

# DAVID SWETT

## SWETT'S FINE FOOD

NASHVILLE, TN

December 5, 2018 10:45am

*Thank you so much for doing this. I'm at Swett's Fine Food in Nashville, Tennessee and it's December 4<sup>th</sup>, no it's December 5<sup>th</sup> and it's about 10:45am. And we are here doing an interview with David Swett. Can you please state your full name and spell it for me, just for the tape?*

Full name is David Swett, D-A-V-I-D S-W-E-T-T

*That's [Swett's] an unusual name. Do you know the origin of it?*

Well no. I don't know the origin of it. What I do know about the name Swett is that it came from Cheatham County, Ashland City, Dixon County...in that area. Where my father's from. My grandmother was a Bell which was a Lucy Bell and she married someone named Swett and it's been that way since the 1800s. I think that our name was supposed to be something different, like Simkins, but they didn't change the name after she had a child, it was something mixed up back then.

But Lucy Bell was also the illegitimate daughter of Montgomery Bell, who was a famous person. There is a Montgomery Bell Park here and there's a Montgomery Bell School here in Nashville and that's on the Tennessee records. If you look up her name you will see that her father was Montgomery Bell and she was my grandmother's mother.

But I didn't get into where the name originated...I actually think that my ancestors spelt it a little wrong. It should have been S-W-E-A-T but somehow it ended up S-W-E-T-T. But we're not the only ones in the USA that share that name and pronounce it that way. There's folks up in New England, there's some more Swett's in Murfreesboro that I saw on Facebook the other day. There's two different ways to spell.

*Interesting. Walter and Susie Swett are your parents?*

Umm hmm.

*So Ms. Bell that was your mother's...*

My grandmother's mother

*So tell me about your parents. Because they had many businesses, right?*

Right. My father came to Nashville, and what did he tell me...1920 and he was 16 years old. He was born in 1904. He also said he came to Nashville and he had one dollar in his pocket and it was the first time he ever had the opportunity to eat a hot dog and they were five cents each and he stood there and he ate 20 of them until he went broke. And after that he met my mother here in Nashville and he worked, my father worked on the railroad as a Pullman person on the railroad and we would go back and forth from Nashville to Chicago. Then he met my mother and they fell in love and he stayed in here in Nashville. My father started off in business. He always wanted to be in business. His first thing in business was a jitney. A lot of folks don't even know what a jitney is. It's like an illegitimate cab. It was Uber many, many years ago. He ran an illegitimate cab and he also picked up numbers and did anything to get a start. And then he ended up going into a gasoline business, selling gasoline at 28<sup>th</sup> and Jefferson down here before he ended up moving up the street to that little store you see on the wall right there to 28<sup>th</sup> and Albion. And opened up a little store there. That's where I was...I was born in 1945 and that's where we lived. And from there he ended up coming up the street a little more here and purchased this property to build a little restaurant which was in the brochure I showed you.

They actually opened up this restaurant here as a beer tavern in 1954. And they opened up on an interesting date, September 11<sup>th</sup>, 1954. And like I said, they opened up a beer tavern and my mother decided one day to cook some food...something other than sandwiches. 'Cause they had hamburgers, they had hot dogs, they had French fries, so she said, "Look, let's cook some real food." So she started cooking fried chicken and meatloaf and greens, green beans, green vegetables and macaroni and cheese and candied yams. That was the original menu. And from that, she started that menu in 1955 which was about a year or so after they opened up the beer tavern and by 1956, '57 we kind of conferred it over to more, what Nashville likes to call, "a meat and three" type of restaurant. We went from there, we moved on into the '60s in the restaurant business and went from a beer tavern to a full-fledged restaurant. So today we don't even sell beer anymore, we more of a family-type restaurant. We only sell food.

*When your dad was a Pullman porter and he started his jitney business...it may have been illegitimate, but do you think there was a real need for it because there probably wasn't cab service for black people.*

Right. That's part of that yeah. And he also wanted to be independent. He was always independent. He didn't want to work for anyone, he wanted to work for himself. And that was it. The goal was to end up being in something that he could do where he didn't have to report to anyone, he was a very independent person. And I guess that's where I got my independence from. I would rather stand on a corner with a sign than to ever work a day for anyone. That's just the way I feel. Okay. I know that I like to be...it's not that I can't take an order, I just don't like the system, the way it works for some people and you know what I mean by some people. So I just work for myself and it works out well. I work hard, but hey, I'd rather work hard than to have to...I've had jobs before, it didn't work out well.

