

## **PETE'S FAMOUS HOT DOGS**

1925 2<sup>nd</sup> Ave. North  
Birmingham, AL 35203  
(205) 252-2905

*"[There's] something about [these hot dogs]. I mean, you can take a hot dog and wrap it up and put it in a sack, and go out there and eat it. It doesn't taste the same as it does when it's in here. This preacher s—s—said it's something in these walls that, you know—that makes it taste like that. And that's true."*

**--Gus Koutroulakis**

Birmingham legend, Gus Koutroulakis, has been slinging hot dogs from the same tiny stand in downtown Birmingham, Pete's Famous, since 1948. According to Gus, his Uncle Pete and a buddy bought the place in 1939 with money they won in a Pinochle game. Pete renamed the place after his self-proclaimed famous dogs when he bought out his business partner in 1946. That same year, Pete installed the colorful neon sign that still lights up 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue. And Gus still makes his dogs the same way his uncle did: "all the way" with mustard, kraut, and special sauce. Or, you can order a "special," with a beef topping that's—be careful—not chili. The classic sauce is unique to Birmingham and certainly a Greek addition to classic take-away fare. No one's quite sure who came up with it, but variations on that same sauce can be found all over town. A visit to Pete's Famous is quite an experience, so when you visit, spend some time taking in Gus's hot dog wisdom and learning interesting tidbits from loyal customers, while downing a few of what are arguably the most famous dogs in Birmingham. The record, by the way, is eighteen hot dogs eaten in one visit.

---

### **Interview Transcription:**

Gus Koutroulakis owner  
PETE'S FAMOUS HOT DOGS  
1925 2<sup>nd</sup> Ave. North  
Birmingham, AL 35203  
(205) 252-2905

INTERVIEWER: Amy Evans  
DATE: March 8 & 9, 2004 @ 3:00 p.m.  
LOCATION: Inside hot dog stand.  
LENGTH: Approx. 30 minutes

**NOTE:** This interview was conducted on two different days. The interviews were conducted in the late afternoon, when business would be slow, but Gus

maintains a steady stream of customers. The conversation is continuously interrupted, and the interruptions are either noted in the transcript or the recording is stopped momentarily (there are six different recorded tracks for this interview). Gus's wife Kathy, while not a formal part of the interview, interjects from time to time. She can also be heard interacting with customers and laughing quite regularly. The obvious interruptions are noted in the transcript.

\* \* \*

Amy Evans: This is Amy Evans on Mong—Monday, March eighth, two thousand and four in Birmingham, Alabama, on 2nd Avenue North at Pete's Famous Hot Dogs. And we have a customer here—

Gus Koutroulakis: Pete's Famous.

AE: --at Pete's Famous, who has a short story to tell. And what is your name, sir?

CUSTOMER: Uh, Danny Speakman. Uh, the day that I was born in the hospital, my father, uh, had walked down here from the hospital and got him some hot dogs. He always used to come down here and get hot dogs. And, uh, so he was down here getting hot dogs when my mom was giving birth and, uh, after I was old enough to get up and come down, we've been coming here for years and years—getting hot dogs.

AE: What do you order on your hot dog?

Gus Koutroulakis: How old are you?

CUSTOMER: [To Gus] Forty-three. [To the interviewer] I get two—all the way.

AE: All the way.

CUSTOMER: And a Grapico. I usually get two hot dogs and a Grapico.

AE: How come only one today?

CUSTOMER: Uh, I've done ate one!

AE: Oh, okay! [Laughs]

CUSTOMER: [Laughing] Yeah!

AE: [Laughing]

CUSTOMER: They're good!

AE: All right. And this is the proprietor, Gus Koutroulakis. And you told me earlier that your given name is Constantine, correct?

GK: Constantine, right. Constantine George Koutroulakis. [His wife Kathy gives a short laugh in the background] That's my given name. That's my—

AE: And everybody just started calling you George—I mean, Gus. I apologize. [Laughs]

GK: No, I just—well, I--it's just for short. You know, like—like they call—like the—Robert, they call him Bob, you know.

AE: Uh-huh.

[Kathy's chirpy laugh again in background]

GK: Like that.

AE: So how long have you been here?

GK: Been here since--January the eighteenth, nineteen forty-eight, I started working here.

AE: Okay. And were you born in Birmingham?

GK: St. Vincent's Hospital on Southside.

Kathy Koutroulakis: No, Hon! South Highland, Honey!

AE: Okay.

GK: South High—excuse me—South Highland Infirmary. That's where I was born at.

AE: And what year were you born? If I may ask.

GK: Nineteen twenty-nine.

AE: Okay, and you opened here in—

GK: I didn't open it. This place has been here since before the First World War. I th--early nineteen hundreds. And my uncle bought it in nineteen thirty-nine, and I was drafted here in nineteen forty-eight, and I've been here ever since.

AE: What was your uncle's name?

GK: Pete.

AE: So he's the famous Pete?

GK: Yeah, right.

AE: What made him want to be part of a hot dog stand?

GK: What do you mean what—what—what made him want—he just—he just bought it and he came down here.

AE: He just wanted to serve hot dogs.

GK: Well, he was in the—he was selling the—he was working with someone else in a hamburger joint, so he—so he—he had an opportunity to buy this one, so he bought this one.

