

ROBIN JOHNSON
WILLIE BURGERS – HARTSELLE, ALABAMA

Date: January 14, 2016
Location: Willie Burgers, Hartselle, AL
Interviewer: Sara Wood
Transcription: Shelley Chance/ProDocs
Length: Twenty-four minutes
Project: A Burger by Any Other Name

START INTERVIEW

[*Transcript begins at 00:00:57*]

Sara Wood: Robin [Johnson] will you just start by saying hello and introducing yourself and telling me who you are and where we are right now?

[00:01:02]

Robin Johnson: Hello. I'm Robin Johnson, here in Willie Burgers in Hartselle.

[00:01:08]

SW: And you don't have to look in the camera. You can look at—

[00:01:10]

RJ: Look around.

[00:01:11]

SW: Yeah, look around and look at me.

[00:01:12]

RJ: Cool. (*Laughs*)

[00:01:14]

SW: Can you tell me where you grew up?

[00:01:16]

RJ: I was born in Virginia, grew up in Morgan City/Union Hill area in Alabama.

[00:01:25]

SW: And then do you live here in Hartselle now?

[00:01:28]

RJ: I live in Priceville.

[00:01:29]

SW: Okay. Now can you tell me a little bit about—you know, were you young when you moved here from Virginia or—?

[00:01:36]

RJ: I was a couple years old. My daddy was in the navy and he retired right after I was born. And family was here in Oneonta and Birmingham and he went to work for the arsenal. So that's how we ended up in the Union Hill area.

[00:01:54]

SW: And what are your parents' names?

[00:01:56]

RJ: Margie and Clarence [Johnson].

[00:01:58]

SW: Okay, and so what—do you have memories of when—when y'all were eating hamburgers growing up, was it like the hamburgers that you make here or were they different when you ate hamburgers if you remember?

[00:02:11]

RJ: Growing up I vaguely just remember, when we went anywhere we went to Shakey's Pizza. I don't remember having burgers.

[00:02:21]

SW: What was Shakey's Pizza like? Was that in—?

[00:02:23]

RJ: It was in Huntsville.

[00:02:25]

SW: Okay.

[00:02:26]

RJ: They had a banjo, piano, and you could sit there and watch them toss the dough up and make your pizza right there and it kind of made you think of a Chuck-E-Cheese but smaller.

[00:02:38]

SW: So somebody was playing the banjo live there?

[00:02:40]

RJ: Yeah.

[00:02:41]

SW: That's awesome.

[00:02:42]

RJ: Yeah, well that was way before your time. (*Laughs*)

[00:02:44]

SW: I—

[00:02:46]

RJ: Way before your time.

[00:02:46]

SW: I would kill to go to a pizza place with a live banjo.

[00:02:47]

RJ: I know, I wish they had a Shakey's Pizza.

[00:02:51]

SW: Is it still around do you know?

[00:02:52]

RJ: No.

[00:02:54]

SW: And I'm wondering if you could tell me a little bit about how—can you tell me a little bit about how you started working here and what you were doing before or—?

[00:03:05]

RJ: Well actually, my mother was the manager for C.F. Penn's down the street and when Mr. Sapp bought this place he wanted my mother to come up here and help them get it started. I have worked at Huntsville or Arab and then Huntsville for SCI. I [started at the plant] and wanted something on this side of the river, so I worked next door with Miss Cook at the furniture store and I had enough of her, and they were needing help over here and so I just came over here and helped mama and Sheila and Etta was here at the time.

00:03:44

SW: And from what I understand—was the very first—the one here at Hartselle that was—?

00:03:50

RJ: From my understanding yes. And then they had Decatur and then they had Cullman.

00:03:55

SW: So how long did your mom work for Penn's?

00:03:57

RJ: I think she was twelve years there.

00:04:01

SW: Do you have any memories of her working down there or—?

[00:04:03]

RJ: At Penn's? Yes, I have plenty of memories because on Mule Day back then I've had to help and then on Christmas parades I had to help. I was cooking burgers way before I came up here and cooked burgers. I guess that's why Mary [Lawson] thinks I'm good at it 'cause I done been doing it for years. (*Laughs*)

[00:04:20]

SW: What's Mule Day?

[00:04:22]

RJ: Well Mule—well what they call Depot Day now, but they called it Mule Day back then.

