

**Celestine Dunbar and Peggy Ratliff
Dunbar's Creole Cooking—New Orleans, LA**

Date: September 7, 2007
Location: Cannon's Restaurant—New Orleans, LA
Interviewer: Sara Roahen
Length: 55 minutes
Project: Southern Gumbo & Boudin Trails

[Begin Dunbar Interview]

00:00:00

Sara Roahen: This is Sara Roahen for the Southern Foodways Alliance. It is Friday, September 7, 2007. I'm in New Orleans, Louisiana, at Cannon's Restaurant where I've just taken a seat with members of the Dunbar family. And so if we could get started by your telling me your full names and your birth dates, I'd appreciate it.

00:00:26

Peggy Ratliff: My name is Peggy Ratliff and my birthday is October 27.

00:00:32

Celestine ("Tina") Dunbar: My name is Celestine Dunbar, and mine is November 10, 1943.

00:00:36

SR: Okay, thanks. And just for the record, you—you told me that you had been called a shortened version of your name since childhood.

00:00:42

CD: Tina is the short version. *[Laughs]*

00:00:46

SR: And maybe since we're doing this loosely on gumbo, if you could tell me what kind of gumbo you serve or served—I'm not sure if you're serving it right now, but—at Dunbar's Restaurant.

00:01:00

CD: At Dunbar's we do Creole gumbo. It's a mixture of—okay, it's a mixture of shrimp and andouille and smoked sausage and chicken. And you know, it's like throw in everything you know—lots of good fresh seasoning, and it's made with lots of filé. So it's a filé gumbo. It's Creole. It's really good.

00:01:25

SR: And do you use okra or roux in that?

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CD: I—I use okra and roux.

00:01:32

SR: So you use all three?

00:01:34

CD: Yes, yes, I do.

00:01:36

SR: And where did you—where did you come up with that recipe? Were you working on it, you know, for a long time? Is it a family recipe?

00:01:45

CD: I learned how to make gumbo at six years-old. My father taught me how to make gumbo at six years-old. So it's been a family recipe a long time.

00:01:55

SR: And was your father the cook in your family?

00:01:57

CD: More or less, yes. My mother was more a gourmet cook and my father was just like a Creole cook, uh-hm.

00:02:06

SR: And where did you grow up?

00:02:07

CD: I grew up in Litcher, Louisiana. *[Laughs]*

00:02:11

SR: And how did you wind up in Louisiana—in New Orleans?

00:02:15

CD: I married a man from New Orleans at a young age, and I moved here; so—.

00:02:23

SR: And so the—the kind of gumbo that you made at Dunbar’s—. Well, I should—let me just clarify it because I don’t know what tense to use. Your restaurant flooded after Katrina, and right now you’re in, in another spot. Do you serve gumbo where you are right now?

00:02:38

CD: Yes, every Friday, uh-huh.

00:02:42

SR: So just like at the restaurant, okay. And so did your father teach you how to make that style of gumbo that you make at the restaurant?

00:02:47

CD: Yes, yes. They’re using his recipe.

00:02:56

PR: Have you changed anything from the gumbo recipe?

00:02:56

CD: No, I haven’t changed anything. Still great gumbo.

00:03:02

SR: And so was your father from the New Orleans area, or is the Creole gumbo in Lutcher, Louisiana the same as the Creole gumbo in New Orleans?

00:03:10

CD: Lutcher, Louisiana is more or less Creole gumbo. All the people—neighborhoods and people cook the gumbo like that in Lutcher, Louisiana where I'm from. My father was from Lutcher, yeah.

00:03:21

SR: Can you take me through the process of making a gumbo—just orally?

00:03:28

CD: Yes, you start off with a roux. You start off making a nice brown, brown roux, browner than a copper penny. And then you add hot boiling water, and then you start adding your ingredients like your gumbo crabs, your dried shrimp, and you let that cook for a while because those items give flavor to the gumbo. And then you, you know, you add as you go. You add like your, your celery and your green onions and onions, which is—that's your vegetables—some people call it vegetables—to put in the gumbo. And then on—maybe when the gumbo is an hour or so before cooking ending, you might put your chicken in it you know, and your filé—stuff like that—and your okra. So it can kind of like, you know—. Your okra is always cooked ahead

of time—not in the gumbo; on the side of the gumbo, and then add to it for thickness and richness. It's good, yeah.

00:04:31

SR: And so—

00:04:33

PR: Isn't the roux the heart of the gumbo? if you don't get the roux right—?

00:04:37

CD: Gumbo not going to be good, right. If you don't get the roux right, you're messed up.

PR: And have hot water.

00:04:42

CD: The roux—the roux is the secret, yeah. Rich—it makes it real rich and creamy. A lot of people make gumbo and it's just like brown water, but my gumbo is creamy and rich and—yeah, full of flavor.

00:04:58

SR: And so when you say you have to get it right, do you mean the color or—?

00:05:01

CD: Yes, the color and the texture has to be right: enough thickness and enough color. You can't go halfway, light brown and all that. No, it got to be the right kind of dark brown.

00:05:15

SR: And so how much darker than a copper penny is it? *[Laughs]*

00:05:18

CD: As dark as it will go without burning. That's the secret. Because when you add water, then it lightens it up and—and it don't hold the richness, if it's—if it's not enough roux. You can not put enough, too; that's another thing. So it's kind of hard to explain, but I know how to do it.

[Laughs]

00:05:40

SR: And have you passed that onto your children?

00:05:42

CD: Some of my kids know how to do it, yes. The kids are pretty good cooks.

00:05:45

PR: Yes, yeah, I can do gumbo. *[Laughs]*

00:05:52

SR: And so I have a few questions about what you said. I'm interested that you use dried shrimp.

00:05:57

CD: Uh-huh. I use dried shrimp and fresh shrimp, but the dry shrimp give it the gumbo flavor and taste. It's more in there for flavor and taste than—than the meat of it, and the fresh shrimp are in there for the meat of it. Yeah.

00:06:12

SR: I'm going to have to try that. And so while it's—do they disintegrate in the cooking, or are they still in—they're in the gumbo?

00:06:21

CD: They stay hard, but they're not as—not as plump and soft as the, you know, as the [fresh] shrimp. The dry shrimp, they'll stay whole but not—it's not a fluffy moist thing; it's just in there for flavor like bay leaf. Bay leaf is only in there for flavor.

