

Rick Schmidt
Kreuz Market—Lockhart, Texas

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Southern Foodways Alliance
&
American Studies Department
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Group Members:
Eric Covey
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[BEGIN INTERVIEW]

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Eric Covey: All right, we are recording. Uh, I'm Eric Covey, and I'm in Lockhart, Texas, with Gavin Benke, here at Kreuz Market. And if you could, for me, can you go ahead and, uh, give us your name and, uh, your date of birth?

Rick Schmidt: I'm Rick Schmidt. Uh, date of birth is December 6, 1945.

EC: Excellent. All right, so I think we'll just go ahead and start at the beginning here. Uh, can you go ahead and just give us an idea when Kreuz Market got its start?

RS: Well, it, it originally was, uh, purchased by Charlie Kreuz, Sr., uh, in the year of 1900. I think in the month of August or thereabouts. He bought an existing meat market in Lockhart, uh, that was, uh, owned by someone named Mix, if I have my history correct. And, uh, at that time, he changed the name to Kreuz Market, which was his name, and it was a meat market, uh, some groceries. And, uh, as was common in that time, refrigeration not being as efficient and almost non-existent, um, markets butchered quite often, and they didn't have the refrigeration to hold the meat long, so before it would get, uh, bad or spoil, most of your meat markets, almost all of them, had a barbecue pit out back, and they would grind their cheaper cuts of meat, and their better cuts, they'd cook them. So if they didn't sell the meat raw, they would sell it cooked, which it would hold longer, and then, and, that's how a lot of the barbecue places in central Texas got started. Um, but it was in 1900 when he, he bought that meat market and started Kreuz Market. Uh, the, uh, the history in, in central Texas, most of your older barbecue places, uh, that are near 100 or more years old, uh, have the name "market" in their name, and that's because

they started as meat markets. You know, a lot of them still have some, uh, fresh meat, and others have gone just to strictly cooked meat. But, uh, that's how it got started, and, and, uh, in 1924, Charlie, Sr. had sold his business to three of his sons, back in 1907—to drop back again. In 1907 he sold it to three sons; it was Theodore, was Teddy Kreuz, and Alvin, which was known as Molly, and Willy. And then in 1911, Willy wanted out, and he, he sold his third interest to their brother-in-law, Mr. Hugo Prove. It's spelled P-R-O-V-E, like the word "prove." And those three men ran it, uh, until about 1947 when Teddy died; uh, then the other two were ready to get out, and in 1948, they sold it to my father, Edgar Schmidt. But, uh, they were in an old metal building, and in 1924, they built a brick building to be in, and that's when they made a definite move toward the barbecue business. It went from being a back, out back, pit and picnic tables to a sit-down restaurant. And they had knives chained to the tables and all that. And, and still had the grocery stores. We, we did away with the grocery in the late sixties, decided that we didn't want to compete with the larger, uh, supermarkets and chains, and that we would do what we knew how to do best, and that was meat, fresh and cooked.

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EC: OK, you mentioned that, uh, you know, in the early days, most of the places here in Texas slaughtered their own meat, and that's how they operated. How long has it been since Southside stopped doing that?

RS: Southside?

EC: My apologies; uh, I'm still thinking—I'm thinking sausage up north. Yeah. Kreuz.

RS: We, uh, we quit—we closed our slaughterhouse in the, uh, about the mid sixties—’66 or something like that. It was about the time that, uh, it was Lyndon Johnson was President, and he pushed a law through called the Wholesome Meat Act, and, uh, which is not a bad thing, but at that time, it was so, uh, unstable, that you couldn’t get a, uh, an inspector to tell you that what you are doing today will be good next week. My father drew up the plans for a slaughterhouse, to redo his old slaughterhouse and do it to the current standards at that time, and he asked the inspector, he says, “OK, is this fine?” And he looked at it, and he says, “Yeah, everything looks good. That, that would, that will pass.” And he said, “Well, would you sign it, and telling me that this will pass, so I can go to the bank, and we’ll get started on this thing?” And they wouldn’t sign it. They said, “No, it might change next week.” And about that time, we knew of a couple of, of, uh, places that were doing their own butchering that had remodeled and then were told it wasn’t right, and they didn’t have enough money to change it again, so they were put out of business. And that’s the time that we went ahead and started taking our cattle to a slaughterhouse in San Marcos, Texas. It was still, we were still feeding out our cattle; we just weren’t killing them. They were killing them for us and bringing them back.

EC: OK, and before that, where was the slaughterhouse located?

RS: It was located just on the edge of town; it was the east, out Highway 20. Um, they were—we had some feedlot pens and then a small building there, and, uh, cinderblock building, concrete floors, and that’s where we did our butchering.

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EC: OK, and now, are you still raising your cattle for the market here?

