

WALKER TAYLOR
Germantown Commissary – Germantown, TN

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Location: Germantown Commissary – Germantown, TN
Interviewer: Rien Fertel for the Southern Foodways Alliance
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs
Length: 20 minutes
Project: Southern Barbecue Trail – Tennessee

[Begin Walker Taylor-Germantown Interview]

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Rien Fertel: This is Rien Fertel with the Southern Foodways Alliance. It is Monday, July 21, 2008. I'm at the Germantown Commissary with Mr. Walker Taylor at 2290 Germantown Road South. So, Mr. Taylor can you introduce yourself and tell us your name and birth date, please?

00:00:23

Walker Taylor: My name is Walker Taylor. I was born August 25, 1957 in Greenwood, Mississippi.

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RF: Okay; so we're at the Germantown Commissary. When did you open this restaurant?

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WT: August 1, 1981.

00:00:44

RF: Okay; and let's—let's get the question I think you—you get a lot of right out of the way.

What is a commissary?

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WT: Commissaries back in the old days were little country stores that were mainly on the farms where the farm labor and help would often shop at and that's where they would trade, so they

were essentially just country stores which is what this was up until 1981 when we turned it into a restaurant.

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RF: Was there a name for this—this farm or farm store before '81?

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WT: No; this was not specifically a farm store but it was a country store, so that's why I called it a commissary.

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RF: Was it—was it derelict or in any sort of decay when you bought it? Was it a shabby building, 'cause it's a very nice place now?

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WT: Well thank you; yes it was. It was a building that had been built around the turn of the century and it had been added on and piecemealed together, so yeah it was pretty much a shanty.

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RF: So you're—you're from Greenwood; when did you move to—?

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WT: I was just born there; I've been a lifelong Germantown—.

00:01:47

RF: Okay; so you moved to Germantown when you were young?

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WT: Yes.

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RF: And grew up in the Memphis area?

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WT: Yes.

00:01:54

RF: So tell me about the barbecue in the area. Since you grew up here I'm sure you ate a lot of barbecue growing up. Where do you remember growing up—I mean where do you remember eating growing up?

00:02:02

WT: I remember eating barbecue at Leonard's down on Bellevue, Coleman's which aren't around too much anymore—places like that.

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RF: And did you—did you have early jobs in the restaurant business?

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WT: In college; waiting tables at various restaurants around the town and some of the chains.

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RF: And when you go into the restaurant business in 1981 did you have—did you own or operate other restaurants before then?

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WT: No; I had just gotten out of college two years prior and worked for a big corporation and didn't want to do that, so I wanted to get into the food business.

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RF: And what—what was that—what was the final push into the food business? What convinced you?

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WT: Working for a big corporation and knew that I didn't want to go that route.

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RF: Where—was your family supportive of that? Just being in the restaurant business is a difficult line of work.

00:03:00

WT: Well at the time it was just me and my wife, so it wasn't too difficult to—to persuade her to do it. So it wasn't that hard; I didn't have a lot of financial responsibilities at the time.

00:03:09

RF: And you knew of this building?

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WT: Yes; well I knew of the business. I was familiar with the business that was here, operating an old country grocery store.

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RF: Did—did that country grocery store, did they sell barbecue or any sort of smoked meats?

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WT: They did sell barbecue to go. But it was only to go and there was no—and they cut bologna and—and cheese and souse and goose liver and all that. They primarily had—had served the construction trade out here while Germantown was being built up and that had since moved on so something else had—had to transpire here.

00:03:42

RF: And tell me about those first years in business. Were they difficult; was it an easy you know life from—from the business world to the restaurant business?

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WT: Well it was pretty lean back then. One, the economy was not in a great time back in the early '80s, very similar to what's going on now. Gas prices had gone through the roof and the difference was interest rates were extremely high then. As I say, it was not a good time in the economy. Germantown had not matured into a—where you had money spending people living

out here. Primarily then people had moved out here back in the late '70s to escape the busing and they were still paying pretty high house notes and had children at home. So yeah; it was a struggle the first few years, and then I was able to buy the property in '84. And then in the fall of '84 we had a fire and we had to shut down for about three months to rebuild the building back. So yeah; you know, like any other business it's a struggle in the beginning but I think you know it makes you leaner, meaner, and a little bit tougher.

