

LARRY PROFFITT
Ridgewood Barbecue – Bluff City, TN

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Interviewer: Amy C. Evans, SFA Oral Historian
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[Begin Larry Proffitt Interview]

00:00:01

Amy Evans: This is Amy Evans on Monday, February 23, 2009, for the Southern Foodways Alliance, and I am in Bluff City, Tennessee, at Ridgewood Barbecue sitting with Mr. Larry Proffitt. And Mr. Proffitt, if you would state your name and also both of your occupations for the record, please, sir?

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Larry Proffitt: I'm Larry Proffitt; I was born November 27, 1943. I'm a pharmacist by profession. I'm the last man standing in my family that owns Ridgewood Barbecue. I've known it more intimately than any other business since I was—I remember when I was approximately four to five years old, I came here to see this place with my father [Jim Proffitt] when it was strings [to show foundation outlines] around it. It's—it's a vivid memory. You know, you don't remember many things, but I remember that.

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AE: And I can hold this microphone throughout, since we'll go back and forth. But could you speak about your parents? And I understand that the idea for the Ridgewood came from a family trip to Florida?

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LP: We—we didn't really have barbecue until I was—I was in high school in the [nineteen] '50s. We really didn't have barbecue as such. Every—everyone in this area around here had

some little barbecue, and we'd see it in the papers, but most of that stuff was cooked in—in an oven someplace. Or the way that we do it today is—was derived when we were in—my father would take us on vacation. We went to Daytona Beach most of the time in Florida, so we went out one night and he noticed—we saw someone who they were cooking chickens, and they would pipe the smoke as they still do some places in south Georgia; I've seen it. They would build the fire in one place, and the smoke would migrate over to the place where they had the chickens and the—the chickens would cook. And so we came back home, and he built his first barbecue pit. And it was made out of—he made it out of cinderblocks. So shortly thereafter it was like the *Three Little Pigs*. It was full of—got full of grease and up it went in smoke.

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So the second time he built it in the same place, and he built it out of bricks. That lasted somewhat longer, but it too went up in smoke one day when all that grease caught in fire. So his final design, and the design I use today is—we use firebricks on the inside, just like what's on the inside of your fireplace. And so it has—the whole thing is lined with firebricks, and it has walls about fourteen inches thick of concrete on the outside of that, and all that's coated with stainless steel. It has a stainless steel top and stainless steel doors, so that's our design today; it's—we smoke the meat from—. Of course it depends on how much you're smoking that particular day but we—we smoke it anywhere from six to nine hours, depending on how much that we have in there, until it gets completely done. We use hams, not shoulders. I've often said that even a country boy knows that shoulders go into sausage. We take the best—the best cuts and we buy—try to buy the best product that we can and it's—when you start out with a good product, you more nearly will end up with a good product.

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AE: So that begs the question for me that—that so much barbecue in the South is—is shoulders and so why go against tradition that way—simply for quality or just to be different or was it a combination?

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LP: It's for taste and quality. You don't—and—and we even when the hams—when the hams come out, any fat that is on there goes in the trash. We cut it all off. You look at our meat, and it will be fat-free. Many places also, they don't cook it long enough for it to be completely done. When you get it—I like to use the word *mushy*; you won't find ours to be that way. I like meat that's cooked until it's done. When it comes out of that pit, it's done. In essence, what we're doing is just getting it red hot on a very hot grill and putting our sauce on it, which is a secret recipe that was my—most all barbecue recipes I've found are secret, and so my father had us to memorize it, the four of us, and I'm just the last man standing. My young daughter [Lisa Peters]—one daughter is a—she's an RN [Registered Nurse], but she didn't like that, so she's now running the day-by-day business. And so after my brother [Terry Proffitt] died, we didn't even tell our wives. And—and Lisa's husband, I think, might be a little bit perturbed that we don't—we don't give it out. And I said, “You're not just a fool; you're a dad-burn fool, if you— if you tell it.” So I told her [the recipe] one Sunday as we made forty gallons of sauce, I said, “Now you remember it?” She said, “Yes.” I said, “You have it down?” “Oh, yes.” And so I made another forty gallons of sauce that afternoon, and I went out front and got me a little pack of matches, and I burned it right before her eyes what she had written down—what I had written down for her and then what she had written down several times. And she really didn't think that I knew the recipe, and she had a pint of sauce hidden in her pocketbook that my brother had made, and she tasted it and she said, “They do—they do taste the same, don't they?” And I said, “Of

course.” I said—but I said, “You—you keep it in your brain and at some point—.” [She] said, “You mean that’s the only place it is?” I said, “The only place it needs to be right now until one of us is dead.” And probably—most likely, I’ll be the first one. I’m sixty-five years old today, and that’s her business then.

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AE: So did it take your daughter Lisa a few tries until she got the recipe tasting right, or did she get it right off?

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LP: Her daddy hovered over her until, you know, she would get it right. All of it’s in the original recipe. It’s spicy, and a lot of people say it’s too hot. Someone will say, you know, they really like it, but it’s—it’s a spicy sauce and—and but—but I’ll tell—I encourage her to hold it just like it is, no changes. People would come in, even after—Terry and my mother [Grace Proffitt] died within eight months of each other, and my brother died at age fifty-five; he’s three years younger than I, but people say there’s no difference. Even today, we don’t—we use the same—we use the same recipe, the same amount of food on the platter. We raised the price a little bit. People say, “We don’t want any change.”