RS: No, we don't. Uh, our volume is such that we, we don't sell the whole animal anymore. We, uh, with our location back in '99 to our new—relocation to our new spot, uh, at that point, I made a decision to put my emphasis on production of, uh, sausage and barbecue and got out of the fresh meat business, like a lot of them have already done. So, in doing that, we don't have the—we don't sell the whole animal, so we buy cuts, and that's easier to do with boxed beef. And boxed beef has come a long way. When it first started, people were afraid of it as it wasn't done very efficiently, but now, you get—you can get excellent meat, and it has a longer shelf life out of the box, and, uh, and you can buy what you need, and don't have the rest of the animal that you've got to find something to do with. So, no, we don't butcher anymore, and we buy specialty cuts.

EC: OK, and do you just, uh, do you utilize just one supplier for the meat, or multiples?

RS: We have multiples. We, uh, we take bids weekly, uh, from, uh, three different suppliers, and, uh, we keep enough inventory that we, uh, we order one week and expect a delivery the following week from them. We don't ask them to inventory anything for us. If they're putting together a load, uh, they can use us for tonnage, and, uh, it works out good that way. It helps them and helps us. And, uh, we pay our bills rather quick; we don't string them out for thirty days, and so it's a good deal for them to, you know, make a truckload. And, uh, we play the market.

EC: All right. Um, how much meat do you go through on a weekly or monthly or even yearly basis?

RS: Well, we average in the vicinity of all, all of our purchased meats. We're retail. We do a little wholesale now. We're getting into that. We're in the ten- to twelve-thousand pounds a week total purchases. That's meat to be barbecued, meat to be made into sausage, um, includes beef and pork. Um, that's, uh, that's about our total tonnage.

EC: OK, and then how much of the sausage you make, for instance, how much do you actually sell here in the store versus how much you sell to take away?

RS: Oh, we're probably selling about ninety-five percent of it here in the store retail; our wholesale business is just growing. We, we've been USDA [United States Department of Agriculture]-approved now for about a year and a half, and, uh, we're kind of letting that business grow itself, so we can handle it. You get one or two big accounts, and you can have more than you can handle, and so we don't want to get into that situation. But it's taking off now. We've got, uh, a real nice account up in New York, Manhattan, and, um, we've got a couple out in Phoenix, and a few scattered around that people are buying our sausage and, uh, they can legally buy it and resell it in their establishment. If you're not USDA-approved, or at least State approved—if you're going to sell it within the State of Texas you have to be state-inspected; if you're going to cross state lines, you have to be federal-inspected, you know. Uh, we weren't for a long time, and the USDA now, uh, is, uh, allowing us to make our sausage like we have for years. They're more concerned about sanitation than they are, uh, preservatives. We, we've

declined to go Federal-inspected. Oh, gosh, fifteen years ago I looked into it, and I was told that I would have to put preservatives in my sausage to do it, and I, I said, “No, I don’t want to do that; I want to do it like we do it. No preservatives.” The only thing that comes close to looking like a preservative is salt. And, USDA, by their own admission, has gotten to understand that, you know, you can make a product without preservatives and freeze it, and freeze it properly, and you still got—you still have a good product. And our wholesale, that’s what we’re doing; we’re freezing it—take the option of freezing it instead of putting preservatives in it and keeping it fresh. Uh, you’ve put preservatives, you can keep it fresh to sell in the stores or something like that, but it changes the flavor of it. We’ve found that freezing—our product freezes and thaws out and re-heats very well.

EC: All right. Uh, in these places, in Phoenix and New York, where you’re selling the, the Kreuz sausage? Is it being sold under the Kreuz brand name, or—?

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RS: Yes, they use our name on their menu. Uh, we don’t have a problem with that as long as it’s our sausage that they’re selling. We’re proud for them to use our name out there.

EC: All right. And then, in regards to the USA—USDA-inspection process, is there a single USDA inspector here in, uh, Lockhart, or, or what’s the situation there?

RS: The inspector that, uh, works with us comes from New Braunfels. He’s about thirty-three miles away, and he’s in here every day and, uh, does his inspection. And, uh, a lot of the regulations for inspection is a paper trail, and my son is—has a science degree, and, uh, has a

Master's in marine biology, and, and he understands microorganisms and everything else, and so it, it works out real good having the degree in here. He keeps our plant, uh, sanitized. Uh, we have to take samples out of it around the sewers and everything else, the drains and all over the place, and send them to labs periodically as the speculate to check for *Listeria* and any other bacteria. And, knock on wood; so far he's done a good job of keeping us clean. The inspector comes in and checks his paperwork on it, and then does, does a physical inspection too. But no, the inspector lives in New Braunfels, and—but he's here every day.

EC: OK. So, then the sausage manufacturing plant is right here on site also?

RS: Yes, it is. This is a 23,000 square foot building, and if—look over here at that brick wall, that's a 4000-square-foot meat plant back there, including coolers and processing room and cooking room and storage.

EC: OK. I noticed that this is definitely the biggest, the biggest barbecue restaurant in Texas that I've been in. Can you maybe tell me a little about the history of the building here?

