

**DESIREE ROBINSON & FAMILY**  
**Cozy Corner Restaurant – Memphis, TN**

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Location: Cozy Corner Restaurant - Memphis, TN  
Interviewer: Rien Fertel for the Southern Foodways Alliance  
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs  
Length: 45 minutes  
Project: Southern Barbecue Trail – Tennessee

**[Begin Desiree Robinson & Family-Cozy Corner Interview]****00:00:03**

**Rien Fertel:** Check okay; this is Rien Fertel with the Southern Foodways Alliance. It is Wednesday, July 2, 2008. I'm at the Cozy Corner Restaurant at 745 North Parkway in Memphis, Tennessee. I am sitting here with Desiree Robinson. To begin Mrs. Robinson; if you don't mind please give me your name and date of birth.

**00:00:31**

**Desiree Robinson:** My name is Desiree Robinson. I was born May 14, 1937.

**00:00:35**

**RF:** Thank you very much. And to begin I just would like to begin with your—your childhood, how you grew up in this area. As I understand you're not—you're not from Tennessee but you are from Mississippi?

**00:00:45**

**DR:** Yes; I was born in Lexington, Mississippi and I was there until I was five years old. I came to Memphis when it was time for me to go to school. My mother wanted me to be educated in Memphis, and so I came to Memphis when it was time for me to go to school and—and lived with my mom and dad. And I went to school in Memphis. Started school, went to the twelfth grade and then went to Tuskegee to—to college and got married and—.

**00:01:17**

**RF:** Well did—did your parents move here with you?

**00:01:20**

**DR:** No, no; my parents came here first. They left me with my grandparents. They came here to get settled, to get jobs, to get a place to live, to get things set up and—and then later I was to come.

**00:01:36**

**RF:** And—and just to know, what did you study at Tuskegee?

**00:01:40**

**DR:** Commercial Dietetics.

**00:01:44**

**RF:** So that—can you explain what that is?

**00:01:47**

**DR:** Foods and nutrition. **[Laughs]** I'm laughing because I retired from a communications company. I never worked in my major until after—10 years after I retired. **[Laughs]**

**00:02:02**

**RF:** Well tell me about what you ate growing up. Do you—your—well first, what did your parents do? What were their professions?

**00:02:10**

**DR:** My mother was a woolen silk processor for the Naval Base. My dad was in construction. And we ate very common foods; we ate fried chicken, pork chops. We ate all kinds of vegetables. We ate vegetables when there was very little meat to eat; neck bones, we ate hamburger and gravy and—and stuff. There were not a whole lot of restaurants that we were able to go to, so most of the cooking was done at home and—and I started cooking for the family when I was eight.

**00:02:51**

**RF:** And what—what did you cook?

**00:02:54**

**DR:** Everything they ate. Dinner had to be on the table by 5:15 when they came in and there had to be something sweet. It didn't have to be a pie or a cake but something sweet; it could be iced tea or lemonade but there had to be one thing sweet with the meal.

**00:03:11**

**RF:** Did—did you make desserts too as a child?

**00:03:12**

**DR:** At—at that age I did not make desserts. I learned maybe the next year or so a little bit at a time; I started doing cookies and cakes and pies and—and that's—that sort of thing.

**00:03:26**

**RF:** Did—growing up in—in both Mississippi and in Memphis did you—did you eat meat with every meal with each dinner?

**00:03:37**

**DR:** No; meats we ate especially on Sunday and maybe one other day of the week but it was rare. It was not—it was not something that we ate and do you know what? Even now I almost have to force myself to eat meat, and I'm not a vegetarian. I don't claim that; that it's just that I don't particularly care for it. But I love every vegetable that there is and fruits. And I eat them a lot. **[Laughs]**

**00:04:08**

**RF:** And how—how—well how do you remember vegetables being prepared when you—when you were younger growing up? Were they—were they stewed were they—how were—how were they eaten?

**00:04:20**

**DR:** Most vegetables were boiled to death. **[Laughs]** The cabbage would be yellow when you got through with cooking it and one thing you can be sure of; everything that was cooked was cooked until it was well done. Any meat that was cooked it was cooked until it was well done and the vegetables the same.

**00:04:42**

**RF:** Was there a lot of—of fat in the vegetables? Was there—?

**00:04:45**

**DR:** Not a lot but whenever we could get it there was going to be salt pork, pork fat of some kind, bacon strips, what—whatever. There was not always a lot of meat but when—when it was available I want to assure you it went into the vegetables.

**00:05:00**

**RF:** And do you have any early memories of barbecue? Was it eaten for holidays or special occasions?

**00:05:08**

**DR:** My—the earliest memory I have of barbecue is my mother taking a tub and putting a screen over it and barbecuing. I never saw men barbecue or heard of men barbecuing until much later. The women did it; the men made—made the sauce but—but that was the first—. I—I—we never did barbecuing when I was in the country, when I was in Mississippi.