00:04:28

SW: And that's sort of like—is that the summertime?

00:04:31

RJ: September.

00:04:32

SW: September and it's like a big town event?

00:04:35

RJ: Yeah, they close the town and have different vendors sell different stuff and they started having kids' area and do certain events and having singing. I don't know. I'm always in here and then when I—by the time we get out of here I go home. (*Laughs*)

00:04:53

SW: Just to avoid the crowds.

00:04:54

RJ: Right, Yeah, yeah.

00:04:57

SW: Can you tell me anything that you remember about helping your mom down at C.F. Penn's like she was there for twelve years, what you remember most about it?

00:05:08

RJ: Just it was a little bit bigger spot than what we have here, but same as usual, waiting on people, fixing the burger, but they only used mustard and onions to where we use mustard, ketchup, and onions. They used a loaf bread when they mixed theirs. We crumbled up buns for here.

00:05:33

SW: And I'm wondering, did she teach you how to make the patties 'cause that's what Mary [Lawson] was talking about the other day that you could do them in your sleep, you do them so well?

00:05:40

RJ: Yeah, they had a certain amount they wanted you to roll out and pat out and be so-so and like I said, I guess helping her down there and having experience is why I came up here and had no problem just going to town. (*Laughs*)

00:05:53

SW: Do you remember anything she told you about working at C.F. Penn's, if she shared any stories with you about the place or about—? I don't know if she was working for Hugh at the time—.

00:06:03

RJ: Yes, she was working for Hugh Penn.

00:06:06

SW: I heard he was kind of a stickler that he—that he didn't have napkins because he didn't want to spend money for napkins. (*Laughs*)

00:06:10

RJ: Yeah, yeah 'cause my mother bought the napkin dispensers and napkins and kept them in napkins down there 'cause she said nobody wants to eat and not have nothing to wipe their mouth off with. So yeah, she—yeah she bought those. (*Laughs*) And she bought some ketchup 'cause she didn't care for mustard so she ate anything she liked ketchup. So they didn't put that on the burger but they had ketchup in case you wanted it.

00:06:37

SW: That's good just to have it prepared—.

00:06:41

RJ: Yeah.

00:06:41

SW: And do you know—so do you know—I know this is a number thing, too. Do you know what year she started down here and Mr. Sapp came and kind of recruited her?

00:06:49

RJ: When who—? I don't—

00:06:51

SW: When your mama started working here?

00:06:53

RJ: It was right after they bought it in ninety-five [1995] – ninety-six.

00:07:01

SW: Do you know how—when did—when did Willis Sapp start this place?

00:07:04

RJ: Ninety-five [1995] or ninety-six.

00:07:07

SW: Okay.

00:07:08

RJ: I want to say the middle or the end of '95 [1995] and mama was here. They got it going and I came in—in February of '96. Then Mary [Lawson] came in sometime I think in the end of '96.

00:07:24

SW: Could you tell me when you started here, like you had mentioned a couple of the women, can you tell me their names and what you remember about them, the women who were here before?

00:07:34

RJ: Well Sheila [Sapp], that was Tony's sister-in-law, married to George and then there was Etta. She had worked for the people before Mr. Sapp bought it. And then Shelley, Tony's daughter-in-law at the time and I can't remember who else all came and went.

00:08:01

SW: And was this place a restaurant before Mr. Sapp bought it, do you know?

00:08:05

RJ: Far as I know it's been—it was Johnny's then it was Prader's and then they said a Shorty Cox done it, and I know we got a picture back there in the back that has a sign that says Prader's. And by the cars it looks like it was in the '60s [1960s] and '70s.

00:08:19

SW: Did they serve burgers do you know?

00:08:22

RJ: Yeah, as far as I know they served. Here people come in and tell it—that they've been serving these kinds of burgers since 1926.

00:08:31

SW: Oh wow. That's way before Penn's too because I think Penn didn't open until '29 [1929] or '27.

00:08:37

RJ: I think they came a year later.

00:08:39

SW: That's interesting. So do you know—so was it Prader's to start with do you know? I mean—

00:08:45

RJ: Back in that time I really don't know 'cause we—a lot of the gentlemen that came in here and ate here forever has passed. I just know when they had come in and had coffee and sat and talked about it, they tell you back in the olden days when so and so had it and this is what

they done. I just know that. (*Laughs*) I really don't know the history of it, just by what they tell me.