RS: Well, this building, uh, I get asked, "What did it used to be?" Well, it used to be a vacant lot. In 1999, I was, uh, we were in another location and had been there ninety-nine years here in town, and we, uh, couldn't buy the property. We were told that we were going to be out of it in five years; they would only give us a five-year lease, wanted a lot of work done to maintain that five-year lease. Anyway, long story short, negotiations, uh, ran up against a brick wall, and I was either going to have to move then, or move in five years. And, uh, I chose to move at that time.

And, uh, we'd been in—I owned the name, had bought the name from our father, my brother and I had. My brother retired about that time. So, in '99, we moved up here. I bought this property, and I built this building. I lost a lot of—oh, what's the word I'm looking for?—its “ambience” and—

EC: Mmm.

RS: And “atmosphere” in the old building because it had been there a long time. It was, uh, kind of a dungeon-type place to work in, uh, but we liked it, and we didn't want to move. And so, losing those memories, I had to create something different up here. I had movie-set people that are good customers of mine say, “Well, when you build the new place, we can come in and make it look like it's a hundred years old.” And my answer was, “That'd be great, but everybody knows it's not.” So I just built it, uh, I wanted something big enough for our Saturdays; we do the biggest part of our business on Saturday. I said, “Well, I want it to where everybody can be in here and be comfortable.” It's a little large for the week, but the week business is, is growing. Saturdays, it's just right. We get it about eighty-percent full, which makes it look like it's full, and, uh, what I lost in the old smoke and everything else, we're building up here. We're getting smoked up and getting used up, and, uh, the size and the layout of it impresses a lot of people, so we're just creating some new memories.

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EC: It is impressive. About how many people can you seat in here?

RS: About 560. The fire marshal allows us 605, I think, but, uh, we've found that, uh, the seating we have now for about 560 is adequate. You know, if we outgrew it we could still add another close to forty-five.

EC: OK, and what about the, uh, you have more pits than any barbecue restaurant also I've been to. How many pits do you have back there?

RS: Well, in this retail area, I have eight, and they're all sixteen-foot long. Uh, they're built identical. They have adjustments on them that I can, um, make them cook either hot or cold, or cool. Uh, make them cook on, totally on the whole grate one temperature, or I can make it hot in front and, and just warm in the back. I, I was able to build these pits myself, and, and fortunately, the City of Lockhart Fire Marshal knew my reputation about lack of fire losses, allowed us to have the open fires, which a lot of cities won't. And, uh, I got to design them like I wanted to, and, uh—so I've got eight of them now; they're all the same, but they all cook differently, because I cook different things on them. And then we have in our, uh, processing plant, we have another cooker back there that, uh, we cook our sausage on for the first time. Part of our—part of our process from day one has been to make the sausage and cook it, then chill it and reheat it on the pit, and sell it—sell it hot, and, uh, it's, uh—like a lot of foods, it tastes better the next day. Our sausage is that type; it tastes good the first time it's cooked; it tastes a lot better chilled and reheated the next day. And so, we cook the sausage back there, and, uh, all the meat and everything out here.

EC: OK, so you—you designed and built the pits yourself, and you've never—never had a fire?
Uh, you cook with oak?

RS: Yes, we cook with post oak, which is, uh—there's a lot of it around here. We're on the southern edge of what is called the post oak savannah. From the maps that I've seen, it runs all the way up through east Texas into Oklahoma and northern Louisiana and Arkansas. A lot of post oak, a lot of blackjack. We don't like to use blackjack, but we like post oak. And we're fortunate that we're in this area, because most of—most barbecue places cook with whatever's in their area, and, uh, we like the taste of post oak best, and, that's—guess we got lucky, wound up here.

EC: And, uh, do you have someone who supplies you with all the wood?

RS: Yes, and that's getting to be, uh, more difficult, because not everyone likes to go out and cut wood. But yes, I have a supplier that I've gotten in the last year, uh, that is real reliable and can keep me in all the post oak I need.

EC: OK. Yeah, I noticed there's a lot of it outside. How much—how much wood do you go through?

RS: We burn around 120 to 130 cords a year. Like, two-and-a-half cords a week.

EC: All right. Kind of switching gears, here. Um, who eats at Kreuz?

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RS: Well, just about everybody. You come in here, and you'll see people in coat and ties; you'll see laborers; you'll see utility workers; just anybody. You can—our menu is such that you can get a pretty good meal inexpensively. Um, I'd say you can eat for six or seven dollars if you want to and get a lot of meat, pickles, and onions, and bread, and cheese, and, and we're mainly a meat place. We have added some sides through the years, but we still have old customers that don't—don't buy the sides. They say, you know, "I'm here—I'm here to eat meat." But, uh, we get all kinds. Uh, you know, being close to Austin, we get our share of politicians, and, uh, law enforcement. Just—just about everybody. You—you can come in, and some of our tables are community; some of them are private. Uh, you might be sitting next to a person in a coat and tie, a banker or lawyer, or something like that, and you might, um, be, uh, working for the Highway Department, been out in the heat. So, we're fortunate that we just get a little bit of everybody.