00:07:12

AE: Do you remember the day that your father shared the recipe with you and your brother?

00:07:18

LP: No, I really don't. It's been, you know—it's been years and years; that would have been like when I was in high school. It's not, you know—he would—I remember his saying when he was developing that sauce, he said, "Here, taste this." I was a little boy and when it—when we lived—we're way out in the country, and when it was a bad day and someone couldn't come to work or someone—I was the dishwasher on Saturday and Sunday. So he said, "Here, taste this; taste this now." This changed. "No, I don't want it." He said, "Boy, you might have to make a living like this one day." So he taught us to work, and that was one of the most beneficial things that he ever taught us was to work.

00:07:56

AE: Did you have an idea when he shared the recipe with you how important that was at that moment?

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LP: Had no idea in the world. Just that—that was something else that he made us do, and they wouldn't write the recipe down when they were—when they were making it. My mother made it for years, and we had it; and then, as she grew older—my father died in 1980, and she grew older and later was in a nursing home. She lived to be eighty-six years old [Grace Proffitt died in 2002], but even when she was in the nursing home, she had some light strokes and she didn't remember, and my brother and I did. So you know as we—as we age, we see the great importance of things that we have learned when we were younger and the things—that's why I say this is my first love. I make a living as a pharmacist for all my life and owned a drugstore, but my first love is what I learned from a child. I have a feeling for what—what's right and what's not. I eat my product regularly so that it stays the same. When my brother died, I gathered

the cooks in here, and I said, “Now we’re going to make it just like this. I don’t care if I don’t sell ten a week. I don’t have to make any money.” I said, “I want—it’s going to be just like this.” And you’ll find from eight to nine ounces of cooked meat on each sandwich.

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Now if we were in the high-rent district, and we owed anything—we don’t owe anything, so we can afford to, still even in hard economic times, to put—give people—I did an interview the other day, and I said, on the radio, I said, “We give even today more than your money’s worth, and that’s what we’re still doing.” Now eventually we’ll go up a little bit on the prices; our product increases but that—people come back from thirty and forty years who have been here, and they say it’s still the same.

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One guy I went to church with was a teacher for Moody Aviation, and he flew into someplace in Alaska, and they said, “Where are you from?” He said Elizabethton, Tennessee.” And he said, “Wait a minute. Tell me something: Is the Ridgewood still there?”

00:09:58

AE: And so I don’t know if we mentioned that the Ridgewood opened in 1948, correct?

00:10:02

LP: That—that is correct. It opened in 1948 [as the Ridgewood Inn], but we didn’t have barbecue. We just had steaks and chops. It was just a little roadhouse out in the country. They had—it was just really—I tell people it was just a beer joint is about all it amounted to. There’s one up and down the road everywhere. So the county went dry in 1952, and we had to make a living. We had to make a living selling food, really. So those were lean times until barbecue

came along and still, we were—it’s in a rural area and people like to refer to it as Appalachia [says *App-al-at-cha*]. Even Lyndon Johnson knew that there was no long “a” in Appalachia. Today these foolish people on the news call it Appalachians [says *Apple-a-chans*], so—but anyway, we—we—my father and mother’s desire was to give my brother and I an education, and so they did and we did. So, but still my first love is what you learned. But and my daughter loves it. I mean nobody loves hard work but, like I told her, I said, “You’ll never get rich, and we don’t like rich people anyhow. We was raised poor.” I said, “We’re just working folks.” And I said, “You’ll make an honorable living and don’t change anything.” So that’s—that’s the way we’re progressing in the year 2009.

00:11:25

AE: And may—excuse me—may I ask you how your father came to name the—the restaurant Ridgewood?

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LP: There was a place called—I’m—I’m thinking this; he never did tell me this thing, but the place that we saw that he kept pointing out to us and telling us was the Big Ridgewood Hotel in—in—in Daytona Beach [Florida]. He loved to go to Daytona and—and I think that perhaps that’s where it came from. That’s the only place it could—it could have come from was from that Ridgewood Hotel. I have no other ideas, you know, or any other recollections of that.

00:12:04

AE: And so back to your sauce, if I may. Could you—it’s a tomato-based sauce—could you kind of describe the taste without giving away too much of the secret?

00:12:13

LP: It's—it's a—it's a tomato-based. It's—it's got a sweet and sour taste. It's thick. And it's reddish brown color, and it's spicy and it imparts a great taste. People will say, "Oh, I put it on French fries, and it's good stuff," you know. And but—but people like it and it's—it's a good taste. There's lots of good barbecue, and there's lots of good barbecue sauces, but this one is just a little bit different because my father kept tweaking it until he got just the right essence of sweet and sour and spicy—spicy-hot—as in hot, as in red pepper hot but not too spicy so that you couldn't eat it. But now—and it's got a little—people might—some people might say a little twang to it. It's got a little sweet and sour taste to it—more on—it's like a Texas-type barbecue sauce.

00:13:13

AE: And may I ask you where you're getting your hams and—and how many you might go through in a week?

