

**BEN WASH**  
**Ben's Long Branch Barbecue – Austin, Texas**

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Southern Foodways Alliance  
in association with the American Studies Department at the  
University of Texas, Austin  
and  
The Central Texas Barbecue Association

**[Begin Ben Wash]**

Andrew Busch: My name is Andrew Busch, I'm here at Ben's Long Branch Barbecue with—with my partner Marvin Bendele, and we're interviewing here Ben Wash today, proprietor of this wonderful, old barbecue establishment and we're certain he's got a lot of great information for us and we're looking forward to talking to you, Ben. Ben, would you mind just stating your name and age for us and maybe just talk a little bit about what you think—what you think barbecue is all about—the meaning of barbecue, Texas, whatever you like, we—

Ben Wash: Thank you. My name is Ben Wash. I'm the president of Ben's Long Branch Barbecue—has been for thirty-six years. In 1971, yes, 1971 when I started it all, and I'm still—still—still going, you know. And well, you know, the thing that, uh—what I was trying to tell these guys, they're a little younger than I am, just a little bit you know, not much *[Laughter]*—nice guys, though, you know, man. I'm trying to, I'm trying to explain to them—I'm trying to explain to them that what barbecue—what it's really like and where it all started—it all started right here in Texas. It's called—Texans used to call it, uh—what's it called?—the trail they used to punch cows across the state—and all the way from, Texas to Kansas—yes and—mostly, if you was any where else in Texas other than Fort Worth—we used to also punch some from—from the East Texas area, and the west part of Texas, also the south part of Texas, they used to push 'em to Fort

Worth, Texas. It was kind of like the headquarters of the Texas cattle, uh—Texas, uh, cattle, cattle run—that was back in, oh, seventeen-eighteen hundreds from history—I read a little bit about it. But—but the thing about it, now, here’s the story that I read, and some of the old guys from Texas says I’m right. They said that one of the slaves started the barbecue—and started the brisket—where that you find brisket it’s been—it’s been known here to go back into the eighteen hundreds.

**00:02:20**

And they said the slaves, when the slaves came here—when the guys used to, um—the masters used to take their—their cow and kill her—and they used to throw the brisket away—and so, the slaves got the brisket, and they dug a hole in the ground. And they made some fire and some coals—*[indiscernible]*—they used to use hickory wood, I believe they said they mostly used hickory wood, you know—to smoke with, you know—and they used to build a hole in the ground, and they put some wire—some like some chicken wire, you know, chicken wire, and lay it up on there you know, and then they uh, get it real hot and they set the brisket up there and let it cook overnight. So, they stay up late that night and change it over maybe twelve or one o’clock that night, they change it over push over to the other side, and let it cook on that side, you know. Now, just go back to the, to the cattle *[indiscernible]*—punching cows now—now they said when they used to get hungry and wanted some beef, and so, this is the way the barbecue started—they got the name for barbecue. So these, normally, you know, well originally the slave was from Africa. They always dug holes in the ground and

cooked their food. If you could go back to some of the history, some of the movies they made they was cooking it then, and they used to live in these little tents, and they used cook in these—dig a hole in the ground. So, these slaves was trying to tell them say look, we don't need a stove or all this stuff that you have in your kitchen at home to cook food. You see, what I—what I'll do—you kill me a cow, and dress him out for me, and I'll dig a hole and I'll make a hole in the ground and put some fire in it, and I'll do some barbecue. I'll smoke it for you, you know.

AB: So they—the slaves used sort of the, the throw away parts of the animal?

BW: Yeah, oh yeah, oh yeah. The brisket was the one—well, what was the problem with the brisket—even if you baked a brisket like you do a roast, you have to bake it three or four times longer, and I guess the master and them, they didn't like the idea that you have to cook it something that long to make it tender, you know. And so, um, but the black people they just put it out there and they just let it cook all day all night if they needed to. So, when they got done—so, somehow or another the master went outside and tasted that, tasted that brisket and he fell in love with it. *[Laughter]*

AB: I fell in love with it also the first time I had it.

BW: Oh, you did—he fell in love with the brisket and he like, “well hey man—  
*[Laughs]*—so he started telling all the other guys about it, you know. So, they all started coming around and tasting the brisket, and they all started liking it. Next thing they know, they was building barbecue places with brisket, you know. Yeah, they was building—they was building barbecue places and that was—that was their barbecue. And, even today, the number one seller in Texas is brisket—right now.

**00:04:54**

I mean, I can buy 500 pounds of brisket, 500 pounds of sausage, and hell, I mean, I can sell three or f—I’d have, I could have 200 pounds of sausage still left and all the brisket’s gone. That’s, I mean, when, and I’m selling to just a variety of people, you know, yeah—so, the brisket is still the number one thing in Austin, Texas. But now, this story I’m telling is something I read about and I did talk to some of the older guys, and they said it’s the truth, though. And even some of them have told me this, so I’m going by something I read, because I’m not old enough to know what happened in those days. *[Laughs]*

AB: That was a great story too.

BW: This is—this is the way they said—this is what the brisket started. And then, the barbecue, and then after that, you know, in 19—1885, when the black people in Texas was free, they—they kept cooking the barbecue like that. They continue to

cook it outside like that, you know, and had the Juneteenth—remember the Juneteenth?—

AB and Marvin Bendele: Yes, sure.

BW: I know y'all know about the Juneteenth—go ahead.

AB: Oh, I was going to say, Austin has a really old free black community—do you know anything about that African-American community?

BW: Oh, yeah.