**00:05:36**

**RF:** And your mom was doing pork I imagine?

**00:05:36**

**DR:** Yes ribs.

**00:05:40**

**RF:** She was doing ribs; okay.

**00:05:42**

**DR:** Ribs, ribs.

**00:05:44**

**RF:** So you moved here when you were how old?

**00:05:46**

**DR:** Approximately five.

**00:05:49**

**RF:** Five and—and you grew up; you went to high school in Memphis?

**00:05:52**

**DR:** Uh-huh; I went to Manassas one through twelve.

**00:05:55**

**RF:** And what neighborhood did you live in? Where did you grow up in Memphis?

**00:05:58**

**DR:** About three or four blocks from here, North Memphis—North Memphis uh-hm by the Firestone plant. The school was by the Firestone plant, uh-huh.

**00:06:08**

**RF:** Do you remember when you were—when you became a teenager and you got a bit older, do you remember going out for barbecue at the old barbecue joints? Do you remember going to maybe Beale Street?

**00:06:21**

**DR:** Yes; I do. We—we would go—there was a place, oh my goodness I can't think of the name—oh Culpepper's was one place I can remember. There was another one; John Somebody's Barbecue down the street but Culpepper's was not far—right off of Beale Street and we would go there and that was the place that my husband, he dearly loved their barbecue. And he said one of these days he might have a place like that and he wanted his barbecue to be good just like theirs.

**00:06:51**

**RF:** And well let's talk about your husband. His name was Raymond Robinson.

**00:06:55**

**DR:** Yes; uh-huh.

**00:06:57**

**RF:** And where did he—where was he born and where did he grow up?

**00:07:00**

**DR:** Raymond was born in Jefferson, Arkansas right near Pine Bluff.

**00:07:06**

**RF:** And what year was he born?

**00:07:07**

**DR:** Nineteen thirty-five.

**00:07:09**

**RF:** Okay; and do you know the circumstances of what brought him to Memphis?

**00:07:14**

**DR:** His family moved from Arkansas to Memphis. He came to Memphis when he was in the second grade and went to school over at Cairns Elementary and then came to Manassas in high school and I met him in high school when he was in high school.

**00:07:27**

**RF:** And was his family in the restaurant business? Did they—did they cook?

**00:07:32**

**DR:** No, no; his mother was—now his mother did some catering. She worked with—her best friend was a caterer and she worked with her a lot. His dad was the chauffer for a Memphian named Abe Plow and he was exposed to a lot of beautiful foods, lots of good cooking, fancy foods, and they brought that—that stuff to the house. So my husband was involved with foods a lot when he was a kid because they were always coming home preparing the foods that they had seen done.

**00:08:08**

**RF:** So Mr. Plow, he was a very wealthy man?

00:08:10

**DR:** Very, [Laughs] very; yes uh-huh.

00:08:15

**RF:** So you met your husband in high school?

00:08:17

**DR:** Yes.

00:08:19

**RF:** And you eventually moved to a—a bit far away I understand.

00:08:24

**DR:** Yes; but that was after we got married.

00:08:27

**RF:** Okay; when did you get married?

00:08:28

**DR:** We got married in 1958. I left school—I graduated from high school and went to Tuskegee and he graduated from high school and went to Japan to the service, and went to Japan and we got engaged in high school but we decided not to get married until later, until he came back and I got out of school. And so we were engaged for four years and he got out of the service. He left the service a little bit before the four years, so he went to Denver. When we got married he had been there for a year and of course I went to Denver to live with him. We were there for about

nine years and then we came—came back home and that was our intention all the time to come back home but we didn't intend to stay there that long and things just began to happen.

Eventually well actually not long after we got there we realized we weren't going to find any good barbecue. There were one or two places there but it just wasn't what we liked, so we just stopped going to barbecue places and started cooking barbecue at home and playing with recipes. And we—we would invite our friends over to join us and they were raving so and saying you just need to open a place; you just—do that because your barbecue is so good. We did and for a few years we—we were—we ran the business and we called it Ray's Barbecue on Williams Street in Denver. And—and then when we decided to come back home we—we closed it. We came back home and—and didn't open this place right away. But eventually we found it and did. We were looking for a place, but we found this place.

**00:10:05**

**RF:** Okay; well let's—I'd like to ask a few questions about Ray's Barbecue because I didn't know about that.

**00:10:10**

**DR:** Okay.

**00:10:12**

**RF:** Do you remember what year he opened that in?

**00:10:15**

**DR:** I don't have a clue; I just don't remember right now. **[Laughs]**

**00:10:19**

**RF:** What—what recipes did he use? Did he do the cooking?

**00:10:24**

**DR:** He did the cooking; he would prepare the cooking, because see he was—he'd prepare the food because he was working for Martin Marietta so he would prepare the food for it to be served the next day. Other people were working for us and I wasn't working. I was taking care of the children by now so I went in from time to time and do—would do a few things but I didn't do a lot in the restaurant there. But he would prepare the food and the folk working for us would run it that day.

**00:10:49**

**RF:** And—and how—what sort of clientele did you have? Did people enjoy the barbecue? Was it successful?

**00:10:55**

**DR:** It was pretty much the same clientele that we have now. There were people would come in every few days or people who would come in every week. There were people who would come in once a month and it was quite—very much like it is now. College Professors, thugs, you know from College Professors to thugs, so every—every—from—it ran the gamut.

