

ROBERT STEWART
Owner, Stewart's Quick Mart
Cleveland, MS

SUBJECT: Robert Stewart-owner & tamale-maker, Stewart's Quick Mart
DATE: June 23, 2005
LOCATION: Stewart's Quick Mart-Cleveland, MS
PROJECT: MS Delta Hot Tamale Trail
INTERVIEWER: Amy Evans, SFA Oral Historian

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NOTE: This interviewed on an excruciatingly hot day in the Mississippi Delta. The store is without air conditioning, and fans can be heard running in the background. Also, Mrs. Stewart is watching soap operas on television and can be heard tending to customers from time to time. When the occurring sounds are an obvious interruption to the interview, they are noted in the transcript

Amy Evans: This is Amy Evans on Thursday, June twenty-third, two thousand and five, and I'm in Cleveland, Mississippi, with Robert Stewart, who has a store here over on Delta Avenue off of Highway Sixty-one. Mr. Stewart, would you mind saying your name and also your birth date, so we can have it on record?

Robert Stewart: Okay. [My] name is Robert Lee Stewart, born ten, twenty-ninth, forty-seven [October 29, 1947].

AE: All right. And what's the name of your store here?

RS: Stewart's Quick Stop.

AE: Okay, and you say you've been making tamales for about fifteen years, is that right?

RS: Thirteen.

AE: Thirteen.

RS: Thirteen years, yeah.

AE: How'd you get to making them?

[COUNTER: 00:45]

RS: Well, just--my grandmother used to make them for us to eat. But I had forgot [how to make them]. So when I decided, you know, to do something else to pick up some extra cash, so I thought about that [making tamales]. I went back and got the recipe and started back making them. I just improved it a little bit. See, most hot tamales put garlic and pepper; you taste the garlic, and you taste the pepper. So I just kind of improved it, where

you can taste the meat and, you know, a good hot tamale. And the dough—the main thing, I can make four types of hot tamales.

AE: Four types? How do you mean?

RS: Four types. Add or take away [ingredients].

AE: Oh, okay. You mean, like a mild and a hot? Or do you mean like a turkey and a beef—

RS: I make turkey, beef—I make turkey now. I make beef, I make chicken. The chicken is your best hot tamale. Your turkey would probably be the next best one. Beef are kind of rough. And then, see, I like turkey because it's less chance of having it spoil the meat, see. When you make a beef hot tamale, you got a whole lot of times you got to throw away hot tamales. It don't take long; it'll spoil just like that. So I go with turkey.

AE: What makes a chicken tamale better, you think?

RS: A chicken tamale is better because it'll hold its spices better.

AE: Okay.

RS: Yeah. But it's—it's a long process. You have to grind the chicken up, boil it, take it off of the bone, grind it up. But now, it's a good hot tamale.

AE: Yeah.

RS: Oh, yeah. When I was making them like that, I was making like forty-five dozen a week. And was selling a whole lot of them. Well, I think I sell a whole lot now. But like I say, I got out of that because the state don't allow that no more [selling commercially without the proper license license]. So I don't have an FDA license. I have a food permit license, but it's only for me to cook and sell out of here [Stewart's Quick Mart]. I can't sell to other stores. So I just kind of let it alone. But it's not a — did want to--my three oldest daughters, they're not interested in too much work. My son, he's too young. But I'm—I don't know, I'm just probably going to make some more—just—you know, like--I make them here, and we sell some during the day. So I probably—may going to get a factory involved and—a small hot tamale factory. So that's depends, you know, depending on the money. My brother, he keep bothering me. He has had the money—the resources—for to deal with a factory. So I say I just give you the recipe and then you make the hot tamales. I have too much in my hands already to handle fool with. So—and she wants to retire.

AE: Your wife?

RS: Um-hmm. And she, well, she's able to work, but she doesn't want to be working all the time. But I'm going to talk to someone, I think—June the fifteenth, I think they told

me. And if I could get me a grant, I would open a hot tamale factory. We got—we looking at right now, you know, me and a couple of other people. We could put ten, fifteen other people to work and just make our own doing. But this—this—have you seen Rainey's hot tamales [Gentle Lee Rainey at the Delta Fast Food in Cleveland, Mississippi]?

AE: Have I—Have I had his?

RS: Have you had—seen his?

AE: Yeah.

RS: I make them about similar---the same way. Keep them red, you know. And see, the spices is what Rainey uses to keep them red. Now, you go to other hot tamales places, you find hot tamales white. Like, white. Not just say white, but like brown.

AE: Plain.

RS: Right. It's all in the spices.

AE: Well, I was asking Mr. Rainey, because I came across a guy yesterday, who only spices the water when he's cooking the tamales. He doesn't spice the meal or the meat. And Mr. Rainey says that he spices it all.

RS: Spice it all, um-hmm.

AE: Yeah. And so do you think that's a key to y'all's—to your tamales and his is the—

RS: I—I make a good hot tamale. I know I do.

AE: Yeah?

