

Don Knight
Johnnie's Drive-In – Tupelo, Mississippi

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Date: August 4, 2015

Location: Latham's Hamburger Inn, New Albany, MS

Interviewer: Sara Wood

Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs

Length: Forty-two minutes

Project: A Hamburger by Any Other Name

START INTERVIEW

00:00:01

Sara Wood: So I just need to introduce us. So this is Sara Wood with the Southern Foodways Alliance. It’s August 4, 2015. And I’m sitting here with Mr. Don Knight at Johnnie’s Drive-In in Tupelo, Mississippi. And Mr. Knight would you introduce yourself, tell me—? Tell me—say hello, tell me your name and tell me what you do here?

00:00:20

Don Knight: Okay my name is Don Knight, and I am the owner.

00:00:26

SW: And can you tell me where we are right now?

00:00:28

DK: We’re at Johnnie’s Drive-In, location 908 East Main, Tupelo, Mississippi, been here almost seventy years. We are the oldest operating restaurant in Tupelo to my knowledge.

00:00:44

SW: And Mr. Knight for the record will you tell me your birthdate?

00:00:48

DK: March 28, 1944. I’m seventy-one years old, getting close to retirement, okay.

[Laughs]

00:00:55

SW: Okay and Mr. Knight, can you tell me a little bit about how this place got started and what you know about the history of it?

00:01:02

DK: Okay the history of it to my knowledge is that Mr. John and Margaret Chism, which they were the original owners, they opened this up in October 17, 1945, post-War. And they operated it until 1977. And they were here—they were here all during the fifties [1950s], sixties, half of the seventies, and—and they left—they sold out to my family, to the Knight family in 1977. And I took it over as a sole owner from the Knight family in December of 1981. So that’s where it just became my project.

00:01:59

SW: What do you know about the Chism(s), do you know the Chism family, Mr. Knight? Can you tell me a little bit about John and Margaret? Are they from Tupelo?

00:02:07

DK: Okay, they were. They lived right down on top of the hill up here. When I—when I moved here in August of 1970 they was operating down here. I met them, was friends with them, and knew them for a long time and always found them to be some of the nicest folks that I ever met. Oh, can I tell them folks thank you, thank you folks. [*Talking to customers in the booth who are leaving to pay their check.*]

00:02:32

Okay all right, nice folks, and Mr. John, he’s passed on, but Miss Margaret is to my knowledge, she’s still alive. She lives down there in Jackson [Mississippi] with her daughter Nancy yeah, okay. And Mr. Chism still has one brother that I know of that’s still alive and his name is Bobby. And have you ever heard of Doodie’s Diner? Okay well they were all the family, okay.

00:03:01

SW: Can you tell me about Doodie’s Diner?

00:03:03

DK: Well I don’t know much about it. I just knew that they were—they were kinfolks is all, okay.

00:03:08

SW: And did you grow up coming here? Are you from Tupelo, Mr. Knight?

00:03:12

DK: No, ma’am, I’m from a town—well you probably heard of Amory, Mississippi, about thirty miles south. That’s where I’m from. My whole family has been in the restaurant business somewhere since around 1960, which we—my sister still operates the old family place down in Amory as of today.

00:03:33

SW: And what’s the name of that place?

00:03:34

DK: Knight’s Drive-In in Amory, been there forever it seems like. *[Laughs]* We all grew up, all my brothers and my sister were—we worked for mom and dad.

00:03:45

SW: And what were your parents’ names, Mr. Knight? What were your parents’ names?

00:03:49

DK: My daddy was named Jimmy and my mother was named Maureen—M-a-u-r-e-e-n. She was originally Maureen Bush Knight. That’s her name.

00:04:03

SW: And can you tell the names of your brothers and sisters, too?

00:04:06

DK: Well two of my brothers is passed on, but I got—my oldest brother is named Jim. My second brother he’s passed, his name was Fred. My third brother, he’s passed, his name was Bob. And then it’s me. And then my brother Gene, he owns the Dairy Kream right down the street here. And then my—my sister—sister, she operates Knight’s Drive-In in Amory and her name is Linda, but I call her sister, but anyway her name is Linda and she works—operates the old home place in Amory. And then my baby brother, his name is Johnnie Ray better known as Bo and he’s opposite. He drives a truck for a living. *[Laughs]*

00:04:50

SW: So when y'all were growing up in Amory did you help your parents with the restaurant?

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DK: We did. We—we all—that’s where we learned it all from by helping them and we all took turns running the place as you know—excuse me. As we—as we got a little older, you know daddy would let us make out like we were owners, you know. But mom and dad owned the place. We just—we just thought we were owners, you know what I’m talking about. In other words, it was said we owned the place, you know be the boss. You know that was—especially when you’re young, you know.