**00:11:25**

**RF:** And people understood that it was Memphis style barbecue?

00:11:29

**DR:** No.

00:11:30

**RF:** Was it—it was barbecue though?

00:11:31

**DR:** Yes; but it wasn't identified as Memphis style barbecue. They thought we were Coloradoans. **[Laughs]**

00:11:40

**RF:** Maybe people didn't—

00:11:40

**DR:** And they just enjoyed the barbecue. It never came—because we had been there for a long time and—and many of our friends were shocked when we—when we left but we never intended to stay. We—we went to—just for a while.

00:11:56

**RF:** And you—so he was working two jobs at the time. Can you describe his first job?

00:12:00

**DR:** Well the job—he worked for Martin Marietta, the missile company and they were making missiles.

**00:12:06**

**RF:** I see; so it—this was a carryover from his days in the armed forces. What—what did he—  
how did he serve?

**00:12:13**

**DR:** Well he served in the Air Force as a Clerk Typist; this was just the job that he got but his  
experience in the Air Force did help him with this job, uh-hm.

**00:12:28**

**RF:** So you eventually moved back to Memphis?

**00:12:31**

**DR:** Yes.

**00:12:33**

**RF:** What was the main reason? Was it just barbecue; did you miss home?

**00:12:39**

**DR:** No; let me explain it like this. He's an only child. I'm an only child. We decided that we  
needed to get away from our parents for a little while and we were going to go and stay a couple  
of years or two and get—you know settled. And we got to liking it and we stayed longer than we  
had planned to. And when we—at—at one point he got laid off from Martin Marietta and I said  
to him, it's time for us to go back home, and we did.

00:13:07

**RF:** And how many children did you have at that time?

00:13:10

**DR:** Two; we—we had—we had two children, a girl and a boy.

00:13:12

**RF:** And what were their names?

00:13:13

**DR:** Val and Ray.

00:13:16

**RF:** So you moved back to Memphis and what did you do immediately? Did you—you didn't open up the restaurant Cozy Corner immediately?

00:13:22

**DR:** No; what did he do? He went to work for—there—well no the second job was the—was the popcorn plant. He went to work for a popcorn plant. Oh, he was Special Agent for Illinois Central Railroad; that was the first job he got, uh-huh. And then later he went to work for Blevins Popcorn Company, uh-hm.

00:13:50

**RF:** And did he continue to cook at home during this time?

**00:13:54**

**DR:** Everybody—you know he was an excellent cook and he always cooked at home. We would share the cooking. And that was one thing I dearly loved about being married to him; he liked to cook. He said it relaxed him.

**00:14:06**

**RF:** Was he—he would cook seven days a week?

**00:14:07**

**DR:** Oh no, no; we—no, no, no. We—we—maybe—maybe once or so you know. Oh when he—by the time he was coming up by the time he got—my grandson here, he cooked most of the time actually. Yeah; but—but earlier we—we would share it and we would—I'd cook and then he'd cook, I'd cook and we'd go out. If he came in from work and I hadn't cooked dinner either he would cook if he wasn't too tired or we would just go out to eat because he knew I had—I was too tired to do it.

**00:14:42**

**RF:** And what were your favorite things that he cooked?

**00:14:45**

**DR:** Once he died I knew that I would never taste a steak that was fit to eat.

**00:14:53**

**RF:** And y'all would work together in a kitchen at home?

**00:14:57**

**DR:** Definitely—definitely.

**00:14:59**

**RF:** What would you cook?

**00:15:00**

**DR:** Pastries, we made a decision early in our marriage that the foods that he would cook I would just not deal with those, and the foods that I would cook he would not deal with them. So he said, so why don't I start—I had been cooking the biscuits and the rolls; so he said why don't I start cooking the biscuits and you do the rolls? If I did sweet potato pie—if he did sweet potato pie, which was who did the sweet potato pie, I wouldn't do that; I would do the pecan pie. We just did different things so that when we came together I mean as a matter of fact, when the children were coming up, whoever got home first fixed a dish. Now this is when they were teenagers. The second person fixed something different; the third—by the time the fourth person got home there would be a meat, vegetables, salad—whatever. By the fourth person got home dinner was almost ready so you had to do something that was kind of quick. And we sat down to the table and ate, so everybody in the house cooked.

**00:15:56**

**RF:** And so we have two really great cooks in a household. Did y'all ever compete or—or—?

00:16:01

**DR:** No; we didn't—we didn't need to do that. We knew that we were both the best. We felt like wherever we went we were slumming. **[Laughs]** Wherever we went to eat—**[Laughs]**; well the poor dog can't wag his own tail. **[Laughs]**

00:16:17

**RF:** So **[Laughs]** why do you think you—the two of you were such good cooks or—or maybe I should phrase that—do you think the two of you meeting had something to do with the food, y'all like to eat, and you both loved food and loved to cook food?