00:09:06

SW: And Robin I'm wondering, you had mentioned that you worked in an SCI and what—what was SCI? What did they make?

00:09:12

RJ: They make component boards for computers.

00:09:16

SW: So you—were you working on a line?

00:09:19

RJ: (*Gestures*)

00:09:19

SW: And how long did you do that for?

00:09:20

RJ: Thirteen years.

00:09:21

SW: You were just kind of tired of it and—?

00:09:24

RJ: Well, the Avery plant closed down which I had already transferred to Huntsville before they done that. I just didn't like going across that Tennessee River Bridge. I got stuck on that during one of their little snow/icy things and not on the bridge itself but on the other little causeway and the flimsy little bridges before them and got swayed around and slipped and

sliding and slid in a ditch. And I said if I ever found me something over here on this side of the river I was never driving back over here again and I didn't.

00:09:57

SW: And so you didn't.

00:09:59

RJ: (*Laughs*) And I have slipped and slided coming here many a times and I keep telling her [Mary Lawson], on this last go-around, if she wants me here she can come and get me. I'll be ready. I ain't driving it.

00:10:11

SW: And it's so scary because people don't drive very well in that kind of weather, too so you have all these things—

00:10:17

RJ: Well I agree. I have no experience on it and I don't want to learn the hard way neither. I can't afford a new car. (*Laughs*)

00:10:26

SW: So you came to work here for Mr. Sapp after SCI?

00:10:30

RJ: No, well I went to Miss Cook's next door.

00:10:32

SW: Oh Miss Cook's and she had a furniture store?

00:10:35

RJ: Uh-hm.

00:10:35

SW: Okay, and then you came over here?

00:10:37

RJ: Uh-hm.

00:10:37

SW: Okay, and can you tell me a little bit about what that—I mean you helped your mom before but had you had restaurant experience? Were you accustomed to working in there? What was it like for you to work with people like—?

00:10:50

RJ: You do what your mama tells you to. (*Laughs*) Yeah, no, and with my mom you learned it and you learned it right, so—. That's how I got into it. [*Laughs*]

00:11:05

SW: Did she teach a lot of the women here how to do it, too? Was she sort of like—?

00:11:10

RJ: Well Etta had already been here. So she know(ed), I don't know if she showed Shelia or not. Like I said, mama was here for a little while and then I came in later, so—. I don't know how she—like I said, Etta should know—don't know about Shelia.

00:11:27

SW: And you've been here for a while Robin. And I asked Mary [Lawson] this but I'm wondering just from your experience and your knowledge, how this place has changed over the years since you started here, in terms of the restaurant and also in terms of the town.

00:11:41

RJ: Well when they closed the streets down and started putting out this beautiful case and stuff out here, that—people was taking detours to stay away from it, and I think they've been doing it ever since and then with the economy, it's just went downhill, because it wouldn't be nothing for it to be two—three people here and just constantly nonstop going. And now it's like, you know see, we haven't had a customer yet [*referring to the morning we are conducting the interviews on that particular day*].

00:12:09

SW: And, how long ago did that happen? I mean how long has it been that way, since it's slowed?

00:12:14

RJ: Well I don't know how long it's been since they've done these awnings and stuff. I don't know—eight years, nine years maybe, ten.

00:12:25

SW: That's a long time.

00:12:27

RJ: I don't know exactly how long. Yeah, it's—yeah.

00:12:32

SW: And I wanted to ask you too, I forgot to ask Mary [Lawson] this but I mean you can get lunch here and it's not—you don't have to pay an arm and a leg for lunch you know but I mean do you still feel like it's hard for people to go out to eat around here in terms of the economy just like you know—? I'm thinking of these burgers, they're big and they're pretty filling and they're like you know—I would think that—that would be good for people when

they're not you know doing so well financially. Do you find that people come in here, who are having trouble?

00:12:59

RJ: Well normally at the first of the month because you're talking Alabama when they get their checks, it's usually when we're busier.

00:13:08

SW: Yeah, and you're talking about like—

00:13:11

RJ: Well there's disability or Social Security or whatever. (*Laughs*) The kinds of checks they get at the first of the month. We're usually busier the first of the month.

