

**EUGENE & BETTY HICKS**  
**Hicks World Famous Hot Tamales & More**  
**Clarksdale, MS**

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Location: Hicks Restaurant – Clarksdale, MS  
Date: August 19, 2005  
Length: 45 minutes, 44 seconds  
Interviewer: Amy Evans  
Project: MS Delta Hot Tamale Trail

*NOTE: Various sounds occur throughout this interview. Rather than mention them individually and interrupt the flow of the conversation, they are noted here: a fan can be heard running in the background of the first portion of the interview with Mr. Hicks. When interviewing he and his wife in the back of the restaurant, where the hot tamales are made, the window air conditioner can be heard in the background. (August in the Mississippi delta is HOT.) When in the main kitchen, other employees can be heard working, and a radio is on. When the occurring sounds are an obvious interruption to the interview, they are noted in the transcript.*

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**[Begin Eugene and Betty Hicks]**

0:00:00.0

**Amy Evans:** This is Friday, August nineteenth, 2005, and this is Amy Evans in Clarksdale, Mississippi, for the Southern Foodways Alliance. And I'm at Hicks World Famous Hot Tamales with Mister Eugene Hicks, the proprietor. Sir, would you mind saying your name and also your birth date, so we can have it for the record.

0:00:19.6

**Eugene Hicks:** Okay, my name is Eugene Hicks. Date--date of birth is February fifth, 1944.

0:00:26.6

**AE:** All right. And how long have you been in business over here?

0:00:29.2

**EH:** This particular location, five years. But I had another location that I was at for thirty years. So I'm thirty in one spot and five at another.

0:00:40.8

**AE:** Were you making hot tamales before you opened a restaurant or a cafe?

0:00:44.7

**EH:** Oh, yes. Yes indeed. We--I made my first tamales at the age of seventeen. Really [at the age of] sixteen, I made my first tamales. And then we started putting them on the market a little bit at seventeen.

0:00:56.3

**AE:** Where did you get your recipe?

0:01:00.0

**EH:** A gentleman taught me how to do that at--black fellow taught me how to do it at [age] thirteen. He telled me how to do tamales at thirteen years old, and I finally decided to try to do it

at sixteen. So we did it, and people liked it and said it tastes better than the man that taught you. And kind--from there it kind of blossomed, you know, and one thing lead to another. So that's how it really got started.

0:01:20.8

**AE:** And what made you want to make tamales in the first place?

0:01:23.0

**EH:** You know, I don't even--I don't have the slightest idea. I made it because he asked--the gentleman that taught me said, "Look, try this. You might like it." So then we tried it and the people seemed to like it, you know, so we just--just continued to do it, you know--just a little bit at a time. And we got good at it 'cause the way we do our tamales today is a little different than the way I was taught. We still use the basics of what I was taught forty-six years ago, you know, so--but I modified the tamale a lot. So it's a little different now than from what we used to do.

0:01:57.2

**AE:** Can you speak a little bit without giving away any secrets of how you changed it?

0:02:02.4

**EH:** Well, we just added--we did a lot of research on meats, on--on chili, so we added some new ingredients, you know, and kind of changed it around a little bit from what he has taught me. And that's really all we've done, because I come up with a machine that will--that we can--can mass-produce tamales. I mean everything he showed me was all hand-made. Now we--we still use our hands to put it in the corn shucks, but I have a machine now to press that meat out, and we have a deal where we can just cut them and roll them in the cornmeal and--and do ten times more tamales per day than we could do back there forty-six years ago.

0:02:42.1

**AE:** Uh-hmm. Well, and forty-six years ago, was this guy that you learned from--did he have a tamale business?

0:02:47.8

**EH:** Well he did them at his home; he and his wife would do it in their kitchen, and he had a little--a little cart-like--a little thing with wheels on it that he would roll up and down the street and sell tamales. That's what he did all the weekend. He made tamales like Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday--Monday through Thursday, and then he'd go out on the street on Friday and Saturday, and he sold these things.

0:03:07.3

**AE:** And what was his name?

0:03:09.9

**EH:** Acy Ware, A-c-y W-a-r-e.

0:03:14.3

**AE:** And now let me ask you this: what do you think it is about hot tamales in the Delta and how they got here and how they've stuck around?

0:03:22.3

**EH:** You know a lot of people ask me that. **[Laughs]** I really don't know. I--I mean, it's a lot of people that do it in this area, but I--I just--I don't know. I don't know where it come from. I'm just one of a few who do that.

0:03:39.1

**AE:** Were there a whole lot of vendors forty-six years ago when you learned to make them?

0:03:43.5

**EH:** No, not in Clarksdale. I think myself, along with three more people that I know of was doing them back then. Now it's probably twenty, twenty-five people in this area doing tamales, yeah.

0:03:58.7

**AE:** Well what do you think the magic is of a tamale that makes them so popular?

0:04:03.1

**EH:** Corn shucks and cornmeal. A lot of people use masa. I don't like it. Can't stand it. I tried it. But I use just plain white self-rising cornmeal, you know. And the corn shuck and that--that's the key.

0:04:17.0

**AE:** Why don't you like--why don't you like masa?

0:04:18.7

**EH:** I don't like it because it already--it has the seasoning already in it, and you've got to put it--and make it into a paste, and you spread it on your shuck, and you don't get an even coat of masa around your shuck, if you don't know really what you're doing. And I never could figure that out.

And then when you buy it with the masa, you only get a small amount of meat, but a lot of masa--didn't like that.

0:04:41.1

**AE:** Uh-hmm. So over the years, when your business has evolved, how many tamales do you think you were selling at the beginning, and how many do you think you sell now?