00:04:46

RF: Well was it—was it a barbecue fire?

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WT: Yeah; we had a pit fire one morning and got out of the pit and caught the pit room on fire and burned a big hole in the roof.

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RF: Tell me how—how we—you said a few things about Germantown, about this neighborhood; can—can you say some more about the history of it? I believe we're in the historic district. I guess it could be considered downtown Germantown?

00:05:06

WT: Yeah; it's considered Old Germantown but quite honestly there's not really much historical that happened around here. We don't have a town square and all that kind of stuff. But this was a center of activity; it's where the train stopped, which you know obviously back in

those days you know up until about the '50s the train station was the center of activity and we had one and this place was right by it.

00:05:26

RF: What's happened here in the past 25 years?

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WT: Well we've had a lot of growth, a lot of commercial offices have been built out this way; the population base has matured and therefore, where the people don't have the high house notes and the kids home—they have expendable income. So it's just kind of matured into a—a nice area that has a good well rounded mix of business, lunches, and dinners and families.

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RF: So tell me about 1981 when you started; were you the pit master, considered the—the main cook of the meat?

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WT: Yeah; we had about three of us here who kind of did it all—everybody. Nobody had one job; yeah I'd run the pit, I'd take the garbage out and I'd bus the tables—whatever it took.

00:06:15

RF: And do—do you have pit master now?

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WT: Well we have several pit men. I mean pit master may be exaggerated a bit. But we have three—three guys that—that do the barbecuing.

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RF: Which one has worked the longest; what is his name?

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WT: Right now I guess it would be Ricky and he's been here about 20 years.

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RF: Can—can you tell me a bit about Ricky?

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WT: Ricky is a hard-working individual that also works at Kroger at night stocking shelves. He's been doing it for 25 years and Ricky is very knowledgeable about the pit and being safe, handling food safely and knows how to trim the ribs real good before we cook them. Also when you're pulling the shoulder he gets the fat out and just a real conscientious good employee.

00:07:01

RF: And—and I've heard of another one here named EB; can you tell me a bit about him?

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WT: EB has been here about five years now and he's a very knowledgeable pit man. He had worked in several barbecue restaurants around town, so he's probably got about 25 years of barbecuing under his belt.

00:07:16

RF: I—I was told that EB was a pit man at Gridley's for some time. And one of your managers, Mrs. Joanne Cloud is Clyde Gridley's daughter. And—and I know a bit about the history of Gridley's you know doing these interviews. You know I'm told that Gridley's started off with tablecloths and he tried to do a nice barbecue. Do you see any connections between what you do and what he tried to do?

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WT: Okay; I guess really the only similarity I would say is Mr. Gridley really strived quality and that's—we've continued to do that all these years. But we've never tried to be a white tablecloth per se, and I'm not sure really they were either. They went in some locations that at that time were very good locations that now days I'm not sure those locations would work. But it was a long time ago but he—he was definitely at that time the man that set the bar.

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RF: So what is—you have a saying I guess under your name, the business name; it's—it says epicurean barbecue and ribs. Can you—what is epicurean barbecue?

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WT: Well epicurean barbecue just means fine. Epicurus was a Greek god of fine things and sometimes you hear the word. Sometimes white tablecloth will have an epicurean dinner which means it's a fine multi-stage type dinner.

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RF: When—when you started doing the barbecue here were the recipes yours; were you doing them from scratch?

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WT: They were—they were my recipes and some that had been in my family.

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RF: So does your family have a history of barbecuing—once they moved here to Memphis or in Mississippi also?

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WT: No; they were just family recipes, backyard recipes we incorporated into the restaurant.

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RF: Were any of those the barbecue recipes or are they more of the side items here?

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WT: They were all—both.

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RF: So was there a trial and error period?

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WT: Every day is a trial and error.