AB: Can you tell me a little bit about that?—

BW: You said, you said one of the oldest ones in the state of Texas, right now. Yeah, we got, we got homes that are 120—see that little house right there?—which, looking at that—

AB: Boarded up a little bit?

BW: Yeah, boarded up a little bit—that's over a hundred years old—we got one sitting up here that looks like they should just take a bulldozer and bulldoze it down—it's about 112 years old right in, right in this same block. Right now.

AB: That's great—

BW: Yeah. So, they're going to make a—make into a—they're going to redo it and I believe they said they're going to make it into a museum—yeah—a historical, it's going to be a historical place—it looks like junk, we'll go around and take a look at it in a minute, I want you to see it, but it looks like something that ought to be bulldozed, or set some fire to it and burn it down, but—it's going to stand, it's going to be standing.

AB: That's interesting seeing that this is such an old historically African-American neighborhood—can you tell us—it's, it's changed a lot in the last few years. Can you tell me about some of the changes?

BW: Oh yes, yes. This was the city—this area was a place I kind of grew up on—I was a teenager when I moved here, and I kind of finished growing up in this area here—and man we had all kinds of food—okay, I can tell you what we had here—I can remember we had, we had, uh, had our own cleaners—we had two cleaners in East Austin, all owned by all blacks—we had restaurants—tremendous restaurants, I can't even remember how many it was, we had our own lumber company, we had our own real estate company, we had a car dealership over here—we could buy a new car in East Austin, from a black man—yeah, and back in the fifties, yeah, and you know, it's, I'm trying to think of something that

we didn't have over here. I don't think there's anything I can think of, you know—it was all did right here in East Austin, Texas. Matter of fact, you sitting right in the—right in the center of it right now, you know—yeah.

**00:07:41**

AB: What has changed since then?

BW: Whew, man—integration—*[Laughs]*—you know what, though—I almost—I almost want to say integration kind of hurt us, man, because they just kind of just scattered us around through the city of Austin, you know—but it didn't really, it helped us, but it kind of seems like we lost our roots when integration came because I guess, you know, we wanted to see something different, and in order for that, you know, we had to move out of East Austin. And we did, you know, and a lot of times a lot of business took—the business went—some of the guys live in East Austin—we're kind of poor on taking care of our own neighborhood—

AB: Yeah, yeah.

BW: That's the only thing I hate about us, you know, I do kind of like—I dislike that about us—and I guess we wanted to try something different, and we start spending our money on the west side of Interstate 35 and that was a mistake. When we start putting more money over there than we put in—back into our own neighborhood, and we kind of lost our business because of that—



AB: Yeah, so the community was a little, was more self sustaining kind of—

BW: Absolutely.

AB: in the fifties, and since then it's just, it's become a little bit more disparate.

BW: Well, it actually started in the late sixties and throughout the seventies, then we just kind of lost all the business in East Austin, you know. But guess what's good now, though—it's all coming back.

AB: Yeah.

MB: Yeah.

BW: It's all coming back.

AB: A lot of money moving into the area—

BW: Yeah, yeah. Well, the only difference there is now, it's a mixed neighborhood now, but we still have some black-owned business in East Austin, which we's trying to hold on to as much as possible, and I think if we can hold on—what's going to be good about us trying to hold on now, I think it's going to get better, because again, the more money here the more people—integration, just use the

word integration—I believe I'd use the word integration. I think it's going to bring more money to black business in east Austin ever. And so I think it's good. Economically, it's good—and I'm enjoying it.

AB: Good. Wonderful.

BW: Yes, I'm enjoying it.

AB: Yeah, you opened back up recently—

BW: Oh yes, I'm back I'm back. *[Laughs]* Yeah, I'm back, you know. Oh, I've been doing this for what—four or five years now—I got, I go—go away and come back, go away and come back. I don't know, you know I've been doing this for thirty-six years, so after I put my first thirty-six—thirty years in, I just been playing around with it ever since then—

AB: Uh-huh.

BW: Yeah.

AB: Who runs—who runs it when you're not available?

BW: Nobody.

AB: Do you have other family members?

BW: Well, I did—I did lease it to somebody, but then they *[Laughs]*—they run all the business off *[Laughter]*—then they go to crying, you know, “let me out of the contract, let me out of the contract”—I let them out of the contract, put a sign up “Ben is Back”—three months later, business is booming again *[Laughter]*—

**00:10:05**

BW: Yeah, I’m blessed, man. I’m really blessed.

AB: Well, you make great food.

BW: Thank you so much, thank you—I’m really—I’m blessed, you know.

AB: You really have a—the restaurant has a nice feel to it, everybody’s very friendly.

BW: Thank you very much—thank you very much, you know.

AB: Back to what we were talking about before with the neighborhood—um, did you see any changes—I don’t know how long that the interstate has been right here, but did the interstate change anything in this neighborhood?

BW: Not really—not really, no it didn't change that much, you know—no, it didn't, you know. No, this—this is an area, though, man, you know—have y'all, uh—maybe some time when y'all got time, you know, and, and I have a little time, I can get—make some time, sometime I guess, you know—but, I'd like for you to see some of the—have y'all been through this area—to see some of the older houses?

AB: I have—I actually, I live just to the north of here—

BW: There are several houses about 120 years old that you see up in this area—some of the oldest houses in Austin, Texas—and you know I, I do like the city of Austin—they're very strict about trying to keep it—

AB: Uh-huh.

