

**JIM McMURTRY**  
**Smokey Denmark Sausage Company - Austin, TX**

\*\*\*

Date: March 26, 2007

Location: Burdine Hall, University of Texas at Austin - Austin, TX

Interviewers: Interviewed by Rebecca Onion and Lisa Powell

Length: 1 hour, 25 minutes

Project: Southern BBQ Trail: Texas

\*\*\*

Southern Foodways Alliance  
in association with the American Studies Department at the  
University of Texas, Austin  
and  
The Central Texas Barbecue Association

**[Begin Jim McMurtry]**

Rebecca Onion: We are here on March 26, 2007, with James McMurtry, Jim McMurtry, the owner and operator, Jim McMurtry, of Smokey Denmark. Would you say your name for the tape, and your place of birth?

Jim McMurtry: My name is Jim McMurtry, and I was born in Norfolk, Virginia.

RO: And your age, if you're willing to disclose that information?

JM: I'm sixty-two.

RO: Very well. And okay, so I wanted to try to start with a little bit of the history of your ownership of the business, so if you could talk a bit about how you came across the opportunity to buy it, how you made the decision to do so, what state it was in at that point, things of that nature?

JM: Well, back in 1972, I got a call from my brother in law. And he said, "Jim, there's a sausage business for sale over there in Austin," and he was calling me from the Bryan, College Station area, so he said, 'there's a sausage business for sale over there, and why don't you go over and nose around and see if that's something that we oughta do, we oughta buy?' He said, "It's Smokey Denmark, and Mr. Denmark has had a heart attack, and his doctors have told him that if he intends to live very much longer, he has to stop

working so hard.” And so I said, “Well, Cliff,” my brother in law, I said, “Cliff, we don’t know anything about making sausage.” And he said, “Well that’s all right, we have enough expertise available to us through Texas A&M to be able to learn the business, and we’ll have a manager to manage it for us.” So I went out to the sausage plant and I met with Mr. and Mrs. Denmark, and they provided us, provided me with information, answered every question I had, let me observe the practices and procedures, and I talked to their banker, and that sort of thing. And I am very conservative, especially when it comes to finances, and it looked like to me like it would at least pay for itself. So Cliff and I decided that we would buy Smokey Denmark from the Denmark family, none of their family members were interested in taking over the business. So we bought it, November 25, 1972.

RO: Were Smokey and his wife sad to be getting out of the business?

JM: You know, that’s a good question. I don’t know whether they were sad or not, in all these years that have transpired since then, when Smokey—Smokey, by the way, lived for twenty-something more years, so it worked—and we have always maintained a good relationship with him till his death. And even now, Mrs. Denmark, she’s been in in the past couple of months. So whether—the business has grown so much since those days, I’ve never gotten into a conversation with either one of them, one of those “what if” conversations, how do you feel about seeing something that’s ten or twenty times as big as it was when it was yours. So I don’t know. I kinda think that Mrs. Denmark still feels like she’s kind of a part of it, that she’s got a touch on it. We’re having some public

relations work done right now, and I know in talking with Mrs. Denmark and getting some pictures of the old days, that she appreciates that it's still "Smokey Denmark." It's not Acme or A-Z Sausage Company. So she appreciates our continued use of the family name as it relates to premium quality. If we didn't make good stuff, then the association of the family name would be a different matter than if you make premium quality products and have that associated with their name.

**[00:04:36]**

RO: And when did they start owning the place, or when did their business start?

JM: Smokey and Eloise moved here and opened this business in 1964. They had lived in the Lockhart area. A few years ago, I looked back in the old archives of the Austin Public Library, and they had old telephone books there. And I noticed that the telephone number that we have today is the same as they had in 1964.

RO: Wow. But a lot of other things have changed, as we will discuss! So when you bought it, what kind of—did you have plans right away to change things or to expand, or did that idea come later?

JM: Actually, we, if you're in business making a product, I guess you always have the desire to make more and sell more product, but I remember a statement that my brother in law made, he said here we are making three thousand pounds of sausage a week, and he

said, “If we can just ever get it up to five thousand pounds, that’s all we need.” Well, today we make between thirty and forty thousand pounds. And if I think—the wisdom that—not the wisdom, but the hindsight of that is—if we were at five thousand pounds today, we wouldn’t be in business. I mean, you have to get bigger, or you have to get out.

**[00:06:21]**

RO: Are there any, I guess, examples of smaller companies—you don’t have to name names, but was there any negative example you learned from watching?

JM: In what sense?

RO: Over the years—you were saying that if you stayed smaller, you’d have a harder time claiming a share—

JM: Yes, well, I think that actually Smokey Denmark in the days around 1970 probably would have been a good example in itself. Because that’s when meat inspection came in, and if you were, the smaller you were, the more difficult it would consequently be to be able to conform your practices in your plant, to abide by the government regulations. And that’s what Smokey was actually facing. He had a business that was going, but in the facility where he was, which isn’t all that far from where our plant is today, but that facility would not pass government inspection. So they gave him a little time to build a new plant, which he did, and that’s about when he had the heart attack.

RO: And what particular kinds of physical aspects of the plant were not going to come up to code, that he would have to change, or that you changed?

JM: Well, not having seen—because by the time we bought the business, the new, that we called the new plant was constructed and he was operating it, and the facility he had had before was a barbecue restaurant or something like that, but I think most of it probably had to do with sanitation and the ability to wash down areas. I know that the building where he came from does not have floor drains or sloping floors, I'm not sure what they had on the walls, but we can wash every wall in the production related areas of the plant, have it all drain down the drain, and I know they couldn't do that where he was.