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LP: Well, you know, this is February, so you're not going to do near the business in February. It's very seasonal, this business is. When things start getting warm—we're way out in the country and we have people come—third and fourth generations. People travel. They'll come by here. We buy our hams locally now. We've bought them from Armor. We've bought them from Lay—Lay Packing Company in Knoxville. They went belly up. Now we're getting them from a local place where these hams are bone—with the bone out and a net wrapping around them. And you take—you cook them with that and take the—cut the net off of them. It's like a cotton [net]

that's around the outside and then it's—it's bone-free, and we slice it. We slice the ham, rather than pull them or shred them. We slice it and we try to—once upon a time we—we thought we were going to try to portion it. Well, that didn't work, so there's just a finite amount of meat that you can get on one of those large barbecue buns without it falling over. And the—so we just let the cooks put on there what—what they think looks good and it's always heavy with meat, and then we charge accordingly. And therefore, we won't—we won't try to portion it because one man might get four ounces and another man five, and they come in and be mad. It's like buying a steak. I detest to go to a place to eat a steak, and they show one about an inch and half thick and you get it and it looks like a hamburger patty. And you think, "Well if I had known that I'd just ordered two to start with, so—." Like our potatoes; we use number one Idaho bakery, the big kind that you see you can buy individually in the—in the grocery store. My mother, one time they went—they were like over a dollar and something a pound, and I told my mother, I said, "We'll use local potatoes. They're cheaper." "No, we won't," [she said]. I said, "Why?" She said, "They don't cook up right." So even at that time, I mean she—you give something to people good and some other places would open—and another one of her sayings, "They will all try it once." If the food is not good, they won't come back. They might try it a time or two but the—the ambiance only goes so far when your belly is growling. And so they—that's what we keep striving for is the product, the product, the product. Make sure that the product is right and sufficient for a person, and they'll keep coming back to get it. So I tell people, I say, "You see those fries? Yesterday they were round." And so we cut them up each day. And we make our slaw from a head—head of cabbage. It never comes in a bag. We make our blue cheese dressing from a big hoop of blue cheese. And once upon a time they sent by mistake some of the kind that's already ground up in a bag, and the customers just howled, "It's not the same! What have

you done to the blue cheese dressing?” Well what happens when you bust that big—when you burst that big hoop of cheese, all the aromatics leave it, whereas when we—we cut it up with—with big knives, cut up that blue cheese and then the aromatics go into the vehicle that you put over it. And it creates its own taste.

00:16:52

AE: And can you tell me some of the other things you have on the menu in addition to the barbecue sandwiches and I know you have some beans and I hear tell that—that recipe might come from Memphis. Is that true?

00:17:02

LP: That—that—that idea came from Memphis. I was in the University of Tennessee in Memphis in Pharmacy in—in the College of Pharmacy and so there’s great barbecue places in Memphis—still are. And this was called Leonard’s Barbecue, and this was in the late [nineteen] ‘60s down on McLemore [Street]. So we went down there and we had—they had beans on the menu, and I said, “Mama, I bet you could make beans better than this.” So I knew she used—used to make baked beans all the time, so when we came—when I came back—back then it was twelve and a half hours from here to Memphis because we didn’t have the four lanes and—and the Interstates. They just went to Knoxville. So I mean today you—you can drive to Memphis from here in eight and a half hours. But anyway, so we didn’t get to come home very often. But when I came home, she had real good barbecued beans. And what she was doing, when you sliced those hams, some of it falls off; you get to the end, there’s the little piece that you can’t—you can’t do anything with. I mean it won’t slice, so they’d chop it up and put it in the beans—no

fat, just the meat, just real lean meat in there with her stuff, plus they'd put that—that barbecue sauce in it. And people loved those beans; they'd eat a lot of them.

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AE: So now you have—since you have the barbecue restaurant here that was inspired by a trip to Florida and beans that were inspired by your time in Memphis, is there—is there anything that you would consider traditional Appalachian kind of influence in what you serve here?

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LP: No, not really. You know, when you go to a steak restaurant, you don't get chicken tenders. But we've got chicken tenders, and we've got good chicken tenders because, you know, there's chicken tenders, and then there's the kind that doesn't look like rubber; it looks like it's a chicken. So we buy that kind and we used to have—we had hot dogs on the menu, and I said, "Mama, why do we've got hot dogs?" "Well," she said, "children eat hotdogs." So you know we've got—we've got good hamburger steaks. We buy the kind of hamburger that you—the good kind that you go to the grocery store and get, and we mash it out and make hamburger steaks. And so that's good stuff. So what we—everything that we have we try to make it good stuff, but I tell people never go to a fish place and order barbecue. Don't go to a barbecue place and order shrimp, but we've got something like that for people who—who don't want—. There might be one person in the group that says, "I don't want this." We've got real good baked ham for baked ham sandwiches. It's the red-type ham that we're all acquainted with that makes a really good sandwich with lettuce, tomato, and mayonnaise on it, and it's—you know, it's good. And the hamburgers are good because they're cooked just like you'd cook them on a grill somewhere in a little diner someplace. When they cook—got plenty of lettuce and tomato and

onions and—and mayonnaise and mustard, and it’s, you know, my mouth is slobbering right now.

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AE: [*Laughs*] Well can you tell me, then, now about—back to the barbecue—about your commitment to using all hickory wood?

