

HELEN TURNER
Helen's Bar-B-Q - Brownsville, TN

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Date: July 17, 2008
Location: Helen's Bar-B-Q - Brownsville, TN
Interviewer: Rien Fertel for the Southern Foodways Alliance
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs
Length: 35 minutes
Project: Southern Barbecue Trail – Tennessee

[Begin Helen Turner - Helen's Interview]

00:00:01

Rien Fertel: This is Rien Fertel for the Southern Foodways Alliance. I am on the Barbecue Trail in Brownsville, Tennessee. This is about 60—65 miles north of Memphis. It is July 17, 2008, a Thursday. I'm at Helen's Bar-B-Q; I'm with Mrs. Helen Turner at 1016 North Washington Avenue in Brownsville. Mrs. Turner can you please introduce yourself and your birth date, please?

00:00:34

Helen Turner: Okay; I'm Helen Turner at Helen's Bar-B-Q. Birthday is July 25, 1955.

00:00:38

RF: And—and tell me; are you—are you the—the owner of this establishment?

00:00:45

HT: I'm the owner.

00:00:45

RF: And for how long have you had this barbecue restaurant?

00:00:49

HT: Well I've been in business now for 12 years.

00:00:52

RF: Okay; and as I understand you—before those 12 years this was a barbecue shop and you worked here. Can you talk a bit about that?

00:01:01

HT: Well I worked for Curly and Lynn about 15 years and then I quit, took a factory job; it was not so good. And then I—they sold to a guy called Dewitt Foster and then I started working for him. And then he gave it up and that's how I ended up in business. He turned it over to me.

00:01:28

RF: Well tell me about Curly and Lynn; what type of work did you do for them?

00:01:34

HT: Cook and cashier.

00:01:37

RF: Okay; and who were Curly and Lynn.

00:01:41

HT: Curly and Lynn—well Curly is Lynn's husband and Curly died so Lynn operated, so I helped her out. So it was just her and me, just—just Lynn and Helen. [*Laughs*] And sometimes she had this other lady working for her but most of the time it was me and I was pretty much her right-hand.

00:02:06

RF: What was her last name?

00:02:05

HT: Spellings—her first name was Linda—Linda Spellings.

00:02:12

RF: And so were they the first to have a barbecue restaurant at this location on North Washington?

00:02:15

HT: Yeah; they was the first.

00:02:20

RF: And what did they serve? What did they begin to—to cook?

00:02:21

HT: Okay; they served the pulled pork, the ribs, they did barbecued chicken; they had the baked beans, the potato salad and the coleslaw. And that's about it.

00:02:34

RF: And what year did you start working for them?

00:02:38

HT: Hmm; what year—that's a long ways to go back. [*Laughs*] Let me see; I think I started working for them in I'm going to say '80—in '81—'82.

00:03:00

RF: Were they from here? Can you tell us a bit about them?

00:03:02

HT: David was from Huntington, and Linda—she's from here, and Linda she worked at the Clearview before she took over the barbecue place and her husband worked for the City. So after they started the barbecue business they both just quit and started running the barbecue business.

00:03:24

RF: So they're retired now; well she's retired—is she still around?

00:03:28

HT: No; they're both dead now. Uh-hm; they're both deceased.

00:03:29

RF: Were they white; were they African American?

00:03:33

HT: Uh-hm; they was white, uh-hm.

00:03:34

RF: Okay; and then tell me about you—you left and you went to manufacturing. What did you miss most about barbecue and where did you go?

00:03:40

HT: Well I started at MTV; that was my first factory job.

00:03:48

RF: What is that?

00:03:50

HT: MTV where they make riding lawn mowers. Mostly I was a floater, so they just put me on any job that didn't nobody show up. **[Laughs]** And then they laid me off and then I took a job in Covington. And—called Kirsch; they make vertical blinds for windows. So I did that for about a year and then came back here.

00:04:18

RF: Did you miss anything about barbecue in those years or about cooking?