BW: They're very strict, sometimes they're almost too strict, you know, about it, you know. Yeah, but one of the things that's changed in east Austin, I, we, I laugh about it a lot, you know there—when you cross over the Interstate 35, especially when you're on Eleventh or Twelfth street, that was East Austin—but I'm not so—I'm not so happy about them changing the—the name of it now—it's Central Austin, now—

AB: They always say central now, yeah—

BW: I don't like that too much. *[Laughs]*

AB: I—I would agree with that, yeah—

BW: I'd like to—I'd like to keep the name "East Austin," you know—I really would, I'd—I'd rather see it here say East Austin—even though—even though—that, that everything is changing like that, but—I—I've kind of liked the name "East Austin" for so long, you know—okay, in 1936—*[short pause]*—this area was put aside for the black people—ever since 1936—and that's when the city was very, very small then—probably had, what, twenty-thousand people then or less, you know—but anyway, and I don't know, it's just something about it, you know—I lived in North Austin, I lived in northwest, and right now I'm still in East Austin, but I'm outside the city limit—

AB: Oh, really.

BW: Yeah, I live outside the city limit, but I'm still in the east though, you know—and you know, there's nothing wrong with living anywhere you want to live, but you know what though, I don't know what it is, you know—I—I love going—I love the whole city—I love the lakes, I love to go to Lake Travis—but when I go home I don't know what—there's just something about East Austin that I still wants to

go—it may be because of my age, I’m sixty-seven years old—maybe that’s what it is. *[Laughs]*

AB: I—I actually live over here too, up by Manor—

BW: Oh, you do—no, you don’t do you?

AB: —and—I like it over here—

BW: You took my—you took my house then didn’t you? *[Laughter]*

AB: I may have.

BW: Yeah, you took my house, man. *[Laughter]* I—I want my house back. *[Laughter]*

AB: Uh—I’d like to change—switch gears here a little bit—I’d—I’d like to hear about—I’d like to hear about how you started this business, coming from Mississippi, and how you got into the barbecue business yourself.

BW: Well, the first thing I walked in the place and I saw that big old brisket and I thought it was burnt *[laughs]*—you know how—how they cook brisket and I thought it was burnt, right. So, I looked around the grill and I said—I saw—so, when he sliced it, it had a little burn on the tip—just a little bit on the butt—just a

fraction of an inch or whatever, you know—and then up under there it was so pretty—I said, “Give me some of that roast beef” *[Laughter]*. I didn’t know what barbecue were, man—I didn’t know what it was—

AB: Now, where are you from exactly?

BW: Mississippi—from Meridian, Mississippi—hell I didn’t ever hear—I’d never heard of barbecue until I got here. *[Laughter]* I’m serious, really—yeah—and so, the guy say—he starts laughing—so he went on and says “I’m going to give you a barbecue brisket sandwich”—so, he sold me a barbecue brisket sandwich. I said “Damn, that taste pretty good,” you know—*[laughs]*—I said, “What it is?” He said, “Brisket.” Well, I didn’t know much about brisket, because we didn’t do brisket too much in the east, and even in Mississippi—that brisket was hard to cook, man, because we didn’t—we didn’t even know how to barbecue it, then if we did cook it, we’d have to put it in the oven and let it bake, you know—hell, you gotta bake it five or six hours before they get done, you know—so we didn’t eat that much brisket down there, but I ate that man, and it was so good man—so, the way I found out—then I said, “Well, I’ll help some of these old guys,” you know—back in those days—

AB: Could you tell me what year that was exactly?

BW: That was 1958—in about 1959, some of the guys that was older than me, and my brother was about eight years older than me—and he hung around some guys that was even a little older than him, you know—and every weekend, these guys would go out and barbecue in the backyard—and man, they could barbecue so good man—I wished I could barbecue as good as they could now, I still can’t—but, be honest with you, though, I hung around them enough to learn how to barbecue well enough to start my own business—and that’s the way I learned how cook—backyard—every weekend, we’d buy some barbecue, buy some meat and get in the backyard and just kind of play around with it, you know—and I got pretty good at it, and they all said, “Well, you don’t have to buy anymore, we’ll do all the buying and you do, you do the cooking”—so that’s—so all I had to do was show up and cook. Then I got to thinking one day, you know, I got the hardest part of it, you know *[laughter]*—but, you know, all my life I loved cooking.

I remember when I was seven, eight years old, I used to follow my mother around in the kitchen, and get in the way all the time—you know, she used to spank me some of the time I got in the way, because I wanted to—I was watching Mother cook, and I used to try to help her, you know—and as I grew older, she’d give me a little—a little of this to do, a little of that to do, a little of that to do—by the time I was a teenager, I said—well, about the time I was fourteen, fifteen years old, certain things I could cook real good—sure did, not everything, but I cooked a lot of things real good, you know.

**00:15:03**



AB: What kind of things did your mother make for you?

BW: Everything—she used to make a lot of cakes, you know, but I never liked sweets that much, though—and she used to make pudding and stuff, you know—she used to make jelly and jam, you know, because we was in the country—yeah, we was in the deep country, you know what I’m saying, so all our food came off of what we raised, you know—and my mother, she did everything—but what I learned how to do—I learned how to fry and bake real good watching her—I learned how to bake and fry—real good—yeah, I could boil stuff—and I learned how to cook greens and stuff like that, because I cook—I cook—I like to cook soul food too—yeah, I like soul food, yeah—and I learned all that stuff from my mom, you know. When I left home I was seventeen, about the time I was eighteen, I was on my own—I had me a room then—at that time people had a lot of rooms—because I was only making ninety-eight cents an hour—wages was real cheap, even here, you know, in Austin. So, I could afford a room, but I couldn’t afford an apartment, you know—and so I used to go in there and cook—cook my own breakfast, and I cook my own dinner, sometimes lunch, you know, stuff like that—I always, always hung around cooking, man, you know, and you know what, I thought I went, I worked for, for, until I was about twenty-seven years old. I did all kinds of work trying to find something I liked to do because I didn’t want to go to college, I didn’t, don’t like college, I didn’t like school that much. I did finish high school, but I didn’t like—I didn’t want to go to school. And then all of a sudden one day, you know what, I said to myself, I said, I can barbecue pretty

damn good. I want to—that's—that's what I want to do. So it took me about four years to get it together because I couldn't get my hands on enough money, you know.