EC: And has—has the customer base changed over the years? Are there more—more tourists now, or, you know, is it different than it was twenty-five years ago?

RS: Well, not twenty-five years ago; it's different than it was fifty years ago. Uh, I'd say starting in the late sixties and early seventies, uh, we started getting some publicity, uh, and, uh, there was some interest about writing about us. It was like a time when windows and old tables ceased to be, uh, junk and become an antique. That's about the time Kreuz Market seemed to turn to an antique stage. And it got to be popular to write about us. And, uh, we resisted change at that time; a lot of our competitors had changed and gone to cafeteria style, and different ways of cooking. And, uh, I'm trying to remember your question now.

EC: Well I sure—I'm not sure I remember it myself either. Oh, it was about the—how the customer base has changed over the years.

RS: OK. Yes, the out-of-town was what I was leading toward. At that time, we started getting a lot of customers from outside the county, people traveling on vacation, or people just wanting another place to eat, and there was this interest. And, uh, it's grown today. We started getting more of, uh, out-of-town business at that time—I—lack of a better word. And today, I estimate that about seventy percent of my sales is from outside the county. People from the Austin area, San Marcos, San Antonio, Houston, uh, drive over, just—and we're a destination. We're—Lockhart's really not on the way to any place. If you're in central Texas, and you want to go to San Antonio or go to Houston or go to the coast, uh, the freeways all go around us. If you want to come—if you want to go through Lockhart, you almost have to go out of your way, and so, we feel real fortunate that people are willing to drive out of their way to come here and eat. But, uh, seventy—rough estimate, seventy-five percent of our business right now does not live in Lockhart or Caldwell County.

EC: OK. Kind of on that note and thinking about—about Lockhart and Caldwell County, this was actually once a big railroad town, uh, I guess, and, uh, have you seen—over the years, has that—have changes in the railroad or changes in town changed your business at all?

RS: Well, the railroad always came through here. It wasn't a railroad town; it was more of a cotton farming community, and Caldwell County had seven or eight gins in it. Now it has one.

But, uh, the farming community—there's still some pretty good size farmers around, uh, but a lot of farmland has been converted to pasture land, and they're in the cattle business now. The train had quit running through here, except for just occasionally, until about the time we moved out here. We're right next to the tracks, and they went from four or five trains a day to, well, we're—we're at eighteen or twenty now. And, uh, but they don't stop here; they just go through. They're freight trains, and they—the railroad has, uh, there was a busy rail from Austin down through San Marcos, New Braunfels to San Antonio, and, uh, they wanted to get the—because of traffic over there, they wanted to get the rails off of that, so now they're taking them around through Bastrop, and they're coming—to get to San Marcos, they come around and go through Lockhart to get there. It's a roundabout way, but they're freeing up the traffic between San Marcos and Austin. Uh, but like I said, all it does is mess up traffic; it doesn't help the economy at all. But, uh, this is an agriculture, uh, community: uh, farming and ranching, mostly ranching now. Uh, there is some oil production, and, uh, then there's a lot of, uh, people that live in Lockhart that drive thirty minutes to Austin to go to work, some of them in the high-tech business, some of them just in business.

EC: OK, I want to ask you a little more about—about Lockhart, but first, just to rewind a little bit, you had mentioned, uh, you've added the sides here. You have the sauerkraut and the beans, and then you have the German potatoes. How long have you had those for? And—and where are the recipes from, I guess?

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RS: Well, I don't give the recipe out, but, uh, when we moved into this nice, big facility, uh—when we were—go back to when we were in the small facility, we were almost had a barbecue-

stand atmosphere, and so when you had a limited menu, it worked. People go up there, “Oh, that’s all you have.” And, uh, and we had, you know, barbecue and sausage, bread and crackers, and, uh, pickles, onions, and cheese, and tomatoes and avocado, and all those items came out of what used to be in the grocery store. Kreuz Market as it is now—our menu is a product of evolution. Going back to when they used to barbecue the meat to keep it from spoiling, well, they had butcher paper is all they had from the meat market, so that’s what they served it on. Uh, they bought barrels of crackers. It wasn’t store—it wasn’t sliced bread. And people would buy their meat and get their crackers and sit down. If they wanted an onion or some rat cheese or anything like that, a tomato, they’d go up into the meat market, in the grocery store, and buy it up there, then go back into the restaurant and eat it. When we quit selling the groceries in the late-sixties, mid- to late-sixties, uh, we took those items that they’d been buying and put them in the—on the menu, like the tomato, the avocado, and the cheese, and the onion, and we always had—then we have pickles. When I moved out here, people were surprised, and they said, “This is a big place, and that’s all you got to eat?” Well, it was kind of offending at first, but then finally I said, “Well, I need to try to, you know, please more people,” and so I put the beans in first. I said, “Well, they’re a protein; we’re a protein place.” It kind of went with it, and the beans were popular. And, uh, then later on, I got a good recipe for German potatoes. I didn’t want a traditional potato salad; I like being different. And, uh, then instead of coleslaw, my cabbage is sauerkraut. And, uh, that’s the three sides that we’ve added. And, uh, another thing we added when we moved into this new facility is dipped ice cream. And, uh, those—all those items are—are—give people that want a little bit more variety something to choose from.

