

**WILLIAM VANDIVER
C.F. PENN HAMBURGERS**

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Date: January 13, 2016

Location: C.F. Penn Hamburgers – Decatur, AL

Interviewer: Sara Wood

Transcription: Shelley Chance

Length: Fifty-six minutes

Project: A Hamburger by Any Other Name

START INTERVIEW

00:00:01

Sara Wood: And William if you wouldn't mind, just start by just introducing yourself and saying hello and telling me who you are and where we are right now?

00:00:08

William Vandiver: I'm William Vandiver and I own C.F. Penn Hamburgers in Decatur, Alabama.

00:00:12

SW: And can you tell me a little bit about—where did you grow up?

00:00:15

WV: I grew up here in Decatur, Alabama.

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SW: So do you have memories of CF Penn as a kid?

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WV: Oh yeah, when I was a kid my—my grandfather actually carried me here when I was probably three or four years old and we'd go sit at the counter and have us a Penn Burger. He didn't like onions but I always liked it all the way—mustard and onions.

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SW: Did y'all know the Penn family growing up?

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WV: I knew who they were. But I actually met Franklin Penn when I worked at a bank and they were our customer and that's when I started asking him did he want to sell it. It took

about fifteen years of me asking him about twice a year if he wanted to sell it and he finally said yeah I might sell it. *[Laughs]*

00:00:55

SW: So you asked him for fifteen years? Why—why did you want to buy C.F. Penn?

00:00:59

WV:

00:01:27

SW: I'm wondering if you could talk about you know I know that you've heard so many of the stories, but are there a few of them that kind of stay with you, the ones that are most visceral or memorable to you?

00:01:38

WV: I have one. A guy, he came in here and he was about the only customer in here and he was sitting here, this older gentleman, and he said, "This—this place reminds me of Germany." I was thinking you know he's going to say it tastes like strudel or something and I said, "Well why does it remind you of Germany?" And he said he was in World War II and they were in a town in Germany and they had been there for a couple days pinned down by the Germans and it was a—a company from this area. And they hadn't eaten in a couple of days and someone yelled out, "I sure could go for a Penn hamburger." And everybody down the line just went "Yeah me too, me too." He said, "I'm going to get one when we get back." And you know that's the kind of stuff that through the years this place has survived through the Depression, World Wars, economies, everything and it's like a cockroach. It's still here. *[Laughs]*

00:02:33

SW: What do you know about the—I mean obviously I told you, you know my predecessor Amy had interviewed some of the Penn family about the business, but what—what do you know—what could you tell me about the history of—of this place and C.F. Penn himself?

00:02:46

WV: It started in April 22, 1927 in Hartselle, Alabama. Charles Franklin Penn started it. He bought or had a carpenter construct a ten by eighteen wooden trailer. It was on iron wheels because at that time if you fried anything it had to be on wheels so if it caught on fire they could push it out of the way.

00:03:09

And he started that as a one-man operation. He looked around for different recipes and finally came up with this recipe which is a closely-guarded family secret. And he started as a one-man show and then six months later he hired Rufus Tieg, and Mr. Tieg worked for forty-two years I believe for Mr. Penn and he was manager of this location when they opened it in 1936.

00:03:42

SW: Wow, I'm just going to pull this a little bit closer to you. Okay, make sure—okay.

00:03:49

WV: Everybody has a Rufus Tieg story when they come in here, too.

00:03:52

SW: What have you heard about Rufus Tieg?

00:03:53

WV: He always smoked a cigar and always had a cigar in his mouth and anybody that is from the—the '60s [1960s] down age group will say *I remember that guy was in here with a*

cigar all the time and his ashes would fall in the burgers and that's what made them taste so good. [Laughs]

00:04:12

SW: So that could be the secret recipe?

00:04:14

WV: Yeah, we'll never know. [Laughs] Maybe I need to start smoking cigars in here.

00:04:19

SW: And do you know—keep going. I don't know if you—

00:04:23

WV: Well he would at that time, they bought their meat from the A & P which was right down the street. And he would go get the meat every day and they would put in a big pan with— with a sheet or towel over it and he would always walk down the street with that cigar in his mouth and—and everybody—everybody comments about that. [Laughs]

00:04:43

SW: Are there pictures of him here?

00:04:45

WV: Uh-hm.

00:04:46

SW: You do have—

00:04:46

WV: Right over there.

00:04:47

SW: Over there, okay.

00:04:47

WV: And his—his children, his sons which they're in their sixties and seventies now, they still come in and will talk about how they helped him here like on Saturdays. They would chop onions or they would work a window.

00:05:03

SW: So I wonder—I might ask them if they might want to be interviewed later down the road. Do you think they might want to?

00:05:08

WV: Oh sure, yeah, yeah.

00:05:09

SW: The sons.

00:05:09

WV: Uh-huh.

00:05:10

SW: I think that would be good to have.

00:05:11

WV: Yeah, yeah they—they're interesting to have—tell stories about it too.

00:05:18

SW: Yeah and I don't—obviously we don't ask people to give away secret ingredients or recipes but something that—and I was talking to you a little bit about while I was setting up you know in North Mississippi we have what's called the slug burger and it's a hamburger with—I guess it—some kind of extender in it. But could you kind of—for people who aren't familiar with this style of hamburger could you describe what a Penn Burger is, the hamburger here?

00:05:41

WV: It's a mixture and we use bread for our extender. And some people I know in Mississippi use a cornmeal mix. It's people have used different stuff as the extender. And—and the reason it's called a slug burger is because back in the Depression Era, nickels were called a slug and the burgers usually generally cost a nickel. Ours were a dime, they were a dime each or three for a quarter when it started. But they use that extender during the Depression Era to stretch their meat to make more of it and we still use the same recipe, do the same thing. We get our meat delivered daily which there she is delivering it [*gestures to a woman delivering the meat to the counter as we sit and talk at a booth*]. [*Laughs*]

00:06:23

SW: Where do you get the meat? Can you say where you get the meat?