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RF: [*Laughs*] I mean most—most of the restaurants I've been to and—and spoken to the owners, they had inherited—either bought the name of the restaurant, something like that—inherited the recipes then and you didn't do that. You started from scratch and there's not many people like you.

00:09:51

WT: Yeah; we had our—just family recipes that my dad had and stuff that I had developed over the years messing around in the backyard cooking and then just you know put them on a commercial scale.

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RF: Was your dad a good cook? What kind of cook was he?

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WT: He was a good backyard cook.

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RF: A grill kind of cook?

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WT: Right.

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RF: What did he do? What was his profession?

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WT: He had been in the automotive industry for about 35—40 years.

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RF: Well let's talk about what you cook here. How do you—let's talk about your shoulders.

What's the process?

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WT: Well we take fresh shoulders, never frozen and we trim them up—trim some of the excess fat off and cook them over hickory embers for about 12 to 14 hours until they fall off the bone.

And then we chop it or pull it, pull all the skin and fat and bone out of it and put the sauce on the slaw and let it go out the door.

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RF: Do—do you season them at all before they go on the pit?

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WT: No; we put a little splash of vinegar—that helps draw some of the fat out of them but—but essentially no.

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RF: Can—can you tell me about the pits? Did you built them or were they here?

00:11:01

WT: Well we have one; it's about an eight by ten brick pit, the old-style pit barbecue that we still use. Then we also have two—two Southern Pride cooking pits that are kind of the 20th Century way of cooking but it's the—it's the same principle. It's the gas flame burns the logs that then cook the meat.

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RF: And tell me about the ribs.

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WT: The ribs—we use a St. Louis sparerib. It's a sized rib; it's a two and a quarter—two to two and a quarter rib. And we trim them and we put a special rub seasoning on them—unlike the shoulders; we do season them and then we finish them with a light base about 30 minutes, before they come off, and let that caramelize on them and they're done.

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RF: Do—do you call them dry ribs or wet ribs or do you try to stay away from that categorization?

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WT: We typically try to stay away from it, but they would be more the dry; they're definitely not wet but we don't throw the seasoning shake all over them either.

00:12:00

RF: Right; and there's a few other menu items that I think we should talk about, mainly because you don't see them in a lot of other barbecue restaurants here in Memphis or in Tennessee and one is—are the deviled eggs which I had a couple weeks ago and that are very good. Can you talk about them?

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WT: Well they're just one of the many items that we've had for a long time and everything here is homemade—everything except for the French fries and I wish we could get away from that fry, but people like it. It's a seasoned fry. But everything else here is homemade—the potato salad, the coleslaw, the deviled eggs are—chocolate coconut lemon icebox pies—everything is homemade and I think that's something that's really unique. It's very labor-intensive; it—it's hard to find the skilled labor to do it—to follow recipes correctly but we've managed to do that.

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RF: And—and you have a few items on the menu that are from other States including the—the stew—the Brunswick stew.

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WT: Right; I had been there down in Georgia several times and I really found the stew to be very good and I wanted another item on the menu that—that in the wintertime especially and I didn't feel like running soups or anything, so I thought the stew would be—would go over well especially from people that come up from the eastern part of the United States. Where we have beans with our barbecue they tend to have stew. But it's done real well and—and sells well and again that's another homemade item.

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RF: How do you make it; do you cook the—put the barbecue in the stew or—?

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WT: It's a tomato-base that we cook in big 10-gallon pots on the pit but it has the meat in it and the meat is cooked in it, but it's—it's a tomato-base and it has vegetables. It has potatoes and lima beans and green beans and corn.

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RF: Do Memphis people try the stew?

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WT: We sell a bunch of it yeah; yeah. We've won them over.

00:13:57

RF: Okay; good, good, good. What do you think makes Memphis or this area—the barbecue here special?