00:04:22

HT: Yes; most of all I missed the people that I deal with you know all the customers that come in here. I knew everybody and everybody knew me and that's mostly what I missed, but I'm just not a factory worker. **[Laughs]**

00:04:35

RF: Okay; well before we get into—into your—when you took over the restaurant and when you came back to the restaurant let's talk about where you're from. As I understand it, you're born here?

00:04:48

HT: Yes; born here in Brownsville.

00:04:48

RF: And can you tell me a bit about Brownsville?

00:04:53

HT: Hold that for me.

00:05:00

RF: Okay; so can you tell me about growing here? Can you tell me about your parents—maybe what they did?

00:05:05

HT: Yes; my parents—my mom and dad, mostly they don't do anything. My dad was a farmer you know. He worked for farming all his life that I know of and my mom, she was just a—a housewife you know, just raising 10 children and cooking every day.

00:05:26

RF: Did your father have his own land?

00:05:29

HT: No; he worked for other people.

00:05:31

RF: What—do you remember what he farmed?

00:05:33

HT: Cotton all I know.

00:05:36

RF: Is—is Browns—as I was driving it seems to be they call themselves the Cotton Capital of the Delta here. Is—is cotton very important here in Brownsville?

00:05:46

HT: Yes; there's a lot of people that raise cotton and—and other things. I don't know what it is 'cause I'm just not a field worker. *[Laughs]*

00:06:01

RF: Okay; who—who was the better cook in your household of your parents? Who cooked the—the meals?

00:06:07

HT: My mother.

00:06:07

RF: And do you remember what she cooked?

00:06:10

HT: Yeah; she would fry corn—fried cornbread, greens and ham, neck bones, chicken dressing, butter beans, black eyed peas.

00:06:26

RF: When you were young did you ever help her in the kitchen?

00:06:28

HT: Sometimes.

00:06:30

RF: And what would you help her cook?

00:06:32

HT: Well I tried to bake.

00:06:35

RF: What's that again?

00:06:37

HT: Baked cakes.

00:06:39

RF: Oh you baked cakes?

00:06:39

HT: Yeah; I baked cakes sometimes but my most(est)—I specialize in banana pudding.

00:06:44

RF: Okay; and—and how old were you when you started making banana pudding?

00:06:50

HT: About 12.

00:06:52

RF: And was it your mother's recipe or a family recipe?

00:06:55

HT: My mother's recipe—homemade banana pudding from scratch.

00:07:01

RF: Can you tell us how—how to make it real quick? [*Laughs*]

00:07:05

HT: [*Laughs*]

00:07:08

RF: Without a secret can you tell us what's the basics? I mean what's important; if I want to make a banana pudding at home what's something I should—what's the important thing, one—
one thing I should know about banana pudding?

00:07:19

HT: One thing you should know about banana pudding is—

00:07:21

RF: That most people get it wrong?

00:07:26

HT: That mostly everybody should know how to make a banana pudding, mostly everybody.

Some do—do it by scratch and some do it the new way.

00:07:34

RF: What's the new way?

00:07:35

HT: Well the new way is going and getting some Jell-O Instant Pudding and putting it together.

00:07:39

RF: Well that's not the good way?

00:07:43

HT: That's not the good way. No; the old-fashioned way is the good way.

00:07:47

RF: Okay; so you came back to work here with Dewitt Foster?

00:07:55

HT: Yeah; after Dewitt Foster bought it from the—Curly and Lynn, he called me ‘cause I was working in Covington, and he called me and asked me to come back and work ‘cause—to make the barbecue sauce ‘cause he didn’t know how to make the barbecue sauce. So he wanted me to make the barbecue sauce for him. So I ended up coming back and he asked me did I want to be a partner? So I told him yeah; I’d be a partner. And then he’s you know he’s kind of old; he was probably about 80-something and then he said well I’m just too old for the business. Do you want it? And I go like yeah; I’ll take it. And so that’s how I ended up with the barbecue business.

00:08:37

RF: Okay; and how long did you work with him before he sold it to you full-out?

00:08:42

HT: Not even a year; uh-um. I think it was about like maybe six or seven months before he just gave it up.

00:08:53

RF: And so the recipes or the—the process of the barbecue that you make here, does it go all the way back to the original owners?

