

OLLIE GATES

GATES BAR-B-Q

KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI

I'm Candacy Taylor and I'm interviewing Ollie Gates. We're at Gates BAR-B-Q right now. I believe you have six locations? Is that correct?

Yes.

Can you talk about that?

Well there's not a whole lot to talk about. We've had six locations over the past 72 years.

Are they all still open?

Oh yeah, they're all open and they're all owned by Gates BAR-B-Q.

Are they in Kansas City?

Well in proximity to Kansas City, some in Kansas. There's some in Kansas. There's two in Kansas and one in Independence, Missouri and then the three in Kansas City proper.

Was your father George W. Gates?

You're going to have to talk louder for me.

Was your father George W. Gates?

Yes.

Ok. He did railroad work, correct?

He did several things but the railroad was the last thing he did before he went into business here.

What did he do for the railroad?

He was a waiter-in-charge. At the time they wouldn't allow black folks to be stewards, so he was granted waiter-in-charge, even though he was in charge of the dining car on Rock Island railroad, yes.

His wife, was that Arzelia?

Arzelia yes, June.

And so when they opened up in 1946?

Yes. He bought the business from another gentleman who owned it at that time by the name of Johnny Thomas. He bought a business that was already...he bought "Old Kentuck's BBQ which was already in business in 1946.

Were they a team? Did she cook? Or what was the set up?

No, the team was my dad went into business with another fellow by the name of John Hudspath and the barbecue industry at that time wasn't a reputable kind of business. It was an afterhours speakeasy kind of business and that's the kind of business he bought with another fella. And certainly they didn't get along so he bought him out. And they did all kinds of things. Some legal and some illegal at the time that they bought it. At three o'clock in the morning they would have all kind of activity going on. So he brought my mother in after he got rid of his partner and she cleaned up the mess and so we have a barbecue business today.

As women tend to do, right [laughing]? So, do you know how he afforded to open up his first...?

Yes, I know how he bought it. Of course, at that time, you couldn't, didn't, borrow money from the banks, you had vendor operators that would run by the vendor operating companies. So, we borrowed money from the jukebox vendor man. He loaned dad enough money to buy it and took the payment out of the jukebox that was in the place at the time, and that's how we got started, with a \$500 jukebox loan.

He had a lot of imagination and guts.

Oh, he had a lot guts, that he had. And a lot of determination.

Yeab, he would have to. It's so rare to find a black-owned chain restaurant, especially that lasted this long. Do you know if there were any others? Any competition in this area?

In the restaurant business, no. But there was a restaurant that was before us in the barbecue industry that was black at the time but now it was bought by white guys. That was Bryant's and they were in before we were but he died and it sold to whites so...we've probably been the longest black entity, restaurant business in Kansas City.

That's fantastic. So when did you first hear about the Green Book?

From you.

From me. So you don't what his [father] relationship may have been to the Green Book because you had just heard about it?

When it came under Old Kentuck, we bought the restaurant it was Old Kentuck, so it might have been even before my dad owned Old Kentuck. We changed the name after a period of time during his ownership.

Yeah, in my notes here, the Old Kentuck was first listed in 1948 in the Green Book.

Is that right, well dad bought it in 1946.

So, two years after, he knew about the Green Book, and it was listed up until 1952. But then the other, the one on Brooklyn Avenue...

Yeah, that was in 1951 the one on 19th and Vine. The initial [one] burned and so he moved it to 24th and Brooklyn, 1951.

Yeah, in 1953 it was listed until 1960. And then I have a 1221 Brooklyn?

1221 Brooklyn, 1958. We built a brand-new barbecue place at 1221 Brooklyn in 1958.

And that was listed until 1967, until the Green Book ended, it was listed. So from 1948 to 1967 you were in the Green Book. When they had the fire, do you know what caused the fire?