00:16:35

**DR:** Had nothing to do with it; didn't know about that until after we met. I saw him and thought he was cute; that's all it was. **[Laughs]** And obviously he thought—he thought the same thing. **[Laughs]** What happened was he was—he'd ride the bus home every day but after football practice he would come to visit with a neighbor of mine, Joe Lee who lived two doors from me. And eventually he started calling me on the phone and teasing me about usually the boyfriend I had. And he would say to me things like if I were your boyfriend I wouldn't carry your books home. You've got more strength than I do; you can **[Laughs]**—you can carry your own books. Where did you get that stupid boyfriend? **[Laughs]** So we—we harassed each other for about a year and then we started dating and we dated until he graduated—. Well we actually got engaged after he got graduated.

00:17:27

**RF:** Okay; well let's—let's talk about the restaurant. It opened in 1977?

**00:17:32**

**DR:** Nineteen-seventy seven yes.

**00:17:35**

**RF:** And was it always at 745 North Parkway?

**00:17:37**

**DR:** This is the place—the original place. We did open another restaurant, Cozy Corner Fish and Ribs on Watkins—on Cleveland I think by that time; it's Cleveland. That was open for several years but—but we closed that one.

**00:17:56**

**RF:** And opening the restaurant at this location in this neighborhood did it have to do with the fact that you grew up not too far away?

**00:18:07**

**DR:** It had absolutely nothing to do with that. What it had to do with was the fact that it was set up already and it—we weren't real, real particular at that time about where the location would be. But when we found this place with a barbecue pit that we could cook the food in front of the customers and had the equipment, a lot of the equipment that we would—you know and it had formerly been a barbecue place, closed for some time, but that—that was what sold us, because we felt like people—we knew that we would go wherever we had to go to get what we wanted, so we felt like other people would do that too.

**00:18:44**

**RF:** Can you tell me; do you remember anything about the restaurant that was here before?

**00:18:47**

**DR:** When we came it had been closed for a while. So we don't—the only thing we know is that it was Cozy Corner Restaurant and the telephone number was 527-9158 because my husband said we were changing none of that. He was not going to pay the money to change—he'd hold a nickel 'til the eagle faded off. He—he said he was not going to pay money to change the sign when the name was fine with him and he was going to leave the telephone number the same, so—.

**00:19:13**

**RF:** So the name of the restaurant was Cozy Corner?

**00:19:13**

**DR:** It was Cozy Corner Restaurant.

**00:19:15**

**RF:** And I guess you—it's—it's a wonderful kind of name. Did you—you just fell in love with the name?

**00:19:21**

**DR:** I did eventually but I asked—you know I—because it is; it's wonderful. We're on the corner, it's cozy and—and **[Laughs]** you know people just call it—sometimes people will say let's go to Cozy. Others will say Cozy C, you know you just give different names to it and it—it's wonderful.

**00:19:38**

**RF:** So tell me and there's a beautiful kind of glass encased barbecue pit that you use to cook all the food. That was here before you moved in?

**00:19:52**

**DR:** Yes; yes that was one of the—the main thing that attracted us to the place. This is I understand a Chicago style pit and back in years ago they would—they would be—the pit would be at the corner just like it is but people would drive thru, drive around and the barbecue would be handed to them out the window. Of course ours is not a drive-in but customers are able to see us cooking when they come in.

**00:20:21**

**RF:** Well tell me a bit about this neighborhood. I'm really interested in Memphis history and this neighborhood. It's very close to downtown Memphis.

**00:20:29**

**DR:** Yes.

**00:20:30**

**RF:** We're very close to the river and this neighborhood has obviously see a lot of changes since—

**00:20:37**

**DR:** Lots of changes; it was—at one time there were projects all over the neighborhood and a few years ago those were torn down and now they've—they're beautiful—beautiful homes in the area. And the homes are multi-okay; they—people of low income, middle income, and high income are able to buy them altogether.

**00:21:10**

**RF:** And does that reflect the clientele that eats at Cozy Corner?

**00:21:16**

**DR:** It does; it does. It's changed tremendously. We have—we have, you know a lot of people would—at one time were really afraid to come to the area once they—of course it didn't stop folks from coming here but they—but they would express that sometimes they were not comfortable because of the reputation of this area and the reputation was crime, drugs, and that sort of thing. But now it's—it's different because of the clientele and the various people who are moving from well there's Harbor Town and that's a gorgeous place and very nice and it's right on the river. Many people come over from there. The Pyramid was built since—since that time. And so it—the neighborhood has changed tremendously. We've never had a problem when it was—in the old days. Kids come in here—folk come in here now and say when they—they lived over there they were kids; their mother would bring them in here. We hear that often, so but we like it.

**00:22:24**

**RF:** Well let's go back to 1977.

**00:22:27**

**DR:** Okay.

**00:22:29**

**RF:** What was on the original menu? What did you serve and cook?

**00:22:30**

**DR:** Whatever is on that menu now—there are very few changes. Very few changes were made. We were serving hamburgers then, and we only serve hamburgers now when he makes them and puts them on as a special 'cause he's great with that—my grandson. One thing that we added and we added that within the last two years—wings and corn. Within the last two years we added wings and corn. Our menu is pretty much the same. It works; of course the additions that we've made are excellent. The people love the corn; they love the wings and so that—that's the only change.