00:06:38

SR: And you didn't mention green bell pepper. Do you—?

00:06:40

CD: I don't put green bell pepper in my gumbo, no. Other people do; I don't.

00:06:48

PR: Because it's powerful. Bell pepper takes over.

00:06:53

CD: That's exactly why I don't put it in there.

00:06:54

SR: And the okra—do you use fresh okra or frozen?

00:06:59

CD: I like the frozen cut-up okra because it's—it's the same thing if you take a fresh okra, cut it up, and freeze it, so it's less time but it's the same thing. You get the same results, so why cut it up and freeze it? Or why cut it up if it's already done for you? So that's the reason why I use the—the frozen one.

00:07:20

SR: And so you—well you add the filé before it's done cooking—like it cooks for a while?

00:07:25

CD: Yes. I usually add my filé about 15-minutes before you cut it off. Right, because you can add too much filé too early and it gets ropey. It will get too thick. So—

00:07:41

SR: All right—

00:07:42

TR: The shrimps are added later too.

00:07:44

CD: Almost to the end.

00:07:45

TR: —almost to the end—the fresh shrimps.

00:07:48

CD: Right, uh-hm.

00:07:51

SR: So they don't get too cooked?

00:07:53

TR: Right.

00:07:53

SR: What else was I going—something else that you said—. What about oysters? Do you put oysters in there?

00:08:01

CD: Sometimes like around Christmas time you can add oysters to your gumbo, but on the norm I don't—on a basic, no. But around Christmas time, holiday time, if I'm making gumbo at home I'll—I'll put it in there. But I won't put it in there in public in the restaurant. So many people can't have oysters, won't have them, and—and if you don't tell them that it's in there they'll eat it and break out and stuff like that. So—.

00:08:30

SR: And I think you mentioned andouille. Is that the only kind of sausage you use?

00:08:34

CD: No. I use—I use a Double-D smoked sausage. It's a real good smoked sausage, but the andouille have a different flavor. It's a—it's cooked in a smokehouse, and that's why the andouille is so necessary. It, again—it again brings flavor.

00:08:50

SR: So you use the andouille and the—?

00:08:51

CD: And the smoked sausage. Yes, yes. And andouille is more for flavor than anything else, but it's good.

00:09:00

SR: I think that I was in the restaurant during Lent once when you didn't have any meat in there. Is that right?

00:09:07

CD: You're exactly right. You've been to Dunbar's. That's a seafood gumbo. We only put the shrimp, crabmeat, crabs and whatever kind of seafood—oysters—and still make the same stock with whatever I told you; everything but the meat. Exactly. You were there.

00:09:26

SR: I was there many times. *[Laughs]* And so, and then you serve it with rice in it?

00:09:33

CD: Yes, we serve it over rice. Yes, it's potato salad and French bread. Yes.

00:09:43

SR: And how do y'all deal with that potato salad? Do you eat it in the gumbo or just alongside the gumbo?

00:09:48

CD: I like mine alongside it. I see she put hers in—

00:09:50

TR: I like mine's in it.

00:09:54

CD: I like mine's alongside it.

00:09:57

SR: And did you grow up eating it in it?

00:10:00

PR: I don't know. It just happened. I don't know when I started eating it in it, but I know I didn't grow up eating it in there. I think that was an adult move. [*Laughs*]

00:10:11

SR: I like it that way too. And so when you were growing up—both of you, I guess—on what occasion would you have gumbo at home?

00:10:20

PR: Holidays mostly.

00:10:23

CD: Lots of holidays.

00:10:25

PR: It's a holiday meal. Yeah, because it's a lot of work to do gumbo. The preparation is—is tedious.

00:10:33

CD: Gumbo has always been an expensive dish. A lot of people think gumbo is—just take it lightly—but gumbo is a process. If you make a real gumbo, the right ingredients, you're going to spend some money, yeah. Yeah. So usually it's done around holidays, uh-hm.

00:10:53

SR: And at the holiday meal, do you have that as an appetizer or is that the main course, or how do you serve that?

00:11:04

CD: Well where I came from it was the main course. We didn't know too much about appetizers and all that stuff, you know, but—. So it was like a main course. They had a lot of other food cooked, but normally you'll eat a big bowl of gumbo and you'll lay around the house and you'll come back and you're going to get some turkey and dressing, and so you're just eating [*Laughs*]. Okay. That's the way we did it.

00:11:29

PR: Yeah.

00:11:30

SR: And is that what you still might have on a holiday—like this Thanksgiving, will you have that?

00:11:37

PR: But now it's more of a cup. You normally get your cup of gumbo now. And then the other things is the main course; so it—it's the beginner, you know. You always come in the house getting a good hot cup of gumbo to get the chill off.

00:11:53

CD: That's right.

00:11:57

SR: And what about at the restaurant: do you start it—do you make it the day before? How long does this process take when you have to make a huge batch?

00:12:06

CD: Gumbo takes about three hours, and we always make it the day of. We never make it the day before. We may chop our seasonings and the fresh vegetables and break up the crabs and washing and preparing, but never make it. Because gumbo is something that spoils real fast. Real fast.

00:12:27

SR: Why is it?

00:12:28

CD: It's—it's so hot, and it's—and you have to know how to cool it down just right. If you don't have someone that knows how to cool that gumbo down just right—. When gumbo comes off the stove and you're going to put it in the refrigerator to save it for the next day or something like that, you have to ice it down, 'cause it have to cool down real fast. So a lot of people—you have employees that won't take their time to do that, so we don't play with making it the day before. We make it the day of, but we always make enough. *[Laughs]*

00:12:59

SR: And what do you have to charge for a bowl of gumbo at the restaurant to—since it is an expensive dish to make?

00:13:08

CD: Well normally we serve—charge \$6.50 for a bowl and \$4.00 for a cup.

00:13:15

SR: Uh-huh, that's not bad. That's worth it. And—and at home, do you ever make any other style of gumbo?

00:13:22

CD: I don't. I don't. No.

00:13:25

PR: We don't know any other style. [*Laughs*]

00:13:30

SR: What about, do you ever—do you order gumbo out?

00:13:34

PR: I do, but it's never the same so at some point you just stop. Like right now, I don't order gumbo from anywhere else, because gumbo, when you go out like to another restaurant it's a broth—more of a broth. And so you may have a piece of shrimp in it, or just a little something floating around in it. To us that's not gumbo.