Yeah, negligence. The one in 1951 that we had was my brother-in-law and myself were cleaning the place at nighttime and we dumped some cigarette ashtrays in the trash can and we then didn't empty the trash can outdoors and we left the trash cans inside and burnt up the place.

That's horrible. You probably felt so awful. How old were you?

I was in college. I was 20, 21, 19, 20.

That's a heavy burden to bear.

Well, it didn't take long for my dad to let me know that either [laughing]. I had to quit college and come home.

[laughing] What were you in college for?

I was in building construction at Lincoln University at the time and so my brick laying ingenuity caused me to have to come home and build another barbecue pit so we could go back to business and went to business in another location at 24th and Brooklyn.

So, you had something to do with the some of the design and the ideas of the other restaurants? Is that true?

A little bit, yeah. What I claim for myself is that we made a business out of the barbecue industry and so I'm the one that packaged it up and gave it a new face, yeah.

So what about the offspring? How are you [Arzelia, Ollie's daughter is sitting in the room] related to?

That's Arzelia, my daughter.

This is your daughter? Ok, I didn't know.

My elder daughter.

You're named after...

My mother.

So that would be your grandmother, wow. So, she's going to be the next generation. Do you have kids that are going to run the next fifty-sixty years?

Arzelia: They want to.

But we have a couple of granddaughters, I tell them I have some great-granddaughters, and they say 'No, you don't have no great-granddaughters'. I say, 'yes I do.' They're great, and they're my granddaughters. [laughing]

Well you know it's got to be in your blood to do this work. You have to love it.

Right. It's a marriage.

So, do you think the next generation, do you feel like are they're going to stick with it, are you worried?

Arzelia: Well you lose some, because everybody's interests aren't the same, but the ones that are here, I think, are grounded to be here. And the ones that are bringing the fourth generation in, I think they're grounded as long as they have the example, the role models and the [work] ethic.

Do you know approximately how many customers you serve?

Let me say this, the population of Kansas City is approximately a half a million people, we consider ourselves to be able to serve that half a million people. The general population of the whole area is probably right at two million people, so we have a disadvantage of trying to service a million and a half people. And with the workforce of black...25% and there's still such a social problem that we have today, that that 25% is all the workforce that I can choose from. Because still the majority of the community don't want to work for black folks if they own the businesses. So consequently, you're in a morbid situation that you've got to try to service a million and a half people, picking a less than a half or a quarter of the population that you have to get your service people from. So in other words, white people don't want to work for black folk and black folks that you're picking from are going to the white jobs so we're in an awful position trying to get enough black folks working in black businesses. That's one of the reasons we can't expand in the areas that you can't get help from. And that's a fact.

[10:30]

And this has been true consistently, and it just hasn't changed, or has it gotten worse?

Well you know...has the United States gotten any better? It's a part of the United States. And remember now, Missouri has got a pretty good [bad] reputation anyway.

I just wonder if because there was such rigid segregation that in those years maybe there was more community and more black people working because there were fewer options, or the illusion of options...

In the old days, that was a fact, but today the population and the social implications are still there. So you might say you can do this, you can do that, you can't make people like each other and you can't make people love each other so the social problem that you had years ago, you're still going to have it. And you're always going to have it. So we just have to do the best that we can with it.

Well thank you for being real about that.

Well, we don't really have a choice.

What makes the barbecue so good here?

Personality. Personality. That's all. Barbecue is personality. What you like in a town and the guy that's fixing it. It's very reasonable, as you probably know, but the popular item is the way that you cook it and the wood that you cook it in, more than anything else. A lot of areas in the country you can't get hickory and oak, those are the basic woods, and that's the basic flavor. That's only thing that makes Kansas City any different than anybody else. We got a toe hold and we did good...Major Leagues has helped quite a bit to do that. Baseball, football, those sports [in audible] Bill Grisby & Mel Horman people like, and they've taken to barbecue in this area. It was steaks years ago, now it's barbecue now so. It's just a matter of taste and what you like. And you've got whole a lot of different tastes in Kansas City. When people say Kansas City barbecue, then that's just the area where you've got all different kinds of tastes, you can have your smorgasbord of different types of meat that you like.