**[00:08:57]**

RO: So did you, in terms of the recipes for your product, did you get them from him or from those days, or how do you come up with the recipes?

JM: Smokey was making—when we bought the business, he was making two products. He was making the pork and beef product that we casually refer to as “the regular” even today, and then he made an all beef sausage. He had one or two customers, I think, who used an all beef sausage. And those were the only two products he made, the only two recipes we got from him. The other products, and there are numerous ones now, many

kinds of sausage and smoked brisket and spare ribs and chopped barbecue—did I say spare ribs?—those are all recipes we have developed since then.

RO: So how does that happen, how do you develop recipes? Without getting too specific into trade secrets?

JM: When you visited the plant, I may have made the statement that there are no secrets in the sausage business. And most people, they might say, you're crazy. But given enough time, enough trial and error, enough patience on the part of the customer, you can usually pretty well match what someone else has done. Or you can tweak the flavor profile, or the texture profile, you can tweak it by again, by trial and error. By taste and by looking at it. So that you can make just about what anybody thinks they want. And that's the way I would say that most of the recipes have been developed. Somebody had a particular need or a particular product they desired for us to try to do, and given enough time, we have been able to satisfy those kinds of requests.

**[00:11:20]**

RO: So who ends up taste-testing it on your end? Do you do it?

JM: Well, it's kind of a group effort. Usually, someone is working, either Jonathan—my son-in-law, my partner—or myself, is working with the customer, the relationship develops, sometimes it's both of us and the customer, but because we have an interest, we

are very much involved in the taste testing and the analysis—taking a knife, cutting it open, seeing if it’s binding, the meat’s binding together, tightly or loosely, or whatever the objective is, and then working with the customer too, to say, “How is this?” and they might say, “We’d like a little more black pepper,” or whatever it might be. It’s fun, though.

RO: Yeah, that sounds like the funnest part. So what are some examples of recipes you’ve developed in that way?

JM: Well, we make sausage products for particular customers that we have developed the recipe, but it’s for the purpose of suiting them or satisfying them. I recall one customer that was buying from a competitor and they were having trouble with tough casings. In other words, the casing, the part, we use hog intestines, but the part the meat is stuffed into, was tough. And so they, the customer, had, we found out later from them, that they had gone to different sausage manufacturers in Texas and tried to get something that would be better, more acceptable to their customers and to them. And one of the owners exclaimed to the other one, “I guess we just are not going to be able to find anybody to make a better product than we have right now.” And the other owner said, “Well maybe Smokey Denmark can do it.” So they asked us to do that, and we took that on, and today some, I don’t even know how many years later, we have not only the restaurant that they had then but they have three more now, and I think they’re very satisfied with our product. But we made it to suit them, and I don’t think it’s any secret that one of the last things we do with our sausage, most of our sausages, is that we inject the smokehouse

with steam. And that helps tenderize the casing, and that was their particular problem they were experiencing, and so that put our product ahead of whoever they were using.

[00:14:57]

RO: Which is actually another question that I had. If you could talk a little bit about your relationships with your customers, and how you over the years may have built up some of these long-lasting supplying relationships with them?

JM: Well, I suppose that this is going to sound pretty self-serving, but I will do that and you can decide what you want to do with it. We inherited, from Mr. Denmark, we inherited customers, and that's part of what we bought when we bought the business. And I looked, oh a year ago or something, I went back and looked at the old customer list, or maybe I just did it in my mind, but I found that we still had seven customers still in business from 1972. There were seven of those still in business, and we still had them all as customers.

RO: And these are restaurants we're talking about?

JM: That's right, these are restaurants. And you bring to my mind another part of the answer, is that most of what we sell, it ultimately goes to restaurants I think, but it goes through distributors. But in the old days in the beginning, everything we made that went out the door went out in our little truck that drove around Austin and went directly to

restaurants. But there are, the relationships that develop, and I think they develop because of service and because of the product itself and just the daily contact or weekly contact that you have with the customer. We do things for our customers that I'm not sure if other manufacturers do or not. Right now we have a customer in the University area here whose business burned down. And they have other locations, or one other location, and so we have helped them with projects like catering projects that are right now too big for them, because of their loss due to the fire.

RO: So kind of a long-standing relationship, you have the ability to come through in moments of stress for customers.

JM: And I think that's not just good for business, I think that's the Christian thing to do.

RO: And so what percentage of your business would you say goes directly to restaurants, versus to distributors, versus to re—I guess, you know, human customers?

JM: I've never really looked at that, exactly like that, but probably only about twenty-five percent of our production goes directly to a restaurant, and I'm answering that way because that's about what we deliver with our trucks here in the Austin area. About seventy-five percent of our production goes to distributors, who ultimately call on restaurants, but it's not a direct sale from us.

RO: And you do sell some retail—you sell to Sam's Club, I think you said?

JM: We're in four of, all of the Sam's Clubs in the Austin—Round Rock area, that is something that we began about two years ago, so we do have retail packaging equipment and labels and nutritional statements and all of that. And then last week, or two weeks ago, was the first time that we have put product in even smaller packages, into a test grocery store here in Austin.

RO: Which grocery store?

JM: It's an Albertson's store, out on Research Boulevard.

RO: And are most of the restaurants you sell to barbecue restaurants?