KK: [To a customer] How many?

CUSTOMER: Two and a pint of milk.

AE: And did he like the hot dog business?

[Sound of buttons on cash register]

GK: Uh, evidently.

AE: [Short laugh] Yeah? And do you like the hot dog business?

KK: [To the customer] One forty-three.

GK: Well, it's—yeah. It's all right. It's been—work like heck. I've been here for [sound of cash register], you know, ever since forty-eight.

KK: Hi, Honey. [To a customer]

AE: And you're open—are you open every day?

GK: Yes, ma'am.

KK: [To the interviewer] Seven days.

AE: From when to when?

GK: Well, right now, I'm open up from eleven 'til six. But—

AE: Okay.

GK: But when they—this place has been open, you know—it's up until about twenty years ago, it was open from six to eleven o'clock in the morning to eleven o'clock at night, seven days a week.

KK: [Short laugh]

AE: So what changed that? You got tired and people—

GK: Well, there's nobody—

AE: --and people stopped coming downtown?

GK: Well it's not that, it's a—well, that's part of it. [Sound of change dropping into cash register] It's, uh, s—you know, [sound of door opening. Some new customers walk in] people don't come to town like they used to. That was when the town was hustle and bustle. It's not—you know, it's—a lot of people have moved out of the [sound of change dropping into register]—

AE: Sure. Let me pause and let you do some business here.

GK: Pardon?

AE: I'm going to pause and let you do some business.

GK: How many what?

AE: Let you do some business with your customers! [Just one customer has come in]

GK: Okay, okay. [To a customer] Yes, sir!

CUSTOMER: A bag of chips.

GK: Is that all?

CUSTOMER: Uh-huh.

GK: Okay. Sixty and—that'll be seventy-five, sir.

AE: Excuse me. [To the customer who just bought the chips and had to saddle by me to leave the place. Pete's Famous is tiny—about six feet wide—and I am perched near the front on the candy counter next to Gus's grill and just inside the front door. It's impossible to not be in the way.]

CUSTOMER: All right, bye-bye.

AE: Thank you!

GK: Oh, you can cut it off. Did you?

AE: Yes, sir. [This is a misunderstanding. The interviewer thought Gus asked for it to be turned off at this instance. It's only turned off for a moment, and then recording begins again]

KK: Okay?

AE: Okay. We're back. After you sold some chips.

GK: Yes, ma'am.

AE: And your partner in crime here, the lovely lady—

GK: It's not my—it's not my partner in crime. She's my wife.

AE: [Laughs]

KK: [Laughs]

AE: And what's your name, ma'am?

KK: Kathy.

AE: Kathy?

KK: Yes, ma'am.

GK: Katherine.

AE: Katherine.

GK: Katherine Melton Koutroulakis. [Phone rings]

KK: Hey!

GK: [Gus looks at the caller ID on his phone, which is perched on the wall just above his shoulder.] That's my brother-in-law from Pennsylvania there. [Phone rings again]

AE: Well you answer that.

GK: [Answering the phone] Pete's Famous! Hey, how ya doing, buddy?

KK: [Short laugh]

GK: [On the phone] Fine! I'm being interv— [Recording stops, and Gus talks to his brother-in-law for about five minutes.]

GK: He calls me every once in a while.

AE: I understand. That was your brother-in-law in Lancaster, Pennsylvania?

[Sound of Gus taking buns out of their bag.]

GK: Yes, ma'am. He calls every—he's a neurosurgeon, and he—he just—he's seventy—seventy-two years old. And he just—he just quit, uh, operating, and so he—that's—he has a little bit more time, and he calls me two or three times a week.

AE: Yeah?

GK: [Coughs] Just to chitchat. He called to find out how Alabama's doing [the University of Alabama] in spring training. I—

AE: Uh-oh.

KK: [Laughs]

GK: You know. That's all—

KK: That's all he does!

AE: [Laughs]

KK: Call down and check on Alabama.

GK: You know, so he—that's all he wants to—you know. Ask me if anything else developing and all, and I tell him, "no," you know. That's—

KK: Ooh!

AE: Well, football and hot dogs!

GK: Yeah, well I got a lot—lot of his—a lot of football fans, ex-football players, everybody else [coming in here].

AE: Yeah?

GK: Everybody—everybody that's anybody's going to come by here. Like that man said [a previous customer], his—his daughter's from New York?

AE: Yes, sir.

GK: Well, you multiply that with a—with a—you know from the forty-eight states, really. I mean--but you know, there's a lot of people that live—that live out of town [smacks hand on stainless steel counter top], the first place they come is [hits counter again] right here, and then they go visit their folks.

AE: So how do you explain that?

GK: I don't know.

KK: [Short laugh]

GK: It just—this place has been here a long—I—I can't give—I—I—I don't—you know. Like yesterday—they like the hot dogs, I imagine. They sure don't come to see me, I don't think.

KK: [Laughs]

AE: Sure they do. I'd come to see you. I'm gonna come back and see you.

GK: All right.

AE: And that's a threat and a promise. [Laughs]

GK: Well that's a—okay, well. Well, I guess some of them do because they want to find out just like my brother-in-law wants to find out what's happening. And it—people come in here, they--they converse, and when they converse with me—it's different. And you pick up all the news in here too.