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WT: I just think it's a unique way that we do it. I mean barbecue—the way barbecue is prepared can change drastically in 100 miles and—but we have a lot—a lot of places in this city that—that are very fine barbecue restaurants and it's just what we're known by. We've kind of developed it; it's a unique way of doing it that I think people find that they like very much, I think even more so than—you know take—you got probably four hotbeds of barbecue—Memphis, North Carolina, the Kansas City and the Texas and whenever there—there are contests that go on and they judge all four, Memphis walks away every time hands-down the winner. Now you are going to have some people's tastes that are going to prefer the beef to the pork and probably the more vinegar-based sauce which is what Carolina is known for.

00:15:02

RF: So have—have you visited these other barbecue regions?

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WT: Oh yeah; yeah many times.

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RF: And you think there's something very different about the Memphis or that it's—it's—it's better?

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WT: Well—well let me just say I like ours better. You know it's just different. In Texas it's beef; in Kansas City it's beef except for ribs. And in North Carolina they tend to slice it. It's—they use the pork loin which is a wonderful cut of meat but it's just different.

00:15:33

RF: What's the secret to good barbecue anywhere?

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WT: I think it's you know one is buying quality products and the having conscientious people prepare it. If you go about it haphazardly, sloppy, buy you know not as quite a good quality cut of meat then you're not going to have as good a barbecue.

00:15:53

RF: We started the conversation and you said in '81 the economy was very similar to what we're seeing today. At—which is—which echoes what I'm hearing from a lot other people; are—are pork prices changing? Is it getting hard to—to cook meat?

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WT: Pork prices are seasonally up like they always are this time of year. They raise—they start rising the middle of May and go through Memorial Day, Labor—the 4th of July, and then they usually start backing off Labor Day. Hopefully we'll see that this year. The shoulder is up about 25-percent but as I say that's more typical of the seasonal fluctuation but everything else across the board, all other ingredients that go in your food are—are up 20-percent over the last 12 months.

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RF: Is it making it harder to—to operate the restaurant?

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WT: It's shrinking the bottom line.

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RF: Do—have you had to raise prices?

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WT: We're getting ready to. The new menus are at the printer and we're probably going to insert them in the first of August.

00:17:07

RF: Tell me about the clientele here; is it mostly local? Do you also get some—some tourists?

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WT: We get a good mixture. We have a lot of tourists that come through, people that have heard about us. On Monday nights like tonight it will look like a businessman's joint. It's all you can eat ribs and the hotels that have people in town they send them up here to—to eat ribs and there will be families. You know it's just a good cross-section.

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RF: Did—when you opened the restaurant did you ever think you would run the business for this long and that it would take off like it did?

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WT: Well if you had told me I'd still be doing this in '81—hang on one second. What was—?

00:17:48

RF: I'm going to repeat the question. Back in '81 did you—did you think you'd be running the restaurant for—for this long?

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WT: No, because I wasn't making any money the first couple of years and I said I'm going to give it one more year, one more year. Well one more year has turned into 27 years, so—but it's been good for my family and the families that work for me.

00:18:13

RF: What was the year and what was the point where you—where it finally took off and you knew that this was going to be a great business?

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WT: It was probably around '83—two years—two and a half years into it and we kind of turned the corner.

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RF: Was it because of growth of the subdivision?

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WT: No; I think it was the word got out. You know it's tough in the restaurant business; you have a honeymoon period and then it kind of dies off and it's just tough to be able to do that—sustain and hang with it.

00:18:44

RF: Do you still love to eat barbecue?

00:18:46

WT: I do; I still eat barbecue. In fact I just had a barbecue turkey sandwich.

00:18:53

RF: What do you cook at home?

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WT: I'm—I'm an outdoor cook—hamburgers and chicken and—and my favorite piece of meat to cook is a pork loin and smoke that for about four or five hours and it makes great sandwiches; so—.

00:19:07

RF: Why thanks; that's all the questions I have—if you'd like to add anything. I want to thank you.

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WT: Good; I appreciate you coming by and—and I hope this works well for you.

00:19:17

RF: Okay; thank you very much. Okay; thank you. Can I get your signature—a release to put it online? And can I take a picture of you too?

00:19:31

WT: Sure.

RF: Your signature here.

00:19:42

[End Walker Taylor-Germantown Interview]