**00:23:10**

**RF:** So the famous Cornish hen, that was an original item?

**00:23:14**

**DR:** Yes; that was original, uh-huh.

**00:23:17**

**RF:** And the—the recipes, the sauces, the cooking times and temperatures, did Mr. Raymond develop those? Were they things that he had been cooking at home?

**00:23:28**

**DR:** We developed them. We started in Denver; we worked on things here and he would come up—I've got an idea; let's see what you think. Or I would go—I would say I've got an idea; let's see what you think and it—that—that was how it went.

**00:23:44**

**RF:** In Denver did you barbecue just pork or did you sometimes do beef or other meat?

**00:23:50**

**DR:** We did beef, pork, chicken; I remember he used to do—he—he put together you know the fried pie. He'd put together a sweet potato mix and he would cover it with—make a ball with the—with the—with what would normally be the crust. He'd put the sweet potato and then cover it; it looked like—looked like a golf ball and drop it in deep fat. He did that in Denver; we've never done that since. I hadn't even thought about that. We've not done that since Denver. It was awesome. Sweet potato pie we called it. **[Laughs]**

**00:24:31**

**RF:** And he made this at home or did he make it at Ray's?

**00:24:35**

**DR:** Oh no; he made it at the restaurant. He had a—a black pot with legs that they used in the old days and he'd drop it in deep fat and serve that. That was one of the desserts. That's been a long time and I can't remember a lot but I—I don't know why we never did that again. **[Laughs]**

**00:24:51**

**RF:** I mean that sounds like something you might want to bring back. It sounds really delicious.

**00:24:55**

**DR:** I'll—I'll think about it. **[Laughs]**

**00:24:58**

**RF:** Well I want to ask a few more questions about the menu. The—the sandwiches, the meat that you serve unlike most Memphis barbecue restaurants who serve their meat chopped, you serve your meat sliced.

**00:25:13**

**DR:** We like the thinly sliced meat; it just—we just think it's better. We think it looks better; we think it tastes better. And it—it probably doesn't taste better but it—it—it's a beautiful sandwich to us, so that's why we do it thin. We thinly slice it and put lots of meat on it.

**00:25:34**

**RF:** And have you always served the sandwiches on the long hoagie style roll?

**00:25:38**

**DR:** Yes, yes; we have.

**00:25:39**

**RF:** And what was the—the reasoning behind that?

**00:25:43**

**DR:** It looks pretty. We know it tastes good. So we—we just thought that—that would look better than the norm.

**00:25:50**

**RF:** And tell me about the—the smoked turkey. That's—I think it's a specialty item; you might have to wait a few days for it.

**00:25:58**

**DR:** Right; normally you do have to wait a few days except Thanksgiving and Christmas. We make a list, and so if you get on that list you'll get your turkey for Thanksgiving and Christmas—whatever day you tell us you want it, but the rest of the year you need to give us—give us three days to get it done for you.

**00:26:18**

**RF:** And the—and the turkey is smoked in the same way as the other meats?

**00:26:20**

**DR:** Yes; we put our sauce on it and we put it on the pit.

**00:26:24**

**RF:** And what happens—I've never had a smoked turkey. I've had fried turkeys. What happens to a turkey when it's smoked? What happens to the skin of the turkey?

**00:26:31**

**DR:** Pretty much the same thing as when it's—it crisps. We cook it slowly, we cook it long and slow and it crisps and it's delicious.

**00:26:44**

**RF:** And so what sort of fuel do you use to cook all the meat here?

**00:26:48**

**DR:** We use charcoal.

**00:26:48**

**RF:** A hundred-percent charcoal?

**00:26:50**

**DR:** Yes.

**00:26:52**

**RF:** And it's always been that way?

**00:26:53**

**DR:** Yes.

**00:26:54**

**RF:** And does that go back to the Colorado days?

**00:26:56**

**DR:** No; we started that—that in Memphis, uh-huh.

**00:27:02**

**RF:** And why; what—what is the reasoning?

**00:27:05**

**DR:** It works. It works. That's all. See we've got a pit at home that's in the backyard that we have gotten as many as nine pork shoulders on it because before we got this restaurant my husband was barbecuing. We had an established clientele before we opened. My husband was barbecuing in the backyard for folk for fraternities and clubs and for groups and so—and we kind of played around with woods. We did—did some woods and we did you know the charcoal, so we—we decided the charcoal would do what we wanted and we—we just went with it.

**00:27:44**

**RF:** So he was doing catering out of the home?

**00:27:46**

**DR:** Well we didn't call it that, but that's what it was. **[Laughs]** Yes.

00:27:51

**RF:** And did he make sides or did you make sides?

00:27:56

**DR:** No, no; we just did the meat and then they would come and pick it up and they did whatever else they needed. Just the meat; uh-hm.

00:28:02

**RF:** And when Mr. Robinson was alive, did—did—was he the main Pit Cook? Did he cook all of the meat?

00:28:12

**DR:** He cooked; my son cooked, and that—‘cause my son backed him up and we began to—as the business began to grow we added a night cook.

