

**TOMMY HUGHES**  
**Tommy Leonard's Bar-B-Q - Horn Lake, MS**

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Date: August 4, 2008  
Location: Tommy Leonard's Bar-B-Q – Horn Lake, MS  
Interviewer: Rien Fertel for the Southern Foodways Alliance  
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs  
Length: 29 minutes  
Project: Southern Barbecue Trail – Tennessee

**[Begin Tommy Hughes-Tommy Leonard's Interview]**

**00:00:00**

**Rien Fertel:** This is Rien Fertel with the Southern Foodways Alliance. I'm on the Barbecue Trail. It is August 4, 2008, a Monday, just after 10:00 a.m. I'm at Tommy Leonard's Bar-B-Q with Mr. Tommy Hughes. We're going to ask him some questions. Can I have you introduce yourself and give us your birth date, please?

**00:00:26**

**Tommy Hughes:** My name is Tommy Leonard Hughes. My birthday is March 9, 1943.

**00:00:31**

**RF:** And you're the owner of this restaurant?

**00:00:33**

**TH:** Yes; I am.

**00:00:35**

**RF:** And I—I think those—those familiar with barbecue history and culture will be very interested to—to read and listen to this interview. So let's start with your family history; who—who was your grandfather—tell me that?

**00:00:54**

**TH:** My grandfather's name was Leonard Heuberger; most people around this area know him and around the world know him. He started Leonard's Barbecue in Memphis, Tennessee, 1140 South Bellevue and McLemore in 1922. And I'm the fourth generation in this business.

**00:01:14**

**RF:** You're the fourth generation; what's the first—him or—or a child of yours?

**00:01:19**

**TH:** His dad came over from Germany and he had a—a small café in Memphis, North Memphis and then my grandfather and then my mother and then me.

**00:01:33**

**RF:** What was your great-grandfather's name?

**00:01:37**

**TH:** His—his name was Leonard Heuberger, Sr.

**00:01:39**

**RF:** And his—his café, do you remember—or do you know what they served?

**00:01:45**

**TH:** I just knew they served beer and barbecue and I don't know too much about it 'cause that was—that was way back then. I'm not familiar with it but I do know that he was in some type of restaurant and—and grill work.

**00:02:00**

**RF:** I don't think many people know that—that there's a generation even before Leonard of Leonard's Barbecue. Is there anything else you know about your grandfather? Your great-grandfather—where was he from in Germany maybe?

**00:02:15**

**TH:** I don't know what part of Germany he was from but I do know when he was over here he worked—he worked for a beer company and then he opened up a small café, but that's all I know about him. There wasn't too much said about him; it was mostly about his son, my grandfather that was such a big success in Memphis.

**00:02:38**

**RF:** So when was your grandfather born, and he was born in Memphis I assume?

**00:02:42**

**TH:** He was born and raised in Memphis. He was born November 11, 1895.

**00:02:48**

**RF:** And you were telling me you have quite a collection of—of pictures of the history of his history. When he was a young man he—he went to World War I?

**00:03:00**

**TH:** When he was a young man he went to World War I on a Navy ship and I looked up the ship that he was on. It was called the USS Yale. And he also told me that during his War days that the ship he was on crossed the English Channel 92 times.

**00:03:22**

**RF:** And you were telling me that he was a cook on the ship?

**00:03:27**

**TH:** He was a cook—a cook on the ship and that’s what first gave him the idea that when he got home he wanted to serve people food and be in the café business.

**00:03:37**

**RF:** When he came back or before or after the War did he work for his father?

**00:03:43**

**TH:** No; his father was—he died at a—died at an early age and my grandfather when he got off the World War I Navy ship he went to work for Cutty Packing Company and then after a few years at the packing company he opened his first restaurant in 1922 at Trig and Latham in Memphis and that’s when he met my grandmother and they married. My grandmother was Italian and—and my grandfather was German and my grandmother started the Italian Spaghetti and they’ve been in it ever since.

