

Jodie Avair and Jay Thornhill at Dupuy's Restaurant

Interviewer: Carl Brasseaux

Brasseaux: Well, here we are at Dupuy's Restaurant in Abbeville, Louisiana. It is May 14th and I'm gonna let my informants introduce themselves but first, before we do, I just wanna get on the recording here that it's okay for me to interview you about the history of Dupuy's Restaurant and it's involvement in the oyster industry and that we have your blessing to make this available to researchers both at LSU and at the University in Lafayette and if at any time you want me to stop, or you know, you need to turn attention to something else, just tell me, we'll stop, and we'll pick it up again at your convenience. So, any rate if I can get you to start off, give me your name and your date of birth and your association with the restaurant.

A: Okay, my name's Jodie Avair, I was born 11/06/72 in Abbeville, Louisiana and I'm also the owner of Dupuy's Oyster Shop.

B: Okay now, Jay, do you wanna—?

T: My name's Jay Thornhill, I'm the manager, I've been here almost four years. I was born in September 30, 1973, I was born actually in California, my dad's from Winnsboro, Louisiana, which is a little bit lower than Monroe there, and I've been in Lafayette now for about ten years and...that's it.

B: Okay! Now, the restaurant has been around since 1869, is that correct?

A: That is correct. It started off by Roland—I'm sorry, Joseph Dupuy—back in 1869, which was handed over from generations to family—generations of family.

B: Well, it's interesting that he went into the restaurant business because it wasn't, you know, their—according to the Abbeville Paper and the papers that we have, apparently people from here had been going down on the coast to get seafood periodically, but the fact that you don't see much information before the civil war about people actually bringing it up, you know for consumption, at least not in this area, I know in Bayou Lafourche they did, what made him decide to open a restaurant? Do you know?

A: Really, I'm really not sure of that history of it, but from what I heard, when he started out he had a boat here docked in the back, and he would take the Vermillion River, go all the way down the bays—to the natural reefs that they had back there and he would dredge it himself, put 'em on the boat, and come back up the river, you know, and then, of course, shuck 'em and sell 'em to the public here for five cents a dozen, until eventually it came up, you know, where they wanted more and more and more and they started getting into other seafood items back then—from what I was told.

T: Yeah, and this was originally—this was main street that we're on here, and the city wharf—and I don't know this, but from what I've been told by people here in town, the city wharf was about two doors down right there and because of where Abbeville was located at the time—the lack on interstates and so forth—that was—the commerce of this town was run off of the river and so being that this was located right here, it was kinda the central point of the region and so that's why the

restaurant was here and why, probably, why he was able to generate business, because everyone went to the wharf.

B: Right.

T: They didn't use the roads, they used the river, and so this was what brought all the people here, and I'm assuming that's what he chose to open up a restaurant right here.

B: And you know, unlike Lafayette, you could navigate this stretch of river year 'round.

T: Right.

B: Farther north you couldn't.

T: No.

B: It was just too shallow.

A: Shallow, right, yeah.

B: So, he began selling them from the boat along the docks

T: Yes.

B: And he eventually opened up a restaurant here. Do you have any idea what he was selling in the restaurant when he first started?

A: I just know it was like pints of oysters and stuff back in the day. It was pints, half-gallons, and stuff like that, I knew, He had told me of some brief history about it, it's been a while, trying to bring it back to memory but it's been a while because he died about two and a half years ago—two and a half to three years ago, and he used to come in and tell me all the stories—

T: This is Roland?

A: Yeah, Mr. Roland Dupuy himself, yeah.

T: Oh, okay.

A: Roland Dupuy would come in, you know, and just tell me stories of, you know, of what they would do back in the day and how things were ran and stuff like that and...But I—from what he was telling me it started off on the half shell...I mean just, I don't—

B: So it was basically and oyster bar—

A: Right, and oyster bar, pretty much, right, right.

B: Okay. Um it's interesting, I noticed there were some other places along Bayou LaFourche that were also basically seafood restaurants but they would serve gumbo—something they call "iron-side gumbo", whatever--I have no idea what that actually was but—

A: I don't know—I haven't heard anything about that.

B: Okay. When did the restaurant here begin to branch out and diversify it's menu and include—?

A: I'm sure it started—

B: Other items.

A: I'm sure it started in the '60's I think by some previous owners, I'm not quite sure of the name but I do know—well, actually, I wanna say it was—they leased it out of

the family. They leased the business out of the family to a guy by the name of—I think Jack Farris, after a while. I wanna say...I think I wanna say in the 70's.

B: Okay.

T: But they probably had things other than oysters before that. I'm assuming, I don't really know.

A: I'm not sure. That I don't know. See I don't know that area, he really hasn't talked too much—he really hasn't told me too much about that era. And it all comes—

T: I've talked to customers who said that they were eating fried oysters and stuff here, 60, 70, one guy, 80 years ago. Now, how accurate those memories are, I don't know, but I've literally talked to—When I first started here I talked to a man that was almost 90 years old that he said he was eating here since he was five, so yeah. So I don't know—now he didn't say he was eating fried oysters here he just said he had been coming here since he was five. But I think that—I don't know--but I think that they cooked oysters at least, if not other entrées started—I think, a while back. I don't know.