00:28:27

**RF:** And was the restaurant open at—at night? Was it—?

00:28:31

**DR:** No; it was open 10:30 ‘til 7:00. Down through the years the hours were 10:30 to 7:00.

00:28:37

**RF:** And what—what did you do in the restaurant? What did you prepare?

00:28:40

**DR:** I worked for Bell South and supported my husband and my children who ran the restaurant. I thought they were doing a beautiful job; I knew they were working like dogs. I stayed out of here. **[Laughs]** No; really I would come in for lunch and stuff but I didn't—I didn't work in here actually until after he died. I came down one day with the intentions of supporting the children just to let them know. You know what I used to tell them when he was alive? I said now you need to be your daddy's shadow. Learn everything he knows because if he dies before I do you will be immediately unemployed if you don't know what to do 'cause I don't have any intentions of working in food anywhere, any time. I came down after he died just to—I said I need to go down and give them some support. Sat around a day or two and when I knew anything I was coming every day all day loving every minute of it and—and that was seven years ago. And I told my daughter I will never ever again retire. She's taking me out of here on stretchers 'cause I love it.

00:29:43

**RF:** So let's talk about the family; they—they obviously enjoyed shadowing their father.

00:29:48

**DR:** Yes; they did. They really did because I tell you; they know things that I—even as long as I've been here now they know things that I never even thought about thinking about you know. But and—and they—they've done an awesome job with the business.

00:30:05

**RF:** And were any of Mr. Robinson's family involved, his—his mother or—?

00:30:09

**DR:** His mother—his mother, she held court on that bench over there and she would sit down and entertain the customers, every day—now she’s 87 years old now. And every day somebody comes in and asks about her and reminds me that no matter how long it had been since they would have been in here, when they came back she would—she would tell them what they talked about the last time. But she’s 87 years old; she is confined to the house but she is doing just fine. As a matter of fact, about a year and a half ago she was diagnosed with an illness and they told her she only had six months to live, so they put her in Hospice care. Last fall they told her they’d have to take the people away from her because they had to send their people to somebody who needed them. She didn’t need them; she’s doing fine. I asked her one day; I said Nevalle how are you feeling? She said well I feel bad sometimes. Well I feel bad more than that you know.

**[Laughs]** But—but she’s doing great; she really is. She doesn’t get out but she is doing great and she was a vital part of this business because she—she encouraged my husband and she—from that bench over there she helped him actually run the business and keep everybody—oh she kept everybody in line. **[Laughs]**

00:31:28

**RF:** And what was her name?

00:31:30

**DR:** He name was Nevalle—Nevalle Jackson; my daughter is named after her. And that’s where the Val comes in; uh-hm.

**00:31:36**

**RF:** And was she a—a very good cook?

**00:31:40**

**DR:** Yeah; she cooked good. She liked to deal with fancy foods because of the—her experience with the caterer, the catering business earlier. But yeah; she was a good cook, uh-huh.

**00:31:51**

**RF:** And—and I'm guessing she—she held court because she was so proud of her son and his cooking?

**00:31:57**

**DR:** Yes, yes; oh she was. She was—oh she was so proud of him, uh-hm. And—and as I said, he was an only child too you know so she was very proud of him.

**00:32:07**

**RF:** Okay; so working here today in 2008 how many generations of the family are—are here?

**00:32:16**

**DR:** There—normally there are four generations; almost all the time there are four generations here and that's because she cannot get out anymore, so she doesn't come into the restaurant anymore but we are a five-generation family. We are blessed because everybody is doing fine and the—the four that are here, the youngest is 14 months, but everybody works and we are working on here, teaching her to say thank you so that she can start to work. All—everybody

started work—all of my grandchildren started work when they learned how to talk. They sat on that bench—we had a stool at—up by the—in front of the pit and they sat on it and said to the customers as they left—thank you for coming; come back again. And I think y’all started out with about 25-cents a week right, very—very low salaries. One day my youngest granddaughter came up to me and she said grandma I need a raise. She was about four. She said I need a raise. I said well honey your mother handles that; you need to talk to her. I said but when you talk to her if she doesn’t give it to you come back to grandmom. **[Laughs]**

00:33:19

**RF:** And the youngest what is her name?

00:33:19

**DR:** Her name is Laila and she’s 14 months and we are trying to teach her to say thank you. All we want her to say is thank you so we can sit her up there and start her working. And then when she walks she’ll clean tables. Every one of my grandchildren started the register clerking when they were nine years old and the youngest one now is 11 but he started when he was nine. And they work up to that; they clean tables, they clean the sinks, they—they do everything except—except you know as little children they don’t prepare plates nor do they do the pit. But the 11 year old has been working orders, so he’s been preparing plates; the first day he did it not a one customer sent a plate back—not one.

00:34:10

**RF:** I—I mean on my first visit here which was a week ago I was very surprised to see a very young man behind the counter and he was not shy at all. His—what is his name?

**00:34:21**

**DR:** His name is Shun; his name is Shun. He's my son's only child. My daughter—all of the others belong to my daughter.