RS: And I could not—if there's any more—the hot tamale—the best come from the seasoning in the hot tamale. Everything goes into it in the cooking. See—see, I put spice in my dough, spice in my meat, I cook them in spice, and then also, when I was shipping them to San Francisco, I put a dozen in a one-pound bag and put the sauce in there with them and shipped them, I think, twenty-seven dozen up there. The man supposed to give the hot tamales to some guy to manufacture—to see how they taste to manufacture them—manufacture hot tamales. He had to send back for five more dozen because he ate five of them!

[COUNTER: 04:50]

AE: [*Laughs*]

RS: And that's a good way to sell them, too. With the sauce on the hot tamales. Like it makes them more moist, you know, when you boil them. Yeah, it's a--I make a good hot tamale. It's all in the—in how much money you want to spend. See a whole lot of people go the shortest way, because they don't want to spend no money. Because when you make them good, you know, it's going to take a little bit of money to make them good.

AE: What do you spend money on to make them good?

RS: Your spices, you know, like you buy the best spices and then, you know, you add in a little more than necessary to make it come out right. You could—you really could—when I would sell a hot tamale to people, I'd give them the spice already mixed up and found out that I had mixed the spices together—mix the spices—I could put the spices in the water. Just keep the hot tamale—gives it flavor at the same time. It'll always keep the flavor. But like, I could sell some hot tamales now frozen, and you go home and put them in a pot and boil them in some water, they ain't going to taste like nothing.

AE: Yeah.

RS: It take all the spice out of the hot tamale. But you boil them in the sauce that—that you carried with your hot tamales, they'll taste good.

AE: Yeah.

RS: All the time. And see, that's a little secret that I liked about when I started off. I didn't—I didn't—I had—I'd be [making them] how the recipe went, but I didn't like how they looked and how they tastes, see what I'm saying? My wife, she loves them. We'd go all over Mississippi trying hot tamales. But every one we found were garlic—too hot from garlic. See what I'm saying? It would never be something that people could enjoy eating. So, that's one reason that I changed the way I made them. Because the old people, they just made them with just garlic. Little garlic, little pepper. See what I'm saying?

AE: Yeah.

RS: And I [*laughs*] I couldn't stand that.

AE: [*Laughs*]

RS: So after we started making them, we just changed, you know, changed our way. And about a year and a half—six months—we got it right.

AE: Yeah?

RS: And so it's right now.

AE: And so, you talked about how a hot tamale looked and that yours are red and Mr. Rainey's are pretty red too. Is that something that, if you go eat somewhere else, that you judge a tamale by is how it looks first and the how it tastes?

RS: Well, because if you see one that's not red or not—got no color on it, it means there's no spices in it. They done added garlic and pepper and, I mean, it's not—there's not nothing in there, you know. But a whole lot of people, okay, put more garlic. See, because anybody's going to taste the garlic. Just know they just spice the dough, because when you bite down—excuse me—the first thing you're going to taste is the dough, so why shouldn't it be seasoned too?

AE: Yeah.

RS: So, see, it's your—it should be seasoned too, or it ain't going to taste right. [Makes sale to customer. Sound of change moving across the counter] So that's—it's—I'm—I'm going to show you—but you get a—you get a better hot tamale [attending to another customer]. I sold them in Chicago. I was making them—Oh, when I was making them, I was making them.

AE: You sold tamales up in Chicago?

RS: All over Chicago. When I was making them, I was making them. I couldn't keep them. There's a guy that come in yes—not yesterday. Last Wednesday, I think. In Indianola, I used to sell to [him]. But he closed the business down, but then he opened back up. He wanted me to make him fifty dozen, and I told him I couldn't do that. He said, "Why? You make the best hot tamales." I said, "Well, the state don't allow it no more. You know, I can't make them for you no more." He said, "Teach me how to do it." I said, "Uh-uh." See?

AE: Yeah.

RS: A whole lot of people think it's just very simple. Everybody can't make a hot tamale. I don't care what you do. It's all about taste. See, with the spice in the dough and the meat, then when it comes together it's better. Because when you first bite it, you're going to bite the dough anyway, so why not make the dough spicy. I used—I used to make my dough red, when I was selling a whole lot of them, because it just tastes better. It'd be I quite selling so many because I quit making so many. I don't make enough, but I still keep, you know, good flavor, you know. Keep them red. So it's got quite a few things [in it]. It's a—a good product to make. A lot of people just sell in the wintertime. They sell all the time!

[COUNTER: 08:46]

AE: Yeah.

RS: Sell a lot now [in June]. I'll sell about fifteen or twenty dozen a week. I think Rainey, he makes about fifteen or twenty [dozen]. And I like—next month, July, I'm probably going to need about fifty-dozen or more. See, because people come to town, you know. But I used to sell a whole lot of hot tamales in Chicago. I mean, a whole lot.

AE: Have you heard about a sandwich up there called the Mother-in-law sandwich that has a tamale in a bun?