00:06:25

WV: We get it from a local grocery store. They're a home—home-owned family grocery store and they deliver our meat fresh every morning and we mix it in the back just like they did in 1927 by hand, which it's—it's a workout.

00:06:39

SW: So I kind of want to jump around a little bit here William but you know when you—when you first purchased this place in 2010 I mean what was the learning curve like for you here? There's so much recipe and tradition and culture here, what was it like for you to jump in then?

00:06:54

WV: I came and I worked every day here. I started with you know I wanted to know how everything worked exactly. And I started with—I wanted to mix the meat and I wanted to chop

the onions and we chop onions fresh daily, too every day, the same way. We've got about 1950 onion chopper and it's a hand-tong—that we—we still use it every day. *[Laughs]* So I chopped onions, peeled onions, mixed the meat, fried the burgers, waited on the customers, and—and I still do that. I come here in the mornings now. I don't stay all day.

00:07:33

But I have nice loyal employees that are—that are here and they handle it. Most of them are long-term employees. I have a lady that's been here thirty-five years and one that's been here twenty-six and Sissy *[referring to Regina Nix]* there, the manager, she's been here fourteen, fifteen years.

00:07:50

SW: Yeah, I remember from the interview with Amy *[Evans]* that they had talked about how long the employees had been here. Could you—could you kind of introduce some of them by name and—and talk a little bit about—?

00:08:01

WV: Our—our previous manager, she just retired two years ago and her name was Lillian Coggins. She had been here forty years. And she's just a jewel of a lady. She had to retire. Her husband got sick so she had to retire to take care of him. And she did that and he died here recently.

00:08:21

But she's forty years of—of right here and she has plenty of stories about Penn's and—and *[Laughs]* the customers and—and everything.

00:08:33

And then Louise Terry, she's employed, she's been here about thirty-five years. And Valerie Kelly, she's been here twenty-three, twenty-four years. Regina Nix, or Sissy, she's the manager and she's been here about fourteen years. She took Lillian's place which is a big step to—to take but she's—she's hanging in there. And then I have a few employees, Brandi Kelly who is here now and she's been here four years, five years, something like that.

00:09:06

SW: I don't know how to phrase this question but it just seems interesting that I mean there's—you've had them with you for so long and they're so embedded into that history and they're passing on this tradition as well for not just the customers coming in here and—and remembering the family and coming in here with their grandparents or parents but it's—it's almost like a craft that's being—. Do you ever think about that?

00:09:29

WV: Yeah, I do. It's something—and that's one of the reasons I wanted—wanted to buy this place is that—that it is. It's a—it's a history or it's a craft of something. You don't find hometown burger joints anymore and anywhere I travel I try to search them out and go and see them just to see what they're doing and what they do because it's—it's a dying deal. You know everything is—is a franchise and it's the same from city to city and it's just a part of history that—that everybody needs to experience. You know and that's—that's what I want people to experience at Penn's. You don't have to like them necessarily, that's—we're not trying to be everything to everybody but at least try one and see what you think. That's pretty funny when you see people that come and try them for the first time, when they bite into it. They look at it [Laughs], *what is this?*

00:10:19

SW: I mean, why do you think people react like that? Do you think they're used to like a—because I feel like this is like the original hamburger recipe and then people went to all-beef? But this is still like an older recipe and I wonder if you could talk about—this is one of the questions I had for you is—you know when you can go to a place like McDonalds and it's a beef burger, but you—you come here—

00:10:40

WV: It's not really beef though. [*Laughs*]

00:10:42

SW: That's true. You don't know what's in that, right?

00:10:45

WV: You don't know what's in that, no. No, you can come look at our meat back there and it's red meat.

00:10:49

SW: But I mean why do you think this recipe has stayed around for so long?

00:10:54

WV: I think like you said it's kind of a craft. It's kind of just a tradition. It tastes different than anything else you can find. And you know and even I've gone places to try different slug burgers and—and they don't—they don't taste the same as our burger and I don't know that—because I'm biased to that, to this burger, this is what I grew up on, and that might be the case that—that you're used to what you've grown up to in your area.

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But I've had—I've got a group of elderly gentleman and they travel around and taste slug burgers and they go to Mississippi and—and Louisiana and they always say they like ours the best. I don't know, if they say that to me they might say it to every place they go. I don't know.

[Laughs]

00:11:36

SW: Well I feel like a lot of people I talk to, even people who aren't from Alabama, when I—when I talk about this project I'm working on everybody brings up C.F. Penn. That's the first thing that comes to mind. So it's almost like—

00:11:45

WV: Good.

00:11:45

SW: —it's a brand really you know almost.

00:11:48

WV: Yeah, it—it is. Yeah, you know and if it's been around eighty-eight years it's got to be you know we've got to be doing something right and—and it is a different taste. You know our grill we use, it's been here I believe since 1950-some odd, '50—'51 so you know it's got a pretty good bit of seasoning in it. Our fryers are late '50s [1950s], early '60s fryers for our fries and stuff and I keep repairing them and keep them hanging in there. You know that's—that's good quality, that isn't thin made in China stuff. [Laughs] So that's why I keep repairing them and fixing them and it's just good stuff.

00:12:31

That was one of the hardest things when I bought it not to do anything, just to keep it like it is and—and continue on the tradition. A lot of people want to know why I didn't introduce something—excuse me—like a healthy. In here we're not about that. [*Laughs*] We're about fried hamburgers. That's what we do.

00:12:52

SW: I can't imagine that's what people want here. Either they come here for a very specific—

00:12:55

WV: Yeah, they come here for—for—for a Penn hamburger and—and that's what I want to preserve, the Penn hamburger and mustard and onions. You can put ketchup on it if you want and red pepper mix.

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SW: So can you talk a little bit about the red pepper mix? That's something that's quite unique as well.