0:04:51.2

**EH:** Well I guess we started off selling like maybe fifty dozen tamales per week. Now we have sold like--as many as 2,000-dozen tamales per week. So it varies, you know. Like this week we might sell 100-dozen hot tamales. Last week we might not sell but forty dozen tamales, you know. It just--it varies. But we were on the Food Network, and we shipped hot tamales throughout the country, and we were averaging like 2,000-dozen per week. And that happened like three or four times we did that. So that's a lot of work there.

0:05:30.0

**AE:** And how did you get to where you could produce that many? I mean I--I know you use kind of a--a mechanized operation now. Did you come up with that, and how does that work?

0:05:37.3

**EH:** Yeah, I come up with that. I come up with--with a thing we can just run that tamale through there, and I got ladies that help me. I got three ladies that know how--I've taught how to put them in the corn shuck, so that's basically all they do. Of course, the wife [Betty Hicks], she's retired from school. She comes in and helps them do that. So but really, the hard is--about tamales now is putting them in the corn shuck. That's the most work.

0:05:59.9

**AE:** Do you know about the folks who have gone to parchment paper to roll their tamales? Have you heard about that?

0:06:05.5

**EH:** Say it again.

0:06:08.6

**AE:** The people who have gone to parchment paper instead of using shucks?

0:06:11.4

**EH:** I know about the paper; I don't like the paper. I've had it before. The paper has a wax on it. It's like a wax paper when you get it. It has a wax on it. And when you cook your tamale, that wax comes off of that paper and gets in your tamale, and you can taste it in your tamale, and I don't like that. I don't use that.

0:06:30.3

**AE:** Uh-hmm. So what do you look for in your tamales? What--what makes a good tamale?

0:06:36.3

**EH:** Well you just to have the ingredients in it. You've got to have good taste, and you've got to have your corn shuck--the cornhusks. That's--that's what makes tamales. But you need that taste, too.

0:06:47.1

**AE:** And yours tend to be a little bit on the spicy side? You like the spice?

0:06:50.5

**EH:** Yeah, a little spicy. And see, that's--that's another thing. People--spices are very expensive now, so people don't want to spend the money to buy the spice they need to put into their

tamales. So they cut back a lot, and I refuse to cut back. I'm going to keep my tamales there the way I was taught to do it like forty-five, forty-six years ago. I'm not going to change that, you know. And that--that's the key is keeping--the name of it is hot tamale. So it sounds like it's spicy, you know, so that's the way we do it, you know. **[Laughs]** We won't change it.

0:07:24.8

**AE:** So you say your wife works with you. Do you have any other family that's here?

0:07:28.2

**EH:** My wife and my son, who is graduated from Jackson State University in 2002; he's here right now. And my daughter, she helps me a little bit but she's lazy. But the wife is back there now doing tamales, right back there now. My son is up in Tennessee with his girlfriend, so he'll be back probably tomorrow.

0:07:49.6

**AE:** And you just focus on a drive-through business?

0:07:51.4

**EH:** Say it again.

0:07:52.5

**AE:** You just focus on a drive-through--drive-through business?

0:07:55.2

**EH:** No, no. No, we are--this facility is open a lot. It was open yesterday, but my son had to go to see--take care of some business with the little lady, and they got a newborn son, so they had to take him to the doctor, too, today. So he took off, and I'm short of help. But that was--this [dining room] will be open all the time here.

0:08:15.2

**AE:** And you have barbecue, and today I see you have crab cake dinners and things like that.

0:08:19.4

**EH:** Yes, indeed. We've got a lot of good food.

0:08:21.6

**AE:** Can you tell me a little bit about your barbecue?

0:08:24.7

**EH:** We got some of the best barbecue in Mississippi.

0:08:25.7

**AE:** Yeah?

0:08:27.7

**EH:** Uh-hmm, very good barbecue--very good rib--rib tips, chopped barbecue sandwiches. You need to try this before you leave.

0:08:35.2

**AE:** I will.

0:08:35.0

**EH:** Very good stuff, very good. That's the way--and I try to do that myself. It's very difficult to get anybody to come here and barbecue like I like it. They cut corners, and I don't like cuttin' no corners. No, we got good stuff.

0:08:47.6

**AE:** Would you say that the barbecue business and the hot tamale side of the business are kind of equal, or does one outshine the other?

0:08:54.6

**EH:** Well I think the barbecue business is probably better in this area--your local people. You know, tamale business is--is a better business--people passing through. You know, if somebody wants to take some back to--to Atlanta or back to Texas or Arkansas or Illinois, wherever. They come from all over. We even had people take hot tamales all the way back to Australia. So they--they come from everywhere.

0:09:23.7

**AE:** And what--why do you think that is? Why do you think they want to take them home with them?

0:09:26.5

**EH:** I don't know. They said they heard about me and my tamale making and wanted to give it a try. And they'll come in and eat some tamales here and they say, "Look, can I take some more home with me?" Yeah! [We] pack them up, and they take them home.

0:09:36.8

**AE:** Would you consider hot tamales an authentic Delta food item that's kind of part of this region?

0:09:43.4

**EH:** Well hot tamales--hot tamales is an impulse item, you know. You kind of buy that thing on site, you know. But I--I don't know what you would say. I mean, by me doing it so long and people--they just come look for me and my tamale. Most people have to wait and see it. I don't have to have my tamale for you to see it anymore; people come to me with what they want, you know. So it's--I don't know what--I don't know.

0:10:09.6

**AE:** And what has been in Clarksdale and this resurgence of--of blues musicians being appreciated and people flocking to places like Clarksdale to hear live blues, and I know y'all just had that big festival last weekend.