00:13:59

CD: Right, yes. And for me, they used to have a restaurant that I loved their gumbo but it's not there: Chez Hélène. And he's—they're not there anymore. And I found they were so close to our gumbo, and it was delicious and I used to get it then. But I haven't been anywhere now that I enjoy no gumbo.

00:14:19

SR: Is that the restaurant where Austin Leslie worked?

00:14:21

CD: Yes, right, and he was the chef—awesome chef. He died, yes. But I had his gumbo and it was awesome.

00:14:32

SR: He is missed in this town.

00:14:34

CD: He is missed, trust me, he is. And that's the last gumbo I ate in the New Orleans area other than my own. It was his.

00:14:42

PR: You're about to get in trouble.

00:14:44

CD: Huh? Oh I'm sorry.

00:14:46

PR: I'm just playing--you'll get in trouble with that statement. [*Laughs*] This is gumbo city.

00:14:51

SR: That's another thing I'd like to talk about, is—there's such strong opinions, and I've seen people get in arguments about gumbo. Does that ever happen in your family, like the color of the roux or anything like that?

00:15:04

PR: No, we don't get in arguments about it. They just come in the house raving about it. *Where the gumbo?* Come in the door waiting for it. **[Laughs]**

00:15:11

CD: But a lot of New Orleans families, I found, make good gumbo. I'm talking about intimate family; I'm not talking about restaurants. A lot of New Orleans families make good gumbo—at home—pretty good gumbo.

00:15:22

PR: What I find with the arguments is some people take and boil their seafood before they put the—before they add all the other stuff. They use the boiled water from the seafood as their water, the stock, and so that sometimes is an argument. Do you boil the seafood, use the water from the stock for your water? Does that make better gumbo other than her traditional way with the roux? And so I find that—I hear a lot of arguments about that.

00:15:59

SR: And so when people do that, then they add the roux later?

00:16:01

PR: Yeah, they add the roux to that mix, and then like hot sausage—hot sausage is something new people are adding to gumbo. You know hot sausage wasn't a tradition in—in gumbo.

00:16:20

SR: Because you get that a lot in a lot of gumbos.

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PR: Right, uh-hm, so that's—people are making it—now they personalizing it.

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SR: Well some people would say—I haven't heard a lot of people say that they use all three: filé, roux, and okra. Some people have rules about combining—

00:16:39

PR: Right.

00:16:39

CD: But you can't even tell that the okra is in my gumbo. It's really cooked so long until it just cooks up into the stock and it's—it makes a rich stock. I think I added that since my father.

00:16:53

SR: Oh yeah?

00:16:53

CD: I think I added that. [*Laughs*] I'm kind of like—I think I added that on my own, yeah.

00:16:59

SR: And so for you, the okra is about giving it body.

00:17:03

CD: Right, exactly. That's what it is.

00:17:07

SR: What about: do you put thyme in your gumbo?

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CD: No, I don't. I don't like thyme. Thyme is very overpowering if you don't know how to use thyme. And you got to use a little bit of thyme—just a little bit.

00:17:17

SR: What about peppers?

00:17:19

CD: I'll use—I don't use the red hot peppers. I will use like black pepper or a little cayenne pepper, but never that red—you're talking about the pepper, the little—the little peppers you're talking about?

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SR: Well no. I'm just wondering if you use black pepper or, or red pepper.

00:17:35

CD: Yes, I use cayenne pepper and black pepper. Uh-huh, yes.

00:17:40

SR: But if I remember correctly it's not overpowering spicy, your gumbo?

00:17:45

CD: It's not. It's mild—very mild and very soothing and good. Like today—well it was awesome today. [*Laughs*]

00:17:53

PR: I intended to bring me some home.

00:17:56

SR: You didn't bring any home?

00:18:00

PR: No.

00:18:00

SR: Did you have leftovers?

00:18:01

CD: A little. We always have a little left, but not a lot because today was a big gumbo day. Usually, sometimes, if it's too, too hot they don't ask for gumbo, but today was kind of like on the little mild side so they were eating gumbo today. It was—everybody was asking for gumbo, so it was a big gumbo day today at Dunbar's.

00:18:17

SR: Yeah, there's a teeny touch of fall in the air so maybe that's—

00:18:21

CD: That's what I'm saying, yeah, because of the rain and the weather and people was getting the gumbo today, they were.

00:18:28

SR: But you make it all through the summer, right?

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CD: Yes. Every—every Friday no matter what. It could be 150 degrees—still make gumbo, and they still sell it.

00:18:38

SR: Some people don't make it in the summer.

00:18:39

CD: Right, yeah. But we make it year-round.

00:18:44

SR: I wonder—it just dawned on me: I mean I know it’s a Friday tradition in a lot of restaurants, and maybe households too—I’m not sure. But I wonder where that comes from. Do you think it was, I don’t know, Catholics eating seafood on Friday or—?

00:18:59

CD: Maybe. I think because of the seafood on Friday that the Catholics don’t eat meat, and they might have started off with a seafood gumbo, so maybe that’s where it came from. I don’t know where the tradition really started, you know, but that’s—maybe on Friday here in New Orleans that’s why we have it.

00:19:16

PR: Like red beans for Monday.

00:19:17

CD: Uh-hm. Well we know where red beans started. The mothers used to put the red beans on and go out in the fields where red beans can boil all day long on a Monday. So those—those working ladies started red beans off, ‘cause they can cook them so slow and go on out in the

fields and do all their work and everything. Come back, the red beans are ready. It takes four hours for a good pot of red beans, you know.

00:19:41

SR: But the gumbo needs a lot more attention than that. Maybe they took Fridays off.

00:19:45

CD: Maybe so. I don't know.

00:19:47

PR: Well gumbo is mostly—in homes it's mostly a Sunday dish; not a Friday. It's seafood like fish or something like that on Friday, but not gumbo. Gumbo in the home is a Sunday dish.

00:20:02

SR: I'm going to pause this for a while so we can eat. Our food just arrived.

00:20:10

SR: Okay, we're back after some delicious food, and we were talking over our meal about when you opened Dunbar's and what you did before that. Can you tell me a little bit about that?

