

JIM NEELY
Interstate Bar-B-Que – Memphis, TN

* * *

Date: July 16, 2008
Location: Interstate Bar-B-Que - Memphis, TN
Interviewer: Rien Fertel for the Southern Foodways Alliance
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs
Length: 1 hour, 1 minute
Project: Southern Barbecue Trail – Tennessee

[Begin Jim Neely - Interstate Interview]

00:00:01

Rien Fertel: Test; this is Rien Fertel with the Southern Foodways Alliance. It is Wednesday, July 16, 2008. I'm here with Mr. Jim Neely, Interstate Bar-B-Que in Memphis, Tennessee. Mr. Neely, can you please introduce yourself; please tell us your name and your birth date?

00:00:19

Jim Neely: My name is James Neely, better known as Jim Neely. My birthday is October 21, 1937.

00:00:29

RF: Okay; and as I understand, you were born here in Memphis, Tennessee.

00:00:34

JN: Yes; I was born here in Memphis.

00:00:38

RF: Okay; and what is—you are the owner of Interstate Bar-B-Que?

00:00:41

JN: Yes; I am the owner and the founder of the Neely name in the Memphis barbecue scene. I was the first Neely to go into the barbecue business here in Memphis, Tennessee. There's been a lots of misconception on different ideas that maybe my nephews, but my nephews were kids in

elementary school when we went into the barbecue business in here, and then in '77 when my brother died they lived here with me, worked here for four or five years until they decided to try and go business for their selves. But I was the Neely that put Neely on the Memphis barbecue scene. And I still carry the baton. I'm the drum majorette for Neely and barbecue business in Memphis.

00:01:33

RF: Well excellent; we'll get into all that. Can we talk about—ask a few questions about your early childhood in Memphis, maybe what you remember eating here in Memphis, barbecue restaurants, if you remember going any places with your family?

00:01:50

JN: It was a—a to-die-for situation. I mean to be growing up in Memphis, man, I mean barbecue was just capital here you know and it looked like all the old people, man, I mean they just had the barbecue sauces and the know-how to, you know, whereas—you wouldn't—if I didn't get no meat it was okay. Just give me some good barbecue sauce and some good soft light bread; I'll sop it like it was molasses you know. And we had—every neighborhood almost had a local barbecue joint. They were joints at the time but almost every neighborhood, whether it was a black or white neighborhood, there was barbecue places you know that everyone favored. And by the '70s, all the old people had their little joints, educated their kids, and made a living for their family—they have died off. And by them not building it to a real business kids they didn't want to do—keep it alive you know. So the recipes died off with them.

00:02:47

RF: What separated a barbecue joint of—of the '60s and '70s and before with the barbecue restaurants in Memphis today?

00:02:53

JN: Well the—the word; they were joints. They were juke joints; they were joints where you'd go in and they had the jukebox playing and the people buying quarts of beer, and they was dancing in the floor you know and it—they were joints. Today we have barbecue family restaurants you know on a mega-scale you know where we can seat 100, 150, 200 people and 250 people. Those were just joints, but they've turned out a good barbecue and it's hard to capture that old favorite today.

00:03:30

RF: So well would—I mean these places would serve beer and be open all night long?

00:03:34

JN: Oh yeah, yeah; they—they'd serve beer all night long. If they had a back room they may have had a crap table [*Laughs*] in the back room or something, you know. So corn whiskey flowing out the back door, you know, but they were real joints, you know, but they were great. And some of them, lots of them didn't; they had places like downtown they had Johnny Mills—well known place back in the '30s and '40s; Boss Crump he used to like to go there. It was a black-owned restaurant but when Boss Crump decided to go there with his cronies you know all the blacks had to go out and leave out of it, but they went in you know and just had them a good time eating barbecue and drinking and what have you, so—.

00:04:14

RF: What neighborhood did you grow up in Memphis?

00:04:16

JN: I grew up in South Memphis. I grew up on Lauderdale Sub, as we called it—Lauderdale Sub—and real nice, real nice neighborhood. We were surrounded by two blocks of the north on Lauderdale which we called the St. Thomas area that was predominantly all Italians, you know. St. Thomas Catholic Church at Trig and Lauderdale was an Italian—all neighborhood all up through there, so we grew up in that neighborhood.

00:04:46

RF: Do you remember which barbecue joint was closest to your home?

00:04:49

JN: Yeah; Uncle Sam's right—right down on the—on the next block from me. Uncle Sam was the barbecue place in the neighborhood. Two blocks up in the white neighborhood you had Gus' Barbecue, you know, and we could get barbecue out of them. Of course we had to go to the back door and someone—the kitchen help would bring it to you but still, you know, we were able to go and it wasn't no biggie. I mean it's just the way things was, you know; you know, if you wanted a sandwich you go to the back door. I wanted a sandwich; I didn't care if it came out the front door or the back door, you know. **[Laughs]** It's going to be the same product if it came out the front door.

00:05:21

RF: Back then was there a difference between the barbecue that white barbecue joints and African American barbecue joints were selling?

00:05:31

JN: Well not really because most of them had all black cooks working there, you know, so that was the thing, you know. You had these black people that was there cooking and it was pretty much the same.

00:05:40

RF: Did—do you remember what your mother or father cooked? Did they barbecue at home or cook anything else real special?

00:05:47

JN: No, my—my family wasn't into it; my mom was a real culinary—you know, she was into, you know, really Southern cooking and canning and what have you. And my dad raised hogs in the yard up until '48 and we would slaughter hogs and they would smoke meat and what have you. And we got into the pork chops and the lungs and daddy would make the pork sausage and stuff like that but barbecue—no. Now a neighbor next door—great barbecuer; on the 4th of July and holidays like that in our backyard and all the neighbors would get together, so we had the neighbors that could barbecue and what have you, so, you know, we still had everything going good.

00:06:30

RF: Can I ask a couple questions about your father? Was he from Memphis or was he from rural Tennessee or Mississippi? Why was he—why did he have hogs is my question?