AB: Mmm-Hmm.

BW: So finally, I just start saving pennies, and whatever, you know, pennies I was just, I had pennies, quarters, fifty cent pieces, you know, like they had a lot of fifty cent pieces back in those days, you know.

AB: Sure.

BW: And man, I just start putting that stuff in little jars and stuff like that and then I—I go in a barbecue place to buy some barbecue and I look at a cash register I look at some scales, you know. So I go buy me some second handed scales some fricking—you know, I just buy it and put it in my garage, you know? And I just doing that for about a year, year-and-a-half and I had quite a bit of little stuff there, you know. And then I bought three hundred dollars on a credit card. I took that money and bought up some equipments with, you know, yeah. And then I paid that, paid about half that off and then I went to the bank, I was working for one of these guys part-time, one of the bankers, and he extended my loan up to five hundred dollars. Then I just went on and got the rest of that—I think I paid—I had about four hundred dollars more money I could borrow until I got to five

hundred dollars, so, I just kept borrowing money like that and putting stuff in the garage. You know, I'll go, and then finally the last thing I bought, I bought me some picnic tables for my barbecue place. I sure did, you know.

AB: Is this the original building or did you have a—

BW: No, no, no, this is not. My original building is—I built it—well, it was my idea, but the guy—I was blessed man, you know, there's some guys own a real estate—own a construction company and they had the lot I wanted, a corner lot I liked. I always like corner lots. They had the lot I wanted, they had the construction company, they had everything I wanted. And I went in there crying. I cried on their shoulders for about half-a-dozen different times. Then one of the guys said, “You know, we're tired of you crying on our shoulders, we going to go out there and build this restaurant for you.” **[Laughter]** Then when I built it for five hundred dollars.

AB: Wow.

BW: That all I had to put up was five hundred dollars.

AB: Man.

BW: And a contract.

AB: Wow.

BW: They built it for five hundred dollars brand new. They built a little, little place like—it was a western—like a little Western place, you know?

AB: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

BW: Yeah, it had poles, you know. Guys used to ride up to the place with their horse and tie it around the poles. You know, like the little—

AB: *[Laughs]*

BW: Okay.

AB: They had horses then?

BW: Yeah, oh yeah man. You had—back in the seventies, man, they were still riding horses, especially in Montopolis. They rode horses everyday in Montopolis, man.

*[Exclaims]* Yeah.

AB: On Montopolis Avenue? By, by where the airport is now?

BW: *[Indiscernible]*

MB: Sure.

AB: Going out to the airport?

BW: Yeah, so they got, they got the poles out there and the guys ride up there and tie his horse, you know, and I had, had Long Branch Barbecue on it. *[Short pause]* I used to watch the [television show] *Gunsmoke*. That's where the name comes from. Ya'll ever watch *Gunsmoke*?

AB: Sure.

MB: Oh, yeah.

BW: Okay, that's where the name came from.

AB: This whole area seems like it's taken on that sort of moniker—the Long Branch—

BW: Yeah, we've got a street named Branch Street right there, yeah—but anyway, one of the guys, he liked the *Gunsmoke* too, and we were standing there trying to find a name for my restaurant when they was building it, you know, I didn't have a name then for it. So, he said, "Well you like *Gunsmoke*?" I said, "What about

Long Branch because of Kittie's Long Branch?" You remember Kittie's Long Branch?

AB: Sure.

BW: He said, "Well make it Ben's Long Branch." *[Laughter]* Ben's Long Branch Barbecue and that's where the name came from.

AB: And you got it now.

BW: Yes, sir. It's been there for thirty-six years, that's what it's been.

MB: Now where was the original place?

**00:19:51**

BW: It was on 601 Montopolis Drive. The address is 601 Montopolis Drive. Go ahead and write that down. *[Laughs]*

MB: I will. *[Laughs]*

BW: I don't want you to remember— to forget anything, you know. Yeah, that was my first restaurant and I will never forget that address I guess. 'Cause you see how quick I told you about it and I hadn't been out there, I haven't even been through there in probably a couple years. But I always kind of go back and take a

look around because that's where I started. That's where I got started. I spent 10 years there. And I sold it in '81 and I bought here in '81 and I have been here ever since. So I spent thirty-six, my last thirty-six years I spent cooking barbecue. Yes I have.

AB: So, we were talking earlier about the sausage. How do you procure your meat and your, your wood for barbecuing?

BW: How you cure?

AB: No, how, how do you get your meat and your wood? You were talking about the sausage company, I'd like to hear about that a little bit.

BW: Well, yeah—Elgin, Elgin hot sausage, which is the oldest hot sausage place in the—probably in the state of Texas, especially going strong like they going—they go back to 1882 when it all started, you know. And they—they delivered in Austin four, four times, three times a week—and I—Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, they delivered my barbecue from there. So, I started then—sometimes I kind of hate I started because I can't sell any other kind of sausage other than Elgin now. Yeah, even if, even if it's a good sausage, if it's got that Elgin sausage on it—they call it Elgin hot sausage—if its got that label on it there, they'll buy it. And I lost, I'd say, three or four times, four times I remember for sure I took it out and put somebody in and I lost, I lost, 75% of my sales on my

sausage I lost. Every time I'd take it out I'd lose it. I could only sell about 25% of what I'm selling now. So finally, that fifth, that fourth time I decided I would never change it again and my sausage sales always been good. It's the second thing, second best seller I have right now behind my brisket, it really is.