B: Well it makes sense because I know, comparable restaurants in New Iberia were beginning to do that, beginning to diversify, in the 1920's and 30's I guess, and I think probably part of that's a result of electricity coming in and refrigeration becoming available.

A: Right.

B: So they could store other things here besides just oysters. I'm guessing.

T: Yeah.

B: Um, well tell me a little bit about how the menu has changed under your regime here.

A: Well, we bought the place back in May of 2000, and they had—it had a full menu going already and I pretty much took what they had and—what I've learned over the years as being a chef and working at other different restaurants is putting my technique to it, you know, and the way I was trained and taught how to do and brought it to my style of cooking—my Cajun way of cooking it, you know, my style of cooking. And I've added tuna, I've added fresh fish, fresh tuna, fresh fishes, grouper, tilapia, soft-shell crabs, just a bunch of array of different other seafoods that you normally don't see on some menus. You know, that we run for specials, you know, uh [nightly] specials and uh...

T: Some of the pasta dishes—

A: Pasta dishes too, because I've worked at Italian restaurants, but I mean just try to influence some Italian and into Cajun cooking too, which went over very well, I mean, people love it. I mean, I don't get any complaints about it. But that's pretty much what we've done—imparted to more—you know, uh, some more fresh new ideas, you know, that we have today.

T: Mm hm. I've—from what I've seen, and I wasn't here—I never saw the restaurant before it was remodeled the way it is now, but from what I've seen pictures of and what I've heard Jodie and Tonya have—[as JD's word, refined], but uh prettied it up a bit I guess, it was a little more oyster shop—

A: Oysters, yeah.

T: Café—cafeteria style before and generally from what I—talking to customers and from pictures I've seen it's a little nicer now—it's still not, you know, it's not like an

elitist thing, or you know, it's not dress code or anything like that, I mean, we get plenty of [wealthy] guys in coveralls but the appearance overall, the restaurant is a lot nicer now than it was when it was and we can show you some pictures, so—

B: Okay, now you talked about the controversy about where it was located originally, has it always been on this side?

A: As far as we know, yes. As far as we know it's always been at this site. We have some pictures here—

T: Yeah we could scan these in, but uh, this is 1950's, you can see a location called Ben's Bar, which is right here and if you look outside you can see—

B: Right, yeah.

T: That this is the oyster shop, this is Dupuy's right here, this is the river—

B: So this is now the parking lot here?

A: Yes, that's the parking lot.

T: That's the parking lot now, correct, and then, even here in our—and I meant to tell you, you should probably go see this guy too—

A: Yeah, he has a lot of photos if you wanna see photos.

B: Okay. Who is this?

T: Copy Services.

A: Uh, Copy Services, yeah.

B: And that's—where is that, downtown?

A: And that's Mr. John.

T: John, this is John right here.

A: John...what's his last name? I can't remember.

T: He puts these calendars together and has been for a couple of years, and I can't find it though.

A: Which one you lookin' for?

T: Oh!

A: Ben's Bar? They have here—

T: Yeah, I did find it, this is the put together Oakley and it's just to show you some of the confusion that—

A: Yeah there was a lot of confusion—

T: Even people here—this is obviously this building. It says "The Original Site of Dupuy's" which you can see from this picture isn't the case, but...

B: Mm hm.

T: So—

B: Hence the controversy.

T: Right.

A: Right.

T: But right over here, Copy Services and afterward, finish this up, I'll tell you how to get over there. He's got a—he's been putting these calendars together for a few years—historical calendars of Abbeville—

A: Right.

T: And I think probably surrounding Vermillion Parish and so forth.

A: We might have a few more copies of one of the—

B: So great, thanks, that would be great. Because we are also putting together a photographic archive, you know, to try to document the whole coastal—
[INAUDIBLE]

T: Now I know that—and let's see, there was Roland Dupuy, and Tita Dupuys—is that the same—?

A: That was Joseph. Joseph Dupuy was nicknamed Tita.

T: The original Mr. Dupuy was Tita Dupuy?

A: Yeah, he's the one that originally started it back in 1869.

B: And how long was it in that family, do you know?

A: I'm really not sure, I don't know an exact date...but I wanna say until somewhere around the 50's or 60's. It was in—

B: So it was almost 100 years—

A: In the family.

B: It was in the family from 1869 to the 1950's?

A: Probably.

B: That long?

A: I'm guessing—

T: Maybe even a little bit longer—

A: Maybe even a little longer, because then the building—then it was leased out to different people.

T: I don't know how it could [INAUDIBLE] I'm thinking like 30 years. Like it's been out of the family for thirty years.

A: Right.

B: Well even so, that's amazing!

A: So pretty much 100 years or a little more than that

T: Right.

B: More than three generations, almost four.

A: Right. So it's pretty much, you know, from what we know, [INAUDIBLE] from here.