00:06:38

JN: Well up until 1948 you could have hogs in the city and you know Memphis was a country town, you know, and we used to raise as many as eight, ten hogs back there. And then when we—slaughter time would come, all the neighbors would come up and they would get together and slaughter hogs and everybody got some of the, you know, some of the meat and what have you. No; but my daddy was born in Mississippi right down the highway in Marshall County in Byhalia in 1884 and in 1819 when he came out of World War I he came to Memphis and he took his money from his—most of his pay from the Army and he bought himself three teams of mules and three wagons and Dad started a transportation business that he ended up developing to where in the '40s and early '50s he was running as many as 12 trucks, and was working as many as 24 people on his payroll. So he became a real entrepreneur with no formal education. Dad could not read or write; he could count money and he could move the bricks and stuff that they were doing but he became a pretty wealthy man in the city and, in fact, in the '20s after the Depression he built a five bedroom brick home with hardwood floors, steam heat, indoor bathroom, where most of the people in the neighborhood had outhouses. So without a lack of education he had a lots of common sense.

00:08:10

RF: And what was your father's name?

00:08:12

JN: Will Neely; and in fact it was nine of us kids, and I used to watch my dad and I always said to myself—I will always have to do and go to a higher level than my dad. Now that meant I had to really go some because for a black man to have a five bedroom brick home on an acre property you know and to watch my dad work and scuffle where all nine of us could go to college if we wanted to, you know. So that was always my nemesis up there; that was my goal and I still push(es), you know, to keep excelling and exceeding the standards that I grew up you know—and the ability to be—to want to be an entrepreneur just based on what he had done. I was one of those kids in the house of the nine that didn't want to go to college because first of all I didn't see nothing in the '50s that I could do with a college degree other than teach school or work in the Post Office, and I didn't want to be—I didn't want that. I wanted to be an entrepreneur. I wanted to call my own shots.

00:09:16

RF: Well I want to ask you about how you—how you got into business and became successful but do you remember anything special your mother cooked—any recipes or what you—what you really enjoyed?

00:09:29

JN: Everything my mother cooked was special. I'm telling you; my mother could really bring it on man. I don't care if it was turkey and dressing or—she used to do a—a German goulash thing with cabbage, you know, and I mean she was just—and it was a lady across the street from me that was a caterer and my mother started working with her. And Miss Morton served all the rich white families you know and mother learned so much from being around her. And then my dad's mother lived in the house with us, so she had for the old soul food cooking and what have you—

my mom could make chicken cordon bleu like you wouldn't believe or spaghetti, you know, so—. My mother—everything she cooked man I'm going to tell you it was a delicatessen. She made everything taste great. I know my sisters eat their heart out now 'cause they still can't do it.

[Laughs]

00:10:27

RF: And—and the hog slaughter that would happen on your—on your family property was that for special occasions? Was it for a season or a holiday?

00:10:34

JN: No; that was for survival. My dad had a garden in the backyard and he raised peas and corn and tomatoes. He raised hog for meat. He had his own smokehouse where when they slaughtered the hog, the—the bacon part that the bacon come from, he smoked and cured that meat, you know, 'cause people at that time didn't have freezers and stuff to put all this meat in. And of course the sausage and the stuff like that he'd have—and they put it in the freezer but the big bacon slab thing, that was cured and hung in the smokehouse and once you cure meat it can hang there for a year, you know. So that wasn't a special occasion; it was about survival for nine kids and two adults. **[Laughs]**

00:11:26

RF: Okay; and as I understand you—you left Memphis for a little while and went out West?

00:11:30

JN: Yeah; in 1954 I was out of school for the twelfth grade. I was going into the twelfth grade, so I went out to California to visit my sister and when I came back home I went to school until the twelfth grade and when we got out for Christmas I joined the Air Force. I did my four years and when I got out of the Air Force, my whole mental ability about the South and the way it was—I couldn't stay here, so I went back to California because, you know, when you don't know different you can accept things. When I went away and went to Japan and was gone for four years, I knew different and I knew that I was a man—that I wasn't a boy. And I knew that I wasn't accepting nobody treating me no other way but that, so I went to California and went to work in the Post Office. And again I didn't like it 'cause it was a job and I couldn't be an entrepreneur. And I stayed there 'til '65. I went to work in insurance; then it was like I was my own entrepreneur 'cause when I got up and put my clothes on what I did was based on my ability and I worked that until '72 and I transferred to Memphis with a company 'cause I always said I would never come back to Memphis looking for a job—I'd bring a job with me. So I transferred but only to get here with a job 'cause my goal was to open my own insurance agency. In 1975 I opened my first agency here in Memphis and I was in the Peabody Hotel. Before—during right—shortly after they went into bankruptcy and they closed the hotel and I moved to Lamont and Bellevue at the—at the office complex over there, by the end of '75 I opened my office in Nashville. The first of '76 I opened my office in New Orleans and Baton Rouge. Early '77 I opened up an office in St. Louis. I had about 80 agents working for me and I was earning high six-figures a year [*Finger Snaps*]. I was earning high six-figures a year and in '79 my oldest son was in the Navy; he got real sick. And when he came out he was 50-percent disabled. And then where we're sitting right now used to be a grocery store and the name of the grocery store was Interstate Drive-In Grocery. I bought this grocery to give my son a job. Well, the little store was

so profitable and we were renting for \$300 a month for rent; no lease—but it was a good business. So I asked the owner for a long-term lease and he said, “why don't you buy it? I'll sell you the property.”