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LP: We have—we have a lot of hickory around this place. And you know in Texas they use a lot of mesquite, which would be good. Perhaps other types of wood would be good, but this is what my father started using. I don’t know why; I don’t know where he come up with the idea of using hickory, but you see a lot of places say “Hickory-smoked wood,” but today most—so much of your barbecue is not cooked outside in a pit. It’s cooked in—some—you know, who knows where it’s cooked; it may be cooked in an oven someplace. It appears so. We were in Naples, Florida, last year and we—we came out of this place and went around the corner, and it said, “World Famous Ribs. Open at four o’clock.” So we pulled in there, and we’re sitting about fifteen until [four], and I looked over at my wife, and I said, “Uh-oh.” She said, “What?” I said, “No smoke.” She said, “What?” I said, “No smoke.” I said, “Maybe they’re smoking it way out in the country and—and trucking it in here.” So we got in and I got the ribs, and the ribs were like the ones that you—you use—and so people ask me, “Why have you never used ribs—never done ribs?” I said, “I’ve got a good way of doing ribs because I found a place in New York State that makes some of the best ribs I’ve ever seen, but they—we tried them buying raw ribs and cooking them and smoking them but the—the hickory makes such an intense taste that the ribs just weren’t good.” And we’ve let it alone. The way—this intense taste that’s on the outside of

these hams, as the ham is sliced and the blade goes through the ham, some of that outside taste is imparted—sliced—goes through that—every time it slices it goes through and imparts a little bit of that taste into that meat, whereas if you cut all the outside off of it—at Leonard’s in Memphis they had what they called the white pig, a mixed pig, and a brown pig. The white pig was all the inside meat. The mixed pig, of course, was the outside where it had been cooked and a little bit of the white. And then they had a brown pig that was cooked off the outside. But—but we use the whole ham, and it’s sliced and that—that slicer imparts part of the taste through the meat.

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AE: Can you tell me about Lewis Malone, your pit master who has been here for some years?

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LP: Lewis died about two months ago. Now his—he—he had been retired now for about six or eight years, and his nephew, Leon Malone, had helped him for many years. And now Leon is working. He’s about, oh, I think Leon might be forty-two years of age. And he’s been with him, and we have another—another young man that’s helping him, so—and Lewis Malone was—was the man, the second generation. There was another man named Gleeson Malone who was—who was Lewis Malone’s uncle, so they’ve been—in essence, it’s a third generation right now of the Malones, who are—that’s cooking—this man that’s cooking. And then we have another man that’s helping them. He’s learned the art. The art in the cooking the way we do is to get the wood very hot and get a—an immense fire in the morning early. And then you put the meat in there and you shut the air off, and the art in it is letting just enough air through to let the wood smolder and retain the heat and the smoke; but if you—if you let too much air in there, you’ll burn your meat, so you want just enough to get it very hot and keep it very hot, and you keep adding wood

all during the day. And then when they'd get done, we'll take one out and cut it open and see if it's done. No meat unless it's done. A lot of people hold their meat and they—they want it to just be barely done so that they—they don't—they do a lot of shrinkage, you see, if you cook it undone. And we'll—we'll lose fifty-percent by cooking it that way, whereas you might be able to get by with the third, but then you end up with that—what I call a mushy product. But you won't find a mushy product at Ridgewood; you're going to find meat that's done.

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AE: Now what is it about this place and this business, do you think, that has—that has kept three generations of one family here working for you?

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LP: We treat them like we'd want to be treated, and we pay them accordingly. We have people that have been—we've got the second and third generations out here of ladies that are waitresses and people that—that cook, some of them the third generation; and it's as a family, and we treat them as if they were our family. And we pay them accordingly. When—when you pay people and treat them right, they'll stay. They'll honor you by staying with you.

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AE: Can you describe what this place was like when your father first opened it—the building and also the clientele?

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LP: The building looked more or less like it does today. It was just a large stucco building way out in the country and time passed us by. The—this used to be the main road between Elizabethton and Bristol, just a little narrow concrete road back then. And it was—the clientele was just local clientele, and it was not until barbecue came on my mother—my father was the genesis of the—of the ideas for these things, whereas my mother stayed with it. She—she would stay and work it, and she would have to go out and pick up her help and take them back home at night. There wasn't many people that had cars around here and, at that time, in—in the early [nineteen] '50s. So but as time went on in the '70s and '80s and 1983 or '82 there was some people that came by here, and they traveled all over the country looking at different kinds of restaurants that are out by the wayside where that you—you go into a small town you see all these cars. You say, "Man, that's a good place to eat." So they did this study on—on—went to all these places and Jane—and Jane and Michael Stern had a book called *Good Food [Road Food]* and they—they picked Ridgewood as being one of the top three they found anywhere.

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So one morning I was working at the drugstore in [nineteen] '83, and my mother called me, and she says, "*Good Morning America* [television news program] called." And I said, "Well good morning to you, too, Mama." And she says, "No, no; they called me." I said, "Who?" She said, "*Good Morning America*. They want me to be on *Good Morning America*." I said, "Why?" She said, "Because they picked up that thing from *People* magazine." And so we—we went up there [to New York City], and she cooked on there with Joan London, and that's many moons ago—'83—but still people—they don't come for the—I don't think they—today, they don't make it—these are another generation. People—people who come—I'm like my father; every place I go I say, "Come eat with me." And they say, "What?" And I say, "Come and eat with me out in the country." I went to Best Buy [electronics store] the other day, and this young man, he

said, “Ridgewood,” he said, “I go there all the time now.” He said, “I went—I used to go to X, Y, Z Restaurant but,” said, “somebody told me about where you were.” He says, “It’s really good.” So that’s—that’s why, you know, each generation, I think that they don’t come for the ambiance. They come for the food. That’s anywhere you go in the nation, I think. People, they’ll go to—to the food.