0:10:25.3

**EH:** Oh, yes, indeed.

0:10:26.4

**AE:** What does that do for your tamale business?

0:10:28.3

**EH:** Oh, it helps. It helps a lot. But a lot of people come--see the [Sunflower River] Blues Festival is uptown, so the people comes out here and eat tamales. We had customers in here all day long during that blues festival. People just want to eat hot tamales. They're going to come back when they get ready to leave Clarksdale and take tamales home with them. So we pretty much sold a lot of tamales in the last week 'cause everybody want to try it, and they want to take some home with them. So they'll call me and pick them up. We give them a business card. They'll call and let us know when they're getting ready to leave town. And they want two-dozen or a dozen to take back home with them, and that's what we do.

0:11:01.2

**AE:** Do you ever--or have you ever considered doing a booth downtown during one of the festivals?

0:11:07.5

**EH:** I thought about it, but I'm a little bit too old for it. Uh-uh, it's too much work for me now.  
Everybody come in and pick it up and go. [*Laughs*]

0:11:16.4

**AE:** Have you had anybody else's tamales--anybody here in Clarksdale or in the other parts of the Delta?

0:11:20.8

**EH:** Say it again.

0:11:22.0

**AE:** Have you eaten anybody else's tamales in the Delta?

0:11:23.4

**EH:** Yeah, I had some from Doe's [Eat Place in Greenville, Mississippi].

0:11:26.2

**AE:** What do you think about Doe's [hot tamales]?

0:11:28.6

**EH:** It was--it was pretty good, but they didn't have enough--they--they used the masa, and they didn't have enough spices in the thing, you know. Just--it didn't taste like—well, it didn't taste nothing like my tamales. So it might be good to some people, but my customers like my tamales. So I don't complain.

0:11:49.2

**AE:** Well and yours are beef tamales?

0:11:54.3

**EH:** All beef. Of course, I got one that I have made with turkey breast--that's all white turkey breast--and I make a special sauce for that thing. It's very good. But it kind of gets expensive to make that one. So I don't make it all the time, but it's very, very, very good.

0:12:10.9

**AE:** When you say special sauce, what does that mean?

0:12:14.0

**EH:** Well I make--I make a chili sauce. My tamales--we cook them in a vegetable shortening--it's a good vegetable shortening--and water, we cook them. This thing, we make a chili sauce that we cook it in, so that way when you just cook the tamale, you eat the sauce and everything, you know. You just take--you take some saltine crackers and break it up in the saltine and eat it all--tamale and everything. It's different, uh-hmm.

0:12:36.6

**AE:** Now your recipe--is it something that you've written down or something you just know and make by heart or have told--?

0:12:42.3

**EH:** I never wrote--no, I ain't never wrote it down. I should. I don't write it down. I just know what I need to do and most time when I'm--when I'm preparing my tamales, especially when I'm cooking my hamburger meat, I usually try to be alone, you know, because I don't want no phone ringing, and I don't want anybody talking to me. That way I get all my ingredients and set it out, and then I know what I'm doing when I start cooking, because you can be distracted by the telephone and by all the people talking to you. See, I've did it so long, I know what I need to do,

but I kind of wait until I'm alone. I mean, the wife and children--I don't want nobody around me, and then I cook it. Then if I screw up, see [*Laughs*] I know I did it on my own. [*Laughs*]

0:13:26.3

**AE:** Uh-hmm. So you're the only one that ever cooks the meat for the tamales?

0:13:29.0

**EH:** Only one; nobody ever touches that.

0:13:31.2

**AE:** Are you ever going to pass that on, you think?

0:13:33.7

**EH:** Well I've been trying to teach my son how to do it, but he said, "Pa, that's too much work. That's too much work." He don't know. He could do it, but you know like when I--when I cook the tamale, I usually cook like 100-pounds of ground beef at one time and so--just because to stir--you know, what I'm talking about? So we got to find some kind of a big machine with a mixing blade in it, so we can stir that stuff because it's hard on your arm--very hard. He say he can't do that.

0:14:05.9

**AE:** So can you talk about a little bit the process of making them and how you spice them?  
Because I know some people just spice the water or they just spice the meal or just the beef.

0:14:14.3

**EH:** We spice--we spice our ground beef. It's just like making a chili. That's really all we do. It's--it's really something like a chili. Then once we cook it, we cook it for X-number of hours. And then because we've got pans that we got--spread it out in and we sit it in our walk-in coolers, and it will stay in there like fourteen to twenty hours. Now it's real--it's chilled and it's tight because of our machine. I would put it in and press it down and roll it. We'll show you that stuff before you leave here.

0:14:44.8

**AE:** Okay. Well do you have any other ideas about hot tamales in the Delta and--and what the future of making hot tamales is? Because, you know, I've talked to a lot of people, and [tamales are] so labor intensive. And there are a lot of people that have recipes that they haven't necessarily passed on, and I wonder if you think the next generation is going to carry that tradition on?

0:15:06.9

**EH:** I--I really don't think so. I think when my time is up--I'm sure others feel the same way, we--I think when a few of us finish, I don't think it will be anybody to fill our shoes, because it's work. And I see our young people don't want to--they just don't want to do their work. I mean, they like it, but they say that's too much. And it's a lot of work involved, yeah--a lot of work. So I don't know. It--someone might carry it on, but I'm thinking that it won't be a lot. It--it's going to end soon, it sure is.

0:15:39.9

**AE:** And I see on your menu that a dozen hot tamales is eight dollars and ninety-seven cents plus tax?

0:15:45.1

**EH:** Yeah, eight [dollars and] ninety-seven [cents].

0:15:45.0

**AE:** Do you remember how much they were when you first started?

0:15:48.7

**EH:** It was like two dollars [for a dozen]. So you were doing hot tamales for two dollars. But since then, ground beef has--ground beef has tripled in price. All your spices has quad-tripled. Cornhusks are like eight dollars a pound. You can't even eat that thing! So everything is ridiculous now price-wise, and we still got the regular prices of our tamales. We've got people coming from elsewhere and say the cheapest tamale they can find in their home is like thirteen, fourteen dollars per dozen. They don't taste like nothing, you know, so--I think we're still doing pretty good, um-hmm.

