



Cindy Sweatt
Irondale, Alabama

Date: January 13, 2020
Location: Golden Rule BBQ, Irondale, AL
Interviewer: Michelle Little
Transcription: Diana Dombrowski
Length: One Hour and Five Minutes
Project: Career Servers

[*BEGIN INTERVIEW*]

[00:00:03.11]

Michelle L.: All right. Today is January the 13, 2020. I am Michelle Little, and I'm here with Cindy Sweatt. We're in Irondale, Alabama, at the Golden Rule Barbecue. This is for the Southern Foodways Alliance project on Career Servers. Cindy, to get us started, could you tell me your full name and when you were born?

[00:00:27.20]

Cindy S.: Okay. Cynthia Delaine Sweatt. I was born in Fort Worth, Texas on June the 30, 1955.

[00:00:37.25]

Michelle L.: All right.

[00:00:37.25]

Cindy S.: I'm the only of five children that were born outside of the state of Alabama, so.

[00:00:40.26]

Michelle L.: All right.

[00:00:42.18]

Cindy S.: We just happened to be living in Texas at the time, that was all.

[00:00:47.02]

Michelle L.: Okay. So, then, what brought you all to Alabama, and how quickly did—

[00:00:52.17]

Cindy S.: We're from Alabama. My parents are from Alabama. They just happened to be living in Texas at the time of my birth, so.

[00:00:56.23]

Michelle L.: Okay.

[00:00:58.17]

Cindy S.: We moved back when I was about three months old or so.

[00:01:00.03]

Michelle L.: Did work take 'em there?

[00:01:03.17]

Cindy S.: I think so, yeah, more or less. Just change of scenery, probably, knowin' my dad.

[Laughter]

[00:01:07.22]

Michelle L.: Right, right. And so then where in Alabama did you—

[00:01:11.00]

Cindy S.: We came back to the Birmingham area.

[00:01:11.24]

Michelle L.: Birmingham area, all right. Which neighborhood or where?

[00:01:17.02]

Cindy S.: Probably the Avondale area, around this area, not far from here. Just down the road about five minutes.

[00:01:22.21]

Michelle L.: Right, right. Yeah. Believe it or not, I've lived in Birmingham now twenty years.

[Laughter] And what did your parents do?

[00:01:33.08]

Cindy S.: Well, when I was really young, my mother was basically a housewife. My dad drove a truck. But then, when I was probably five or so, we moved up to Indiana. Up near Chicago. My dad would work in the steel mills, and then my mother, when she went to work, she would work in the foundries—different foundries. She worked for Rand McNally and a place called Mitchell Glass. Then we would move down here when we'd get homesick, and then we'd move back up there when things would get rough.

[Laughter] So, from the time I was probably five until I was about seventeen and a half, I spent about eight years up there all total.

[00:02:15.04]

Michelle L.: Okay.

[00:02:16.18]

Cindy S.: But it was like up there and back home, and up there and the back home.

[00:02:20.18]

Michelle L.: So, you had to change schools a lot.

[00:02:22.07]

Cindy S.: I was in . . . three schools, four schools, in one school year. Like fourth grade, I think it was. Fifth, third grade. Four schools in third grade.

[00:02:33.29]

Michelle L.: Wow, yeah.

[00:02:37.03]

Cindy S.: [Laughter] I went to several schools over time, yeah. And I had a problem in that, when I would live up there, people would make fun of me for my Southern accent. When I would come home, they'd all make fun of me for my Northern accent, so. [Laughter] People still, to this day, say, "Where are you from? 'Cause you're not originally from here." I've gotten used to that.

[00:02:57.05]

Michelle L.: And you said you had five siblings? Four or five?

[00:03:02.01]

Cindy S.: I have four. I had three younger brothers, and I have an older sister. One of my brothers is deceased.

[00:03:10.07]

Michelle L.: Okay. And what were some fun things you all did together when you were growin' up? Did you all play games and . . . ?

[00:03:17.13]

Cindy S.: Oh, yeah. Well, we just played outside, just runnin' and playin' in the dirt, climbin' trees. Just kids back then. Nowadays, everybody's just lookin' at their phones and stuff. Back then, there was no such thing. Don't come in till it starts gettin' dark. [Laughter] Then they'd still have to holler at us to make us come in, so.

[00:03:38.16]

Michelle L.: Yeah. What did you think, what did you want to be when you were a little girl?

[00:03:42.29]

Cindy S.: I hadn't really—didn't really think about it that much. I was thinkin' maybe be a nurse or something. And I actually had an opportunity, in my early twenties, to go to school to

be a nurse. But with circumstances of having to support myself and one thing or another, I really just—I didn't make it work. It's my fault; I can't blame anybody else but just my lack of determination to do it. But I had a real opportunity to go school and be a nurse. But I just kept bein' a server.

[00:04:18.02]

Michelle L.: So you'd already—and that brings me to my next question, what was your first job?

Was it serving, or . . . ?

[00:04:25.06]

Cindy S.: No, actually. I started workin' when I was probably about twelve, thirteen, fourteen, somewhere around that, workin' at a place called Top Dollar. It was just a little, like a Family Dollar-type store, this little neighborhood thing. I would go in and help 'em straighten up, get ready for inventories and help do inventory and stuff like that, just anything to earn a little money. Then, when I got eighteen—between my junior and senior year—I moved out of my mom's house and moved out on my own. I worked in a office for a little while, at a loan office, and there wasn't enough hours or enough money to survive. So, a friend of mine says, "Oh, I'll get you a job here at Catfish King." I was eighteen, nineteen. It was right across the street from my high school that I went to.

[Laughter]

[00:05:20.01]

Michelle L.: And which high school?

[00:05:21.22]

Cindy S.: Woodlawn High School. It was right across the street from there. That was my first server job. Didn't have a clue what I was doing, but that was my first server job.

[Laughter]

[00:05:34.10]

Michelle L.: Do you remember who kinda taught you the ropes there at Catfish?

[00:05:38.09]

Cindy S.: Well, my friend who helped get me on. She kept a close eye on me and helped me figure it out. It wasn't that hard, though. I mean, it's just like—came natural, pretty much. You know? Just write it where the kitchen can read it. [Laughter] I mean, it was fish and things like that, so—so it wasn't really that hard.