00:20:22

CD: Yes. Before—before Dunbar's I had a boutique shop, and I was working at Ochsner Hospital first, but during the time I was working at Ochsner Hospital I had the boutique at the

same time, because my daughter went to beauty school and we opened up her a beauty shop. So we combined the beauty shop with the boutique. And a friend of mine across the street from the boutique had this little deli restaurant and he took sick—took ill. And the doctor advised him not to go back into that business. It was stressful, and—and he wasn't strong enough to run a business, so they advised him not to do it anymore. So he was going to close it down and not open it up no more. So I—behind raising seven kids and cooking for seven kids, I said, *I'm a pretty good cook. I'm going to try to give this a try.* So I talked to him and everything, and he told me, *Sure*; he didn't mind me taking it over. So we talked to the landlord and we took it over, and it just was a little small place—that I used to cook in my house and transfer the food across the street on a hot table. So my first dish was meatball and spaghetti. It was. We opened on a Wednesday, and it's still meatball and spaghetti day today—now.

00:21:48

SR: What do you mean by a hot table?

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CD: Like a steam table where you, you know—yeah, like a steam table and we used to cook the food—I used to cook the food at the house which was right across the street, put it on carts, put it in the little steam table pan, put it on the carts and roll it across the street and drop it on the hot table and serve that.

00:22:08

SR: And so meatballs and spaghetti—it seems like that is a Wednesday thing in New Orleans.

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CD: It is a Wednesday thing. I didn't know it. I didn't know it at that time, but that was the first meal that I prepared for the restaurant.

00:22:19

PR: I believe that she set the pace for a lot of things that happen. A lot of people patent after her menu, and it wasn't done on purpose. It was—she just, *Okay tomorrow I'm going to cook meatballs and spaghetti*, and then people would ask for a certain thing, and then she'd say, *Well I'm going to do that*. So I believe that's how a lot of people have patent behind her. Like you never got sweet tea before her. Now you can get sweet tea in the city.

00:22:47

SR: Is sweet tea—that's kind of a Mississippi thing a lot of times. Did you grow up with drinking sweet tea?

00:22:57

CD: I grew up drinking sweet tea from where I am from, but I didn't know it was a Mississippi thing. [*Laughs*]

00:22:59

SR: Well I mean that's how I think of it because I don't get it in New Orleans very often, but I always get it at Dunbar's.

00:23:08

CD: We've always had it. We always has it as kids, sweet tea and lemonade. We didn't—we weren't a big fan of sodas. Our parents wouldn't let us have sodas, so it was Kool-Aid, sweet tea, and lemonade. So I grew up with sweet tea and lemonade, yeah.

00:23:23

SR: So in the—in that first location—on Oak Street it was—did you just have one dish a day or—?

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CD: Yes, in the beginning lots of po-boys and the one dish. Yeah, the one special everyday.

00:23:41

SR: And it was a sit-down type place?

00:23:42

CD: It had a couple of tables—not many, maybe about four or five tables and a long countertop—tall countertop with stools. Uh-huh.

00:23:50

SR: And at what point and why did you move to Freret Street?

00:23:57

CD: Why? [*Laughs*] Because the place where I was, they had a—they had a lady that used to come in my restaurant every day, every day, and she said, *This is a well-hidden secret*. She said, *You should be somewhere where you can get exposed to stuff. People don't know you're here over in this corner*. So she kept bothering me and bothering me to move, but I told her I have no money to pick up—it was a little bit, you know mom and pop little place. So she said, *Come and look at this building that I have on Freret Street*. So we went and we looked at the building and I told her, *I don't have any money to just move this restaurant to this one*. So she said I'll do this and I'll do that and I'll do this; she literally almost paid for everything for me to transfer—you know, brought everything over there. So that's how we got to Freret Street.

00:24:48

SR: And did she own that building?

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CD: She owned it at that time—at that time, and seven months later after she remodeled it. My husband was a carpenter; she paid for all the materials and my husband did all the work, and we left from one location to the other one, and seven months later the building caught on fire. So she pocketed the insurance money, sold the building from me—to me. And that's how I become the owner of the building.

00:25:16

SR: So that was—you referred to a fire while we were eating. You lost the cookbook, I guess in the fire?

00:25:21

CD: Yes, I lost the cookbook then because there was an upstairs in that building and the cookbook—the fire started upstairs. It was the third floor and we had a lot of stored—we had stored a lot of stuff there, and that’s where the cookbook was and it got burned.

00:25:37

SR: And so that—what year was that you moved to Freret?

00:25:39

CD: Eighty-four. I would say 1984, uh-hm.

00:25:45

SR: And so you didn’t grow up in a restaurant family or anything, but it must have kind of gotten in your blood because you’ve been doing it for a long time.

00:25:55

CD: Well I grew up around a lot of great cooks but not a restaurant, but cooking for a big family and cooking large quantities of food, and same thing—do the same thing for the restaurant. There’s a large quantity of food, and knowing how to prepare that much food, so—.

00:26:10

SR: And so as we mentioned before, the restaurant flooded in Katrina. And what's the current state?

00:26:21

CD: Right now they—they analyzing everything and they said that it couldn't be rebuilt. The structures wasn't strong enough to rebuild on that structure, so it should be torn down and rebuilt over. So—so we're waiting on more funds to do that with.

00:26:39

SR: And can you tell me then how you came to be on the Loyola Campus where Dunbar's is right now?

00:26:47

CD: Yes, it's kind of a spiritual thing. I mean some people don't believe in spiritual things, but I do. And after the storm, it was a year or so after the storm, and it looked like everybody around me had gotten some money or gotten good jobs or was replaced somewhere else, and just everybody was doing well—except me. So here I am, restaurant owner, and then took care of all these employees and done—done took care of the neighborhood of New Orleans all these years, and I'm sitting there with no income, no job, no restaurant. So I was praying. I started praying and asking the Lord, I said, *Well why me? Why—what's going to happen to me?* And I prayed and I prayed and I cried and—and so when I finally settled down and just sit a while, I could hear the spirit of the Lord say, *Call Tulane—Tulane University.* I said, *Call*