00:05:21

SW: And do you know how they—how they decided to start the restaurant? How did they start the business, do you know?

00:05:27

DK: Just the place come for sale and my dad was working for John Deere and—and he and—the doctor had advised him to get out of it because he later died with asbestos cancer. Anyway the doctor advised him to get out of it, so he—the place come up for sale, so the family bought it and the rest of it’s history. We still got it in Amory.

00:05:50

SW: And what do you serve there at Knight’s Drive-In?

00:05:52

DK: Just basically the same here, short-order, everything here. Now keep in mind, I haven’t been down there in—you know I hadn’t ran the place since 1970, so the menu I’m sure has changed some, so I’m not real familiar with everything that they do now ‘cause like I said my sister runs it. I’m just more of—I’m more familiar with what Johnnie’s does.

00:06:16

SW: So Mr. Knight, did you end up taking over the drive-in when you got out of school? Like how did—how did you get to Tupelo?

00:06:22

DK: Okay I got out of the Army when I come out of Vietnam. I’m a Vietnam Veteran, very proud of it. I’m a Vietnam Veteran. I come up in 1968 when I got out of the Army and I went to work for my daddy down in Amory running Knight’s Drive-In. And then in 1970 my brother Gene, which is my younger brother, called me and we came up here and we bought the little Dairy Kream right down the street there and he had—he and I were partners in it from 1970 to 1979 and I sold my part out and bought a drive-in across the street.

00:07:03

And then this place come up for—up for sale and then we got it and—and but my brother Gene is still down there and that’s how I got this—that’s how I got to Tupelo. I’ve been up here since 1970, August 17, 1970.

00:07:19

SW: So you—you were in Vietnam you said?

00:07:22

DK: Yes, ma'am, I’m a Vietnam Veteran.

00:07:24

SW: Was it—what was the change like from coming back there to coming here and buying restaurants? What was that shift like for you?

00:07:30

DK: Well we—we’ve been in the business all our lives anyway, it’s basically all we knew. I mean you know we all grew up in the restaurant business, so that’s just all we knew, so you know we really—it just really made sense, you know to me it did. You know but being a restaurant owner is like having two wives. And the restaurant most time if you’re going to make a living is the priority—it’s priority which is not right, but [*Laughs*] anyway my wife will tell you this happens. A lot of times we—we miss things because of the restaurant, but that’s how I make a living you know, and it’s still how I make a living.

00:08:07

SW: What—what are—I’m sure you learned a lot from your parents growing up in the restaurant business, what are some of the most important things that they taught you about running a restaurant?

00:08:15

DK: Okay mother always said never serve anything that you would not eat yourself, try to always know your customer by first name if you can, and always tell them thank you and come back to see us because that’s part—that’s part of it. Thank you and come back and good service and—and—and being personal with them, that’s—that’s better than the food, is—is letting people know that you appreciate their business and don’t take them—never take them for granted ‘cause—‘cause you just need to do that. You need to tell everybody thank you and come back to see us. You know, sometimes I miss people. I’m just like everybody else you know, every now and then I’ll miss somebody. But—but I—I saw them come in. I may not do nothing but just wave at them, but—but I want them to know that we appreciate it. That’s what I tell all my employees, you know is—is let the people know that you appreciate them and give them good service.

00:09:16

Now we’re just like everybody else. We mess up like everybody else, yeah. You know that’s one thing that mom and dad always taught and—and try to always give a man his money’s worth you know. You know if you charge \$2.50 for a burger make sure he’s got a good burger worth \$2.50. A good milkshake, make sure it’s good, good glass of tea you know and that’s just things that—that—I mean that’s what mom and dad always said. You know and we had to be halfway successful ‘cause mother and daddy bought that place in ’60 [1960], this is 19—I mean this is 2015 [*Laughs*] and it’s still operating, so you know if you—if you just let people know that’s what I believe. And I’m seventy-one years old and I—I think it holds true today. If you’re fifteen and you know—what really bothers me and I don’t guess I ought to say this, but what really bothers me is we have people that will walk out the door and never acknowledge that you

even spoke to them or anything like that. Maybe I can understand that, but—but it happens. It just happens. Everybody is not—you know they could be having a bad day, but I tell my people, you better let everybody know that you appreciate them now. And I will—if I catch them which they know—my people ain't perfect, but they're good folks.

00:10:40

So you know—but I tell them and if I see them not done it I ask them why didn't you do that? And they probably already done it and I just didn't hear them 'cause I don't hear real well, but—. And—and most of the people that work here has been here a long time.

00:10:53

SW: Mr. Knight how many employees do you have working here?

