

Chris LeClair
The Salt Lick—Driftwood, Texas

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American Studies Department
The University of Texas at Austin

Group Members:
Melanie Haupt

[BEGIN INTERVIEW]

00:00:00

Melanie Haupt: Ok, so now we're recording. Could you state your full name and date of birth for the record?

Christ LeClair: Christine LeClair. One, three, fifty-six.

MH: Okay. And I am Melanie Haupt. And—in the interest of full disclosure—I know—I worked with Chris here at the Salt Lick in 1989 and 1990. So—um—so, how long have you worked at the Salt Lick, Chris?

CL: Nineteen Years.

MH: Nineteen years. Wow.

CL: Give or take *[Laughs]*.

MH: And how has the Salt Lick changed during that time?

00:00:30

CL: Um, mostly it has just grown, really expanded a lot, done a lot more catering, a lot more offsite expanding and buildings, and serving a lot more people.

MH: Uh-huh, uh-huh. I remember when I worked here, that we just mostly did business in that one main building, and now—and now it seems like—

CL: Yea

MH: every square inch is covered [*Laughs*].

CL: Right. We've had to open—or they've had to open—another building outside pretty much to cover customers on the weekends. If it's rainy, I guess we've got to have somewhere where we can serve them, to keep from being on the two—two hour wait.

MH: Yeah. Does that help? **Does it help [*indiscernible*].**

CL: It helps a lot, and Customers are a lot happier when they don't have to wait two hours.

00:01:17

MH: Right, right.

CL: Especially the newbies [*Laughter*].

MH: Right. Um—one thing that I remember from—from my time at the Salt Lick was the uniforms—when we had to wear those chambray shirts and the—either jeans or denim skirts and the bandanas around our necks. Can you talk to me a little bit about what your favorite uniform has been, and why, and how they've changed over the years?

CL: Probably just wearing—the uniform I liked the most I guess was just wearing one of the Salt Lick t-shirts. They were cooler than the collared chambray shirts and the blue jeans or the blue jean skirt, which we could wear for while—and we can't—we don't do those anymore. It's either long blue jeans in the winter or kahki shorts in the summer and then a salt lick t-shirt for the waiters. So—

MH: And why can't you wear skirts anymore?

CL: They've just decided—no [*Laughter*].

MH: Well there's definitely a lot of potential for disaster [*Laughter*]—

CL: Yea, that's true.

MH: With skirts on a lot of levels. [Laughter]

CL: Yea that's true.

MH: I would imagine [*Laughs*].

CL: Keep it pretty consistent—everybody looking a lot more of the same—alike.

MH: Well and you know, you can just get your—you don't have to keep buying new, new—

CL: Right.

MH: Button down collared shirts. You can just get a new Salt Lick shirt.

CL: Yes.

MH: Okay. So, we were talking about the uniforms, and they are a lot more comfortable now and I also noted the buildings are all air-conditioned now. And how has that, kind of—changed the way you work? Is that—?

00:03:07

CL: It's definitely made it a lot cooler. I think we get a lot more customers during the summer—because there is some. I mean the main restaurant still has the open-air atmosphere even though there is air-conditioning blowing. So, it can still be hot at times, especially if it gets crowded—or during the day—but most of the people expect it.

MH: And does the business still die off a lot during the winter?

CL: Not really—no—it keeps—it keeps going. I mean it will be busy weekends like anywhere else—from mother's day, father's day, graduation weekends.

MH: So, I remember they laid a whole bunch of us off in the winter—back then. And—you know—were on the scale lifting for just a few days a week.

CL: Yeah, the catering does a lot more business—they do, you know, parties—or we do a lot of Christmas reservations—and stuff. So that picks up more in the fall.

MH: Right, right. I remembered what I was going to ask earlier, which was—do you guys have to wear nametags?

CL: We do wear nametags.

MH: You do wear nametags? And, um, does anybody ever—how do you feel about wearing nametags?

00:04:20

CL: Um—I think it's good because a lot of people can't—you don't either hear you say your name if you announce it or a lot of people don't tell it—tell you what their name is. So, I think the customers like it a lot more.