AB: Well where do you get all of your other meats from?

BW: I get it from ah, to be honest with you though, most of it came from Kansas.

AB: Oh, really?

BW: Most of it, you know, like my briskets came from Kansas, or they come—it's Dakota, Dakota, Kansas, and Nebraska. Three, those three states there, that's where we get our brisket. Most everything I get now except my brisket is frozen.

AB: Mmm-hmm, okay.

BW: You know I get my ribs from Kansas City, Missouri.

AB: Sure.

BW: Yeah, I didn't—yeah I get the ribs from Kansas City, Missouri, in a frozen box and they got the best ribs in the country, I believe, yeah. They got, their ribs look



a little, little bit like the baby, babyback ribs, but they just about twice or three times more meat on them in there, you notice it's real meaty—

MB: And it's beef—it's, it's beef right?

BW: No they're pork, pork ribs.

MB: But they're *big*.

BW: Yeah, what it is they have a special cut on it, I don't know how they get that cut on that meat like that but they do. And what they do they take the ears and they cut off and they call that the rib tips, which you guys know about that, you know.

AB: Yeah, in Chicago where I'm from, yeah.

BW: Yeah, but it's good though, you know. I'm going to start, I'm going to buy—start cooking some here, yeah.

AB: Oh yeah, the rib tips I think would sell very well.

BW: Well, I sold quite a few of them at the *South By Southwest*. I was trying them, they sold good. Especially when they guys came from the north, they just went crazy over them.

AB: It's a great little snack, you can put some of that Chicago sauce on it, yeah. I would buy them

BW: *[Laughs]* What about Ben's sauce?

AB: Ben's sauce is good, too.

BW: It's not as good as Chicago, right?

AB: It's different. *[Laughter]* It's what, I guess it's what you're used to.

BW: I'll take it, I'll take it.

AB: You know, but your meat is better than anything they have up there.

BW: You know what, though. You know, you're right. I think, I think y'all's sauce are better, but I think our meats are better.

AB: I guaran—I, I would agree with that—

BW: We got the best meat, y'all got the best sauce. I agree, yeah, yeah.

AB: It's interesting that you, that you have mutton. There's not a lot of places around here that have mutton. Can you tell us how you got interested in having mutton? I *loved* it. It's the first time I've ever had barbecue mutton.

BW: I had never had any mutton until I came to Texas and I never did really like it that much, you know, even though we grew up—we had goats and we didn't have no sheeps, but I don't know, its something about the sheep I never did like that much, you know. And then I have so many peoples keep asking about it, asking about it all the time, so finally, you know, one day I decided just go ahead and put it in the barbecue place. [To employee] You need something, partner?

**[23:59-24:04 inaudible]**

***[Recording paused for Ben to talk to employee.]***

**[24:04 Recording resumes]**

BW: The city going to spend a fortune on that building.

AB: Oh, yeah. The city wants—

BW: I'll be they spend a quarter million dollars or more just to get it right – just to get it up. Then they're going to spend another—they'll end up spend a million dollars when they get it all stopped and everything like that. Because this is going

to be a place where you going to find all the black history going to be right here.  
The real history you know? It's going to be there in that building right there.

AB: You talking about just to the East of here?

BW: I think, I think, yeah, no. Come here.

MB: *[Laughs]*

AB: Okay, hold on.

BW: I gotta show this to y'all. You'll almost laugh when you see this.

BW: *[To a patron]* How you doing?

Patron: I'm good, how you doing?

BW: I'm good. *[Indiscernible]* You keep doing that you probably will be.

AB: Can you speak into the microphone please so we can get you?

BW: Okay, Okay.

AB: You can hold it if you want.

BW: I can't believe, that you know, anybody want to take a building like this and redo it. *[Laughs]* It's just a horrible looking place, man, you know? And history's right there, that's it right there man.

AB: Yeah.

MB: With a little painting *[Laughs]*—

BW: Yeah, if you notice they had a building all in here, they took all these other buildings down and then this is standing. It's says a hundred and ten years old, something like that. It's way over a hundred years old, put it that way, over a hundred years old. *[Laughs]* I just got, y'all gotta see it man.

**00:25:16**

MB: And this is where the museum is going to be?

BW: Yeah, that's what they say. That's what they going to make out of it, yeah.

MB: Wow.

BW: That's a piece of crap ain't it? *[Laughter]* That's got to be a piece of crap, man, you know? *[Laughs]* Yeah.

MB: And it definitely needs work.

BW: *[Exclaims]* Yeah. That's right.

AB: It looks very interesting with these new condos going up right across the street.

BW: You right, but you know what though now you take these, these engineers could come in here boy—designer—a designer, engineer, and they could make this thing look so good and they probably will, you know. But they said they's going to keep everything they can and they going to put it back just like it is.

AB: Wow.

BW: That's what they said. I, I remember the people that own it though. I knew them but they dead now, but they—when I moved here twenty-six years ago, I remember when they owned it.

AB: Mmm-hmm.

BW: Yeah, they used to come in there and eat all the time, I used to come up and talk to them all the time—they real old people, you know?

AB: They—this was just a residence?