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WV: Yeah, we—we mix that here in-house, too. And it's a—just a spicy cayenne type red pepper mix. And it gives it a little—gives it a little pizzazz that people like. They started adding the red pepper. It was first a liquid pepper mix in the late '50s [1950s], early '60s but they said that the winos would come in here and drink it so they went to a—they had to watch them. It would turn up—and now I still have people come in and steal this. I guess they want it for their—for the logo on it, but I'll come in every day and there will be one or two gone. I think I'm

going to use like a—like the banks do, a chain on them you know. But you know if someone wants it we'll sell it to you, too.

00:14:05

SW: Do you ever sell the pepper?

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WV: We do when we have—when we want to replace it from people stealing it and that's why they're not full. We usually keep them about right here.

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SW: That's smart. That's too bad that people do that though.

00:14:17

WV: It's good you know.

00:14:17

SW: It's kind of flattering you know.

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WV: You know and someone—I was telling somebody about that and they told me that during the '60s [1960d] and '70s when you could smoke in restaurants that Waffle House had a stamped little tin ashtray that said Waffle House and people would steal them and they wanted them to steal them so they could have it at their house. And you'd say hey, there's a Waffle House. Let's go to the Waffle House. So maybe—maybe that's the same thing. *[Laughs]* I don't know.

00:14:41

SW: Who knows?

00:14:42

WV: Who knows?

00:14:41

SW: It could be absolutely.

00:14:44

WV: Yeah.

00:14:44

SW: It's memorabilia, too you know.

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WV: Yeah, it's memorabilia and we do have tee-shirts for sale, too if somebody would like one.

00:14:49

SW: And William you talked a little bit about the mustard and onions and there's ketchup and pepper. Can you talk about in terms of like the way people—I've heard that like as the years went on customers would come in and—and the employees would just know the way they liked their burgers fixed, and not just fixed, but like if they wanted them crispy. Could you talk about—?

00:15:10

WV: Yeah, we—we still—we still have a lot of that—that because the employees are such long-term employees, they get used to the people coming in and they can see them when they pull up out there. They go he wants two without, which without means without onions. And so they'll have them ready and have them sitting there. We have a guy who actually is an older gentleman and we call him Wednesday because he came here every Wednesday. He would drop

his wife off to get her hair done and then he would come over here and—and get his—get his Penn's fix. And we would see him pull up out there and he would want two without and a Diet Dr. Pepper. And he sat right back here in the back so when they saw him pull up they'd have them ready sitting—sitting, waiting on him and he'd just come in and be ready to go.

00:15:52

SW: His name was—you called him Wednesday?

00:15:54

WV: We called him Wednesday yeah and he actually—he just—he got Alzheimer's really bad and just kind of came on, so—yeah.

00:16:03

SW: I imagine that's sort of—and thinking about a customer like Wednesday, you know you probably have so many customers who've been coming in here for years and years and years, I mean is there a crossover? Do you see their family members come in? What's it like today?

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WV: Definitely, we'll have generations of families and that's—that's neat also that you know you'll have just like my granddad—granddad did, you'll have grandparents bringing their grandchildren in and they want them to sit at the counter for the first time and then they want a picture you know and I get a picture out front, a picture of them at the counter, which is—which is super that they want that.

00:16:38

And they're—they're preserving the Penn's and it's part of their family tradition to come here. You know people would—would pay millions of dollars for that kind of advertising. And

it's just—just something that's super. It's great that we have and I want to preserve that and keep it going for—for that generation of people so that the little kids up there now can bring their grandkids here. And that's another neat thing. I had a guy that came here that had moved away and he came in and he looked around and sat down up front there and he was looking. And he said, "I haven't been here in forty years since I graduated high school. And it looks exactly the same." I said, "Good." [*Laughs*] That's what we're trying to do is to keep it exactly—. And you know it's not something, I want to keep it the same for everybody to enjoy so that they come in and—and enjoy it.

00:17:38

SW: And you know William you talked a lot about why that's important but I mean I'm thinking—and I don't know a whole lot about the history of Decatur but I mean I'm sure things have changed since you've grown up here. But I mean, why is it important to keep a place like this in Decatur? Is there anything like this here anymore, not—?

00:17:57

WV: Not necessarily. There's—the—the Princess Theater right here which I've heard 1,000 stories, which—and I never get tired of hearing them but because when people start with it I know where they're going but I just let them continue because that—they want to tell me their story and that's great. I want to hear everybody's Penn story.

00:18:13

Is that back in the '50s [1950s], '60s and on into the early '70s this downtown area was where all the merchants were and—and everybody would come here especially on Saturdays. And I've heard thousands of stories because you could—the Princess Theater is right across the street here and you could collect bottle caps and if you had five bottle caps you could get into the

movie, the matinee for your bottle caps. And—and people would just drop their kids off down here and they'd go shopping and their kids would be running around and they'd say that they would come here and get them a Penn hamburger and take their bottle caps and go to the Princess and watch a movie.

00:18:53

SW: Do you know what they'd do with the bottle caps? What's the incentive?

00:18:54

WV: Evidently the—the—and I remember vaguely as a kid collecting the bottle caps that—that it was—the Princess would turn them into the drink companies, Coke, Pepsi, whoever and they would pay them so much for each bottle cap. And so they could get the—you know then I guess they would take their sack of bottle caps and the—and the drink distributors would come by and pay them for them. They would always—they said their parents would give them fifty cents or something and they would have—have their Penn burger and they'd go watch their movie. And I had an older gentleman the other day who was telling me, "I remember back in—when I was a kid and we'd come and went to the Princess that somebody had a sack of Penn's in there and man you could smell them and everybody was asking him for a burger." And he was over there just eating and grease going everywhere. *[Laughs]*

00:19:42

SW: That's—

00:19:44

WV: And another—an interesting fact about Penn's which is it's part of our history which—and I don't want you know people in the South—it was just the way it was. We had a colored window where the—back in that time the—the black people couldn't come inside

restaurants. And—and it was common practice for people but we were still the only business that's still in business that had such a thing. And they'd walk up to the window and they would order their burgers and they would put it out there. And I've had a lot of—of elderly black people come and tell me about that and—and they aren't angry about it. They said that's just the way things were then. They said—and then they'd tell me the same Princess story—that they would come here to the window, order their burger, sit outside and eat it and then go to the—go to the Princess and—and they aren't angry. They're just—it's just the way things were and that's what they tell me. It's just the way things were then. But they really enjoyed it.