00:27:51

AE: Now you said there weren’t many barbecue restaurants in this area when your father opened Ridgewood, but were there any other restaurants in general in the area?

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LP: Oh, yeah, many, many restaurants—many restaurants in—in Johnson City. Some of them—some of them advertised barbecue; some of them advertised different things. But there was a lot of restaurants around here—no chains, of course. And but there was a lot of small restaurants around.

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AE: And so your—your father, Jim, conceived this place, but the more you’re talking, you’re talking about your mother, Grace, who was—who did a lot of the cooking and the recipes. Was she also kind of the personality of the place early on?

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LP: She was the personality and then—and—and as she’s notorious as—as her later years—as she got older people would come and just swarm on the weekend. They didn’t understand that—that she’s just an old woman out here in the country. She—wait just a minute.

00:28:52

My mother, in essence, she ran—she ran the restaurant by herself. My father worked at a little rayon plant in Elizabethton, and it was so long—she said, “Many months I would go and not make—not make a penny. I’d just make enough to pay my employees.” And why she stayed with it, I have no idea. She—people would ask her that, and she said, “I had two little boys to educate,” so you know that’s why she—she kept staying with it. And I think that probably the product started catching on, and then local people would come. And she just stayed the generations; she just stayed with it so long and kept the same product and, you know, you go to a place and you get used to seeing John Doe there all the time. And she was always here; she worked seven days a week. And then later on, six days, but she was always here and the people were always here, and then they had the same product, so she enjoyed it. She enjoyed the people. You will never see a restaurateur, a real—someone that really enjoys it because you think about it, and they say dentists are the ones—dentists are often—have a high suicide rate, whereas I would suspect people in the restaurant business—like, “Oh, my goodness, what good food you have!” And so I—I suspect that they—they dwell—there are people in the restaurant business, the owners who stay right with it. They must feed off that. I know it’s—it’s encouraging when you hear that and—but it’s—like I told my daughter, it’s an honorable way to make a living. So I think, really, my mother, her drive and her stay with it was to see my brother and I educated.

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AE: And what made you want to go to Pharmacy School?

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LP: I saw—we had a local pharmacist in Bluff City who I really liked. And, originally, I was going into medicine, and my best friend is a cardiologist in Johnson City, and we went to UT [University of Tennessee] together, but then I decided to get married. And I could get out of pharmacy in four years, rather than getting out in about seven or eight years, so I went into pharmacy and it's been—it's been good for me because, at my age now, I can hire someone to do the work, whereas if I were a physician, I would still have to be in the trenches. But I just got in it as a way to make a living.

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AE: Do you think there are any similarities between the barbecue business and pharmacy?

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LP: Very much so because, as my—I often quote my mother, and she had many, many things that she would say, such as, I said a while ago, “They’ll all try it once.” But—but what she’d do is she would say, “Anyone who has to deal with the public—.” And you—you’re dealing with the public when you’re in any kind of retail business and imprint it on her because of her—the way she would tolerate people. And she often said about trying to help—she says, “I always tried to help those who try to help themselves. The poor will always be with us, but there’s the people who try to help themselves.” The poor, she would try to help them. But the similarity, I think, in the two professions is dealing with people and seeing the—the—the myriad of makeup of people. It’s—but, and of course in pharmacy you—you see a lot of people who are sick. People who are sick, they need help.

00:32:27

AE: And your—speaking of—your daughter Lisa is a Registered Nurse, is that right?

00:32:32

LP: Both of my daughters are Registered Nurses. One of them—the one that runs here is a Registered Nurse; the other one is a Nurse Practitioner. She’s got a Masters in—in Nursing and she works two days for me at the drugstore, and she works for an OB/GYN in Elizabethton two days a week. She did run a local rural clinic for the state, but that was just too stressful and she’s got two little boys and my little hunting buddies.

00:32:57

AE: And what’s your second daughter’s name?

00:33:01

LP: My other daughter’s name is Rebecca.

00:33:04

AE: And was that important to you for them to go have the same opportunities that you had to get out and get an education in another line of work before they came back here?

00:33:13

LP: That was. I preached it to them from the time they were young is you need to learn to make—get something to make a living with. There’s so many people that I have observed

through the years that they go—*go to school* but they graduate with something that they can't make a living with. So one of them was going to go into medicine, and one was going to go into pharmacy. When they hit real Organic Chemistry, they both decided to go into nursing, and I said, “That’s fine with me. You can make yourself a living at that and that—that’s good.” You can go anywhere in the world and make a living, so that’s—that’s what’s important to me. I—you know, many people preach, “Oh, if you get—in my era, if you got any kind of education—college education you could—you could really make a good living.” But today, that’s not the way it is.

00:34:02

AE: Well and I imagine that your daughters are about my age, in their mid to late thirties, and did you—were you afraid at all if they got out and got an education that they may not want to come back and be a part of the barbecue business?

