to be here in the ‘50s and ‘60s.” So I called him up and started talking to him and started buying them. That’s how it all—but actually that chef up at the Country Club of Virginia is the one who is responsible for it, you know—they finding out about it, so—.

01:08:38

SW: And I also wanted to ask you—I heard a lot about the attic that you have here. Could you talk about that, how did—did your dad build that?

01:08:50

RB: It was probably added on. He—he put the—the—the chain system in which carries the ham. Now we have—uh we don’t use the attic as—as much as we used to. The only thing—

we've had some Mangalitsa up in there. I use it for long-range. Right now we've just got a few of Elijah's Ossabaw in there. It—it's a wooden system, it's a wooden building.

01:09:18

The USDA would probably like for me to tear it down because it's—it's been grandfathered in. You know wood you can't wash wood. When I first started here we had tobacco sticks, that was our only aging house here when I first started here. And we had tobacco sticks that you hung four hams on. Well as the tobacco sticks broke they wouldn't let us bring anymore in so we went to stainless steel sticks. So but—but with the addition of the other in '93 I think—no, no, maybe '90—'91 we built this stainless steel aging—aging house which was a lot more labor efficient and you'll see that the hams stay on the—. The one in the attic we had to push a tree of hams which is fifty and we had to take them off one-by-one and hang them on the chain. The chain goes up and then—then a guy takes—he takes one ham off and then he swings it to another guy and he was walking on—on a greasy board on top of the other hams with them tobacco sticks.

01:10:25

So he goes out and hangs them and I'll show you how it worked but it was really a labor intensive—but it's a cool building. It—there's nothing like a ham cured in a—in a wooden room because they just—you know that wood has soaked up all that grease over the years. They just cure a good ham. But the chain system we got that thing was put in 19—in the '50s I think and then we can't get parts for it anymore, so we've kind of—. We pulled away from it a little bit, you know well probably a lot, so—. But it's—it's a neat room. It's—so—

01:11:05

SW: And when you're—when you're smoking what kind of wood—is there a particular type of wood you use or is it—?

01:11:11

RB: Yes hickory chips.

01:11:14

SW: I just wanted to make sure I had that. Mr. Brown I'm just going to look at my notes real quick to make sure—. I think we talked about most of the things. Oh well I guess right now, you know do you know of—I mean are—what are the hogs eating now in terms of the ones you're getting in here to cure? Is there—is it just a—you were talking about an assortment of things. Is that pretty much what they're eating now or do you—?

01:11:46

RB: Not on the commercial, you know they're—they're getting a—you know whatever they're blending up. I don't know—you know you can't feed one just straight corn so they're probably mixing some different grains up and with corn and you know mixing that up. Now the one—the Mangalitsa and stuff you know some of those and the Ossabaws you know I know Elijah's they were eating, you know they were running around in the woods somewhat eating you know acorns and whatever. But you know they—they had to be supplemented, you know some—with some more food other than that, so—.

01:12:23

They—they would be—the ones on the smaller farms, the ones that are on the ground will be—they will be eating a wide variety of stuff, not the commercial hogs, they're all you know they got big feeders and it comes on automatically and it you know—they're feeding, they're eating the same stuff, so—.

01:12:42

SW: And Mr. Brown what is the best piece of advice your father ever gave you about this business?

01:12:48

RB: What about this business?

01:12:52

SW: Or curing?

01:12:55

RB: I'm trying to think, probably just not uh—not to—not to rush the product out and just take—take your time with it. That's probably the—you know the best advice he gave me on that, so—.

01:13:10

SW: What do you love most about this job?

01:13:15

RB: Probably the—just the interaction with, you know with the customers and stuff on the phone, the long-term relationships. I mean it gets to a point you know it's sad somewhat because I've seen—seen the customer basically that's been with us so long you know they start passing away you know. Then their wives will order. And then they'll pass away and then—then you know it gets to be like a tradition, you know having a Johnston County ham at Christmas. And then some of the kids will pick up on it. That—you know just—just dealing with them and—and letters you get from them about how you know the ham made the holidays and—and stuff like that you know. And that's probably my favorite part and seeing the people come in here in the store off the interstate and looking back in the window and seeing all the hams hanging up and saying, “Oh wow!” you know so—.