0:16:25.4

**AE:** Well do you think there's--do you think there are any comparisons or none between barbecue and hot tamales and the labor involved and the price point and any--the craft of it?

0:16:34.9

**EH:** Bar--barbecuing is much--much simpler. If you know how to barbecue, you can just stay on the grill and just cook, and once you take it off the grill that's it. Hot tamales go through a lot more than that. I mean, you got--I got to cook it, we got to chill it, we got to roll it, we got to meal it; then we got to shuck it and then we got to tie and then we got to cook it again. So you're talking about hours on top of hours to process tamales--a lot of work.

0:17:01.5

**AE:** Do you like to eat tamales yourself?

0:17:03.6

**EH:** I eat a few.

0:17:05.9

**AE:** Yeah.

0:17:06.3

**EH:** I don't eat a lot, but I eat a few. **[Laughs]** I have to. See, when I put it together, I got to taste it. In other words, I can't let you have it, if I'm not satisfied with it. And if I don't like it, you're not going to get it. See what I'm talking about? **[Laughs]** That's the way we do that. Anything I put--put together back there, I--I'm going to taste it first. And if I like it, I'm like, well, I hope they like it. But if I don't like it you not even going to know anything about that 'cause you're not going to even get that item. No, uh-huh. **[Emphasis Added]** We don't do that.

0:17:37.1

**AE:** Do your kids like eating hot tamales?

0:17:39.2

**EH:** My grandbaby love it; he's only five. Everybody eat it a little bit, but the grandbaby is ridiculous. He—he go to kindergarten, and he come back from school every day he wants some hot tamale right now. [He'll say,] “Granddad can I get a hot tamale?” [I'll tell him,] “Boy, you're too small and you want a hot tamale?” He's this big. [Holds hand about two and a half feet above the floor] [*Laughs*] He's all right.

0:17:58.9

**AE:** Now let me ask you about--there's a man, Oscar, who would sell [hot tamales] out of his truck [in Clarksdale].

0:18:04.3

**EH:** Oscar?

0:18:03.8

**AE:** Down here on MLK [Martin Luther King Boulevard]?

0:18:04.7

**EH:** Uh-hmm.

0:18:05.7

**AE:** Is he still out there on weekends?

0:18:07.4

**EH:** Oscar Orsby--Oscar Orsby. No, he's not there no more. He's not there. He--his wife has a heart condition and he--he spends some time with her now. He stays at home with her, uh-hmm. So he ain't out there.

0:18:30.8

**AE:** Yeah.

0:18:32.0

**EH:** He was out there 2002, maybe 2003, and he ain't been out there probably since then.

0:18:39.2

**AE:** Yeah, how long had he been out there selling tamales?

0:18:43.9

**EH:** How long Oscar been out there?

0:18:44.3

**AE:** Yeah.

0:18:44.6

**EH:** Since 1983. That's when he started, eighty-three. He retired from the City. He was working for the City of Clarksdale, and he retired, I think at [age] sixty-five, so he went up there and started selling tamales, yeah.

0:18:59.7

**AE:** All right. Well, can we take a tour of your tamale making station back there?

0:19:06.9

**EH:** I'd be happy--I'd be happy to show you around.

0:19:08.0

**AE:** All right.

0:19:09.9

**EH:** This--this is my right-hand lady right here now [Pauline White]. She can run these hot tamales out here for me, yeah. Well I don't know what I'd do--she left me one time, too. And I started to get my shotgun and go get her. But she left me--sure did. But she does handle these hot tamales. Anybody can't do this. I mean can't just nobody do it. Now, we go to the back and people back there--.

0:19:36.5

**AE:** Okay, excuse me. [Walking down narrow hallway behind kitchen to get out the room where they make tamales.]

0:19:42.9

**EH:** I think she's still back here in this room.

0:19:47.8

**AE:** How many people you have working for you?

0:19:49.2

**EH:** Just--just--just Miss [Pauline] White and Missy--see she just--

0:19:54.0

**AE:** [To Mrs. Betty Hicks] Hello, ma'am. How are you?

0:19:54.6

**EH:** She just—she's just now finishing up.

0:19:56.4

**AE:** Okay.

0:19:58.3

**EH:** But we—see, we put her back here and let her make hot tamales. If we don't put her back here and do something, she come out there and talk all day. It keeps her busy.

0:20:05.4

**AE:** Well at least--at least you put her back here in the air conditioning.

0:20:07.9

**Betty Hicks:** I'm the only one that works around here. That's the--what it is. You can see my work [points to a stack of hot tamales]. [*Laughs*]

0:20:14.1

**EH:** This is--this is where we put them in the corn shucks. If you had been five minutes earlier, you'd see how she do some of this. This is all we have, uh-hmm.

0:20:23.0

**AE:** So can you--?

0:20:23.6

**EH:** This--this is the machine that we--that we use for tamales. [Points to a large stainless steel contraption that looks like a large pressure-cooker] This thing is a hydraulic sausage stuffer, but

we use it to make--we make sausage, too. But this thing will hold fifty pounds of meat. We chill it, we put it in this--in this machine, we close the lid up, and we got a funnel we put on the end of here—[on the top of the contraption, where the contents are extruded]. And, of course, I made this thing right here [points to a large palette of sorts, with concave rolls to hold the extruded tamale filling. There are slits in the pipe about ever five inches or so down the line, which is used as a guide for cutting the tamale filling at uniform lengths]. Like that--it's turning around the wrong way. Let me move these pans, so we can turn it around the other way. This is the only one in the country--nothing else in the country like this because it's--it took me twenty years to figure this out. And I figured it out. This is a new one just made 'cause the one we had, it was twenty-five years old, and then it got kind of funny looking. So this one here now is maybe two months old--it's about two months old, right?