00:14:19

Well in this property as you can see there was three other businesses. The one next door was a beer joint, the other part was a little hamburger place; so I bought the property and after buying it I started wondering what could I put in the other side. Then it dawned on me that the barbecue in Memphis had just deteriorated. I was driving all the way to East Memphis—which was about 20 miles one way—to buy a barbecue sandwich. And I had a feeling that I could do better from what I was buying and try to recapture that old feeling here in Memphis. So, I opened a barbecue place in the other side; we kept the store going and I was going to help them for about six, maybe eight weeks at the most and get back to my insurance business. As we sit here it's 28 years have passed and I'm still sitting here with no idea of ever going back in the insurance business now. But I've grown this thing to where now it's a national-recognized restaurant; for the last four years fortunately for me I'm on the *Travel Channel* weekly—sometimes twice a week. I've been featured on the *Food Network* numerous times; almost every major publication from *USA Today* to *Vogue Magazine*, *People Magazine*, you name it—I've—you know I've all these different acclaims that I've, you know, achieved. But I'm a push person; I push myself to be the best. I challenge myself every day and when I go to open this restaurant you'd be surprised how many old people I talked to and pick their brains for their barbecue sauce recipe. And I'd write 'em down and I'd come in and I would try it. I'd mix up a little of Ms. Morton with a little of Ms. Owens' product and you know just kept. And I'd bring it out and let my customers taste it and see what they think and I was like probably six, seven years down the road

before I decided I had a sauce worth bottling and putting in the market. But by that time I was convinced: I had nailed it. So, from that point on it's just been history, as to where we are today.

00:16:36

RF: Well you brought up a lot of questions. Why do you think in that—in that period when you arrived back in the '70s, why do you think a lot of the barbecue joints were—were gone or serving bad food, as you said?

00:16:52

JN: Well, all the old-timers had died off. And like my dad—my dad struggled hard to get us through school and to give us an education, and he was still running the trucks—had the trucks and of course when I came out of the Air Force he gave them to me. But again I ran them for about a year and a half but that wasn't for me, you know. And—and the stuff he had to put up with—with the companies that he did haulings for, you know; they would talk to you sometimes real crazy like they was talking to my dad who couldn't read or write. Well I could read and write. And when I asked him to give me something in writing, you know, it was like I was insulting them, you know. So but that's what had happened; the older people had died off and the kids didn't want nothing to do with it. They had moved on. And then again remember; by the mid-'60s you would have the Civil Rights Movement. Different jobs had opened up and the job equality began to open up and there was jobs that people that never—when I came out of high school in '55 or '65—I saw jobs that blacks never dreamed that they could enter into, you know. So they moved on to other things, and so that was one of the main reasons. And believe it or not, the hottest barbecue place in Memphis by '72 was a white-owned restaurant named Gridley's.

00:18:23

RF: Is—is that the place you would drive to?

00:18:24

JN: Yeah, I would drive to Gridley's. Of course Clyde Gridley died—died in a car wreck in the early maybe '80s and he only had daughters and a brother, and his brother was running the place for him but when the daughters became owners all of the sudden they had more sense than he had so he left them. Consequently with nobody knowing how to cook the business folded, you know. A big corporation came by and bought it because of the name, but again, you can buy a name. Someone could come along right now and buy Jim Neely's Interstate Bar-B-Que. You could buy my name but you can't buy my passion for what I do in here, you know, and if you don't have my passion for what I do in here, I can give you all the recipes in the world and it's not going to work because it's more to it than a recipe. It's that passion that drives you every day to strive for excellence, to be on top of everything, to care about your place from the curb in the parking lot as you drive in, to the bathroom. Everything has to be right—everything, and when you start accepting the little small thing or paper on the floor or the toilet is not cleaned or there's no toilet tissue, two rolls of toilet tissue sitting on the back of the toilet, even though you got a roll on the spool, you know, because if that two rolls is not there you're not paying that much attention—pretty soon someone is going to go in there and there's no tissue in the bathroom—bad scene; so you have to be on top of everything and if you don't have that passion you can forget it.

00:20:03

RF: And—and has your passion, your drive been there since day one, here at the barbecue store?

00:20:07

JN: I came in here 28 years ago; I was probably what maybe 48—49. I'm 71 and my passion burns just as hot and as strong as ever. My middle son that was my General Manager has been in here with me for 26 years after he finished college; he wanted to go back to California where he was born. He stayed out there about three or four years and when the business started growing he came back in and was my General Manager. January this year he came and told me he wanted to open his own place. So when he left there went my support, whereas my wife and I had been able to travel and leave town three weeks, four weeks at a time; now we're back in here seven days a week, 12, 14 hours a day because there's nobody out around here right now that I can entrust to come in here and see everything and every detail on things needing to be done. And I can tell it 'cause when I walk in I see things wrong and I got to tell somebody "hey man, so and so—so and so," you know, or "this ain't right." And I tell them all, "when are you going to learn to see it? Why do I always have to see what's wrong?" I can walk in—I can walk in that door right there at 1:30, 2 o'clock and I can tell you everything wrong, because I see what's right. I see a restaurant full of people enjoying my food, so I see that. But someone needs to see what's wrong. A table needs busing, something on the floor, something out of place, someone not performing their job correctly; you know, you've got to see all that and make corrections 'cause if not the customer is going to see it. I don't know why whether it's car energy where you go to get your car fixed or anywhere else—why you the customer have got to find something that the mechanic should have saw if you're at the dealership having your car fixed. Why do I have to go

get—get in my car and then turn around and go back and say hey man, so and so—so and so, you know? So I guess it's the mindset of the young generation.

00:22:11

RF: And, as I understand, this is still kind of a family run business. How many generations or how much family works here or have worked here in the past?

00:22:20

JN: Well, I still have two sons. My oldest son, Kelvin, he's the Night Manager here. My youngest son, he managed the restaurant in South Haven. My brother which I opened my barbecue place in Los Angeles for him in '84 moved back to Memphis two years ago and he helps me manage the Airport along with my daughter. And I got daughter-in-laws, son-in-laws, so—I've got grandsons, granddaughters, you know, they all work here in the family business. Although my, you know, they go to college but in the evenings or the weekends they're all around here. And now I have great-grandses walking around here. **[Laughs]** So we're working—and like I said we hire about 85—90 people in here.

