

Don Wiley
D. Wiley, Inc.—Buda, Texas

Date: June 26, 2007
Location: D. Wiley, Inc.—Buda, Texas
Interviewer: Marsha Abrahams
Length: 25:53
Project: Southern Barbecue Trail - Texas

Southern Foodways Alliance
&
American Studies Department
The University of Texas at Austin

Group Members:
Marsha Abrahams

[BEGIN INTERVIEW]

00:00:00

Marsha Abrahams: This is Marsha Abrahams. I'm sitting here with Mr. Don Wiley at D. Wiley, Incorporated in Buda, Texas. Today is June 26, 2007 and, um, we're going to get started with the interview. So, Mr. Wiley, if you could tell me when and where you were born—

Don Wiley: I was born in Stockdale, Texas about thirty-six miles from San Antone [Antonio].

MA: And have you lived in Texas your whole life?

DW: Absolutely. Well, I went to college in Oregon. But that's OK.

MA: But then you came back?

DW: Right.

MA: So, how long have you been working with pits and doing this as a profession?

DW: I built my first pit in 1981, and each time I build a pit I number it. So, the pits that I've numbered since right today, is 1072 that I've put on wheels.

MA: Wow, that's pretty amazing. So what made you interested in getting into this profession, and what sort of sparked your enthusiasm for it?

DW: In 1981, there was a man that I was—I was, uh—well he came by my shop and he saw me building a pit for myself. So, I finished that pit, and he came back two days later and he said, “I want that pit.” So, I sold it to him. And then two days later he came by. He wanted another pit. The same man, I never will forget him. His name was Ed Black. So, three, uh, three days or four days later he wanted another pit. So, I sold my first three pits in 1981. Of course, I had another business since 1982 when I sold it. And then I went full-time into the pit business.

MA: What business was that that you sold?

DW: I had a gasoline pump service. I had it from 1968 to 1982.

00:02:02

MA: All right. So, this is definitely a little shift, but it seems like you love what you’re doing here.

DW: Well—and when I sold that business in ‘82, I walked to work. And really my job was the pits, the barbecue pits. And since then I’ve just—I just like doing what I do.

MA: All right. Well, it said on your website that it was a family business. Is it—do you have other family members working with you?

DW: Just myself, my wife, uh, she goes on the internet and answers most of questions off the internet. We have a website on the internet too.

MA: Would you say a lot of your business comes from the internet or do you advertise other places as well?

DW: Mostly I advertise in *Austin American-Statesman*. Then they go on and they have it on their website too. And I have a lot of referrals of pits I've built before. And mostly that's where I—my business is.

00:03:10

MA: So, give me a sort of brief description of the services or products that you offer so our audience has an idea of the business that you do.

DW: Well, all of my—all of my work is a custom built, uh, it's built for a particular customer. Uh, we have customers all over the US. We have, uh, information to give them. We've, uh, built pits on wheels, built pits for backyards. Most of our business is pits on wheels. We have rotisserie pits. We have, um, pits that will cook ninety briskets at one time. We also have pits that will cook a thousand turkey legs at one time. Uh, there are people that are in the catering business. Uh, I like to say that we do a lot of work for Rudy's Barbecue. We do a lot of work for The Salt Lick. We do work for, uh, small barbecue people around here. A lot of times we do work for the [University of] Texas Longhorns. We've got probably eighteen or twenty pits out with the Texas Longhorns. Uh, of course, we paint them orange and sometimes we—we get a hold of a, uh, [Texas] A&M guy. But I always tell those A&M people that, uh, our—when we build a pit for them, our—we put our firebox upside down. So, but that's the way we get acquainted with the Aggies. So, the Longhorns know that, and of course, I live just fifteen miles South of Austin. So, I'm a Longhorn.

00:05:13

MA: All right. Um, could you tell us what your most common type of job is?

DW: Uh, mostly, uh, we build just a shorter pit, uh, say a pit that will cook twenty briskets. And this for, uh, mostly people that go to cook-offs and they want a shorter type pit, not the great big commercial type pits. So, we have a lot of business there. About, I would say, half of the business is for those type of people and referral business.

MA: Now the people participating in the cook-offs, are those individuals or are they business owners who just want a smaller pit to use for those occasions?

DW: Well, both of them are—sometimes they're just individuals. They are people that go together and buy a pit. Uh, they're people, uh, that do not like to borrow other people's pits. So, we have a chance to equip them with what they need.

00:06:25

MA: All right. Um, could you take a minute to describe, sort of, the range of pits and how they operate and, sort of, the process that really goes into preparing food in one of your pits?