0:21:17.8

**BH:** Yeah, maybe.

0:21:18.1

**EH:** This is brand new. This is made from PVC water pipe and this [bottom part] is aluminum.

0:21:22.2

**AE:** Say that again.

0:21:24.6

**EH:** This is made from PVC water line. And this is an aluminum bowl that I got here, and these are adjustable blades. And see this thing [the raised table of sorts that the PVC pipe contraption is situated on], it comes right up here [up to the extruding mechanism of the machine], like so. Put a funnel here and it shoots the meat right down through there [down the length of the PVC pipe tray, which is about four or five feet in length]. Pull it all [there on the PVC rows] and cut it out through there [the notches in the PVC, which occur about every five inches down the length of the PVC], and then we cut it. We cut it, and then we roll the cornmeal.

0:21:41.5

**BH:** Cutting this whole tray you have ten-dozen [or 120 tamales]. When you cut all this--

0:21:45.7

**EH:** Got a whole ten--usually you see whole dozen—see, this is the way we do it. [Mimics extruding a length of tamale filling.] And then we cut that and put this on top here like so [on his PVC contraption]. We fill it [with lengths of extruded tamale filling and cut it,] and we just turn this over and dump that out. And then we start all over again.

0:21:57.3

**AE:** Do you have a name for this rig that you made for yourself?

0:21:59.8

**EH:** No--no name for that. Somebody told me I need to get a patent on that thing.

0:22:03.9

**AE:** Yeah.

0:22:04.9

**EH:** But I don't know. Who would buy that?

0:22:09.1

**BH:** [Offering a name for the contraption] The dumping tray.

0:22:11.2

**AE:** The dumping tray [*Laughs*].

0:22:12.3

**EH:** 'Cause people don't make a lot of tamales, and so I don't know who would buy that. This thing--they don't want to pay 8,000 dollars for this. See, I mean, most people that's just getting in the business, they don't--I mean, you spend 8,000 dollars for something like this [the extruding machine]. And this thing [the PVC pipe contraption] probably costs you a hundred dollars to get one made. So you got a lot of money tied up in the front, you know. So I don't know if people want to do that 'cause I wouldn't do it, but I had been doing it for like—well, I just bought this [extruder] thing in [the year] 2000, so this thing is five years old now. So I did it forty years before I invested 8,000 dollars in something like this. Because I've been doing tamales like forty-five years or forty-six. So that means I did--I did it the other way, but I had one you turned with your hand, and it just weared me out. But then before--I hope it give me my money back. So this thing is 8,000 bucks, but I think it will pay off. I like it 'cause, like the ladies can use this thing. But the way we used to do it, I had to do it; I had to turn--do it all. But now I can go home and they can--this thing is on hydraulic, so they can do it. It's simple to do now. But they couldn't do it before.

0:23:27.9

**AE:** Mrs. Hicks, do you mind if I ask you a couple questions and record it?

0:23:31.2

**BH:** No.

0:23:31.6

**AE:** And so when you're in here and you make these come out of the machine, and then you stand here and you roll them and you have help rolling them? Is that the way it works, or you do it all?

0:23:41.4

**BH:** Sometimes I have to beg them to come help me, but they--they'll come and help me. You know, they come in and help me and--well Miss [Pauline] White up in the front, she is the one that knows how to do it--to really give me the help that I need. Sometimes I can get my kids or maybe some other little workers to come in and help me. See, once I get them rolled—say, for instance, I have these all rolled out [on the PVC contraption, ready to be wrapped in shucks]. This is--this is the work right here [points to the part of the work station where she was dipping the shucks, wrapping the tamales and tying them]. I just finished the work. Okay, let me give you an example of what I do.

0:24:17.1

**AE:** Okay.

0:24:19.3

**BH:** Let's say this one is right there [unwraps a rolled tamale] there it is, bare-naked. So what I have to do, I--once they come out of there [the extruder], they're just bare and naked and I--there they are, a whole handful. So I take my shuck--husk and I dab it in a little oil, and I dab into the meal. Then I reach over here and get this [the filling]. And everybody can't do this; they're just not able to do it. They don't understand. But there it is [rolls the tamale in the shuck]. And Miss [Pauline] White in the kitchen, she knows how to help me to do this. And now I got this done. Now I'm ready to make my final step right here [tying the tamales into bundles of three]. And I'm going to let those [finished tamales] go back to the cooler to get a little--little cool and give myself a break. But I--I kind of clamp this board down [a long two-by-four, which has large holes about three inches in diameter, cut into it. This is where the bundles pf three are situated for easy tying], clamp it down here so that it will hold securely [on the counter]. And I will take three--three tamales and put them into each hole. Now, I can get someone to help me to do this as long as they don't press it too hard. So once they're in there, this little board holds nine dozen--nine dozen [which means there are thirty-six holes in the board]. So as we finish each board full, we know we have nine dozen. So once I get it [the board] full, I wrap it [the bundle of three]--twice, and this is it [holds a finished and tied bundle of tamales]. Now it's ready to go in the pot and get cooked so--.