01:14:14

SW: Is there anything else you want to add about your family history or about curing or about this particular business that I didn't ask you that you think is important for people to know?

01:14:25

RB: I don't think really. Well I can just tell you that you know the company started in 1946 and—and most of the ham companies—us, WayCo, of course there's some of them that are shut down, we all—they did not start out as country ham plants. They started out as a frozen locker plant where people rented you know locker space. There was these metal drawers almost like a file cabinet and you got a key. You paid rent. You come in because back then the home freezers were not out. And but they—they would bring the farmers and stuff—they'd bring their meat in there and they were grinding sausage and they were curing hams and stuff for the customers

when they brought it in. But when I think General Electric came out with the first home freezer or refrigerator it kind of put—put freezer lockers out of business. So they—they started a—they started curing hams. And at that time there was no Interstate 95. [NC Highway] 301 was the main thoroughfare which came right by the plant.

01:15:34

And Mr. Edmondson, he—they started having ham competitions at the Frozen Locker Plant Association. And I think he won like the first award back in like '49 and it—they got written up and you know and just started the ham business, you know kind of and this place started taking off. And it's the same way it did down at WayCo down in Goldsboro. We've always—we've had a great relationship 'cause I've grown up you know with that family 'cause we always you know share—you know exchange supplies and stuff like that so—.

01:16:07

SW: So do you know if—so when those competitions started did they learn to cure from the farmers who were bringing their stuff in do you know?

01:16:18

RB: Kind of. They—they—I think they were because most of them didn't know what they were—they were—just started playing around with it then and it's no telling what the stuff turned out like those first ones. But then they—then it started going and they all started getting into it and I think the different owners were helping—at the locker plants were helping each other and so it was kind of like a growing—growing thing.

01:16:43

And then you know they—they would have a lot of ham competitions and then one thing that helped our—you know we started having the Ham and Yam Festival here. And—and when we first had that it was—it was the battle of the two Smithfields. Smithfield came down here and then we had several other cured—little small curers in the area at that time. And we all had—went head-to-head on the competitions and we—we beat them two years in a row. Well they quit coming and then we started having all the ham curers in the state come [Phone rings]. Well we won so much of it that everybody kept saying it was rigged. So we kind of dropped out the last couple of years but we—we won ham competitions up at—up at the [NC] State Fair when they had it and it was really you know—filled the walls though with plaques and give you a lot of notoriety on that so—.

01:17:37

SW: And so—you said the WayCo—is it the WayCo family?

01:17:43

RB: Well no, it's—actually the Worrell family. It's WayCo Hams. They're down in Goldsboro but they—they started the same time we did—frozen locker plant, but really you know we've kind of—they're more you know we're kind of more in the—they do some specialized—specialty foods. They're more into the—doing the packs of sliced hams, you know. They got trucks on the road. They deliver you know say a lot to Wal-Mart and Harris Teeter and stuff like that, that's where their business is—but you know a good family and good people.

01:18:20

SW: And so in your particular job as the plant manager here now Mr. Brown, do you—you don't actually own the whole business but you're in charge of like everything that has to do with curing? Could you—I just want to make sure I have that right.

01:18:34

RB: Yeah, yeah you know I order—order the fresh product coming in you know and keep all the supplies ordered you know and help process the orders you know kind of—work the guys on how to get them out and do a lot you know of the sales, you know a little bit about—a little bit and a lot of everything, so—.

01:18:54

SW: I don't have any other questions for you. I really wanted just to ask you once again if you—if there is anything else that—I'm glad you brought up the frozen locker business because I didn't know about that at all.

01:19:09

RB: I think that's—that's about it. I don't know of anything. I think we've covered—covered about everything.

01:19:17

SW: I guess there's only one other I'm thinking of. I mean do you think the demand for ham is—is growing again now in our modern day here?