00:23:10

RF: Tell me about the—the place in Los Angeles? Is it still there; what was its name?

00:23:15

JN: The restaurant is still there; its—the name of it is Jay Bee's. And one of my younger sisters now runs Jay Bee. I also have a sister Gloria, the one right next behind me; she has a restaurant out in Los Angeles, called JR's Barbecue. And they all doing real well, you know. In 19—in

2007 my wife had a nephew that had worked—went to college, went—sorry. When he finished high school he joined the Marines. He did 23 years in the Marines and he got out of the Marines, and he wanted—he bought a property in Phoenix and that’s where he wanted to live and he wanted to do barbecue. And in April of ’07 I went out and we opened him a barbecue place in Phoenix and he’s doing great. The kid is doing it just the way I trained it. You’re talking about walking in the drum major’s footsteps. He’s walking right in my footsteps just like I trained him. He’s not deviating ‘cause he got enough sense and military background that my Uncle Jim have proven it works his way. And I don't need to fix nothing that’s not broken.

00:24:27

RF: And—and your nephew what is his name and restaurant name?

00:24:32

JN: Eric, and the name of his place in Phoenix is Memphis Best Barbecue.

00:24:37

RF: Okay; well let’s—let’s talk about how—how you got into barbecue. As I understand there’s a California connection with a friend in California. How did that get started?

00:24:43

JN: Well when I was working insurance in Los Angeles a friend of mine’s, James Compton opened Jay Bee’s Barbecue, and I would stop by Jay Bee’s, lots of evenings going home; it was around the corner from me and I was working insurance. So I’d stop and get ribs or something for dinner. And we became real good friends. We both liked to boat and we both liked to scuba

dive and we would take our boats sometimes and race to Catalina Island or go scuba, and what have you. And in '83 he had a heart attack, and he couldn't run his place anymore. So I got my brother, Harry to buy it, and that's how Jay Bee's came to be because I—when I got opened up here in '79 the main thing I wanted to know from—from Jim Compton was how do I keep a fire burning all day? When I'm cooking in the backyard I look up sometimes and my coals has run out. And I went out and he showed me the technique on how he designed this pit. So I came back in and designed my pit the same way. And from that design there's only six of those pits in Memphis. I own two and my nephews own four—two at each restaurant. But I even refined Jay Bee's design here in Memphis myself. And I build very, very good even cooking, indirect pits, and they cook great, but like I said there's only six of them in Memphis.

00:26:20

RF: Did the owner of Jay Bee's in Los Angeles, did he build that pit himself?

00:26:24

JN: Yeah; he helped—yeah he designed his pit.

00:26:26

RF: And what kind of barbecue did he serve? Was it Memphis style or is there such thing as West Coast style?

00:26:34

JN: Jim was from Louisiana so it was kind of a blend. He had a great—he had a great product. He had a great product, 'cause coming from Louisiana you still had that—you know this

influence of Memphis-style barbecue it's kind of—goes on down the line through Greenville, Mississippi on down through Jackson, even over as far as Beaumont, Texas which is East Texas, you know. You've still got that southern thing, you know, 'cause remember; the barbecue thing came from slaves—from the slaves. They're the ones—they're the ones that when they killed hogs certain part of the hog was—was not the prime cut that the plantation owner wanted, and they gave this to them and they learned how to take the brisket of a cow for example, which was a tough piece of meat, and learned how to cook it and make it tender, you know, so that—you know, that's where it actually came from. So you'll find it pretty much through the South. You get over in Texas and then you get into—a little bit different 'cause now you get in cow—cow country and the way they cooked them was a little bit different, you know. You go into Kansas City it's still pretty much the same, you know. They may use a little different in sauce. When you go up to North Carolina it's a different ballgame. You know, it's the shredded pork with the vinegar based barbecue sauce.

00:27:57

RF: Where was Jim from in Louisiana just to clarify?

00:28:01

JN: Somewhere between New Orleans and Baton Rouge, down in that area.

00:28:09

RF: So—so you kind of—he kind of influenced the pit you built here.

00:28:16

JN: Oh yeah.

00:28:18

RF: How did you build it? How long does it take to build a barbecue pit or that first one? Was it you know a trial and error?

00:28:23

JN: The first one was trial and error. When I expanded my restaurant—‘cause I had built a pit. I had built a pit the old-fashioned way, you know. We built this big brick pit and everything, you know, and we got a thing on the bottom where you could put your charcoal and stuff. So I had to come back and modify that pit and build a fire box. Well the only thing about that, when you’re cooking over the years and you’re cooking those pork shoulders all night, all that grease drops down into the bottom of the pit and it got to go somewhere over a period of time. So it goes all down into the bricks and to the bottom. So, when I added on my building in ’95 I took and had a quarter-inch steel plate, liner, built and it was built like six-feet deep, eight-feet tall, eight-feet wide—pretty big pits, so all steel. And I had—when I built the wall, I built a concrete slab for it to sit on. And then when I built the wall of the building, I left an opening where that steel liner could be put in first. And then after we put that steel liner in we took and built a layer of fire bricks all the way around that steel liner. Then we stepped up about an inch and a half from those fire bricks and ran another layer of regular bricks. We moved out another inch and put another layer of bricks, and then another layer of bricks. And in the space between those bricks they got some stuff they call Bake(r)lite which is an insulation. When we got to the top of that metal pit we back-filled it with insulation to make it hold the heat and then we put the—built a concrete

top over that by pouring a slab. Man they cooked great—really great, and we built it where we can fire the pit with natural gas. The main heat is from natural gas but it has a double fire box, and then one of the fire boxes there's a place for a tray for hickory wood and charcoal. So in that area we burn a charcoal and hickory wood to get what's the smoke and the flavoring for the meat and then in the other box we got the flame for the heat. But it never reaches into the pit where the meat is.

00:30:54

RF: And does the—the flame is a constant—the gas flame?