00:09:03

HT: It goes all the way back, like cooking it pit style. They—that’s what they started off doing.

00:09:09

RF: Can you describe how you cook—well what cuts of pig do you cook and how—how do you cook it? Can you tell us a bit of the process?

00:09:14

HT: Okay; well what I do, I cook the shoulders. I don't do the hams; I do the shoulders and I cook them on an outside pit with hickory and oak wood burned down to the coals and I use the coals to cook with.

00:09:34

RF: Do you—do you fire the coals separately in—in a barrel away from the pit and then put them in the pit?

00:09:40

HT: Uh-huh; yeah I burn the wood down in a separate pit and then take them, put them in a shovel and then shovel them under the pit that I got the shoulders on.

00:09:55

RF: And what percentage hickory and oak do you use?

00:09:56

HT: What percentage—how much? Not much because if you put too much [*Phone Rings*] because if you put too much under it, it will burn and then if you put a lot under it, it will catch fire.

00:10:10

RF: Of—of which—of oak?

00:10:12

HT: Of oak and hickory 'cause it's a mixture of wood, uh-hm.

00:10:15

RF: Okay; so you put—you put shoulders. Do you also do ribs?

00:10:19

HT: I do ribs and I do chickens every once in a while, you know like customers call and want chicken. I do chickens and the ribs and I do the Polish sausage and the barbecue bologna.

00:10:34

RF: Okay; so you cook shoulders. Do you—do you—?

00:10:41

HT: Why you're doing that while we're not talking, let me show you.

00:10:45

RF: Oh okay; we can learn some things.

00:10:49

HT: Yeah; while we're not talking and then we can come back and you can ask me.

00:10:48

RF: Test; okay so we're back. We took—we took a short break to go look at the pit outside. So can you—can you tell me about the pit; who constructed it? Is it the same pit?

00:11:00

HT: No; it's another pit. I had that pit put in after I got here. The guy that did the pit he's deceased now but he built it for me.

00:11:13

RF: And so we'll have some good pictures but you have the fire pit where you make the goals right across from the barbecue pit and you just—it's really easy. You just shovel back and forth.

00:11:25

HT: Yes.

00:11:26

RF: The room it's—you know it's kind of a screened porch kind of room. It's really, really smoky and it burns, you know, the eyes and the lungs. Can you tell me how you stand it?

00:11:39

HT: Well it's kind of bad on my eyes sometimes, but I guess I've been doing it for so long so I just done learned to deal with it. I cry every once in a while but [*Laughs*]
—I cry every once in a while but that's just how I make my living, so I just go ahead on.

00:11:56

RF: So how many shoulders did you have on just now?

00:11:59

HT: Nine.

00:12:01

RF: And when did you put them on this morning?

00:12:02

HT: I put them on about 6:30 this morning.

00:12:08

RF: And how long do they cook for?

00:12:12

HT: They should be ready about—between 6:00 and 7:00 this afternoon.

00:12:16

RF: So do you—how many days a week are you open?

00:12:18

HT: Every—six days a week.

00:12:21

RF: So you cook all those days?

00:12:25

HT: I cook all those days; uh-hm.

00:12:25

RF: So putting them on in the morning keeps—you don't have to have someone here at night. Is that why you do it in the morning?

00:12:32

HT: Right; that's the reason why I come so early in the morning so I won't be here all night, uh-hm.

00:12:34

RF: And do you—do you season them before you put them on?

00:12:41

HT: No; I do not season them. I don't put nothing on them. I just clean them and put them on the pits.

00:12:46

RF: Why do you think some people season shoulders or hams and some people don't? What do you think the—the difference is or what does it do to the meat?

00:12:57

HT: To me, the way I cook if I season them it would burn 'cause you know you just can't put barbecue sauce on the open pit and just put them on there and they be looking like they're looking now like you saw them. They'll be all burnt and you know dark. So I'd rather not season anything I cook; let people season their own food.

00:13:22

RF: And tell me about the ribs; how do you make them?

00:13:23

HT: Pretty much the same; I don't season them either. I just put them on the pit. Most of the time I just cook those on top of the shoulders or—'cause they will burn quick.