*I understand that. I work for myself, too. But I think particularly, at the time when he started his business that took a lot of courage and faith.*

Absolutely.

*What did your mother do?*

She helped him. She actually worked in the business with him. I will never forget one of the things my dad used to say because he opened up a store that was a block away from another store that was ran by a Caucasian person and he used to say that the difference between his store, and the guy's name was Blue [assumed spelling], Mr. Blue's store was that Mr. Blue's sugar was sweeter and his ice was colder. Which means, you know ice freezes at 32 degrees, you he was saying this because he was African American. This is what people told him.

*Yeah, it's...what's so significant about Swett's still being here is that it's probably outlived all those other places that said their ice was colder...*

I came along and started helping my father, well I worked here during my high school years. It was a family business. We always had to work, you know. The difference between me working here as a young adult and me working here when I was junior high and high school is I didn't get paid [laugh]. When I was young adult, I finally got to a point where I got a pay check.

*What was your first job here?*

Washing pots. I washed pots. I still say today, I'm the best part washer and the reason I'm so good at it is because I didn't get paid to do it, so I learned how to do it really quick and very efficiently, ok? So that's why I'm good at that particular job. So I came from the pot washer to the owner [laughing]. Funny thing, I was actually working at the blast plant, at Ford blast plant, but I came here as a young adult permanently. But I remember those days at Swett's in the '50 and the '60s, of course I came here in the '60s to work everyday.

*What was the clientele like?*

Clientele has been interesting at Swett's, always been interesting. We were probably one of the few African American businesses in Nashville that has a mixed clientele. Always had it. For some reason, the city of Nashville has been great to the Swett family and I'm talking about everybody in the city, I don't care what ethnic background you are. We've had people from all walks of life. We have as many Caucasian customers as we do black customers.

*And you can say that was true when your dad started?*

Right.

*That's amazing. But in the '50s what was the neighborhood like here?*

In the '50s the neighborhood, first of all, it wasn't as developed as it is now. And this neighborhood is in the process of new development. If you look around here, you'll see 'em. But it was an African American neighborhood. The streets were smaller they were not as paved. There were more people actually walking up and down the street at that time than there is now. It was just a little black neighborhood. Yet and still, what really opened us up to a lot of other people was after the interstate highway came through. See what happened in Nashville, the Army Corps of Engineers came along and built the interstate highway through Nashville and in the process, just before that they had the riots when Martin Luther King got killed so when they designed the highway they designed it to cut off North Nashville, in case there was another riot, they could shut it down. Okay? So what they did was, all the thru streets in North Nashville, from South Nashville to North Nashville on this west

end corridor of Nashville, there are only three thru streets, 28<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue. And so we happened to be on 28<sup>th</sup> so that kind of opened up for us for people who were trying to cross the city. So we had more traffic because there were all kinds of ways to cross the city before that time so it opened it up and we became more visible for a lot of people.

*Wow. Urban Renewal was a very real thing all over the country. When he opened this and it was in a black neighborhood, how did it become integrated. Did white people just know that the food was good?*

Back then, you know, one of the things that white people would say was “this was the food I ate when I was child.” Because a lot of...and this is true, they didn’t just make this up. A lot of white families had a black nanny and the black nanny cooked for the family. Ok, it’s not as prevalent today as it was at that time, so in looking for something, food, that was comparable to what the nanny fixed, they found Swett’s.

*It was comfortable. It was like home.*

Comfort food. Right. Comfort food.

*Wow. That makes sense. Can you tell me...[your father] had a gas station and a grocery store?*

[13:30]

He had a gas station at 28<sup>th</sup> and Jefferson and he ran it for some years and he moved up, he leased that property and then he moved up to and opened up that grocery store. This store that there on 28th Avenue. If you came off the highway here at 28<sup>th</sup> Avenue to come here, right across the park

*I drove down from downtown...*

Well right down the street there’s a store on the corner and that’s where his first store was and then they had another store at 32<sup>nd</sup> and a bigger at 38<sup>th</sup> and then we had another store here on this corner and then we have the store across the street.

*So how many businesses do you have?*

I have three. And then I’m involved in one at the airport.