[00:06:04.11]

Michelle L.: Yeah. Is that restaurant still there?

[00:06:04.11]

Cindy S.: No. Actually, no. It's been gone for years and years. I think it's like a lawyer's office now or something along those lines. It's been two or three different things since it was Catfish King.

[00:06:18.11]

Michelle L.: How big of a place was it?

[00:06:20.23]

Cindy S.: Um, I would say it's . . . it was probably about as big as this place before they added the big dining room. It's just . . . they had an upper stairs and then down in here. Yeah, it was about this size; the size of this restaurant, which is . . . it was about a hundred-seater or something like that, maybe a little more.

[00:06:52.20]

Michelle L.: Yeah. Everybody had their own section?

[00:06:54.16]

Cindy S.: Yes, um-hm.

[00:06:56.26]

Michelle L.: Were most of the—was it mostly waitresses? Or were there some men that worked there?

[00:07:01.12]

Cindy S.: No. Back then, you're talkin' about the mid-[19]70s, so it was mostly women there. You didn't see many men in this business or in this town, so.

[00:07:12.13]

Michelle L.: Yeah. Do you remember any memorable moments or stories from that place?

[00:07:18.04]

Cindy S.: Just remember tryin' to learn the ropes, basically. That was . . . it was so long ago, till.
I was goin' to school still.

[00:07:30.05]

Michelle L.: Okay. So you were still in high school.

[00:07:34.10]

Cindy S.: Yeah. I was still in high school and tryin' to work, too. So, it was . . . it was a little touch-and-go there. A lot of things I don't remember. A lot of people will say, "You remember so-and-so happened in school?" I'm like, "Not really." [Laughter] I had so much goin' on that senior year, not a lot really registers anymore. Except the day I graduated, thank you, Lord. [Laughter]

[00:08:02.28]

Michelle L.: Right.

[00:08:03.15]

Cindy S.: That's a clear memory. [Laughter] Oh, go ahead, I'm sorry.

[00:08:08.13]

Michelle L.: No, I'm sorry. You go ahead.

[00:08:10.28]

Cindy S.: Right after that, I went to a place called Pit Grill.

[00:08:14.00]

Michelle L.: Pit Grill?

[00:08:16.25]

Cindy S.: Uh-huh. It was kinda like a . . . cross between a Denny's and Waffle House. It's just a little bit nicer than one and not as laid out as the other, so. I worked there, I was actually workin' there when I graduated. Then I went to another little place called—similar to the Waffle House—called Huddle House. I worked there for just a short while. Then the ladies at—some of my customers that came in—they worked at the Red Lobster when it was up here at Eastwood Mall.

[00:08:50.10]

Michelle L.: Right.

[00:08:51.01]

Cindy S.: And they recommended I come up there. I went up there and put my application in, and that's where I first got my actual formal server training course, 'cause I had to go

through, like, a two-week training program there. That was actual just the first actual, "This is how things are supposed to be done" type of training that I had had, and it was very, very good. They were very good people, very nice. Then I got to where I was tending bar some, when I became of age. Then, eventually moved on to working in nightclubs from there. I was in nightclubs from then until probably about 1984, so this was from [19]70—I'd say [19]75, [19]76 up until about [19]84 I was working in nightclubs. 'Cause I graduated high school in [19]74. I'd say [19]76, I probably started working in nightclubs, bartending, cocktail waitressing, whatever. Then I had my son in August of [19]83, and when he was about six months old, I decided I needed to get out of clubs. It was just . . . the working all night and trying to take care of him and all, it was just more than . . . that, and I had a disagreement with the owner. And being who I am . . . [Laughter] He told me, "I will fire you." I said, "You don't have to! I quit!" [Laughter] So . . . you don't threaten me with my job. I don't handle that very well. There are other places to work. Only thing of it is, I had been in nightclubs so long, a lot of people wouldn't hire me.

[00:10:45.28]

Michelle L.: Oh.

[00:10:46.01]

Cindy S.: 'Cause they figure, "She's used to that nightclub money; she won't stay." So, the only place I could really get a job was at the Omelet Shop right down here, when it was down here at Eastwood. I was a 2-to-10 cook for about three nights, and then they made me a

waitress. I was there for a little over a year, until some of the waitresses from the Golden Rule come in and say, "Don't tell anybody, but we have a girl turned in her notice. You need to get down there and put your application in." "Okay." Twenty minutes later—"Don't tell anybody." I had six people come in and go, "Don't tell anybody." [Laughter] So, it was . . . [Laughter] So, I came down the next day and put my application in. I spoke to Sammy and he said, "Why are you wantin' to leave the Omelet Shop?" He knew me 'cause he would come in and eat breakfast there. I said, "Well, to be honest with you, just the hours. I have a young son that I have to support, and never knowing what hours I'm going to be working, I mean, if they were short, they expect you to stay—I've been workin' sixteen hours a day, sometimes more. When you have a small child, you can't do that. I need to know when I'm gonna be workin' and be at home at night with my son." He hired me; I turned in my notice down there, and I worked out my notice and came here. That was April the 26, 1985. I remember that because I came to work on the Monday before the Talladega races was the next Sunday, which was always the first Sunday of May. I didn't work that weekend because it used to be chaos around here during the race weekends, because there was not that much between there and here back then. So, it was kinda chaotic here, so he didn't want me getting discouraged. Workin' nightclubs, this was not gonna scare me. [Laughter] Trust me. But anyway, I've been here since.

[00:12:59.28]

Michelle L.: Wow. And goin' back to you, you were mentionin' the training you did at Red Lobster. Was that maybe the first time you thought about this as a career, having that formal training?

[00:13:14.11]

Cindy S.: Well, no, not really. I never really thought about it. This is what I did. You know?

Then . . . I enjoy, I enjoy waitin' on people. Not all the times, but most of the time.

[Laughter] I've just never, it never really was a thought about, "This is my career. This is what I'm gonna do." This is just what I've always done. You know? So, I don't, no, I never really gave it much thought about that. But now, I am the server, and I have been my whole life. Say, "Well, don't you want to do something else?" "Go back to school, is that what you're talking about?" [Laughter] No, thank you anyway. [Laughter] I'm getting my Social Security now. What do you think? [Laughter] Maybe when I finally retire I'll go, just for funsies or somethin'. No, this, I'm gonna do this as long as I'm able, and then just take it easy.

