

**Wanda Mays**  
Sam's Barbecue, Austin, Texas

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Date: 2007  
Location: Sam's Barbecue, Austin, Texas  
Interviewers: Anna Martin, Andrew Busch  
Length:

American Studies Department  
The University of Texas at Austin

Group Members:  
Anna Martin  
Andrew Busch  
Marvin Bendele

**[Begin Interview]**

**00:00:00**

**Anna Martin:** Mic check.

**Andrew Busch:** *[Indiscernible]*.

**AM:** Mic check.

**AB:** A little higher.

**AM:** I might talk a little louder too.

**AB:** Um hmm. Yep.

**AM:** And since you're going to be doing this maybe you want to listen?

**AB:** I think you should listen.

**AM:** OK.

**AB:** Alright, we're all good to go.

**AM:** OK. Thank you so much for doing this with us. Start off – OK. We just kind of want to get established, so if you could just state your name, age, and why you're a part of Sam's Barbecue?

**AB:** You don't have to say the age if you don't want to.

**Wanda Mays:** Wanda Fay Mays.

**AM:** OK, and why are you a part of Sam's Barbecue?

**WM:** Well, my dad. It's a family business.

**AM:** OK, and could you start maybe by giving your definition of barbecue?

**WM:** Well you have to put your love in barbecue. You got to put love. So I put the love in. People come back. Put the love in barbecue *[laughs]*.

**AM:** OK. And we just want to get a little history of the business. So how did Sam's originate?

**WM:** Well my cousin and them had it first from Sam. They . . . well the brothers started it, then my cousins took over, then my dad took over. That was in '78. In '78 they took over, in '78.

**AM:** OK, and what led the family to get into the barbecue business?

**WM:** Well, my dad was driving a cab one day. So he stopped through here, and my cousin asked him if he wanted to get into it. I was driving a school bus at the time and so . . . next day I was in here. I was still driving a school bus and working up in here.

**AM:** Can you tell me a little bit about how the business is run?

**WM:** Family. Takes teamwork and family. Just family business and teamwork.

**AM:** And why, why this small building on East Twelfth Street? Like what does that have to do with Sam's and was there ever ideas of relocating or . . .

**WM:** No. This a landmark right here, cause it's been here a long time.

**AM:** How old is the building specifically?

**WM:** I think this was 1943 or something. It used to be a ??? station, before it became a barbecue place.

**AB:** What was it?

**WM:** A ??? station in the old days. Then it became a barbecue place.

**AB:** Where did your father and his cousin come from originally?

**WM:** From Round Rock.

**AB:** Round Rock?

**WM:** Round Rock.

**AB:** So is that where they learned to barbecue?

**WM:** Nope. We didn't know. (laughs). My cousin taught us.

**AB:** Could you explain like how, how he learned or how, how barbecue basically started in your family?

**WM:** Well, we'd always cook at home but we'd always get some barbecue. So when we came in my cousin taught us how to do barbeque, how to cut meat, everything.

**AB:** Wow, that's great.

**WM:** Uh huh.

**AM:** What do you think are the key factors to Sam's success?

**WM:** Key factors to Sam's success. Love. And good luck, good food. Good personality, definitely.

**AM:** Do you think that the meat has a lot to do with it?

**WM:** Yes. There's love in there.

[laughter]

**AM:** Is that your key ingredient?

**WM:** Yep, that's love. Gotta have love. If there ain't no love in there, no food's right. Gotta have that love in it.

**AM:** That's great. Have you ever needed to advertise?

**WM:** Well, not really. Once I got in the business was already there, so we came on in, picked it up. It's been pretty good so far. We've been there twenty eight years. April thirteenth be twenty nine, twenty nine years.

**AB:** Do you know who owned the place before y'all?

**WM:** Sam. The original Sam. Original Sam.

**AM:** Did you guys know Sam pretty well?

**WM:** Well, my dad. I was little when, I was coming up, I was a little kid. My daddy did. That was their cousin and stuff.