00:13:33

RF: You actually lay them on top of the shoulder meat?

00:13:37

HT: You didn't see them out there? Uh-huh; I just actually lay them on top of there and they cook like that and they turn out perfect. They don't burn; they're real tender.

00:13:50

RF: And do you offer them every day?

00:13:51

HT: I offer the ribs every day; uh-hm.

00:13:53

RF: And tell me about the setup you have in the kitchen. You have kind of two—

00:14:02

HT: The pits in the kitchen? The pits in the kitchen is the way I keep them warm. I use the same coals from the outside to bring them in here and keep the meat warm in here.

00:14:07

RF: Okay; and how many pits are there in the kitchen?

00:14:12

HT: I got two but I only use one.

00:14:14

RF: Okay; and the first time I was in here a couple weeks ago I saw a really cool device that's on top of the pit. It's an old—I guess an old-time cabbage—.

00:14:25

HT: Right; uh-huh that's the way I grate my cabbage—my slaw.

00:14:30

RF: What does it—how does it work?

00:14:35

HT: Oh man I got this thing, the screw-on thing and it just—just takes my arm. It's more arm work than it is anything.

00:14:41

RF: So does it turn? It's like a crank?

00:14:43

HT: Yeah; well it just turns. It don't crank; it just turns.

00:14:47

RF: And does it shred the cabbage?

00:14:47

HT: Yeah; it shreds the cabbage real thin, uh-um.

00:14:53

RF: And did that come with the restaurant? Did you have it before?

00:14:56

HT: No; that didn't come with it. Well they used it too but that one is mine; uh-hm.

00:15:00

RF: Okay; and what kind of slaw do you make? How would you describe it?

00:15:05

HT: Well I make the vinegar and mayonnaise slaw and I put my own ingredients in it.

00:15:14

RF: So it comes out a little white?

00:15:15

HT: Beg your pardon?

00:15:17

RF: What—what color does it come out—the slaw?

00:15:20

HT: Oh it comes out you know white, uh-hm; once I mix it yeah.

00:15:22

RF: And you have sauces; how many sauces do you have?

00:15:25

HT: How many what?

00:15:28

RF: Barbecue sauces?

00:15:29

HT: How many sauces do I have—just two, a hot and a mild.

00:15:32

RF: And can you describe them without giving secrets away?

00:15:35

HT: No. [*Laughs*]

00:15:38

RF: Well is it—is it—are they—?

00:15:42

HT: I can't describe the sauce without giving the secret away.

00:15:44

RF: But would you describe it as sweet or tomato(ey)?

00:15:46

HT: Well no; I just describe it as sweet sauce and hot sauce. That's about all I can tell you about the sauce. [*Laughs*]

00:15:54

RF: It's a big secret. Did you—did the Foster(s)—were they here before; did you make them—did you change them?

00:16:00

HT: I—uh-huh; I made them when they was here before.

00:16:04

RF: Okay; but they're the same sauces they carried over.

00:16:06

HT: They're the same sauce; uh-huh, yeah the original recipe from Curly and Lynn; yes.

00:16:12

RF: What do you like to cook at home when you're not cooking barbecue?

00:16:14

HT: What I like to cook at home when I'm not cooking barbecue is I make dressing, ham, and fried chicken, green beans, sweet peas—whenever I cook at home. Most of the time I don't cook at home.

00:16:30

RF: Do—do you like to cook?

00:16:31

HT: I like to cook. I used to serve the home-cooked meals down here. I used to cook the fried pork chop and—smothered in gravy and onions. I used to serve it but it got too much for me so I had to cut it off.

00:16:47

RF: Out of the kitchen here you mean?

00:16:47

HT: Uh-hm; out of the kitchen here, uh-hm. Can I get my customers?

00:16:55

RF: Okay; so we had to take a break, so—so you could serve two customers. It's not even 10:00; it's 9:45 and they came in for barbecue. How often do people eat barbecue for breakfast?

00:17:07

HT: If I open at 7:00 they will eat it for breakfast. I don't care; if they see the doors open they come in for barbecue.