**00:04:19**

**RF:** What was your grandmother’s name?

**00:04:22**

**TH:** Her name was Edith Heuberger. Her maiden name was Edith Suliano.

**00:04:30**

**RF:** And—and so they served—that original restaurant at Trig and Latham was it—what was the name of it?

**00:04:36**

**TH:** It was called Leonard's Old Hickory Barbecue and they—they specialized in barbecue and just the barbecue products.

**00:04:44**

**RF:** Did they serve spaghetti also—your grandmother's?

**00:04:49**

**TH:** She made—she made the spaghetti and they called it a half and half plate. It had the barbecue on one side and spaghetti—spaghetti on the other side and the homemade coleslaw too and it was a big success.

**00:05:04**

**RF:** And I mean there's places around town that sell something called barbecue spaghetti. Was it barbecue spaghetti? Was there the barbecue in her spaghetti or was it strictly Italian spaghetti?

**00:05:14**

**TH:** We have never done anything like barbecue in the spaghetti. It was always barbecue on one side and the spaghetti on the other side.

**00:05:24**

**RF:** So your restaurant now you—you do serve a similar half and half?

**00:05:26**

**TH:** I have the same recipe—close to what they had back then. It's not—not exactly the same but it's close to it and I serve exactly the same thing as they did and try to serve it to the best of my knowledge and—but we do now have barbecue spaghetti that's—that's the meat chopped up into the spaghetti. We started that too with the half and half. So you have a choice of the chopped up barbecue in your spaghetti or you have a choice of it one side and spaghetti on the other side.

**00:06:03**

**RF:** And so your—your grandfather opened his restaurant in 1922 and when did he move to the—this well-known location?

**00:06:11**

**TH:** He started in 1922 at Trig and Latham in Memphis and then he moved to Bellevue—Bellevue and McLemore. That was the location everybody knew him at in 1932. And he sold his restaurant in 1968.

**00:06:27**

**RF:** And—and that was the large drive-thru location?

**00:06:31**

**TH:** He had 300 drive-thru and about 350 inside the restaurant and they had about 25 car hops and they stayed open 'til 2:00 a.m. in the morning, seven days a week, and—and had quite a business back in the '50s and early '60s.

**00:06:50**

**RF:** It—I mean it sounds like your grandfather ran an amazing business. How—how did—did he learn to cook barbecue, from his father?

**00:06:57**

**TH:** That's something that I've never heard—heard of. I don't know where he learned it but he sure learned it good and he—and I have to say this about my grandfather. He taught me everything that I know in the barbecue business and I think of him every day.

**00:07:22**

**RF:** When did you start working there?

**00:07:24**

**TH:** I started working there when I was about 12 years-old. I was a car hop and I worked out there with the car hops and taking trays off the cars when I was 12 years-old. And—and then some Sundays after—after church we would go down there and they'd let me—I'd catch the bus there, the 17 Glenview bus and I'd catch the bus and go downtown and watch *Tarzan* movies and



then when I got back—back to the restaurant it would be time for us to go home after the afternoon rush.

**00:07:52**

**RF:** And I mean back then your—your grandfather ran I guess the most well known barbecue in town. Do you remember any other places in that area, or was he the only business around?

**00:08:09**

**TH:** Back in 1922 and probably 1932 he was the only business in town. And then back in the late '40s and '50s there was other barbecue restaurants that came up after—after he did.

**00:08:24**

**RF:** So why do you think the—the operation, the restaurant, why do you think it worked and became so big?

**00:08:34**

**TH:** Well one reason it worked is—is because my grandfather, his—his attitude toward people is he was very friendly and he always gave the customer anything he wanted. He put a lot of food on the plate and it was consistent and it was very good and people just loved his attitude. And he always had time to come out and talk to you.