MH: Because if they have an issue you can—they can say, “Hey can you get Chris for me,” or—

CL: Right, Right. Or if they want something they can yell at us to get our attention, and say, “Bring me more bread,” or whatever—or brisket [*Laughs*].

MH: Hold up the feed bucket [*Laughter*].

CL: Yeah.

MH: Right. So tell me about—you said you were getting a lot more customers. How has the— how has has the clientele changed, if at all, as the Salt Lick has grown over the years?

CL: I don't think the clientele has changed that much. We're getting more people from out of state, out of country—than we have ever had, but—I mean—we're getting more clients—or customers—all around. So, to me, it's natural to get more from out of state and out of the country. But, we do get a lot of visitors, and we get a lot of repeat business too. So—

MH: Well, I'm living proof that you guys get a lot of repeat business [*Laughs*]. Well, and I guess I wonder, when you have people coming in from different states, different regions, different countries, do you notice difference in the way that you're treated as a member of the service industry—as a female member of the service industry? Do you—

00:05:43

CL: No, uh-uh. I think they—you know—they're glad to be here, glad for some good barbecue, looking forward to some good barbecue. We might have a little bit of a problem because they don't realize you have to bring your own alcohol.

MH: Uh-huh.

CL: *[Laughs]* Since it's B.Y.O.B, any alcohol you want, you have to bring. But that's usually—the most that first time customers' aggravation is no alcohol.

MH: No alcohol, right, right. Now—what other jobs have you worked? What job did you work before you worked for the Salt Lick?

CL: I worked for an insurance company, underwriting car insurance.

MH: Really? So, what made you come to the Salt Lick?

CL: I moved and was looking for something close to home—and this was just where I came to *[Laughs]*.

00:06:29

MH: And apparently you didn't go back to the insurance industry. So, you—

CL: Yea, I enjoy it, it's nice—better hours, flexible hours, evening hours like I like.

MH: And are the tips still really, really good? The way I *[Laughs]*—

CL: Yeah, yeah. The tips—the tips are good. Money is coming in, and it keeps me going.

MH: I know it's tough to talk about money in this culture. So, it's always an uncomfortable question to ask—but have you ever missed a day of work—for any reason?

00:07:02

CL: I have missed a few. I have had a couple of surgeries. I have also been sick a time or two, but not very much. I don't take off much time. So—

MH: Yeah, and if you—do you have to make that up or do you get regular sick days? I mean—is it like a regular job where you have sick days and have time off?

CL: There is no sick days. So, if you don't pay—if you don't work, you don't get paid.

MH: Well, yeah, that sounds about right.

CL: You try to schedule your time off, but it doesn't always work.

MH: Um, so, what is your favorite dish here at the Salt Lick? What is your favorite food here?

CL: The pork ribs.

MH: Yeah.

CL: The pork ribs. Then down to the brisket, then probably the turkey.

00:07:47

MH: Why do you like the pork ribs so much?

CL: I just like the flavor of them. They are usually well done, which I like meat well done—and it has the sauce on both sides.

MH: Do you ever have the—I don't usually get the ribs. I usually get the chicken.

CL: Really?

MH: I guess I'm kind of—I guess I'm kind of a weenie about—

CL: See, I wasn't brought up much on chicken—growing up. So, chicken and turkey—it was—

MH: Where are you from?

CL: Well, basically central Texas, but **daddy** was military, so *[Laughs]*. We traveled a little bit, but daddy—daddy didn't really like chicken, so mother didn't cook it.

MH: What branch—of the military?

CL: Air Force.

MH: Air Force. You didn't have to go abroad ever?

00:08:34

CL: We did. We lived in Korea for a year and a half and England for three years.

MH: Wow. And you have sons right?

CL: I have a son and a daughter.

MH: A son and a daughter. And they're grown now?

CL: They are.

MH: And you have grandkids?

CL: Well, not by them—but my stepkids—I have a stepdaughter and a stepson, and between them there's five grandkids.

00:08:57

MH: Wow. And do they come out here and visit you here at the Salt Lick?

CL: Eh, yeah, sometimes.