00:13:22

SW: And is it mostly for lunch?

00:13:23

RJ: Yeah, but we don't have like no lunchtime per se anymore. We're liable to have it be hitting in the morning and not seeing nobody in the afternoon and we're liable not to have done nothing in the mornings and it all hit right there when you got everything cleaned and ready to go home and then everybody comes in. It's like *where were you at hours ago*, but it can't help it, the people show up when they show up. [*Laughs*]

00:13:47

And I think, too, a lot of people and myself included, if we had a drive-thru I think we would do better but where are you going to put a drive-thru in here? But people would rather just have the convenience of getting it and going and getting where they need to go.

00:14:03

SW: Do you have people come in and buy burgers and take off?

00:14:06

RJ: Oh yeah.

00:14:09

SW: And I asked Mary [Lawson] this but I always like to have people do this. Will you describe for people who have never had a burger here, what—what is a burger like here? How would you describe it for someone?

00:14:17

RJ: Well it's different. [*Laughs*] I don't eat a burger anywhere, hardly ever, ever, ever. I don't care if it's even if I cook one at home, my husband loves them on the grill. I'll fix him, I'll fix me something else 'cause I see and look and smell enough of them. But they're different. To me you have to have an acquired taste to them because it's not full ground beef. It's mixed with bread, so it is kind of a little squishy. It's different and kind of like she [Mary Lawson] said, almost like a meatloaf.

00:14:58

SW: When you fix a burger for your husband do you fix them the same way you fix them here or do yo use—?

00:15:02

RJ: No. He wants pure ground chuck or sirloin. He don't—he don't even care for ground beef.

00:15:12

SW: Do you know where this recipe came from or why people started putting the bread in it?

00:15:16

RJ: I would assume 'cause you know back in them days you went and you killed your own cow. And for the meat to go longer they probably put in what—homemade bread to make it go further—would be my guess is why bread ended up in it.

00:15:37

SW: Uh-hm and I'm wondering if you have—I only have a couple more questions for you and then I'll set you free. *[Laughs]* You're doing really good so I appreciate your generous—. Do you have any stories from this place that really stick with you like certain customer or something—a story a customer told you, just something that happened here that just really stands with you whether it moved you or you thought it was really funny, just in terms of memories of being here?

00:16:02

RJ: Well see, that's—that's my problem. I don't have a very good memory. Like I said, she can—somebody come in ten years ago and she'll remember them right off the bat and I'm like—I don't have a clue. But I don't know, now we had this one gentleman and I don't know if she mentioned him or not, Mr. Oakley that was ninety-something years old and him and his wife and—came in here and they liked to fuss and argue with her and stuff. But she could always make him mind. *[Laughs]* I guess he would be the one that stood out the most of all the people that's came in here. I mean we got some—we got some good people, we got some bad people.

We have some people that want to pick up on you and all that stuff. [*Laughs*] I walk away on some of that.

00:16:52

SW: Do you ever wonder, I mean—and this is sort of a stretch—but I mean I waited on people before at a restaurant—a couple restaurants and it's almost like people when they come in they want the certain kind of attention because they might be lonely out there, like this is the one place where people will interact with them and being behind the counter and serving people is a whole other experience because you get to see a side of people that most people don't see. And I wonder if you ever had that kind of experience where you just—you feel like—?

00:17:21

RJ: We have some men that's wife has passed and we got one man in here that he still is married 'cause I don't guess he wants to split half of what he's got and asked me if I needed a girlfriend, or if I needed a boyfriend. He comes in here on occasion and he was just in here yesterday. [*Laughs*] I tell, "No, uh-uh. I'm married. I don't need one. One is enough." But yeah, we have them. [*Laughs*] Those that wants to carry on conversations 'cause they ain't got nothing else to do and nobody else to talk to.

00:18:00

And there's times that you know friends—I'm moody. I can sit there and stand up there and talk with them for a while and then sometimes you know about five—ten minutes and I've had enough, you know it—it varies on how I—what kind of mood I'm in.

00:18:14

SW: How do you shut people down? Do you usually just stop talking to them or just walk away?