EC: All right, very good. Um, how—have you been involved with Kreuz your whole life?

RS: No, I, uh, grew up working in it some, uh, with my father. He had a deal with my brother and I that if you played sports, you didn't have to work in the market, and so I played, uh, football and baseball, so in basketball season, I worked in the market, and in the summer I worked some. My brother was the same way. We both—he was five years older than I, but, uh, he went off to TCU [Texas Christian University] on a baseball scholarship, and then when I graduated, I was fortunate enough to go up there and get a scholarship, too. So, we went through, uh, TCU and got our business degrees. And, uh, he was in, uh, well, he worked for a tobacco company for a long time, uh, in retail sales, factory rep. Uh, then he went into real estate, and I went into institutional food distribution, and I worked for people like Oscar Mayer and Heinz. And then I went into distribution level, uh, some of the distributors you might be familiar with are SYSCO, US Foods, and Ben E. Keith, and stuff like that, those type of companies. So, I got a lot of experience, uh, calling on restaurants and selling them food and learning what they did. And, uh, then when my father—in '82, my father was ready to retire; that's when my brother and I negotiated with him, and, uh, we bought it in '84. And, uh, he had business experience, and I had a lot of business and food service experience, and so we got in, and it helped us. And, uh, we didn't change the way we did anything, we just did—we changed the way we kind of kept track of things. And, uh, it's been fun.

EC: OK, now, we—we talked to, uh, a few weeks ago, we talked, uh, to Joe Capello down at City Market in, uh, Luling, and he, uh, he mentioned that he got his start here at Kreuz, you know, quite awhile back. Do you think that's common with a lot of, uh, a lot of folks in central

Texas is—is they—they start working at one barbecue place, and then eventually maybe go on to open up their own, or work somewhere else?

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RS: Yes, that is. That—that's happened several times. I know Joe's from Lockhart. Uh, his brother worked for us. I remember his family being in town; went to school with some of his brothers. Um, but that, what you asked, is—has happened. Uh, Chisholm Trail Barbecue here in town, uh, Floyd Wilhelm used to work for Black's, and, uh, when he left Black's Barbecue, he—he, uh, tried an endeavor in a tavern, and then he decided he liked the barbecue business and opened his own up, and so he—he came from one. Um, I've got a guy that used to work for me that's in the barbecue business over in San Marcos now. Uh, and, uh, how he's doing, I'm not too sure, but, uh, he learned it from us and decided he wanted to do it on his own. I have had, uh, a good employee that left me one time to go out on—to go to Austin to do his own venture, and unfortunately, he didn't last but six months. And, uh, so it—we—I guess it's a compliment when we make it look easy enough everybody wants to do it. It—there's—it's a lot harder than it looks.

EC: Sure it is. Uh, what time do you have to start cooking the meat, speaking of hard work?

RS: Well, we—we cook differently than most people; we cook fast by the industry standards. We'll take a fifteen-pound shoulder clod and get it done in four-and-a-half hours. And, uh, we, uh, sometimes can pre-cook meat and then finish cooking it the next day. So, we start about seven—between seven and eight in the morning now, and, uh, and have everything—we open up at ten-thirty, and we have everything good and fresh, and we have our ways of doing it. Uh, and

that's because we have enough pit space here. At the other location, we didn't have enough pit space; we were starting at four-thirty in the morning and stuff, but people that cook briskets, eight, ten, twelve, fourteen hours, uh, that's their way of doing it. I—I don't—I'm not that patient. We get our briskets done in about six hours, five-and-a-half to six. And, uh, it takes more attention; you don't just put it on there and then come back in six hours. You have to turn them about every thirty minutes or so, move them around, find your hot spots on your pit, and do a little juggling. It's a—the way we cook, we cook so fast, it's almost a combination of barbecuing and grilling, but it's all done with wood.

EC: And about how many employees do you have here to—to make sausage and barbecue, and everything?

RS: Our employee, uh, count is somewhere around twenty-two, sometimes twenty-four; depends on the time of the year and how much part-time help we have.

EC: OK. Uh, now back to Lockhart. Lockhart's the Barbecue Capital of Texas. How—how did that happen?

RS: Well, a long time ago, there were a lot of barbecue places here, and then they—one by one, the meat markets closed up, and it wound up being just two: uh, Kreuz Market and Black's Barbecue. Then, uh, Chisholm Trail Barbecue started up, and we—there were three of us. Now, Lockhart at that time was around 9000 people and three barbecue places, and you have to—makes you be good. I mean, you got—you can't just let your quality slip when you have that

much competition. And then when we were forced to move in '99, uh, my sister opened up the old location. She inherited the building, and so she took it and opened it up. And, uh, there was four. So you have four pretty substantial barbecue places in a town of 11,000 now. Like I said, seventy-five percent of my business is from outside the county. I would say that per capita, we probably sell more barbecue than anybody else just because we're a small town with—with four barbecue places. Most of your smaller towns have two. And, uh, it's, uh, it's flattering to be called the Barbecue Capital of Texas. Our legislator, state representative, a few years ago did that in the legislation, and—and got us a—a declaration, it's on the wall over there, that Lockhart is the Barbecue Capital. And, uh, other towns are the Sausage Capital.