00:10:55

DK: Let's go back, I think we've got twelve not counting—not counting me and my son-in-law. My son-in-law he's—he's—he was the guy that just walked in and handed me this—that's my son-in-law, yeah. So I think we've got twelve—eleven, twelve, I—I'd have to go look on the time clock. My wife could tell you all about that and sit here and name them 'cause we got us a couple just like part times. Most all of our people are part-time, okay.

00:11:23

SW: and I just wanted—I have—finally get to ask you, so you and your brother bought the Dairy Kream and then you bought a drive-in across the street?

00:11:30

DK: I—I did.

00:11:30

SW: You did. What was the name of the drive-in?

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DK: It was Knight’s Drive-In.

00:11:34

SW: Knight’s Drive-In.

00:11:35

DK: [*Laughs*] That was in Amory—I stole my dad and them’s name. They said it was okay. I asked daddy was it okay and he said, “Yeah.” You remember—you probably don’t remember ‘cause you’re not old enough, do you remember the old Shearer’s Drive-In in the sixties [1960s]—probably not? Like I said you’re not near old enough. It was an old drive-in. I had a picture of it but when the restaurant—when my restaurant burned up in Saltillo, I had the picture back there in my office and it burned also so I don’t have a picture of it, but I used to have a big picture of it.

00:12:07

SW: What—what happened with the fire? What restaurant was that?

00:12:10

DK: Me and my wife, we bought a—we built a restaurant up in Saltillo in 2003, a big steakhouse, seated about 160 and we operated it ‘til 2010 and in 2010 it burned to the ground. One night—one Saturday night while we were getting ready for church the next morning they—she burned to the ground.

00:12:33

SW: I’m sorry to hear that.

00:12:34

DK: Well I am, too. [*Laughs*] But anyway that’s just part of it.

00:12:38

SW: So how many—so besides Johnnie’s how many restaurants do you own right now
Mr. Knight?

00:12:42

DK: Oh I just own this one. This is all I own. One is enough, one is enough.

00:12:49

SW: And so can you tell me a little bit about how you decided or how your—you said
your family bought it from the Chism(s) and then you bought it from your family.

00:12:54

DK: Yeah.

00:12:56

SW: Can you tell me a little bit about how that happened?

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DK: Well let’s see, in 1977 Mr. Chism had already asked me and my brother Gene somewhere
around ’75, would we be interested in buying it and we told him no—that we just didn’t have the
money. And then—then in 1977 he asked me about it again and I told one of my brothers about
it. And my brother came up here and bought it from him and—and then in ’81 I bought it from
my brother so that kept it in the family.

00:13:36

SW: And not—not Gene, another brother?

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DK: No, no my other brother. The second brother the one I said passed on, his name was Fred. Yeah, I bought it—he bought it in ’77 and I bought it in ’81.

00:13:46

SW: What was it like to—what was it like when you first started here after you bought it?

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DK: Gosh that’s been so long ago I can’t hardly remember. Well I’m trying to think who worked for me and can’t even hardly remember. Anyway it was a lot of fun, it was different because we had been used to working seven days a week and down here we only work six days a week and I really like that. Didn’t have to work on Sunday and later on when I sold the drive-in down here, it was a relief because I didn’t have to work on Sunday. We worked all our lives, we worked seven days a week until somewhere around ’84 [1984].

00:14:28

SW: What year did you sell the Knight’s Drive-In down here?

00:14:31

DK: What year did I sell it?

00:14:32

SW: Yeah.

00:14:33

DK: Eighty-four, eighty-four.

00:14:34

SW: And so can you tell me a little bit about how—I mean did the Chism(s) just decide to retire? They just wanted—?

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DK: I’m sure. Now they didn’t—I didn’t get into their business. They just asked us—they’d been doing it for thirty-two years and they just wanted to get out I’m sure. I don’t—you know it was like me, I’ve been doing it for forty-five years, since 1970 so I’m not counting—I’m not counting the time I worked down in Amory for dad and them ‘cause like I said we [Laughs]—that was—that was childhood stuff, you know. As a grown man owning my—operating my own business I’ve been doing it forty-five years. [Laughs]

00:15:10

SW: That’s a long time Mr. Knight.

00:15:12

DK: It’s a long time. I’ve really enjoyed it. I can’t—I can’t think of anything that—that I had rather be doing than running the—. Let’s see, let me see how I can say this and make you—make people—I like people. You know and—and people come in and different people come in and they have different stories and we get all kind of visitors. And see here’s an old banjo picker coming in the door right now.