AE: Sure.

GK: See.

AE: Well that gentleman who was in here before said he'd been coming here since he was knee-high to a grasshopper.

GK: Um—oh, this—I've got—I've got five generation people come in here, ma'am.

AE: Yeah.

GK: Some people that come in here, they used to set them on the—on the counter. They were knee-high to a duck.

KK: [Laughs]

GK: Just sit in here. Now they were children, they bring their children and—

KK: Sit them up on the counter.

GK: --grandchildren and do the same thing. You know, that's a big thing for a little kid, to sit on the counter.

AE: Yeah.

KK: [Short laugh]

GK: I had a dwarf—a dwarf that just left her.

KK: John Michael.

GK: He goes to, uh—

KK: Sanford.

GK: Sanford University. He's a freshman there, and he's a dwarf, and his daddy [short pause] moves—says, "You mind if I move the candy?" I said, "Naw, I don't mind." So he moves the candy and set him up there and eats.

KK: [Laughs]

AE: In that front counter?

GK: No, right here on this—[Gus points to the shelf of candy by the front window]

AE: Oh, I see.

GK: --on that bench there. He just moved the candy and sets him up there, see?

AE: Okay. So you've had to have seen a lot behind that counter—

GK: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

AE: --over all these years.

GK: Quite a bit. My eyes—

AE: Any stories that stand out?

GK: Well, there are so many of them. Heck, I can't—you know, it's hard to tell. You know, it's hard to—got a lot of stuff going on in here. Shoot, I tell you, when my Uncle Pete was here—well, heck. It wasn't nothing. He had to—there for a while, he had—he had ex-convicts in here. They get out of

prison, they come in here and go to work. Four or five of them, they worked for a while. Pretty rough around here back then though.

AE: Yeah? Birmingham's changed a lot.

GK: I mean, it wasn't real—it wasn't real bad but, I mean, it was—you know, you had to—you had to be on your toes.

AE: Well how has business affected you—that change over the years?

GK: Well, it affected me a little bit. I mean, when people come to town, I get my share of them. I get my share of business. But when nobody's in town—of course, I still—I still do business but not like—you know. [Short pause] But, uh, that's the way it is. You know, it's a lot of these people, during the holidays I—you know, like Thanksgiving, Christmas—when people come to visit their, you know, their kinfolks, well they'll come—they'll come by here, they bring all of them—bring the family in. That way I—I get—like last Saturday a man came in here. He—he celebrates his—his daddy's birthday. Every year they come in here. There was three of them come in here, and they spent eighty dollars in here. Eighty-three, I think. Eighty-three or eighty-four dollars. They ate all those hot dogs and carried a bunch of them with them. They're from north Alabama and—from Florence, I think. Somewhere up there.

AE: Well this is quite an established tradition, hot dog making.

GK: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. It's a—

AE: Do you have a philosophy of hot dog making?

GK: What do you mean? I—I just—

AE: I don't know—

GK: I just give them quality and service. That's—

AE: Yeah?

GK: --all. That's all that will make this—you know. That--that will make any—any business, you know.

AE: Well I see you serve—you serve Ziegler [brand]—

GK: Yes, ma'am.

AE: --hot dogs.

GK: That's the—well, that's the best—for this type. I ain't saying that ra—the other ones aren't any good. But for this place here, I've been using Zieglers ever since they—they're number one in my book.

AE: Um, and your customer before also mentioned that you used to have rolls that came in a box--

GK: Oh, yeah.

AE: --that you used to use. What were those?

GK: Oh, the same. It was this [Gus points above his head to a shelf where there are stacks of hot dog buns in plastic bags] but it was a—it was a pasteboard box. They—everything's mechanical since—you know, they used to have—you know, this friend of mine, we used to be neighbors, he—he owned the bakery that I buy the bread from. And I used to go to the bakery with him because—you know, we were kids. You know, we used to—and they used to have the ladies that pack them—you know, put them in the box and then put them on the conveyor belt, and then they wrap them. Now they—they don't even touch them now. They just, uh, run--run them through everything.

AE: What was the bakery called?

GK: Home Baking Company.

AE: Oh, okay. The Stevens family?

GK: Right. You know them?

AE: No, I've been doing some research. I've come across that name.

GK: Oh, really.

KK: [Short laugh]

AE: Yeah, I'm going to stop by Lloyd's Restaurant [the restaurant the Stevens brothers now own] later on this week.

GK: Where? Lloyd's?

AE: Yes, sir.

GK: Yeah.

AE: Yeah.

GK: Well hell, they were neighbors right—I grew up with them. When you go by there, you tell them you came by here.

AE: I sure will.

GK: Tell them I recommended you to go by there.

KK: [Short laugh]

AE: Oh, all right. Well, I appreciate the good word. Thank you, sir. [Laughs]

GK: Okay.

AE: So how do you make a hot dog?

GK: How do I make it?

AE: Yes, sir.

GK: I—how do I make it?

AE: How do you prepare a hot dog? How do you serve it?

GK: Uh—

AE: What's your style?

GK: Oh, my style? I don't know. Just pick up a hot dog, put it together.