RS: Say it has what now?

AE: It has a hot tamale in a hot dog bun. Up in Chicago?

RS: It's a lady up there that makes one--one hot tamale. I mean, she sells one hot tamale in a bun, yeah. Um-hmm.

AE: Yeah?

RS: One hot tamale in a bun.

AE: DO you know her name? Or the place where she sells them out of?

RS: No. I know it's out in the suburbs. Man, I tell you what. I don't know. But she's from down South. My brother-in-law introduced me to her, and she made one big hot tamale. About like that [makes hands into round shape about two-and-a-half inches in diameter] Sold for two dollars.

AE: Okay.

RS: And then put it in a bun.

AE: So she made it special for the bun—

RS: Um-hmm.

AE: --and made it extra big.

RS: Yes, she do. For the bun.

AE: Okay.

RS: And she'd used like ground beef. You know, like you put ground beef in cabbage? You ever seen that?

AE: Um-hmm.

RS: Take the cabbage and put in on there. Well, she did that. She'd take the hot tamales—she made them special for it and put them in a bun. And they stayed together—mostly meat, then a little dough—and two dollars each. *[Laughs]*

AE: *[Laughs]* What'd she put on it, anything?

RS: No, but she usually put cheese on it.

AE: Okay.

RS: See, I had a few with cheese. Taste pretty good. I didn't like it, but a whole lot of people like cheese. Like, you know, make cheese—eat a cheese hot tamale. I—I didn't like it. I—I'd make some of them. It wasn't hard to do. It just didn't taste like—I didn't like the taste of them. It's not a good idea. Because they put cheese on the hot tamale. Some people like hot tamales, they put cheese over it, you know. Some going to drown them pretty much in hot sauce before they eat it. So I just—I just cook up a regular hot tamale. And, like I say, I'll put mine up against anybody's. And I—I got a colleague that makes them up there—up—south--

AE: You make them up at your house?

RS: No, I make mine here. But I'm saying he makes his up here on South Street. Across the street from Super Value?

AE: Who does?

RS: John Williams.

AE: Oh, John, yeah. John's hot tamales. Yeah, I was going to go by there. Yeah.

RS: Now, me and him—all of us make hot tamales about the same. I can—I can make mine good now, because I don't mind spending the money. Now—now, his are good. As good as mine. Made the same way. You know, made no different. It all depends how—how much you put in. Other than that, it depends on how good you are. Do you like hot tamales? Have you ever eaten one?

AE: Oh, yeah. I've eaten plenty. *[Laughs]* That's part of my job. *[Laughs]* I've got to eat them. *[Laugh]*

RS: Oh, okay. But—there's some guys down there, Cleveland Lumber Yard—no, Bolivar Lumber Yard—they called and wanted some hot tamales. They say it wasn't hot enough. I say okay, tomorrow I'll make some more, I'll make them hotter. But I just try to make up one batch so that everybody can eat them.

AE: Yeah?

RS: See, people have high blood pressure and all this kind of stuff, so I try to have them with a little spice, but not too spicy. But a whole lot of people like them hot, hot, hot. I don't—I don't think they're supposed to be hot, hot, hot—the hot tamale. Some people say, "Well, what do you think it's called a hot tamale for?" Well, I don't know, they're supposed to be hot. But you want them hot, put some hot sauce on there. See, because you're catering to the public. See, like I say, a lot of people don't like salt, too much hot. Especially black people because they have high blood pressure. Most all black people got high blood pressure. So I have to look at that factor, too, see. So I make them with less salt and less pepper. So if you want, you can add you some more—you might add hot sauce to it, whatever. Sometimes I slip and put too much pepper in it, then I have a [special] sale. because when you get too much pepper, you're not going to be buying them. Because it's going to run your blood pressure up, so you have to look at all that. So I just kind of make them kind of mild, you know. Because you—some people, that cayenne pepper? I sell to this one guy, I have to give him a cup to carry his cayenne pepper; that's the way he likes it. Fire hot. So it's--I don't know. I just—I just eat them

AE: [Laughs]

RS: I don't like them hot.

[COUNTER: 13:01]

AE: Well let me ask you this, you were talking about, you know, selling to the black community and people having high-blood pressure and being conscious of that. How about hot tamales in the African American community in the Delta and the history there, and how it has really been a tradition that's been maintained in the black community. [Phone rings]

RS: Right.

AE: Can you talk about that a little bit?

RS: It's a—I got it. [Short pause. Phone rings again. Mr. Stewart answers it. Recording is paused for about two minutes.] I'm sorry.

AE: That's okay. You're fine.

RS: Now you say you want the—

AE: Just talk about the tradition of hot tamales being kept in the black community and it being a tradition that's been passed on through the generations and is still here.