[00:14:20.02]

Michelle L.: Yeah. And you said, after you left Red Lobster, you bartended a little?

[00:14:28.09]

Cindy S.: Um-hm. I bartended and cocktail waitressed and bartended. First place I went to was a place called . . . what was it called? The Bonfire.

[00:14:39.29]

Michelle L.: Okay, where was—

[00:14:40.23]

Cindy S.: It was down on 20th Street, across from what used to be the Parliament Hotel. It's not there anymore. And across from what used to be Michael's and all that down there. It was in the medical center. I was there, and then I went to Sammy's Go-go. I ran the floor there for a while, and then I went to a place called the Cabaret, which was just down the street from Sammy's. I worked there for a while, and then Sammy came and asked me to come and open up his store on Valley Avenue for him. So, I went over there and ran the night shift over there for a while. Then I moved back down to the 3rd Avenue West store, and then circumstances . . . he had someone else he wanted to come in and start doing my job. So, I told him, "Fine." He knew that he and I wouldn't gee and haw, that the girls would still come to me when they had a problem or they needed somethin'. So, I had to go. So, needless to say, that didn't end well. But I did tell him before I left, I said, "Two months, you'll be comin' down lookin' for me again." Six weeks later, after he had had to replace two large plate-glass mirrors from the girls getting into a fight, he came to us, "Please come back." I'm goin', "Not in your lifetime." [Laughter] I went back down there to Cabaret, and I worked there for quite a while. That's when I had the opportunity to become a nurse, so I was tryin' to go to school and get out of clubs. Like I said, living on my own and having to support myself, it just wasn't gonna work. I mean, I might could have tried harder, but . . . I'm like, "Eh." You know? I don't suffer well. [Laughter] I didn't want to live with my mother and I didn't want to live with my grandmother, and you know, just . . . I just went back to work. I was a waitress at a place up the road here called Bank's Lounge. I was there for a little over a year, I think, and then we went back down to where the Cabaret was, but it was called something else then. From there, I left

clubs. I think it was probably January of [19]84, and I worked at the Omelet Shop from, I think, March of [19]84 to April of [19]85. Then I came here.

[00:17:22.06]

Michelle L.: I'm sure you have a lot of stories from the bar and club years.

[00:17:27.18]

Cindy S.: Oh, oh. [Laughter] People are . . . they're . . . they're something when they're out drinking. Yes, they are. We used to have these—once place I worked was the Rock and Roll Bar. Needless to say, we would have what back then what they called a beer bust. That's not long after they came out with draft beer here in the Birmingham area, and you paid so much to come in, and you could drink as much draft beer as you wanted between this hour and those, for a two-hour period. Idiots everywhere.

[00:18:06.20]

Michelle L.: Wow.

[00:18:08.29]

Cindy S.: It was lots of fun.

[00:18:11.16]

Michelle L.: Ooh.

[00:18:11.16]

Cindy S.: Yeah. People would say again, what was so funny is people called me the bouncer. I said, I wasn't the bouncer, I just wasn't gonna let people fight on my floor, because people ran off your business. You weren't makin' no money if you did that. They said, "Yeah, but you threw people out." I said, "Yeah, that was a perk. That wasn't part of my job, it was just somethin' I got to do." [Laughter] My family still kids me about that. I say, "I keep tryin' to tell y'all, that was not my job; that was a perk." They just go . . . [Laughter] Yeah.

[00:18:44.02]

Michelle L.: So, how long did it take before that, the beer bust idea, changed? How long did that go on for? [Laughter]

[00:18:53.08]

Cindy S.: That lasted for a year or so, I think. We weren't the only ones doing it at the time, but yeah, after a while, it got to where it was just . . . it was terrible. Some of these idiots didn't know how to drink to begin with, and they'd be getting sick. Then, of course, my waitress would be goin', "I can't do this." I'm like, "Wonderful, thank you." I get to take care of everything on the floor, so, "Just go on, I'll handle it. I'll handle it." Bein' the head waitress, that's what you do; you handle it.

[00:19:28.24]

Michelle L.: So you've had to learn to serve a lot of different types—

[00:19:31.18]

Cindy S.: Oh, yes.

[00:19:33.06]

Michelle L.: Red Lobster to cocktail waitress, I mean . . .

[00:19:39.04]

Cindy S.: Yeah. Red Lobster probably taught me more about bartending and stuff, because people would come in there and they would order dinner cocktails. So, you had to know the recipes and stuff. I learned a lot there. I learned a lot from Red Lobster, just procedures and just the way things are supposed to be done. Then the bartending part of it, too. It was fun. It's all been fun, I mean, I've enjoyed it or I wouldn't have been kept doin' it. But it's . . . some parts are more interesting than others, and some parts are just plain crazy. Some of it is just, you're like, "Did I really do that? Did I really do that?" [Laughter] Yeah, and a lot of people think it's funny—my family thinks it's funny because they're, "Oh, Cindy this, Cindy that." I'm like, "If y'all only knew. Y'all don't know the half of it." [Laughter] But I had fun. I have to say I did. I've had fun.

[00:20:41.22]

Michelle L.: Were there any other—I mean, were there some women bartenders in those years? I mean, that you were kinda able to learn from—

[00:20:47.25]

Cindy S.: Oh, yeah. I've known several of them over the years that were the business for years and years and years. You know. [Coughs] Pardon me. That were, yeah, that was their career, that was what they did. You know? And they did it as long as they were able to. Oh, yeah. Back then, it was nothin' unusual to find someone who'd been in the business ten, fifteen, twenty years or so. Nowadays, not so much, because . . . it's a different breed of people. Things are different now than they used to. It's more dangerous, for one thing, 'cause people are just . . . they don't think and act like they used to. Used to they had a little bit of a decency and a little bit of common sense, most of them would, but nowadays, they just wanna get silly. There's a place over here that I've gone to a couple'a times, and they fixed us one drink in a gallon pickle jug. I'll just look at these people sittin' here drinkin', "Well . . ." I'm like, "You love a hangover, huh?" [Laughter] I don't understand, I mean, I'm not real big on power drinkers. I've ran across a few of those before, so . . .

[00:22:07.04]

Michelle L.: Yeah. So, how else have you seen the customers change in the years you've been in the industry?