00:15:53

And I just like—I just like people. I like to see them and like I said all of them have got different stories and so you know you can learn all about their culture, especially people that come over here from Australia and England and Africa and Russia and Scotland, you know all those folks. They’re all different and the first they want to know is, “Do you have any beer?” [Laughs] Beer is more like their water over there. Well I’m drinking ice water, you know so it’s

just part of it. It’s—but it’s a lot of fun. It—it really is, it’s still fun, and when it gets not to be fun well then I’ll quit, but right now it’s still fun.

00:16:35

SW: And so Mr. Knight when you—when you took the business over in ’81 what—did you change anything about the menu or did you pick it up from where it was? Can you tell me about anything you’ve added to the menu from what the Chism(s) were serving?

00:16:50

DK: When I bought this place from Mr. John he give me one good word of advice that I’ve stuck by all these years. *If it ain't broke don't fix it.* The hamburgers, the Johnnie Burger is the same, we just kind of changed the name on it to the Johnnie Burger. The barbecue is the same. We do everything basically the same.

00:17:15

Now we’ve added a few things sure because you know as—as people progress on, different—people like different things. And you know salesmen come by and they’ll sell you something. You try stuff. And a lot of stuff sells good and a lot of stuff does not sell. But that’s one thing he told me, so I’ve been—we’ve—we’ve pretty much stayed on our own. We—we got customers that come in, we got just five days a week customers, we got one man been—he told me he been eating here sixty-three years about three years ago, so I’m going to say that now he’s going to add a couple years, so you know ‘cause he just told me that. I can't verify that but he said that.

00:18:01

And we’ll—we just have a lot of loyal customers that come by and tell me, “Hey in 1952 or ’53 me and my wife got a first date out here and got married.” You know and—and now that’s fun, yeah.

00:18:22

SW: What’s the best-selling item on your menu would you say?

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DK: What’s—?

00:18:25

SW: What’s the—what’s the top seller on the menu?

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DK: Johnnie Burger, the Johnnie Burger.

00:18:29

SW: And can you describe for people who don’t—somebody from Nebraska who might listen to this what’s a Johnnie Burger?

00:18:35

DK: Well a Johnnie Burger is one that we add to, of course we don’t never tell them what we do but it’s—excuse me, excuse me—it’s—it’s just a burger that we add to. We add stuff to it to make it go further and that came up from post-World War II. They didn’t have—they didn’t have access to a lot of ground beef and stuff so they had to make stuff and make them go further. And that’s what Mr. Chism told me and that’s what we continue doing to this day. And we’ll continue doing it as long as I own the place.

00:19:07

It comes on a regular bun, comes with mustard, onion, pickle, but we’ll put anything you want on it, but that’s—that’s how—if you just order one it comes with mustard, onion, pickle, you know. But like I said we’ll put anything people want on them. They change, a lot of people want to put cheese on them, so—so we just call that a cheeseburger. But—but actually they call them doughburgers. Let’s see, I’m going to think of some of the names. They all them doughburgers, slugburger, Doodie burger, one woman from out of—over in Atlanta, Georgia she calls them mysteryburger [*Laughs*]. There’s a lot of different names for them but we call them Johnnie Burgers. And I’ve been—just several different names.

00:19:49

SW: And Mr. Knight did you grow up eating doughburgers or Johnnie Burgers?

00:19:53

DK: No, ma'am, like I said, I was a grown man when I moved over here. Now when we lived in Amory my mom—my mom, we—we eat [inaudible]. Mom didn’t do that, we—we had an all-meat burger down in Amory. We didn’t have—this was—we only started doing this when I bought this place.

00:20:11

SW: Had you ever heard of these burgers before you bought this place?

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DK: Oh yes, ma'am, I had heard of them ‘cause we—like I said, we were neighbors to Mr. Chism for nine years. Well actually seven years, he sold out in ’77 but yeah we knew about them, but we just never did come down to eat mostly ‘cause we had a place down the street you know. Anyway when—when we first moved up here, times was hard I’m telling you and we couldn’t—we couldn’t get out and do much visiting. We—yeah—

00:20:38

SW: You were busy all the time?

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DK: Well I was trying to make a living, yeah.

00:20:44

SW: And so did—what did—did Mr. Johnnie tell you anything else? I don’t you to reveal the recipe but like what did—did he tell you anything about the history about how they started making the doughburgers?

00:20:52

DK: No, it—it never came up, not to my knowledge. It just never came up. We make our own chicken salad. We make our own hamburger steaks. We—we roll out all of our own all-meat burgers. We do a lot of stuff. We make our own gravies—brown gravy and white gravy. We—we do a lot of—of our hamburgers. I think I said that. But we just make a lot of our stuff because we don’t want—I mean you know we—everybody—everybody has got an old frozen patty. We don’t—we don’t do that. We just like I said, I just—we just kind of—we’re simple. You know we just—we just a little old small business, little what we call a mom and pop operation. And like I said, as long as I own it we’re going to stay just like that because I don’t—I don’t want to change nothing. It’s worked for me so far. The Good Lord has blessed me, you know, yeah.