RS: Yeah, I reckon it's just something they did along in the house, you know. And as time went on, you know, different—most of the blacks made them for home—for to eat, you know. Once a month your grandmother made some. Most of them could make them. And then they made for hol—usually, as we come along, we done the same thing. It's

just something labored. And I think that most blacks got into making hot tamales and selling hot tamales because of lack of money. You know, you found out you make them and could sell them and make money. Now a lady down in Leland—I forget her name. She's passed now. But she used to sell hot tamales years back out of her house. She had a sign on the door. On the side of the highway, you'd see a green house as you go into Leland. Turn off on [highway] eighty-two?

AE: Okay.

RS: And she sold tamales out of there for years. And she was really about the onliest one around here selling to the public. You know, in this area right there, I remember. And you had Joe Pope over in Rosedale. Now he started selling—making hot tamales and selling them to the public. But most of the black people have made hot tamales for years—for generations. You know, like I say, when we were little kids, my grandma just made them for us to eat.

AE: Well a lot of people say that, you know, that they came when some Mexican immigrant workers—or migrant workers—came to the [Mississippi] Delta to pick cotton.

RS: Um-hmm.

AE: And they shared that culinary tradition with the African American community, and it just stuck down here.

R: Well—well, yeah, that's what—well, see, my grandma, she was a [short pause] she was from New Orleans. She was French, something or other, I don't know. But her mother—her mother was a—a gypsy. So that's where she got it from.

AE: Okay.

RS: They was—my grandmother used to call them a rolling gypsy—say they were rolling gypsies, you know, so—

AE: Rolling because they're on the road?

RS: Right. Her mother was a gypsy. They migrated from Louisiana—from New Orleans down there up—up to this way. In, I think--I think she said in nineteen twenty-two. When they had this big flood [in 1927], they got separated, her and her mother. And her brother came. So we ended up back in Louisiana until after the flood, however long that lasted, she came back to Mississippi. But she got hers from her mother; she had a whole lot of recipes. And I didn't know—didn't take no mind until I got older. Like this chow-chow you see in jars that you see uptown in some of the stores here??

AE: Yeah.

RS: My grandmother, she used to make all that kind of stuff. And I didn't feel anything about it. A certain part of the year she would make this and jar it up and put up hot tamales the same way.

AE: And you're talking about he peppered cabbage in a jar, like that--?

RS: Um-hmm.

AE: Okay.

RS: You make it, and you put it up. See, I never thought nothing about that. Same thing about hot tamales. I never thought about hot tamales being sold to make money. She'd make them and put them in jars. I don't know how she made them preserve. I don't know. I didn't fool with that. I didn't think about that.

AE: Yeah.

RS: But she could preserve them.

AE: And you don't know—she just picked up these recipes—

RS: Did she pick them up?

[COUNTER: 16:44]

AE: Yeah.

RS: Oh, it was passed down to her.

AE: Yeah?

RS: Um-hmm. She got—she got them from *her* mother.

AE: Okay.

RS: Mm-hmm.

AE: What was your grandmother's name?

RS: Lela Mae Killen.

AE: Lela Mae Killen?

RS: Mm-hmm.

AE: K-I-L-L-E-N?

RS: K-I-L-L-I-N.

AE: I-N, okay.

RS: Yeah, she died about four years ago.

AE: yeah?

RS: But—um-hmm. She died at ninety-eight [years old], I think. And could eat all the pepper you made. The doctor told her, when she had her last fit before she died. Like two months later, they told her, “I can’t find nothing wrong with this lady but old age.” And she was ninety-eight.

AE: Wow.

RS: She had a whole lot of recipes. But like I say, you wasn’t interested--kids don’t pick up on nothing. It’s just something I have in mind—that I have to remember, you know. Sometimes, when I started doing it. But now I convinced them out here—out by Pace--before you get to Pace, [Mississippi], which is west of Cleveland towards Rosedale, Mississippi] out at Airport Grocery [Restaurant], they—have you ever been out there?

AE: Yeah, and I was out at the Shanty [restaurant owned by the same man who has the Airport Grocery restaurant] today, and they were making hot tamales, and I went—I stopped in there.

RS: Okay. I made one of them here. His wife—his wife told me---she said, “Excuse me, you can’t make a good hot tamale.” She said, “I’m married to a Mexican.” I said, “So.” You know, Mexicans know all about hot tamales. [I said,] “I bet mine [are] better.” She said, “Okay, bring me a dozen tomorrow over to the Shell [gas] station over there.” And she was married to the Mexican.

AE: Who is this you’re talking about now?

[COUNTER: 18:07]

RS: The Mexican [restaurant] out here. [Highway] number eight? The Halfway store out there [which is east of Cleveland]?

AE: Um-hmm.

RS: There’s a Mexic—somebody out there makes hot tamales. I forget his name.

AE: Oh, okay.

RS: Oh, yeah. He makes hot tamales—been making them. It may be the next place, not the Halfway Store. Halfway—not the Airport Grocery. There are supposed to be two stores out there, I think.

AE: Okay, okay.

RS: Yeah, but he got married to somebody. So she's married to him. And I took her some [hot tamales]. So the next day she said, "I give up." I said, "What's wrong." She said, "You out done him. I've never tasted one like it."