JM: I would say that most of the local volume that goes into restaurants is of a barbecue nature. It's not all the same sausage, we make many different kinds of sausage. But there are other restaurants that use our andouille, which is a Cajun sausage, obviously not destined for a barbecue restaurant. Or they might use our bratwurst. Those are not typically barbecue restaurants either.

**[00:20:22]**

RO: To switch gears a little bit, I wanted to see if we could go through the production process, which, I know, is kind of a lot to talk about, but if we could kind of mentally

walk through the tour you gave us, it might be good to have some of that on tape. So, starting with the giant vats of meat?

JM: Well, everything that we bring in to make sausage, all of the meat components come in boneless, in a box or in a combo, which as you were talking about, is about two thousand pounds of meat, we buy pork this way. The pork comes primarily from the Midwest. Most of the beef comes in, we use several sources, but most of it's probably from the panhandle of Texas. And the briskets, they come in from Tyson and IBP, and they have plants all over the United States and even Canada. So our meat comes in boneless, except for the spare ribs, and so it comes in in a box. And sausage is—I'll talk about making sausage. Sausage is a mixture of meat and seasoning and, so, someone has to decide what you're going to make, and so each day we look ahead to see what we're going to need in the next few days, the foreseeable future, and we give our production staff instructions as to how many batches of this and that they're to make. And we make things in batches. Some plants have a continuous process, where it's like putting things in on one end of the process, and sausage, or whatever else, keeps coming out the other end. Ours is in batches, however. That's how we've chosen to make it, and keep up with it, and keep the records, and so forth. And so the production begins by weighing up various kinds of meat. Most of our sausage products are a combination of beef and pork. However, some is all beef, and some is all pork. But depending on what we're making, the meat is weighed up, it is ground, through a grinder, and the ground meat is then lifted into the mixer, that's where it picks up the seasoning, the seasoning is portioned for that size of a batch, it is preblended for us by our supplier of seasoning according to our

specs. And then after it is mixed for precisely the amount of time we have in our recipe—because it makes a difference, how long you mix it makes a difference! Then it goes to the stuffer, and we have a Hotmann stuffer that is computer-controlled, very precise, portion-controlled, and you’ve seen the results, every link and every ring looks the same as the one before it—

RO: Wait, tell the story about the prison. *[Laughs]*

**[00:24:09]**

JM: *[Laughs]* We, as we were taking our tour, I shared with you one of the comments we got at a food show, where the man who bought, at that time bought the meat items for the jail in Belton, that’s Bell County, just north of here a couple of counties, he came up and said, “I like Smokey Denmark sausage, it’s good for my prisoners.” And I said, “Well, I’m glad to hear that. You mean it’s wholesome, it’s tasty?” He said, “Oh it’s all of that, but I like it because the big guys don’t fight the little guys for the biggest portion.” We’ve told that story many times, but it’s kind of an unusual story, but it really speaks to portion control. And after those links are portioned, and put on sticks, smoke sticks, bars or rods that the sausage hangs on, and then we hang it on the rolling racks that we’re able to roll into the smokehouse, that’s where it’s smoked.

RO: And how many pounds go on a rack?

JM: Little bit more than three hundred pounds on one rack.

RO: And so tell us about the smokehouse.

JM: Well, the smokehouses are thermostatically controlled. We use electric power for heat in the smokehouses that we smoke sausage in, and then we have smoke generators that use hickory sawdust to make smoke. And at the precise time in the process when smoke is called for, the sawdust falls down onto kind of a hot plate and it smolders and makes smoke, and that smoke is what is piped into the smokehouse, and that's where the sausage picks up its smoked appearance and flavor.

RO: And that's unusual in the business.

JM: These days. In the old days it was not unusual at all. That's the way sausage was made. But these days, many times, I might say most times, where you have something that was called a smoked sausage, it is actually smoked, and maybe I ought to be holding up my fingers here and putting this in parentheses, it is actually picking up its smoked flavor from liquid smoke that is sprayed on the outside of the sausage. But we don't do that.

RO: And this might be a good time to talk about the temperature-controlled probe with the wireless hookup. *[Laughs]*

JM: Well, one of the things that we are required to do is to take good care of the product. We're a USDA inspected facility, and we have to abide by the guidelines, the requirements that the USDA establishes, and that we have agreed to in our plan of inspection. But doing that and being able to prove that are two different things. WE need to not only be able to do that, but able to prove it as well. So we actually have redundant methods of making that proof. In the old days, and even today, we have probes that are inserted into a sausage link while it's in the smokehouse, along with all the other links that are on the rack, a couple of racks in there, and a chart recorder is keeping up with the temperature of that link of sausage. And so we have a paper recording of the time and temperature of that link of sausage that was in there. We can prove by that means that the link cooked up to a certain temperature, and that it cooled down to a certain temperature while it was in the smokehouse. A couple of years ago, I suppose, maybe it's been longer than that, we invested in the Freshloc system. In addition to the old paper system, we now have with the Freshloc system, we have a probe that is not connected to a wire, it is wireless. The probe is inserted into a link of sausage, actually we do that after the sausage is made and before it ever goes into the smokehouse area. And that probe transmits what it is sensing. In other words, the temperature of that link of sausage. Every two minutes, I think. And it is transmitting that to receivers that we have throughout the plant. So if you wheel it from one area of the plant to another area of the plant, well, you're still being picked up, the temperature is still being picked up. Into the smokehouse, out of the smokehouse into the chill—it stays with that link of sausage until that link is put into a box. So with that information, that information is transmitted into the receivers as I said,

and then it's transmitted by Internet to a server in Dallas, Texas, and is accessible to us twenty-four hours a day, and even from home.