0:25:57.7

**AE:** And then--your husband created this board also?

0:25:59.2

**BH:** He created this board some ten, twelve, fifteen years ago 'cause we used to do it by hand. He would get them off of here [counter stacked with rolled tamales] and pick it up [the bundle of three] and hold it, and I would tie it or he would tie. So he said, “Well there got to be an easier way.” So I guess one night while he sat and thought about it, he created this little board. And this board holds nine dozen, so any time we fill this up we got nine dozen. So that's what we have right here, and this is the way we do it. Once we get all this done, [we] take them in the kitchen, put them in the big pot, and they can cook and simmer probably about five hours, and then they're fully cooked and ready to be served. But it takes about five hours to get them thoroughly cooked. The meat in here is already cooked, but you need that time to cook this meal. And this meal is made out of yellow cornmeal and paprika to give it its red color, and it'll change--it will come to a full boil. You turn it off and let it sit for a while and sit there and swell. This meal has to swell. And then you turn it back on and let it cook again, and turn it off and it swells. And you may even turn it on again, if you're not sure, 'cause you want this to--to swell and make a complete little crust around it. And once you do that, then it rolls out [of the corn husk] and that's a full little crust, a casing around that hot tamale. So it'll take about five hours to thoroughly cook that meal where it--you know, your customers will enjoy it. Now some people, they don't mind that it's a little gritty but, you know, some of them say, “Oh, it's raw!” It's not raw; it just hasn't swollen to make that full casing around it.

0:28:00.8

**AE:** Uh-hmm. Can I ask you about that dipping stuff [the pan of grease situated at her work station next to the empty corn husks]?

0:28:03.7

**BH:** Okay.

0:28:03.9

**AE:** What does that do, exactly?

0:28:05.1

**BH:** Okay, what it does here--this being just a bare--

0:28:09.0

[Young man walks into the tamale room]

**AE:** [To the young man] Do you need to speak to her? [He gestures “no” and leaves.]

0:28:12.3

**BH:** This is just a bare shuck, so what I do--I dip it in this oil. It's just an oil, and I drain, and I dip it here, and that makes the meal cling to the shuck. And when I put--put that hot tamale on here and wrap it in here, all that meal that's already on the little hot tamale and this hot--and this just kind of clings to the hot tamale and give it that little casing around it.

0:28:44.4

**AE:** I've not seen anybody else do that step.

0:28:47.1

**BH:** Really? You've looked at others do that? How do they do it?

0:28:49.6

**AE:** They just don't do that.

0:28:51.9

**BH:** They don't do it?

0:28:51.9

**AE:** They just take that--the thing that's extruded and put it in a shuck.

0:28:56.8

**BH:** Just put it in a shuck?

0:28:58.4

**AE:** Uh-huh.

0:28:58.5

**BH:** Well, this gives it a casing--another little casing--and it looks real pretty, too. Did you see the ones in the kitchen?

0:29:05.2

**AE:** No.

0:29:06.0

**BH:** Well I have to take you in there and show you. You want to go in there?

0:29:09.4

**AE:** Yeah, let me--can I get a couple more pictures of you in here real quick?

0:29:12.9

**BH:** Do I look worth taking a picture of?

0:29:14.5

**AE:** Yes, ma'am. [*Laughs*]

0:29:15.4

**BH:** I'm all sweaty and hot!

0:29:18.8

*[Recording is paused while interviewer takes photographs. Recording resumes when Mrs. Hicks begins talking about what they use to tie the tamale bundles together.]*

**AE:** Can I ask you to say that again about the ties?

0:29:21.1

**BH:** Okay, these ties--well we discovered that we may could use these ties when we are-- thought of the garden ties, you know, when you go to the Garden Center, and you've got vegetables growing, like tomatoes or what have you? Well, you can buy these little things to tie up your vegetables or even the--the waste, you know, your—your garbage bags, those little ties that come in there?

0:29:49.4

**EH:** This is one that they make especially for us. This is paper/plastic they call it. In other words, it's plastic on one side and paper on the other.

0:29:55.5

**BH:** Yeah, and Hicks--

0:29:56.1

**EH:** The heat don't deteriorate it; it will stay right there.

0:29:59.0

**BH:** Yeah, it will stay there. That's why Hicks got the idea, when he saw these little ties, and so he went looking around and calling around and found a company and told them what he wanted to do with--and they sent out different little ones for him to try. And finally he--he chose this one because it does have a little plastic, and it can stand up to like 400-degree heat without melting off. And even the final product still have this tie on it. And after it sat so long--so long, it maybe will come off, but you still have that wire there, so it's a good strong wire. And like I say, the finished product is in the kitchen.

0:30:42.2

**AE:** Uh-hmm. Now do you like the ties a lot better than strings? It's a lot easier?

0:30:45.7

**BH:** Oh, yes. We did it for years--just strings--and he'd hold them, and then I'm cutting them [the string]. That saves us an extra step right there 'cause he--he and I used to make probably fifty to a hundred dozen a week, but now we have to make more than a hundred dozen a week and--and so this is much easier. So we've come a long way with little created ideas. So we've come a long way.

0:31:11.0

**AE:** Necessity is the mother of invention, they say.

0:31:14.4

**BH:** Yes, yes.

0:31:15.3

**AE:** Y'all got that covered.

*[Recording is paused again for about three minutes, as we all walk back into the kitchen area to talk about cooking the hot tamales.]*

0:31:19.0

*[Recording resumes. Music heard in background]*

**BH:** [To Mr. Hicks] Hey, somebody is at your window. [To interviewer] These are his cooking pots. Once I get them [the tamales] all done and get them tied up, I take them and put them in here. And he has all sizes of pots.

0:31:33.2

**AE:** How many tamales does that biggest one hold?

0:31:37.1

**BH:** Well you can probably put--probably sixty in here--about sixty. And then we move on down to a smaller one. You can probably put fifty--and then we have one smaller, we can put like twenty-five dozen. So it just depends on how many we have that we're going to cook at a time. And that great big pot right here [points to pot underneath counter], we use it for cooking and sterilizing those shucks 'cause when the shucks come in--they have been cleaned and sterilized but, being a natural product, you know, and out in the weeds--out in the--on the farm and all, you have little bugs trapped in there. So naturally, they have to sterilize it and clean them. But I often say they leave the--the little carcasses that maybe come in the shuck. So when we get the shucks, we'll cut them to our size and then we--we cook them. We boil them again so the--the shucks are perfectly clean. But still you will find that silk, that little hair, and some folks say, "Oh, I don't want this hot tamale. It's got a hair in it." Well, you see, I wear a [hair] net. Not that my hair is not falling out, but anyway, the shucks has just a natural little hair in it. And that--that is sometimes on the shuck. So I have to clean the shuck of the hair--any other little debris that may be on it. And once we get them cooked, I take them out of the pot, and we put them here [in a warming tray or steam-table scenario] and here they are now. And now they're ready for serving. And that's--and that's what she's doing. She's getting ready to serve these. That's--that's a dozen.