Tulane? I said, *I'm not going to call Tulane. Tulane don't have nothing for me.* It said, *Call Tulane.* And I could just—just over and over and over in my spirit. So I kind of like obeyed the spirit, and I picked up the phone and I called Tulane. And I was talking to a young man and I told him who I was; I said, *I'm Miss Dunbar with the restaurant down the street on Freret Street.* He said, *Miss Dunbar, I know who you are.* So evidently this young man knew who I was, so I was saying, *I'm trying to find a location to have maybe some red beans and rice and fried chicken—just a little small spot that I could lease.* He said, *Miss Dunbar, I'm going—I don't know how to do this,* he said, *But I'm going to give you to a guy that might can help you.* So he gave—he transferred my call to this man, and I was explaining to the man who I was again. This man knew who I was too. So I was telling him who I was; he said, *Miss Dunbar, I eat in your restaurant all the time. I know who you are.* So he said, *Miss Dunbar,* he said, *We don't have anything.* He said, *Everything is contracted out.* He said, *But I have a friend at Loyola University who is looking to put a little restaurant in on the law campus at Loyola.* He said, *I don't know. I can't promise you anything or nothing;* he said, *But I'll get back with you.* He said, *So don't—don't take this as a promise.* He said, *But I'll see what I can do and I'll talk to my friend.* So it—about a week later he called me back and he gave me this guy's number that—I mean this man is over so many things. You ever heard of Sodexho? Big huh? This is the owner of Sodexho. I talked to him. This is the man who's over everything—over—yes, he is. So I talked to him and he told me to put a menu together and put an equipment list together and bring it to his office. He say, *I got to go out of town and I'll call you when I get back.* When he called me when he got back he said it's a done deal. He said, *I got one, one little person,* he said, *I got to sign off,* and he said, *I'm sure it's not going to be a problem.* Within the month I was in Loyola. I was—on the 28th of August, which is the day before Katrina—you know the anniversary, the first year

anniversary—I was over on Loyola campus, and it was like, just like—it just went so smooth. Like everything, everything. Like they told me I had to have \$5,000,000 worth of insurance. I said, *What?* It was like, I can't even count that far; it was like, *What?* [**Laughs**] And just quick like that [**Finger Snaps**], it looked like my spirit quickened, and he said, *Don't worry about it; you're going to have it.* I told him, *Okay, no problem,* and went—and when I got ready to get the insurance, we had dealt with this insurance company before. We went back to that company and we only had to come up with like \$5,000. I didn't have any money; my family together got together and put the money up, and a friend of mine put the money up for all the groceries. So everything just went—God said, *Yes,* and it just went—just went to plan. So I—I give all the credit to my spiritual Father. This—that is absolutely the truth. So many people wonder the same story. *Well how you do—how in the world did you do this?* This has never happened in the history of nowhere. Not just New Orleans—nowhere. Soul-food, Creole food, on a college campus. This have never happened. I made history. So it's nobody but God that did it for me. Nobody.

00:31:35

SR: Well your cooking helped.

00:31:36

CD: Yes, it did. [**Laughs**] But [He] guided me to that place.

00:31:40

SR: Right. And so you basically run it as an independent restaurant on that campus?

00:31:47

CD: Yes, it's an independent restaurant. Yes.

00:31:50

SR: And so you don't have to adhere to very many rules. Like you cook your own food there?

00:31:57

CD: I'm pretty much—if I was leasing a place out on the, on the street somewhere, the same thing—the same deal. Same deal.

00:32:04

SR: And so tell me what your menu is like. Did you have to shrink it a little bit because the space is smaller, or maybe it's not smaller?

00:32:12

CD: No, we didn't. We kept the same menu. We enhanced it. We—we enlarged it because we did a lot of stuff—we're doing a lot of stuff there that we didn't do at the other restaurant: a lot of salads, a lot of vegetables, a lot of fruits, and a lot of desserts and chips and a lot of stuff. We didn't do all that in the other restaurant. We did desserts, but not a lot of fruits because there wasn't call for it. I mean, I had adult customers. They weren't coming to Dunbar's for fruits; they wanted some soul food [*Laughs*]. But the students, they—they have to eat healthier. You

know a lot of them are health-conscious, so we put a lot of healthier food on. Not that Dunbar's food is not healthy, but I'm talking about more of a diet kind of thing, you know—nutritious.

00:32:58

SR: Well it's maybe, if you're eating everyday, maybe you need to mix it up a little.

00:33:03

CD: Right. That's why I have a lot of vegetables, a lot of fruits, a lot of salads, a lot of nice sandwiches and tuna and stuff like that, for the kids that don't want that red beans and the fried chicken, yeah.

00:33:14

SR: So your clientele—I mean I know some of your own clientele is finding you, and—and you can walk into the campus restaurant from off the street no problem, but in general your clientele has changed a lot. What has that been like?

00:33:31

CD: It's kind of strange because even with the old clientele that's coming, there's like—it's strange for them to be going through the line and getting their own food and being served on paper supplies and stuff like that and not have the service that they had at the real Dunbar's. The other Dunbar's, you had service you know at the table: white linens and stuff like that. So it's kind of different.

00:33:51

SR: And are y'all getting to know some of the students? Do you have regulars?

00:33:55

CD: Oh we have regulars, yes. We know them pretty well. [*Laughs*] And we have some from last year that's back this year, so—we're acquainted with quite a few of them.

00:34:05

SR: And so some of your clientele is finding you there. Is it mostly, like, people who work uptown or—?

00:34:13

CD: No, they coming from all over because we put a sign on the old building and the sign is letting them know exactly where I am. They're having a problem with parking, but other than that a lot of them is still coming, uh-hm.

00:34:27

SR: Well maybe when the streetcar gets running that will help.

00:34:31

CD: Help 100-percent, that will help. The downtown people definitely would come, I'm sure.

00:34:37

SR: What about—so what can you tell me a little bit about where you went for Katrina?

00:34:46

CD: Yes. We went to Houston at first, and my granddaughter has some friends of hers that was in Eunice, Louisiana, at some cabins. So they told us about it, because once we found out that we had to stay in a hotel forever, then we were looking to seek other places. You know we couldn't afford to stay in a hotel; we wasn't—didn't know anything about FEMA at the time, and all that stuff. So we were trying to seek other places that we could afford, you know, because it was 19 of us that evacuated together. I have a large family, and so we went to Eunice, Louisiana to this church and—.

00:35:23

PR: I thought your arm might have been getting tired.

00:35:25

SR: Oh no, it's okay. I'm fine.

00:35:27

CD: So we went to this church. She—she [Peggy] can tell you a lot about the church. We went to this church and the people treated us like royalty. We were even cooking in their cafeteria. When they found out we were restaurant owners, they had us cooking [*Laughs*] for all the people. We cooked for over 200-some people a couple of days.