**00:09:00**

**RF:** What kind of boss was he to his employees?

**00:09:01**

**TH:** He was the best boss of any—anybody that you could ask for. He was just like a father to everybody.

**00:09:08**

**RF:** Do you credit him with any other innovations in the restaurant business or the—or the barbecue business?

**00:09:17**

**TH:** He's—he's noted for a lot of things—his charity and—and—and the way he has treated people through the years. He was—he was a very kind person and—and he was—he was a good grandfather to me.

**00:09:32**

**RF:** And how many children did he have?

**00:09:38**

**TH:** He had one daughter which was my mother.

**00:09:41**

**RF:** And she worked at the business also?

**00:09:42**

**TH:** Back in the '50s she started working down there and then later on she opened her own business in White Haven.

**00:09:49**

**RF:** And—and you were telling me about the—well what was the name of the business, I’ve got to ask that?

**00:09:55**

**TH:** The name of my mother’s business was Bill’s Barbecue off of Range Road in White Haven.

**00:10:03**

**RF:** How long when—were the years of operation there?

**00:10:07**

**TH:** They was there about 10 years before they retired.

**00:10:09**

**RF:** And when did it close?

**00:10:13**

**TH:** They retired in 1980 when I opened my first business up in South Haven.

**00:10:18**

**RF:** And what did you call your business originally? Was it the same name?

**00:10:21**

**TH:** It was called Tommy's Old South Barbecue and then I changed it to Tommy Leonard's Bar-B-Q to get my grandfather's name into it.

**00:10:32**

**RF:** And do you carry over recipes or cooking techniques from your grandfather's restaurant?

**00:10:38**

**TH:** As close as I can get to the recipe; they've changed—I've changed them a little bit but they're very, very close to the original recipes.

**00:10:46**

**RF:** So what do you cook here? What—what do you cook—shoulder or butt for your sandwiches?

**00:10:52**

**TH:** We started out cooking shoulders and then we—we now use Boston butts because they're—they're smaller and you get a better yield out of the pork. You don't get 50-percent shrinkage like you would on a 16-pound raw weight shoulder. And we cook practically everything that he cooked back then. And we—we specialize in barbecue ribs; we use the baby back ribs which to my mind is the best tenderest rib you can buy and we also started Mississippi catfish which is going over real, real good and I'm very proud of that too.

**00:11:33**

**RF:** So you fry catfish?

**00:11:32**

**TH:** Fried catfish, right; we—we serve—we serve all you can eat catfish, all you can eat barbecue and ribs every Thursday, Friday, and Saturday night.

**00:11:46**

**RF:** And—and the—did Leonard's Barbecue did they serve ribs also?

**00:11:53**

**TH:** They are the ones who got me on serving ribs. They didn't serve baby back ribs; they served spareribs back in those days.

**00:12:02**

**RF:** And what kind of cooker do you use here at your restaurant?

**00:12:05**

**TH:** We went over to the rotisserie oven where we could put hickory wood and green pecan in there to give the flavor to the meat and it cooks it a lot better than the—the old pit does. And—and it just—it's just a better all-time cooker than I've ever seen.

**00:12:28**

**RF:** Are you're the first one I've met who uses green pecan. Everyone uses hickory. Why—why do you use the—the combination of the two woods?

**00:12:38**

**TH:** We use the hickory wood and any type of wood that gives the—the meat the flavor, we—we use. And someone told me you ought to try using green pecan; it also adds a flavor to it, so—. So I combine the both of them together and—and it really gives the ribs and the barbecue a tremendous flavor.

**00:13:03**

**RF:** And how long do you cook your—your Boston butts for?

**00:13:06**

**TH:** We cook them approximately nine hours a day; we put them on in the morning and take them off in the evening and—about nine hours.

**00:13:14**

**RF:** Are they salted or seasoned before they go on the pit?

**00:13:22**

**TH:** Before we put them on the pit we've got our own special basting sauce that we rub them and then toward the end we put a regular barbecue sauce on it that's—that's original and then we wrap them in aluminum foil and we put them in our cooler. And then we take it out of that cooler and the next day and—and put it in another pit that warms it up and then we serve it to the customers.