0:33:18.2

**AE:** Do a lot of people ask for the juice, too, on the side?

0:33:21.4

**BH:** Yes, some people want the juice. They want the juice. And the juice is made of oil and water and paprika. Now with the paprika, again, just to give it a color, but it's really just a little oil to keep it from—well, it gives it a flavor, I guess, and--and it cooks in this oil. And now--I wanted to show you that little crust around it. That's why I got my plate. I want to show you that little--I guess you call casing or little crust. I'll show it to you now. You see there [unwraps a tamale from its shuck] now that has sat for quite a while, but there it is [the cooked tamale is covered with a dusting or cornmeal]. Then that band--that little tie, and now--now these are freshly made. There is that little crust, that little casing. I--you know, I dabbed it in the meal, and I rolled it and--this is the best part to me.

0:34:30.0

**AE:** The part [the corn meal] that's still stuck to the shuck?

0:34:31.7

**BH:** Yeah, it's just so good. See, you just kind of break it off. And see, when it's done--fully done, it just rolls right out of the shuck and all that little meal--I like that. I like to scrape it off and eat it. And--

0:34:51.1

**AE:** I see you definitely take pride in your craft.

0:34:53.5

**BH:** [*Laughs*] Yes, yes, we--we try to do it so that others will enjoy, and we serve it with our crackers--serve it with the crackers.

0:35:05.0

**AE:** Now are you from Clarksdale originally, Mrs. Hicks?

0:35:08.4

**BH:** No, my home is south, down in Belzoni. Belzoni. Isola, that's my home. And I came up here to go to school in [nineteen] sixty-eight, and that's when I met [Eugene] Hicks. And he was in the Army, and I was in school, and we just happened to meet up on the campus, and about a year later we were married.

0:35:32.2

**AE:** Were there many hot tamales in Belzoni when you were growing up?

0:35:36.3

**BH:** I had maybe heard of hot tamales, but I never--I don't think I had ever seen one. And you know, back in the days when I heard of a hot tamale, I used to hear folks say hot tamales was made out of--what? [Turns to her husband.]

0:35:49.7

**EH:** Cats and dogs.

0:35:50.8

**BH:** Cat guts. Did you ever hear that? Said they were made out of cat guts and dogs and--I don't know, I've just heard that. But I've never had seen one--never had seen one. But Hicks makes this out of pure beef, good pure ground beef, and he takes it all up.

0:36:09.3

**EH:** Ground chuck--ground chuck.

0:36:11.3

**BH:** Ground chuck beef--not hog, but beef. Would you like to taste it?

0:36:16.6

**AE:** I would definitely like to taste it.

0:36:17.7

**BH:** Come on, why don't you taste this? [She gives me the plate of hot tamales she just took out of the warmer.]

0:36:18.8

**AE:** Well now tell me, though, what you thought when [Mister] Hicks told you that he was a hot tamale maker and you married him?

0:36:27.3

**BH:** Well, he wooed me thinking that he was interested in me, and when I got kind of serious about him, then he told me he was a hot tamale maker. So then he says, "Oh, I make hot tamales on the weekend." I thought I was going home with him, you know, to spend some time with him and be a girlfriend. He brought me home. I was out on the college campus, and on weekends he'd come and get me, and he'd bring me home. We spent a little time together. But we would go to

his parents' house, and we made hot tamales. And it turned out that I made them so well, then he decided to marry me. Now that's what I think about it.

0:37:07.6

**EH:** [To interviewer] You don't believe that, do you?

0:37:08.2

**BH:** [*Laughs*]

0:37:09.0

**EH:** You don't believe all that?

0:37:10.2

**BH:** [*Laughs*] That's true. I'm telling you the truth. He--he tried my hand skills out. See, I was a good cotton picker one time, so I was good with these hands, so he made sure he tried my hand-skills out. And when he found out that I could make these hot tamales, then he decided to marry me. Because between this lady [Miss Pauline White] and myself, we are the only two ladies that can make hot tamales to please him. So he got her in here, and he married me and if I--if he

hadn't married me, he'd have married her. That's right. That's what would have happened.

**[Laughs]**

0:37:48.3

**EH:** Do you believe this? Say that again?

0:37:51.4

**BH:** **[Laughs]** I'm telling you--he—[to Pauline White, now] you and I are the only two ladies that can make--just make hot tamales to please them.

0:37:58.4

**EH:** [To Mrs. Hicks] Okay, now tell the truth. Now we got--

0:37:59.8

**BH:** And when he met me, he--he tried my hand skills out and saw that I could make the hot tamales quite well. That's when he decided to marry me. So then--

0:38:08.9

**EH:** Well tell--we got three more ladies that can do it, too.

0:38:11.0

**BH:** But we the only ones who stuck--we can put up with them. So I was--he married me when he found out that I could make them. So if he hadn't married me, he would have married her 'cause she--she--she can make hot tamales to suit him. Now that's the bottom line. **[Laughs]**

0:38:25.4

**AE:** And what is it that it takes to suit him when you are making them?

0:38:27.4

**BH:** Well you just got to do them right. Like I say, everybody can't do that the way I was doing them in there and rolling them in there. They just don't do it right, you know--they don't do it well and--and it doesn't look good, and they don't have any speed. Now she can beat me [talking about Pauline White]. Maybe it's the age difference. She can beat me. She can--she can go on and get them done. And--and I'm pretty fast, but she--she does them very well, and she will come out of here [from the main kitchen] and help me [in the tamale room]. Sometimes we'll bring them up here [in the main kitchen] and we'll do them, but she does them quite well and she's been with us about, oh, ten years.