**AM:** Could you walk us through a typical day at Sam's? Like when it starts, and maybe when it gets busy, and what the end of the night is like?

5.00

**WM:** Well, I don't know about the end of the night cause I get off about seven in the evening time. So – my other sister, she works at night. That's their department (laughs).

**AM:** What time you guys typically get here in the morning?

**WM:** I get here about eight-thirty in the morning. Eight-thirty, start everything, get ready.

**AM:** OK, so you don't pull the night shift?

**WM:** Well I used to a long time ago. We used to stay open till five o'clock back then long time ago in the eighties, seventies and eighties. And half of the nineties we used to stay open till five in the morning. I used to work night shift. It was alright. But people steady coming in here till five o'clock. That time we closed up and eight o'clock we reopen. And people steady coming in. They were steady coming in. Sometimes we'd be in there till six o'clock in the morning. People steady coming in, going to work. That was a long shift, from seven till five in the morning. Long. I'd sleep all day. [laughter]. Get time to go to work the next morning.

**AM:** OK. Can you give a little personal history, maybe of yourself, of your dad?

**WM:** Like what you want to know? I'm single. [laughter].

**AM:** Just maybe a little bit about growing up, you know, growing up with the business.

**WM:** Well I was about twenty five, something like that, when I came here, twenty five. My dad was probably about forty something, fifty something when he came in here. My mom too. My mom and dad came in here.

**AM:** We want to talk a little bit about the building because you've already said that it's a landmark.

**WM:** Yep. This part right here [points to side seating area] was added on. We added this on right here. It was just cut off right there. That wall right here.

**AB:** That's small.

**WM:** It was real little when we came in here. Everybody likes a little business. Everybody likes to go to a little business. They don't like to go to a big business. They like to come to a little business. That's where everybody goes.

**AB:** How is, how is having other businesses come and gone affected y'all business here?

**WM:** We're all by ourselves. We're by ourselves over here, and I love it (laughs).



**AB:** Good, yeah.

**AM:** Can you tell us a little bit about the fire of 1992? Maybe what happened and the aftermath?

**WM:** I was at home asleep. So my brother was here, I don't know what he did. He still says he doesn't know why. It just smoked out. He was back there with the pit doing something. It got out of control. I don't know what he did to it. But my friend Rob, and Bill, they came and helped us out at the time. They came out cause they real good persons. Today when they come out ain't no charging them for no barbecue, cause they put all this in here for us.

**AB:** How did y'all raise money to reopen? Or was there . . .

**WM:** Donations. My friends named Rob and Bill, they came in. They got their friends to come in here and help us out. Uh huh.

**AB:** Was there like a drive of some sort or did you do some kind of community project?

**WM:** No. He seen us on TV that morning so he came by the same day and he said he was going to help us out. That's what he did, Rob and Bill. He got his friend Bill and their little crew and they came and helped us out. He's a real good guy, Rob.

**AM:** So he's just a family friend or a patron?

**WM:** He was just a customer.

**AM:** It's the love in the barbecue, right?

**WM:** That's it [laughter].

**AM:** Can you tell us a little bit about the location, maybe a little bit about the community where the building is at?

**WM:** Well, it's alright. [Indiscernible]. It's alright. A lot of people come through here from all over.

**AM:** Do you think that a lot of your patrons come from just the local community?

**WM:** All over, out of town, everywhere. Germany. I had some people in the other day from Germany, Lincoln, I had some people from Germany last night over here. Uh huh. Then some people from out of town last Tuesday night. They were from London. That was where they were from, London. They came through. We have everybody, all over: Washington, DC, New Jersey, California, everywhere they come. They hear about us. We're on the Internet, so that's, you know, Internet, they show us so they come straight here. Somebody else, somebody else shows us, they just come.

**AB:** I was wondering if you could talk just about how just this corner, you go out here, about how this community has changed since you've been here, thirty years?