00:20:48

And I like that—that they—they don't have any bitterness or—or towards us or towards the Penn's that they—everybody enjoyed a Penn burger.

00:20:58

SW: Do you know how long the window was there for black folks?

00:21:03

WV: Up until the '70s [1970s].

00:21:05

SW: Really?

00:21:06

WV: To the late '60s, early '70s and I've had a gentleman tell me, he said, "I remember the first time I came in here—came inside." He said, "I was scared to death to come inside." He said, "I came in here and I sat at the booth and everybody was as nice as they could be to me." I said, "Well, good." You know that's—that's good and—and you know that's something that—that it was bad. We shouldn't have treated people that a-way but it is a part of history and we

don't want to forget that history because I don't want in twenty years somebody saying blue-eyed people can't come inside.

00:21:43

SW: Yeah. And I think it's interesting that you bring that up, too William because I think a lot of times when we start talking about restaurants and nostalgia and history we forget that we're talking about a specific type of nostalgia for a specific race of—like mostly white people you know and that's something we do at SFA. We try to like—we talk about food as a way to talk about class and gender and race. And you know we all have this thing in common but we have different experiences of it. And so I'm wondering, you know do you—at the time was the location of the restaurant here? Where was the window out front or—?

00:22:16

WV: Uh-hm, uh-hm. It was—we originally—we were down the street a block on the corner there which we were next to a furniture company and the furniture company burned. So we had to—we moved here in '73 [1973]. And they had—they—that's when they took the—the window out was in '73.

00:22:36

SW: Was that—I think that Dr. [Franklin] Penn [*referring back to his 2010 SFA oral history with Amy Evans*] was talking about that in an interview that—was it there was some structural damage and that's why the restaurant had to move?

00:22:44

WV: Yes, the roof—yeah the roof was and—and—and his father, Hugh Penn was—was known as thrifty. [*Laughs*] He was not going to pay for anything that was unnecessary to say the least. And I've heard stories especially from Lillian who worked there at the time that the—the

roof was about half off and he would not close while they were getting this—this ready to—to come in and that it would rain and it would rain on—inside the building and would come in and they were there serving the burgers. [*Laughs*]

00:23:24

SW: And it would be raining on them?

00:23:26

WV: Huh? Yeah, yeah, it—up at the counter it would just be—they would still be in there eating. And they were—and it didn't faze them, no and—and that—before whenever it rained they had a little back door and the water would come in if it rained heavy, it would come in and it would be behind the counter and they had to walk through the water to serve the customers. And they didn't care. They would—but a lot of the—like those stools came from down there.

00:24:01

SW: They look nice. Were they restored?

00:24:02

WV: No.

00:24:02

SW: They're the original—?

00:24:04

WV: They're the original stools, probably '40s [1940s]. I think they had a—'56 they did a remodel where they put the formica. These tables came from down there—not these booths but these tables.

00:24:21

SW: That's incredible.

00:24:22

WV: Yeah, yeah. [*Laughs*]

00:24:25

SW: Can you talk a little bit more William about you know just your memories of Decatur growing up like what were the industries and how—how have things changed economically in Decatur just from you—your experience of being here?

00:24:34

WV: We were really more of a blue collar type area. We had a lot of industry here. We still have a lot of industry here but you know how industry has changed and become more technical. There was a—and there was also, we—we had a lot of agriculture, a lot of—a lot of cotton farms and I know Lillian told me that they were—the thing they were proud of is the cotton farmers would call in because they'd picked cotton by hand and they got—and the cotton farmers would call in orders for all their hands and to go out and serve them Penn burgers. They got 1,200 burgers ready in I think less than an hour when the farmers would call in those orders.

00:25:22

SW: That's—how is that even possible?

00:25:25

WV: They would—they'd get them out. They could do it. And another—one of her traits is every morning we'd pat the burgers out and she would pat them out and you could—she could carry on a conversation with the customers, with—with us the employees, with me, and at any time I'd Lillian how many burgers do we have right there? And she'd go, "We've 206." [*Laughs*]

00:25:50

SW: That's—it's just second nature.

00:25:52

WV: Yeah, yeah, uh-huh. But—but how it—to get back to your question on how things have changed, you know obviously the cotton farmers, they're still here but they've got a giant cotton picker that is air-conditioned with wifi and everything else in it. [Laughs] So they don't need 1,200 burgers anymore. But we still have a lot of industry. We're the only place—we're actually building rockets here now. And we're building the only rocket that's going into space now with the United Launch Alliance that's here. So and it's—it carries all the satellites and up into space now.

00:26:32

SW: So is that a big—that's—that's employed a lot of people locally here?

00:26:35

WV: Uh-hm, uh-hm and a lot of—a lot of engineers. That's who—we're—we're surrounded by rocket scientists, literally with NASA and Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville, and then we're building rockets here and they're building the new generation rocket in Huntsville, so we're—we're quite technical here now. And we have a—a lot of steel mills here, too now which are a new industry which—which again is—is more of a blue collar but it's more of a technical blue collar. It isn't a—the old pounded out type blue collar worker.

00:27:12

SW: So would you like today would you say that the customers come from all sorts of backgrounds, economic—?

00:27:18

WV: Oh yeah that's what neat about in here which you know you can find the different type—you can find the—a factory worker to farmers, judges, lawyers, since we're in the

downtown area, we get a lot of attorneys and you can have prisoners and judges sitting here beside each other eating a Penn burger and they—everybody enjoys them and we don't—we don't discriminate—never have. [*Laughs*]

00:27:47

SW: You get folks in here who are you know regulars in terms of eating in but then you get the regulars who pick up their lunch.