01:19:27

RB: It—I think it’s growing maybe in—in other ways. I mean they—like right now they like the ham you know. I think they found out that really the country ham is—is real similar to the prosciutto that comes from Spain and Italy so they’re using it a lot more like that. To cook country ham, something already prepared that has—that has grown because people—you know they don’t have time with their schedules prepared—such time you know it takes up such time to cook a whole country ham and stuff. So—so that has—that has picked up, but as far as the consumption of—of country hams as you know—you know overall has decreased. And it’s a lot to do with the—the older generation starting to pass on. And a lot of the younger kids just—you know it was not an item they picked up on. And now everything you can go to a grocery store now and don’t have to cook at all. You get just prepared meals and—and stuff ready to go, so—.

01:20:41

SW: Do you think people tend to overcook country ham?

01:20:46

RB: They do—they do as far as pan-frying and that’s a big thing. I—the baked ham it would be hard to overcook it but you know the whole ham in the oven, but—but yeah they do. They overcook it.

01:21:00

And one thing that has killed I think it’s hurt a lot of our business is when—when the country ham business got so big in the grocery stores and stuff and whole—people were flooding it with whole hams I think a lot of—I’m just trying to think how to say it—it’s not bad product

but—but product just like they just flooded the market with stuff that was really too salty and everything. And you know people will try something once and may try it again but you know—and also you know and the salt varies. You know you have to have four-percent concentration to be called a country ham and ours is always ranged on the—you know the low-end, the four to five-percent.

01:21:46

Whereas you get into like a genuine Smithfield ham or some of these other hams, I mean some of that can skyrocket up to ten percent, which is real briny. So that—that's a big—that's one thing our hams has always been kind of famous for is the consistency and—and the lower salt content.

01:22:07

SW: Do you—how—are you—do you intend to pass down this to the—your—the next generation? Do you have any kids who want to take over when you're ready to retire?

01:22:18

RB: I've got one son but he's had—he has not showed any—any interest in it. I think he wants to do something else and it might be a good thing. It's just things—it's just—there's a lot of things in the meat business now with the markets and—and the fluctuation—. You see the price of the hams and bellies were—I mean they would cycle down. You might kind of stay low for a couple of years and it might go up for a couple years and down but—but this—but the—the global market now has really driven prices up and everything. It's hard you know—you know

hard to make a good—a margin anymore on it, so—. But that’s one thing the global market has really changed the whole meat industry ‘cause there’s so much exporting done now, so—.

01:23:08

SW: And okay one more question, what—what is it like to carry on a tradition that not many people have any—or carry on a tradition that not many people are able to do anymore?

01:23:20

RB: You know I have people call me up, you know that got into big—you know these chefs and stuff. It’s gotten to be a—to me it’s what I’ve always done. You know I—you know I don’t think—I don’t know if I look on it as a tradition but you know it—it’s—the process overall is not that complicated. I mean you—if you got an old refrigerator at home and you know I can talk you through curing ham, you know if you store it in there and do this. And these chefs have gotten [*Laughs*] real big now you know they want to do their own sausages, their own meats, their own cured hams. Well they do a lot of them now at their house, at the restaurants, which you’re not supposed to do [*Laughs*] but they call up and you know I try to help them the best I can you know on it. But they’re—you know they—it’s artisan meats and stuff is also kind of gone wild you know with the—with the—the restaurant owners and the chefs doing their own meats now and then serving them to the clients and stuff which is you know is a great thing.

01:24:31

But the government will catch up with them once—after a while but that—but yeah. It’s—I just look at it just you know as—as my job. But it is a tradition and it’s a—we have a lot

of people call all the time you know just intrigued with it—you know questions and answers—you know I try to answer. I try to help them out.

01:24:52

SW: Well Mr. Brown I really appreciate you sitting here with me and taking the time to do this. Thank you very much.

01:24:59

RB: You're welcome, you're welcome, my pleasure.

01:25:02

[End Rufus Brown Interview]