EC: Elgin, yeah.

RS: Yeah. And stuff. And that's great, you know, but the customers are the ones that count. You know, what a reporter says, and what a few politicians says, is flattering, but the cash register is what takes—what does the talking.

00:32:48

EC: Yeah. Do you think the designation has been good for Kreuz or good for Lockhart, or?

RS: I think it's good for Lockhart, and it's been—and—and indirectly, Kreuz, too. It's—our—business is in a growth mode now that we are real proud of, and like I said, even with our—our wholesale business, we could do some advertising and really blow the top off, but we're not sure we can handle the volume, because our retail is growing so much that we've got to take care of it first. And, so, we're trying to have controlled growth.

EC: OK. I know, like, you said there's a lot of—you've got the growth right now, and you're—there's a lot of attention focused on barbecue in Texas and central Texas barbecue, Lockhart, and especially on—on—on Kreuz. Um, you know, what is—what is that—what has all that media attention meant for you?

RS: Well, we feel like we're at the top of the heap, and we have no place to go but down, and we don't want to go that way. So, it—it keeps our pencil sharp and our attention on our quality very keen. And it's healthy. And, uh, like I said, it's—it's hard to get to the top; it's almost harder to stay there.

EC: Now you—you know, you got a lot of people who come down here and interview you and—and—and talk to you and such; when—when you talk to these folks, do you feel—do you feel like you need to represent, uh, Texas, or—or even Lockhart, kind of on the national stage?

RS: No, I'm—I'm real proud to represent Lockhart, but I can't represent, uh, I've been called on my representation of Texas barbecue, but I really don't barbecue like most places in Texas. We're—like I said earlier, I cook fast, and, uh, I don't use a sauce. We—we use a—a rub that we make ourselves, and we use post oak wood, and we get our flavor with the rub and the right wood, and we cook—cooking it fast; uh, most people cook slow. So, I wouldn't say that we're a representation of Texas, but we are a representation of Kreuz Market, and that's what we worry about.

EC: OK. And when—when we talked earlier before we started the interview, you said that, you know, a lot of people write about Kreuz, but a lot of people get it wrong. They don't check their facts. What kind of things are they—are they getting wrong?

RS: Well, small details, like, uh, they'll ask me how many rings of sausage do we, uh, do a week, or how many rings of sausage do we make, and I'll say, "Well, on a weekly basis, we'll make about 15,000, sometimes up to twenty [thousand], sometimes a little less. Depends on the time of the year." And it'll come out that we make 15,000 a day, you know, and that's kind of embarrassing. I was—and that—you know, it—that's a lot of sausage, you know. Things like that. And—and then, on a personal level, it's, uh, the reason we—you know, like I said, I didn't want to move from the old location; the business had been there ninety-nine years, and I wanted to keep it there, and, uh, tried hard to. But, uh, most of the stories that came out about it, they called it a feud between my sister and I, and it wasn't a feud. She just said, "I'm not going to sell it to you; I'm not going to lease it to you more than five years; and that's it. What else you want to talk about?" Well, there wasn't anything else to talk about. So, it wasn't a feud. And a lot of them say that, uh, she inherited the building, and my brother and I inherited the business. Well, that's wrong. We bought the business, and we paid hard dollars for it. And, uh, it's—it just gets a little irritating sometimes when people tell me I inherited this business, and I say, "Well, I guess all that money I paid my father, I just threw away."

EC: Well, you said you bought it in '84, right?

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RS: Right.

EC: Fifteen years before you moved over here.

RS: Yes. Yeah. Bought it in '84, and at that time, we were supposed to buy the property too, but, uh, Sister, uh, talked our father into not selling the property to us and just renting it to us. And then he died in 1990, and, uh, when we opened the will, she was our landlady. And my brother and I said, "That's fine. Uh, you know, we'll pay her rent just like we've been paying Dad." And, uh, but things got a little sticky, and so, nine years later, here I am, and, uh, I'm really not sorry for it now. I—I was not happy when I had to do it, but I was forced to do something that I probably never would—would've had the fortitude to do on my own, because this was a big step. And, uh, especially at my time of life, I was in my fifties, and I never thought I'd be going into debt like I was, and—and building—taking on something like this, but it's turned out to be a blessing in disguise. We do a better job up here. Uh, customers are more comfortable; employees are more comfortable. My turnover rate in employees is—is real low. At the old location, it was such a dungeon to work in and so hard, I used to have to have fifty to fifty-five W2's each year just to maintain about fourteen employees.

EC: Wow.

RS: It was that much turnover. And, uh, over here, we don't have that, so we're happy.