*But those are not just restaurants.*

No, no. The plaza is rental property and then this store over here is a convenience market and then we partnered with another company at the airport, is Swett’s.

*So you’re always expanding, now.*

Moving all the time. Never stop, never stop.

*Did you learn that from your father?*

I don’t know, yeah. But my dad was a hard worker. My dad was like a focus guy.

*But you know there are people who work hard, all their lives, and yet never have anything to show for all that hard work. Because it doesn't mean...there's no guarantee. You have to have the foresight.*

You know it takes good luck, it takes a little luck and being in the right place at the right time and you have to also have good people around you, good lawyers, smart friends help a lot and I've been lucky to have that. I went to school with a bunch a guys that were all geniuses and a couple of them are gone now. They were just smart guys and I could lean on them for information and depend on them and had good lawyers. Been lucky, been lucky. I call it luck. Some of it's luck and some of it's hard work. But you also have to have luck to, especially if you're African American. Now it takes a lot to do, if you're African American, even today.

*Talk a little more about that?*

Let's go back to 19...I started here in 1969 and then we turned it around, my father retired here in 1979 and the restaurant is in that brochure I showed you. So my brother and I were here at that time, my brother, he unfortunately passed away and we decided to build this restaurant here. So in 1984 I put together a set of plans for this restaurant. And I actually walked those plans to every bank in the city for 2 ½ years before I got a loan. And the only reason I got a loan was because a nice person decided to help me. A Caucasian, a white person, went to his bank and said, "I want you to help this guy." And I ended up getting a loan to build this building. His name was Ben Richter [assumed spelling] and anyway, but it took me 2 ½ years to get a loan. We couldn't get anybody to give us the money to do this, but the rest is history. We're successful, we don't have any mortgages anywhere, we move on.

*But see that took, whatever you have inside or that your father gave you, to keep trying for 2 ½ years.*

Yes that drive, that drive, that's the thing. You don't let anything stop you.

*If you would have quit one month earlier...*

Let's move forward. Let's move forward to the year 2000. When I built the plaza. I still couldn't get a loan. I paid this building off. Look here. And the only reason I was able to get a loan on the plaza was that I went to a Belle Meade, Belle Meade is an influential district where all the billionaires live. Union Planters bank in Belle Meade, somebody told me, they said, "Go to Union Planter's Bank in Belle Mead one of their officials told me this and wasn't supposed to give me this information, but they did, they said they need a minority loan, and I had been all over the place trying to build this plaza, let me tell you what they told me, they said, North National has enough retail space, it doesn't need more. There is not near enough and I'm always full over here, well anyway. And I got the loan in two weeks. But it's tough, it's tough, but you can't stop it. And I spent a lot of time trying to...now today, the fortunate thing, if I wanted to build a plaza today, I would never...I could take care of that. But the thing is...

*But how many years have you been doing this?*

Since 1969.

*Right.*

It's hard. It's just tough for black folks. Even the ones that are working hard, trying to get it done. It's still tough for them. And you can see the mix here in my clientele. And this is every day.

*It's amazing.*

[19:15]

And I'm not mad at anyone, now but I'm just telling you like it is.

*Oh, I know. You just need to tell the truth. Right? We need to tell the truth. About how many customers, do you know, do you serve roughly a week, a day, a month? Do you have an estimate?*

A day? About 300-400.

*And how many employees do you have?*

I have about 20. When I can get them to come [laughing], not every day.

*How is it finding good help?*

It's tough. It's tough. We rotate shifts all the times because we're seven days. I've got a whole other crew that's not here today, some of them will be here tomorrow and some of them will be here over the weekend, so, you know, it's...running a seven-day operation is tough. And I've got some kids who have told me, they say, "Look, I can't do this, dad." So I'm stuck out here. Well I'm not still here *because* of that. I'm here because I want to be. Because I like to work. I really enjoy this.

*About how many hours do you think you put in a week?*

Oh, I don't know. I work about eight or nine a day, now I used to work 12 or 14, but eight, nine, I cut back to eight or nine hours a day and I do that about six days a week and then on Saturday if we don't have something special going on, I work two or three [hours].

*Yeah, I'm doing about 12-14 a day [laughing].*

This is what it takes. It's a real mess but this is what it takes. Now I do some twelve hour days. On Sunday, I did a twelve because the evening cooks didn't show up. So I did twelve Sunday. It depends on...it's not every day that I'm lucky enough to get out.

