

Interview with Sammie Hardeman

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Begin Tape 1, Side 1

Michael C. Buff: All right. Mr. Hardeman? Where are you from, sir?

Sammie Hardeman: I was born in Lockhart, Texas, which is Caldwell County. How I got away from there was that my mother was single, and she married a farmer, and we came to Martindale; stayed there one year and came to Reedville. Going out the back gate of Gary Job Corps, it was our landlord who lived in that house just as you came out the back gate, and his name was Charley Fellis [probably Ellis]. Where Gary Job Corps is now, all of that was farmland then; our farm took in the part of Gary Job Corps.

Well, in 1929, crops failed, we left Reedville and went up to Frost, Texas, on a cotton pick. When we got through up there, we came back to San Marcos, I came to San Marcos on the twenty-seventh day of December, 1929. Then, in 1930, I started my school year out at Dunbar High School. During this time, I learned to, I was working for a man by the name of Avana Barrs, he believed in cooking and having little stands, barbequing and what have you. And I began to help him.

So I learned the trade of barbequing. So then, at all the school closings, I would do the barbequing; in those days, on the last day of school, we would have a big barbeque, and I would do them. Well, then I began to do the meats, some of the old-timers here, which were the Bests and the Breens, and Dr. Evans was the president of the college. I used to work for a family, the name was Henry King, they lived at 1235 Belvin Street; that's the house that Mayor Craddock lives in now, she purchased the house from him. On my way out there, I used to cross this lot, which was where the former college had moved from. It was on Hopkins Street, I believe, a vacant lot that I crossed on my way to work, which is how I discovered where the old college had moved from. During that time, the university did not come under a board of regents but had trustees; they had trustees here and were made up of local San Marcos men. I know Mr. Woods and Mr. Green, they were some of the old-timers who were trustees.

After it went to Southwest State College, I know it had three buildings built: Old Main, the Science Building, and Fine Arts. It was those three buildings on the hill that they used in the starting of the college. Also, one side of the Science Building that they did not use, they didn't need it, seeing it, so they leased it out to high school. At one time, the high school used one big

room for beginners, children, I don't know what age but I was familiar with it, and that's how it started.

It was during this time that they began to start the food service, and it was run by the college, and it was people that I know, families here, that did the cooking up there. Families like Tina Brown, John Tolliver, Thelma Ramsey, and my mother-in-law, Hattie Love, also worked up there, and the college was running it on their own. So, as years went by, they began to promote certain entertainment on certain days. One of those days was Frontier Day. Also, about 1930, they had about two thousand students, but then the Depression came about 1933, and it dropped to about seven hundred students.

As time went on, as I say, Dr. Evans was president, as I remember, he started a building program. Somewhere during this time, they bought land and built the college farm, which they are still using. And then they began to buy land up there and add on other buildings, and Dr. Evans lived in a place they called a cottage, that's where he lived. From there, he started this expansion program, and they began to buy on toward downtown. As time went by, they continued to buy out people and build, and that's how they ended up now plumb down to downtown, where they are now.

As time went on, they built, and near as I can remember, Dr. Evans stayed there nearly thirty years, he stayed there longer than all the other presidents that they have had together. When he retired, the next one who came along was Dr. Flowers, and he stayed quite a time. Well, Dr. Leland Derrick was teaching there during this time and was right there next to the president; in other words, it seems at times he was in turn president, at times. Then it went on and on until the business manager, seems like his name was Bryan Wildenthal, he was set up as Business Manager there.

There was a place downtown by the name of Moore Grocery Company. They had a fellow working there by the name of Willow Haynes. He was one of the first men who worked in the storeroom and ordered the groceries and food for the university when they began to prepare their own food. They had a dietician by the name of Perryman. She was a young lady who was real sharp, and she ran the food service. So, they ran it between 1962 and 1964.

Buff: Were you working with food service during this time?

Hardeman: No, I was working with Piggly Wiggly Stores. I worked at Piggly Wiggly stores from 1945–1952. During this time, I met Mrs. Perryman, and she was a customer at Piggly Wiggly, and so were so many of the students. They would come on Saturday. We would sell barbeque every Saturday, that's why after buying barbeque there and liking it so much they said, We had wieners last Frontier Day. They said, Can you barbeque for us on Frontier Day? and I said, "Yes, I can." She said, "We would like you to prepare for about seven hundred people." And she asked me what it would take. I asked her, "Where do you want it?" I said, "Our pit is

not large enough to do a job that size. How about going down to Sewell Park.” Sewell, that’s another teacher who was up there; that is where the park got its name. I said, “How about going down in the park, and we dig a ditch twenty foot long and two and one-half–three feet wide, we can cover it with iron strips, bed railings, or what have you, then we can put chicken wire over it.”

That’s what we did. We brought this meat. They wanted to start about 11:00 a.m. the next day, so we started about 11:00 that night cooking the meat. I had a cousin of mine to help, his name was Richard Miney. We had two pitchin’ forks, the meat was in big chunks, and we would turn them with the pitchin’ forks. Just about the time the meat began to get about right, it started raining. It rained, and so Mrs. Perryman had to help us, they came down, picked up the meat, and carried it up to the college and kept it warm in the oven until the next morning, and when it cleared off and the sun began to shine, so we brought it back.