MH: Are they able to kind of reconcile the fact that you're at work and you can't, you know, bestow you grandmotherly—

CL: Oh yea.

MH: Appreciation upon them *[Laughs]*?

CL: No—the grandkids—no. They want me to pick them up and carry them *[Laughter]*—let's go—the youngest ones do. But yeah, no.

MH: And do you? I mean do you—

CL: If we're slow—if it's slow and nothing's going on—then I don't have a problem, but—usually not.

00:09:30

MH: Do you find there's much difference between the way that the men work and the way the women work here at Salt Lick—or the way that—

CL: I think there's differences just like there is in the outside world. You know at home, the men do things a little differently than the women do. So, I find us the same here.

MH: Uh-huh.

CL: The men don't like rolling silverware, but other than that *[Laughter]*.

MH: But that was the best time that—

CL: But, they'll carry the bus totes for you.

00:09:58

MH: Right, right. Well, I remember at the end of the shift on a Saturday night, and we're all exhausted—you know—that was a good time to sit down and gossip for an hour *[Laughs]*—while the men did the dishes *[Laughter]*. But, I know that **Carmen** is still here. He's the meat captain. Isn't that—that's his official title, right? He's the meat captain?

CL: He's over the meat as far as I—as far as I know. We've got a general manager that does a lot more overseeing over all of them than used to be. She's more involved with what goes on in the day-to-day process—and what's in and out—and what's in the meat locker—and what's not. So—

MH: And what's her name?

CL: Mariam.

MH: Mariam?

CL: M-a-r-i-a-m—Wilson.

00:10:44

MH: Okay. I did notice—and the reason I ask about Carmine is because—

CL: Carmen.

MH: Carmen—Carmen is because, you know, he's been here for twenty years too.

CL: Yeah, over that.

MH: And when we were here for dinner a couple of weekends ago, I noticed that there was a woman at the meat table, as well—which is something that you never usually see.

CL: Rosio cutting the meat?

MH: Yeah. She was cutting the sausage, if I remember correctly—and you rarely see a woman working the pit. And, so I'm kind of wondering, is she kind of like the exception to the rule here?

CL: When she started out washing dishes and then when she was ready to transfer up and move on—try something else—she said she wanted to do that. And they said, “Okay”—and that's where she stayed. She pretty much cuts the meat and that's it. She doesn't mix

any—most women move up and start doing the coleslaw and the potato salad, mixing it and stuff, or making the desserts, and she didn't want that. So—

00:11:46

MH: Well, that's interesting. So she's kind of breaking the—

CL: Yeah, yeah. And, she's good.

MH: Yeah, yeah. She seemed just as—I mean, she seemed fast and efficient, and she was holding her own, so—like I would expect a woman to *[Laughter]*. Now are the—now, when I started the Salt Lick, I was a drink *girl*, and then I worked as a host, and then I went on to wait tables very briefly. Is it still drink *girl*? Or is it—do they have—?

CL: It's nearly always a drink girl. Every once in a while we'll have a guy do it if we're shorthanded or something, but we still call them the drink *girl* *[Laughter]*. But they don't always start out a drink girl. They start out—it depends on where the manager wants them. Sometimes you start out as a hostess, or drinks, or dessert. Now we have a dessert person who does the desserts.

MH: Is that right?

CL: So—

MH: Okay. I just find that interesting that there are women doing desserts and, you know, the typically kind of girl things.

CL: Yeah, the guys are doing the busing. But, I mean, that's heavy work carrying those bus tubs.

MH: That's true.

CL: I also—the guy—we have some women on the line. Actually, we have several women who are doing the line, but the problem is when you carry those five gallon buckets of pickles or—that's mainly the big thing—is carrying the pickles—or whatever.

MH: Especially if you're pregnant or, you know.

CL: Most of them don't last in the heat with the—being pregnant [*Laughs*].

MH: Yeah, true, true.

CL: It is hard work. So, you have to watch—

MH: Yeah.

CL: Where they go.

00:13:19

MH: Yeah. Now, are there—is it a pretty even split with the waiters—let’s just call them all waiters—is it a pretty even split between men and women [*indiscernible*]?