00:18:18

RJ: I'll usually will grab a mustard, ketchup or something that needs to be refilled, changed, washed and got to work. *[Laughs]* I don't—I don't try to be purposely rude to nobody. *[Laughs]*

00:18:32

SW: And I only have one other question for you but it was—it's about Mary *[Lawson]* because she talks a lot about how you guys are really good friends. And I just wonder what it's been like since you met Mary and worked with her, how that's affected you as a person?

00:18:47

RJ: Well at the very beginning I think you know there's twelve years-age difference. She's the age of my sister. I think she's going through the change so she had an attitude so we didn't kind of click at the beginning. Now you know that's—that's my job now going through that but we get along fine now. We're—I mean she's like you know an older sister, not exactly a mother figure but she's like an older sister because like I said, she's the same age as my sister. And I think we get along fine—do well together now.

00:19:22

SW: When you pick her up and—do you guys carpool here every—?

00:19:24

RJ: Yeah, well I live in Priceville and I—she lives off of Bethel and I mean I go right by there, no big deal to go by and pick her up 'cause I know she has difficult seeing to drive. And I—well I have to go pick up the other one, too, so we work together, so—. *[Laughs]*

00:19:39

SW: Oh Susie [Roy, *referring to the other employee of Willie Burgers who is not working on this particular day*]?

00:19:41

RJ: Yeah, even though she walks two miles a day and she hadn't when I had to pick her up but okay.

00:19:48

SW: Does she walk—she walks two miles here to get to work, Susie does?

00:19:50

RJ: With her heart condition she's supposed to walk two miles a day but the whole time Mary was gone I picked her up and carried her home unless you know by a fluke she had somebody else done lined up, but I didn't see where she walked it but okay whatever. [*Laughs*]

00:20:06

SW: Robin do you have anything else you want to add about this place or about the burgers or about the customers, anything that I didn't ask you that you think is important?

00:20:15

RJ: No, I just wish you know the economy or more people wanted to stop by and eat these 'cause like I said, we're barely getting by to keep it open and I like it here and like I—if she [Mary Lawson] couldn't keep the doors open I'd have to go out there and find something. And it would be hard for someone my age now to go out there and try to get something because they want somebody younger and prettier.

00:20:47

Well, I mean this want one experienced one to do all the work but they want all these other ones, prettier and younger that makes better money that they don't care if they do anything 'cause they got this other one that's working 'cause they have to. And I would be that one that would have to. *[Laughs]*

00:21:02

SW: Do you and Mary ever talk about like if—if Mary ever retired, do you think you'd ever take this place over—do you think about it?

00:21:10

RJ: I couldn't really—myself afford it 'cause she's—I use my pay to pay bills. She you know she has—which I have a husband, too, but they're retired, they're well settled, you know, they are more accomplished than me and my husband is on stuff. So it's—to me like a hobby something for her to do, someplace to go. Me, it's a hobby and a place to go and something to do, too but I have to have a paycheck. And what I would think I would have to turn around and put it back in and then what—the house would not get paid, so it would be like do I live in here or do I live you know—? So it—

00:21:59

Mary *[Lawson, off camera]*: Our *[referring to herself and her husband]* intentions is for her to have this place if I ever—.

00:22:02

RJ: Yeah, but you're giving it to me, not buying it. That's a different story. *[Laughs]* I said if you just gave it to me, but—.

00:22:15

Mary [Lawson, *off camera*]: Like I said, I couldn't do it without her you know and he knows that too. And that way she would have it to carry it on, too, you know. That's our intentions and my husband has no problem with that.

00:22:35

SW: Yeah.

00:22:37

Mary [Lawson, *off camera*]: And I couldn't do it without her. I mean she don't just help me here. She helps me at home, too, you know.

00:22:45

SW: Robin do you want to say anything else before I turn the camera off?

00:22:50

RJ: No, you can turn the camera off. [*Laughs*]

00:22:52

SW: Okay.

00:22:52

RJ: I'm good. You can turn the camera off.

00:22:54

SW: I'm going to turn it off but I'm wondering—I was really hoping to get a nice portrait of the two of you together.

00:22:59

Mary [Lawson, *off camera*]: Sure.

00:22:59

SW: And I'm going to just like take this stuff down so it's not in your way and before y'all get—

00:23:04

Mary [Lawson, *off camera*]: Honey you're not in our way. [*Laughs*] You're not in our way, not at all.

00:23:09

END INTERVIEW