DW: In building one of these pits, we start out with a round cylinder and we put a firebox on it. We put, uh, heat diverters inside there. So, this would give you equal heat all the way down your cylinder. We take pride into saying that, when you build a fire in our firebox, that the fire is free-flowing smoke. In other words, the heat goes down the heat diverters and then it comes up out of the exhaust. We have a damper on the exhaust. We have a damper on the intake of the air. Uh,

we have, uh, burners that we can put in these units. We have steamers that we put in these units. We have rotisserie motors. We have automatic burners that will come on with a thermostat. A lot of the people like to, uh, cook different types of—like they'll cook a brisket, they'll cook chickens, they'll cook sausage, hams. Any type they want to put on this pit they can do. On the rotisserie type pit, there's a different style in that. It has—it rotates over and over and each basket feeds the other basket with moisture. So this makes it cook real, uh, smooth. It makes it have a good flavor. And we do not have to, uh, have steamers to moisten the meat. Uh, I take pride in some of our pits. We just—some of them just don't need steamers and some of them there are customers just want them to have so they'll have hot water. But most of the time they do not need steamers, in our type of pits.

00:08:47

MA: All right. Could you describe the difference between a smoker and a pit?

DW: A smoker does not get as hot as a pit. You can—you can regulate a smoker and not—not have the heat that goes into that smoker. Uh, mine is a pit. And it serves as a smoker and a pit. So we—we also—we have those type of boxes that we put up for smokers and have shelves in them that people want. Of course, we custom build every one of them. But we use our type of system in all of our pits. They might want something other, but when it comes right down to building a pit, it takes about fifty-two hours for two men to build one pit. So, we take pride in each one of our pits and we, uh, check it out before it leaves and make sure everything's fine, and then they go off hopefully a happy customer.

00:09:58

MA: What would you say has changed the most over the years since you started your business?

Have you changed anything about the pits or have they remained the same throughout that period?

DW: Definitely my first pit, we still use the same air intake on our firebox. We use a little bit different type. We have, uh, heat diverters that we put in 1983. Uh, and we've been using those same type heat diverters. And we use the same type intake. And we—and the exhaust, we use the same type. We do not, uh—we haven't changed that method since 1981. We like that free-flowing smoke and we do not trap our smokes in our exhaust. Uh, we have those grates that we put in there. All of the, uh—all of the shelves that we put in there is removable. All of the, uh, grates or the heat diverters can be raised. And it is attached to that top so that it's easy cleaning inside the barrel because cleanliness is very important when you're cooking, uh, on some of our pits. And out pits, uh, we take pride, we have—we have drains in them. If you—when you—we always tell our customers that when you heat your pit up spray some Wesson oil on this pit. This tempers the metal and it also keeps your pit moist on the outside. And you do this and you'll have a longer lasting pit.

00:11:58

MA: Are there any other recommendations that you give to your customers? Do they—I know there's a process to season a pit. Is that something that you usually recommend a process or is that an individual thing for your customer to do on his or her own?

DW: We custom build all of our—all of our pits, but we want to leave some of that for the customer to do. And our, uh, pits are—will last a lifetime if you take care of them. If you clean out the firebox and you don't let any of the, uh, ashes leftover in there, in the firebox, clean it

out. And clean your pit out where it, uh, will be nice for the next use. This is always a good thing.

00:12:55

MA: What is the most unusual request you've ever had from a customer?

DW: That might be a hard one. Uh, I guess it would be in 1985. We usually were building horizontal type pits. Uh, then they asked for a vertical type pit or vice versa. We built vertical pits, but now they want a horizontal type pit. In other words, it's straight up. Put a fire underneath of a cylinder that's straight up and then all the heat goes all through the meat, straight up. So it's, uh, it's less, uh, what would you say? It doesn't take as much room. It doesn't take as much room, so it's straight up. So it'll be a, uh, maybe eight-foot tall. And your—your door will be six-foot tall. You have shelves in time in that that goes straight up. Uh, and then you have kind of rotating type so that you can put your sausage, or brisket or anything on that and feed it and, uh. When you put your meat on your—on top of each other you want your briskets, one of them, right over another brisket. You don't want your chickens over briskets or mixing your meat up in these vertical pits. Uh, horizontal that does not usually happen. But, uh, the vertical pits, I guess, would be the one that was the unusual one.

00:14:57

MA: How do you see the technological advances in this, um, area changing your business, if at all?

DW: Uh, probably, I would have more customers because I have more referrals, and I don't think I'll ever run out of something to do. And it's just, it's continually growing out here. People

are just—they want outdoors. They want outdoor pits. So, I would say that it would be—it'd be an advantage to a lot like myself, you know and my business.

00:15:46

MA: You mentioned that a lot of your pits are outside. Are all of them outside or do you ever construct something in a structure or—you know the preparation area of a restaurant—or it's mostly outside?

DW: Most of my business is outside. Uh, we do have inside pits—which is rotisserie pits that we put inside of, uh, restaurants. Uh, of course those are not on wheels. Uh, they are—they exhaust out and they use propane mostly—and wood. My rotisserie pits is both, uh, both, uh, wood and, uh, propane fire. So, you can get the smoke that you need and also get the heat that you need to cook those briskets.