CL: As far as number employed? Yeah, I think so. Sometimes we’ll have more men on than women or vice versa—but, um, I think it’s pretty even. I can’t say I’ve really done a count, but it’s a pretty even split as to what’s hired and doing the same work.

MH: Uh-huh, uh-huh. And everyone wears the same uniform. So, that’s—

CL: Right, right. In fact, well, all the servers get to pretty much wear what shirt they want. The support staff—they pretty much transferred them to where they all wear black shirts.

MH: Okay.

00:14:10

CL: And I don’t know if that really helps the customer out or not. I’m not sure the point behind it. But—

MH: Yeah. I don’t know that I would have noticed. If you hadn’t said anything, I don’t think I would have gone, “Oh, the drink girl is wearing a black shirt and so is the bus boy.”

CL: To me, black is an awfully hot color for out here, but it looks the cleanest, I think, with the barbecue sauce and the spills and stuff.

MH: Right, yeah. I just think that the barbecue sauce and those light blue shirts, and it's there forever. Um, so, now you've seen a lot of high school kids come—come through here.

CL: Uh-huh.

MH: Like I'm a good example. I came here in high school, I kept coming here through college, and I kept coming here with my husband and my son. How has that been for you to see people kind of grow up and come back?

00:15:09

CL: Yeah, a lot of them—a lot of them will stay and stick it out. It can be a long if they start at sixteen because they pretty much have to wait until they're eighteen or nineteen before they can start even waiting tables. They have to be here for a while because so many of the waiters stay that it's not a big turnover as far as that. It's fun to see them, and a lot of the high school kids they graduate, they go college, they come back and work Christmas, summer breaks, spring breaks, whatever or—which works out well because then a lot of the high school kids are wanting to go away. So we're not—but it's nice because they come in and they're already trained. They already know what they're doing, so. It's nice to see a lot of the repeat kids coming back and watching them—watching them grow up. Yeah and see—most of them, when they've left and gone on to other lives, they usually come back at some point to eat, and so you see them or hear them.

00:16:03

MH: Yeah. It's—it's always kind of neat for me to come back here, and I always try to come when I know you are going to be working because it's just kind of a nostalgia thing too. I mean, do you think you'll ever retire? I mean, your going to have to retire eventually.

CL: Well, eventually [*Laughs*]. No plans anytime soon.

MH: Yeah.

CL: But, eventually I'll quit, do something else, or stay home, or something.

MH: How—how is that drive for you? It's—you live—

CL: Well, I only live five miles from here. So I rarely—I think in the nineteen years I've been here, I've had one accident that I've had to go round about to get home. You know, put in an extra five or ten miles on my car to get home. Other than that, other than being flooded out of my subdivision when it rains—it floods at the entrance, so you wait an hour then you go home. That's happened more times than being blocked off, since I don't drive to Austin or anywhere else—

MH: So what's a typical day off like for you? What do you do in your own time?

CL: Usually spend time with my grandkids going—cook dinner for the family because I work. I work evenings pretty exclusively—go in, spend time with the grandkids and—they're at the right age.

00:17:23

MH: Any hobbies—gardening or knitting?

CL: I like to sew—sew, watch TV, cook. That's about it.

MH: What kind of food do you cook?

CL: I'm willing to try most anything. Usually it's not hot because most of my family won't eat spicy foods. So, much to my distress [*Laughter*]. I like the spicy, but none of them will eat it though. So it's—I have to do it other ways. I like trying new recipes, trying new things.

MH: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. I for one cannot cook meat.

CL: Oh.

MH: Which is why I like to come out here.

CL: Yeah.

MH: I'm a baker myself.

CL: Are you?

MH: So, I—it's interesting to here what others like to cook.

CL: Well baking—to me, baking comes easier than cooking meat, but I can do casseroles, and I'm getting better at cooking meats—trying to cook just meats and follow recipes—not just throwing them together and see what comes out.

MH: Yeah, so, you said you grew up in central Texas? I'm sorry we're kind of boggled around here, as things kind of resurface in my brain. Did you grow up kind of having any of the other, kind of, long standing barbecue places?