00:34:16

LP: I had no idea in the world that Lisa would even want to. You know, we just—we assumed that Terry would just—he would—you know, live as long as I did. But he, you know, in the Lord’s providence he—he—he—his days were done at age fifty-five, and Lisa really didn’t like nursing. She was in it—she was a charge nurse on a floor at night in St. Petersburg and—and she just really didn’t like it because the pay is not commensurate with the responsibility. Today that’s—that’s changing today because of the lack of qualified nurses and people going out of it, so the pay is becoming—is starting to become equal to the responsibility that they incur. And so I had no idea that they would—that they would be here and be back here working. It just—it just evolved but I just—I knew that they could make a living for themselves if they had ton and so

they're both married. Their husbands work, but I think it's imperative that—that people learn to make a living. I don't care what it is, if they're a welder or whatever they do; if they can learn—learn the trade, they can make a living for themselves.

00:35:32

AE: May I ask you what came first, your brother—your brother Terry's passing or Lisa's interest in the restaurant?

00:35:40

LP: My brother started having some blacking out spells, and Lisa had talked about the Ridgewood, you know, perhaps she would come back, so she came back and worked with my brother [in 1997] five years before he died [in 2002]. And I started her out. Oh, she would whine to her mother because I started her out—I said you—the—the most knowledgeable man, my CPA told me, he said, “The most knowledgeable man in—in the restaurant business was a man that must have weighed 400 pounds, and he never came out of the back of that Hardees [fast food restaurant]. And so he—I said, “What was his—what—what was his essence? What did he do so well?” He said, “He could teach anyone to do any particular job in that business so expertly that he made his business—it was the number one Hardees in the nation.” So one day one of the supervisors—a new supervisor came in and he told him he was going to be out front and all this stuff, and he quit. They came and fired their supervisor and begged him to come back but he wouldn't. Now he's got one of the Pizza Inn's in the world. And but it's because—he can—he knows each job and can teach them. And I told my Lisa, I said, “You wash dishes, you bus tables, you learn how to cook the sandwiches, you learn how to do this; you learn how to do all this stuff, so you don't—no one—no one—you—you can teach each person how to do their

particular job perfectly.” And she whined a lot to her mother, but you know it’s business and it’s—it’s tough to make a living in it, but you only what you can engender and put into your child’s head is what’s important. You teach them to work, and that’s what I taught mine.

00:37:24

AE: And so does Lisa understand now the legacy she has to carry on her at the Ridgewood?

00:37:31

LP: She does and I think she takes it seriously and—and she loves it, but it gets back to, you know, it’s—my mother said it’s a hard job. But it is a hard job, when you have to deal with thirty or forty employees and—and this one lays out and that one lays out that’s the—the pitfalls in restaurants is employees. And I talked to my CPA one day and he said—I said—he said, “McDonald’s stock will always be under-valued.” And I said, “Why is that?” He said because they have—no one in the restaurant business has yet ever solved the employee problem.” I said, “Why? Pay them—pay them a good wage and they—they’ll work.” He said, “They won’t.” He said, “They’d rather work at the bank and make half as much as they can make at McDonald’s in management because of the perception of the job.” And so, you know, you have that problem in all restaurants. So that’s a—any kind of business when you’ve got a lot of employees, I don’t care what you’re in, you have to have—that’s the stress of jobs and of a business of maintaining enough and keeping enough capital to keep the job going—keep the business going.

00:38:41

AE: Now can—can you talk about, over the years, how your business has grown and word of mouth and you mentioned the—the Sterns earlier and their promotion of your restaurant outside of the area and getting more nationally known and how that’s changed over the years?

00:38:56

LP: After that exposure—national exposure—we had an influx of people, and the people would come and—and it’s been written up in a lot of magazines and so forth now, and there’s people who travel the country that will come and we have a lot of people who come to these mountains from the—from the South, from Florida and the—and the—come up here in the summertime, so it’s—we have a lot of—it’s been a big help to have the exposure. And then when I bought out my brothers, we made a corporation. I bought out my brother’s wife and daughter, and so I remodeled. I put a new roof on it and enclosed a little waiting room and enclosed the bathrooms and it was just you know—it was in pretty bad shape. So you still are not buying ambiance when you come here; you’re still—it’s still just a place to eat. But we’ve—we have second and third generations that come and I tell people, I say, “Come on Monday, Tuesday, or Wednesday; don’t come Thursday, Friday, or Saturday.” When I started running it, I closed on the Lord’s Day. It’s—it’s very interesting, that, and it’s baffling to know that to anyone that’s opened on Sunday, see, if they don’t say that the church crowd are the ones that typically are the most whining and complaining and—and low-tipping—they won’t tip and they—you know, so I didn’t—that’s not the reason I closed on Sunday. I just believe in closing on Sunday. So but anyway, I thought that was an interesting aside, and I’ve heard that from more than just one source.

00:40:36

AE: Can we talk a little bit about the interior of the building here? You were just mentioning some upgrades that you made, but I have to say that this feels less like a barbecue restaurant just in its appearance and—and more like a diner. Can you talk about just the way the place looks?