*And it's still good that you have your health and you're able to work.*

And I think working helps me with that. I really do, you know. I'm not a spring chicken. I see the folks, some people I went to school with, they're just barely making it now, and I'm up every day still doing it. And I have to beat myself up somedays but it's okay.

*Do you mind telling me your age?*

I'm 73 and I'll be 74 in March.

*Wow. That's amazing.*

And I'll be here next year if the good Lord lets me stay.

*You know I did that book "Counter Culture" and the women that were waitressing were into their 80s. And they tried to retire but they went back to work because they missed it so much.*

I like coming in and talking with my customers. I have a lot of fun with that. And a lot of them are, I have customers who are a joy to see and I have customers that are *oh my God*. So I have both of them.

*How many generations [do you serve]?*

I have customers here that at here in the '50s. I have a few of those left. In fact, one of them was here yesterday. One of my white customers who was here yesterday told me he worked at the Tennessean in 1956 when he first came in here.

*He worked at the what?*

The Tennessean Newspaper in 1956. But what he said, he tells me the story that he was the "Route Manager" and he was having trouble with the guys, and he's a white fella. He was having trouble with the guys going somewhere and not finishing, so somebody told him and said, "you can go out there at Swett's" He said, they go out there every day, and that was at the time when we sold beer. He said, they were drinking beer. He came out here, just walked in, didn't say anything to them, [they] saw him and knew who he was. Okay. But he ate here. He says, "I ate some food and he said he's been eating here ever since. I came out here to jump on them, and I ended up eating food and I've been eating here ever since."

*What about your most long-standing employees?*

The long-standing employees would now be Diane, she's out sick today and Otis. Otis has been here since 2005, I think, 2005 or 2007. He's been here 10-11 years. But the longest employees were, like I showed you the picture. They left here in the '90s. And they were here with my father and came up with me and trained me, actually. Those little ladies beat me up every day [laughing] especially one of them, one of them jumped me and you don't know how much I loved them. I mean she straightened me out in a minute, but she taught me a lot about how to do things. So that was what was so wonderful about her. And they believed in doing things the *right* way. A lot of times you get these new folks and show them how to do something and they want to change it. When people ask me "Why didn't you open more restaurants?" And I tell them that I'm too particular about how things are done. And I know that if I'm not there, it's not going to get done that way. So I just decided to run this one restaurant. And I've got a couple of other little satellite businesses, that I can watch and I can be there in a moment.

*So what are you particular about? What are your pet peeves?*

Everything. Everything. I like everything done the right way.

*You're on a computer system right? You're not using...some of the older diners wouldn't use computers.*

We do cafeteria-style and the reason we do that is because it's fast. And most of our customers, the biggest portion of our business is lunchtime. So we can get you through, get your meal in front of you and you can get back to work and plus we do a lot of buses too. We have a bus of 50 people, by the time the waitresses take the 50 orders, we're finished with it.

*Has it always been cafeteria-style, when your dad...?*

No, it wasn't when I came in '69. I talked my father into converting it because we had so many lunch customers. Now in the other dining room, we have a group over here that we do also, different corporations and different groups. That's more sit-down [service] over there. We're doing that too right now, as we speak.

*But that was your idea, to move it to a cafeteria-style?*

Yes, I wanted to be able to move fast. And also, the other advantage of this, is each customers comes down...in this neighborhood, you've got to get your money. And everybody pays before they get to the table. The problem we had with the waitresses, sometimes around the check. You give the check and they're gone. This way that doesn't happen. Now every now and then they lose something, not often. We get it, people sit down and then you come back and figure out something to complain about or whatever you want to do, but anyway we get that first, which keeps our bottom line working.

*That's really smart. So being a business owner...what's your biggest struggle? Is it health insurance? Is it managing employees?*

[26:20]

Help, help.

*Just getting good help.*

I don't have a struggle other than help. I know all about what we're doing. I know where to get any product we need, I buy product. We're fortunate to have resources. If a product we use a lot of if it is on sale, we'll buy a lot of it. We make money on buying...one of the things we do is that we try to purchase stuff at the best price. Even though we're one operation, we don't have a franchise, we're still searching out for the best price, because those are the things that...a lot of times we have no control over payroll but you do have control over who you buy it from and the price so you've got a little control there.