In this ditch, we just piled it with wood from one end to the other and set it afire. And when it burned down to coals is when we put the meat over it; we still had a bed of hot coals and put the meat back over it and had it ready by 11:00. They had only two slicers at the college, and I borrowed two from Piggly Wiggly and got four guys, and we began to slice the meat as it was coming through. We had four lines, and we would slice pans of meat and keep going to each line. And the college provided cole slaw, pinto beans, potato salad, hard rolls, and brownie squares, and we also had lemonade. So that was the first Frontier Day with barbeque, and from that led at one time to doing barbeque for every school in San Marcos. Which included the Academy, the Brown School had got started here, the high school, and the college. I specialized in doing chickens. I was doing chickens for ten cents a chicken. So, you see how fast I was getting rich.

So, finally I got a better job, I worked out at the Officer’s Club, I was manager of the mess hall out there, and the base closed. So when the base closed, I went to Austin at the Villa Capri as Assistant Chef and worked my way up to Banquet Manager. Just about the time things got going good, I started there in July of 1959 and stayed there until September 14, 1962. And it was some place people from college, from Austin, had come here and bought a place we called Hill’s Restaurant. I don’t know if you were here during this time?

I opened it up the twenty-third day of September, 1962. At that time, we could only sit 75 people, but it grew so fast we had to add on a place that could sit 156 people. They still stood out in the streets waiting to be fed. Another little place we closed in would hold forty, we still couldn’t make it. That’s when we put on the big room that would hold three hundred more people. During this time, Dr. McCrocklin came here, he was having pretty large affairs, and there wasn’t any place up at the university. Even though they had been building, it was mostly dorms and classrooms and places that they need. They still didn’t have a place to entertain. Dr. McCrocklin had at least three large affairs out there before they ever got facilities to entertain up at the college.

They built this large cafeteria, which is Jones. Commons is the old cafeteria, at one time it was the only one that they had. After they built Jones, they first built one side, and they called it "Senior." As the students began to come in, there wasn't enough room, so they added on another wing, [and] then they had their junior room and their senior. And they began to have functions in one side of it, but still it caused such a hassle that they would rather it be somewhere else. That's why Dr. McCrocklin had a lot of them at Hill's Restaurant. Then they finally built the library, which is up there now. It's eleven stories, and they began to have some of their functions there.

I remember back up to '59, Mr. Cates, he still lived here, he never was President, but he acted as Interim-President until they could get someone. And I think he belonged to a group that would go deer hunting, and we went down to Catarina, that's somewhere down by Mexico. I went with them on a deer hunt and cooked for them for a week, and that's how I met Mr. Cates.

Dr. McCrocklin came and was the president of the college. After he resigned, Billy Mac Jones was President, and he didn't last too long. After he left, Dr. Smith came. Well, just before Dr. Smith came, the food service found out they could not make the profit with the college running it themselves. They gave the contract to ARA, which was a Slater Foods company. Their head man, who still lives here now, his name is Len Fielder. He lives at 109 Formosa, up on the hill.

So, in 1973, he hired me to come work up at the college. I had been doing jobs all along and started studying to be a banquet manager for Slater Food Company. Mr. Fielder was my supervisor. He was Director of Food Service. After one month, he said, "[I] wished you had come up here ten years ago, you seem to have a lot of experience. I'm going to make you my assistant." So I was his Assistant Director of Food Service, this was in 1973. I believe they lost the contract in 1977, and the food service that's there now came in, Professional Food.

Dr. Smith was President, and I had been in his home several times, doing parties for him. When he wanted a party, he would give me any number of girls, and I would need to go in and do this party. Professional Food got the contract, and they came in and said they didn't want any of the managers. (Laughs) They would take all the employees, but they said they had their own managers, and they didn't want any others.

ARA sent me to Baton Rouge, Louisiana, to be interviewed as banquet manager over all cash operations; that's one thing I specialize in, running cash operations, cafeterias, what have you. Seven of us went to Baton Rouge, and one of the presidents of ARA lived in California, and he met us there, and we seven were interviewed. Out of seven, they said they would take some of the rest, but they definitely wanted me for banquet manager over all cash operations, and I agreed to take it. I got back home and met Dr. Smith a few days after, I noticed he wanted to say something, but he wanted to say something. I could tell he had something on his mind.

So the managers, one named Greg, he was Head Manager of Professional Food. Ms. Lunelle Anderson was the assistant to the president and did all his special work; they were wining and

dining, had a nice supper going on. Dr. Smith asked him, "What are you going to do with Sammie?" He says, "We won't need him, either. We have our own man, and we would rather use our own man." Dr. Smith told Greg, "You had better give Sammie a job. We want him at this college." Well, he said, "All right!"

So, I had promised faithfully to go to Baton Rouge, and they began to send for me. I didn't know all this going on, so when they began to send for me, I didn't go.