RO: Do you check it from home a lot?

JM: I don't check it from home a lot, but my partner Jonathan does. And I would go one step further about the Freshloc system. It's not just probes that go into sausage, it also includes sensors we have located through the plant that can tell us what the temperature is in the chiller, or what the temperature is in the pack-off room, or the freezer, at any hour, and there are predetermined temperatures that if, like if it gets, if it's not cold enough in the freezer—this last weekend, Jonathan called me and said, "I'm getting a message that the freezer is no longer at zero." And so I took care of it, and later in the day, I checked back and the temperature was down. So it, all this to say, we can do a better job today than ever before in being able to prove that we took good care of the product.

**[00:32:20]**

RO: So what happens after the sausage leaves the smokehouse—it goes to the chiller?

JM: Actually, the chilling begins in the smokehouse. It kind of surprises people sometimes when we say that the last step in the smokehouse is a bath. A shower comes on. Normally we don't think about washing meat, especially cooked meat. But that's exactly what happens, it runs a predetermined amount of time, usually twelve minutes, a

shower comes on. The purpose is twofold. One is to wash any grease that might be on the outside of the casing, on the outside of the sausage, so it looks better. It's not greasy-looking. I'm not sure what it would look like if the shower didn't come on, but anyway, it's not greasy at all after being showered. But probably the more important reason to have the shower is that cold water is not only washing the outside of the casing but it's also helping to bring down, very quickly, the temperature. And the quicker you can pass through the window of temperature from about 140 to about eighty, or go on down below that, but the quicker you can get from 140 down to eighty, the longer your shelf life is going to be. Because that's the window that bacteria and things enjoy. They grow better in that area.

RO: What kind of bacteria are you worried about?

JM: *[Laughs]* I'm worried about any bacteria. Things we're interested in dealing with are E. coli, salmonella, and all the other kinds of things you hear about in the media.

RO: Okay, so they're in the chiller, then they go to the packing room?

JM: Yes, we chill most of the products down to 40 degrees before we pack them, and then we take them out of the chiller and put them in the appropriate box, or if they're going to go for retail, like you mentioned Sam's Club, or the grocery store, we'll use our rollstock machine to actually put them in an airtight and air-evacuated container like you're used to seeing in a meat case.

RO: And then they go to be put in bigger boxes and sent away.

JM: Yes, that's right.

RO: So how long does the process take through the entire, from the beginning to the end?

JM: For us, it is probably a quicker process by necessity than it might be somewhere else. Because we are pretty much maxed out at our production facility. We have to turn things over as quickly as possible. We have to bring in, for the most part, the meat we're going to be making sausage with that week. This morning is a Monday morning, and we have trucks that are bringing in meat that will actually even be used today, beginning today. And then because of lack of space, the end product, the finished goods, they have to move out too. I hate to put it this way, because normally people think this is a bad way to live, but we have to live hand to mouth. In other words, we have to have a quick turnaround of the product. Now, the good side of that is, is that everything that leaves is as fresh as it can be. But we would ideally like to have a little bit more storage capacity so that we didn't have to depend on a truck that was scheduled to be here at a particular hour actually being here at that time.

**[00:37:10]**

Lisa Powell: Could you tell us just a little bit about the relationship you have with the meat inspector? I noticed that you, for example, even share your office with the meat inspector. Could you tell us about that relationship and about the inspector's role in the sausage making?

JM: That's a good question and I think it's an interesting dynamic between the inspector and management. The plant was, originally designed to give the inspector his own, in those days, his own office—our inspector now is a lady, and I would guess that about half the local inspectors in this area of Texas are women—but we, because of growth, we have had to intrude, I guess, a little bit, on the space that was originally devoted to the inspector, and so that's why you find the inspector and me actually sharing an office. The inspector is at the plant every day, usually more than one time in the day, and they are assigned tasks, and I say assigned, by random assignment, as to things that they are really going to zero in on, inspect for that day. So that we, as management, we don't know what is in direct line of inspection for today. We don't know whether our inspector will be there when we start, to do pre-op with us, or whether she will arrive two hours later, or whether she will even come back when the cleanup crew is there at night. We don't ever know. We joke a little bit, when she says, "See you later," we'll say, "Well, how much later?" And we laugh about that. We have an excellent relationship with not only our present inspector, and I would call her by name but I'm not sure that would—we're on a first-name basis with them, but—they understand, and we understand, that they have a job to do that's very important. It's not just important for the consumer, though, I guess that's ultimately who they're working for, but it's important for us, too. It helps, we

would acknowledge that it helps us to manage our production, our procedures and everything, to have somebody else who is looking over our shoulders to see that we're doing what we said we would do. It's like accountability, I guess. They don't tell us what to do, and under our system today, we come up with our own plan to manage the hazards that might befall a product. We come up with that, and we write it down on paper, and they make sure we do what we said we would do. But our relationship is good, and cordial, and there are a few times when we disagree, and I think because we have a cordial relationship, we find it's easier to work through those times.

RO: And how often is she at the plant?

JM: She's there every day, sometimes more than one time per day. I think she has three full time plants and a part time plant that is only under inspection occasionally. So she is dividing her time primarily between three plants.

**[00:42:05]**

LP: I just had one more question kind of in the vein of the process and your plant. Could you talk a little bit about the building where your plant is, and we did see some of what seemed to be original rooms of the building that now serve different purposes than they used to, and we saw some very new or expanded areas adjacent to or outside the building. So could you talk a little bit about how the building has changed?