BW: Yeah, it was a residence. Yeah, it sure was. *[Laughs]* This whole block here was residence, except, uh—that's the only building we had here, even right here, right here, all these. We had another house here and then next door there, we had a four-plex. All that was residence and then when you got to the corner up there, they had a barber shop and a beauty shop there. They sure did.

AB: So it was really a more residential than it is now, you say?

BW: You know, it was. Yes, it was, yes it was more residents.

AB: How's about this Baptist church over here? Can you tell me anything about that?

BW: You know what though, that church has got to be over a hundred years old, I think. Yeah, it's got to be over a hundred years old, yeah, sure it is. Now there used to have Huston Tillotson used to be right up there, where that drug store is right there and that building right next to it there, that used to be Huston Tillotson right there.

AB: Really?

BW: Yeah. That's back in there *[indiscernible]*.

AB: Where is Huston [Tillotson] now?

BW: It's right down, right on down Eleventh Street, all the way down to Chicon Street.  
About ten blocks from here, yeah about ten blocks down there, yeah.

AB: That's good.

BW: It's still in this area, yeah. Yeah, you want to take some pictures of that thing  
man? Come on and let's take a look, take a look at the side over here, yeah.  
When y'all, about, I'd say about a year or two from now, though y'all come back  
though, we'll be taking tours here, now y'all will be taking tours.

AB: Oh yeah, so, this is going to be a, just like a historical marker, a museum?

BW: Yeah, that's what it is. That's what they said it's going to be. That's what they  
told me. Because I had thought they were going to take it down because they had  
two other houses right here, one right here and one right over there. They tore  
them down and then one of those was like ninety, ninety-something years old, one  
of them was, yeah. But this is the first, this is oldest, the oldest one here, they  
decided to go ahead and keep it, yep. They said its horrible inside too, it's just all  
messed up they say.



AB: It, it seems like the city is really putting a lot of effort into revitalizing this area.

BW: Yeah, yeah, you know what [*short pause*] it took them so long to start doing it, and, and you know, and I was just shocked the money they—when they did start doing it, they just brought millions, they brought so many million dollars over here, they just dump it like, I mean, like its heaven over here man, you know, man, its scares me sometimes, you know? These, these units here, you see here, these are very high rising units, man.

AB: The condos across the street.

BW: That's right. They are high risers, man, even there, the cheapest the apartments you get there is \$1205 a month starting out with—that's high dollar stuff, one bedroom—

AB: So, are those going to be buying units, like, is it going to be renting or buying?

BW: You know what though, somebody told me that—that you could rent or buy—

AB: Oh, wow.

BW: but I'm just not quite sure yet. Yeah, yeah, I'm not quite sure. They could rent or buy, they said you could, yeah. First thing they were going to do was going to try

to get them rented first they think and then you know, you could probably rent it for a while you decide you want to buy just go ahead and buy it, I think you can do that, uh huh, yeah. I think so. Yeah, yeah.

AB: Alright, well let's uh—

BW: We got a hotel that's also coming right up front there. Did I tell you about that?

AB: Right across the street—

BW: Yeah, right across the street there. *No*. Just go back down here, it's right in front of these buildings here—it's right in front of these units here, of course.

AB: Oh, right here.

BW: Well, ok, I'm going to show you, yeah, you see where they got all that junk there?

AB: Uh-huh.

BW: Okay, you got, you also got a mobile home there, and uh, you got about two mobile homes there because there's a lot of junk there. That's the hotel site there.

AB: Wow.

BW: And they said they try go and get these units up and get those rented and then they going to—shortly after that they're going to start on the hotel, they say.

AB: Something I find interesting is that when you cross the highway over there and it's an overpass, it's the only pass where there is an overpass.

BW: Yeah.

AB: So, you can tell that they are trying, trying to more connect this neighborhood to downtown.

BW: Yeah, they surely are—well, that's why they changed the, changed the name of it I believe.

AB: Mmm-hmm.

BW: They, they connected, they called it Downtown Austin, now yeah. That's what they called it, Downtown Austin.

AB: They're trying to make some money, huh.

BW: Yeah.

AB: *[Laughs]*

BW: They're making it too. *[Laughs]*

BW: It's working, the money part of it is working.

AB: Uh, huh.

BW: Well everybody wants to be in this area now.

AB: Yeah.

BW: They paying thousands and thousands of dollars just to get in this area, man. And everybody is trying to get here you know.

**00:30:02**

AB: Yep. It really is a sort of up-and-coming area.

BW: It'll be, it'll be like Congress Avenue.

AB: Oh, yeah.

BW: You know everything is around the capital down there, all that land. They were selling it by the lot now they're selling it by the square feet now, it sells by the square foot now, yeah—ain't that something? Yeah.

AB: Alright, do you want to go back to the—to sit down? We can talk, we got a few more minutes here.

BW: Okay. Yeah, all that stuff there is going to be hotels. Yeah, if you notice you don't see no units until you get way on the other side of those mobile homes right there. Which is office like, that's office space there. And they going to, when they move all that stuff they going to start building on the hotels there. Well, that's going to be a beautiful site for a hotel there.

AB: It really will.

BW: It's going to be nice.

MB: What hotel, what hotel is it going to be, do you know?

BW: They don't know the name for it yet. Yeah, because um, well you know how these hotels are, man you know, you build a hotel for one year it could be a Marriott, next year it will be what, Days Inn, you know what I'm saying, you know, yeah. So they leaving the name off of it right now. Now they say.

AB: Hopefully we'll be able to see the river from there, too.

