

JOHN WILLIAMS, JR.
Owner, John's Homestyle Hot Tamales
Cleveland, MS

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Date: June 23, 2005
Location: John's Homestyle Hot Tamales - Cleveland, MS
Interviewer: Amy Evans
Length: 25 minutes, 31 seconds
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: John's daughter, Yolanda, can be heard working in the background from time to time, and fans and the window air conditioning unit can be heard running in the background (June in the Mississippi Delta is HOT). When the occurring sounds are an obvious interruption to the interview, they are noted in the transcript.

[Begin John Williams.mp3]

0:00:00.0

Amy Evans: This is Amy Evans on Thursday, June twenty-third, 2005 in Cleveland, Mississippi at John's Homestyle Hot Tamales. And if you wouldn't mind introducing yourself for the recorder?

0:00:21.0

John Williams: I—oh, yeah, I'm John Williams, Junior, the owner of John's Homestyle Hot Tamales here in Cleveland, Mississippi.

0:00:27.4

AE: May I ask your birth date, so we know what generation--?

0:00:30.2

JW: I was born the tenth month, second day of 1948. That makes me fifty-six years old. If I'm blessed to be alive on October second of this year, I'll be fifty-seven.

0:00:46.7

AE: Okay, and are you from Cleveland originally? Or this area?

0:00:49.7

JW: I'm originally from this area. I'm originally from Beulah, Mississippi, over by the riverside over there [just south of Rosedale, Mississippi], and--but I've lived here [in Cleveland, Mississippi] for the past thirty-five years.

0:01:04.6

AE: What brought you here?

0:01:04.6

JW: Beg your pardon?

0:01:06.3

AE: What brought you to Cleveland?

0:01:09.3

JW: I think, if I remember correctly, it was--it had to do with job--work. At that time we had an automobile factory, you know D&L--a lot of people know about D&L. We made all units for cars. You know, the chrome, window openers, you know.

0:01:26.7

AE: Did you work with Robert Stewart because he worked--he used to work down there?

0:01:27.9

JW: We worked together.

0:01:29.9

AE: Okay, okay.

0:01:31.5

JW: So yeah, he and I both was--both the foreman one time and then we got--got into quality.

As a matter of fact I was a Quality Control Technician for fifteen years.

0:01:45.6

AE: Okay.

0:01:45.1

JW: At D&L.

0:01:47.5

AE: Okay. And then they closed down, right?

0:01:49.9

JW: Yeah. Yeah, they closed down. The trend to want less chrome on cars--there wasn't anything for them to do.

0:02:00.4

AE: And to plastic, huh? [*Laughs*]

0:02:00.7

JW: Yeah, uh-hmm.

0:02:01.9

AE: And so when did you open this place?

0:02:05.2

JW: I opened this place here in [nineteen] ninety-nine, so I've been here about six years.

0:02:11.9

AE: Was there anything here before you were in this place, or did you build this place?

0:02:16.9

JW: It was another guy that had a fast-food restaurant here. What was it--what was the name of that place that was here before--yeah, Be Good Fish and Wings, yeah.

0:02:31.4

AE: Okay. Did he have hot tamales?

0:02:32.8

JW: No, no.

0:02:34.0

AE: So how did you get your recipe? Where did you learn to make them?

0:02:36.7

JW: I figured it out--I figured my--my recipe out myself. Matter of fact, Robert Stewart and I, we worked together at the time that I figured it out. So we--we worked together on figuring it out ourselves. So we--this is my original hot tamale formula.

0:02:59.1

AE: And so y'all were developing recipes together at the same time?

0:03:02.1

JW: Yeah, we--we--well actually, I was the one doing all the figuring out. But since that time, that's been--well 'cause I'm constantly improving it, you know. It was a guy that lived at Rosedale [Mississippi], Joe's Hot Tamales, and that was my cousin [Joe Pope, who is deceased, but his business is still open and being operated by his sister Barbara].

0:03:38.7

AE: Really?

0:03:39.2

JW: Yeah, he had--he had done that for over forty-some years, I know.

0:03:42.9

AE: Yeah, and he just passed last fall.

0:03:44.1

JW: Right, uh-hmm.

0:03:46.6

AE: And he actually is kind of what sparked this [Tamale Trail] project is that when he passed, you know, we realized that this is a--a big tradition and, you know, the next generation may not keep that up.

0:03:55.3

JW: Right, uh-huh.

0:03:56.5

AE: And so we really wanted to look at tamales in the Delta. So did he teach you anything about his style as well?

0:04:01.4

JW: No, no, he didn't. Like I said, I figured out how to make them up myself, you know--just from smell and taste.