00:16:48

MA: So, you were mentioning earlier about the—you were sort of describing the construction process. How many people do you have working here and what goes into—would a single person be working on constructing a pit or would there be multiple?

DW: Uh, we have—most of the time we have two men working on a pit. And then we have an extra one to help those two out. And then, of course, I work on some of them and fine tune them.

00:17:17

MA: What goes into the design of the pit? Do you do individual designs for individual customers or do you have sort of a general design that you modify based on the customization that's necessary?

DW: My design goes with all of my pits. And then I customize what they were asking for. Uh, if they're asking for burners on the side or a box underneath their pit to put their, uh, seasoning, salt, and things like that, we put that under there too. Uh, but, uh, basic Wiley pits is strictly my design. I've designed it. It works well, so we don't, uh—only thing we do extra is maybe have the shelves that, uh, swing-out shelves so you can get up closer to your pits. We have, uh, doors that—that we have ballasts on them, which means if they're too heavy then we—we can make them to where they're feather-light doors. Uh, we have hinges that will last for long time. We have, uh, designs of the trailers we enclose and make them fancy-like. We'll put, uh, stainless steel around them. We'll put, uh, different colors of the pits. We'll put any type of colors, but it's still basic Wiley pit.

00:19:17

MA: I noticed when I walked in, the pit sitting outside has the Longhorn symbol on it *[Laughs]*. Is that something you regularly do, or was that specific to that pit?

DW: Well, this pit that we're talking about is going to Colorado. Uh, he used to live in Buda, [Texas], fifteen years ago, and he's always wanted one of my pits. So, he finally broke down and said, "I want one of your pits, and so would you bring it to Colorado to me?" So, we are supposed to take this pit to Colorado probably in the next week or two. My wife and I enjoy, uh, seeing the country. So we're delivering this pit and, uh, as far as the Longhorns—yes, this, uh, customer, his name is Brad Shaw, and he used to live here, and he was a Longhorn, and he wanted it dressed up with the Longhorns and other things that we do.

00:20:29

MA: So would you say, generally, the most typical client for you is commercial or residential? Or if you could just describe your sort of most typical, common client?

DW: Our people that we—we deliver to is mostly catering type people that has cater jobs. For instance, we have one caterer that ordered four pits from us. He has a rotisserie type pit that will cook ninety briskets at one time on eight shelves. He also has a smaller roto-pit that will cook thirty briskets at one time. It is propane fired. It also has a firebox on it for wood. Uh, most of our regular customers are, uh, customers that like to go to cook-offs and see if they can get the best results on my pits. And I've had a lot of them that come in first, but that's—that's a lot of times it's not all pit. It's the guy that's seasoning up the meat that they're cooking. We have very few, uh, clients that—that are individually, uh, motivated, like backyard pits. We just—we just don't build a whole lot of those. We don't have a lot of requests. Um, we take pride in our customers that like to go to cook-offs, our caterers, our restaurant people. We like to take care of them pretty quick.

00:22:35

MA: You mentioned that you were about to deliver that pit in the next week or two. How often do people from out of state order your pits?

DW: I would say the last—longest was in Cape May, New Jersey. We delivered a pit there. We dropped off one in, uh, Georgia. We took another pit to the Georgia Bulldogs. They, uh—the baseball team has it right behind the, uh, batters. Of course the Georgia Bulldogs, it has to be red. So, we put red and we put a big “G” on the back of the pit. Uh, Cape May is a restaurant owner that heard of us over the e-mail, internet. We delivered one to, uh, California, Oregon, Utah. This

is just a few of the states that I—I think there's one in Albuquerque, New Mexico. So, there's another one—a lot of them in Texas. We just go all over. But I—that's just a few that I can remember right now.

00:24:06

MA: Would you say there's anything distinctive about a Texas pit?

DW: It cooks right.

00:24:18

MA: *[Laughs]* All right. Well, is there anything that we missed that you wanted to mention that's sort of unique to your business? Or that you would like to share with other people?

DW: Well, I started out building the first pit. And each pit that I build I number. And, so I've got a record of every—every pit that I've built since 1981. And each one of those pits is by the year. And we try to put a year on each one of those units that go out. We put a number. I do not know how many pits that went out that didn't have a number. So our—our true count of 1072 is an accurate number, but it could be a whole lot more. I told my wife—I said I would retire at 400 pits. That didn't happen. My customers wouldn't let me.

00:25:25

MA: Do you have a new number?

DW: Uh, no.

MA: Well, good. That's what we like to hear. It seems like people really love your products and

clearly they come from all over the country to order them and enjoy them. So, thank you so much.

DW: Well, thank you for coming by. I hope this helps you out. I'm happy to help anybody.

MA: Great. Thanks.

[END]

00:25:53