*That's why Walmart is...*

Yeah, yeah, exactly. Payroll is going to be payroll. Matching the fight with money for the government, you've got no choice. You can't control...well you try to do the best you can to control the utilities, but the utilities always go up.

*But see you never had a business degree and you've figured this out on your own?*

Well I've had great teachers. My mother and father, they taught themselves and they passed it on. It's mostly just common sense. And there's no course...now there's universities that teaches you how to watch everything, you've got to watch everything. It's not that you watch some things. You watch everything. Everything's watched.

*So do you have children?*

I have four children.

*Wow. Ok. And do you think they'll pick up...*

I have a daughter that's interested in coming here maybe. The problem is that she lives in Alabama and she's thinking about coming back to Nashville. She really likes the business but she has her profession and she'd like to try to come back here and do both.

*What do your children do?*

Well, I have two sons, they're in the food business also. They have a company called "Fresh Chefs" [assumed spelling] and what they do is that they do institutional food, they help a juvenile center and do three meals a day for it. And they have another vocational school, these are troubled children they do the food for. And then I have another son who lives in Houston who teaches school and then my daughter is a dentist in Alabama. They youngest one, the professor, is the one that couldn't do this. He said, "Y'all work too many hours and too hard here!" So anyway.

*It's not for everybody. And people assume that anybody can do it and we know that's not true.*

It's not for everybody, and I know that. And if it's not something that you want to do, you've definitely got no business here. If you want to get beat up the first day, hear? Because it's hard.

*Had you heard of the Green Book?*

I saw the advertisement on TV for the movie and I was wondering about the *Green Book* and then when you guys, the lady called me from CBS [Sunday Morning], then I started looking into it. And I did look up some things about the *Green Book* and I saw Swett's in there. The '61 edition, I think it was. You know, I haven't been able to get a copy of the '61 issue. That's hard to get. There are other editions that you can get copies of, but that one is hard.

*Yeab, you know, I'm trying to see what years, I thought I had a note here. I think it was 1960 and 1961. But you have no idea why your father listed it or how this business got listed in the Green Book?*

No, I don't know how that happened. However, I was quite surprised, but I'm not really totally surprised because we'd been around a while and in '60, '61 we were only like seven years old, the company, but I do know that there weren't a lot of places that black folks could go to without a problem. Everything wasn't open, because when I was younger, it was like in high school, we couldn't go to certain places, so I remember that time. I'm not surprised, but I am surprised. And I say this, I'm surprised but not surprised that somebody had a book. And I probably saw it once or twice in my life, but [there's been] a lot of time between now and then and [probably] forgot about it. But it's really interesting. I intend to go see the movie.

*Hmm mmm. Well from what I hear the movie really doesn't have anything to do with the Green Book. They interviewed me, Universal Studios to talk about the Green Book, because most people left the theater thinking, "I still don't know...what is the Green Book." So they kind of used that name because of the popularity of the Green Book but it's really about a buddy road trip.*

*But I wanted to ask you [customer comes to the table] I was wondering if your father had a name for his jitney business?*

No I don't.

*Because there were cab stands and taxi services listed in the Green Book too, so I just wondered if maybe he was...*

I doubt it because it was illegal.

*Well, I'm sure most of them were. You know because I don't think they gave licenses to any [black people]. And there were taxi stands and cab services. What was the name of his grocery store?*

Swett's. Swett's Cash Market.

*Ok, I'll look and see if that was in there.*

Yeah, in fact this sign over here has the phone number for Swett's Cash Market.

*Ok, I'll take a look at that. You know this book was in publication for almost thirty years and it's really hard to find any paper work or direct link from the Green Book to these businesses. So I'm always looking for that. Do you know, when your father passed, did you save any of his records?*

What type of records?

*Any kind of business records that may have linked this restaurant to the Green Book?*

I don't think so. I really don't. You know, it's kind of like, when integration came, folks were so happy a lot of that stuff, kind of like a puff of smoke that went away and they forgot all about here and they went over to the other side and a lot of black businesses, too many black businesses that suffered from integration and never survived it. That's one of the things you learned about black businesses.

[33:32]

*It was a double-edged sword, right? And I think maybe the reason why you were able to beat the odds was because you were already integrated.*

Yeah, yeah. We were already integrated. The reason for that was because like I told you, was the folks wanted to get back to the nanny in the house. Because I heard that so many times. "This reminds me of the food Ms. so and so cooked for us when we were kids." And the tradition continued. But you see that Nashville has been real good to the Swett family.