00:17:18

RF: And—wow; and do they eat pork or bologna—everything?

00:17:19

HT: They eat pork, bologna, and everything—whatever I got hot that's what they eat.

00:17:26

RF: Tell—tell me about your customers. What—who—who are your customers; what makes up the customer base?

00:17:32

HT: Who are they?

00:17:35

RF: How would—how would you describe your clientele?

00:17:37

HT: Great; my—my clientele is just real good.

00:17:43

RF: Are they locals? Do people drive in to eat your barbecue?

00:17:46

HT: Well they—most of them it's local but I have a lot of out-of-towners from Covington.

Really I have them from all over—Covington, Ripley; I have them from Jackson, Chicago.

00:17:59

RF: Chicago?

00:18:02

HT: See my plaque over there; uh-huh they come from everywhere.

00:18:05

RF: And do some people eat here a couple times a week?

00:18:11

HT: Well I got people who eat here every day. They sit out here and eat uh-huh; eat their food and drink them a drink and get ready and go back to work.

00:18:21

RF: You—you told me earlier right when I got here that you do it for the—because you love being with people. Can you talk a bit about that?

00:18:29

HT: Yes; I like dealing with people. My customers are really sweet. I don't have any trouble out of none of my customers. Everybody that comes in here treats me just like wow; you know. It's just something nice. I don't know what it is. I just can't explain it but it's you know—my customers are really good.

00:18:48

RF: What do you think makes your barbecue special or really good?

00:18:56

HT: Well I think it's the way that I cook but I do know they like the sauce, you know everybody likes that hickory smoked taste in their meat so I'm going to say probably the way I cook.

00:19:13

RF: And what makes the way you cook special?

00:19:16

HT: It's not too many places that cook the old-fashioned way with the hickory you know wood and—and pit; don't too many cook like that.

00:19:26

RF: Do you remember eating—were there a lot of barbecue restaurants in Brownsville or do you remember eating at other places when you were younger?

00:19:37

HT: Well I remember eating at—I think they called the place—I know it's hickory pit in the backyard right now but it used to be a barbecue place right down the street from me and I can't quite remember the name of it, but I used to eat there all the time.

00:19:57

RF: And they did traditional shoulders and—?

00:19:58

HT: Coleman's Barbecue it used to be and I used to eat down there quite a bit.

00:20:05

RF: Did—did your family ever barbecue?

00:20:10

HT: No, no.

00:20:14

RF: Not for special occasions or—?

00:20:15

HT: Not even for a special occasion; they always liked to cook out the kitchen. And if my mother barbecued she always barbecued like, you know, you barbecue your chicken or something in the oven, uh-hm.

00:20:28

RF: Do you remember ever going to—to barbecues at family—other family's houses or other neighbors' houses?

00:20:33

HT: Yeah; like my aunt—I got an aunt that lives in Stanton. They cook out quite a bit and I got an aunt that lives out in Whiteville; they cook out quite a bit and, you know, like the 4th of July, you know, we probably go over there, or, my husband's mother—now they barbecue quite a bit.

00:20:53

RF: How do they—how do—your aunts, how do they barbecue?

00:20:55

HT: They got just—just a regular small pit, well a grill, you know, one of the—I guess it's a barrel grill, uh-hm. That's the way they barbecue.

00:21:10

RF: You mentioned a husband; what—what’s his name and what does he do?

00:21:15

HT: My husband is Reginald Turner. He works at Haywood Company and he been out there for like 31 years. And he’s a lead person, uh-hm.

00:21:29

RF: Does he love barbecue?

00:21:30

HT: Yes; he loves barbecue. You saw him now, you’d ask me why?

00:21:35

RF: What—what does he order when he—when he comes in? Does he come in for lunch? Does he get time?

00:21:41

HT: He don't get off for work for lunch. He eats within the plant. But when he gets off of work he eats barbecue. Mostly he asks for ribs. Yeah; he eats—he likes the ribs and then every once in a while he might eat a barbecue sandwich, uh-hm. But he’ll try it all though. He’ll try it all.