AE: No kidding.

RS: She said, "But I thought Mexicans made the best hot tamales." I said, "Well, you've got to better understand what I'm saying. Pepper don't make the best hot tamale. " See what I was saying about all that pepper and garlic? That's—that's—that's—that's cost—less cost. Pepper and garlic, see what I'm saying? And she just bragged. She bragged about me, and I told her, "Let me bring you some of mine, and you don't have to pay me for them." And so finally, after all that, I went there and carried her that dozen. The next days she's bragged about it. She said, "Yeah, I told my husband you beat him out."

AE: Oh, no. [*Laughs*]

RS: So she said, "He said there wasn't no way. He had to come see you." But see, it's—I—I—a lot people think it's a Mexican food. But I don't think so. I just think, like I said, the Mexicans probably passed on to the black people that come through the country. I don't know whose food we're eating.

AE: Yeah.

RS: But they say Mexicans are—I mean, hot tamales come from Mexico, but they've been in the black neighborhoods for generations. You know. And now Mexicans do deal with them, now. They've been making them for years. But I—I used to buy my shucks, when I was making a whole lot of hot tamales, out of Waco, Texas. And this guy called me—he was selling them by the bale; I used to buy them by the bale. He said, "Well, Mr. Stewart, I want you to make them hot tamales because you know every black man I know makes the best hot tamales. But I didn't know, shucks. But we Mexicans can make some hot tamales." And he was a Mexican. I was buying shucks from him. So I reckon it passed from the Mexican to the black, you know. It's—it's a—they--

AE: Yeah.

RS: You know, it's just another way to make them. When I was making three or four hundred dozen a week, I had about four peoples [working with me]. See what I'm saying? And we would go to eight hours a day.

AE: Wow.

RS: It's a whole lot of work, so we would work eight hours a day. So it was a whole lot of work, now.

AE: So now just you and your wife make them or do you have st—or do you have help still?

RS: I just make them.

AE: You make them by yourself?

RS: Um-hmm, I just make them myself.

AE: Okay.

RS: I don't—I've got some new stuff here now. And some dough I cooked this morning. I'm not going to do more than ten dozen, now. I'll do ten dozen a day, and fifty dozen a week. That's all I'll do.

AE: Yeah.

RS: See, I haven't sold but twenty. I'm going to make a little more next week. Got the Fourth of July coming up. And we're having a family reunion, so my sisters and brothers, they come from Chicago and everywhere else. So I know what that means. One year they whipped the devil out of me with these hot tamales. They wanted five-dozen to carry back. They want you give them to them at that.

[COUNTER: 20:51]

AE: *[Laughs]*

RS: So you know how that is. And I make them, too.

AE: So your grandmother was around to see you at the store here making hot tamales, yeah?

RS: She did. Yeah, because she's been dead like four years. I've been making them—I've been making them thirteen years. And she loves her some hot tamales. She said I could make them better than her.

AE: Yeah?

RS: She said, "Boy, you can make hot tamales better than I do." Because she liked hers hot. She liked hers hot. When I made some, I would make--I made all of them together, and when I got done, I took two dozen out, and I cooked hers in a separate pot and put all that [cayenne] pepper on them. Red-hot. She said it was the most—she said it was good. I

mean, red-hot. Because she used to—she used to eat a pepper off of the stalk. She'd stay out there on the porch and pick up a hand of peppers—like picking an orange or grape and eat peppers like that. So, yeah. I tried it one day and stayed sick for a week. From trying one piece. And she did that. She would sit down on the porch in a chair and eat peppers like you'd eat grapes. I ain't never seen nothing like it in my life.

AE: That's maybe why she lived to [be] ninety-eight. [*Laughs*]

RS: That's right. And didn't have nothing wrong with her.

AE: Yeah.

RS: I'm saying *nothing*. In all them years. She didn't have need no teeth. It's just like-- she pulled them out herself. Hot peppers. And she loved her some hot tamales too. Well, they say—I've seen—heard one time—they say, if you eat a pepper, it'll clean you out. So maybe it did her the same. Because they say the Mexicans don't have no trouble with high blood pressure than black people do. Form that hot pepper. See, we [are] totally opposite; eat something hot, it'll cause high blood pressure. See what I'm saying? She never had it. In her life. Ninety-eight years old. Never had it. And I can't eat nothing hot. I make those hot tamales, I'll taste that sauce [and] it will burn me up. Once it's cooked, you know, it gets hotter. I can't stand it. There's some people that will try to do that in this day and age, eat some pepper. But she—she ate her pepper.

AE: So was she proud to know that you were making her recipe or that you were making hot tamales?

RS: Oh, yeah. She asked how much did I change them. She said, "Well, you changed them." I said, "Yes, ma'am. I just improved it." You know, what I thought was improving.

AE: Had she ever written anything down, or was it just a recipe she kept in her head?

RS: In her head like I do.

AE: Yeah? You haven't written it down?