0:04:09.7

AE: Did you come up eating a lot of his tamales?

0:04:12.4

JW: Oh, yeah. I grew up eating his hot--eating tamales, yeah. Yeah, I've always--hot tamales have always been a favorite of mine, anyway.

0:04:20.3

AE: Do you have any idea where he got his recipe from?

0:04:22.6

JW: I have no idea. I have no idea where he get--where he--where he got his recipe from. But I do know that I figured mine out myself one Sunday afternoon, and it didn't take me very long. It didn't take me any--it didn't take me very long to figure it out. But like I say, it's been greatly improved on since then.

0:04:46.4

AE: Yeah?

0:04:47.0

JW: Uh-huh.

0:04:46.8

AE: How so? With hotness or spice or flavor or what?

0:04:49.8

JW: No, just the flavor. As a matter of fact, I found out that I'm pretty good at--at other kinds of cooking, too. I didn't realize I had that talent. But you know with some of the flavoring, I'm--I'm pretty good at it.

0:05:05.1

AE: Yeah? Well what made you want to get into the tamale business?

0:05:08.9

JW: It--it started out like just something like just a little hobby at first. You know, because I was--when I first started making them I--I was also working at D&L you know. So it got to be for me making some extra income. But--but when--when D&L went out of business, then things got kind of serious since--I enjoyed doing it anyway, so--

0:05:35.7

AE: Yeah? So you do it full-time and it's been your business since--?

0:05:37.6

JW: Yeah, I do it full-time.

0:05:40.2

AE: Do you have a lot of regular customers that come and get like twenty dozen for a weekend or--?

0:05:45.8

JW: Yeah, a lot of times, you know, you have Saturday outings or whatever, you--you have individuals come in and--because they're having a party or something, you know.

0:05:59.7

AE: And what kind of meat do you use in your tamales?

0:06:02.7

JW: I use ground beef.

0:06:04.4

AE: Beef, okay--and do you have--I know everybody has a different process and a different style of cooking it. I've heard some people just spice the water, some people spice the water and the meal and the meat. Do you have a way you like to do it?

0:06:17.5

JW: Yeah, well--well one thing about my hot tamales, there's flavor throughout. It starts with the shuck. All right, the way it's done is, you know, I spice my meat up and everything first and--and the dough, you know, is all spiced up first. And then when I get ready to cook it, the juice that I use to cook my meat and stuff with, see it's already spiced up. I use that to--to cook the hot tamales. See, the meat is already cooked but the--the dough is not. You have to cook it after you put it in--after you wrap it. So--so everything is spiced then. If I don't have any juice left over from my cooking of the meat--if I don't have enough juice left over, see, I can make--I make it up--the spice and the water and whatever, you know.

0:07:13.4

AE: Okay. Do you have a way that you like the tamales to look--like a certain length or width or--?

0:07:21.3

JW: Yeah, just maybe about two inches—two-and-a-half inches long. Maybe about a little better than a quarter-inch in diameter, something like that.

0:07:32.0

AE: Uh-hmm. Now are these folks here that are working hard, are they related to you? They look like they kind of favor you.

0:07:36.1

JW: It's my son and daughter. *[Laughs]*

0:07:37.4

AE: Okay. *[Laughs]* So you got them in the business, huh?

0:07:41.8

JW: Yeah.

0:07:44.4

AE: Yeah.

0:07:45.0

JW: They're my son and daughter.

0:07:48.8

AE: Do you make tamales every day?

0:07:51.2

JW: Yeah, every day--yeah.

0:07:52.3

AE: Yeah? How many do you think you make in a day?

0:07:54.8

JW: Well, I'll put it this way: we--we can run--we can run thirty-five to forty dozen an hour--per hour, you know, just manually because I don't have a machine [extruder].

0:08:06.7

AE: Right.

0:08:07.2

JW: The only thing I wouldn't be able to do much better than that, even if I had a machine—the reason--one of the reasons why we--we're able to do about thirty-five to forty dozen per hour is because of my experience in manufacturing. See, I was a foreman for about five years at D&L also, and we had these production lines. I--I gained a lot of experience from--because I understood the entire production process.

0:08:36.4

AE: Yeah, so you know how to--?

0:08:37.4

JW: I was there for twenty-three years. Yeah, so a lot of that knowledge--I use a lot of that knowledge in doing what I'm doing here.

0:08:45.6

AE: Yeah, so a little assembly line, huh?

0:08:47.3

JW: Yeah.

0:08:47.6

AE: And so you found out you're a good cook, though. So what else--

0:08:50.8

JW: Yeah.