**00:13:47**

**RF:** And how many kinds of barbecue sauce do you—do you have?

**00:13:51**

**TH:** We have two kinds of sauce. We have the barbecue sauce which is called the Sweet Sauce; that's the sauce that goes on the ribs and the barbecue and then I make a special sauce I put on the table; it's a Hot Sauce and you just need a drop of that to set you on fire.

**00:14:07**

**RF:** Yeah; it looks very good. It's almost like—is it kind of a Tabasco type of sauce but it looks thicker and peppery?

**00:14:17**

**TH:** It's not a Tabasco sauce. It's a—mostly a cayenne pepper sauce with apple cider vinegar and—and several other things in it which I'm not going to mention.

**00:14:29**

**RF:** Did—did—the original Leonard's Barbecue, did they have similar two sauces?

**00:14:37**

**TH:** They had exactly the same as I do except they—when they cooked their shoulders back in those days you cooked it over charcoal. They had a basting sauce which is 50-percent apple cider vinegar. They basted their shoulders every two or three hours back in those days. We don't do that today 'cause I think it takes away from the heat, opening the pit door and—and basting. You lose your—your heat and you don't want to lose your—your heat. You want to try to cook the meat at a certain temperature for the full nine hours. That's why I—I baste them in the beginning

and then at the end I put the barbecue sauce on it 'cause I don't interfere with the cooking procedure.

**00:15:18**

**RF:** When you're at your grandfather's restaurant do you remember if he cooked or was he a front of the house kind of man?

**00:15:24**

**TH:** When he first started he—he showed the people how to cook and then they had a pit outside behind the restaurant back in those days. He cooked five tons of barbecue per week back in the early '50s. And he had two cookers in there that stayed in there 24-hours a day.

**00:15:46**

**RF:** Two men?

**00:15:46**

**TH:** Two men but one—one cook and then the next day the other one would cook.

**00:15:51**

**RF:** Do you remember their names or anything about those two guys?

**00:15:56**



**TH:** I remember them very well. One of them's name was Tom Tillman and then there was another one named James Willis and then Milton Smith; they was the three cooks. And then Tom Tillman later on went back into the restaurant and left it to James Willis and Milton Smith.

**00:16:14**

**RF:** Those three men they were—they were white or they were black?

**00:16:16**

**TH:** They was black. They was black and they stayed you know they stayed in there and one of them stayed for 35 years with my grandfather. The people that worked there loved him like I said before and I all the employees—his waitresses and his cooks, they would—it wasn't nothing strange to be there 25 years, because they loved the man.

**00:16:42**

**RF:** And—and your grandfather, you were showing me around, had some famous friends; tell me about his—his friendship with Elvis.

**00:16:49**

**TH:** Elvis back in the early '50s used to come in my grandfather's restaurant and—and they became friends. And I remember one time that Elvis' mother died and my grandfather closed the restaurant down at Bellevue and McLemore and all us employees stood in front of Bellevue as the funeral procession went by and Elvis really appreciated that. And on November 11<sup>th</sup> my—it was my grandfather's birthday and Elvis sent him a birthday cake. And on his 61<sup>st</sup> birthday and I

have the picture in the restaurant telling—telling about that event and—and Elvis was a wonderful, wonderful man.

**00:17:29**

**RF:** Did you get to meet him or—or even wait on him when you were here?

**00:17:35**

**TH:** No; I was—I didn't get to meet him. I met him one time at the fairgrounds but I never seen him at the restaurant but I just—you know that was back in the early '50s. I was just about eight or nine years old but he used to come down there and then in the mid-'50s when he became famous he used to send George Klein down there to pick up a lot of barbecue and—and I do know that. I was—I was there than at 2 o'clock in the morning.

**00:18:03**

**RF:** Did your grandfather, did he cook at home also? Did he have time to cook? I mean you said he—he cooked in the Navy and he opened this famous restaurant?

**00:18:11**

**TH:** I've never seen him cook at home. My grandmother always cooked at home and—the meals for us and—and we didn't eat barbecue at home.