BW: They will be. They will because the hotel is going to be real high, there—yeah, they just going to be real nice. Yeah, it's going to be real nice, it's going to be real high and everything. Yeah. I'm hoping I can stay here too, you know, to see all this.

AB: Oh, yeah.

BW: I'm not like some of the older people, you know. I guess I kind of like changes. I like a lot of history though. I do, I love history but when time come to change, you know there's a few things I don't like but most everything I see I like, change, changes I see, I like it.

AB: Well, what seems nice to me is this area is changing rapidly but they're trying to maintain a lot of the history 'cause this is a very historical area.

BW: That is a good part about it. They are trying to maintain some history here, which I'm really, I'm really pushing for and I've been in meetings you know over the past few years trying to help keep the history here, you know, 'cause, you know man, I had a lot of good times up here, man. I had a lot of great times here man, you know. I really did, yeah. And you know I always, had always called this my

roots. I could always call this my roots, you know? And I guess being older, I was born in 1940, I go way back into it, you know? So this is me, you know.

AB: You look good for that age.

BW: Well, hard work. *[Laughs]*

BW: A lot of hard work, you know, just remember that, now.

AB: I'm trying, yeah I'm trying.

BW: You said you're about thirty, now?

AB: I'm thirty, yep.

BW: Okay, well just remember, now, hard work keep you looking young. *[Laughs]*

AB: Okay, um—

BW: Yes sir, I tell people that all the time, you know.

AB: Oh, yeah.

BW: Look here, I'm through talking. I'm going to let you ask me some questions now. I'm through talking. I want you to ask some questions now. All I been doing is talking. *[Laughs]*

AB: Okay.

BW: I got a lot to talk about.

AB: No, we want to hear you talk.

BW: Yeah, I got a lot to talk about. Cause there's a lot of history over here and I just like—man, I used to come in—Bobby Blu Bland, and B.B. King, and all these guys I used to go see man, you know.

AB: I was just going to ask you, actually, if you'd like to talk about some, um—

BW: I tell you, though man we had 'em all over here, man, you know? All the—we had Muddy Waters, you know, you name all the guys. Jimmy Reeds, Chuck Berrys, you know we had them all right here in East Austin man, you know.

AB: Really?

BW: Oh, yeah.



AB: Have a lot of them eaten at your place?

BW: Well, you know, not since then, but this was before—I had a job then. I was a dishwasher then. At that time I was washing dishes then. So when I found out two or three months that, that Johnny Taylor was coming to town, I'd save a dollar every week till I got enough money to go see him.

AB: *[Laughs]* Did you ever have politicians or anybody come over to eat?

BW: Oh yeah, we have a lots of 'em. Oh yeah, we got, we have, *[short pause]*, any day you come in here you can find anybody in here, from, from Governor Rick Perry down.

AB: Uh-huh.

BW: Oh, yeah

AB: So then how—

BW: I think Rick is a kind of little bit upset with me cause I like, I like Keeton.

*[Laughs]*

BW: Strayhorn [Carole Keeton Strayhorn]. You know, Strayhorn.

AB: Me, too.

BW: Yeah, I like her a little bit, you know. And he [Perry] don't know about that. He kind of undecided about whether he want to hang around Ben's anymore.

*[Laughs]*

BW: But he been here a lot. He ate here lots of times.

AB: Uh-huh.

BW: I like him. He's alright. He's fun, though, man, yeah he's fun.

AB: Nice guy?

BW: Yeah. He's alright.

AB: Um, like, do you consider yourself a pillar of the community still around here?

BW: No, no, I don't know why, by some people—I've been labeled, yes. But I don't consider that, though. I'm just another person. I never had much of a ego. You

know I was kind of a shy person like, you know, growing up. And even when I grew up, I'm still—well, I'm not so shy, but I just like being laid back.

AB: Yeah.

BW: Yeah. I just like being myself and not trying to be like you or anybody else, you know, just being myself. I love it, you know.

AB: That's a good way to be. Do you find, like, that, you're, that the place or the restaurant, it's kind of a, I don't mean pillar of your community, but it just seems like a lot of people come in here. A lot of people know you.

BW: You know what, though?

AB: You know?

BW: You know what, though? I very much, you know what? I tries not to think about that very much, but you know what, though? It's all out there, man. I've had people that come in here and they'll rate this restaurant as high as you almost can go in Austin, Texas, and I don't know why but it's everywhere. I mean you know we're just everywhere, you know. And you look on the Internet, you look on the computer, you can just find me all over that thing, man you know. Yep.

**00:35:08**

AB: Oh, yeah. I saw—

BW: You know, yeah. And I don't even know who do it, man. Man, I get in some national magazines sometimes. Yeah. Somebody talking about, oh man, somebody out of Chicago, out of New York, Boston. You name it. Uh, you know Los Angeles. *[Imitates customer]* "Say man, I read about you. It mentions you in this magazine." I'm in some magazine I've never even heard of before.

AB: That's the world we live in now.

BW: Yeah, that is.

AB: If you've got good food and a friendly place—

BW: I didn't even know, the people that came in here and wrote me up, I ain't never met them.

AB: *[Laughs]*

BW: I don't even know their names. They know me but I don't even know them.  
Yeah.

AB: I think it's better to do it face to face, you know?

BW: Well, I'll tell you what man. The only thing about it is I can't get much peace unless I get out of Austin.

AB: Uh-huh.

BW: I don't care why, I can go to the lakes, I can go anywhere in Austin, and it's always somebody—is—know me, you know? And I really have to keep my nose clean. I *really* have to keep my nose clean, you know what I'm saying? You know. But I'm always, like I said I'm laid back anyway, so I really don't do nothing much no way. You know, and um, so it don't bother me. But I do like sometime to go someplace, I would like a little more peace sometimes.