00:21:58

RF: Tell me about the gentleman you have working here with you?

00:22:00

HT: That's my brother. He don't—he just be here with me because you know so many things happen in the area you know like people walking in and that keeps me from being here by myself every day. But pretty much I work by myself.

00:22:13

RF: What is your brother's name?

00:22:15

HT: His name is—we call him Lee, but his name is Albert.

00:22:22

RF: How do you spell that?

00:22:24

HT: A-l-b-e-r-t.

00:22:24

RF: Oh Albert, okay.

00:22:25

HT: Uh-huh; Albert—uh-huh.

00:22:25

RF: Okay; and does he help cook a little bit or—?

00:22:27

HT: A little bit when I'm busy. I have to have somebody out there watching the meat, you know, to keep it from burning. You see all the fire out there; uh-hm.

00:22:33

RF: So was it tough or is it tough being a—a woman Pit Master? There's not many of you out there.

00:22:48

HT: I know; it's kind of tough, you know, because I have to do all the work. But I've learned to manage it pretty good. I don't get in no hurry; I just do it to my—you know, my advantage and I don't have any problems. But I like what I do though. I guess you can tell. [*Laughs*]

00:23:18

RF: I can tell. Do you—and because there's so few women Pit Masters, have you ever had a customer say that, you know, maybe women can't barbecue?

00:23:28

HT: No; I never have that to happen.

00:23:31

RF: Never happened, okay good; I've heard of things happening. I'm glad that hasn't happened to you. [*Laughs*]

00:23:38

HT: *[Laughs]* No; I haven't had that to happen. You know womens are good cooks; yeah. Now I got customers that comes in and says oh, I don't know how you can stand it, 'cause most of the time there will be a lot of smoke up in here. But you know, it's all right though; it's all right.

00:23:58

RF: What was this building originally? It's a really interesting building.

00:24:01

HT: Really? You should have seen it before now. *[Laughs]*

00:24:06

RF: What did you do to it? What did it look like before now?

00:24:08

HT: Oh, before now it was like leaning to one side and it was real old looking, red, dull paint; yeah. And, I wish they had a picture but I don't have one. But it was original before now.

00:24:27

RF: Was it someone's home?

00:24:27

HT: It used to be someone's home. It was this guy; I don't—his—they called him Mr. Pierce and he used to have a car lot next door and he told me that he used to live here; this used to be a

house. And really it used to be a house 'cause there's like bedrooms upstairs. And—and this was the dining area out here, so it used—yeah it was somebody's home.

00:24:58

RF: What else do you cook here? What sides do you make?

00:25:01

HT: Potato salad, baked beans, and coleslaw, and every once in a while I do a banana pudding.

00:25:11

RF: How often do you make that banana pudding because it's already come up a couple times? Is it only for holidays or special occasions?

00:25:15

HT: Well my customers would like for me to have it every day, but I may do one every two to three weeks. [*Laughs*]

00:25:25

RF: Is it time-consuming?

00:25:25

HT: Sometimes; it depends on how busy I am.

00:25:30

RF: Do you have to bake it?

00:25:32

HT: No; it's just a lot of work in, you know, putting stuff together for banana pudding. Now this is my husband; uh-hm.

00:25:41

RF: What was I going—oh do you think—I've spent a lot of time in Memphis over the past couple weeks interviewing barbecue people. Do you—do you think barbecue comes from the country, these rural areas? I mean we're surrounded by old cotton farms. What do you know about that—or what do you think about the history of barbecue?

00:26:05

HT: Really all I know—they come from hogs; that's all I can tell you. *[Laughs]* And I buy mine's; I buy mine's out of Jackson. They deliver to me three to four times a week. And I'm pretty much—I've seen a lot of hogs and stuff around here back, a long time ago.

00:26:28

RF: Did you—growing up did you know people that raised hogs?

00:26:30

HT: My dad did.

00:26:33

RF: Okay; did he slaughter them?

00:26:34

HT: Now that I don't know but I know he raised them. I don't know whether he slaughtered them or not. I'm sure he did though.

00:26:39

RF: Did he raise them at your home where you grew up?