00:27:54

WV: Uh-hm.

00:27:55

SW: What—who would like—could you give me some examples of people coming in to get like a sack of Penn burgers and take out?

00:28:00

WV: I can give you a personal example of that. I used to work at a bank and I was a loan officer at a bank. And—and we were down the street here and we used to—everybody would want a Penn burger but nobody wanted to come in here because you'd smell like it. And so we'd—whoever was the low man on the totem pole would have to come and get the Penn burger order and I used—I loved when I wasn't the low man on the totem pole anymore and I didn't have to come in because from then on everybody said, “You went to Penn's didn't you?”

[*Laughs*]

00:28:30

SW: Can you describe the smell for people?

00:28:32

WV: It's—it's a fried burger smell. It's more of a—it's a meat kind of donut(y) smell. I don't know if when you came in this morning you could smell it but I did when I pulled up. I could smell them cooking. It's a—it's a different unique smell. People just need to come here and smell it and they'll smell like it the rest of the day.

00:28:58

SW: So you can still smell it after all this time?

00:29:01

WV: Oh yeah.

00:29:02

SW: You haven't gotten used to it yet?

00:29:02

WV: No, no.

00:29:03

SW: It's not something that just becomes—

00:29:05

WV: I hadn't and I know when I go home at night and put my clothes in the dirty clothes I can—the next day I can go in there and I can smell it. It just kind of hangs with you. *[Laughs]* But it's a good smell, it's not like a—you know like a cigarette smoke smell or—it's more of a sweet meaty smell.

00:29:26

SW: I have a few more questions for you William. Do you have time for a few more questions?

00:29:31

WV: Yeah, sure.

00:29:31

SW: I wanted to talk about a little bit about your background. So did you—you started in banking?

00:29:36

WV: Uh-hm.

00:29:36

SW: Is that what you did and then you—?

00:29:39

WV: I went to—I went to Auburn and I graduated Auburn and then I worked here for first—well I actually went to California first when I graduated Auburn and I worked for Warner Brothers Records for about a year.

00:29:51

SW: What did you do there?

00:29:52

WV: I was an Assistant AR person which is the—the AR people go out and sign bands and I was like a gopher for one of them.

00:30:05

SW: That sounds kind of awesome. Was it fun?

00:30:07

WV: It isn't like the movies. It isn't like what it's all cracked up to be, you know. It's a different—whole different world out there and from—

00:30:15

SW: Were you in Los Angeles?

00:30:17

WV: Yes, I was in Los Angeles and—and from—a small town boy from the South that's a whole different deal. And it was neat and it was enjoyable but it—it's just different.

00:30:28

SW: Did people ever treat you differently because you were from the South?

00:30:31

WV: They wanted to talk to me to hear the accent, which I don't think I really have that—I didn't notice it but they would go, "Oh, where are you from Texas?" I'd go, "No, Alabama," and they'd go, "Oh." So yeah, they would—I don't know if they thought that we were dumb or something but—but when I would tell them I went to Auburn and everything, oh Bo Jackson. [*Laughs*] That's the first thing and it's like yeah, "Bo Jackson. Y'all are good in football." Yeah, yeah, yeah.

00:30:58

SW: So how long were you out there for?

00:30:59

WV: I was there about a year I guess, somewhere around there. Yeah, our claim to fame was the Goo-Goo Dolls and we signed the Goo-Good Dolls.

00:31:09

SW: Gosh. That's awesome.

00:31:12

WV: Yeah. *[Laughs]* Yeah, I recently went there. My wife—I just got remarried and my wife and I went to California for our honeymoon—area and spent a while out there. And we were going on one of those tours, this was the—we went on the—it was called the Morbidly Dead Tour where you go around and see where musicians and rock stars and stuff died. And we went by The Whiskey and a guy said this is where famous bands get discovered. And he mentioned the Goo-Goo Dolls and I had to *wait a minute, no, it isn't. I can tell you all about that.*
[Laughs]

00:31:45

SW: Because you signed them.

00:31:46

WV: Yeah, yeah or actually they're from Buffalo, New York. But anyway to get back—and I came back here and I went to work for First American Bank and I was the loan officer there and I worked there for ten years and then I went to work for a local Chevrolet dealership as a business manager. And worked there for approximately ten years and then came here. I started restoring classic cars, too.

00:32:17

SW: Can you talk a little bit about that—about the classic cars?

00:32:18

WV: So I restored classic cars and I told you earlier I bought my first classic car when I was fourteen and—and that just—that changed me on that. I made a little money on it and to a fourteen-year-old that was easy. And it doesn't always work out that way. *[Laughs]* I've learned

that. But that's another business I had that I did is I restored classic cars and—and I would drive them a little bit and then sell them.

00:32:44

SW: So how did you learn to do that or is that just something—were you self-taught?

00:32:47

WV: My—my father was—was a big classic car guy and that's something he did and that's something I grew up with and—and he died when I was fourteen. And it was just something I guess when I was a kid I was always around it and I just got to enjoy it and—and learned a lot about it and feel like I knew about it, but it's something I know and it's kind of another thing that's kind of a—a lost art of people. Most of the people that are in that are older people and—and they're dying off.

00:33:24

SW: Can I ask you a question about that? You said that you restored that car, you bought that car at fourteen. Was your father—

00:33:32

WV: that was—no, he had died, yes. He had died and—and I guess that was kind of a deal, you know I had always seen him do that. And he had just died and I said that's—that's you know looking back on it, I said, "I want to do that 'cause he did that." You know I went to the people's house and knocked on their door and said, "Hey what about that car. You want to sell it?" because I had seen him do that numerous times. You know and I was—I was trying to be like him I guess, being—being the man. You know and I was the only child and you know it was tough on my mom because he had a couple of businesses also that he ran that my mom was thrown into.

00:34:13

SW: What kind of businesses?

00:34:14

WV: He had a printing company that—that he had run and he had a—it—it became *Auto Trader Magazine*.

00:34:24

SW: Oh wow. That's incredible. What was your father's name?