AE: [Laughs]

KK: [Big laugh]

GK: Mustard, onions, kraut and sauce.

AE: Okay. And the sauce is—

GK: What do you mean?

AE: Is that like the chili sauce you have back there?

GK: No, ma'am. It's just a regular sauce.

AE: What do you mean a regular sauce?

KK: Regular sauce.

GK: It's a—it's just—

KK: What do we call it?

GK: You know, we just, uh—you know, I just, uh—sauce, like—it ain't chili. It's regular. [Short pause] You put—

KK: [Short laugh]

AE: Well, what's in it?

KK: The sauce?

GK: Well quite—everything—I got quite a few ingredients in there.

AE: It's a regular sauce with everything in it? [Laughs]

GK: Yes, ma'am. Well it's got, uh—I've got about—let's see, four---about fifteen different ingredients in it. And like, uh—

AE: Is there anything Greek about it? The sauce?

GK: Anything Greek?

AE: Yes, sir.

GK: Yeah, me, I guess!

AE: [Laughs]

GK: I don't know.

AE: So how is it that there are so many hot dog places around here, and they seem to all be run by—

GK: Because this—

AE: --Greeks?

GK: Because of this place.

AE: Yeah?

[Short pause]

GK: That's right.

AE: They saw how well this place was doing, and so they did the same?

GK: Yeah. It's a lot of—it's like I told her when I—I said—see I—that brother-in-law that called me—

AE: Yes, sir.

GK: Well, he married my sister. And I told you he's a neurosurgeon. Okay, he bought my sister a Mercedes Benz in nineteen seventy for her birthday. Well after about four years, he—she bought a—he bought her another one. So he was going to sell that one, so I told him, I said I'm—so my sister said, "Being that my brother wants it, I wouldn't have sold it, but if he wants it, I'll sell it to him." So he—I bought her Mercedes. See, and then when I park it out there, people come in here, and they see the Mercedes and—they come in at--right—right at lunch time, when I'm supposed to be busy, and they say, "Man this guy's doing plenty—he's making plenty of money." Well I didn't pay—I just paid six thousand dollars for that Mercedes—from my brother-in-law.

AE: [Laughs] But they don't know that.

GK: Naw, they don't know it. So Anyway, so I told them—Kathy, I said—I said, "That Mercedes and these people come here right at twelve o'clock, when I'm supposed to be busy and I am busy, they think that I'm--"you know. So they go and open up a hot dog stand to—the—they say they're going to get rich too. But you know, you've got to work in these places.

AE: Sure.

GK: You can't sit around and do nothing. If you sit around and do nothing, you can forget it. Either--

AE: Yeah, and well this place makes you stand up! From what I see here.

KK: [Short laugh]

GK: Either let somebody else run it. Well, you can forget it.

AE: Yeah.

KK: That's it.

AE: *Has* the hot dog business been good to you and your family?

GK: Yes, ma'am. Very good. Help my—helped my brother-in-law—well, it helped my brother through dental school, helped my brother-in-law through medical school and [short pause] and my other brother-in-law, hel--helped him through—

KK: Law school.

GK: --law school.

KK: [Laughs]

GK: Plus a friend of ours, he went to—he's another doctor—he went, you know, he worked here for a while. Helped him through school. Beside, you know, my personal stuff too. So it's been good, but hell—but we work though!

AE: I know you do.

GK: You know, we don't sit around here and do nothing.

AE: I know you do. And that was your son who was in here working earlier?

GK: No, ma'am. That's, uh, Kathy's son.

AE: Okay.

GK: Yeah, he's going to be interviewing for another job.

AE: Yeah.

GK: He just helps us out, you know, every now—every—every time—you know, every chance he gets.

AE: Okay, and what is his name?

GK: His name is Michael Skaran. Pardon me [to Kathy]

KK: Michael Skarantavos.

GK: Yeah, that's right.

KK: They cut his name, though, when he was young.

AE: Oh. How do you spell that, if I may ask?

GK: What, the--

KK: S-K-A-R-A-N.

AE: S-K-A-R-A-N. Okay.

KK: Got scared and ran!

GK: Yeah.

AE: [Laughs]

GK: Yeah, that's what—that's the name he goes by, you know.

AE: Okay.

GK: You know, just like a lot of Greeks, they'll—you know, like my mother's—uh, some of these Greeks names are that long [holds hands up and apart about one foot to illustrate], and they call them—cut it and call them Poulis or Papas or what have you but all—

AE: Yeah.

GK: --Greek, by God, they're that long. [Holds hand up again to illustrate]

KK: [Laughs]

GK: They—they fill a whole page.

AE: So are you a first generation born in Birmingham?

GK: Yes, ma'am.

AE: And where in Greece is your family from?

GK: Right outside of Sparta. A little town in the—little town—little south of Sparta named Sykea [Gus pronounces this *See-key-ah*. On a map the town is Sikea] S-Y-K-E-A. Sykea in Greek is "Figville." I mean, in English. See, in Greek it's Sykea and—[Hits hands forearms on the counter top and grabs the edge of the counter with his hands]

[More customers walk in]

AE: Okay. Well, lets pause again for you to do some business. How's that?

GK: Okay, yeah. He wants a—[To the customer] You want one all the way, don't you?