00:18:34

CL: No. No, mother cooked. Mother was a stay at home mom so we ate at home—

MH: Uh huh, Uh huh.

CL: For ninety-nine percent of my life. So, we rarely went out. She only worked two or three years of our growing up life, I guess. So—and then we only got to eat out on Fridays [*Laughs*]. So, she cooked and it was the same thing. She could cook a roast, but that's about it [*Laughs*].

MH: Wow. And, so when was the first time you ate at the Salt Lick? Was it when you started working here?

CL: Right. When I started working here, I hadn't eaten here. I hadn't been here before that. So—

MH: Wow. So, you just answered an add and—

CL: I just came in—had to get a job. So, I thought I want somewhere close. I'm tired of driving for an hour across town to get to work. So, I wanted somewhere close and this was the closest place to home out here. So, and then it was only open four days a week; it was only open Thursday through Sunday. It was kind of a weekend job, but it worked out well.

00:19:37

MH: So, I'm wondering if you ever stayed home with your—with your kids.

CL: I only stayed at home six months, or so, a year before I started working. And then this was a weekend—pretty much a weekend, evening job. So, I'd pick the kids up from school, get them up, take them to school, or whatever. And then I also worked at the school during—part of the time.

MH: As a working mother myself, that sounds like a really good arrangement. You know, like you kind of get the best of both worlds.

CL: Right. Yeah, you did because you were there after school. I mean, if you worked at school, the kids came to your room and, wherever I was working and met me, and then could come home and have the evenings, except on the weekends—and then have the day during the weekends, and dad would put them to bed so—*[Laughter]*.

00:20:29

MH: And that's the least fun part anyway.

MH: Yeah *[Laughter]*. Well that's really interesting. I hadn't thought about that arrangement, but you know, the kids—you and the kids would have the benefit if you—when you get home.

CL: And, not having to shell all your money out for babysitting—

MH: Right, right. That's a pretty sweet deal.

CL: Yeah *[Laughs]*. You know don't you?

MH: I do. I do. So, any advice for anyone—a young woman coming to work at the Salt Lick or any other barbecue establishment?

CL: Not really. Just enjoy what you're doing and work, work with it.

MH: Bat your eyelashes at the irate customers *[Laughter]*.

CL: There you go.

MH: How do you deal with the irate customers?

CL: I usually try to calm them down, figure out what the problem is, try to take care of it if I can—if I can or can't, whatever. Just let them know. Be honest with them.

MH: Yeah, that's—do you have any particular, like, doosie stories about strange things that have happened while you're working here?

CL: Not off the top of my head. I can't think—there was one episode with a guy throwing up. That was when we had a lot of college kids coming. The guy was sitting there throwing up, but that was just vulgar [*Laughter*]. That was nasty—throwing up in the beer box and it running out the bottom. That was just—

MH: Ew.

CL: That's the one that always gets—it was nasty. It was just like, of course, the guy was so drunk he didn't know what he did, but at least he didn't throw up all over the restaurant. So—

MH: [*Laughs*] At least he had the good sense to—

00:22:10

CL: Try to throw up in the box. Yes, in the beer box. So, that's the one that always comes to mind, and that was over ten years ago. So—*[Laughter]*

MH: Most people mind their **Ps** and **Qs** I guess.

CL: Yeah. They've gotten better, and we have sheriffs on the weekend helping with crowd control outside. And if we have a problem, and they're also here for security reasons. So if we have a problem, they are more than willing to come and help us.

MH: When did y'all start having—have the sheriffs always been here? Well, obviously they haven't always been here. Do you know when that started?

00:22:41

CL: I don't. It's been ten years.

MH: I just wondered.

CL: Yeah.

MH: I don't know if you've been here during South by Southwest, the big music festival, and seen people who are famous, um, waiting for a table. Who, off the top of your head, can you think of?

CL: Well, the last one, of course, I'm horrible with names—the last one that was in was the older gentleman from *The Princess—The Princess Bride*. It's the kids—

MH: Peter Faulk—who played Colombo[*Laughter*]?