[00:22:14.17]

Cindy S.: Oh, just here, it's totally different. You know, people used to . . . we've always had those that come in that their little darlins did no wrong. No, not really . . . But . . . [Laughter] Your children are only cute to you, honey, I'm sorry. [Laughter] You know,

and they have been allowed to just run and go as they please. But for the most part, people were—they made their children behave and sit. Now, it's everybody's—even the one- and two-year-olds are sitting here, playing with phones and tablets and stuff. I'm like, "Really?" I mean . . . when my children were young—'course, we didn't have all that, this has only come about in the last, what, ten, fifteen, twenty years? But it's like they don't interact, and they hand this to their children to entertain their children so they don't have to deal with 'em. I'm like, I don't get it. That can't possibly be good for a child's brain to be that active all the time. I wouldn't think so.

[00:23:31.16]

Michelle L.: Right. Is it tougher on you as a server, also, once people started having—

[00:23:40.21]

Cindy S.: There are some that are just really polite with it. "Hold on, I'll be right back with you," and then they'll . . . but then there's others like, "You're not important and I am an important person talking on the phone." I'm like, "O-kay." I had one gentleman, there were like five or six of them in this group, and this, it's like I didn't exist. This man would not tell me what he wanted to drink, nothing. He was on a phone call. So, I went around to the other guys' and got their drinks. When I came back, I got all the other guys' orders. I went, I come back with their food. He gets off the phone, he goes, "Well, where's mine?" I say, "You were on a very important phone call. Are you ready to order now?" I thought the other guys were gonna crack up, but they subdued themselves. But it was everything they could do to keep from laughing, 'cause they knew exactly what I had

done. There was no question in their minds that I had just totally ignored him just like he was totally ignoring me. I'm over here. But for the most part, now, yeah, people had gotten to where they were really bad, but for the most part, they'll say, "Can you wait just a minute?" I'll say, "No problem. I'll come back." But if you're gonna sit there and totally ignore me, I'm gonna walk away. When I see you're through with your phone call, I'll come back. Because it's just terribly rude, I think, personally.

[00:25:18.05]

Michelle L.: Yeah. What about tipping? Has that changed over the years?

[00:25:23.25]

Cindy S.: More people are aware of how important it is to tip now than they used to be, I think.

A lot of people thought that we were getting paid regular minimum wage, at least, and whatever. Of course, when I worked in clubs, it was just—even . . . I've always made good money at it. But a lot of people really actually thought that waitresses made the going rate for the minimum wage, whatever it was, \$7 and a quarter of something now, \$8 or something. No. We get a whole \$2.20 an hour here, just 'cause they like rounded numbers. [Laughter]

[00:26:10.01]

Michelle L.: Right, it's just easier.

[00:26:11.03]

Cindy S.: It's \$2.13 an hour. When I started out, it was \$0.89 an hour.

[00:26:16.19]

Michelle L.: Okay.

[00:26:18.06]

Cindy S.: So, yeah. They didn't cut out taxes for all your tips, they didn't cut out Social Security.

That I've found . . . has probably affected me as I've gotten older, especially when I worked in clubs and stuff, because I didn't really start paying a lot into Social Security until I got into my twenties. Even though I had been working since I was sixteen, eighteen, whatever, you know. I think it probably made a big, significant difference. And I think the federal government finally caught on that we were makin' a killin' out here and demanded that they started cuttin' us tips and stuff. Which is okay, that's fine. I'm glad they do, because at least I have something paid into Social Security and income taxes. I don't have to pay every year and so on, so it's . . .

[00:27:17.13]

Michelle L.: What about when people—people used to have cash on 'em and they paid with cash, and now it's more card, do you feel like that changed anything as far as . . . ?

[00:27:27.03]

Cindy S.: Well, with parties and stuff especially, I think yes. We didn't have credit cards here for the longest time. Only in the last less than ten years have we started usin' credit cards. I

mean, less than ten years, I would have to say. We were one of the last ones that used cash only. With the credit cards, people tend to tip a little better sometimes, and especially if it's a large group and it's a large ticket. It's easier to write in a little extra in there than it is to—because when you're lookin' at the cash, you're goin', "Hmm . . ." So, yeah. [Laughter] I went out to lunch with a friend of mine and my brother-in-law's sister just last week. I paid for all of us, and my sister says, "I was gonna get the tip." I was, "Don't worry about it," and I threw the tip on the table. My brother-in-law's goin' . . . "You're gonna tip her that much?" I'm goin' " . . . Yes." My sister goes, "Steve. She's a waitress. They tend to tip a little more." [Laughter] Yeah, for like, forty years. So, you know. But it wasn't that much over, but he was a little surprised. [Laughter] I mean, you know, I understand. Believe me. I know what this is about here, so, yeah.

[00:29:01.07]

Michelle L.: I'm tryin' to think about maybe what else has changed with customers. What about when people quit smoking inside as much? Did that kinda—?

[00:29:13.00]

Cindy S.: Oh, yeah. We had a lot of people that were very happy when we banned smoking, some that were very, very upset. But we never really had a smoking or a non-smoking section, and in here with a open pit, permeates with smoke already. [Laughter]

[00:29:32.23]

Michelle L.: Right, right.

[00:29:32.23]

Cindy S.: Didn't seem to make a lotta sense. But yeah, we had a few that were pretty upset about that. For the most part, it's been okay, because it's everywhere. It's not just us.

[00:29:44.07]

Michelle L.: Right, right.

[00:29:46.00]

Cindy S.: If we had been the only business that had done that, then it might have really affected us, but everybody had to do it. So . . .

[00:29:52.00]

Michelle L.: Yeah. I just always wondered if people started lingering a little less at the end of meal, maybe?

[00:29:59.02]

Cindy S.: Yeah, well, several of 'em will just get up and go outside and smoke and come back. Or yes, they'll be ready to go faster because they want to go smoke a cigarette. Yeah, here, we've always done a pretty fast turnover anyway. It's pretty much eat and leave for the most part. We do have some that sit around and talk for a long time and some that linger and some that visit or whatever. That's one thing, but for the most part, our people eat and leave. So.