00:34:29

WV: Harold Vandiver.

00:34:31

SW: And your mom?

00:34:32

WV: Madge Vandiver.

00:34:34

SW: And so when you decided to—so you know you said that fifteen years, Franklin would come into the bank—

00:34:44

WV: Uh-hm, well I would call him when I was [inaudible].

00:34:47

SW: Oh yeah, yeah.

00:34:49

WV: I would call him and say, “Hey what’s happening?” because he’s a—he’s actually a psychologist, a school psychologist. And it’s—he’s a great guy. You know real soft-spoken, I’m sure you’ve listened to his stuff but a wonderful guy.

00:35:05

SW: Why do you think it took fifteen years?

00:35:07

WV: I think he you know he was brought up in this also and kind of the same thing—nostalgia for him. He had—his dad ran these ‘cause C.F. Penn died in—in 1958 and Hugh Penn who was his son and Franklin’s father ran these from then. And Hugh had actually started in the ‘20s [1920s] when he—when he was in school he kept the books for Penn’s ‘cause like I said he was a thrifty fellow. There’s plenty of stories about him being a thrifty fellow.

00:35:41

But he ran them and you know I guess then his dad run them and he wanted to carry on his—his family and—and I guess it took—too he wanted—he just didn’t want to sell it to anybody and he told me that many times that he’d had a lot of people calling about selling them and wanting to buy them but he could tell that people just weren't the right people to buy them. They weren't going to carry on the family tradition and—and he’s come in quite a few times and he and his sister both and—and said that they appreciate what I was doing keeping the—the business and thanked me for it.

00:36:19

SW: How do you think he picked you? Out of all these inquiries but I mean well you ask him for fifteen years so there—you were persistent but why do you think he decided on you?

00:36:28

WV: I don't know, I guess he saw that I had the—the—the—the—maybe I don't know if the ability but that I had the same vision maybe that he had and that I was younger and could do it. You know and he was—he was getting older and wanted to see it continue, wanted to see it pass onto get people—different generations of people to enjoy it and experience. And you know that's what I want to do.

00:37:02

SW: Do you see is there—like when you think down the road in the future of CF Penn's do you hope that it will passed down to—another—the next generation? Is there anyone in your family who is interested?

00:37:15

WV: Yeah, I have three children and they always you know say that and they—they enjoy it and they—they like to come here sometimes except if I make them work. “Ah I don't want to go there and work,” which you know they're young. They always—I said it with mine I'm sure Franklin said it with his and you know that's just a kid thing. *[Laughs]*

00:37:35

But yeah, they—they enjoy it and they like—they all wear CF Penn Hamburger shirts to school and everybody there knows that we own CF Penn and they—and they get Penn stories from people, kids in there saying, “I went to your dad's restaurant today,” which that's great that they're—they're experiencing it. My son wore a C.F. Penn sweatshirt to school yesterday and he said a kid came up to him and said, “That's your dad's shirt. Why are you wearing it?” *[Laughs]*

00:38:04

SW: How old are your kids and what are their names?

00:38:06

WV: I have Michael and Anna Michelle, they're twins and they're nine. And then I have William, he's thirteen. And then I have two step daughters McLean who is a senior at Ole Miss and the Maddie who is a freshman.

00:38:22

SW: And is she at Ole Miss as well?

00:38:23

WV: No, she was at Barry and then she decided she didn't like Barry so now she's— she's finding a new path.

00:38:29

SW: That's cool.

00:38:31

WV: Yeah, that's fine. That's what it's all about.

00:38:32

SW: That's what you're supposed to do.

00:38:34

WV: Yeah, that's right, that's right.

00:38:35

SW: And for the record, what's your wife's name?

00:38:37

WV: Lara.

00:38:37

SW: Lara. I've talked to her a bunch.

00:38:39

WV: Yeah, yeah, yeah we actually grew up together.

00:38:42

SW: Really? How—can you—

00:38:43

WV: Yeah, she's from here also.

00:38:44

SW: Can you talk about how you guys met?

00:38:46

WV: We met in elementary school, the same elementary school that my kids go to.

00:38:51

SW: What's the name of the elementary school?

00:38:52

WV: Eastwood Elementary. We met in elementary school and went elementary school through Auburn together. And we—we went out a few times. We were friends the whole time and we went out a few times in high school and went to some dances and stuff, but we were mainly just friends.

00:39:11

And then later about seven years ago we both got divorced on the same day, which we didn't know at the time.

00:39:19

SW: That's crazy.

00:39:20

WV: Yeah, and a friend of ours that we went to Auburn with she said, “Y'all need to go out,” and we both said ‘Yeah we’ll go out just for you know someone to go to dinner with and stuff.’” And we got married in July.

00:39:35

SW: Well congratulations.

00:39:36

WV: We were waiting for her—her daughter which they lived in—she lived in Huntsville at the time and her youngest daughter Maddie, we were waiting until she graduated high school because we didn’t want to—folks to have to—you know she’d been there her whole life and we didn’t want to upset that.

00:39:50

SW: That’s really nice. And what did she think about like does she—does Lara have—Laurie, sorry.

00:40:00

WV: Lara.

00:40:01

SW: Lara, sorry.

00:40:01

WV: Yeah, L-a-r-a.

00:40:02

SW: Okay.

00:40:03

WV: Like Lara but it's Lara (pronounced Laura).

00:40:05

SW: What did she think—does she have stories of C.F. Penn?

00:40:10

WV: Oh yeah, she had the whole—her granddad brought her here, also. He was a cattle farmer and excavator here, her grandfather was and her dad actually also worked with her father too and they would come here and they've all got Penn stories of—of when they were in high school coming here. Her dad played basketball in high school and he said they would always come here before basketball games. It was like their tradition to do.

00:40:40

And so a lot—we have a lot of class reunions and they'll come here and Gibson's.

00:40:47

SW: Oh yeah the barbecue, yeah, yeah.

00:40:49

WV: Gibson's Barbeque.