CL: No, no that's not him. No, no. It was a short dumpy guy. I don't know what his name was.

MH: Oh, Wallen Shawn [*Laughter*].

CL: Is that what his name is? See, like I say, I'm horrible with names.

MH: “Inconceivable” guy. [*Indiscernible*] Yeah okay.

CL: And he almost got mugged by customers. Poor guy [*Laughs*]. Came in by himself.

MH: Aw.

CL: Yeah, yeah. The customers kept wanting to talk to him while he was eating. Poor guy.

MH: Is it interesting seeing all the—because, I mean, I know that just in the city it gets really strange during South by Southwest because I go to all these like taco stands and

stuff and there are all these people, you know. Does it really change the character of this place when there is an event like that going on?

00:23:52

CL: They—they all come out to eat, and you can tell it's a little bit different clientele because there's so many musicians, I guess, that come out and want to come and eat while they're here. But I mean they're nice. They are just dressed a little differently I guess you could say. So—but I'm horrible. I don't—I don't listen to music that well. I don't know music that well, and I'm horrible with recognizing people. Somebody usually has to tell me, "That's so and so."

MH: And you're like—

CL: "What's he do, what did he do?" So, but we've had—Sandra Bullock's been out, we've had, see like I said, you know. When they filmed *The Alamo* back over here, we had people come in for that. But there's been a lot of people, but I'm horrible with names
[Laughs].

00:24:27

MH: I'm just wondering because I worked at a toy store in central Austin for a while and during South by Southwest it would get so busy, and people would just be all over—it was like Christmas Two.

CL: Yeah, yeah. Well, we're a little further out, but if they hadn't planned on coming out here, they wouldn't necessarily come out here. So, but we get a lot of, you know, after

South by Southwest, we still are busy. Like on the Monday after because that's when all the musicians can get a way and do what they want to do, either before it actually starts or after it's over for a couple of days. So—

00:25:27

MH: It's an event to come out here. I mean, you don't—you don't just drive around and go, "Oh, let's go to the Salt Lick—that sounds good." You know, you definitely have to plan it.

CL: Or—or if you're one of those people that does that, they usually come in going, "I got lost." They normally get lost coming—trying to get here.

MH: Have you been to the Salt Lick 360?

CL: I have a couple of times.

MH: And how—what do you—what do you think about—I mean, it's obviously very different. So, can you talk about the differences?

CL: It's a lot fancier over there and a lot more variety of foods. They do—and they change their menu on a—it is my understanding they change their entrées periodically. Whereas ours is a pretty set menu except on Sundays—we do specials until they're gone, and then they're gone.

00:26:12

MH: Uh-huh.

CL: And they serve alcohol over there. So, that that makes a difference.

MH: Uh-huh, uh-huh,

CL: So—

MH: We were here on a Sunday, and my friend got the prime rib.

CL: Uh-huh.

MH: On the giant—

CL: Plate.

MH: Platter.

CL: Yeah. It's huge.

MH: Yeah, it's ridiculous [*Laughter*].

CL: Yeah—it's a good serving. You got to—you almost have to plan on sharing it with somebody—when you order that.

MH: Yeah, because it comes with three sides too.

CL: Yeah.

MH: And bread.

CL: Uh-huh.

MH: Yeah, it's insane. The portions out here are very generous. I don't know how you have managed to work out here as long as you have and not be as big as a house

[Laughs].

CL: Well—well—no it's still good, and I still eat it. I just, you know, when you're full, you're full, especially at the end of the night. You are usually so hot and sweaty that it's like you eat a meal and then it's time to get up and clean and do something else. So, it only goes for so long.

MH: Well, you're also, you know, basically working it off as you're going. So that—

CL: Or sweating it off *[Laughs]*.

MH: Sweating it off, yeah. I remember I got quite thin the summer that I worked here.

[Laughs].

CL: Did you?

MH: Yeah, well I think that does it. So, I thank you for your participation.

CL: You're welcome.

MH: In our project. We really appreciate it.

CL: Hope it goes well.

[END]

00:27:29