[00:30:32.17]

Michelle L.: So, do you have some regular customers here at—? [Laughter]

[00:30:37.07]

Cindy S.: Oh, I know everybody. Some of my customers bring in their grandchildren now. You know, I knew this one couple when they were dating and then I knew their babies and then I knew their grandchildren. [Laughter] Now the grandchildren are getting grown. It's, oh, yeah. I look at it, I'm like, "Golly, I can't believe how old they've gotten. Oh!" [Laughter] Not me.

[00:31:11.13]

Michelle L.: No!

[00:31:11.16]

Cindy S.: I'm doing great. [Laughter] But yeah, I've known these people here. Yeah. And I've lost so many of my customers over the years, it just breaks my heart because I have some older people that I've lost over the years. Yeah, I know everybody. It's funny, because about four years ago, my son and I, my family had a family vacation in Florida. My son and I went, youngest one, and we were at this motel my whole family was stayin' at. These people come up and they said, "Cindy, what are you doin' here?" I said, "Probably the same thing you're doin' here." My son said, "Mom, please don't tell me you know who that is."

[00:32:07.01]

Michelle L.: Oh, how funny.

[00:32:07.01]

Cindy S.: It was one of my regular customers. [Laughter] Stayin' at the same hotel we were stayin' at.

[00:32:11.21]

Michelle L.: Small world.

[00:32:15.15]

Cindy S.: Everywhere we go. The lady I live with and take care of, we go to the doctor's office, and I see people I know, customers. I see doctors and whoever, and different people. That's everywhere we go. We can't go anywhere that I don't know somebody. She's like, "You know everybody in the world?" I said, "No, just my little corner of it." [Laughter] From here to maybe Pell City and back this way. [Laughter]

[00:32:47.16]

Michelle L.: Yeah, I was gonna ask, is it mostly locals from Irondale?

[00:32:51.05]

Cindy S.: Trussville, Pell City, we have quite a few that come all the way from Pell City. All around the Birmingham area; Mountain Brook, a lot of Mountain Brook people. Yeah. I've helped open some of the other stores around, and it's funny, because I've gone to Arab and I've gone to Tuscaloosa and I went to Helena and I went to Calera and I went to Pell City, and people could be, "What are you doing here?" "I'm trying to help get them open, but they're not cooperating!" [Laughter] "They're not wantin' to be Irondale, they're wanting to be their store, and I'm wantin' them to be Irondale, which is what they're supposed to be after . . ." You know. I don't think I ever went anywhere to train that I didn't run into at least several people that I knew.

[00:33:38.23]

Michelle L.: How bout that.

[00:33:40.12]

Cindy S.: It's strange. It was funny because people would come in and they'd hug me and stuff, and they're goin'—the people that I was training would be goin', "How do you know them?" I'm like, "Irondale? Everybody comes to Irondale."

[00:33:53.18]

Michelle L.: It's the center.

[00:33:54.29]

Cindy S.: I mean, it's the original, original Golden Rule.

[00:33:59.29]

Michelle L.: Yeah, I've noticed some of the booths have names and—

[00:34:02.28]

Cindy S.: That's a funny story. That's a funny story.

[00:34:08.02]

Michelle L.: Yeah. Miller Gorrie Booth is the name of this booth.

[00:34:09.08]

Cindy S.: Yeah, he's one of the ones that owns Brasfield and Gorrie Construction Company, and he's one of them. But it's funny, because it started in one of my regular customers, Mr. Smith. His daughter wanted to give him something different for Father's Day, and so she said, "Do you mind if I get a plaque and put it on his favorite booth?" "No, no problem." She came in and put a little ribbon up, had a little ribbon-cuttin' ceremony. It was so cute on Father's Day morning, it was just the cutest thing. Well, and he has his name on his booth. This other person comes in, goin', "Well, why do they have a booth and I don't have a booth?" "Well, they did it. We didn't." "Well, what if I get a plaque and I put it up?" "Sure, no problem!" Next thing you know, this booth had one, and that booth had one, and this booth had one, and that booth over yonder has one. [Laughter] Everybody wanted a booth. One guy says, "Aw, to heck with it. I'm gonna get me one to put it over the dining room. That whole room is mine." [Laughter]

[00:35:10.28]

Michelle L.: Did he do it?

[00:35:14.15]

Cindy S.: It started out as just a little jealousy because somebody else had a name on a booth and they didn't. "And I've been coming here for years and years!" [Laughter] I said, "I've been working here for years and years, and I don't have one, either." [Laughter] Yeah, it's been fun. We've had some crazy things happen here. We've had an employee pass away behind the counter, I mean, just fell down. Had his heart quit. And we had a customer that passed away over there. Just . . . you know, strange stuff. But that could happen anywhere. It's just, over the years, it's been one thing or another. I'm still here, almost thirty-five years later.

[00:36:13.16]

Michelle L.: [Laughter] Right. So, you've mentioned you've helped train some of the other locations that have opened.

[00:36:20.00]

Cindy S.: Yes, um-hm.

[00:36:20.00]

Michelle L.: Which is, and how many, would you say have opened since—

[00:36:24.00]

Cindy S.: Well, there are some of 'em aren't around anymore. The one in Tuscaloosa's not, and the one in Calera is not. Helena's still around. Pell City's still around. I think Arab's still around, but I'm not sure. Oh, there was another one. I can't remember. But yeah, there's two or three of 'em that are still around, so.

[00:36:50.06]

Michelle L.: So, when you go in and train the new location, what is it like to communicate what the culture of this place to—

[00:37:00.17]

Cindy S.: Well, the first time we do it, a lot of them we don't use what they call the point of service machines here. They've tried to set 'em up with the computers, but they said, "That'll slow y'all down. The way y'all do it, it would slow y'all down."

[00:37:12.02]

Michelle L.: And for anyone that doesn't know what a point of service machine is, could you—

[00:37:14.13]

Cindy S.: Point of service is the computers where you go in, the waitress takes it, and it just goes in and she orders it on the computer. It goes to the kitchen. Then they can do the computer read-out thing. Well, we don't do that here. We write out our tickets here.

[00:37:28.23]

Michelle L.: All right.