00:30:58

JN: Oh yeah, it's a constant, you know. Right at the opening up of the pit there's a big metal plate, so when that flame comes out of the end of that inch—inch pipe, and that flame hits that plate it makes it flare up and burn on a big flare like a turkey tail you know. You ever see a turkey when he flares his tail up? Well that's the way it burns at the opening of the pit.

00:31:21

RF: And what's the mixture of—of hickory and charcoal that you use?

00:31:27

JN: Well we—you know, it's no certain mixture. We just put some charcoal and put hickory in it on top of it, so as the charcoal burns, the hickory burns and it really gives off a great aroma and keep a constant—if we didn't do that it would like be cooking meat in a regular—in a oven, 'cause the name of the game is, to smoke the meat. And it makes it great because you ain't got all

this charcoal, all this stuff to try to rake out, you ain't got all this grease, and by this pit having this metal liner and the bottom of the pit is made into a trough, where all the grease comes down into a trough and out into a three-inch pipe and it goes into a—the grease goes into a holding tank outside the pits, so—. It's like I said it's only six of them in Memphis, you know.

00:32:15

RF: And tell—tell me about—well how would you describe your barbecue—the meat that you cook?

00:32:21

JN: The meat that we cook and the method we cook in because we cook with closed flue on the pit. We only crack the flue just about a half-inch, enough felt by—the draft from the outside with that pipe going up in the air, the draft is enough that it pulls the smoke and the heat in evenly over and under the meat and it keeps the meat moist and all the smoke predominantly and the heat in the pit, so that means any moisture that's dripping down off that meat, when it hits that metal—hot metal plate in the bottom of that pit it's like you pouring water in a skillet with grease in it. It goes [*spsst*]; well that creates a vapor and that vapor keeps that meat moist with the meat's own juice. So when that meat is completely done it's moist and tender and not crispy and hard.

00:33:25

RF: How long are shoulders and ribs cooked here for?

00:33:28

JN: Shoulders we cook in about 12 hours. Ribs we can cook anywhere from four and a half to five hours—or five and a half hours depending on the thickness. You know hogs come in different sizes. Sometimes ribs come in different sizes. You can have a thick rib sometimes which might take a little longer and sometimes they kill hogs—. Like it's 4th of July, Memorial Day, Labor Day—they going to kill everything they can kill because the supply and demand got to be met. So you get some thin ribs and you have to watch them 'cause you can overcook them, you know, and you got to know where you got your heavy ribs at and where your small ribs and you got—you know, that tells you how to watch them, especially on the last 30 minutes to 45 minutes.

00:34:07

RF: And were you always your own Pit Master?

00:34:10

JN: Oh yeah, I started off I was my own Pit Master. I got one guy now that been with me for 13 years and even now I can walk past—when the pit is open I can walk past a tray of meat or something he done taken out and I can tell him right away, “Joe these are cooked a little too long,” you know. And I—I monitor everything all the time. I'm a snoop; now I'm a snooper. I'm a Sherlock Holmes around here, you know—and, you know, I have to let him know sometimes you trying to cook too fast; you're trying to go too fast. I know you're trying to get all the cooking in 'cause I give him a cooking list of what I want cooked every day. I said, “but you know I'd rather for you to run short and don't get it all in than do something wrong trying to go too fast, you know.” Anything worth doing is worth taking your time and doing it well and that's the only way to do it.

00:34:59

RF: I mean do you think that's the secret to running a successful restaurant is—is being everywhere?

00:35:07

JN: You have to be. You can't be an absentee boss in the food business. In the mechanic business I can be an absentee boss. A lots of business I can be an absentee boss. For example I take my car to the shop; if they don't fix it right, I take it back. They say oh Mr. Neely we'll take care of it and when I go back—take it back and they fix it I'm satisfied. You come in this restaurant, and I violate your mouth, it's hard for me to make it right, so you have to eliminate all these problems. You've got to be on top of things all the time. You got to pay attention all the time, so—and it's all about what you bring to the table. But any successful food business—any successful food business it's got to be a chef there that's on top of things all day long. Someone have got to be monitoring. And it's hard to have—or find that in people. You know it's really hard to find that unique person that can do that.

00:36:06

RF: I mean tell me about the first—the first months in the food business; was—was it hard? I mean to go from—from insurance to food I would think would be completely different.

00:36:17

JN: It wasn't hard but it was financially wrecking you know. I mean we opened up and we'd go like a weekday, \$70, \$75, \$80 a day you know. Sometimes the wife and I would sit in there and

watch a whole movie on HBO between customers you know. And the next thing we know—we'd mess around and we'd look up on a Saturday we're doing \$400—\$500, you know, and, you know, so but by me not having overhead—by me being in the insurance business so long, by me still having agents out there in the field, I still had an income from the insurance business with the renewals and everything, so I could afford to be in here during that slim time, you know, and during that time I never dreamed or I never had a vision that one day I would build a business that's doing multi-million in sales, plus we're shipping across all over America every night—we're shipping. Our fax line is hot every day; our email orders is—is up. You walk out in my parking lot; we can probably park 100 cars out here and on any God's given time over 50-percent of them are from out of the State. I look out and people are up taking pictures of the building. If I'm around here on the weekend or during lunch I must take 20—25 pictures; you know people want to take a picture 'cause I seen you on the *Food Network*. I'm from so and so; I'm here 'cause I saw you on television you know. So it was hard but the reward has been great you know. For me I traveled around the country and I got \$1,000,000—\$1,500,000, a custom-built motor coach; I've got a 45-foot yacht, you know. I work seven days a week; I'm in here from five o'clock in the morning. My wife is in here every morning from 4:30; she usually don't leave 'til 6:00 in the morning and when I say 4:30 I don't mean 4:30 in the evening. She comes in at 4:30 every morning, so whatever we own or we've accomplished and accumulated whatever we have, we deserve that 'cause we worked hard for it, you know. And I'm helping with all my grandkids going to college and other family members that need anything—they call me. I helped the nephew open a place in Pontiac, Michigan. I knew it wasn't going to succeed 'cause his head wasn't right but I gave him my order. I went up and stayed with him two weeks and spent time with him, you know. But my nephew that got the Neely Barbecue in Memphis now has a show

on television, you know. They tried to get open; they didn't even know how to build a pit, you know. But I went out and helped them just like I told them—you know, I said just like I did when your dad died, you know. When your mom lost the house after Reagan cut Social Security off on kids over 18, it was three of them still in school, you know. But they lost that check; you take out three checks out of a household pretty soon you got a house note you can't pay. But at the time I had a house that was vacant and they lived in my house for about two—three years, you know and—while they was going to school and working here you know. I mean on their TV show they don't admit that they learned how to barbecue from working here you know but it's not a Neely nowhere in the barbecue business that my fingerprint is not on.