00:21:52

When people come in, a lot of the regular customers you know I can’t do it as much now because I don’t work as much as I used to ‘cause I’m older, but when I was younger, people would come in and I pretty well knew what they eat ‘cause if they ate here pretty regular I pretty

well knew when they come in the door. I pretty well knew what they were going to eat. But you know we’ve still got some people like that but—but not a whole lot of them now because—and we probably do, I just don’t work as much as I used to.

00:22:22

SW: How often do you come in now Mr. Knight?

00:22:25

DK: I come in every—oh I come in every day. I just don’t work the hours I used to work.

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SW: Do you eat Johnnie Burgers?

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DK: Oh yeah. Well yes, ma'am, I can't—but I will you know—oh yes, ma'am. And they're good. If they wasn't good, I wouldn't sell them 'cause like I said I wouldn't sell anything that I wouldn't eat myself, yeah.

00:22:47

SW: And how do you—how do you have yours fixed?

00:22:49

DK: Me, I just do mine with mustard, onion, little hot sauce, Louisiana hot sauce on them, that's the way I like mine with a little salt on it. Make sure it's good and crispy and they're mighty good. And we got a good hotdog but we do our hotdogs different. We fry our hotdogs on the grill. Fry them on the grill, put them on a round bun, mustard, onion, and pickle. People want slaw on them, we'll—we'll do them anyway but that's the way if you just order one, if you walk up and say I want a hotdog that's how it's going to come. You tell us different we'll fix it but if you don't tell us different—.

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SW: And Mr. Knight I just have a couple more questions for you, is that okay?

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DK: Ma'am?

00:23:33

SW: I just have a couple more questions—

00:23:33

DK: Yes, ma'am, okay.

00:23:35

SW: I’m wondering you know when people order—when they come in and they’re not from around here and I’m sure you can tell when they’re not from—

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DK: Oh yeah, yes, ma'am, most of the time they have a camera in their hands. *[Laughs]*

00:23:45

SW: And do you have a mix of—would you say there’s a mix of regulars and tourists coming in here? How—how does that break down?

00:23:54

DK: Well just like the folks—well you probably didn’t pay any attention but the folks in number two *[referring to booth number two]* they was from Mobile, Alabama. Well the reason we can—we can always tell, most of the time they got a camera in their hand. And then I can—I can pretty well look at them and tell. My secret to it is most of the time I look to see their tag. I can see the tag out the window. But when they walk in the door and they start—they don’t—I

can tell right off the bat they ain't from Mississippi, right off the bat. [Laughs] You know or they can—they can tell that I am from Mississippi right off the bat, you know [Laughs] ‘cause you know—you know we’re pretty country. [Laughs] And you can—you can tell I’m pretty country.

00:24:38

SW: What makes you say that?

00:24:39

DK: Well ‘cause I say yeah, y'all, y'all come back here, stuff like that you know—people do that. You’re—I don’t think you’re from Mississippi, no?

00:24:48

SW: I’m from Michigan.

00:24:49

DK: Michigan, is that right?

00:24:51

SW: Can you tell from my nasal accent?

00:24:51

DK: Yeah, well I—

00:24:53

SW: I sound like I’m from Canada. [Laughs]

00:24:54

DK: Yeah, but like I said when I—when you walked in the door I knew you weren't from Mississippi ‘cause—what part of Michigan are you from?

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SW: I’m from Muskegon so it’s—it’s the west side.

00:25:06

DK: Yeah, yeah.

00:25:06

SW: Yeah.

00:25:08

DK: Yeah, well we got kin folks up in Dearborn, Inkster, up in there, yeah, yeah. My sister-in-law’s family lives up there.

00:25:17

SW: Oh wow.

00:25:17

DK: Yeah, yeah, she’s still got hmm her sister—two brothers I believe it is left, yeah.

00:25:24

SW: That’s great. It’s cold up there.

00:25:27

DK: I imagine so. I have never been to Michigan, but anyway that’s off the subject, okay.

00:25:32

SW: I’m wondering Mr. Knight when people come in here do they need to be—and they order a burger do you—do you feel like you need to explain to people well this is different?

00:25:40

DK: Well we—we do. We try to explain to them what they want. I mean what—what they will order so that they will know. And here’s what we always tell them ‘cause they want to

know what Elvis ate you know, you know. And so you know I—I have to go by what people say ‘cause I never met Elvis. He was gone before I got up here.

00:26:00

But so if they want to order—if they want a burger, we—we try to tell them what it is and then we always tell them if you order it and you don’t like it and you don’t eat it you don’t have to pay for it. And we very—very few have a complaint on that. Most of them like it.