*It's bittersweet, I guess.*

We are a little different operation that survived in the South. In fact, they call these restaurants a "meat and three" and you'll see why because if you look at the food, the meat's here and a bunch of vegetables and you choose what you want.

*So what's your specialty here?*

One of our specials is fried chicken. We do a beef tip, we do a rotisserie chicken. We do country fried steaks, pork chops and gravy, meatloaf, turnip greens, mac and cheese, candied yams, green beans...all the comfort food. Fried corn, boiled corn, we have some days, okra, squash, pinto beans, we do different beans from day to day and apples, stewed...

*Was your mother a good cook?*

Great cook.

*So was it her recipes that...?*

A lot of them are. A lot of them are new. Some of the things are new, some of them are the same thing that they did. People have asked me over the years, "Well, when are you going to change the menu?" And my answer is "When it stops selling." The same menu has been selling for 60-some years. No need to change it. I'm not going to change it. I'm going to roll all the way to the end with it.

*Please don't. Please don't. [laughing]*

We just do the same thing. And what makes it easy is that we do the same thing over and over every day. It's called Groundhogs Day [laughing]. If you're familiar with that, yeah.

*It's amazing. I'm sure you know how special it is because you know how much work it takes to keep this going, but it's even so much more special that you're a black-owned business, family-owned business for this long. Most restaurants won't last a year.*

Yeah, it's the hardest business in the world. No doubt about it. It's a very difficult business. I think I read an article back here that 65% of new restaurants fail the first year, 80-something [%] the second year and then five years, it's right at 90[%]. Only 10% survive. Something to that numbers. That's close to what I remember.

*That sounds right. I've heard those numbers too. Since 1954, that's incredible.*

Oh, we've been here a while, yeah we've been around a while. It's amazing. I look back at my time here and I can't believe all these years have passed. I'm like "Wow!" And I'm still going. I've got to keep going. I'm not going to stop. Now we do something interesting here at Swett's, we also close up in December.

*For how long?*

We close December 24<sup>th</sup> to January 2<sup>nd</sup>. We do that every year and my customer base...we put up signs and they understand. We work from January 2<sup>nd</sup> nonstop until December 24<sup>th</sup>.

*So you give your employees Christmas off...*

Yeah, everybody. We give them a little Christmas bonus and give them their checks and everybody goes home. Especially the base employees, we take care of them. And we take a week off and come back to work. It's very important, because it can be long. I get happy this time of year because we're in December. We've got a lot of work to finish up. We've got a lot big jobs coming up this next week. Jobs for 200 people, 300 people, stuff like that.

*like catering...?*

Right. We have several of those coming up next week. But anyway, I get happy the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> because I have everything out the way. And then we go on vacation, enjoy the kids, and the grandkids.

*Wow, this is amazing.*

*38:35*

You want to know how I got to Swett's? I'll tell you that. In 1969, how I ended up here at Swett's. You see I was working at Ford Blast Plant and what happened was, my parents had spent all of their life, my parents had nine children and had spent their entire life working – never took a vacation, and their church was going to Jerusalem and they wanted to go. So, at Ford, what they did was, they gave us these jobs, at Ford Blast Plant in the '60s and the only reason they hired us [black people] is because the government forced them to hire some African Americans clause, they had 1800 employees and less than one percent [was] black. So they gave much of a job. They would work us 90 days and then they would lay us off. If they kept you on the roll past 89 days you became a permanent employee, so they'd keep you 90 days and then they'd lay you off, every year. And a lot of people went through that for years until they ended up permanent employees. Well, I knew that was going to happen, okay? So I told my parents, I said, "Look, y'all need to go on this vacation, you've been working hard all your life." Of course the family came together and we all agreed, I said, "I'll come there and I'll help. I can do this. It's no big deal. Okay?" Not knowing that I was never going to leave. I didn't know that part, ok? So I came over here and helped them stayed with them a week or so. Then they went to Jerusalem and they were gone two weeks, or three weeks or something. When they came back, my father said, "Well, you did a pretty good job. Why don't you just stay here and I'll let your mother go home, because she was happy with that. So I stayed here with him and then I never left. So that's how I ended up here and we started in the process of changing the restaurant around to make it more efficient. Of course that was like bumping your head up against a wall, working for my father...