RS: Mm-mm. Just got it in my head. I never wrote it—see, it's just so much in it [that] you have it [in your head]. See, me and my wife were talking one day, and when I first started, I used to measure—so much chili powder, you know. Measurements for how much of this to put in. I don't do none of that [now]. I just take it and put it in there.

AE: Can you talk about making tamales? Like how you start and kind of the process.

RS: Um-hmm, yeah. There's corn shucks. Well, we'll go with the meat first. I just season it—spice it. Put enough spice in the water. You just have to use pepper, chili powder, camino [cumin], paprika, stuff like that, garlic [powder], onion [powder], and salt. Put it

all in the water and then put your meat in there. I let it boil until it gets done, then I grind it out. The same sauce that I cook the meat in, I save that for to make my dough [or masa]. If I have to cook some more hot tamales, because I only make dough like—if I ain't going to do but fifty dozen in one week, I only make dough one time. And I make my dough with the sauce. Now, I also cook my hot tamales with the sauce. But—and when it comes to rolling, once you clean your shucks, you use your dough and your—the dough come on [the corn husk] first, the meat come in the dough. And everybody can roll them; there's nothing to it. And the from there, you tie them up—if you don't have no sauce already made, you mix you some sauce and put your hot tamales in. And—I could show you all this.

AE: Yeah? Yeah, that would be great.

RS: Okay. I think I got some—I got some meat already done.

AE: Okay. Let me [*recording is paused for about ten minutes, while subject and interviewer relocate to the other side of the store, and subject sets up tamale-making area.*]

[COUNTER: 24:50]

[Sounds of fan, tin foil being torn, soap opera on television.]

RS: Hold on just a minute.

AE: Okay, no problem. [Long pause]

[COUNTER: 25:19]

RS: [*Standing at sink about to wash corn husks. Shows interviewer the plastic wrapper that the corn husks come in, which has a tamale recipe printed on the back*] You take the same recipe, because see, I couldn't remember everything that went in my grandmother's recipe. I had to search my memory. All I did was use some of this here. [Unintelligible phrase]

[Long pause as Mr. Stewart puts on rubber gloves and continues setting up to fill and roll tamales.]

[COUNTER: 26:18]

AE: How often do you make chicken [tamales].

RS: I don't [Laughs] I haven't made none in two years.

AE: Really? Well, they're the best, so how come you haven't been making them?

RS: See, because—

AE: Too much work?

RS: Because of the work. Because see, you have to de-bone it. You have to mostly use leg quarters and boil them and take out the bones and then grind it up. So what I did to make sure I wouldn't do no more chicken, I gave my grinder to one of my partners. It's just too much work. You know, if I was a—if I was still doing it for a whole lot of profit, I would—if I were using a whole lot of people [to help make tamales], I would make some chicken, some turkey [and] of course, some ground beef. But this way, I do enough of them. Because see, to be honest about it, the customer don't know the difference. You know? To be honest about it, the customer don't know the difference. They don't know the difference because all of them taste the same. Now, this batter--[short pause]

AE: Can I take a picture of just that right there?

RS: I never measure, never worry about it. They're all going to be the same.

[Long pause as he fills tamales]

[COUNTER: 28:00]

AE: Do you have a certain length or width that you like to make them?

RS: Um-hmm. Because I have a gallon bag that I put them in.

AE: A gallon bag? Okay.

RS: [To his wife] Hey, Mattie, come here a minute. Go in there and bring that bag of hot tamales out of the deep freeze right there.

MATTIE: Over where?

RS: Deep freeze.

[Long pause, about thirty seconds]

RS: [Sound of frozen hot tamales hitting the table.] There are some that were made yesterday. The reason I make them this length is so they fit into these [Ziploc freezer] bags.

AE: Okay.

RS: That's why I make it like that [holds up frozen tamale he pulled out of the bag]. [Short pause] Now, you're going to take the same dough and the same meat and make your hot tamales. And then it's just a matter of folding shucks. One guy wanted some

special hot tamales. I said, “Well, I have hot tamales already made.” [He said,] “I want mine full of meat.” [I said] “How much meat are you talking about?” He said, “Full of meat.” I do, “Okay.” And so I put some more beef in there—some shoulder—because that’s the way he wanted them. But when I told him the price, he didn’t want to buy them.

AE: Uh-oh. *[Laughs]*

RS: He didn’t want to buy them. I—I got a few customers that, during the hunting season, I make deer hot tamales for them. Like--

AE: Okay. Some hunters that bring in deer meat?

RS: And they love—they love those hot tamales.

[Long pause, about twenty-five seconds]

RS: What’s going on? What’s happening?

AE: What’s that?

RS: Oh, I’m talking to my brother [who just came in the store]. I just see him every now and then. *[Long pause, about twenty seconds]* *[To customer]* What’s up, man? Mattie will be with you in a minute. Mattie will be with you in a minute.

[Long pause, about twenty seconds]

RS: I’m tired of working with these. These old dried up shucks.