[00:37:30.22]

Cindy S.: But we had to go in and train the computer people. They said, "Well, this is the screen." We're like, "That's not gonna work, 'cause you have to have some way to put in whether they want their meat sliced or chopped or inside or outside or half-and-half, or if they want slaw on their sandwich or if they want this or if they want that. That's not gonna work." So, we basically had to go in and completely re-write their computer program thing for the machines. Anything we found that wasn't quite right, they had to go in and adjust it and stuff. So, the training crews basically set up the whole point of service machines in the other stores, because they didn't have a clue about barbecue. [Laughter] Now, they had some other stores that were selling steaks and stuff, then they had it where you could order your steak how you wanted, but the barbecue—no, baby, it's called Golden Rule Barbecue, and that's our product. We have to be very specific about our product. Believe me, you have to be very specific about this product, because if you just take it for granted that somebody's gonna want it a certain way and you order it and you bring it out—"Oh, no. I wanted it so-and-so." Believe me, I learned very fast to ask. Very fast to ask 'em, and that's one thing I always stress when I'm tryin' to train a new server is, "Ask all the questions." Because if you don't, you're gonna be totin' it back. Trust me. So.

[00:39:09.02]

Michelle L.: And can you walk me through what a day is like for you here? I mean, you get here. What do you do?

[00:39:17.04]

Cindy S.: Well, you come here, and you clock in. Depends on what station you're working.

[00:39:26.04]

Michelle L.: Right.

[00:39:27.17]

Cindy S.: Now, over here, there are only two workers. On the big side, there's three. Each girl has a station, and each station has a sidework that they do; like the front does tea and gets the bread and whatever. The center station does the salad dressings and the sauces and fillin' the sauces and ketchup bottles and sets them out, and cuts lemons. The wall station does all the silverware and pulls all the stock, as in cups, lids, straws, Sweet 'n Low, Splenda, anything like that that you might need during the day. Over here, basically, you had the one station does tea and fills the bread warmer. Then the other person does the silverware, does the tea, also cuts the lemons. And the other one does the silverware and does the sauces and ketchups over here, but it's a lot easier, 'cause it's less than half the work over here than it is over there. Because it's less than half as big as that side over there is, so. It takes about an hour to get everything ready to go. Then, when you open up—well, around here, honey, if they pull up and want to come in, Sammy'll unlock the door. I mean, "They want somethin', let 'em in!" "Okay, boss." Got nothin' to feed 'em,

but they can come on in. [Laughter] Like I say, we've been here so long that we've known most, 99% of the people that walk through the door. Very rarely do we not know at least part of the party that's comin' in, I mean, you know. Occasionally, we'll get some that they've heard about the place and they want to try it, and you'll have to go through the spiel of how things work, how our side orders are, like fresh-cut potatoes and sweet baked bean and this, that and the other, marinated slaw and so forth. You can get your meat sliced, chopped, pulled, inside-outside. What I love is they always ask me, "What's your favorite?" [Laughter] "Burger King." [Laughter] No! I'm not for real, don't pay any attention to me. I usually recommend what we call our Number One Sandwich Combination, which is our Number One Sandwich with two ribs and two side orders. That way, you get to try the pork and the ribs, and those are our two specialty products, in my opinion. So, that's always my favorite that I recommend to my customers. So, it's just . . . then you take care of 'em. Every once in a while, you get some that are just not going to cooperate and they're going to be ugly to you. Those are the ones you just keep smiling at. Say, "Little do you know, I would love to take and choke you, but I'm not going to, 'cause the boss frowns on it." [Laughter] You have to be nice. It works most of the time. I have gotten a lot better as I've gotten older, in that I have a filter better than I used to. I think that was kind of a carryover from when I worked in clubs, used to what came through my head came out my mouth back then. As I've gotten to where I'm working in food and not with crazy drunk people—not all of 'em, anyway—I've had to learn to kind of stop 'em. [Mumbles] [Laughter] [Mumbles] But I have, on occasion, slipped. When one man was like, "Be a nice restaurant if we could get some tea." And he'd had two glasses already. Said, "Yeah, it'd be nice if you were the only asshole in here, but you're

not." [Laughter] And I'm goin', "Oh, Sammy's gonna kill me for that one." Definitely the guy took it in stride, because his buddy's goin', "You asked for that one." But we're good buddies now. The man's now, he comes in, he looks for me, him and his family and his grandson.

[00:44:08.17]

Michelle L.: Oh, my word.

[00:44:10.08]

Cindy S.: Yeah, they look for me now, yeah.

[00:44:12.02]

Michelle L.: One of your regulars now. [Laughter]

[00:44:13.03]

Cindy S.: Yeah. Waited on him yesterday. He's like, "Where are you sittin', where do you want me to sit?" Oh, yeah. I mean, sometimes it works that way. You let people know where you stand and that you're not going to take a lot, and they appreciate it. I had one customers that comes in here, oh, every other waitress in this building cannot stand this man. "I refuse to wait on him!" I said, "What's y'all's problem? He's not a bear, he ain't gonna bite you. If he do, bite him back." [Laughter] His wife loves me, because when he starts gettin' that cutesy with me, and he just does it to get a reaction, and I know that. I quit reacting a long time ago. Now, when he says something ugly to me, I just say

something ugly back. His wife goes, "I just love you." They sit with me every time, because I don't take anything and he appreciates that. [Laughter] It's weird. I mean, you have some that are like that, though.

[00:45:12.17]

Michelle L.: Yeah. What do you think gave you your tough skin to—

[00:45:19.05]

Cindy S.: Oh, that was growing up. My parents separated and divorced when I was younger, and I have an older sister who wasn't . . . big in stature and one might say strong emotionally back then. And three younger brothers. And I protected them, took care of them. Then, when I got out into the world, it was, "No, you're not going to run over me. I'm not gonna ignore it." And being my size helps some, too. When you're 5'10" and [mumbles] pounds, people tend to— [Laughter] People tend to think twice before they mess with you. Then, when I worked in clubs, I always wore very, very high heels, which put me a little over six foot. Almost nobody messes with you when they're looking up at you or looking eye-to-eye with you, so. It was just a facade that you put on and you carry it on, because it's . . . it works. [Laughter] What can you say? Had a man one time in here, he was drunk and he was aggravatin' my coworker. "Cindy, do something with him! I'm not going back over there!" So, I went by the table. He said, "Hey, good-lookin'." I said, I knew he was drunk because I'd been here nine hours and I knew what I looked like. I said, "Can I help you, sir?" He goes, "Hey, what're you doin' when you get off?" I said, "I'm gonna go get my son, I'm gonna go home." He goes, "What say me and you go have a drink when you

get off?" I said, "Well, to be perfectly honest with you, I don't think my husband would appreciate it, and I know it would piss my boyfriend off." [Laughter] And he stopped and he blinked and he looked at me. Couple minutes later, he decided it was time to leave. [Laughter] He wasn't gettin' anywhere here. [Laughter]

[00:47:16.13]

Michelle L.: Oh, man.