0:08:51.1

AE: --what else do y'all serve here besides hot tamale?

0:08:54.4

JW: Well we sell--I got my own little fish batter mix I make. We sell catfish fillets, you know--
farm-raised catfish fillets. We sell what--have you heard of a polish--a polish?

0:09:07.1

AE: A polish sausage?

0:09:08.0

JW: Yeah, about that long [holds his hands up and apart about ten inches].

0:09:11.3

AE: Okay.

0:09:13.3

JW: We sell hog maws. That's pork stomach, a delicacy among black people. **[Laughs]** Not too many white people like them.

0:09:23.8

AE: Yeah, I've had them before. You've got to develop a taste for them. **[Laughs]**

0:09:27.3

JW: Uh-huh. [*Laughs*] But anyway, we sell hog maws—hog maws, hot tamales--hot tamales, fish, and that's about it.

0:09:46.1

AE: And being down here closer to downtown, do you have--what kind of customer base do you have?

0:09:50.0

JW: I would say that I have about the same ratio of black and white. It's a real--it's a real good location.

0:10:02.3

AE: Yeah.

0:10:04.3

JW: But I imagine where Stewart is located at [Stewart's Quick Mart, just south of town], he primarily deals with black people because don't too many white people go down in that [neighborhood] down there.

0:10:13.3

AE: More of a neighborhood place?

0:10:13.1

JW: Right, uh-huh. It's kind of rough down there. The last time I got down there, because I worked down there with--because we worked in the projects there, Stewart and I--but it was rough down there. I didn't like it down there at all. So we finally went our separate ways, me and Stewart. But--but anyway it's something I enjoy doing. And so far it's done--it's done pretty good.

0:10:48.9

AE: Well, do you have any ideas about the history of hot tamales in the Delta and how the--the black community has held onto the tradition of making them?

0:10:56.6

JW: The only thing I know is I know--I remember--and this--this is how I kind of like how I discovered the flavor for--for this hot tamale [I make] here. I remember--I couldn't have been more than about five [years old]. I wasn't--I wasn't that old; I was about four years old. I can

remember back a long time. You know Pace, Mississippi [halfway between Cleveland and Rosedale, Mississippi]?

0:11:21.2

AE: Yeah.

0:11:22.6

JW: Okay, there was a black guy on the streets, you know. And it was a custom back in those days, most black people would go to town on Saturday afternoon because they worked all week long in the fields. But anyway, this--this black dude, he had a little old cart that he pushed around and on the speaker you'd hear him, "Hot Tamale." And I remember my mother buying some of them, and she would pick off a little piece and give it to us, you know. But she didn't have but three kids at the time. But anyway, that taste--that hot tamale tasted so good. I--I had never tasted anything that tasted that--that well you know. I just can remember that. And then making this hot tamale, I kind of ushered up those memories, you know. I--I think that's--that's kind of helped me in--in making the hot tamales that I make. I don't know too much other than that about--I know--and they--before I came, see I moved to Cleveland thirty-five years ago in 1970; that's--that's the year I got married. I got married in [nineteen] seventy. I left Beulah in [nineteen] seventy and--but prior to my coming over here--the black dudes that sell hot tamales over here, too, you know the people telled me--told me about it, you know. You'd go around town with your girlfriend, but--but now just like the hot tamales that--that most black people make, they have a different--it

has a different taste to it than a traditional-Mexican hot tamale. It has its own little personality. I don't know--I don't--I don't know when--I don't know when this thing all started, you know, from black people making hot tamales. But it--it's been around a long time. It's been around a long, long time. But I--the history, the only thing I know is for the past forty or fifty years almost I've eaten them. *[Laughs]* I like them myself, too.

0:13:42.3

AE: Yeah, they're good. It's good eating.

0:13:42.8

JW: I kind of have to resist them because I'm a little overweight now.

0:13:48.3

AE: Now your recipe that you finally developed and are still improving is--is that something that you've written down or something that you just have in your head?

0:13:53.8

JW: Well, I got some of it written down.

0:13:56.8

AE: Yeah?

0:13:57.2

JW: Uh-huh.

0:13:57.2

AE: And do your kids here--do they know how to make them?

0:14:00.0

JW: Uh-huh.

0:14:01.0

AE: According to your recipe? Yeah?

0:14:01.9

JW: They know how to make them.

0:14:02.9

AE: So it will stay in the family for a while longer?