EC: Very good. Uh, is there anything else that they're missing out on when they—when they write these articles about you in—in national magazines and the *[Austin American] Statesman* and so forth?

RS: Well, nothing right off-hand. It's, uh—I can't think of anything else other than what I've just talked about.

EC: OK. I know that when a lot of folks write about barbecue in Texas, or especially about Kreuz, they emphasize that y'all don't have forks here, and you don't have barbecue sauce, and the knives used to be chained to the tables. Those are three re-occurring themes in the stories. Why do you think those—those three things come up all the time?

RS: Well, it's unusual. Most people, uh, think of barbecue, think of sauce. Outside of Texas, barbecue means pork. Um, it's just automatic: it's pork in any other state. I've learned that in the little bit of the traveling and the, uh, meeting other barbecue men. The, uh—the no sauce is, uh—it's surprising to some people, and they—we have people say—tell us, “Well, I have to have sauce with my barbecue.” And we say, “Well, have you tasted it yet?” And they say, “No, but I always use sauce.” And our suggestion is, “You taste it and see if you need it.” And ninety-nine percent of them will come back and say, “You're right; I don't need it.” And, uh, and that's unique in the state; there's not many of them that don't serve sauce.

EC: And you have hot sauce.

RS: There's hot sauce. That's a product of evolution, especially from the Hispanic community. That was—my father started putting hot sauce out, oh, back in the, I guess, fifties or sixties. Uh, a family would come in and buy their barbecue, or a man would come in and buy his barbecue, and then go to the meat market and buy them a bottle of hot sauce and want to use it and not use it all and leave a little bit and just left it on the table, because at that time, it only cost a nickel. Customer Number Two comes along, sits down, and this bottle's still sitting on the table. Well, they use it, and everything's fine; everybody's happy. A week later or so, whenever, the next day, whenever it might be, Customer Number Two comes in. Well, Number One hasn't been there to leave the bottle of hot sauce, so Customer Number Two buys his meat, sits down at the table, and looks for the sauce, the hot sauce, gets up, and goes to the counter and says, "Where's the hot sauce?" Well, that happened so many times, my father just started putting it on the table. And that—that goes to, like I said, product of evolution. Our menu is a product of evolution.

EC: What a—well, what about the forks? There's no forks. Do people—do people think that's strange?

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RS: They think it's strange, and, uh, I'm just bull-headed enough to—to stay like we are. When you come here and eat with your fingers, you'll remember the place, and we want to take the emphasis away from forks and let them think about the food. And usually when they take a bite of the food, they forget about what they need to eat it with.

EC: OK. And what about the story of, uh, the knives being chained to the tables in the past?

RS: The knives were chained to the tables. Uh, that was to keep them from being stolen. Uh, Kreuz Market back in the early, or the mid-part of the century, fifties and sixties, was in the middle of a block that had about seven or eight, uh, beer taverns. “Beer joints” is what we called them, but—and, uh, somebody would get a little bit too much to drink and—and, uh, want to eat; well, they’d come over. And most of them behaved themselves and stuff. And there was—the story was that the knives were chained to keep people from fighting, and that wasn’t the case. They carried their own knives. It was to keep them from walking out. The Health Department, uh, at a point somewhere in the seventies or so, uh, told my father to—he couldn’t put any more out. And they did let us leave the ones that were on the table, and we washed them all day long periodically. When we cleaned tables, we—we wiped them off with sanitizer and stuff. And, uh, but we couldn’t—when they got—when they disappeared, someone would steal it, they’d take wire cutters and cut the chain or something and steal them for souvenirs, we weren’t allowed to replace them. If the inspector came in and saw a new knife on the table, he’d—and so, about the time that we moved up here, uh, in ‘99, I had, uh, I had eight knives left. They were on chains, and I made the announcement that—well, because of a breakdown in communication and negotiations in moving, in two weeks, five of those knives disappeared. People wanted them for souvenirs. So I had three left, and I took them off the table myself, and they’re hanging behind you over on the wall. There’s two of them against that wall crossed, and then there’s another one there. And I said, “Well, at least I’m going to keep three of them.” I’ve been offered a lot of money for them, and I—well, it’d be nice to have the money, but it’s nicer to have the knives. But, uh, they were there as a product of that evolution, you know? You needed something to cut your meat with, and so the Kreuzes put an old cabbage knife on a chain and chained it to the table.

EC: All right. Uh, what's your favorite barbecue?

RS: My favorite barbecue to eat every day is beef shoulder, the shoulder clod. Uh, it's a naturally tender piece of meat; it has a lot of marbling, good flavor. And, uh, I like it all; I like all the barbecue, but I'll have it more often than I do anything else. My next favorite's going to be brisket. I like fatter meat. Depends on what kind of mood I'm in. Uh, but above that, my favorite product that we sell is our sausage. Uh, I don't consider that barbecue; I consider that barbecued sausage. But, um, our menu is limited. You know, in the beef, we offer the shoulder clod, the brisket, and the boneless prime rib, and they're all excellent.