[00:47:20.13]

Cindy S.: You have to be quick. You can't let people get the upper hand sometimes; you have to think on your feet. And you can put people in their place and do it nicely, so. [Laughter] I told you. [Laughter] This is not gonna be your typical interview.

[00:47:43.02]

Michelle L.: No. I love it, I love it. What's your favorite thing about the job?

[00:47:50.02]

Cindy S.: The people I have met over the years. People I've worked with. I have a very dear friend that's living in Texas now, and we worked together for a long time here, and I miss her terribly, I do. There where she's at, because she had several family tragedies over the years, and she needed a change of scenery. It's been very good for her, and I'm very happy for her in that, but I miss her so much. Then I have another lady that worked here for over twenty years, and she left about two years or so ago, maybe three. I miss her a

lot, too. There were people—they didn't stress me. I mean, if I was upset, I got mad, if I said somethin', they didn't take it personally, they just knew it was part of the . . . chaos.

[00:48:45.15]

Michelle L.: Right.

[00:48:47.05]

Cindy S.: It was easy to work with 'em. My customers, oh, there's so many of them, it's . . . I know them, I know their children, and they know my children. 'Cause we lived in this area and then we lived out in Leeds, and so many of the people that lived in Leeds come in here and they, "How are the boys doin'?" You know, 'cause they knew my children from school and whatever. Yeah, it's family. It's hard to imagine not walkin' in here just about most days, you know what I mean? I try to dream of that day, but . . . [Laughter] It won't be anytime soon unless I win the lottery or somethin'. I don't see Steve Harvey comin' to visit me from Publishers Clearing House anytime soon, but . . . [Laughter] Other than that, I'll stick around.

[00:49:46.27]

Michelle L.: And then what's your least favorite thing about the job?

[00:49:49.07]

Cindy S.: The stress levels sometimes. People that want . . . that don't want to do their job; they're not proud of their job. They have no self-pride, I mean, they have no pride in their

job. They're here to get their money, and to heck with it. Well, this place is an institution. This place has been around my whole life, even before I was—since 1891, this place has been around this area. This place has been around my whole life. I've known of Golden Rule my whole life. And this place is like an institution. People that come in here expect a certain . . . quality, I guess. And a certain pride; people have pride in their work. There's so much that's not there anymore, you know? Me give me mine, I'm here to make my dollar, and I'm outta here. That's just really disappointing, disheartening sometimes. Like I say, I've been here so long, and I've known the place my whole life. It's just like an institution. It's like a landmark. People, it's like they don't appreciate it, like a lot of the people don't appreciate the people that come in here. Back in the day, we were surrounded by businesses. I mean, this place would be packed out every single day. Well, over the years, Irondale has gone down. We've lost several big businesses around this area, and people that come here, come here. They don't just say, "Hey, this right here—close. Let's go." They make a concerted effort to come here. It's like they don't really appreciate that. And I do, because I know. I lived in this area. I lived all around here. And I know what businesses are here and what's not anymore. These people aren't just—I know lawyers, and actually, they're a little upset because I haven't been working on the big side the last few Fridays when they've come in. [Laughter] They ask me, what did I do to get banished over here to the short side? Said, "I don't know. I got old, I guess." [Laughter] "Who do we need to protest to? We need you back over yonder." And they come all the way from downtown Birmingham every Friday. Anywhere from four to eight of 'em, every Friday. To just be here. Eat here. That's sayin' a lot. When you have customers that are that dedicated, that loyal, you have to appreciate that.

[00:52:54.26]

Michelle L.: Do you think that's something you've seen change in servers over the years, or do you think that's something you're kinda born with? The way you work, the way you look at it. Do you feel like you've always had that attitude, or do you think it's somethin' . . . changed over generations, the way people look at the job.

[00:53:19.20]

Cindy S.: Yeah. The ones that get in this business and stay in this business have a server's heart. Whether it's as a food server or in some other field, nursing or whatever, you have to have a server's heart for certain fields. You have to genuinely like people. And if you're not comfortable talkin' to people or bein' around people or don't like—this is not the business for you, period. But if you genuinely like people, I mean there's nothin' better. Because I have people come in here, and they come in here and they look for me and they hug me. They inquire about how I am. If I'm not here, they worry about me. It matters to me, because I'm the same way with them, though. If I don't see them for a while, I'll worry about them, because it's more of—they're not just my customers. They're my friends and my acquaintances; people I know, I've known and are part of my life. So, I mean, if you don't like people this is not the business for you. And if you don't like payin' attention to the details and dealing with people even at their worst, if you can't deal with 'em at their worst, then you don't want to be here. 'Cause eventually, even the nice ones are gonna have a bad day, and you just have to kind of go along with it. But if you don't . . . if you don't have a server's heart and you don't really like people, this is not the

business for you. So many people now, it's just a means to an end. It's just a way to make money, and anybody that says this is easy money is out of their tree-lovin' mind.

[Laughter] This is not easy money. This is hard work right here. My advice to anybody that wants to get into this business: get you some good support hose. [Laughter] 'Cause if you don't when you get older, you're gonna be regrettin' it. The legs get the worst of the wear. Wear good shoes and get you some support hose. If you really want to do this business, or anywhere you're on your feet like this, take care of your body. Because getting old is not as fun as they make it sound. [Laughter]

[00:56:04.06]

Michelle L.: Yeah. I mean, 'cause what time do you get here every day?

[00:56:07.06]

Cindy S.: I got here this morning a little before 10. I was supposed to be in here at 9:30 and work on this side, but we had a lady that was out sick. So, they brought in another girl to work over here and put me on the big side today. But that's okay, 'cause I got to see a lot of my customers I hadn't seen in a while over there. But I can't wait to get back over here, 'cause it's not as hard. It's so much easier over here; so much less stressful.

[00:56:34.09]

Michelle L.: So y'all kind of rotate the stations?