0:14:06.7

JW: Matter of fact, I'm thinking about taking it to another level, you know. I'm probably going-- you know, have me something like a little factory built and then take it, you know--take it nationwide and even maybe--maybe not, you know. It will just be a step up from where I'm at now. There's certain other criteria you have to meet in order to qualify under the USDA standards. I've talked with people that work with them and they--I've gathered all the information I need, should I decide to do that. I probably will.

0:14:53.5

AE: Yeah? Hit the big time, huh?

0:14:53.9

JW: Yeah.

0:14:56.8

AE: [*Laughs*] Well can you describe what you look for in a tamale that you think makes a good tamale? Or about your own that--because some people have talked to me about the way a tamale looks. If it's real red, then you know it's got good spice in it before you even un-wrap it--

0:15:15.6

JW: No, I--I think about the only way you could tell--about the only way I could tell would just be by the flavor inside. I would have to sample it. A well-balanced flavor, where you don't have one ingredient overriding another one. Where you have that balance and same—that your taste buds tell you it's just right, type of deal. Because see, if we just go by coloration then maybe you used a dark chili powder, which doesn't add too much to the flavor, you know. Maybe it got--you have various kinds--various kinds of chili powder. Chili powder is one of the main ingredients that you use in making them. Of course, you got the onion and garlic and stuff like that. Once you figure out how to balance out where you don't have one that's more--you know, more--you can't taste nothing but one of the ingredients, then I don't think--I try to keep mine balanced out and then try to have the entire—the meat as well as the dough—see, along with the shuck. You see, then once you get to cooking--

0:16:45.6

AE: Well are there any other places in the Delta that you know of that you like to--to eat their tamales or have been around?

0:16:55.7

JW: Well, about the only one that I really enjoy is when my cousin up in Rosedale [Joe Pope, at Joe's White Front] was making them. I like--I liked his flavor. It--it was very unique type flavor. And a lot of other people loved them, too.

0:17:09.2

AE: Oh, yeah. That place is really well known.

0:17:10.0

JW: He had people come from all over just to get his hot tamales. There's a guy--black guy in--in Clarksdale [Mississippi], Hicks [Eugene Hicks of Hicks' World Famous Hot Tamales & More].

0:17:19.6

AE: Yeah, I know them.

0:17:19.9

JW: I've--I've never tried any of his hot tamales, but they say he makes pretty--pretty good-tasting hot tamales, too. But everybody that's carrying the name hot tamales they ain't necessarily--. You know everything they call a hot tamale is really not one.

0:17:44.7

AE: How do you mean?

0:17:45.8

JW: Some of them doesn't have the flavor or the kick to it.

0:17:54.5

AE: So to you a hot tamale needs to be a spicy tamale?

0:17:58.5

JW: It needs to be—yeah. See because of the fact that you're saying *hot* tamale, it needs a kick to it.

0:18:05.9

AE: You know that Robert Johnson song “They’re Red Hot”?

0:18:08.9

JW: Huh?

0:18:09.8

AE: That Robert Johnson song called “They’re Red Hot,” about hot tamales?

0:18:13.3

JW: No, I don't know about it.

0:18:11.9

AE: No? It's a blues song that a lot of people talk about when they're talking about hot tamales.

0:18:17.6

JW: Okay, well I--that's the first I hear of that.

0:18:21.1

AE: Yeah? Do you have many tourists coming through or coming down looking for--?

0:18:24.8

JW: Well, I've had people to come by and see--and see the sign out front, and they'll stop and want to take photos or whatever.

0:18:31.6

AE: Yeah.

0:18:32.5

JW: Yeah. Uh-huh, and that happens quite often.

0:18:37.1

AE: Yeah? Did you make the signs that are out there, or did you hire someone to make them?

0:18:38.7

JW: I had someone to do that.

0:18:41.2

AE: Yeah.

0:18:43.4

JW: But I was thinking about--I was thinking about, you know, working sales [in] about--about a 200-mile radius area where I would have my own tamale stands and--and I'm thinking about you know a hot tamale stand would have--it would be designed a special way, you know. And then I'd be the one supplying my own self. I'm thinking about doing that instead of--because the other way is--you come under USDA, and then start people putting them in the store nationwide, international. There's no limit to it. But I figure that--I figure the people make pretty good money that's doing it a little different ways. Nothing is complicated; nobody pressures or anything. You simply are supplying yourself. And you're allowed by law to have as many as you want--could be in a 1,000 places if you want. I'm thinking about doing that.

0:20:03.6

AE: Would you call your hot tamales John's Hot Tamales?

0:20:05.6

JW: John's Homestyle Hot Tamales. Good to the last bite! I'm thinking about putting me some billboards out on the highway up there on [Highway] 61, north of town and south of town. Ain't too much happening east and west. But north and south, you got a lot of people just touring and going through.