00:35:47

SR: So it was like—?

00:35:48

CD: Acadiana—it was Acadiana?

00:35:52

PR: Yeah, Acadiana Parish, yeah. It was—it's a retreat center is actually what it is. So they facilitate—.

00:36:03

SR: Did you cook any gumbo?

00:36:06

CD: Did we cook gumbo? Did we—?

00:36:09

PR: No.

00:36:09

CD: No, we didn't. We cooked the red beans one day.

00:36:13

PR: And we cooked something else the second time.

00:36:14

CD: We cooked a lot of baked chicken and we—. We didn't cook gumbo. No, we didn't.

00:36:19

PR: Because they did, what they had there, with the food—because they had food trucks that would come in and whatever they brought—.

00:36:25

CD: They would bring like, you know, donations, and Red Cross would bring lots of stuff. We prepared a lot of stuff there.

00:36:34

SR: And at that point did you know that the restaurant had flooded?

00:36:37

CD: Not that bad. We just thought it was flooded, the water would recede, and you know, we would go back into it after everything calmed down. That's what we thought. Yeah, because we had had bad storms and we had had floods before, but never that bad, yeah. Yeah, we stayed there what—two months?

00:37:01

PR: Too long. We didn't come back until October, so two months.

00:37:10

CD: Yeah, we stayed there two months. But we were like—we were treated wonderfully, oh yeah. If I can ever get so where I have a charity to donate, that would be my charity, yes—yes.

00:37:26

SR: Did you eat any gumbo while you were out there?

00:37:28

CD: I don't think we did, no. And they had a lot of donated food there 'cause the fire department cooked several times and brought the food to their restaurant there. They had a big cafeteria, so a lot of people donated food because it was a lot of people there besides us that evacuated and was staying there. At first we were all in one cabin, and then they started breaking us up into like hotel rooms—cabins, yeah.

00:38:02

SR: Well I'm glad—there's always some kind of like friendly story in the Katrina stories. Let me look over—what about—so I was asking you while we were eating, too, about other family members that might work with the restaurant. Are—are there any family members that cook?

00:38:24

CD: Not necessarily, no, no. Short-orders, short-order cooks and prepare the food, like you know dish it up and plate it up and stuff like that. One of my daughters is on the cash register now; she's more of a manager. She's doing the cash register now.

00:38:40

CD: I was trying to be the chef one day, but she wouldn't let me. *[Laughs]*

00:38:44

SR: Why not?

00:38:53

CD: I used to have a restaurant on St. Charles at one time—St. Charles and this—the Circle; right there on Lee Circle at this hotel. And so I was over there running that particular restaurant while the other restaurant on Freret Street was being run by her and my chef and some more people. So the chef quit, or she had to fire him or something. He must have got so smart or something she fired him. So she was in high heel shoes all dressed up and come out the office, and she going to cook the food. I said, *Oh Lord, let met put this apron—*. Honey, I took my apron off at the other restaurant and I flew over there.

00:39:26

PR: I was going to do it. *[Laughs]* I was going to cook.

00:39:31

CD: Yeah, right. She's—she's an all right cook, but she was—and it was on a Friday, and it was gumbo.

00:39:39

SR: Oh it was gumbo day.

00:39:39

CD: Not that large pot of gumbo. She could not handle that.

00:39:43

PR: That was funny. They wouldn't let me cook. *[Laughs]*

00:39:46

CD: You glad?

00:39:48

PR: Yes.

00:39:51

SR: So there's no one chomping at the bit to take over the restaurant one day?

00:39:55

CD: Not—not that, no. Management and stuff like that they want to do it, but not the cooking because I'm not really doing a lot of cooking myself. Not—not now, because for the last 10

years I had chefs and stuff, you know, and they were doing my recipes. Like I've taught this chef here since we've been back from Katrina. She was my breakfast chef. So since she's been back with me, I worked in the kitchen with her for a few months, and she was a good cook but never doing my recipes. So now she's doing my recipes—just like I want her to cook. She even make the gumbo just like I want her to, and I kind of like, you know, mentored her, yeah.

00:40:37

SR: What's her name?

00:40:38

CD: Cynthia Porter. Yeah, she been with me about 12 years. And she was the breakfast chef before Katrina. Now she's the chef in the kitchen, uh-hm.

00:40:51

SR: Is she from New Orleans?

00:40:54

CD: I don't know if Cynthia from New Orleans. She been here so long, I don't know if she originally from New Orleans, but she's living here now. She's been here a long time, yeah.

00:41:06

SR: And do you do breakfast at the—?

00:41:09

CD: Yes, breakfast, lunch, and—and ‘til 7 o’clock Monday through Thursday, and until 2 o’clock on Friday.

00:41:17

SR: So one of the other things that you’re famous for is fried chicken. *[Laughs]* Can you tell me a little bit about your fried chicken, without giving away any state secrets?

00:41:27

CD: Well the secret is really frying it on the slow—350-degrees, like slow. Some people fry their chicken on fast and everything; slower you fry the juicer it gets. Yeah and it’s—there’s a good blend of seasoning that creates the juiciness too, yes—not just frying it.

00:41:50

SR: And what kind of oil do you fry it in?

00:41:50

CD: I used—used to use peanut, but I found out the vegetable oil does a good job as long as you’re changing your grease pretty regular. A lot of people want to keep the grease in the deep fryers for a week. They want to make all the money. You cannot keep that grease in the—you have to change the deep fryers and clean them, you know, and frequently. We cleans our deep fryers regularly: every day, every other day. If you fry lots of days you—. Like today was a big frying day: seafood, chicken, everything; so we have two deep fryers, so we change those.

Monday morning we have fresh frying oil, you know, so Monday is another big day. Tuesday is not such a big day because we have barbeque chicken, so we—sometimes we don't change it on Tuesday because it's not a big frying day, but you can't fry that chicken a whole week and want it to come out all pretty.

00:43:10

SR: The oil makes a big difference.

00:43:12

CD: It makes a big difference.

00:43:12

PR: Yeah, it does.

00:43:22

SR: What about for your gumbo, for your roux? What kind of fat do you use?

00:43:25

CD: I use the vegetable oil, yeah.

00:43:28

SR: Is that what your dad used?