CUSTOMER: Yeah.

GK: All right. You don't want nothing to drink.

CUSTOMER: No [rest of phrase unintelligible].

KK: [Short laugh]

GK: All right, baby. You want to wrap it up, or are you going to eat here?

CUSTOMER: I'll eat it here, if I can.

GK: Hell, yeah. You can it if you want to. Shucks yeah, man.

AE: What's the most hot dogs you've seen somebody eat at one time in here?

GK: Eighteen.

AE: Eighteen! [Short pause] That's a good record.

KK: [Laughs]

GK: Yeah, other people say they ate more than that but I—They--“You remember that, Gus?” I say, “I don't.” I mean--but you know—

AE: [Laughs]

GK: I just—I don't want to sit there and argue with them. A guy drank eighteen, uh, bottles of 7-Up in here one night too.

AE: [Laughs] One for each hot dog, or this was a different guy?

GK: No, uh, he didn't—I think he ate about eleven or twelve hot dogs.

[Sound of cash register in background]

AE: My goodness.

GK: Well that was back before you they the—they came up with the, uh, the word cholesterol [sound of Gus putting a hot dog in wax paper]—addiction there.

AE: [Laughs]

KK: [Laughs]

GK: Really. I used to have a lot of people come in here and eat--quite a few people come in—in—anywhere from eight to ten hot dogs, drink a pint of milk and eat a piece of pie. This one guy on the corner, one time, he came in here and [short pause] it was—it was snowing and it was, you know, bad weather. It was in the month of January. January or February. It was real cold—snow. And he come and he says, uh, “Business is kind of slow.” He said, “I'm going to put you to work!” I said, “All right. All right, Joe.” His name—name is Joe. So every time he wanted a hot dog, [sound of Gus tapping on the counter twice] he'll tap like that.

KK: [Short laugh]

GK: And we'll fix him a hot dog, and he'll [Gus taps twice more] tap. [Gus taps again] He—another tap. He ate—he ate eleven hot dogs and a—drank a pint of milk and, uh, ate a piece of—had fried pie. I went back there, and we had fried pies.

KK: [Short laugh]

AE: Do you eat hot dogs?

GK: One every day. I just got through eating one about a half-hour ago.

AE: Yeah? What do you put on yours?

GK: Well, different things. My, uh—my taste now is onions, a little bit of kre—you know, everything but mustard.

AE: Okay.

GK; I've got—you know, I can eat most of it, but I don't—you know, I prefer not to.

AE: And do you still serve fried pies?

GK: No, ma'am. Well, the guy quit making them.

AE: Oh, okay.

GK: You know, these old—these old-timers, you know, they quit making them and the health department gets on you and have to spend all this money to do this and that and the other, so. You know, when you're up in age, and you have to spend—you know, people don't want to get, you know, get in too—you know, get in debt, you know. So—so, can't get nobody to work anymore. It's one guy, he—he didn't even tell me he was going to quit. He just quit, you know. He came in here one day--I said, "Where's my pies." And he said, "I quit making them." And I said, "What the heck don't you say something about it."

KK: [Short laugh]

AE: Didn't give you any warning, huh?

GK: No.

AE: Well how did this place end up in this tiny little walk—walk-up?

GK: Lady, you got me! This place has been here since--like I told you—it's been here, I'd say, about, uh, nineteen ten to twelve. Something like that. Seriously!

AE: Yeah.

GK: Before the First World War. So the First World War was nineteen fourteen, so it had to be, you know, before the First World War. So I'd say about—

AE: Do you know—

GK: --ten to twelve.

AE: Do you know when that neon sign went up outside?

GK: Yes, ma'am. [Short pause] Went up nineteen forty-six. I was here when they put it up.

AE: Yeah?

GK: Yeah, I was—I was here when my Uncle Pete, he [short pause]—that—that sign cost five hundred dollars to put up there. When my Uncle Pete bought this place by himself—he had a partner when he came in [Gus Cumbageorge (the spelling of his last name is a guess)]. Bought his partner out in nineteen forty-six, I think. And after he bought it out, he went up there to the real estate people and told them if—if you give me a ten year straight lease, I'll remodel the place. This place was nothing like it—well, it was something like that. It—and he, uh—and so they gave him a ten year lease, so he fixed it like that. It was-- see, before that—before that he had two little old doors like a saloon. You know, your swinging doors?

KK: [Laughs]

[Sound of door creaking open and a new customer coming in]

GK: You go in and went out—yeah, so he—so they put that in there, and then he, uh—then that—wanted the neon sign like that, so—and he come down there with blueprints and drew it all up. He liked it. He said, "Yeah, that's good." Said, "How much it cost?" He said, "Five hundred and forty dollars." Put that—[Gus looks out the window at the sign]—it was about eight-thirty at night, he put all that stuff on the--so my Uncle Pete told him, he said, "Naw." He says—he said, "I'll give you five hundred cash—five dollars—five hundred dollars cash money for it." "Oh, Mr. Pete, I don't think I can do it." You know, they told me—told my Uncle Pete, said, "My boss ain't gonna--" he said, "Well, you take that—you take that blueprint to your boss, and tell him I'll give him five hundred dollars cash for it—for that neon sign." You know, he said, "If he says no, just take those papers and throw them

away. Because I don't want it. But for five hundred you can come back and put it up." So he came back and put it up.