00:40:50

SW: And I remember hearing Amy's [Evans] interview with Dr. Penn and he's talking about you know there's Big Bob Gibson, C.F. Penn and another one. You don't do barbecue here and they don't do hamburgers there so it's nice to have—these two really powerful traditions in Decatur.

00:41:03

WV: It is. It's—it's—and people when they come into town they'll say they're going to come here and Gibson's. It's where they want to go.

00:41:10

SW: That's awesome.

00:41:12

WV: We ought to get some kind of package together or something you know a tourist package.

00:41:15

SW: It could be, you never know. I think we have an oral history interview with him. I wanted to ask you one more thing about Hugh because you talked about the roof. And you said there's stories of him being quite thrifty. Do you have any other stories you'd want to share that you've heard about Hugh saving some change?

00:41:34

WV: Let's see what I can think of—

00:41:36

SW: Something you can tell? *[Laughs]*

00:41:38

WV: Yeah, something I can tell. Valerie, an employee here, who is still here, she always talks about him that when she had a—she had a hysterectomy or something and she was off for a day and he would call her and tell her she needed to be up here. She could sit on a stool and do the register. But she had to be up here. *[Laughs]*

00:42:02

SW: Oh wow.

00:42:04

WV: And that he wasn't—he wasn't mean by any means. He took her and she would say that her husband had a heart attack and Mr. Penn paid for the ambulance when—because they couldn't afford an ambulance when they got the bill for it and he paid for it for her. But—but he wanted you here and he wanted you working. But—and when he would come up here every day and they could see in the reflection of the glass across the street him coming and they got to work, that there was no standing around when he came in. He didn't want any of that. You were working. He was also the postmaster of Hartselle.

00:42:47

SW: Oh I think I remember hearing about that, so he was doing both at the same time?

00:42:52

WV: Uh-huh, he ran three restaurants and was the postmaster of Hartselle, too. Let me think on a Hugh Penn story.

00:43:06

SW: Yeah and I actually wanted to ask you, so the first restaurant was in Hartselle and then Penn family was from Hartselle, right?

00:43:11

WV: Uh-hm.

00:43:12

SW: So how do you think—why do think this is the one location in Decatur that’s— that’s stayed the course? Do you know ‘cause I think they had others. Didn’t they have one in Birmingham?

00:43:21

WV: Yes, they had—for a while, they also had—they had one—this one when they opened it, it had always been the most successful even though over the—the Hartselle one. And I don’t know because Decatur was a bigger city, I don’t—I’m not real sure.

00:43:40

And then they had one—they opened one in Cullman in ’66 [1966]. They opened one in Birmingham in I believe it was in the ‘50s and that’s where also when they went to Birmingham since the—the burgers weren't pure 100-percent meat, the Birmingham Health Department told him he couldn’t call it hamburger. He couldn’t call the restaurant C.F. Penn Hamburger because it wasn’t all hamburger. So according to—to my knowledge of it he had the word Penn Burger copyrighted and had a trademark on it so that he could call it C.F. Penn Hamburger.

00:44:22

SW: Now did he—did he keep it just there in Birmingham or did he—did he change the name, I mean ‘cause people—

00:44:27

WV: No, he stayed in Birmingham and that restaurant didn’t—it lasted I think maybe five years, three to five years, something like that. And then he has also—there was one in Molton for a while and one in Athens for a while.

00:44:42

SW: Oh wow. But that—the Birmingham one was the only one to call it a Penn Burger that—he call it—?

00:44:48

WV: Uh-huh.

00:44:48

SW: That's so interesting.

00:44:50

WV: And the one—the Hartselle location closed in 2000 and Cullman closed in '97 [1997]. And the Hartselle location closed because the building they were in they—they found it and it had—at one point it had—had a fire in it and the roof had structural damage and they were going to have to spend a lot of money to get it updated and—and they didn't—and Hugh died in '97 [1997] also.

00:45:19

SW: Okay.

00:45:19

WV: That's when Franklin took over.

00:45:23

SW: I—I was at Willie Burgers the other day talking to Mary Lawson and she said she didn't know too much about the history but there's a woman in there who works with her named Robin. I don't know her last name. I'm supposed to go to talk to her tomorrow. But Robin said her mother used to work at the C.F. Penn's in Hartselle and she used to—she—her mother actually taught her how to pat the burgers out when she was at CF Penn because she'd bring her

into work with her. So that must have been—it must have been at least ten or twenty years ago if it closed in 2000.

00:45:53

WV: There's a historical marker in Hartselle.

00:45:54

SW: There is for the CF Penn's?

00:45:56

WV: Uh-huh, for the CF Penn, yeah. It's on the corner of the building.

0:45:58

SW: On Main Street?

00:45:58

WV: Yeah, right on Main Street there and it's on the—on the corner there.

00:46:02

SW: I'll have to find that.

00:46:03

WV: Yeah, yeah, uh-hm.

00:46:05

SW: I'm going to go out there tomorrow so I'll have to look for that and take a picture.

00:46:07

WV: Yeah, look for that marker, yeah, yeah.

00:46:09

SW So William I don't have like any more specific questions, I guess one big wrap up question and I sort of asked you this in a few different ways but I mean what do you think—why

do you think it's important to keep this—to keep CF Penn going for Decatur? Why do you think this place is so important to Decatur Alabama?

00:46:32

WV: Just I think it's—it's just a part of the history of Decatur because we've been around for so long, most everybody alive in Decatur has known CF Penn's as being in Decatur. We're just kind of part of Decatur. Everybody like I said, like I told you, everywhere I go someone has a Penn story to tell me which is wonderful whether it be the same story just in a different connotation from a different person but they have—everybody has some sort of Penn story whether it be good, you know or bad. I've had people say, "I hate those burgers. They're horrible." And I said, "That's fine, you've tried them though. [Laughs] And you have—you have a story about it. You know about them. And that's wonderful."