**WM:** It's changed a whole lot. Everything.

10.00

**AB:** How so?

**WM:** Everybody's buying up. Everywhere a little land. Every empty spot they're putting up houses, houses, houses. You'd be surprised. I went up to Tenth Street other day. All them big old houses, three lots, three houses, three houses on one big old lot. Three houses. Ain't nothing but houses.

**AB:** It seems like it's a real good area, so close to downtown.

**WM:** I still live down that way. Uh huh. Two blocks from [Interstate] 35. So I've been down there about twenty four years.

**AB:** Really?

**WM:** Yeah.

**AB:** So do you remember when [Interstate] 35 came into town?

**WM:** I wasn't even born yet.

**AB:** Yeah, that was a while ago, I'm sorry [laughter].

[Indiscernible]

**AB:** What people tell me is that [Interstate] 35 really changed the dynamic of the town a lot when it came in.

**WM:** Yeah, yeah. That's what my dad will tell you, but my dad ain't here. My dad's in the hospital, so you know.

**AB:** Yeah

**WM:** I know they used to . . . He'd tell us that we couldn't go across [Interstate] 35, that we had to stay on this side of [Interstate] 35.

**AB:** Oh really? How come?

**WM:** I don't know. You know, restrictions, that was a long time ago. I don't know. We couldn't go across [Interstate] 35, yeah.

**AM:** How active is Sam's in the community?

**WM:** Real good. Everybody comes through, everybody's well known.

**AM:** Can you tell us a bit about the décor, the pictures, and maybe how that got started?

**WM:** One picture on the wall. [laughter]. I put one picture on there, everybody started putting pictures on there, one picture, everybody started putting pictures on the wall. Paper plates and everything. We just have one picture, and everybody started putting them.

**AM:** OK, and we want to talk a little bit about the meat. Would you explain the process of food preparation?

**WM:** No [laughter].

**AM:** Is it all secret?

**WM:** Yes [laughter].

**AM:** Do you cook throughout the day or is just a morning thing?

**WM:** All day and all night. All day and all night until we close up.

**AM:** So the preparation, is it a lot of tradition? I mean has it been passed down through your family?

**WM:** Yes

**AM:** It's the love, right?

**WM:** That's it, the love [laughter].

**AM:** And who typically cooks the meat? Just whoever is here at the time or . . .

**WM:** I'm on day shift, I'll cook all day. I'll cook all day.

**AM:** So just some people are cooks and . . .

**WM:** Next shift, I got to cook at night when I'm off.

**AM:** OK, what kind of wood do you use? Is it a specific kind?

**WM:** Oak wood, oak.

**AM:** So you use a pit cooker?

**WM:** Huh? Just oak wood.

**AM:** So are your recipes secrets?

**WM:** Yes

**AM:** How many people know about them?

**WM:** Just family (laughs).

**AM:** OK, where do you get your meat at?

**WM:** I go shopping around meat markets, different ones. I go to them.

**AM:** So you have a reputation for having the best brisket in Austin. Can you tell us a little bit about why you think that is?

**WM:** I just told you, the love. That's it, it be good. Tasty, tender, come back for it. Yeah, they come back for it.

**AM:** It is very tender. I guess the reason it's tender is a secret as well, right?

**WM:** You the girl.

**AM:** You're also one of the only barbecue restaurants in Austin to still serve mutton.

[Inaudible]