00:26:19

Now the people from Netherlands they come here, it’s always about forty of them and they come most of the time about twice a year, of course they already know what they want ‘cause they’ve been here so many times and they just get a cheeseburger, fries, and a drink. That’s what Elvis—what they said that—they want what Elvis eat. Well you know I don’t know if Elvis eat that or not but that’s what several people say you know. So I don’t—you know but anyway, but we try to explain it to them and try to get them—make them happy, we want to make everybody happy if we can. Ain't nothing like a—an unhappy customer. [*Laughs*]

00:26:53

SW: I can't imagine.

00:26:55

DK: Oh [*Laughs*] remember what I said a while ago, being in the restaurant business is like having two wives. Right and so—it’s just part of it. But anyway we try to always make them happy and help people out and like I said most of the time they—they go away real satisfied and real happy, you know. We got—we got I don’t know how many guest books back there in the back that’s—that’s full with people that came from around the world coming in here. And I’m just amazed. I really am.

00:27:34

SW: Must be nice to meet so many different people—

00:27:38

DK: It is, yeah it is—it is—it is. I could tell you many, many, many stories but I don’t have the time and you don’t either.

00:27:46

SW: Can you think of one that sticks with you?

00:27:48

DK: The best one, the best one was the—the seventeen kids from Princeton University. That was the best one. They had a chaperone come in and the two little girls from—from China was here. Of course I was just being you know just laughing and carrying on and having a good time—I thought. And—and I told them, I said, “I don’t believe you girls is from Mississippi are you?” And that offended them and I didn’t mean to.

00:28:20

But I told them, I told the chaperone to tell them that I was just playing, just didn’t mean anything by it, because you know I knew right off the bat they weren’t from Mississippi. And so my sense of humor was not funny to them. [*Laughs*] That’s one of the—so needless to say, we ain’t heard anymore from Princeton. But they did, they had seventeen people. They had been all around the United States and they had called us about six months in advance and we were waiting on them. And they had—they had several people from different countries, you know. But anyway that—that comes to my mind because [*Laughs*] when they started ordering you know I was just being cute I reckon. I said, “You girls ain’t from Mississippi are you?” You

know that didn’t go—that didn’t go over good at all. [*Laughs*] But anyway so that ain't the first time I put my foot in my mouth and won't be the last time.

00:29:12

SW: And when people ask you who aren't from here who have never had a Johnnie Burger and they’re like what is in this, what do you tell them about—?

00:29:19

DK: just tell them it’s one we add to and that’s all I ever tell them. You know I tell them if you want to try it and if you don’t like it, don’t eat it, you don’t have to pay for it. Now if you eat it you have to pay for it. And a lot of times it’ll be like—they’ll say, “Well you know let me just try one.” If it’s four of them we’ll cut it in four sections for them and they’ll have a little piece of it. It just makes them—they want to try it, so you know you don’t never want to pay for something you don’t eat, which I don’t—you know I don’t blame them for that.

00:29:54

SW: Did Mr. John teach you how to make a Johnnie Burger?

00:29:57

DK: Hmm?

00:29:58

SW: Did Mr. John Chism teach you how to make the burger? Is that how you learned?

00:30:02

DK: Uh-huh, oh yeah. They showed me. I bought all the recipes from them and they showed me everything, how to do everything when I bought it, yeah, yeah.

00:30:08

SW: Do you know where he—where they learned to make them from? Did they ever say where that recipe came from? Did it come from—come from his parents or—?

00:30:15

DK: I think—I really don’t know. I haven’t never asked—if Nancy—that would be her daughter, if she ever comes back up and I see her again I’ll ask her.

00:30:26

SW: Does she still come up sometimes?

00:30:27

D K: Every now and then. I see her about—I saw her last Christmas out there. She had her mother up here. Miss Margaret [Chism] is in a nursing home down in—down in somewhere around Jackson down there.

00:30:39

SW: And Mr. Knight, I have two more questions for you.

00:30:41

DK: Okay.

00:30:41

SW: One is you know you were talking about how the doughburger, the slugburger kind of started in the Depression era, where they were trying to stretch out—

00:30:50

DK: Right, right.

00:30:51

SW: I’ve noticed going to some other places that serve that kind of burger they’re not as expensive as like going to somewhere like McDonalds.

00:30:57

DK: Right, right.

00:30:58

SW: I’m wondering, thinking back to you know—we’re talking like the Depression era, with that still being served, what makes you think—? It’s kind of a two-part question, why do you think these burgers are still around and do you think people are still looking for—like in terms of the economy like a decent priced-meal and this is a good idea?