*How old were you?*

I was 23.

*Ok, but you had gone to Ford and realized that you're not...you don't want to take orders from anybody else.*

It was just a horrible, horrible place to work at because the people, they didn't have any respect for African Americans, okay. Not the kind of respect that they needed to have. They would do awful things to you. They would go upstairs to the catwalk, throw water on you, buckets of water, and they'd do all kinds of stupid stuff...they called it. It wasn't the place that I wanted to be. I didn't have the demeanor for it, either. Because I was young, strong, and very radical. I may have hurt someone because I remember when I was a kid, we had sit-ins. I went to college a couple of years and I would never volunteer for that because I knew that I wasn't the kind of person and didn't have the kind of personality for someone to spit on me. If somebody spit on me, we're gonna fight, okay? That's just the way I...so I would not volunteer. They were looking for volunteers at the school, but that wasn't me. And I know who I am, here, so I said, "Nope, ain't doing that, here. Y'all go right ahead. I'm proud of you. Keep working."

*Wow. And I guess you had another option, right?*

Yep and that came along and I realized that this is where I'm supposed to be. I didn't get out of here. I'm stuck here [laughing]. I didn't have enough sense to get out of here. I always say about my last two children, I told them, "Maybe I should have kept one of the like me." I got them formal educations, them last two and they don't want to be bothered with this [laughing].

*Did you ever want to do anything else?*

No, not after I got here. No. This is me. It's what I like to do. I do it. I like to be around people and I like to talk to people. I like to meet people, you know. I like being my own boss. Simple as that. Not that I can't take an order. I take orders all the time from the customers. But I like being my own boss, but it's hard work.

*But it takes a certain kind of person to, you know, keep this ship going, so that's what's your specialty really is. If you didn't have those skills there would be nothing to...*

Yeah. It's a lot. We actually start every morning at 6:30 and we open up at 11[am]. We do a lot. We get everything together. Yeah, see it looked like we were floating along but we've got 50 people in the other room, we're really busy. We're really moving. A lot of times, it doesn't look like we're doing things.

*Now I worked in a restaurant for years. I know. I didn't manage one but there's the back of the house and the front of the house and there's two different productions going on.*

Right. Exactly. So...

*Well I think you've answered all my questions. [I ask about objects to travel with the Smithsonian exhibition]*

I have a whole album that I intended to bring, of pictures that were taken of my family in 1947 by a photographer for a Russian magazine, what they were looking for was a family in the South in business. Now we never saw the magazine, but we got copies of the pictures. But what happened, my mother had a fire in her home in 1964 and those pictures all got destroyed and a cousin of mine came by here one day from Cleveland, Ohio, [and] had one of the pictures that she had given him. The artist with the photographer's name on the back, and I was able to contact him, this was 15-20 years ago, he was an elderly person, still living and had copies and I never will forget the

conversation I had with him. I said, "I would love to get copies of those.." and he said, "I think I do." He said, "You call me back in three or four days." And then he said to me, "I found them." He said, "But I'll have to charge you for them." I said, "I don't care about you charging me for them. There are some things that are priceless. Pictures of my family in 1947. It's unbelievable." Yeah, so I've got a whole album of those. I may have some of them. I may have a few on my phone. I intended to put all of them on my phone, but what happened was my phone stopped working. And I got a new phone, just the other day. I don't know if they transferred. Let me see. I have some of them here. It's hard to find. I've been working on putting these in albums. Here's one of them. This is the photographer and that's my brother in 1947 in the store that I was telling you about.

I make fun of this picture. This was my dad's family. Back in the community. That was a long time ago. But I have a lot of those pictures. That's a lot of history in there as to where this family came from. I used to tell the story about being in that old store down there and the pictures are being in there, as a family we always knew what we were going to have for dinner that night, and how we were going to...the running joke in the family was... with the kids, how we knew what we were having for dinner...whatever dad had in the meat case that was turning green [laughing], what was spoiling was what we were eating. I said, look here, "I didn't know what fresh meat [was]" I was a grown man before I had a fresh piece of beef. Everything that we had was already spoiling hear? And that's what he fed his nine kids with. We made that joke, but it wasn't that bad though. But anyway.

[47:07]

[END]