AE: Yeah, they don’t bend for you right?

RS: They tear.

AE: They tear?

RS: They can tear so fast, but--

AE: Do you know anybody who makes them—or rolls them in parchment paper around here?

RS: No.

AE: Have you had them wrapped in parchment paper?

RS: No. No, I have seen them.

AE: Yeah?

RS: Okay, now the only thing about that [unintelligible phrase] They don't hold flavor. They don't hold as much flavor.

AE: Yeah.

RS: But they say the paper's cheaper. You know, shucks now are high [expensive] because I roll them—when I regularly roll them---like so many a week--every [bag of] shuck[s] we open, we use all of it. But see now, I can't use this here [holds up a small piece of a corn shuck].

AE: Yeah, pieces too small to make any difference.

RS: I'll throw them away. But I know, the kind I'm working with here, take two or three and put them together and use all of them, see. Because they're not all that expensive. You can get a bag for about—about three [dollars and] eighty-five [cents]. And as you roll, like, you can get like twelve dozen out of a bag. So you are—if you sell them—if you're selling them wholesale, see, you know, you can make some money.

AE: Are you still getting your shucks out of Waco [, Texas]?

RS: No, I just buy them from out there to Lambert's [Wholesale in Cleveland, Mississippi, on Highway 8 East out of town].

AE: Okay, that wholesale market?

RS: Right.

AE: Okay.

RS: but when I was making a big volume, I would buy them by the bale, see, because it's cheaper. And I'd buy them maybe once—maybe twice a month, two bales at a time. But now I don't do no more than mine [for the store] and everybody else--I just buy them off of Lambert's. Mostly the one that rolls is me—it's just me. Since I'm rolling twenty, thirty dozen a week.

[COUNTER: 33:35]

AE: Do you think there's anybody—since there's so much corn being grown in the Delta—do you think there's anybody who makes them with from shucks from the field?

RS: I doubt it. You can't.

AE: You can't? Too many chemicals and stuff?

RS: Yeah. Right. They have—they have to have the fertilizer off. And like a friend told me—this guy told me out here said, “Come get all the corn shucks you want.” I said, “Yeah, and go to jail too.” I can’t use that because it hasn’t been processed.

AE: Right.

RS: This guy in Alabama, I made sure that he had a legit plant. He had a legit plant.

AE: What if you maybe just built —were growing a few rows in your backyard? You know? Would that be something worth trying or—

RS: Then--then you’d have to boil them.

AE: Yeah.

RS: You’d have to boil them.

AE: Make even more work, huh? [Laughs]

RS; Um-hmm. Right.

AE: [Laughing]

RS: Boil them, then find something else to clean them off with.

AE: And the work is part of it. I mean, you said that your kids aren’t interested in making them because it’s too much work, but do you enjoy making them?

RS: Me? Oh, yeah. I do. Mm-hmm. And after—I’d be enjoy making more. I enjoy just making them—like I’d be sitting down here, it’d be slow—business would be slow. I’ll sit over here and roll hot tamales. But, yeah, I enjoy making them myself. Yeah. And I’m still going to try to get me a grant. [To his wife] What now?

[Recording is paused for about three minutes]

RS: I could make them. Okay, the next step, I tie three to a bundle, like I have them here [in the bag of frozen tamales].

AE: Yeah.

RS: And then I boil them. I take the spices and then make it—everything made with spice. That’s the whole key, spice. Because there ain’t nothing in there but [corn] meal and flour and meat.

AE: How many do you keep frozen at a time?

RS: I put up about half. But then this [in the bag, frozen] is just about two and a half dozen left from yesterday.

AE: And when people come through and buy them do you—do people just know how to carry them home and heat them up, or do you give them instructions--

RS: Oh--

AE: --on how to do it best and keep the flavor in?

RS: Oh, I give them—see, what I do—[unintelligible phrase] I give them the hot tamales and the spice—spices.

AE: Oh, okay,

RS: To give it a little bit of spice in the water when they get home to put the hot tamales in it. Now it would be more easier if I would make them a dozen to a bag and had that spice already in the bag. That's what I was saying for Sysco—I made the sauce and put them on it so they could be sold, and then ship them with dry ice. I used dry ice. He's got about thirty dozen. Still working on that contract so he says. I ain't too much worried about that.

AE: You can spread your tamale love. Spread your tamale love. [Short laugh]

RS: Mm-hmm. I ain't much worried about that either. But yeah, it's a—I don't need anything more than I have right now. But the only way I see the says--at the way it could be beneficial is if somebody make me an offer, at least have about one dozen with sauce on them and ship them, a dozen at a time. Because this, just making hot tamales costs me. I can't hardly make them for to sell like that. You can't—like here, sell a dozen in the bag with the sauce in the bag and ship it to them. So I'm going to look into it. It may not—it may not be much. But I could sell them like that.

[Short pause in recording to take photographs, about five minutes]

[COUNTER: 37:35]

AE: Yeah, all your seasonings? Definitely.