00:43:31

CD: Yes, vegetable oil.

00:43:35

SR: And you don't put tomato in yours, right?

00:43:37

CD: No tomato.

00:43:40

SR: Well was your dad from Lutchet?

00:43:40

CD: Yes.

00:43:46

SR: I've heard people in New Orleans refer to a gumbo by neighborhood. [They] say, you know, *Well I make a typical Seventh Ward roux, or I make a typical—*. Have you heard of that?

00:43:59

CD: No, I haven't heard of that, but I'm sure it's just a New Orleans thing—Downtown or the Ninth Ward, you know Mighty Nine and all that kind of stuff. No, I know—I don't know anything about that.

00:44:12

SR: And so Monday is red beans and rice, Wednesday meatballs and spaghetti—

00:44:19

CD: Tuesday is cabbage and barbeque chicken and fresh candied yams. Fresh candied yams—
not the can. [*Laughs*]

00:44:26

SR: What about Thursday?

00:44:27

CD: Thursday is mustard greens and candied yams and smothered pork chops, but it used to be
turkey necks on Freret Street. The students are not interested.

00:44:38

SR: Did you try it?

00:44:38

CD: We tried it, but it's—they're really not interested. They kind of like, *Yeah, I don't want
that; I'm scared of that.* [*Laughs*] Yeah, so they—it's delicious, it is—. So they go for the
smothered pork chops on—at Loyola, yeah.

00:44:54

SR: Can't get over that word *neck*, I guess.

00:44:56

CD: [*Laughs*] Uh-hm.

00:45:00

SR: Have you ever used the jar roux?

00:45:03

CD: I have.

00:45:04

SR: And?

00:45:05

CD: But I would prefer the one that you make from scratch.

00:45:09

SR: I have—I've had people tell me that they don't think it makes a difference. But you do?

00:45:12

CD: Uh-huh, I do. Yeah, I do. It's just a quickie. It's a quickie, but I'd rather the one that you make on the skillet.

00:45:25

SR: And just to get your heritage again, your mom—is she from—was she from Lutcher also?

00:45:29

CD: Yes, uh-hm. Yep, yes.

00:45:33

SR: And you have how many children?

00:45:35

CD: Seven—five girls and two boys [*Laughs*].

00:45:39

SR: And how many grandchildren?

00:45:41

CD: I have thirteen grandchildren and eight great-grand.

00:45:46

SR: For the record, these people don't look old enough to be—[*Laughs*]—to be at that stage of life yet.

00:45:54

CD: How old—how old do you think I look?

00:46:00

SR: She's asking me how old she looks. That's putting me on the spot, but I say my mom is—
how old am I? My mom is 57—

00:46:11

CD: Uh-huh, I'm much older than that.

00:46:14

SR: Yeah, you would have to be. I would definitely say in your 60s.

00:46:16

CD: Yes, I'm 63.

00:46:20

SR: Under 60, I thought.

00:46:22

CD: I'm 63.

00:46:23

SR: Well the restaurant business must treat you well.

00:46:27

CD: I get lots of rest. I'm a—I'm a stay home kind of person. I don't, I don't run the streets a lot. I mean I get lots of rest. You need lots of rest to run a restaurant.

00:46:36

SR: Yeah, because you have to be up.

00:46:39

CD: Yeah, you—I gets up. I'm a 5 o'clock person every morning. I don't even need an alarm clock. It's automatically 5 o'clock—4:30, quarter to five [*Laughs*] I'm up. I'm awake every morning, even when I don't have to go. I'm automatic. Sometimes I have to just make myself stay there. *I'm not going to move; I'm going to stay here and make myself—*

00:47:02

PR: Yeah, that field work was—they was farmers. It's just in her blood. [*Laughs*]

00:47:07

SR: That's what I was going to ask because Lutchter is farmland.

00:47:09

CD: Father was a farmer. My father was a farmer.

00:47:12

SR: What did he farm?

00:47:13

CD: He used to do everything, but in the—in certain seasons it was shallots: green onions.

00:47:17

SR: Shallots, oh yeah—oh, green onions?

00:47:20

CD: Yeah, yeah, but it didn't—see it was a seasonal things, but sometimes he did everything, yeah.

00:47:28

SR: That's a big part of the cuisine here, is green onions.

00:47:30

CD: Yes, it is. We cook with green onions just about every day, yeah—with lots of green onions.

00:47:38

SR: In the gumbo?

00:47:38

CD: Oh yeah. Got to have it.

00:47:41

SR: And at what point do you put the green onions in?

00:47:41

CD: You put it in with all your vegetables: your white onions, your celery, your green onions.

All that goes in together.

00:47:49

SR: So you use the white and the green?

00:47:50

CD: Uh-huh, yeah, and then you use the onions too—the big round onions too.

00:47:54

SR: And I guess I didn't—I wasn't clear. Do you sauté those vegetables, or do you just put them in the water?

00:48:01

CD: Just wash them, cut them up, chop them up, and put them in—in the stock, uh-hm.

00:48:09

SR: Let's see what else I have.

00:48:10

CD: By the time that gumbo is done it's all done, trust me—all done, 'cause gumbo take three hours to three and a half hours to cook. A good gumbo, yeah.

00:48:24

SR: All right. Well I think that pretty much wraps up my questions unless you can think of anything I didn't ask that I should have.

00:48:32

CD: I don't think so.

00:48:35

SR: All right. Well thank you both for giving me your time. It was really great.

00:48:38

CD: It was lovely; thank you.

00:48:42

[End Dunbar Interview -1; Begin Dunbar-Interview-2]

00:00:00

SR: Okay, so Tina Dunbar just told me that her grandmother used to make boudin, so I have to add a little—a little something to her oral history interview. Can you tell me about your grandmother making boudin?

00:00:16

CD: Yes, my grandmother used to actually kill the hog, okay, that you make the boudin from. Okay, so then it used to be a blood boudin—and the white boudin—but they banned the blood boudin because of so much—I guess so much disease and stuff in boudin. So I just imagine—but they used to have a blood boudin. But anyway, my grandmother used to take the liver, the gizzard, and different parts of the—of the hog and grind it up and cook it with all kinds of really, really spicy seasonings. And believe it or not, now they put it in these skins that you buy, but not at the time my grandmother was making it. My grandmother was making it with the intestines, where you scrape them and clean them until they're so thin and so white and pretty, and then they'll stuff it. They used to have a funnel—

00:01:11

PR: And let them dry.