00:39:36

RF: What year or at what point did you realize that you have a very special place and that you're going—you're going to have a lot of business for a long, long time?

00:39:47

JN: You know I think it was 1989. I had been open about nine years and *People Magazine* went around America looking for the top 10 places in America. And we came in number two tied with a company in Kansas City by the name of Arthur Bryant. Now when I say Arthur Bryant, let me go back 25 years before I ever went into the business. I was reading an *Ebony Magazine* one day and they had this story in there on Arthur Bryant. And I was enchanted by him because he was a black man that had a restaurant, a barbecue restaurant that Presidents was coming to eat at. So here it is now 25 years later, and at the time 25 years earlier when I read the—I never dreamed of being in the barbecue business. Oh no; that wasn't ever nowhere on my periscope sight, you know. And if I hadn't have bought this grocery store for my son I probably still wouldn't have

been in the barbecue business. But here it is 25 years later and my name is being mentioned in the same conversation with Arthur Bryant. I kind of knew how Peter felt to be associated with Jesus; you know to have my name mentioned with Arthur Bryant was just like Peter having his name associated with Jesus. I mean that's how thrilled I was because you know it was the epitome of barbecue, you know.

00:41:20

RF: Did you ever get a chance to meet Mr. Bryant?

00:41:22

JN: No; I didn't. I really didn't. We had a—a fellow here in Memphis that I grew up next door to his mom and in fact I mentioned Mr. Owens earlier when I told you my dad couldn't barbecue but it was a neighbor that could and that was Mr. Owens. Well they had a son named Brady that went off and stayed in New York for years. And Brady moved back to Memphis and went to work with his mom at a church helping maintain a big church. Well in later years Brady opened up a barbecue place called Lily and Brady's; that was great. I used to come home from California and I'd always go by Lily and Brady's and get me some briskets or something. And Lily and Brady came up with this barbecue spaghetti idea that my nephews get on the *Food Network* and say that was their mama that started it. That was started by Lily and Brady and it was great. And before he closed his business and died he gave me the recipe. There's only two people in Memphis that has Brady's recipe; that's me and Frank Vernon who owns the Barbecue Shop on Madison because he bought Lily and Brady's and later on he changed the name to the Barbecue Shop. And he has Brady's recipe as well as I—. My nephews learned it from me.

00:42:52

RF: What is barbecue spaghetti? Can you describe it in a couple words?

00:42:55

JN: Barbecue spaghetti is very simple. We take the pork meat from barbecue and instead of using ground beef, we take the barbecue pork meat and we blend it with basil, onions, and parsley and we season it with that and we simply drain the spaghetti after we get it done and we take and chop this meat and mix—mix it in with the barbecue sauce in the spaghetti and it's great. You know so that's barbecue spaghetti. Of course there ain't no way in the world you can put the spaghetti on the pit and barbecue the spaghetti itself. It's the meat that makes the barbecue spaghetti.

00:43:36

RF: All right; and can you—can you talk about the sauce you serve here? What—what—how would you describe the sauce?

00:43:40

JN: The sauce that we use here is a slightly sweet with a tangy, little bit of a bite taste to it. I can make it really bite with the hot sauce but it's a real sweet pleasant taste. Let me tell you something about barbecue sauce and meat. If there's a beautiful woman, when she gets up in the morning, once she wash her face she don't need nothing 'cause her face is already beautiful. But she will put in a little eye shadow and a little makeup just to accentuate her beauty. When a piece of meat is well-seasoned and that meat is cooked really done the barbecue sauce is just an accentuator to that taste of that meat and it should compliment the meat—not be the determining

factor that I got to put barbecue sauce in it just to eat it, you know. You know how you go somewhere in a restaurant sometime and you got to doctor something up to be able to eat it? Well it's should just be a compliment and the two should be a marriage between the sauce and the meat to make it work together.

00:44:52

RF: Do you—I want to ask you about seasoning. Do you season your meat before you put it on the pit?

00:44:59

JN: All the meat is marinated with a rub. Everything—and it's not marinated before; it's like marinated a day or two before.

00:45:06

RF: Oh really?

00:45:07

JN: Oh yeah; we marinate it a day or two before. We give it time to really get all the way into that meat.

00:45:14

RF: Have—have you always done it that way?

00:45:17

JN: Oh yeah; we've always done it that way—always. There's guys right now as we speak, there's three or four guys out in the USDA building doing nothing but prepping meat, cutting out ribs, skinning ribs, seasoning pork shoulders, skinning beef, prepping beef, doing chicken and everything, yeah.

00:45:39

RF: How—how long did you—a question that's been running through my mind; how long did you keep the insurance businesses? What happened to them?

00:45:49

JN: After I came in here in '70—in '80, I kept them going for about a year. And I gave the guys that worked for me a chance to get their own contracts with different insurance companies see because I was an independent agent. I had a contract with three different insurance carriers—companies. And I gave these guys a chance to go into business on their own.

00:46:17

RF: Okay; so what do you think makes Memphis barbecue special or really great?