AB: Is that why you keep the shorter hours?

BW: Not really.

AB: No?

BW: No. That unit there – building that unit there [*points across the street to new condominiums*] with the street closed down. That's what shut, that ran off a lot of my business, you know.

AB: Oh, really?

BW: And so I decided, that did it. The third time, it did it. I decided I wasn't going to open up until they finish it, you know.

AB: Hmm.

BW: But I'm going back. I'm fixing to get me a partner it look like now. I've been talking to a couple of guys and one of these guys I'm going to decide— *[to woman on the sidewalk]* How you doing, lady?

Woman: Hey, how you doing?

BW: I'm good, good to see you. Thanks a lot. Come back and see us.

Woman: Alright, we will.

BW: Thank you. But anyway, I'm fixing to get me a partner, cause the old man is slowing down too much, you know. *[Laughs]*

BW: You know how that is. I'm getting a little bit too slow for this traffic, you know. So I'm going to get me some young guns, with some young, fresh legs, you know.

AB: Oh, yeah. *[Laughs]*

BW: And I'm kind of—I'm going to kind of stand back out the way and let them kind of run it. If I get the right guy. I got a couple guys I'm talking to now. They, they, they're very much interested in it. So they, they think they're going to make a lot of money out of it, because of what's coming up across the street, that hotel and all that stuff. And I don't know. They will. Yeah, I think they will [make money]. You know, yeah.

AB: Well yeah, I mean you've done your part.

BW: I have—I've done my part.

AB: You know, and you're an important part of this neighborhood.

BW: Right now I don't have to have as much money as I used to have to have, and I could give 'em a, I can give up a big percentage of it just to keep it, cause I really don't just want to sell it, you know. I've turned down some very, very good money already, you know. Couple times, you know.

AB: Do you have family here in town?

BW: Yeah, my family's here, oh, yeah. I have a daughter and a grandson here, and my wife's here, and I have a couple of nieces and nephews here, and it's not really—I don't have a lot of relatives here, but only just—I got some nieces and nephews, I got a few of them. Just about a handful of each, you know. And that's about it, you know, yeah.

AB: Yeah, okay, oh, okay. Yeah, um, well, I don't know, Marvin do you have any, got any questions that you would like to ask?

MB: No, I think we're doing fine—

BW: Said everything that could be said here. *[Laughs]*

AB: You've, you've said a lot. You're—

BW: Uh, you know, I got, like I say, so much, so much roots in this area, you know. You know when you come here and you're seventeen years old, then you're sixty seven, you know, so you know, it's like fifty years ago, almost, like, you know, and I've had a lot of experiences here and everything. Had a lot of fun here, man. I got my first date right up the street there.

AB: On Eleventh?



BW: Yeah. *[Laughs]*

BW: That's it. Right on Eleventh Street. I sure did. *[Laughs]*. Yeah, that was my first date from Texas, now. I had a little date when I was fifteen, sixteen in Mississippi. *[Laughs]*

BW: But my first date came here. I was seventeen years old. I never forget it.

AB: Any other stories you'd like to tell or any, anything, you know, you can talk about whatever you want. We, we just, we like to hear you talk. Got any stories or anything, anything else you'd like to say?

BW: I think I'm running out of gas now.

AB: OK. *[Laughs]*

BW: My tank is getting low now.

AB: Alright. You know, I can't begin to say how thankful we are. It was a great interview, and we appreciate your openness.

BW: Thank y'all so much.

AB: Thanks a lot, Ben.

BW: When you all going to invite me to the show then sometime?

AB: Oh yeah, we're going to, actually, have—we're having a big get together at the end of our semester,

BW: Are you kidding?

AB: Yeah, so we're going to have, I don't know, we're going to invite people to bring some barbecue and—

BW: *Got* to have barbecue, you know.

AB: We've actually interviewed people with barbecue—barbecuers from all around Central Texas. All the way south to Gonzales. A few people in town, so we're going to try to have a get together.

BW: You know what I'm going to have to do, then?

AB: What?

BW: Since you guys are from—[*to MB*] You from, you from the North also?

MB: No, I'm from south Texas.

BW: Oh, well, okay. *[To AB]* You from the North?

AB: Yes.

BW: I'm going to have to get some rib tips, then.

AB: *[Exclaims]* Oh, yeah. *[Laughs]*

BW: This is, this is brisket here.

AB: That guy's brisket—

MB: And some barbacoa—

BW: *[Exclaims]* Yeah. There you go. That's Texas, too. That's the Spanish barbecue, but that's Texas, though.

MB: Yeah it is—

**00:40:04**

AB: Hey, hey one last question. Have you ever heard of snoots?

BW: Snoots?

AB: Pig's nose? That's up in the North.

BW: Yeah, I heard of it, but—

AB: St. Louis, yeah. They eat that.

BW: They eat that? I don't want none of that. I don't think so. I don't think so.

AB: It's hard to chew.

BW: Yeah, I bet it is. I want to eat just a few chitlins right now. Only a few chitlins I eat right now, yeah.

AB: By specific people?

BW: I used to eat a lot of them. I don't eat many more, though. Maybe a few, you know.

AB: Okay, well I guess, I guess we'll cut it off here. Thanks again, Ben. That was great.

BW: Thank you guys.

AB: Oh, sure.

BW: Thank y'all very much.

MB: Thanks so much, Ben. Thank you.

BW: I hope I see you all.

**00:40:39**

**[End Ben Wash]**