Well I did taste your barbecue when I was here last time and it is special. My stepfather was a big barbecue...Tennessee, you know, and I did tell the difference but it was amazing.

Yeah, well Tennessee, it's very regional, like I say, Tennessee has a flavor, east coast has a flavor, west coast has a flavor, everybody, Texas has a flavor. They're all different...

But it's your hickory, it's the wood...

It's the wood, basically, hickory and oak, yes.

It was distinctive. It was really good. And when you started packaging the sauce, right? So when did that happen and how long has that been?

Packaging has been since about 1970...ish. We did that because the commissaries that we had to run, we had to make sauce anyway for the restaurant, so we had to hire the people to make the sauce, so they had some down time and free time so we started bottling it up, and that's the way that happened. So as the restaurant grew and helped to initiate the growth in areas where we weren't known before by putting in the grocery stores.

Is it sold just in Kansas grocery stores?

No, where in...it's sold about a radius of about 240 miles from Kansas City, but we're not national, no.

How much of that is feeding into the success or profits of your business?

It's a separate business altogether. The barbecue sauce business is a separate entity. We have three entities, the sauce business, the restaurant, and real estate.

Good for you. That's fantastic. Oh, I'm curious about the logo of the man. Can you tell me about him?

[14:00]

Yeah, strut man. He was created because we had to make folk realize that, regardless of how you dressed, whether it was in rags or riches, everybody can strut with Gates Bar-B-Q, and that's a strutting man. And he was taken from a thought of, I guess our togetherness in the company. We thought you could strut with Gates Bar-B-Q, be proud of it, regardless of what you got on. Whether you've got on a top hat, a bow tie or whether you're a working man, either one, or a sack under your arm, be proud that you got it. It really came from a song from Louis Armstrong, "Strutting with [Some] Barbecue."

Ok, didn't know that. Is there anything else that you want to tell me about your business that I didn't ask you? Or is there something you think we should know in terms of...?

What's going to happen here? Your guess is as good as mine. We've got some family still involved, I don't see much expansion out of town or nationally because I don't think the family has the expertise to do that in order for us to go on a national basis. We'd have to have a big brother or something like that, so I don't know what the real future of the restaurant business is for us in Kansas City. All I know is that if you don't grow, and you stay the same, you're dying. And so, it becomes a slow death, if you don't expand or keep growing, then you're dying.

Well, whatever I can do to help you to get at least...from my project. I'm developing a mobile app so people can come to see Gates Bar-B-Q, eat here and experience it. Maybe we'll play the "Struttin' for Barbecue" song in the app that they can experience. I did give your barbecue sauce to Henry Louis Gates.

[daughter] Yes, he's doing the genealogy, right? And he was over at UMKC for some project that he was doing there. But he had a program on television where he would just go around and get your DNA and find out your history and where you're from and that kind of thing...that's great.

Yes, I'm a Harvard Fellow at the Hutchins Center, Henry Louis Gates is at the Hutchins Center in Harvard and I'm a Harvard Fellow, working with him under my fellowship and so when I came here a couple of years ago, I bought some of your sauce and I sent it to him as a gift, because his last name is Gates. And I'm also colleagues with Cornel West and other people.

I like him.

Yeah, he's my heart. And he's very supportive of this project. So I just think it's good to have it in the family and share that if you want to expand or support your business and that we need to keep businesses like yours alive and growing. Because it's so rare for the black community and it's something to be so proud of.

Thank you. We have a program coming up this month in December that would bring all our employees in and I think you're stressing the point, *be proud of what you're doing and make sure you're*

proud of the company you're working for. So, I hope that pride is imminent in our breakfast that we have for our employees.

Thank you. Thank you so much. I don't want to take up anymore of your time. [END]

[signs consent forms]