00:26:45

HT: Yeah; he raised them at my home where I grew up, uh-hm.

00:26:47

RF: But you don't ever remember eating fresh hog or—?

00:26:51

HT: Yes; I kind of remember eating fresh—now I eat the chitterlings from the hog. Yeah; I like those.

00:26:59

RF: Right; tell—tell me about—I'm from New Orleans and we eat a lot of chitterlings.

00:27:06

HT: Really?

00:27:08

RF: Yeah; can you tell me about that? Where—where do you get them or do you make them yourself?

00:27:10

HT: No; I only buy them at the store and clean them and cook them myself.

00:27:15

RF: What do you do with chitterlings; how do you make them?

00:27:18

HT: I mean I just boil them, you know, after I clean them and do—‘cause you know you have to do a lot of cleaning but after I get through cleaning them I just put them on the stove and boil them. I might drop me a couple of onions over—in ‘em you know but other than that—that’s just it.

00:27:34

RF: Is that the only way you spice them up is with onion?

00:27:37

HT: Well no; I spice them up with a little salt and black pepper. And that’s all I do to them. But they’re good like that.

00:27:45

RF: Do you ever cook them here?

00:27:48

HT: No; no I never cook ‘em here.

00:27:53

RF: Would your customers—?

00:27:54

HT: They would love them; they would love for me to cook ‘em here. [*Laughs*]

00:27:56

RF: Oh yeah; so it sounds like you don't want to add anything else to the menu. You have enough to do.

00:28:00

HT: I really have enough to do. I guess by me working by myself I try not to put too much on me. But I got some customers who would love for me to cook chitterlings among other things; uh-hm.

00:28:18

RF: And do you get requests?

00:28:21

HT: I had one guy to request. He asked me if I brought you some chitterlings would you cook ‘em for me? [*Laughs*]

00:28:28

RF: All right.

00:28:29

HT: And I told him I'd think about it, but other than that—uh-uh. You know, like I got customers that want me to add like baked potatoes to the menu because they like to put the pork on the baked potatoes; yeah. So, I got a lot of requests about a lot of different stuff.

00:28:48

RF: Tell me about the—the pit in the back. Is it a hazard; have you ever had a fire?

00:28:54

HT: Yes; I have.

00:28:54

RF: Will you—can you talk about that?

00:28:56

HT: Well I had a fire that it didn't quite burn the building but I had a real big fire though where I had to call the fire department but somehow I had put the fire out before the fire department got here, because by the building being so old, and all the grease and smoke and stuff that I deal with it, it burns like gasoline. And so you know I keep a water hose out back, so—but I did learn one

thing about me being in business. You don't put water on a grease fire. I did learn that right away.

00:29:33

RF: So how did you put it out before the fire department came?

00:29:37

HT: What I did was left the top on—down on the pit out back and soaked it down with the water and then went and got some of those ashes I got—that I use for you know—dumping from cooking and threw it under there and smothered the fire out.

00:29:54

RF: What happens when you put water on a grease fire?

00:29:55

HT: Explodes; it goes like boom. It explodes, but I didn't know that at first, but now I know.

00:30:04

RF: Right; would you—would you encourage other maybe young women to get into the restaurant business or young people or anyone?

00:30:18

HT: Well you know I got two granddaughters and a daughter. I tried to get them to come down here and help or try and teach them how to do this, but young people—they can't deal with the

smoke and the dust. They think wow; uh-uh I don't want to do this. I say you better go to college then.

00:30:41

RF: So is it just the smoke that bothers them?

00:30:45

HT: Well mostly I think it's just the smoke and you know they don't want it in their hair. That's why my granddaughter—I don't want it in my hair, [*Laughs*] you know but yes—mostly the smoke. And I don't think young people like—would like to but it's a lot of fun; a lot of them don't like to cook but it's a lot of fun dealing—dealing with the people.

00:31:13

RF: So are there any other special or other challenges to being a woman business owner, a restaurant owner?