00:47:19

You know like I said, people—McDonalds would pay big money to have that kind of saturation in an area. Or you know whatever, fast-food chain it might be, it's just—it's like I said, it's a part of history. It's a part of Decatur history and it's just something I want to carry on and pass down so it can be a part of history. You know we're—we're still—we've been in this place since 1973 and it has virtually unchanged since 1973 whether it be good or bad. [Laughs] It is what it is. And I want to continue that.

00:48:02

SW: And I want—I just thought of something I wanted to ask you because you brought up Rufus from way back and—

00:48:09

WV: Rufus Tieg.

00:48:10

SW: Rufus Tieg. I heard that it started with mostly men working and then it—it—and now you know I walk in here and there's all women behind the counter. Do you know when that—how that happened and have you heard any stories about that or is it just—?

00:48:25

WV: Lillian, yes can say that. It was Rufus Tieg and Wallace Bowman were the main people and they were here from when it started in '36 [1936]. They were the two that worked here. Mr. Tieg was the manager and Wallace Bowman worked here and he was a real tall guy. And then when Mr. Tieg grew tired at in '64 [1964] Mr. Bowman was the manager then. And—and I think just the—the workforce, you know women started coming out around that area in the late—in the late '60s, early '70s to work and that's just kind of where it has evolved. When I work here everybody will say, "I've never seen a man behind the counter here." You know the older—and not—not the older because all the older people remember Tieg and Bowman here and tell the stories of cigars. Everybody has got a cigar story to tell. Oh but they—and—and neither one of them drove and they would ride the bus here or walk.

00:49:35

SW: Really?

00:49:36

WV: Uh-huh. And—and so they walked here or—or they rode the bus every day and we all—we have a—dang, you got to edit this 'cause I just—her name just left me. Sissy? [*asking Regina Nix, an employee who is known as "Sissy"*] What's her name that worked here forever? Mama Dale [*Laughs*], she—Dale Jackson thank you.

00:50:05

She worked here for thirty-seven years. She never drove. Lillian would have to go pick her up at her house or she would ride the bus or have to get a ride here. There's a picture of her up there. She had a—a big black beehive hairdo you know.

00:50:23

SW: Is she still around?

00:50:23

WV: No, she just died. Yeah, I went and visited her in the hospital when she was sick and she said, "I hope you're making that meat right." [*Laughs*]

00:50:37

SW: There's a picture of her over there?

00:50:38

WV: Yeah, there's a picture of her over there. And I said, "Yes, ma'am, I think we are. Lillian is getting us."

00:50:49

SW: Well William is there any—I know I've asked you a lot of questions but is there anything that I didn't think to ask you and should have or something—anything that you want to add that you think is important for people to know about CF Penn either now or the history?

00:51:02

WV: Just come try one. If you're in the area come try one. You're eating a piece of history when you come. And—and it's unique, it's—it's something to see someone when they eat it for the first time because it's—everybody takes a bite and they look at it and they'll look up

at the counter and then go [*Gestures*], this doesn't look done. And but it is. [*Laughs*] And we can tell.

0:51:35

An interesting story about Hugh again being tight, he—he—we don't have napkins because he didn't want to buy napkins. Everybody and when I was a kid they give you this piece of waxed paper that if you eat one here it's—it's a waxed tissue paper. It's wrapped in tissue paper and then you have a tissue napkin. And that was the napkin. And when I would come here as a kid and in high school, my friends would always come up here and we would sit at the counter. And I have a friend of mine that's kind of loud and the obnoxious type. He would always ask for a napkin on purpose. And they would whip out that piece of waxed paper to him and he'd rub it all over his face and go mmm. This works so good getting this grease off.

[*Laughs*]

00:52:22

SW: I'm going to stop you right there just for a second. Do you mind if I—I need to switch the tape out real quick. I just want you to finish that.

00:52:27

WV: Okay.

00:52:30

SW: I've heard stories about that but—

00:52:32

WV: The waxed paper?

00:52:33

SW: The waxed paper.

00:52:34

WV: Yeah.

00:52:36

SW: This was high school?

00:52:37

WV: Uh-huh and that—we still have a lot of high school people luckily that still come up here and—.

00:52:56

SW: Okay. So he would take the—I just want you to say that—.

00:53:02

WV: Yeah, sure. He—he would take the—take the napkin and rub it all over his face and go, “Mmm. This napkin works so good getting this grease off.” [*Laughs*]

00:53:11

SW: How did—how did people behind the counter react to that?

00:53:14

WV: They didn't think anything—they were just you know that was—here's you another one if that one worked so good. [*Laughs*]

00:53:22

SW: And now do y'all—do you have napkins?

00:53:24

WV: Well no, that was my—they had come in 'cause the health department said, “We needed some sort of napkin. And so, they had gone to a paper—a paper towel and I said, “Oh no. We can't have a paper towel because that—that's my memory and I'm sticking to this—this.” So

now if you'll notice there's no napkins around anywhere. And—and I've told them, "Don't bring anybody a napkin." We've got paper towels and I've got the coarsest [*Laughs*] brown paper towels I can purchase. And they're back on the wall back there under a thing that says *napkins* and if you'll notice, the man behind me just asked for a napkin and they pointed and said, "They're back on the wall," because that's—that's just—I want that to be a part of history that—that other people had. They don't have any napkins here.

00:54:21

SW: That's awesome.

00:54:22

WV: And if you sit at the counter they'll whip out one of those or point back at the wall, "There's you a napkin."

00:54:34

SW: Oh yeah. Oh my gosh I could sit here for another two hours and ask you questions about this place. And I'm sure you have so many more stories, but is there anything else you want to add—?

00:54:45

WV: Uh, not right off hand. [*Laughs*]

00:54:48

SW: I might ask—I'm going to go ahead and turn—. Oh, I need to just ask for the record, what is your birth date?

00:54:54

WV: December 21, 1966.

00:54:59

SW: Okay, I'm going to go ahead and turn the recording off. Is that cool?

00:55:00

WV: Uh-hm.

00:55:01

END INTERVIEW