00:31:17

DK: Well actually—actually you can come out here and our prices is the lowest prices in town. You won't find anything any lower. But when—when—you have to keep in mind that back in the ‘40s [1940s] it wasn’t a whole lot of places, okay, there wasn’t. And so they were—I’m trying to think of the name of the place. There was another place on top of the hill I’ve heard them talk about but there wasn’t a whole lot of places. And I guess people just—just the—just more like anything else like coming to town on Saturday night that’s what a lot of them tell me, “You know, man on Saturday night we—we would come to town on Saturday night and this would be the first place we’d come to.”

00:32:02

And I have all kind of people, this man that left here just while ago with his son lives on Georgia, over in Atlanta and he used to tell me, he said, “Every time we come back in here, we come in here,” and there’s many, many people over the years that I know that I’m still friends with that if their kids come in that’s the first place they come. Now here’s Joe Saber’s boy, when

he comes back in from Texas he comes out here before he ever goes home. That’s what Joe said. You know so [*Laughs*], you can’t—you know just different things.

00:32:34

And it’s—I think it’s more than anything else like a lot of the kids grew up out here coming out here you know. And this place ain’t changed hardly any and maybe it’s just like you know they just like—they just like it. I sure am proud that they do. [*Laughs*] So that’s—that would be the only way I know how to answer that. Maybe that’s the right answer. But that’s the only one I know.

00:32:58

SW: Why do you think these burgers are still around?

00:33:01

DK: Because people just like them. They’re good, they really are. Have you ever eat one?

00:33:06

SW: Yeah, I’ve had one here. They’re—they’re delicious.

00:33:07

DK: Yeah, yeah they—they’re good. So like I said, we—we sell more of them than we sell anything else. So if they weren’t good I don’t think—if people didn’t like them I don’t think we’d still be selling them. Yeah like I said we’re going to celebrate seventy years October 17th. We’re going to be here seventy years. That’s a pretty good record, yeah.

00:33:32

SW: Great record.

00:33:33

DK: Yeah, I think it is.

00:33:34

SW: Did you change the name of the—? Now did the Chism(s) call it a doughburger and then you changed it to Johnnie Burger?

00:33:39

DK: We just changed it to Johnnie Burger. Yeah, but I mean we just call it a Johnnie Burger but look here. When somebody walks up to that cash register if you’ll listen to them, they say, “Give me four of them doughburgers.” You know what I do? “Give me four burgers.” If they say, “Give me a Johnnie Burger, I say give me a Johnnie Burger.” If they say give me a slugburger, “Give me two of them slugburgers.” Whatever they want that’s what I say most of the time. You know the customer pays the bills.

00:34:02

SW: That’s true. Did you name it after John Chism?

00:34:07

DK: Yeah, yeah, yeah that’s what the name came from. See I didn’t change the name. Remember what I said while ago?

00:34:13

SW: If it ain't broke don't fix it.

00:34:14

DK: If it ain't broke don't fix it, absolutely, that’s right yeah.

00:34:17

SW: And did the—did you guys always—did the—did Johnnie’s always have curbside service or did you—?

00:34:22

DK: Yeah, yeah, yeah, we always had curb service.

00:34:24

SW: And you still do it now?

00:34:25

DK: We just—we just continued it. We put a new canopy up out there. We put vinyl siding on. We done it a little different on the inside but basically we kept the food pretty much the same.

00:34:38

SW: And this is one of the questions I feel like is around us. Can you tell me—well for people who have never been here, can you tell me a little bit about the history of Johnnie’s and Elvis and his presence here?

00:34:52

DK: Okay well see now that part I don’t know about. I have to go by what people told me. But what I understand, Mr. Guy Harris, he—he—he lived right across the street. They were all friends. I got some pictures of him and Elvis out there on the wall. And—and then this right here, Jay Ausborn, he’s Mississippi Slim’s brother, and he—he wrote that for—and brought it out here to me and said several years ago signed by—they had it notarized. And he said him and Elvis used to ride his bicycle up here. Elvis didn’t have one. And they’d drink an RC Cola.

00:35:33

Well you know I don’t know if that’s true or not. But that’s what he told me so I—I don’t have any—any reason to disbelieve him. Mississippi Slim taught Elvis how to play the guitar according to him. Guy Harris said that’s true. And Guy said they used to come up here every

now and then when—when they had a nickel, if they could find a nickel, so you know I don’t know. I just have to go by what people told me. Now me, I never met Elvis, never did.

00:36:00

If he ever came in the door—we got a picture in there that says—that man from Missouri that took the picture, took it in that booth right down there, that’s what the picture on the wall is. And the man from Missouri, he signed an affidavit saying that he took that picture in 1956 I believe it is. You know, I don’t know but the man said he did. He’s got a—he’s got a signed thing up there that you can email him and ask him, you know. So you know we just have to go by what people say, so you know I really don’t know ‘cause I never met Elvis.