00:40:50

LP: It's just an evolution; it's just like a diner. It's—no—we—there are no decorations. There's just tile floors, and you've got stuff that's been here in this room we're sitting in since 1982—'81; it's just got—on the walls it's just like paneling that's got pictures on it and—and the other—this used—this room wasn't even here until 1980—'81 and we expanded and put this—put in a walk-in freezer and walk-in coolers and so forth and a big expansion more or less in '81 and '82 and '83 and—. But it's—we don't have any of the—anything that would lead you to believe that it's a western barbecue place.

00:41:42

AE: Well where do you think you fit into the tradition of barbecue in the Southeast United States?

00:41:50

LP: Really, after having seen the—the National Public Radio—TV did a—did a series on barbecue and this last year in Tennessee. They started from—Tennessee is 500 miles long, and it was interesting to see all these barbecue places. A lot of them is just—there's all kinds of barbecue, but I would say that we're just a—we just sell a lot of barbecue. That's about—I don't—I don't really know how it would fit in in the scheme of things, but people say, “Why

don't you change or move out or expand or create something else," but I don't think so. I think we'll just continue to sell food.

00:42:37

AE: When was the last time you were back in Memphis?

00:42:41

LP: The last time I was down there was when I took my—my oldest daughter down there in about [nineteen] '93 or something like that. I worked down there for a man—a Jewish man—and after I had worked for him, he said, "If you'll stay down here, I'll have you managing one of my four stores." I said, "I wouldn't stay in Memphis if you give me these—one of them stores." You know, I was down there during the riot times and when they was rioting, and so I just don't—I like—I like the—the concept of the—the Mississippi and I like the lifestyle and everything of the—the outlying small towns but I'm just a small town person, so I really don't like great big cities. But I love the—I love the country around there. I was down there—went down to Mississippi a lot. We'd get out and ride around. I loved Oxford, going down to stay at the University of Mississippi and all these places and we—we'd go up north and go fishing at Real Foot [Lake] and see—see the life of the Delta and I love that, and I really appreciate it. I just didn't like the big city.

00:43:50

AE: Are there any folks in Florida who have any idea that Ridgewood Barbecue has that Florida connection?

00:43:57

LP: I doubt it. I don't—I don't really know. But it's—it was a good thing for us, but my father, you know, he—he felt bad. He never did have—get to get a high school education and when his cousins did. His father died—my grandpa [Taylor Wade Proffitt] died probably with prostate cancer when he was about fifteen, and he had to go to work in—in the rayon factory so—to keep his—. You know in those days, in the [nineteen] '30s, there were no—no kinds of welfare. You didn't work, you didn't eat, so he had to go to work and—rather than get a high school education. So he really felt deficient because of that, but he was a well-read man. My thing about I can remember that he—he had lots of books and lots of magazines and newspapers. He'd read two newspapers every day, but he was well read, even though he had no formal education other than the eighth grade.

00:44:53

AE: Now just to go back to talking about the pit and—and hickory and whatnot. I was reminded to mention that I read somewhere that you have a family farm that's been in your family for a long time where you source some of your hickory. Is that right?

00:45:07

LP: That's right, it's been in my family—I've got the deeds to it from 1856. It came through the ladies, and one of the Proffitts married the lady that her family had owned it, and my mother—my grandmother [Mary Bertha Proffitt] was born out there in 1882. But it came through the ladies, and we got a lot of hickory out there. And I've—we've been fortunate to have some really good suppliers of hickory wood. There's a lot still grow(ed) here, and I have one good friend who has a contract to clear right-of-ways for TVA [Tennessee Valley Authority], and they

have—they have to move that wood out. Sometimes I'll get some—he'll cut big hickories and I'll get some for those but—but I've got a big building up here that I've got it stored in the dry, so that I'll never let it get down. And then I've got two sawmill friends and they—they have the outside that comes off you know in blocks, and so I buy those and can—keep a stockpile of good hickory wood dry.

00:46:09

AE: Hmm. So it seems like you're in a fairly unique position where you—I can't imagine you foresee any time when you'll find hickory scarce for your business?

00:46:19

LP: Well, no, not in this area. It's just like out in Texas; you'd never be out of mesquite. But around here, these are mixed hardwoods around here and there's lots of—there's lots of hickory. There's lots of oak—white oak and red oak—and we use hickory but we've—I try to identify those sources and I think about those things all the time to keep a good stockpile, but if worse comes to worse, I've got a whole lot of them out there as big around as a front end of a car.

00:46:49

AE: Wow. So being out in this kind of tucked away area in the mountains here, do you have any problems with the Health Department and codes and—about smoke and—and that being a problem in the restaurant?

00:46:59

LP: No, but I can imagine in the city it would be that way, but we're stuck here in a little holler, and I tell the guy, I said, "You know you're here when you smell the smoke in the holler."

People come up and they'll smoke and they want to go look and they'll smell that—that smoke; but if you want to go to a place where they've got real barbecue, look for the smoke.

00:47:20

AE: And I think I read in a piece by Fred Sauceman, he mentioned that when the four-lane highway came through, you were scared that it would hurt business but it actually maybe helped?

00:47:30

LP: Yeah, that first year in [nineteen] '87 we lost about \$30,000. And that was in '87 when the—when they built the new road. But I kept saying, "Man, it's going—the only thing it's going to do is make it where it's accessible. Now we're—we're less than a mile off a real good four-lane road that goes between Bluff City and Elizabethton, and it just made it very accessible. Now it's four-lane from most anywhere from I-26 or from—from I-81. It's—it's one mile of two-lane road off of a four-lane all the way from the Interstate, so it—it just made it really accessible for us and it helped us. Our—after that our business went—really took off.