00:46:26

JN: I think from the legacy that have always been here. You know if you never experience something, example like I say; I grew up in the South. And whether I had to—whether I had to go to the front door for a sandwich or the back door it didn't matter 'cause I didn't know no different. So it's the same way with barbecue in Memphis. We grew up knowing what barbecue was and what barbecue is supposed to taste like. So by us knowing that's how we're able to

achieve the taste—‘cause we know what we’re trying to reach. It’s like a musician; trying to make—reach a certain note, he’s got to in his mind know how that note is supposed to sound. Otherwise he won’t know when he reached his milestone, you know. So and I—that’s the only thing I can think of because here in Memphis we’ve always done it so well.

00:47:20

RF: So I mean the analogy that you just used, the—the barbecue that you’re trying to make, are you trying to make it how it—you remember it tasting back in the day?

00:47:28

JN: Definitely—definitely trying to make it that way because man I mean that was—you know, that was a taste, you know. I can sometime now be doing things and think about a—a barbecue place from somewhere, you know. They used to make a pork rib sandwich where they would put slaw on the bread and put the rib between two pieces of bread. Now you trying to eat that—you know.

00:47:53

RF: With the bones and all?

00:47:54

JN: Yeah but it wasn’t the way you would do it; you would kind of reach in and pull the bone off, you know, and you would eat it, you know. But the slaw on that bread man was so great.

00:48:02

RF: What—what made the slaw different then and now?

00:48:08

JN: My wife can capture it now. She captures it now. I got people coming in telling me I don't eat slaw, but I love this slaw. And I think it's knowing how to season it and knowing what you're trying—trying to accomplish. The slaw is the barbecue—the slaw here is a sweet tangy slightly vinegar-based slaw; it's just slightly—enough vinegar, just a slight amount of vinegar now, enough to give it a little twang with a little cayenne pepper in it, you know, and a certain amount of white sugar for the sweetness of the cabbage.

00:48:50

RF: What kind of vinegar do you use?

00:48:54

JN: I use nothing but Heinz Cider Vinegar—nothing else. Don't give me nothing off-brand, no off-brand, tell me about Sam's or Wal-Mart; I use Heinz Cider Vinegar. They're the only one—you know, I just—certain stuff I use. Worcestershire sauce—I only use one brand and that's French's, you know. I don't deviate from nothing. Mayonnaise it's got to be the top of the line; you've got to have a top of the line product. You can't make chicken sandwich out of chicken crap. Crap is going to be crap. You've got to have the chicken and that's the only way. It's no color—corner cutting. Oh man my food costs; I know some people that's in business you're always worrying about what—what something costs. You've got to worry about your customers' perception and if you can put the product out there to your customers' perception the cost will justify the—the means and the end. And that's what you have to do.

00:49:55

RF: So where do you think Memphis barbecue is going to go in the next couple decades?

00:50:02

JN: Well I hope and I can't speak for Memphis barbecue but I hope the Neely legacy lives on because like I say I got my grandkids around here and everything and I'm sending them off to school. I got one getting ready to go out to Disney—Disneyland in August and he's going into the Hotel Program they got out there for about eight months and he's in college. My oldest grandson is 25; he's in college you know. He's going to school and a Business Major and what have you, but I hope he takes that Business Major and then takes this business here to the next level, you know. Corky's is probably doing \$16, \$17, \$18, maybe \$20 million a year with the barbecue they shipping it on CBS and Snook's stores and stuff and there's nothing that says we can't do the same thing you know to be able to go to Sam's, go to Wal-Mart and talk to the buyers up there to put this product in the store. It's a known fact that the reception is there 'cause I get people all over the country every day coming here and telling me they never had barbecue like that. So they come in and they say I've been to all the barbecue places in Memphis and this is the greatest I've ever had. So when people tell you that for 28 years you know they're not pulling your chain. So I'm hoping I can say in the State Jim Neely's product will be around because I'm handing it off to family members. Whether the other people got that family,, I don't know. I think Frank Vernon is doing the same thing with his son in the restaurant with him, so—.

00:51:44

RF: Can I just ask one or two more questions? Tell me about this neighborhood. We're in I guess Southwest Memphis? How's it changed?

00:51:48

JN: We're in—we're in Southwest Memphis. When I came here on this corner, remember I said I was in the insurance business in Los Angeles. I was a Manager in Los Angeles during the Watts Riot and I had six agents that worked East Los Angeles over there while the riots were going on. But even then a neighborhood over there that corners where the youth hung out none of them was bad as this corner here was when I came here. By eight o'clock in the morning there were at least 15—20 young 19, 19, 20 year-old school dropouts sitting here. There was a liquor store next door to me. You'd drive up they're sitting in the window of the place, wine bottle between their legs, smoking reefer, urinating all upside the building. And when I bought the property and told them they couldn't be here no more, they told me I couldn't stop them; they was here when I came here. And I emphatically let them know you should have bought it 'cause I own it. And anything I own I control. And I strapped a 357 Magnum on my side and put a fiberglass baton in my hand and I didn't waste my time calling the police. If I told you to quit doing something or to move, you best move. I'm going to ask you nicely—and I tell them; I'm going to ask you nicely the first time but if I have to come and ask you again I'd be begging and I don't—bet seven to one I don't beg no one now to get off my property. I'm going to move you; if I don't move you the paramedics will move you. And I cleaned this corner up [*Emphasis Added*], as you can see when you walk up. You don't see no vagrants around here nowhere. I ended up making sure the liquor store was closed. I bought that property. The parking lot here on the north side of the building was a—a vacant—old vacant ice house that they would sit on. I bought all the property so I control everything around here, and then this is not a residential

street we're on. This is US Highway 61; this is a business street and as you notice there is no houses on this street. There is Exxon gas and everything on this street is business. The insurance company is next door to me, and we cleaned it up. I look up and here comes tour buses driving in. I wouldn't be surprised today if one or two tour buses won't drive in unannounced, you know. Sometimes at lunchtime it puts a strain on the seams of the building 'cause we can seat about 270 people but my God; we going to be busy anyway. So the neighborhood was rough. But as you can see it's—it's a good stable neighborhood now. Business is flourishing; Exxon is doing a great business up the street and, you know, so—.