**00:18:20**

**RF:** What—what did she cook?

**00:18:24**

**TH:** We—we mostly ate meat and potatoes at home.

**00:18:27**

**RF:** Because of the German heritage?

**00:18:30**

**TH:** I believe because we eat barbecue all day long and we're just trying to get out of eating barbecue and—and sometimes when she didn't feel like cooking we'd bring some barbecue home to eat, but she cooked home—home-cooked meals back in those days.

**00:18:46**

**RF:** Did he, your grandfather, eat barbecue often?

**00:18:49**

**TH:** He ate barbecue every day—just like I do for a long time. He loved barbecue and—but he loved his vegetables too.

**00:19:00**

**RF:** So you got into the business in 1980; do you remember why? Was there, you know, a spark that said I have to open the restaurant? What made you finally open the restaurant?

**00:19:11**

**TH:** Well one reason I opened the restaurant, my grandparents raised me and everywhere my grandfather went I was—I was there with him and I saw how he loved the—the food business

and—and I'm luckier than a lot of kids. I always knew what I wanted to do just like when he was on the Navy ship he—he knew that he wanted to open up a restaurant. And being around him all my life and respected him the way I did it—it wouldn't be nothing else I'd be in but the restaurant business. And people ask me, when are you going to retire? I say I'm never going to retire. I'm going to always stay in it as long as the Lord lets me have good health.

**00:19:55**

**RF:** Was it tough the first years opening the restaurant business?

**00:20:01**

**TH:** The first years was really tough because they—at—at that time down 51 they was widening the road for about two years and I really had to learn how to make things go over and I learned—learned it you know through my grandfather what to do in tough times 'cause he had tough times too back then. And I just stuck in it and it—finally it—I had so much business in that small restaurant in South Haven, I had to build a bigger restaurant in Horn Lake and that's where I'm at today.

**00:20:35**

**RF:** And—and we're just a few miles south of Memphis down 51—Highway 51. Why did you choose to open in Mississippi? Do you live in Mississippi?

**00:20:44**

**TH:** I've—I've lived in Mississippi; I've been here a long time and the location that I've got down in Horn Lake was ideal at that time and—and it turned out to be a good location.

**00:20:58**

**RF:** And so I'm sure you get customers who remember eating at the old family restaurant.

What—what do they say; what do they remember when they come in here?

**00:21:09**

**TH:** I have some pictures of 1932 of the old Leonard's what it looked like and I have a picture of the cars on the parking lot, the 1950—'52 cars and a few customers has come in and pointed their car out you know in the picture and I think that's amazing that they can—you know remember that; of course they're about 80—85 years-old but they say, there's my car, Tommy. I say—I say well I'm glad I got it on that picture.

**00:21:40**

**RF:** How long have you been in the barbecue business? You told me when I came in.

**00:21:45**

**TH:** I've been in it a total of 45 years or more, practically all my life 'cause I'm 65 years-old and—but actually working I've been in it about 45 years actually you know working every day in it.

**00:22:01**

**RF:** So how has the barbecue or the restaurant business changed in that—nearly half a century in this area?

00:22:09

**TH:** The barbecue restaurant has always been a good business if you have good barbecue. I have people tell me every day that barbecue is not as good as they thought it was going to be but if you come down here to Tommy Leonard's you're going to get barbecue like—like it used to be in the old days and it's been good to me. It's—it's supported my family and everything and what makes it good for me, I love the business just like he did. And if you don't love the business you need to get out of it.

00:22:39

**RF:** And has—well let me ask you a more abstract question maybe; why do you think barbecue is so important to this—to this area of the South?

00:22:53

**TH:** Well it—it probably originated in the South. You got Memphis—Memphis barbecue and of course back—back in those days you didn't have all that and then it's just grown to Memphis in May and just everybody loves barbecue. And then I started the catfish too and the barbecue and the catfish has gone over real good but I think Memphis is the capital of barbecue and I'd say my grandfather was—was part of that, back in those days before it exploded to what it is today.