00:48:14

AE: Do you have an idea of what percentage today you might have of local business and—and tourist business?

00:48:21

LP: I tell people, I say, “We know who keeps our bills paid when it’s cold in the winter. It’s local people.” And if local people trade with you, you come and you see people that’s—that’s local, you know it’s a good place. And so all the winter months and stuff—but now in the summertime you see a lot of Yankee cars, and you see a lot of Florida cars. And the people coming—we’re thankful; we’re thankful to see them and—. One thing that—that is of interest that I think is when the Civil Rights thing was going on and my mother, the—the black people always ate here and she welcomed them. And I thought that was interesting.

00:49:12

AE: So Ridgewood was never segregated at any time then?

00:49:14

LP: No, ma’am, not at all.

00:49:19

AE: Well what do you think the—the future of Ridgewood Barbecue is?

00:49:24

LP: Well only the Lord knows that, but I suspect my daughter will continue. She’s thirty-nine years old; she’ll be forty the twenty-seventh of November—I mean September—and she loves it. And perhaps one of her twin—they’re both seven, Amanda and Jacob—perhaps one of them will want to but—but it’s—it’s a good place. A person can make a good living.

00:49:53

AE: What do you think your parents would have to say about your daughter taking over the business today?

00:49:58

LP: They—my—my mother especially would be tickled to death that her legacy continues because she thought so much of the business, and she put her lifetime of work into it. Even after she didn't have to work, she—she—I had people say, "Aren't you going to retire. I'm sixty-five." I said, "And shame my mama?" I said, "She went down when she was seventy-nine."

00:50:26

AE: So do you see a day when you'll retire from the pharmacy business and—and the drugstore and spend more of your days over here at Ridgewood?

00:50:31

LP: Well, I'm semi-retired now. I have—I just—I pay bills and manage the place, and then I'm part of the time here and part of the time over there; and I enjoy being both places, but you know I would enjoy being right here. It's just like home to me because I worked here as a child. And until I—you know, until I went off to college. And we're stuck way out here in the country and, to me, working here is just like being—this felt more like my home than—than going home.

00:51:05

AE: Well and this has been a great visit. And I—you know, at the end of the meal you like to have dessert, and we haven't talked about the sweet stuff you have here. What kinds of desserts do you have on the menu at Ridgewood?

00:51:16

LP: We don't have any kind of dessert, no dessert. Used to we had pie. People would come up, and they'd say, "Well do you have any dessert?" And she'd say, "Well now, if you'd done what you're supposed to, you can't hold any kind of dessert." But we used to have pies and stuff—local made pies—but they just wouldn't sell. People would come in here and eat that big bite of that hog meat and a big bite of that beef. We got beef, too—top—top round barbecue beef and they'd eat a big load of that stuff and all those potatoes and beans, and they'd come up here and—and I remember seeing one big fat man come up there one day, and his face was as red as a beet; and he says, "Oh, I've eaten too much." And Mama said, "You'll sleep good." And I whispered to her, I said, "Yeah or forever."

00:52:05

AE: [*Laughs*] Now the beef, do you cook that the same way as the ham?

00:52:07

LP: Same way but it comes off a lot faster because there's no—there's very little you know—there is not near as much water in the—in the beef. It comes off a lot—it cooks a lot faster, but we do the same with that. We slice it too, and of course we have predominantly we'll buy—we'll sell four times the pork that we do the beef, but some people prefer the beef.

00:52:31

AE: And how many hams can you fit on your pit at one time?

00:52:35

LP: Well I—I built a second pit. I’ve got—I’ve got a second building, and I’ve got four pits now, and I can probably get twenty-five hams in each. I can probably in the summertime, you know, I could cook 100 hams a day in—in one round. But about eight years ago the—the ceiling of one of the enclosures it caught a-fire. They got too much fire trying to get it started, and one of them wisely ran up here and got the fire extinguisher. Now I have two or three stuck around down there and put it out. But it just occurred to me, my goodness, if that thing burned down, I would be out of business for about six months. So I had me a whole new one built beside that one and then after they—I let them start using that one, and then I rebuilt a whole other new one right beside it, so we can—we cook—we can cook 100 hams easily in one morning—I mean one day.

00:53:39

AE: Goodness. Well I’ve kept you here for a little while. Is there anything that I haven’t asked or may not know to ask that you want to make sure to share?

00:53:48

LP: I think that covers all of it. It’s just—just a place to make a living but we’re—we’re proud of the product. We’re just proud of the product, and I eat the product regularly. I told Fred Sauceman the other day, I was talking to him and I talked to some of his groups from East Tennessee State University come, and he has a food class and I’ll come and talk to them. I said, “Now you’ll have to excuse me when I start talking because of my Appalachian American accent first.” I said, “Not only that but,” I said, “you’ll see that—that I start slobbering because it’s good stuff.”

00:54:22

AE: All right, Mr. Proffitt. Well I appreciate you sitting here with me. I've enjoyed it. Thank you so much.

00:54:28

LP: Thank you, Amy.

00:54:30

[End Larry Proffitt Interview]