**00:34:29**

**RF:** And does a family member still cook? I mean cook—

**00:34:33**

**DR:** Our—our regular cook is not a family member but he's—he came to work here when he was 15 and he's now—I think he's in his 30s isn't he and so he eventually became the—the cook but I'm his backup. We have two cooks—actually him and me; I back him up whenever he can't be here.

**00:34:51**

**RF:** And what is his name?

**00:34:52**

**DR:** His name is Richard Forest.

**00:34:55**

**RF:** And you—you have experience behind the—or cooking the meat. When your husband passed away you took over the pit?

**00:35:05**

**DR:** Yeah; I worked with the pit for a long time; uh-hm, yes.

**00:35:08**

**RF:** And—and you were completely comfortable? There was no—?

**00:35:10**

**DR:** Oh I love it; I love it. It's in my bones. **[Laughs]**

**00:35:19**

**RF:** Well—okay; so we're back. We were joined I should say this entire time with Mrs. Robinson, with her grandson, Bobby Bradley so we're going to talk to him for a few moments. Can you please state your name and date of birth please?

**00:35:44**

**DR:** Bobby Bradley; I was born November 25, 1984.

**00:35:50**

**RF:** So we know—we know the history of the family. You grew up in this restaurant. Do you remember what age you started working?

**00:35:56**

**Bobby Bradley:** No; I don't because it was so early when I mean you don't remember when you stopped using a bottle or anything like that. I mean so young you don't remember things like that but she probably knows.

00:36:16

**DR:** What?

00:36:14

**BB:** When I started.

00:36:15

**DR:** When you started what?

00:36:18

**BB:** Working here?

00:36:18

**DR:** When you started learning how to talk. I don't have any idea what age it was, but you were very small. Everybody when you learn how to talk—well first of all you crawled out of—they—my daughter kept in the—in her office when they were coming up because she didn't want them to go—well my husband was the one that said no baby-sitters. They're going to stay at the restaurant. So they played around on pallets in the—in the office and as they walked out—as they walked out—crawled out they would crawl out and get up at the table with the customers. And—and one day I looked and there were kids all over the place. And I said y'all don't bother the customers and the customers will say to us, leave them alone; we feel at home when they're bothering us you know. So they would—they would play with the customers and talk with them and then they began to walk and talk and we would give them little chores like go clean the table.

And let me show you how to do it and then we'd put them on that stool to tell the customers thank you for coming and come back again. They left one at a time going to school. They all started school at age three. When they would leave the customers would be outraged. Where is Avis? Avis left. But when the last child left, BJ—where is BJ? I sure do miss BJ; he was—. When the last child left people—some—some folk just cried because they—we don't have any children in here. What are y'all—what's going on? There are no children. They missed them so much; it was just amazing. They missed those children.

**00:37:51**

**RF:** Let me ask you another question. Was it always—was it always work or was it—was it fun? Could you play?

**00:37:57**

**BB:** Yeah; we could play. It wasn't like a—a sweat shop in here or anything like that. I mean I—we—we were here most of the time and really all the time, so I mean it gave us something to do. I mean when you're young you—you look for things to get into and I know we did so for them to give us that to do it just gave us something to do I guess productive and we weren't running around tearing up the place. **[Laughs]** And it just gave us something to do. But we weren't forced at all I don't think. If we were I don't remember.

**00:38:31**

**DR:** Every summer we went on a vacation, a driving trip 'cause I would drive and—and we would go and he was always the—what were you the navigator? And—and now as an adult I would trust him to go anywhere because he knows how to do it. He knows how—how to travel

‘cause he helped us one time. We had gotten lost and he said if you keep going this way grandma you’ll be going—you’ll be in Iowa pretty soon. And I said oh I know what I’m doing. And then I said well let me get out and check and he was right. **[Laughs]** We were headed in the wrong direction. I don't know how that happened but it did, but he was a little kid and told—and put us on the right road. But we would take the children on a vacation at least once a year—sometimes more depending on you know—. And the school they were in encouraged that so it was never any problem to take them out of school because they had stuff to do. They spent much of their time doing homework on the road ‘cause they—they were given stuff to do.

00:39:34

**RF:** And what are your duties at the—at the Cozy Corner now?

00:39:40

**BB:** Whatever needs to be done.

00:39:41

**DR:** That’s right; they walk through the door and they go to work wherever they’re needed.

00:39:45

**RF:** Both in the front and the back of the house?

00:39:49

**DR:** Yes; yes they go to work wherever they’re needed. They just—they can look and tell where they’re needed and they—they go to work.

**00:39:57**

**RF:** Okay; so we've just been joined by—is this fourth or fifth generation?

**00:40:02**

**DR:** This is fourth because the same as you; uh-huh this is fourth and this is Shun. This is Shun and we call him little Shun.