So, finally I met Dr. Smith again, [and] he said, "Well, Sammie are you going to stay?" I said, "Well, I don't know. I'll stay if you want me to." He said, "Listen, it was I that wanted you to stay, and they better give you a job!" So, I began to back up and said, "Oh, well, if you want me, I'll be glad to stay." I didn't want to go to Baton Rouge anyway, you know. He says, "Okay."

So then, Jesse Adams was working up at the college during this time, he's retired now. He taught my daughter in school, and he called one morning and said, "Sammie, what are you doing?" I said, "Nothing." He said, "They have closed out ARA. Whatever you are doing, drop it right now. Come on up and see these people, they are waiting to give you a job." So I went up, and Greg said he knew nothing about it, and he said, "Do you want a job?" I said, "Yes, that's what I came for." He says, "Well, I know what you make, and I'll give you ten dollars a week more than you're making. We know you're good, but we believe in paying people because we feel if they don't do their job, it's because they are not getting paid. We believe in paying people, and if they don't do their job in about two weeks, we let them go."

I missed it. It got away from me the way he spoke it. I said, "Let me tell you something. You give me work for one week, if you're not satisfied, if I don't satisfy you in one week, you can have the other week, and I don't want no pay. I know this business from start to finish, from the back door to out the front door, there is nothing up here to be done that I don't know how to do." So he says, "Okay," and he hired me. And I have never worked for a company that was better to me than they were. We got along fine and never had a misunderstanding.

Buff: What company was that?

Hardeman: Professional Food, the one that's up there now. But one thing they thought they wanted to run it different. Len Fielder had it down. You never can please everyone. There were gripes and food fights and what have you, but he really fed those kids. They got eggs three ways, bacon, ham, sausage, every morning. Every type of dry cereal on the market, individual that the student could have. They had seventeen drinks that they could have. Every kind of milk; there was chocolate and low-fat. Orange juice, apple juice, and then they put in soda water that was supposed to start around 11:00 a.m. They put in the fountains with five or six types of soda water. They left it open all the time so they could have soda water for breakfast, hot chocolate, anything you want, but still some guys weren't satisfied. But they were really feeding the guys.

And ARA had a prep room. If they were serving roast beef, they would cook it today, slice it tomorrow, and serve it that night or the next day. This new company didn't want to do it this way, so they hired new cooks and would cook everything right on the dot, that day. They started that and couldn't feed the people—they were just holding them up. They had to go back to the system the other company had. As I told them, I had worked at all the other places and knew the operation and how it was supposed to go. They had hired a woman to work up at College Inn. She didn't show up, so they sent me up there to get it ready to open up. I went up to get it ready, and just as I was getting it ready the women showed up. They gave her the job anyway. But it didn't affect me working. I went to Commons and worked, something would go wrong over at LBJ and they would send me over there. They sent me from place to place.

Well, I was enjoying it anyway, thought nothing of it and was proud to do what I told them I could do. I told them I could work anywhere at any of the places. Anyway, the director, Greg, had an entertainment for us one night, and he called it an award. I always kept my barbeque going on the side. They had eleven managers up there. I had cooked about three pounds of barbeque for a group and asked them if I could bring a piece up for dinner the next day, so they could try it. I carried this barbeque up there, and they went wild over it. From that day on, in early 1979, they said, Will you fix barbeque for the company and serve it at LBJ? That's where I ended up as manager at. I told them yes. From that day on, I did the barbeque until now. I retired in 1981, but I still do the barbeque for the college, and they use it at LBJ, and I have a host of individual groups, student center, what have you. I do their picnics, gone to the University Camp, been there with the group four or five times, catering their barbeque. And it's a group at the administration who I cook turkeys for and do their barbeque several times a year. There's one group up there who I cook pecan pies for once a year.

So, I'm still working up there and pretty much know what's going on. I stay in touch with the managers from Professional Food, and I retired June 5, 1981.

In 1982, they sent me to Nashville, Tennessee, to do a large barbeque at a party they had at the Opera Hotel in Nashville. Then the twenty-seventh day of August of this year I went to Pennsylvania to do one up there for one of the professors who at one time was here, his name was Joe Caputo. He went to Nashville and saw the food that I did there. He said he made up his mind then that if he ever was president of a college, he would have me come and put on a barbeque for them, so I did.

Buff: What college was that?

Hardeman: Millersville University in Millersville, Pennsylvania. I was there three days and did a party for 375 people, barbeque. So that's my line.

Buff: You know it well.

Hardeman: I cater year-round for people. At one time, I had a sauce on the market, that's a picture of it.

Buff: How did that go over?

Hardeman: It went over good, but the people that was sponsoring it died, and that kind of blew it. They were sponsoring it and made all the contacts. I still make the sauce and use it to barbeque.

Buff: It's still world famous?

Hardeman: It is still going over quite well.

Buff: Anything you would like to conclude with?

Hardeman: I retired in 1981 with my health still good. I do stay in contact with all of the groups at the college. I'm still well-known and still do so much of the work and enjoy doing it.

End of interview