00:23:27

**RF:** Was—was your—one more question because you have a lot of things in here that identify you probably as a Southerner. Was your grandfather a proud Southerner?

00:23:36

**TH:** He was a proud Southerner and my great-great-grandfather—his name was AP Leach. He fought for the Confederate Army back in 1861 to '65 and I have some of his pictures in here of—of the years that he was in the Civil War and then after the Civil War he was a Methodist Minister and it was a lot of history that you know goes way back in my family on both sides.

**00:24:06**

**RF:** That would be on what side—the man who fought in the Civil War?

**00:24:11**

**TH:** That would be on my father's side.

**00:24:14**

**RF:** And was your father in the restaurant business? Did he ever—?

**00:24:18**

**TH:** My father's name was Tommy Leach and he never was in the restaurant business. He was the Manager of General Motors out on Summer and then he retired and he's no longer with us; he's with the Lord right now.

**00:24:35**

**RF:** And—and so what do people say I mean you told me about the picture on the wall with the cars; what do people say when they find out that you know you're carrying on this tradition—family tradition and barbecue tradition that's been around for you know almost 100 years?

**00:24:55**

**TH:** They—they're real proud that I'm doing it. They—I have compliments which I really appreciate every day of people saying we really thank you for being down here and—and why don't you open the restaurant in Texas or Louisiana and I've got one answer for them on that. I said well I'm going to go back to my grandfather again; I said I could never talk too much about him. He always told me one business was—was enough and you got another one you'd have a headache so I always just stuck with one business and—and tried to maintain that business the best I could 'cause when you go out and you open two or three restaurants you're not going to give the people the same as you would if you're there yourself personally watching over things. So that's why I'm just going you know to stick with one business and my age has a lot to do with that too but he was right about that. One business is enough.

**00:25:54**

**RF:** Did he—did he sell his business or did someone—how did that happen 'cause there is a Leonard's in Memphis?

**00:26:00**

**TH:** In 1968 he sold his business to Horn Chevrolet Company which was on Union Avenue back then because he was at the age where he—he thought he would you know retire and everything, so he needed to sell the business to—or to have the money to retire—him and my grandmother. And when he sold it to Horn Chevrolet they opened up seven branches of Leonard's all over Memphis and I think they have one left now.

**00:26:33**



**RF:** And—and did the—what—did you visit the restaurant? What happened to the restaurant in those years because it—you just told me two questions ago that he said never open more than one restaurant and they opened seven restaurants? What did that do to you know—did it change the quality or—or anything?

**00:26:54**

**TH:** When he sold his business, the—the Chevrolet Company they opened up seven branches. My grandfather just had the one restaurant and they changed a lot of things in the restaurant which was to my mind a big mistake, because when you have a million dollar business you should try to maintain what you have instead of changing something like that. And the—and the changes they made turned out to be wrong and that's why they probably just have one restaurant left.

**00:27:28**

**RF:** And so was your—did your—what would your—what do you think your grandfather would say now you know knowing that you have your own restaurant and it is a barbecue restaurant?

**00:27:42**

**TH:** I think he knows now that I have this barbecue restaurant and he's with me a lot of times here at night and I know him and my grandmother both from above are smiling right now.

**00:27:53**

**RF:** Did he ever encourage you to get into the business or give you any advice in that area?

**00:28:02**

**TH:** He's encouraged me on a lot of things but he also told me I can do anything I want, and I said—well I called him Pa. I said Pa, I want to do what you've done through the years and try to keep up what you've done and—and of course I never could be as good as he was but I try to—try to make him proud and I think I have.

**00:28:23**

**RF:** Well good; I think that's a good note to end on. I want to thank you for this interview.

**00:28:29**

**TH:** Thank you very much; I really appreciate it.

**00:28:32**

**RF:** Well thank you, sir.

**00:28:34**

**[End Tommy Hughes-Tommy Leonard's Interview]**