00:31:20

HT: I don't have any challenge at all. Now I have a couple of guys come from somewhere. I don't know; I think one of them was from Whiteville. He came over here and was going to cook some barbecue and he came down here and he said well, you got somebody competing with you now. I said well okay; no problem you know, because, you know—I learned that people are going to eat where they want to eat and when they want to eat, so I don't keep it against nobody trying to do nothing they want to do.

00:31:54

RF: So he opened another restaurant in town?

00:31:55

HT: Well he had something like the travel—I guess he called it a traveling barbecue on the back of a truck. Yeah; and he was set up—up around the Court Square around there somewhere.

00:32:10

RF: And he—and he came to actually talk to you and not talk nicely?

00:32:17

HT: If you call this nicely? [*Laughs*]

00:32:19

RF: No, no; and I said and not talk nicely.

00:32:19

HT: Oh yeah and not talk nicely but he didn't stay real long though.

00:32:24

RF: All right; you ran him out of town.

00:32:28

HT: Well I'm not going to say I ran—. [*Laughs*] I'm not going to say I ran him out of town but he wasn't here long. I didn't really know him; that's the first time I ever seen him before.

00:32:37

RF: So just a couple more questions; how do you serve your sandwiches? Do you do them chopped, pulled—?

00:32:42

HT: Well I got a lot of customers that like it chopped. And I got a lot of them that like it pulled, so I do it both ways.

00:32:51

RF: When a customer walks in can you tell automatically what he wants?

00:32:52

HT: Most of them; most of them that comes in here all the time, normally some of them I have the sandwiches already fixed when they—when I see them pull up in the parking lot.

00:33:01

RF: Oh really; you have that kitchen window?

00:33:04

HT: Uh-hm; yeah; 'cause most of them never change about what they're going to eat. They're either going to eat the barbecue or the bologna, so—. My regulars I already have them; when I see them pull up I go start fixing it and have it ready when they walk in.

00:33:19

RF: And your potato salad, can you describe it?

00:33:21

HT: Well I make my own potato salad. I peel my potatoes and boil them and fix them up.

[Laughs]

00:33:30

RF: And it's a secret?

00:33:31

HT: Not really; I just you know—it's just a lot of people make potato salad different.

00:33:35

RF: Does your have mustard in it?

00:33:38

HT: I put mustard and mayonnaise in mine's uh-hm; uh-hm.

00:33:41

RF: So it comes out pretty yellow?

00:33:46

HT: No; it's not pretty yellow. Uh-um; it's not really yellow at all but I put enough in there for you to taste it.

00:33:51

RF: And how do you make your baked beans?

00:33:52

HT: My baked beans, I put them on and cook ‘em. I put some of the barbecue sauce in it that I make and I put some of the pulled pork in there. I chop it and put it in there and let it cook; that’s about the size of the baked beans.

00:34:12

RF: So what do you think makes Tennessee barbecue special? Have—have you eaten at other—you have eaten at other barbecue restaurants; what do you think makes the barbecue here special?

00:34:20

HT: I don’t know ‘cause I got a lot of customers that just like the barbecue with just the slaw. I got some of them that just like—just plain barbecue—nothing on it, but most of all you know, a lot of them like it with the slaw and the barbecue sauce. But I sell it mostly with the slaw and the barbecue sauce.

00:34:41

RF: How do you eat your barbecue?

00:34:42

HT: How do I eat mine—slaw and the barbecue—hot sauce. [*Laughs*]

00:34:47

RF: Do you still love to eat barbecue or is it once in a while?

00:34:49

HT: It's a once in a while thing for me 'cause I smell it when I get here and I still smell it when I go home. [*Laughs*]

00:34:55

RF: Right.

00:34:58

HT: So it's a once in a while thing for me.

00:34:59

RF: So tell me how long you—you want to be cooking for—you want to serve barbecue?

00:35:02

HT: Well as long as I—my health allows me to I would like to you know, keep doing it.

00:35:11

RF: Okay; well I want to thank you and if there's anything you'd like to add but I want to thank you very much.

00:35:18

HT: Well I don't have anything else to add but I enjoyed talking to you.

00:35:22

RF: All right; well thank you.

00:35:24

[End Helen Turner - Helen's Interview]