**00:40:10**

**RF:** And the last name is?

**00:40:11**

**Shun Williams:** Williams.

**00:40:13**

**RF:** Okay; so let—Shun Williams let me get your name and date of birth please?

**00:40:18**

**SW:** My name is Shun Williams. I was born March 11, 1997.

**00:40:25**

**RF:** And you work at Cozy Corner of course. How old—when did you start working?

**00:40:28**

**SW:** When I was nine years old.

00:40:31

**RF:** And do you remember those first days?

00:40:33

**SW:** Not really.

00:40:35

**DR:** I do.

00:40:37

**SW:** Well yeah; I—I cleaned the sinks and stuff and wiped—wiped the tables off, but now I do the cash register.

00:40:47

**DR:** You know what he said—he walked up—the first day he was here he walked over to the cook and said I’m going to take your job. And the cook tells me he—even now he says it and he says—and Mrs. D it still worries me ‘cause he’s—he’s looking now. He’s watching and observing. He said—he told Richard he was going to take his job BJ. **[Laughs]**

00:41:07

**RF:** And do you still want to cook? Do you still want to take Richard’s job?

00:41:09

**SW:** Yes; sir.

**00:41:12**

**RF:** So do you—do they let you man the—the barbecue pit sometimes?

**00:41:14**

**SW:** Sometimes.

**00:41:17**

**RF:** I mean they—they have—

**00:41:19**

**DR:** Well no; what we do actually is let him watch the—if Richard has to leave his job is to watch the pit and be sure that the fire doesn't come up and if it does—but—but as soon as he gets tall enough to see—for a safe height where he can see actual—the actual coals burning then I'll teach him how to cook. He's not quite tall enough yet.

**00:41:40**

**RF:** So tell me; what do you like about working here?

**00:41:45**

**SW:** I like to work on the register and be the boss.

**00:41:52**

**DR:** [Laughs]

**00:41:52**

**RF:** So handling the money makes you the boss?

**00:41:55**

**SW:** Uh-huh; yes it does.

**00:41:55**

**RF:** And you get to eat good food?

**00:41:56**

**SW:** Yes; sir all the time.

**00:41:58**

**RF:** What is—what is your favorite thing to eat?

**00:42:02**

**SW:** My favorite thing to eat is wings, ribs, and Cornish hens.

**00:42:07**

**RF:** And do you get to cook at home?

**00:42:10**

**DR:** No; he don't cook—.

**00:42:10**

**SW:** No.

**00:42:12**

**DR:** We don't eat much at home. Now mostly our food at home consists mostly of fruits and—  
fruits and some vegetables but fruits and—

**00:42:21**

**SW:** Noodles.

**00:42:22**

**DR:** —and noodles he says. **[Laughs]** But we do very little cooking, uh-hm very little.

**00:42:27**

**RF:** Is it because you're so busy here?

**00:42:30**

**DR:** That too. **[Laughs]** It's just not necessary. **[Laughs]** He—he eats you know—we'll leave  
here and go to a restaurant and eat and go home. You know with the family so small it just  
doesn't make sense to stand over a stove and cook. Why should I cook when somebody over  
there is preparing food for me? I just go get it and go on and eat it and go home. That way I don't  
have to wash a dish.

**00:43:03**

**RF:** Well I'd like to thank y'all for sitting down with me. If there's anything you'd like to add you know I'd be happy to hear it.

**00:43:09**

**DR:** Thank you for coming. Thank you so much for including us in this; thank you.

**00:43:15**

**RF:** Well I'd like to ask one more question. On my first visit I noticed there's really, really great music always playing in this restaurant and it was something that Lolis Elie the author of *Smokestack Lightning* also mentions. It's the great Jazz that he you know—that is playing when he walked in. Well can you say something about that?

**00:43:37**

**DR:** Yes; I can. My husband was a music—also a music enthusiast. He loved all kinds of music and he used to say to me, “I even like round mouth music”—opera. **[Laughs]** He loved all kinds of music. He has a country western person up on the wall there because he liked his music. The boy was dead before he even grew up. He died many years ago, but Raymond liked his music, so he put his picture on the wall. He liked all kinds of music and he would sit for hours and tape. We've got enough music to listen to for weeks without hearing the same thing that he taped when he was alive. And he loved Jazz; he loved every—he loved all kinds of music. He could just enjoy music.

**00:44:27**

**RF:** And did he especially love to listen to music when he cooked?

**00:44:29**

**DR:** Yes; he did. He—he did; he loved that very much and he liked—there—there was hardly any question you could ask him about a musician and his career that he couldn't answer. He could tell you so much about them even when they changed groups and went from one group to another or when they stopped singing and—. He could just answer questions about musicians. People will come and they say to me who is that playing? I don't know; I say I'm sorry. I'm sorry; I just don't know.

**00:44:59**

**RF:** But he would have known?

**00:44:59**

**DR:** He would have known; he would have known.

**00:45:03**

**RF:** Okay; well that's—that's I think a good note to end on.

**00:45:07**

**DR:** Okay.

**00:45:07**

**RF:** I want to thank Shun, Bobby, and of course Mrs. Robinson. Thank you very much; this is Rien Fertel from the Southern Foodways Alliance.

**00:45:17**

**DR:** All right; thank you.

**00:45:17**

**[End Desiree Robinson & Family-Cozy Corner Interview]**