JM: In 1970, Mr. Denmark built the original part of the plant, at our location at 3505 East Fifth Street. And in that brick building, brick exterior and most of the interior walls were faced with a ceramic tile, not like a bathroom tile but blocks of, like cinder block almost, that had a tile surface on it. And there was mortar, between the blocks. Well, that would not be such a good idea today, because there are pores in there. Anyway, gradually, we resurfaced the walls, and so you didn't see any of that, it's behind the coverings, the glass board that you see on the walls today. But over the years, since 1972, since we've purchased the plant, the business, we've had four or five major additions. And we have been prompted each time by needing to have more space, make more product, have more equipment, that sort of thing. And it's a challenge each time you add more square footage. It's a challenge because one of the underlying, the basic considerations is that you don't want raw product to come into contact with product you've already made, cooked up to a certain temperature, chilled down to a certain temperature. You don't want there to be an opportunity for a contamination of something that you have been taking such good care of. And so as you add on, you have to think of product flow, you know. How are we gonna do this if we open up this space over here? And as you can well imagine, unless you're out in the country somewhere, you can only add on in certain directions depending on where you've got land to add on, and where we are right now, we would not be permitted by the City of Austin to add another square foot of concrete. So we are at that point now where we can no longer add on. We will be looking for, and are looking for, land to use to build a new production facility. Is that the kind of answer that—

LP: It is, and if you could just follow up a little bit, we saw a couple of small rooms inside that I think had had different purposes before, I think one had been the smoking room, or that's what went on there before, and then—

JM: Well, almost in theory, back in 1972, we had some space devoted to doing most everything we do today. It was smaller, it worked then, for what we did, but as you expand, you have to have larger rooms to do this or that, and so you have to make use of the space that formerly was intended for one purpose, you have to give it a new purpose. Which means you may have to modify the atmosphere in there, or the surfaces, or the doorways, or whatever. Just a few cases in point, in 1972, we had a spice room where we kept spices, spice barrels, we weighed up our spices those days for every batch. Today, that's a computer room, and a small office for Jonathan, my partner. And then the old smokehouses, we had three, they were just pit type smokehouses with no air flow in them, with those same kind of walls I was talking about. Well, so when we got the stainless steel thermatically controlled smokehouses, they would fit in there, and so we got an addition for the smokehouse area. One of those smokehouses is part of the chiller, that space. One of those three old smokehouses is devoted to our coats, our frocks, and so forth, and labels and things like that. And then the third one, we've turned into, it's a drying room. We produce a product today that we never could produce before, where we control the humidity and the temperature. In this room, we are able to produce a sausage that is shelf stable. In other words, once it's made, by controlling the pH in the product and the amount of moisture that ends up in the final product, you could package it and lay it on this table here or on the counter in a grocery store, and it would be safe to eat, shelf

stable, for months. And so that's the purpose that we now have for this smokehouse that was smokehouse number two originally.

**[00:49:15]**

RO: And how were the original smokehouses heated?

JM: The original smokehouses were heated by gas. Gas flames, there was a pit, an open part of the floor, that just had a wire mesh over it, so that the sausage racks wouldn't fall down into the fire. But there was a gas flame that was down in this pit, and there were trays, oh, maybe a foot by three feet long, something like that, where we put sawdust in those, and those we would slide in over the gas flame, so that as the gas burned, the flame would heat up the sawdust in the trays, and that's where the smoke would come from. But they were really pretty crude. We could control the amount of gas in there, so we could control the heat in the room, but there was no air movement in the room so it might be hotter in one area of the smokehouse than in another area, and we had no idea, other than opening up the door and putting a thermometer in a link of sausage, we had no idea what the temperature was inside a link of sausage.

RO: I wanted to ask a little bit about your other product, the brisket, the ribs, and the chopped beef. Who buys that, and where does it get eaten?

JM: Well, the barbecue items, the smoked brisket, and the chopped barbecue, are primarily used, let's take them one at a time. The smoked brisket—and we make two smoked briskets, one which we call the whole brisket, which is just like it comes from the meat packer, with quite a bit of fat on it, a whole brisket is a fat-covered piece of meat, and we do have some customers that want it that way, they feel like it is more moist if it's been cooked that way, and I would agree with them, I think it is. But you have a lot of fat that has been trimmed off, like in a barbecue restaurant, that's part of what they trim off before they put the meat on your plate. But it is a very good product. So we have the whole brisket, and then we have the trimmed brisket, and the trimmed brisket is a product, it's whole also in its configuration, but we have removed, before seasoning and cooking it, we've removed on average about twenty eight percent of its weight in fat. With the trimmed brisket, virtually 100 percent of it can go on a plate. Okay, who uses that? Well, restaurants do. Not barbecue restaurants, because they will cook their own. But with that brisket, with some of our sausage, beans that a restaurant can make, potato salad that they can buy or make, slaw that they can buy or make, they can have a barbecue plate even without having a barbecue pit. I would say that's where most of that goes. The chopped barbecue, concession stands, where they're wanting something that's easy and good, something that they can heat up, put on a bun, and give it to the customer. Whether it's a concession stand or a convenience store, even sometimes we have customers that put it on a baked potato as a topping. So that's where most of that goes.

**[00:54:00]**

RO: So I wanted to ask a little bit about, you kind of alluded to wanting to find a place to find a bigger factory. What other kind of future plans do you have for the business?