KK: [Big laugh]

AE: [Laughs] What about the painted sign that's on the side of the building over here?

GK: Which one?

AE: The one that's by the parking lot at the end of the building? Says "Gus's Famous Hot Dogs" around the corner.

GK: Oh, that's not mine.

AE: It says G—Ohhhh.

GK: No, you're on 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue.

KK: It's on 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue.

AE: 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue.

GK: You're talking about on 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue.

AE: I apologize.

GK: That's all right.

AE: Again! [Laughs]

GK: My name is Gus, but my trade name is Pete's Famous.

AE: I know it. See that's where I'm just getting confused, but—

GK: Well--

AE: I've got it now.

GK: --you're on 5<sup>th</sup>—4<sup>th</sup> Avenue. I know where you're talking about. That—

AE: You can't trick me again! [Laughs]

KK: [Big laugh]

GK: No, that—No, that's, uh—you know, that's another—he's a good boy down there.

AE: Yeah?

GK: Have you been down there?

AE: Yes, I stopped in there today.

GK: Yeah, he's a—he's a good fella. Oh, George is his name.

AE: Yes.

GK: Yeah.

AE: All right. Well, I'm learning to get it straight.

KK: [Laughs]

GK: That's all right.

KK: It'll be all right.

AE: [Laughs] Because the Greek history here is so—complex.

GK: Yeah. The—the what?

AE: Greek history here. It goes back a long way—

GK: Oh, yeah.

AE: --and everybody seems to be connected.

GK: Yeah, well that, uh—you know, when my f--father first came here, the Greeks owned just about all the business here. Beer business, the bakery business, the restaurant business, of course. And produce business. My daddy was in the produce business, and he—he used to—they used to sell seven and eight boxcars of fruit every day, he told me. He—they wouldn't even take them off the boxcar. They'd sell them direct—direct out of the boxcars because they had nothing but fruit stands around the corner, and all the Greeks had the fruit stands. So—

AE: Why do you think that was?

GK: Pardon?

AE: Why do you think that was?

GK: I don't know. Is that—they were a lot better off. People used to eat fruit instead of all this junk now—back then.

AE: [Quiet laugh]

GK: That's right. And my daddy—and my daddy told me, said they came out with a law that everything had to be, uh, screened in. [Sound of door opening] And he said it wasn't—wasn't four months after that, and he lost eighty percent of his business.

AE: Hmm.

GK: They went out of business. [New customers have just entered, and Gus turns to speak to them] Yes, ma'am. [Recording stops so that Gus can serve the customers that just walked in. As they are being served, more people enter. Recording is stopped for about fifteen minutes]

AE: Um, well what was it you were saying to that customer about the—the hot dogs taste different if you don't eat them in here?

GK: Well they—they do. I mean, it's something—something about them. I mean, you can take a hot dog and wrap it up and put it in a sack, and go out there and eat it. It doesn't taste the same as it does when it's in here. This preacher s—s—said it's something in these walls that, you know—that makes it taste like that. And that's true.

[Sound of customers chatting and eating in the background]

AE: Do you have most people eat them in here when they can?

GK: Yeah, right.

AE: How many people can fit in here?

GK: Well, I've had about thirty-four, thirty-five in here, but they were pretty close.

AE: [Laughs] I guess so. And what was that? Another customer came in and was saying that the closer you stand back to the end, the more hot dogs you have to eat because you can't get out of the place. [Laugh]

GK: Well, you know. That's—[Short pause] You know, a lot--lot of people, they come in here and they—with the intention of eating one or two, they wind up eating three or four. Then they [short pause. Gus is cooking hot dogs while we talk]—then they say they're miserable the rest of the day.

AE: [Laughs] So have you been back to Greece.

GK: Oh, yeah. I've been about—I was—I've been to Greece—I've been to Greece twice: nineteen—nineteen sixty-five and nineteen ninety-five. Oh, you know, nineteen sixty-five my—all my aunts and uncles were living—most

of them. But you know, the last time I went, my cousins—you know, I'm not—I wasn't too close with them.

AE: Do you have children here?

GK: No, ma'am. I don't have them—I don't have nay children. [Short pause] Just my wife and I, that's all.

AE: Yeah. Do you have someone lined up to take over Pete's Famous when you retire?

GK: No, when I leave here, this place will be gone.

AE: Yeah?

GK: Because I'm the last one in here, according to the health department, and I might not be here then. They—they give me an ultimatum. I got to do a lot of work in here. They give me 'til April to do it. I mean, not April but August to do it. If I don't get it done, they will not issue me a health permit they told me.

AE: Huh.

GK: So I'm in the process of doing what they tell me to do, and then we'll go from there.

AE: I see. Hmm. Well, what is it that you have up those stairs back there in the back of the restaurant? [They're not stairs so much as it's a ladder that goes straight up.]

GK: Nothing. It's just a little warehouse. I mean, a little stockroom.

AE: Storage space?

GK: Yeah, see—

KK: [To the customers] One more round in the back?

GK: Y'all want two more?

AE: All right. You go. You go right ahead.