0:39:00.5

**AE:** What's her name?

0:39:01.7

**BH:** Pauline White. And she just came right in and just fitted right in, and she's been with us a long time. And she can just run circles around me making them. I try to hang with her, but when I do anything, she's gone.

0:39:16.2

**AE:** What do you think it is, Mrs. Hicks, about popularity of hot tamales, especially here in the Delta? Can you explain that at all?

0:39:22.3

**BH:** I--you know, you can go far and near, basically food is food anywhere you go. You're going to basically find the same food. It may have a little twist to it, a little different way of preparing it, but from my experience, I--you know, you can only just go so far. You just basically finding the same food. But the one food you don't find plentifully is the hot tamale. And I think that's what is so alluring. It's--it's different. It kind of has its own uniqueness, even though you have many--quite a few out there making them. But even with that few, it's not a

wide big open field and--and everybody doing it. You know, you go down this highway here [Highway 61], everybody has a hamburger, everybody has a hamburger, but everybody doesn't have a hot tamale. So it's still different. And I think that's what people are looking for; they're looking for something different, and they have found that in--in hot tamales. It's a different food. It has the same basic ingredient, but it's prepared differently and it's different, you know. And everybody can't do it, you know. They try and I don't know if you've been around tasting them, but I'm pretty partial toward mine. And you can go and taste theirs and taste theirs, but some of them--yuck. Maybe that's the way it is with the hamburger but you know, you can go home and make your own hamburger. But you're not going to hardly go home and make this. You can make something similar, but it's not something you want to do 'cause it's not easy to make. So I think it's just different. It's kind of unique. And I think it's going to take a while before everybody is making hot tamale. You got quite a few out there that's making them. Like I say, it's still a new art and it's--it's not easy, and so I'm hoping we'll be around for a while and--and the competition won't be so great. 'Cause right about now, I don't think we have competition. I have folks who are imitating but not duplicating.

0:41:45.5

**EH:** Yeah.

0:41:47.1

**BH:** [*Laughs*] So that's my theory.

0:41:48.9

**AE:** Well, I know there are a lot of people that hope that y'all will be around for a long time, that's for sure.

0:41:52.0

**BH:** I--I sure hope so. We--we've worked at it hard enough. It's--it's not an easy job, but we enjoy it, and it makes us proud when people come by and--and they appreciate it. And even for our local customers and our local community, they don't know the hot tamale yet. They hear about it, but I think when someone really seriously says, "I want something different," they can appreciate it. A lot of folk right here [in Clarksdale], I guess they still have never tasted a hot tamale. And you know, when something is new and different, you're not--sometimes you don't just rush into it. You're used to the same old, same old. You go and buy your chicken, you go and buy your--your hamburger and your steak and whatever. That's the traditional--what I'm trying to say--meal that you make out of chicken--whatever--whatever. But to take that beef and take that ground beef and ground meat and make it into a hot tamale? No, not a lot of folk doing that and--and a lot of folk--hot tamale is still new to a lot of people. Some people still, don't you know, that have tried it, they don't like it or they say it's too hot, but I don't--I don't find it to be that hot.

0:43:10.2

**AE:** It's flavored.

0:43:11.1

**BH:** Yeah.

0:43:12.4

**AE:** That's all that is. Well let me ask you this, too, because hot tamales--historically, the way people recognize them is as a Latin American foodway and I--primarily in the Delta, the African American--the African American community has held onto the tamale tradition. Do you have an opinion about that, or how it stuck in the community in the Delta?

0:43:30.8

**BH:** No, I--I don't. You say it's a Latin American--the Mexican. I've heard folks say that, and they think of it as being a--a Mexican dinner--food, but then again, maybe it is. I--I don't know. But I--you know some folk, they associate it with chili, and now maybe it's just a chili that has been put into a--a shuck or a pastry and--and kind of modernized it or something. Because some of the--some of the Mexicans that I've talked to, they even make it different--differently than we do. I understand they boil the meat. They boil the meat. Hicks doesn't boil his meat. He takes it and [will] kind of stir-fry it 'til all the water and the grease, you know, the oil is gone. He doesn't

boil it. And I've heard some folks say they boil it. So I don't know. It's something I would like to find out more about and--and how Hicks came to make it, he tells me how he came to make it, but I don't know how that guy started to make it, you know. And he's making it like this old guy that--that taught him some years ago. Now where that old--old guy got the idea, I don't know. But like I say, I always heard of cats and dogs. **[Laughs]** I'm glad it's not cats and dogs. **[Laughs]** I--I wouldn't have stuck with him. **[Laughs]** But it's--I think it's a new--it's still a new kind of food as far as how it's done. But you can't really associate it with chili. Did--did you see us in this *Chile Magazine*? [*Chile Pepper Magazine*. There's a feature on hot tamales in the Delta, and they are profiled.]

0:45:20.3

**AE:** I did, yes.

0:45:21.8

**BH:** Did he show you that?

0:45:22.6

**AE:** Uh-hmm, I've seen that.

0:45:24.3

**BH:** And I think--I think that's what it is. It's like a chili maybe that's been put into a--a crust and wrapped up in the husk to kind of make it what it is. But it--it's basically chili. I think it is.

0:45:38.7

**AE:** Well thanks for talking to me. I appreciate it.

0:45:41.5

**BH:** Okay, well good luck. Good luck.

0:45:44.7

**[End Eugene and Betty Hicks]**