[00:56:37.26]

Cindy S.: Yeah, yeah. I've just only started workin' on this side in the last few months or so. I've always been over there, since the very first day it opened back in 1987. It opened Labor Day, 1987. I was over there the very first day it opened. I had been workin' over there every since, up until the last couple months, when I've worked over here more.

[00:57:00.29]

Michelle L.: So, did that—I'm lookin' over there to the right. Did that almost double the size?

[00:57:05.21]

Cindy S.: Um-hm. That's doubled the seating capacity of the whole building.

[00:57:12.07]

Michelle L.: Wow.

[00:57:12.07]

Cindy S.: 'Cause before, it was just booths. There were these booths, and then two little tables on both sides. Then when they opened that, they put fifteen four-tops and three six-tops over there. So, that doubled the capacity, seatin' capacity of the whole building over there. And the very first day, it was crazy. We were not ready. [Laughter] But we figured it out real fast, how to get the best way to make it work. What's so funny is, 'cause I was here the very first day, me and the girls who worked over there. We set the tables and we set the stations up and we set up how things were gonna go and the rules and the sidework and blah, blah, blah. I have the girls come in now, the new girls, and they want to change

things around; they don't wanna listen to us that have been here forever. I actually had one girl say, "Well, the rules are—" I said, "Don't tell me the rules, honey. I made the rules. Who do you think you're talkin' to? Come on. Please." "Well, the rule I was told, the rules—" "From the horse's mouth right here, baby. Nay." [Laughter] I get their attention.

[00:58:30.05]

Michelle L.: So, what other advice do you give new waitresses, other than, obviously, the support hose? [Laughter] What do you think is the most important thing to learn, or that was the hardest thing for you to learn, maybe, when you started out?

[00:58:47.06]

Cindy S.: Leave your attitude at the door. If you're havin' a bad day, nobody cares. They're here to eat, enjoy their meal. If they're havin' a bad day, they might want to talk to you about it, but for the most part, you're on your own. I mean, talk to your coworkers, if you can, but leave the attitude. Try to leave it at the door. 'Cause if you don't, it's gonna affect your job, and if it affects your job, it's gonna affect your money. And it all comes down to the bottom line. It's about being as pleasant as you can and as good as you can to get paid. So.

[00:59:33.09]

Michelle L.: Well, and I know we're gettin' towards an hour here, and I want you to get able to get on with what you've gotta do today. [Laughter] But is there anything else, anything I

didn't ask that you wish people knew about people that have been in the business for this long or about this place, this special place? Anything we didn't talk about?

[00:59:58.14]

Cindy S.: Well, a lot of people seem to think servers are flighty or airheads. You can't be stupid and do this job. Not when—when I work over there, I have four booths and six tables. You can't be an airhead in that work. When people treat me like I'm stupid, nothing makes me madder. Or they will try to be arrogant like with me, like they're somebody and I'm not. Pardon me; I'm workin' for a livin' just like you do, sir. I may not make as much money as you do, but I've made a good livin' at this. I've raised two sons on my own that have turned out to be very good men, very hard-working men, and I didn't do this for kicks. I didn't do it because I thought I was cute or anything else. I came in here to make a living, and this is what it is, it's my livin'. Don't think you can get away with saying ugly things to me, out of the way things. I've had a few of those. Or talking down to me and treatin' me like I'm stupid, because you can't be stupid and do this job. And I can do it well. Because you have to keep up with who's drinkin' this and who's eating that and who's doing this and what table needs this. The other one over there. And you have to keep an eye on your coworkers, too, and help them. You ain't doin' all that if you're some kinda dingbat. I mean, you just ain't. I had a man one time, I was very . . . oh. He talked down to me. And I have a very expressive face, my eyes especially. And he wanted to say, "You think you can handle that?" "Yeah, I think I can." The man across from him said, "Ooh, if looks could kill." And he looked at me like, "What do you mean? Excuse me?" He just shook his head, but he knew I was not happy about it. Like I say, I have a

very expressive face. He got on my nerve. Had a man said here, just a few weeks ago— I'm almost sixty-five years old, and this old man wants to look at me and say—I said, "What would you like today, hon?" He goes, "I'll take two of you." [Laughter] First off, you can't handle one of me. I didn't say that, though. I said, "To go?" He goes, "Huh?" [Laughter] He said, "Oh, to go, huh. I want a . . ." He figured out real fast I wasn't the one to . . .

[01:03:01.07]

Michelle L.: Straightened him right up.

[01:03:01.06]

Cindy S.: He wasn't going to upset—he wasn't going to catch me off-guard, he wasn't going to fluster me, which was the whole meaning of the exercise, to see if he could fluster me. But he doesn't know me. Not since I was at the Pit Grill has anybody been able to do that, because I had a lady that I worked with that taught me the ropes in how to deal with people like that, especially since I worked the 10 to 6 shift when all the drunks would come in. She said, "This is what you do." [Laughter] So, yeah.

[01:03:39.24]

Michelle L.: Tell me about her.

[01:03:40.01]

Cindy S.: The tough outside there. Oh, I loved her. I can't remember her name now, but we were good buddies. We hung out. I wasn't old enough that we went out to clubs and stuff together, partied and whatever, even though I wasn't old enough. I was being a big girl; I looked old enough most of the time once I got made up and everything, so nobody ever questioned me, anyway. Back then, they didn't question you that much anyhow. I mean, back in the [19]70s, it was pretty open back then. But she was—yeah. I had this one guy, he would always say somethin'. I was talkin' to her about it one day, and she said, "This is what you do, honey." Every morning, I would say, "Whatcha gonna have today?" He goes, "What I want ain't on the menu." She said, "What you do, honey, is you reach over and you take the menu out of his hand, drop it on the floor, step on it, and look at him and say, 'Now it is. Whatcha gonna do?'" That was the last time he ever said that to me. You have to be quick-witted; you can't let people know that they can bother you, because most of the time, that's all they're lookin' for, is a reaction. If you can put back on 'em like that, then you can usually stop it. Let them know that you—I'm not here for your entertainment.

[01:05:12.18]

Michelle L.: Well, I think I've asked all my questions. I appreciate you so much spending this time with me after your shift, so thank you so much.

[01:05:19.29]

Cindy S.: [Laughter] Yeah. No problem. No problem. It's been fun.

[*End of interview*]