CUSTOMER: Yeah, and four to go.

[There is a short pause in conversation, and then recording stops. Gus gets busy again with a late afternoon rush. I decide I've taken up enough of his time, thank him for talking with me, and tell them that I will return another time to finish the interview]

[Can hear radio in background and sound of hot dogs on the grill]

AE: It's now Tuesday, March ninth two thousand and four. And I'm back with Gus Koutroulakis at Pete's Famous Hot Dogs. And I just had a few more questions for you. After our interview yesterday, you got so busy. Um, and one of them is, um, you said your father was in the fruit business.

GK: Yeah, he was in the produce business.

AE: Produce business. And what was his name?

GK: George Koutroulakis.

AE: Okay.

GK: George.

AE: And when did he come to Birmingham?

GK: I think it was in, uh, nineteen-o-seven, I think. I'm—I'm almost positive.

AE: Okay, and did he—

GK: Nineteen-o-seven and then he [sound of hand hitting counter] came over here when he was thirteen years old, and he wound up on Morris Avenue for sixty-five years.

AE: My goodness. Did he start out with a fruit stand?

GK: Yes, ma'am. No, not fruit--he was in the fruit—in the wholesale fruit business.

AE: Okay.

GK: And he stayed there for sixty-five years until he retired.

AE: What was the name of the business?

GK: He had two or three names. First—first it was Derzis and Pappageorge, then it was Greek-American Produce [the two companies merged]. Both of them folded—all of them folded. And then, during—during the—during the Depression he--he was in s—you know, he was in another kind of business, then he went back into produce business and stayed there until--until he retired.

AE: Okay. And then your Uncle Pete, when did he come here?

GK: He bought this place in—the story goes, my uncle Pete used to love to play pinochle.

AE: Pinochle? Okay.

GK: Yeah, so he was working in the sandwich shop—

AE: Um-hmm.

GK: --and that—he had a pretty good—he had a good weekend playing Pinochle, [sound of door opening] and he won three hundred dollars, and he and another man bought this place for six hundred dollars. Back in September of nineteen thirty-nine, I think. And then they had three months lease on it. And then he—then he stayed with it—he stayed with this man until--they were partners until nineteen forty-five, I think. Forty-five or forty-six and he bought his partner out. They--you know, they couldn't hardly get along, so he—one of them had to buy the other one out, so my Uncle Pete bought him out.

AE: Okay.

GK: And a year later he changed the name to Pete's Famous Hot Dogs [Gus believes the original name of the hot dog stand was Louis's Place].

AE: Okay. Well, you can go ahead and make this young lady a hot dog.

GK: [To the customer] Uh, yes ma'am. You want three to—you want three today, don't you? [Recording is stopped for a few minutes]

[Recording begins again with the sound of Gus scraping the grill]

AE: What's the game you play with yourself every day?

GK: Well, I got to clean this grill and put—

KK: [To customer] Seven forty-five.

GK: --I got twenty-five hot dog buns in there, and I'm going to put twenty-five over here. [Hot dogs on the grill] See?

AE: Ah, and keep it even.

GK: And that way, when I get down to about twelve—or ten or twelve—well, I'll start over again.

AE: How many hamburgers do you think you sell from here?

KK: [To customer] One, two, three, four--

GK: I don't sell too many. Sometimes—

AE: I ask

GK: Sometimes, you know—you don't know how many people—

KK: --five, six, seven—

GK: I mean, if they're hamburger eaters, when they come in, well—

KK: [To the interviewer] It messes him up.

GK: --of course I, you know, you don't have to, but I wait on them.

AE: Yeah.

GK: That's nothing you—

KK: [Short laugh]

GK: You know, we specialize in hot dogs here.

AE: Sure.

GK: So therefore we—

AE: Well

GK: --don't sell that many.

[Sound of cash register]

AE: And yesterday you were kind of shy about your sauce, but that's a Birmingham thing.

GK: Tr—kind of shy? What do you mean?

AE: Yeah, about your sauce that goes on the hot dog.

GK: I was shy on it?

AE: Yeah.

GK: What do you mean, I was shy?

AE: You weren't telling me much about it.

GK: Oh.

AE: [Laughs]

GK: Well what do you want to know about it.

AE: I don't know, it just seems a really local tradition and so I wonder—maybe how it came about or what your secret is or—

GK: Well, my—

AE: Miss Kathy was telling me that she and her ex-husband [John Skaran] had the Hot Dog King, and her sauce that she made over there was a little sweeter than yours. [To Kathy] Did I get that right?

GK: Yeah, well see my—

AE: Yeah?

GK: I don't know about hers, but I know my uncle—see back then there was a lot of—my uncle was a bachelor and—and they had a lot of Greek restaurants, and all of them were friends.

AE: Uh-huh.

GK: And this--these guys would—these guys would come by there, and then after they'd close up, well a lot of them would sit back there [points towards the back of the place] and [short pause] and put a case--hot dog case—put a case of hot dogs—empty case on the counter, and they'd open up a fifth of whiskey and sit and drink half the night. And you know, and talk and all that. You know, how they did it. You know. Anyway, and so one of them would say, "You ought to add this, and you ought to subtract that, and you ought to add--" So he, more or less—basically, all of them the same. But you know, these guys—you know, everybody would give, you know, tell them to do this and he ought to—you know—so he came up with a form—you know, with this formula he's got here.