JM: Well, that, and that—I'm stumbling over my tongue here—

LP: Oh, we can take a break if you want—

JM: I think I'll be all right. I think the best way to answer your question is, if someone were to walk in the front door of Smokey Denmark today, and they will, and ask us for a pound of sausage, or five pounds, a little bit of this, a little bit of that, somebody will stop whatever it is that they are doing and wait on that customer, and they will give them what they have asked for. But it's a very inefficient method of waiting on what we refer to as a walk-in customer. And being located where we are, on East Fifth Street, which doesn't go all the way through to Interstate 35, we're a secret. We're the best kept secret, we say, in Austin, even though we've been there at that same place since 1970. We are beginning now to become a little bit better known with the help of the retail presence, not at our location, but you know, retail packaging for the Sam's Clubs and hopefully in the grocery stores. But we were prompted to do that, I think, by a study that Texas A&M did, oh, ten or twelve years ago. I guess something like that. They examined small—relatively small—meat manufacturing plants, not unlike Smokey Denmark, and they determined that the businesses that had some kind of a retail presence, either a restaurant, a deli, a meat market, or some widespread presence in a meat case, you know like in grocery stores or something like that. Those businesses provided their owners with a better return

on each dollar invested in the business. And so we took that to heart and we're convinced that if we will diversify, if we will try to take our business in some manner into one of these areas or some of these areas where we are better known, that will help not only that part of the business but also when a restaurant, we'll say, is getting ready to buy some smoked meat items Smokey Denmark will come to their mind because they will have seen us somewhere, rather than going on the Internet or something and putting "sausage in Austin, Texas," or something and catching us that way.

[00:57:47]

RO: So an expanded retail presence?

JM: Right.

[00:57:53]

RO: Will your son-in-law, do you think, will he continue to be a big presence do you think, or will he take over if you decide to get out or if anything happens?

JM: Well, someday I'm going to retire.

RO: I didn't want to say it.

JM: I very much enjoy working with Jonathan and Missy, his wife, my daughter, is very much involved in the business as well. And I think we all enjoy it. It's a good time, you know. You hear people say, "Don't go in business with your family." Well, I guess if it doesn't work, it's a bad deal, but if it works well, then it's a very good deal. And with us, with them, it's wonderful. We have a chance to work together, but we have a chance to dream together and scheme together and help each other. And so I wouldn't take anything for that.

[00:58:53]

LP: Could you tell us how many employees in addition to your family you have working?

JM: Well, we're looking for one or two more good ones, so—*[laughter]*. We have about eighteen, I suppose, today, maybe twenty. I haven't actually added them up, but we're beginning to go into the part of the season that is crunch time, where we will be—not making sausage—but at least cooking and chilling sausage around the clock. Again, that's the result of being maxed out with our production facility where it is right now and the size that it is. So we'll be adding another one or two in the days ahead so we can be a little bit more efficient in the production time that we have in a production day.

[00:59:52]

RO: And some of the ones that you have now have been with you for a long time?

JM: Well, we have one that actually worked for Mr. Denmark back in 1972 and even before then. And he is a very valuable asset because he knows all of the products. He knows all of the equipment. He knows the processes. But we have, our office manager has been with us for more than twenty years. Our main truck driver/delivery man, you know he's been with us that long too. And I would say most of our employees have been with us more than five years.

**[01:00:45]**

JM: We enjoy them. It's small enough to be kind of like a family. We celebrate everybody's birthdays. We're very much informed and involved in the good things that happen to an employee and the bad things that happen to employees and their families and, you know, having people in the hospital and births of babies and all of that kind of stuff. We're small enough to know that all of that's going on and try to help and participate in those kinds of things whenever we can.

**[01:01:24]**

LP: I just have a couple more questions for you. In part to go back to the idea of the history of the business a little bit. Did Smokey Denmark give you any advice when you took over the business? Are there any sort of words of wisdom that he passed on to you?

JM: Well, yes. And I think that Mr. Denmark—Smokey as we call him—he gave us advice that is, I would say, the cornerstone of our operation and our planning and everything—our standards and everything even today and it will be, I think, forever. I remember him saying—when we bought the business—he said that you’ll probably never be an Oscar Meyer. And he named off some others. He said, “They are bigger than you are, they have larger production facilities, they buy in larger quantities, they have advertising budgets.” “But,” he said, “you can do those things that they can’t do or they won’t do.” Well, I’m convinced they can do just about anything that they would want to do, but they don’t want to do the things that Smokey Denmark does. And so that has been our niche over the years. We don’t feel like we compete with the big guys. We don’t feel like we compete with those who make products that are inferior to us. You know quality has very few competitors. And so, that’s been kind of a guiding principle for us. We do those things that—we make quality products. We’re not the only manufacturer, which makes quality products, you know, a quality sausage. But then everybody knows that there’s sausage and then there’s *sausage*. But everything we make is a premium quality. So I think those are words of wisdom that, well, that’s been our niche and you can trace that all the way back, not just to what Smokey said, but the way that Smokey ran his business, too. He only had two products, but they fit even today in that same definition.

**[01:04:10]**

RO: How does your product compare in terms of price with other products on the market?