EC: What's the story behind the shoulder, because not many places seem to serve that?

RS: Well, back when we used to do our own butchering, uh, like I was talking about before, you get to cooking more meat, you have to cook specialty meats. And we couldn't butcher enough calves to get enough shoulder, enough barbecue meat, because the trimmings had to go into sausage, so we started buying some beef shoulder clods from Massengill Meat Company up in Austin. And, uh, he put us on to them. He said, "It's off the chuck of the animal, and it's a good piece of meat." Nobody else was cooking it at the time that we knew of, and so we ran a test with it. And, uh, the customers created the demand. They walked up, and we had the meat on the meat block, and they would say, "Oh, I want a slice of that," because it's a big chunk of meat, and it really looks good. And so, by customers doing that, we just started cooking more and more of it. And we did it to supplement our barbecue so we didn't have to have all the sausage trimmings,

because we didn't have a market for the sausage at that time. And that's how we got into the shoulder clod, and it's a real good piece of meat.

00:45:20

EC: OK, what about—I had a piece last week. Real good. What about the, uh, what about the prime rib?

RS: The prime rib was a, uh, we used to sell it because it didn't sell in the meat market, and instead of letting it spoil or putting it—or cutting it into ribeye steaks or something and putting them in the freezer, we just prepped it and seasoned it and put it on the pit. And, uh, put it on there boneless, with the lip on. And, uh, it got to be pretty popular, as did the pork chops. Did the same thing with them. And, uh, when the volume outran our supply on it, we didn't have enough coming out of the meat market, we started buying it specifically to cook. And, uh, that's how we got into the prime rib and the pork chops.

EC: OK. Do you have any questions at all, Gavin? I'm—I've just got one—one question left.

Gavin Benke: Do you want to ask about, like, the seasoning, or?

EC: The seasoning? The seasoning mix, I suppose. Is that a—is it a secret?

RS: Yes, it's a—we don't just give out the recipe, but, you know, it's real basic. It's mainly salt and pepper.

EC: Salt and pepper, yeah.

RS: And it's a quality of salt and pepper that's hard to buy. You can buy it in a store, but it's—if you don't know what you're buying, it's, you know—it's—you don't get it. But the quality of your salt and the quality of your pepper make a big difference than just mixing salt and pepper.

EC: OK. My final question, then, I guess, unless—unless you have any kind of follow-up questions after that, uh, would be, uh, you know, what does the future hold for you folks here?

RS: Well, the future looks good. Uh, we, uh—with all the competition in town, our retail was—was—has always done well. We decided we're going to try to, uh, go for our growth in the—in the, uh, institutional or the—or the food service end of it, the wholesale, selling our sausage to other people to sell. We had a lot of interest in that through the years. I can remember as a kid, having to tell people, “No, you can't buy this and take it to your place and sell it, because it's not state-inspected.” It was city-inspected at that time. And, uh, there's our USDA inspector right there.

EC: Oh.

RS: And, uh, so we decided, OK, we want to get our volume up. We'll do it wholesaling, because we have enough interest. And that's what we did. And, uh, our retail has, at the same time, shown some good growth. And, uh, stacked on top of each other, it keeps us busy. So right now, the future looks good, and, uh, it's kind of to the point—we've always used our crew, uh,

that makes sausage. When they're through making sausage, about a half a day, then they come out and work retail. And we're making so much sausage now, it's getting real hard to get them out to retail, so we're getting to that point—do you get a full crew for each side? And, uh, we're going to reach that one of these days, but, you know, we'll know, I guess, when it's time.

EC: And I guess you'd probably like to retire someday, maybe?

RS: You know, I'm pretty much retired right now. Uh, I herd this place; my son runs it day-to-day. Keith is his name, and he does a good job. And I've got a good manager with Roy, and a good manager in the dining room, good manager in our processing room. Uh, Keith takes care of all them. I—I'm the benchmark; I know kind of where things need to be, and if—if we get off course, we discuss it, and do we want to go that way, or do we want to, you know, get back to where we were? So, uh, and Keith lets me come and go as I want to, and, uh, I guess the answer is, I never want to be not attached to this place, because it's been part of my life, and if I wasn't down here—if I'm—if I'm in town, if I'm not down here, I'm at home working on my place. I've got a small place out there, and, you know, I have bird dogs. And, uh, hunting season's coming up; that's when I really get to use my free time. Keith lets me go hunting all the time.

EC: That's real nice. Well, it sounds like you guys are all set for the future here.

RS: Well, we feel like we are, and, uh, it's fun to have a son that likes the business as much as I do. And he feels it; this is a business that you have to feel. It's—it—you can't write down, "Do this, do this." It's a feel-type thing, and he's got it.

EC: All right. That's all the questions I have. Anything else?

RS: No; I appreciate your—your interest.

EC: Well, I sure appreciate you taking the time to talk to us today.

RS: Well, it was a pleasure.

EC: All right. Thank you, sir.

[END]

00:49:58