AE: And you're making the same sauce that your Uncle Pete made?

GK: Basically, yes, ma'am.

AE: Yeah.

GK: I might vary it a little bit. Maybe there's a couple of —one or two ingredients that he normally would have put in there, I don't put in there.

AE: Well, it sure is good.

GK: Thank you.

AE: I can say that confidently now that I just had two. [Laughs]

GK: Do you want another one?

AE: No, sir.

GK: Oh, okay.

AE: Thank you though. And when I was standing back there, another one of your customers told me that, um, you had one of the first air conditioners downtown here. Is that true?

GK: Oh, I don't know about that, now.

AE: No?

KK: [Big laugh]

GK: I—I know I did have the—but I—you know, I waited 'til I—I could get one on a—see, my unit's on the roof.

AE: Uh-huh.

GK: See, but a lot of these units, I ain't got any space to put in here because—so I—I waited 'til they perfected it a little bit better before—

CUSTOMER: I'll see you, Kathy.

KK: Bye!

GK: So I told this friend of mine that's in the—

CUSTOMER: Thank you, Gus.

GK: [To customer] Okay, see you. Thank you, hear!

CUSTOMER: All right.

GK: This friend of mine that's in the air condition business, I said, "When you come out with one, let me know." Because there used to be a hot dog stand like this down the street and the guy had a big old unit. It was—it covered all this place up, you know. It—you know, this is for customers. You know—

KK: [To the interviewer] Where'd you park your car today? [Kathy has the door open and is looking down the street.]

GK: --so I got my unit on a—my units on the top—

AE: Uh-huh.

GK: And I got vents that—a vent that comes in and this is central--

KK: [To interviewer again] Where's your car?

AE: I'm down up on the other block.

KK: Okay.

AE: This time.

GK: This is central air.

AE: Yeah.

GK: I got central air, you know.

AE: Yeah.

GK: This other guy had a—these other guys, they put window units but hell, I don't--didn't want that. See they—a window unit, they'll block this thing up [he points to the window up front] and it'd be dark in here. And I'm cooped up in here as it is, you know.

AE: Sure.

GK: So—

AE: So today—just today again while I was—I've been standing here, you had the guy come in who paints the—your sign—

GK: Sign, yeah.

AE: --that's on the glass here. [The painted words on the window above the door.]

GK: Yeah.

AE: And you had another gentleman who bought a hamburger, who has been coming here for twenty years, and another gentleman who came in here just to say, "Hey."

GK: Yeah, that guy there, he—he used to sell me hot dogs.

AE: Yeah?

GK: See, his mother used to work for R.L. Ziegler.

AE: Uh-huh.

GK: And--when he was a kid, and when—when he got of age, he started working for them and—you know, that's the way it is. You know.

[Sound of door opening]

AE: Were you doing anything before you started working here?

GK: Was I doing anything?

AE: Were you working somewhere else?

GK: Yeah, I was working with my daddy over on Morris Avenue, in the produce place.

AE: Oh, okay. Okay.

GK: I was working in the morning, and I—eleven—about eleven o'clock I'd come here and help my uncle through the rush.

AE: Yeah.

GK: And then when my daddy—my uncle Pete had a heart attack and, uh, he told me to come down here and go in to work. And see, back then [sound of cash register] you know—you know, when your parents tell you something, well you didn't—you didn't have to write you a thesis about it.

AE: Yeah.

GK: See?

AE: [Laughs]

GK: You just say, "Okay, that's it."

AE: Well, I just want to ask you one more question and that is—

GK: Ask me more than one, honey.

AE: What is—what is it that you get when you go eat at Niki's West? Because Pete Hontzas told me you go there twice a week. Y'all. You and Miss Kathy.

GK: Yeah, I get vegetables, a piece of fish, something, you know.

AE: Um-hmm.

KK: [Big laugh]

GK: Get two or three vegetables.

AE: Yeah?

GK: Yeah.

CUSTOMER: [Just walking in] Hey, how y'all doing?

AE: [To Gus] Okay, then.

GK: Pete's a pretty good old boy!

AE: Yeah.

GK: All those people are good people.

AE: Yeah, they're real nice.

KK: [To customer] Can I get you something?

GK: His daddy was a good man. I—you know, I didn't, uh—

CUSTOMER: Two specials. [Specials have everything, plus a beef topping]

KK: [To Gus] Two specials Gus.

GK: I didn't socialize with him too much but, you know, he—he's working and I'm working and—but I knew him very well.

[Short pause]

AE: Well, I—I, um [sound of door opening] You've got another rush, so I'm going to let you b—let you get back to work. And you've answered all my questions now—that I can think of—but I might think of more.

GK: All right.

AE: Or I might just come back for a hot dog.

GK: How long you going to come—how long you going to be here?

AE: 'Til Sunday.

GK: Oh, really?

AE: Yes, sir.

GK: Well, what are you doing now? Where are you going now?

AE: Um, I don't know where I'm going now.

KK: [Big laugh]

GK: Is that—are you going away to interview somebody else? [Recording stops to finish project conversation off the record]

**[END]**