RS: I don't want you to leave without seeing everything.

AE: [Laughs] Thank you. Well do you have any—

RS: I've got one [spice] missing.

AE: Oh, yeah? Which one's missing?

[Short pause]

RS: Now, this one. I've got one more missing [onion powder. Interviewer takes photograph of spices lined up]

[Long pause, about thirty seconds]

RS: This would be a whole lot better to sell this like this [one dozen in a bag].

AE: Are you putting a dozen in a bag?

RS: Yeah, this is my bag here. But if I had one a little bit bigger, I could put a dozen in a bag, pour the sauce in there, and then seal it, put it in the freezer and let it freeze. And you could ship it anyplace.

AE: That would be a good business.

RS: Yeah, um-hmm. And that's the only way that I can see that you could make money with it is with something like that. The Internet is wide open.

AE: [*Laughs*] Yeah, it is. Hot tamale super-highway.

RS: Mm-hmm. But see, that's why you need a factory—see, if you had a factory, that's the only way you could make the percentage—

AE: Yeah.

RS: You know, that chili they sell? Quick chili? Hawks chili [?]?

AE: Mm-hmm.

RS: That's how—maybe I could take this and do something with it. [Next few sentences unintelligible]

AE: People like someone else to do the work, I guess. That's the way—

RS: That's how you save—you'd be saving on it. Like I put some of—all this, put it with the hot tamales, pour it over the top. It would all be volume. Say like, thirty, forty dozen, and you've got plenty of sauce. Nothing to do with it but put it on the hot tamales.

AE: Yeah.

RS: It wouldn't be nothing—now, with the ten or twenty dozen that I make—once I cook it, I put the sauce in the bag—on it.

AE: Yeah. Well do you have any final thoughts about hot tamales in the Delta? And the history of them here?

RS: Yeah. [Short pause] They just--but I think—well, the lady liked them. It's a good ho tamale. A lot of people love them, you know. But this basically is what we call a bad time of year, you know. It's good. I see where--I could see where I could make and sell a lot of them across the country. See what I'm saying?

AE: The Delta's got something special.

RS: Mm-hmm. You know years ago, Lowe's hot tamales—I think it's—I think it's Loe's Hot Tamales in Greenville?

AE: There's a bunch—oh, Doe's. [Eat Place in Greenville, Mississippi].

RS: Doe's.

AE: Doe's Yeah, Doe's

RS: Doe's, right. That store Rainey has right there [Delta Fast Food on Highway 61 in Cleveland]?

AE: Yeah.

RS: I used to be there. There was a lady, bought from Doe's all the time. She used to see me on the highway. One day she come and asked me was my hot tamale any good—as good as Doe's. And I said, “I think so.” And then I told her, I said, “I don't know, but it's good.” She said, “Well, let me have—let me buy one and check it out.” She ate the one and said, “Oh, that's good. Let me have that” She said, “But I'll be back.” I said, “Why?” The old lady went home to get her iron pot. You know, those old iron pots? She took all I had in the iron pot.

AE: Oh, my goodness.

RS: And I put the juice over them. And the whole time I worried. But she gets—her husband gets them now. She buys them from Rainey.

AE: Okay.

RS: She buys Rainey's hot tamales now. She doesn't know. She doesn't know if it's me or Rainey.

AE: Oh.

RS: But she stopped buying them from Doe's. She come with there [to Rainey's] now with her own iron pot. About two months ago I was there. In comes the guy with the iron pot.

AE: Huh.

RS: And told him [Rainey], said, "Put all you got in there."

AE: So when you say you were over there, were you—did you have a cart near Rainey's or were you working at Rainey's or—

RS: We had that place before he did.

AE: Oh, okay. You had the store.

RS: Right. See, we had the store before he did.

AE: Oh, so now he's getting--she's getting Rainey's tamales—

RS: Right.

AE: --but it was yours she first got.

RS: Uh-huh.

AE: I got you.

RS: Yeah, mm-hmm. Yeah because see, we—he—he's been there about twenty years, so we've been down here and over there.

AE: I see what you're saying. Okay. What were you doing before you were in the grocery business?

RS: I worked at D& L [an automobile parts factory]. I was at D&L--Delta and--she [wife, Mattie] didn't work with me for a long time. But I was at D&L You know what I'm talking about? I used to work there. And then we came back in [nineteen] seventy-four.

AE: When you were up in Chicago?

RS: Um-hmm.

AE: How long were you in Chicago?

RS: About ten years. [To Mattie] We stayed up there about ten years, didn't we?

MATTIE: Huh?

RS: We stayed in Chicago about ten years, didn't we?

MATTIE: Who? Oh, twelve.

RS: Twelve? Twelve.

AE: Well, I've sure taken up a lot of your time. I'll let you all get back to your business here. But I thank—

RS: Yeah, well at least you got—you got basically what it's all about.

AE: Oh yeah, definitely.

RS: Okay.

[COUNTER: 44:06]

END