0:20:32.0

AE: Do you advertise at all right now?

0:20:34.3

JW: Just--just a little right now. It's mostly word of mouth, and a lot of people around here, they already--they already know where to come.

0:20:41.4

AE: Well that's best kind of advertising, they say.

0:20:44.3

JW: Uh-hmm. So, you know, like when it's hot like it is now, sales are down--not very much, though. You know, they usually start coming in later on this afternoon and try buying them. But I enjoy the work.

0:21:10.7

AE: Yeah. Are you open seven days a week--six days a week?

0:21:15.2

JW: Well, we work Monday through Saturday.

0:21:19.7

AE: Yeah, okay.

0:21:19.0

JW: Six days.

0:21:21.5

AE: Yeah; and what are your hours then?

0:21:21.2

JW: Open about eleven-thirty in the morning 'til about eight-thirty to nine o'clock in the afternoon.

0:21:28.6

AE: Okay.

0:21:29.1

JW: Yeah, I try to get open in the morning when everybody else closes up.

0:21:34.0

AE: Do you have later hours on the weekends ever?

0:21:36.7

JW: No, no. Well from Monday through Thursday it's like from eleven-thirty in the morning 'til about eight-thirty in the afternoon. But on Friday and Saturday come in at the same time in the morning time, which was eleven-thirty and work 'til about nine or nine-thirty in the afternoon, because by that time everything else will be closed up. We don't want to be sitting ducks on this corner.

0:22:06.1

AE: Yeah.

0:22:07.0

JW: Right. So we--we close--that's one reason why I close up kind of early. If I was on--maybe up on the front of the highway up there, I'd probably stay open a little bit longer. But see, I'm isolated, so anybody coming through, you know, put a gun or--. [*Laughs*]

0:22:25.3

AE: [*Laughs*]

0:22:25.2

JW: Yeah. That's why a lady got killed right over here, right down from the police department.

0:22:31.5

AE: Really?

0:22:30.4

JW: Uh-huh, a few years ago. It was just something like this little--what they call this thing-- this pass-cash type thing, kind of a loan type deal. But it was right down from the police station. I don't think they never found that individual. But anyway, I'm planning on taking it a little bit further than where it is now.

0:23:04.8

AE: Are you married?

0:23:06.0

JW: Been married thirty-five years.

0:23:08.6

AE: Yeah? Does your wife have any interest in making hot tamales or no?

0:23:13.2

JW: No. [*Short laugh*]

0:23:15.7

AE: [*Laughs*]

0:23:17.0

JW: She comes here sometimes and helps out, but--like I said my daughter there, she's thirty-three. My son is thirty-two.

0:23:28.0

AE: What are their names?

0:23:27.7

JW: Yolanda, there.

0:23:29.4

AE: Yolanda, nice name.

0:23:29.5

JW: And--and his name is John, the same as mine.

0:23:32.6

AE: John, okay.

0:23:34.5

JW: But he's not a junior; I didn't want him to be a junior--John William, III because my father was John William, Sr.

0:23:49.5

AE: Well do you have any final thoughts about hot tamales in the Mississippi Delta?

0:23:55.4

JW: Well the only thing I can say is the business is great to me for as long as I can remember and--and hopefully we'll continue. I know I enjoy making them, you know. I--and I think--I think it's because of that tradition, one of the reasons why I ended up making them. Like I say I remember my--my cousin, Joe Pope, over in Rosedale, see, he used to make them--I mean he made them from--back when I was in high school we were making them. And I'm fifty-seven [years old] and I just love--I--I like eating them. I--until I moved over here, I used to drive over

there to get them. So I--I believe one of the reasons for me making them was for convenience for myself. I enjoyed eating them, too.

0:24:54.0

AE: [*Laughs*]

0:24:57.0

JW: I don't think it was all about monetary. [*Laughs*]

0:24:58.6

AE: All right. Well you should enjoy what you do.

0:25:03.9

JW: Yeah.

0:25:05.9

AE: Well I hope you have some sitting around here that I might be able to get from you, so I can taste what we're talking about.

0:25:09.8

JW: Beg your pardon?

0:25:11.5

AE: I'd like to get some from you, so I can taste one.

0:25:13.8

JW: Oh, I'll give you a sample of them.

0:25:15.7

AE: All right, great.

0:25:15.5

JW: Yolanda, get one of these tall bowls here and give her a bundle of them and let her sample them.

0:25:23.2

AE: Thank you--thank you for the interview; I appreciate it.

0:25:26.5

JW: Yeah, well thank you.

0:25:31.0

[End John Williams]