JM: Well, we say that we don't compete price-wise. I mean obviously we're competing for the same dollars out there in the marketplace, but because we don't compete directly, you know, price-wise, we don't keep up with what other companies charge the same kind of customer—retail or wholesale—we don't even keep up with that. We hear once in a while a customer or a prospective customer say what they have been spending, you know, per pound or something. But we don't really keep up with that information. I think, in just my gut reaction to that, is that our prices are probably higher in some ways. We make a hot link that is a premium quality product, and I mean it doesn't have any chicken in it. And it is a good product. In some ways it's one of my favorite products to eat myself. And some people who would be familiar with most hot links on the market would say "Well, you can't say the word hot link and premium quality in the same sentence." But you really can with ours. So, yes it's a hot link, but it doesn't compete, exactly, you know, with the other things that call themselves hotlinks in the marketplace. There is—this is just an aside—but it kind of fits with your question. I came from an old school where we were looking for something that was a good value. It had to be good, but then you ask yourself the question, "Well, is it worth the money?" And so that's kind of old school mentality, I guess, but that's kind of the way I analyze things. But that's outdated. It may still be a good idea, but it's outdated. Many people these days approach that issue of what they should buy by asking themselves different questions. "Is it good?" And "Can I afford it?" That's different from value. We tried to change, I guess, the way that we look at things and the products that may be feasible or not feasible in the marketplace, asking ourselves the same questions that a consumer is going to ask. We find people

buying things over the Internet and we ship all over the United States. Well, the charges for shipping, whether you're using FedEx, or UPS, or somebody else, they're very high. We're talking about shipping a product to Hawaii. There's a restaurant out there that wants Smokey Denmark sausage. And I priced the shipping the other day, and it's almost two dollars a pound. For the *shipping*. So that's going to make the sausage very expensive. But, again, they've been doing that. They want Texas-style barbecue, and that means sausage from Texas. And so, they're in effect asking the question, is it good? and can we afford it? Can we buy it from Smokey Denmark, have it shipped out there and make it and sell it to our customers for a high enough price to be able to make it go, make it fly? And they've been doing that using somebody else's sausage, but they're going to be using ours now.

[01:08:35]

LP: Just to kind of piggy-back on something you said there, what do you think is kind of the place of sausage in the Texas barbecue culture? Or, somewhat related to sausage, how is Texas barbecue or food is different from food somewhere else or barbecue somewhere else or even sausage somewhere else?

JM: Well it's the best. *[Laughter]* Well, because we have the mail order and online customers as well, we get questions that are along those lines sometimes. You know, asking us to describe our products and what is brisket. "I'm from New York. What's brisket?" In different parts of the country, barbecue is, fortunately I guess, or

unfortunately, is different. In the Southeast, if you're talking about barbecue, well you're talking about pork. Like I said, in New York City, if you're talking about brisket, you're talking about corned beef. And then there are different variations throughout the country especially with seasoning and sauces. Some places want more of a vinegar-based sauce and others places more of a sweet sauce. So there really are a lot of differences. In Texas, I think that probably more so than any other place in the United States, sausage is an integral part of the barbecue menu. In Texas we do it all. We have even chicken and you see turkey and you see ham. And you know that's, maybe that arguably is not really barbecue, but it's at least smoked meats and uh, but the mainstay in Texas is gonna be brisket and sausage and different barbecue restaurants like to be known for having a product that's a little bit different than anybody else has or than somebody else has and that's more difficult to do with brisket than it is with sausage. With sausage, you can vary the meat ingredients, all the way from pork to beef. I can't imagine any self-respecting barbecue restaurant in Texas having anything that has chicken in it as far as sausage goes, but, or turkey. But, uh, anyway, they can vary, in building, or in selecting the sausage that they might want to use. They can go all the way from pork to beef. They can vary the, the, uh, seasoning. We make some sausages that have jalapeño in them and, you know, some that are very strong with garlic and there's a whole range in between. You can also vary the diameter of the casing, so that you have something that is, uh, on the one hand may be very big in diameter and another one might want something that is much smaller in diameter. We have made sausage portions all the way from eight links to a pound, which is just two or three inches to, we made a sausage for one of our customers for their grand opening that was, I think, forty feet long.

[01:12:56]

RO: Oh my God! *[Laughter]*

LP: And you mentioned your enjoyment of the hot link. Do you have any other specific favorite types of sausage, or favorite flavors that you like to have in the sausage that you personally eat?

[01:13:07]

JM: Well, the kielbasa jalapeno is one of my favorites, you know, I have people ask the question, you know, like you just did and normally my stock answer is, my favorite is whatever I'm eating at the time. But, the kielbasa jalapeno, I love that sausage and that's my wife's favorite. Because of the way it looks. It is beautiful to see, you know, bright, real green, not grey green, or anything, but, you know, green color, throughout the sausage. I don't mean a green cast, I mean that there are specks, bigger than specks, of green in there. So when you cut one of those sausages on the diagonal or cross section, you see something that looks good. You know, it's striking. The bratwurst, when you get it, it is made without cure, so it is basically a very light color and it's also not smoked. So it almost has a white, or a grayish, a very light colored appearance. It's, it's beautiful in that respect and it's different looking. When you put grill marks on that, you know, when you have it on a griddle, or on a grill where you've got either a hot flat surface or a screen

or something, you see that branded into it, you know, and it's a beautiful brown color. This makes you want to eat it just looking at it. I just, I like it all.

**[01:15:02]**

LP: And in addition to these kind of categories or types of sausage you've just mentioned, the jalapeno, the bratwurst, are there any sort of, I know there are, but, would you tell us about a couple of other or any of the other types or sort of sausage that you make and kind of the, just like you just described, the characteristics of those sausages.