00:01:12

CD: Yes, that's right.

00:01:13

SR: They used to let the intestines dry?

00:01:15

CD: Uh-hm, yes, and it was just—intestines is nothing but skin. It's nothing but a long skin, and they'd clean it and scrape it. That's where chitterlings come from, the skin of the intestine—that's all it is. So anyway, they used to scrape them and clean them until they're snow-white, and you could almost see through them they were so thin. And then she would take that stuff that she cooked—the liver, the gizzards, the kidney, all that—and they'll grind it up and cook it.

00:01:42

PR: But there wasn't no rice in it then.

00:01:45

CD: They—they used to put a little rice in it, uh-hm, but lots of seasoning. I'm talking about shallot, onion, garlic, bell pepper, lots of spices, and they would make it up and they would slip—put it on a funnel and stuff the funnel, and it would go back down into the skin. So I used to watch her as a little girl make the boudin. I used to help her.

00:02:06

SR: And you liked that?

00:02:08

CD: Yes, it was delicious. Boudin, hogshead cheese and cracklings—they used to do all that from this, from the hog. The hogshead cheese came from the head of the, of the hog, and they would boil it in this big iron pot until it just fell apart, and they—they'd put some, all kind of ingredients, which I don't know about at that time, and they would put it in pans and stuff—little square pans that look like little shoeboxes. And they would bring it to the market and they would buy it. The different markets would buy it, uh-hm.

00:02:41

SR: From your grandmother?

00:02:39

CD: Uh-hm. It's—my grandmother was a neighborhood person. My grandmother would go to different houses—. Like okay, it's—not farms, but different houses had like raising hogs and stuff in the backyard. And [when] it was time for to harvest the hog, like kill the hog and cut him up and stuff, my grandmother used to go to neighborhood—the neighbor houses. They used to come get her and—

00:03:03

SR: To kill it?

00:03:03

CD: Yes, kill it, clean it, cut it up, and steaks and everything else, or whatever portion—roasts and everything else, and cook the hogshead cheese and cook the boudin and—and the cracklings. My grandmother used to do that.

00:03:17

SR: She was like a traveling butcher? [*Laughs*]

00:03:20

CD: Yeah, whenever—yes, that’s what she was. They used to come get her 4 o’clock in the morning when it’s time to kill that hog. They would—they would raise that hog. They would raise that hog from a little pig, and when he got to be—be a big huge hog they would put him in a pen and close him up where he couldn’t eat no trash. He had to eat like raw corn and different stuff then—then they was cleaning him out before he got killed. And then they used to—the men, the men of the family would put him on this long big table, and they would kill him and cut him up and clean him. That sounds cruel, but that’s what they did.

00:03:58

SR: Well that feeds a lot of people if you—

00:04:00

CD: It fed lots of people, and all the neighbors would get a steak or a roast and some cracklings and some hogshead cheese, and they would share. That’s how we grew up.

00:04:10

SR: And so that was in Lutchet, huh? And that—Lutchet isn't technically in Cajun country, is it?

00:04:13

CD: I don't think so. I think it's more of a Creole/Soul country.

00:04:17

PR: More Creole. Creole.

00:04:19

CD: Yeah.

00:04:22

SR: Wow. That's so interesting to me. And so but—but as you remember it, Peggy, it didn't have as much rice in it? Did you have—you wouldn't have had your great-grandma's boudin?

00:04:32

PR: Yeah, I did, because when they—when Gram and them had the hog—the last hog that they had, I was big enough to know because those intestines you're talking about, I had stole one and blowed it up like a balloon [*Laughs*].

00:04:52

SR: You were in a hurry to put your mouth on that?

00:04:53

PR: No, it looked like a balloon and it blowed up like a balloon. So the last hogs, I was big enough to see them killed, and I don't remember there being as much rice. It was more meat.

00:05:03

CD: It was a lot of meat, but they started adding rice to it.

00:05:05

PR: Yeah, now they have more rice—.

00:05:07

CD: They started adding rice to it and they have—.

00:05:09

PR: Right, into the boudin, yeah.

00:05:12

SR: And so you—I mean a lot of people in New Orleans don't have a taste for boudin, but you do? Do you get it anywhere?

00:05:18

CD: I, well yes. When we was coming from Eunice, Louisiana, we stopped and they have a lot of stores in Eunice, little corner stores and stuff like that, and we used to buy it from Eunice. And I'll buy it now at Winn Dixie. Winn Dixie—different stores sell it here, and they have a company that brings it from different places and they sell it to these corner markets and you can buy it.

00:05:42

PR: No, my kids' grandmother makes the head—the hogshead cheese.

00:05:48

SR: Oh yeah?

00:05:47

PR: Uh-hm. She gets her head. I don't know where she gets that head from.

00:05:51

CD: She's from Vacherie.

00:05:53

SR: And where is she now?

00:05:54

PR: She's still here.

00:05:54

SR: In New Orleans—she gets the head in New Orleans?

00:05:58

PR: Yeah, she'll get the head and she'll make it and send us some when she makes it.

00:06:01

CD: The supermarkets still sell the head, Like you go to these big supermarkets that sell a lot of meat, you can order the head.

00:06:09

SR: Huh, and she makes it at home?

00:06:10

PR: Yeah, she makes it at home.

00:06:12

CD: Uh-hm, yes.

00:06:13

SR: I would love to see that process sometime. All right.

00:06:17

PR: I like her. *[Laughs]*

00:06:19

CD: Yeah.

00:06:20

SR: Well it's so fun to—every time I think I know something I always learn something.

00:06:25

CD: Yeah, so I was around lots of great cooks. My grandmother was a great cook—great, great cook.

00:06:31

SR: Does any of your family still in Lutchter?

00:06:35

CD: Uh-huh. I have an aunt that lives there, and I have two brothers that live there; relatives, cousins. My mother and father is gone. Grandmother is dead, and my grandmother died after my mother but she was 96 years-old. My grandmother was a wonderful person. She was—was strong. She was a strong lady. Too strong.

00:06:59

PR: To kill a hog, it was going to be kind of hard to kill you. *[Laughs]*

00:07:03

SR: Well that's a good note to end on I think. Thank you.

00:07:08

[End Dunbar Interview-2]