B: How—lemme ask you a quick question about the availability and the quality of the oysters since the [shell groping] took place.

A: Right.

B: You guys still have a lease out there?

A: No, we—one of the previous owners of Dupuys, apparently—from what I heard—let the lease go and just pretty much, I guess went back to the [state] or something like that, I don't know who took it over or anything but they—it was—

B: So you're not getting oysters directly from a site?

A: No, no, no. Not directly out of the waters from here anymore. No, this—process been changed.

T: It's also a little more difficult now a days—

A: Yeah it's much more difficult.

T: we have our hands full running this restaurant. We stay busy and we have a lot going on. With the licensing and the checking up by the Department and Fisheries and so forth to make sure the oysters are being properly cared for and properly fished and kept at the proper temperature, and so forth and so on—

B: Yeah, I see your point. You'd almost have to double you staff!

T: It's almost like a whole other business. Yeah, yeah.

A: So we choose to buy it from a wholesaler that, you know, ships to us; bring it to us.

B: Where are they coming from?

A: Pearl Reef—Pearl Reef Oyster Company. I don't know if you're familiar with them but from there—and we usually get 'em out of Area 7—I think that—

T: But you know what, it really it seems—

A: East Mississippi.

T: It seems to depend on the last couple of years--we were getting them from over here which is way west, this year we got 'em from just east of the Mississippi River.

B: Oh, okay.

T: So we're still you know, kinda—

[A & T TALKING AT ONCE]

T: we were talking about earlier...uh...

B: Right, because it's that area that used to ship them by railway—there actually was a rail line running through St. Bernhard Parish and they put 'em on the rail—the cars there could just—the quickest way to get 'em to New Orleans...

A: Right.

T: This is totally an assumption because I don't know, but I know that this year our two storms—our last year our two storms really hit pretty far west so I'm thinking that some of these beds over here didn't do so well and I'm thinking that's why they pulled from farther over here.

A: Yeah.

T: Because the storms do have—I know when Katrina came through—

A: They weren't as salty. They weren't as salty.

T: The year Katrina came through we were pulling 'em from farther over here and I think maybe from year to year to storms have a pretty big effect on the oyster beds as well and from what I've been told—and I don't know this—it takes a couple years for a bed to even begin to kinda re-establish itself after a major event like that, [or] in a hurricane.

B: Sure. Well that makes sense, you know, in areas where there's impoundment in the water stays, it usually takes at least three years for it to get back to normal.

T: So, the last few years have brought a pretty active—a lot of the activity with the hurricanes and that's affected us to some degree and price-wise it's affected us as well.

B: Um the city here, how much has it been impacted by the storms of the past years? We've been doing some work out of the countryside—you know, we see what's going on with people having to lift homes and so forth. Have you seen much of an influx of people from places—

A: Absolutely.

B: [Aunt Marie] or down in the parish?

T: Well, not from there, but even from volunteer work and construction work and people from all over the country, really, I mean we have regular [INAUDIBLE]—

A: Different organizations, yeah.

T: Have been here for a year with different organizations in the Methodist church and so forth, helping to rebuild, so it's been a real mix of—I don't know, I'm not an economist, I was told that part of the reason we're doing as well as we are right now, as a city is that because of the hurricanes people are rebuilding, and because the rebuilding is going on the construction is just staying up because people won't necessarily build a house in a slow economy, but they're gonna rebuild their house in a slow economy and the construction—I don't know any of this, this is what I heard--the construction is one of the leading factors as far as your economic development goes, so it's been kind of a blessing in disguise in some ways, as far as—economically. Because it's brought some money in, and it's brought a lot of work in, and it's brought a lot of people in, and with the people come the money and the business, so—

A: True.

T: It's been almost a positive thing in a lot of ways economically, but I can also say that emotionally it's been devastating. I mean I literally have sat with people I don't even know and watched them cry in the middle of the restaurant because they just finished rebuilding their house and it just got wiped out again and that kind of stuff. So, you know, I would say definitely both, Emotionally, it's really taken a toll on the people, and you know, it has brought a lot of work but that work can be kind of a mixed—

B: A double-edged sword.

A: Yeah.

T: Yeah, a double-edged sword, exactly.

B: Well guys, is there anything else you want to add?

T: Uh, no, I think that that's uh...

B: Okay!

T: I know that there was an article in National Geographic, I think in the '40's, about the restaurant here, and I keep looking for it and I can't get it, and if you get your hands on it, it would be awesome—

B: I'll be happy to make a copy and send it to you.

T: It said something about the best [five islands] on this side of the—in western hemisphere I think, it said or something like that...

A: I remember you saying something about that.

T: There was a quote, in the National Geographic and some other people—some older gentlemen went through, one of them had been part of that group or something and was telling me about it—

B: Well I promise you if I find it—

[ALL TALKING AT ONCE]

T: Um...yeah, that's—

B: Okay, well if it's okay with you, I'll get a scanner, make a quick scan of this, and get out of your hair, and I wanna thank you both for your time and sharing your memories and your knowledge with us.

A: Hope it helps you out!