00:36:32

SW: Did the Chism(s) ever talk about him?

00:36:33

DK: Well not much. Mrs. Chism, Miss Margaret I asked Miss Margaret and she said, “I don’t know.” She said, “I’m sure he did.” I don’t know if he did or not. She said, “He just was a tow-headed kid back then and we were too busy trying to make a living.” She said, “I couldn’t tell you every—how many kids come in here.” You know I have a picture of—see that picture up there of all five of those kids at the counter? See that wall up there [*pointing to a photograph on the wall next to us*], well see one of them—that tall one that’s Elvis. That’s Elvis, that’s Guy Harris, James Sparrow, that’s old Al Clark, that’s [*Inaudible*] Clayton and that’s James Sparrow up there on the top. I believe I done said him. But anyway now James is dead, Elvis is dead, Laverne is dead, Ebon is dead, so the only one left—and old Al Clark is dead, so the only one left alive is Guy Harris.

00:37:29

And he lives up there by me in Saltillo. He’s my neighbor. He comes in pretty regularly.

00:37:36

SW: And where did all this stuff come from?

00:37:39

DK: People just give it to me. Yeah, I—I haven’t bought anything. People just—except now the ball teams and stuff like that, that’s my little granddaughter who plays in them. But people just give it to me, yeah, they—. Ms. Janelle McComb, she was over—over the Elvis thing, she gave me a picture up there, [inaudible], somebody. This man here, he gave us this picture here. Of course he’s dead and gone. He worked at the—one of those houses up yonder, I mean one of those motels and—and oh some big movie star came in, in the ‘50s [1950s] and he met him and I can't think of his name. I’m sorry.

00:38:28

SW: That’s okay.

00:38:29

DK: Okay.

00:38:30

SW: And I’m wondering if you could just talk about how you—how has Tupelo changed since you’ve bought this place in 1981?

00:38:37

DK: Has it changed?

00:38:38

SW: Yeah.

00:38:39

DK: Oh it’s changed tremendous, it really has. Across the street, everything—everything over there is—all the old houses is gone. All the old businesses that was on the corner is gone. This building—this building next door it’s still here. It’s the original building. The building over there is the original building. The church behind here is original. All the houses is gone. It’s changed a lot. This used—over here [Inaudible] used to be a gravel road. [Laughs] But anyway it’s—you know it’s just grew with like you keep up with the—with everything. We’re supposed—we’re an all-American city and we—we do. We got—we got a good city.

00:39:26

East Tupelo has been mighty good to me. I’ve really enjoyed living in East Tupelo. And I say living in East Tupelo, I never really lived in East Tupelo. I just have a business in East Tupelo. You know we’ve been out here for—since—well forty-five years and it’s really been nice, you know.

00:39:46

SW: And Mr. Knight is there anything else you want to add about having this business or something you think is important for people to know that I didn’t ask you?

00:39:54

DK: Okay, well I think you’ve asked me pretty much everything. And I know I did a lot of rambling on. The only thing I can say is that I’d like to tell everybody that if you come to Johnnie’s we appreciate your business. We hope that you have a good experience. I got a sign on the door, if you’re not happy I got my cell phone number and you just give me a call. I’ll try to answer and try to help you and try to make everything right. And—and it’s—as Elvis said, we always try to take care of business. [Laughs]

00:40:23

SW: And Mr. Knight I just wanted to ask you real quickly, you said your son-in-law helps out around here? Did you say your son-in-law—?

00:40:29

DK: He just—he works here for me, yeah.

00:40:31

SW: What’s his name?

00:40:32

DK: His name is Craig White.

00:40:34

SW: And what’s your daughter’s name?

00:40:34

DK: Kristie—Kristie, yeah. Kristie, she worked for me for a while. Anyway she went off to college. *[Laughs]* And she left me and anyway she—she worked for me for a while until I fired her. *[Laughs]*

00:40:51

SW: It’s hard to work with family sometimes.

00:40:52

DK: Huh?

00:40:53

SW: I said I imagine it’s hard to work with family sometimes.

00:40:55

DK: Well of course this is all a joke, you know but she came in here and worked about thirty minutes and she knew more about running the place than I did. And anyway [*Laughs*] I sent her home, fired her and sent her home. Mama sent her back the next day and gave her a raise. Hmm—true story, as a matter of fact I’ll show you. Hold on. Are you through?

00:41:19

SW: Yeah, thank you for doing this.

00:41:20

DK: Okay, turn it off a minute. I—I—

00:41:21

END INTERVIEW