00:54:32

RF: In those early days did—did your wife or your children question what you were doing about moving to this rough neighborhood and trying to transform a business?

00:54:43

JN: I think—I think a lots of people, even my friends thought I was crazy. Friends of mine—I'll tell you now man; I thought you were crazy man. When you were walking through here and showing me this place and what you're going to do I said to myself, man he's blowing—he's just blowing smoke. But you know, I've always had faith in myself. I've always been a daredevil. As a kid I was a daredevil—even driving a car. I did everything; I pushed everything to a limit. I pushed a car to the limit. I'd push a car to the limit to see how fast I can go and turn the corner. **[Laughs]** Wonder I didn't roll four or five times, but you know I was a daredevil. And I'm motivated by challenge. The day they told me I couldn't move them out of this neighborhood, they was here when I got here—you challenged me. And let me tell you something; when you challenge me on my terms, on my grounds, you can't win. You know I had a hearing this

morning at eight o'clock at the Employment Office on an employee, that I fired. And he challenged my decision. I love to go down there; I love to sit and I love to challenge because I cross all of my T's and dot all of my I's in everything I do. If you work for me, everything I do I'm going to do it the right way. If you violate I'm going to write you up. You're going to sign it. You're going to get all kinds of warnings and when I decide to send you out of this door, 28 years only one person went out of these doors and drew unemployment and it's because I wanted to let him draw unemployment. Nobody ever. You know, because I'm fair; I hire people because I need you. But when you come in here you got to get behind the drum major. You can't come in and change nothing you know. I pay the cost to be the boss and I pay these guys good; so—.

00:56:33

RF: So would you encourage young people to go into the restaurant business or the barbecue business?

00:56:36

JN: If you got the stamina for it, if you've got the backbone, if you got—if you got the determination; if you feel you can work 12—14 hours or if it's 16 hours or 18—whatever it takes to do it—yeah. The reward is great; the work is hard but everything is hard in life, you know. It's hard for me to go to somebody's job and work—somebody else's job and work eight hours 'cause you know why? I feel I bring more to the table than what they're going to pay me. I think I'm worth more than what they're going to pay me because even when I work jobs I work jobs like it's my business, because I want to make more. And the only way I can make more is to show you I'm worth more—to show you I'm the best employee you've got, to show you, you don't have to stand over my shoulder all day, to show me anything you do—tell me to do I'm

going to do it where you're going to say, "dog; damn Jim did a good job," you know. And that's the way I always work you. And I tell guys in here, don't ever come and ask me for a raise; if you've got to ask me for a raise you're not worth one because I'm always watching and I'm always monitoring, you know, because if you're worth anything I'm going to give you a raise 'cause I want to keep you. I don't want nobody to come to me that's—that's only worth minimum wage. You ain't worth nothing and if the only thing—you'll work for minimum wage you wouldn't even know how to sweep in here. You couldn't even do a good job sweeping. I'd have to come behind you and tell you son, look over here; you missed this. Look over here, you know. So I—I—you know I—I want to be able to pay people and I want to hire people that can kind of live up to the quality and standards that I want in here.

00:58:13

RF: So one last question; do you—do you still love to eat barbecue and how do you order your barbecue?

00:58:20

JN: I still love to eat barbecue. I very seldom have to order it because if I'm walking past the pit and the Pit Master just took out a rack of ribs or something [*Laughs*] I may grab me a knife and get maybe two bones and that's it.

00:58:38

RF: With no sauce?

00:58:38

JN: No sauce; one of them I may dip in the sauce pot. I walked through it like yesterday and I was hungry. I got one slice of wheat bread and I got me two thin slices of beef brisket and poured just a dab of sauce on it and kept right on walking and eat—and ate that and that was it. I was—had—always had a weight problem. Three and a half years ago I was 350-plus pounds, 56-inch waste; as you can see now I’m sitting with my legs crossed. I’m at a 40-inch waste and I’m 205-pounds. I had the gastric bypass surgery. I began to gain a little weight; six weeks ago I went out to California and I had—they went down my throat with a new procedure to re-shrink my stomach that began to stretch and during that six-week time I’ve took about 40 pounds, so I eat very little of the pork and stuff, you know, and I watch what I eat and how I eat because I promised my prospective pall bearers, you won’t have to lug 360-pounds to the hole. You’ll never curse me or—my last few steps y’all carry me; you know, I’m going to make it light on you. But I love being thin now man I’m telling you; I love it. I love to be able to put on clothes. I love to be able to get on my yacht, to get in my motor home and got to bend over and pick up something, to be able to sit in the chair and bend over and tie my shoes up ‘cause all my shoes I wore before was sandals that I could slip in you know. So it’s—but I still love barbecue, you know.

01:00:13

RF: Does—does barbecue taste good on wheat bread? I’ve never heard of that?

01:00:15

JN: Oh yeah, yeah; well I took the beef brisket ‘cause I—very seldom I eat any bread other than wheat bread, you know, and—and it’s low—the low-cal, the low-fat wheat bread, you know. So

in fact I wouldn't know what white bread tastes like it's been so long since I ate it. Now I—I will eat some of my wife's cornbread now. *[Laughs]* Yeah.

01:00:37

RF: Okay; well that's—that's probably a good note to end on unless you'd like to add anything else. But I want to thank you.

01:00:44

JN: I appreciate you coming by and I'm glad to give the opportunity to put out the Neely legacy on the Memphis barbecue scene. And I tell you with the history it's really why they're known here in the City of Memphis. So the people, the listeners will know how and where the Memphis legacy began for the Memphis—for Neely Barbecue on the Memphis scene.

01:01:11

RF: Okay; well thank you, sir.

01:01:13

JN: Thank you.

01:01:17

[End Jim Neely - Interstate Interview]