**[01:15:25]**

JM: Well, the hot link. We can't leave out the hot link. I mean, the public itself has nicknamed that product in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. They make very good wrap-arounds. So, those of you who not from Texas may not be familiar with wrap-arounds, but it's basically a flour tortilla around, wrapped around, as a holding device, but as an eating device too, of a link of sausage. And I think that as far a wrap-arounds go, the hot link is my favorite. It's a little spicier than the regular that I referred to earlier and it's a little but spicy for some kids, but, small kids. But my grandkids, they love them, like they are. So, they're not lights-out hot or anything. The andouille, is a, it's a piece of meat and it's made for the purpose of putting into recipes, like a gumbo or a stew, or a soup, or something like that. Something where you're going to be cooking it in a pot, maybe all day long. Well, sausage, remember, has been ground in the beginning, in our

process that we talked about, including andouille. And you're putting it back together again when you're making sausage. Well, andouille, our andouille, anyway, binds so tightly together that you can cut it into pieces, put it in a gumbo, leave it on the stove all day long or on the steam table, or whatever and at the end of the day that piece of meat is still there. It holds together. So that's unique about andouille. Want any others?

*[Laughs]*

**[01:17:28]**

LP: It's up to you. If there any others you'd like to talk about.

**[01:17:32]**

JM: The one thing that we have not mentioned and it is a big item and it fits with the whole philosophy of the things that we do that other people don't do. It has to do with the brisket. Every brisket that I've seen and I admit that I haven't been in every grocery store in Texas, and I'm probably not familiar with everyone who's doing briskets and going into grocery stores with them, but, the ones that I've seen, have water added. They, they are, and it's a good product, I don't mean to be disparaging it at all, it's good for what it is. But it is not the same product that you will find in a barbecue restaurant. What you will find in a barbecue restaurant is the result of seasoning, heat and smoke, period. And that's the same way that we do our briskets at Smokey Denmark. You say, "Well why would anybody want to do anything any different than that." Well, how much does water cost?

In other words, if you can, you know it's not just a matter of that, but the more the water you could pump into a brisket, the, I guess, arguably, the more moisture it could have, you know, whenever you heat it up. But, our briskets are just like you'd get at a barbecue restaurant.

**[01:19:09]**

LP: And you mentioned that in Dallas-Fort Worth they had nicknamed your hot link, was there a particular nickname that they call it?

**[01:19:15]**

JM: Yes, in our product, our hot link is known as Smokey D's in the Dallas—Fort Worth area. There has never been, that name has never appeared on the outside of a box or in any kind of point of purchase advertising. We have not referred to them as Smokey D's. The public has just given them that nickname. I had, I don't remember if I told you, about my experience with the telephone, I guess they're called, well maybe the information operator. Did I tell y'all that story? I was sitting at, you know I practiced law for many years, and I was sitting at my law office one day, and I needed a telephone number that I didn't have and I'm so tight that I normally would not have called information to get the telephone number, but I did. Sitting at my law office, not Smokey Denmark. And I got this, a male operator, you know that's kind of odd in itself, and uh, so he gave me the number. and I like to strike up conversations with people sometimes at

odd times and I said, "Where are you?" And he said, "I'm in Humble," that's a suburb, kind of, it's on the north side of Houston. He said, "Our call center is in Humble and that's where I am." And he said, "Where are you?" And I said, "I'm in Austin, Texas," and he said, "That's the home of Smokey Denmark." And I said, "Yes, it is. How do you know about Smokey Denmark?" And he said, "Well, my mother lives in Fort Worth and every time that she comes to visit us in Humble, we have her bring us a box of Smokey D's." I mean you could call, you know, for a thousand years you could make telephone calls to try to get a telephone number and you'd never have that experience again. I mean, it's unbelievable. So, I told him, I said, "Our family owns Smokey Denmark and this is just an incredible experience that you've given me."

**[01:21:57]**

LP: Do you have anything else that you'd like to have as part of your recorded interview?

**[01:22:03]**

JM: Just a, I guess a recognition of what I think that you all are about and a thank you. I know that you're examining and interviewing people who have all kinds of different connections with this business, this industry of barbecue. It's something that isn't just a place or a pit, or whatever, it is a whole set of processes that come together. I mean, you've told me that you've even gone out talked with people who secure the wood that is used, by some, to smoke their meats with. And you ladies are young and you all have not

lived as much of life as I have. You haven't seen things kind of fall by the wayside. But barbecue has not fallen by the wayside. But, it is something that, like anything else, that is subject to shortcutting, shortcutting, shortcutting. Like we've seen it already with people spraying liquid smoke on sausages. There are even some that are forming their sausages without casings now. I mean, this is kind of experimental. But, uh, you know, I think what you're doing is worthwhile. It's not just a project, it's, I think there's likely to be some lasting benefits from it. In that it's the art of it, the result, the end product of it is more likely to endure and flourish because of the preservation of the information that you guys are putting together. I applaud you and whoever came up with the idea. I think it's a good one. And no doubt there are other industries or practices or something that over the period of time need to be done as well. So, thank you for taking this industry on and doing what you're doing. Texas is *very hot* right now. I mean, we Texans like to think that it always is. But, I'm sure it kind of comes and goes. But, what we do in Texas is very popular these days. And we Texans have a lot of pride in what we do. So this is a good time for you, I think, for you to be doing this particular one.

**[01:25:17]**

LP: Great. Thank you so much for your interview. We've been interviewing Jim McMurtry and Rebecca Onion was the primary interviewer and Lisa Powell was assisting. It is the twenty-sixth of March, 2007, and this interview was conducted on the campus of the University of Texas at Austin, in Burdine Hall.

**[End Jim McMurtry]**