**WM:** I didn't know it.

**AM:** Is it a pretty popular dish?

**WM:** Oh mutton? Yeah, everybody likes mutton. It goes fast. Mutton's good. Mutton's good to eat.

**AB:** How is the mutton served? Like is it . . .

**WM:** You can buy it by the pound, order, or mutton plate.

**AB:** OK, how does it come? Does it come chopped?

**WM:** No, mutton ribs.

**AB:** Mutton ribs.

**WM:** Yeah, mutton ribs, mutton ribs. They got different kind of mutton.

**AM:** Could you tell us a little about your sauce and how that originated?

**WM:** By Sam. He showed us how to do it and stuff like that. Then my momma, she makes sauce too. Yep.



**AM:** Where do you think the traditions come from geographically? Do you think it originated in Texas?

**WM:** I really don't know (laughs).

**AM:** What defines your style of barbecue in comparison to other central Texas barbecue?

**WM:** I can't tell you that neither. I don't even know.

15.00

**AB:** Are you familiar with a lot of other barbecue places around?

**WM:** I know them, but I don't go there cause, yeah, I'm always cooking, so.

**AB:** Right.

**AM:** What types of patrons do you have during the day? Are there a lot of regulars?

**WM:** Regulars, newcomers, all of them. Yep.

**AM:** And how do they differ from your late night patrons?

**WM:** I can't tell you cause I don't even work at night. So different people come through. They come through going out of town, come through going to work. Different people at night. Different crowd at night. Wherever.

**AM:** Maybe a lot of people from downtown?

**WM:** Downtown? I guess. Yeah, my sister, you got to ask my sister that . . .

**AB:** Is it Roxy who works at night?

**WM:** Ronnie

**AB:** Ronnie, I'm sorry.

**WM:** Uh huh, Ronnie (laughs).

**AB:** [Indiscernible].

**WM:** Yep (laughs).

**AM:** We know you've had a lot of famous patrons that are on the walls in pictures, we've read about them online. Can you tell us a couple stories?

**WM:** Well Stevie Ray Vaughn, he came in here. We got a picture of my momma and Stevie Ray Vaughn and Jimmy Farmer all up on there. And plus I was on the last video, before he died and stuff. They came in here and took the last picture. I think after that, that's when the smoke got fired up. You know, after that. But I still got his posters at my house, you know, albums and everything. His brother Jimmy, he came all up. His last DVD when he played on video and stuff. And so that ain't going nowhere but my house.

**AM:** Were you here when President Bill Clinton was here?

**WM:** No, that was my homeboy brought that through here. He brought that picture for us.

**AM:** Are there any other accounts of famous people just stopping by?

**WM:** ???? Vanessa Williams came through and Richard Roundtree, he came through, and some more people came through.

**AB:** *Shaft*?

**WM:** Richard Roundtree, he played on *Shaft*, yep. I asked him when he going to film that new movie. He told me no but he was.

**AB:** (laughs).

**AM:** Where do you see the future of Sam's?

**WM:** I can't even tell you. I gotta go day by day. Never know what happens. It'll get passed down to the other grandkids and stuff like that.

**AB:** Is there a new generation of family members that are interested?

**WM:** Yeah, uh huh. Brother got about eight kids. My sisters and them they got two and one. And my brother got two. I got zero, so . . .

**AM:** What do you think Sam's means to East Austin?

**WM:** Wow. Probably got to ask my momma. What Sam's means to East Austin, Sam's Barbecue. They love Sam's. I got it.

**THIS PART NEEDS WORK\*\*\*\***

**AB** (to Mrs. Mays): What do you think Sam's Barbecue means to East Austin? To the community? Would you like to answer?

**Mrs. Mays:** I don't know, hmm.

**AB:** It just seems like such an important part . . .

[Indiscernible]

**AB:** Neighborhood changes \*\*\*\*\*

**WM:** It changed a whole lot. It changed a whole lot. Property taxes are up. A lot of people are selling now cause some people can't pay property taxes. It went boom. Mine was three hundred dollars. And then mine went all the way up.

**AM:** And that was your property tax?

**WM:** That was on my house.

**AM:** So if you just have a little bit more about how the neighborhood's changed since you've been here and then just where you see it going.

**WM:** It's changed a whole lot. Houses – some of the businesses here have been here a long time. They're still here. But just like neighborhood, the houses and everything changed. Everybody's moving in, going out, moving in, like that. I like the East side. Anything you want over here on the East side. North and South and West, I can't tell you *[laughs]*.

**AB:** I think that's good. I moved over here to the East side a couple years and I live maybe a mile and a half North, up by MLK and Airport (Road), right around there. I really like it, yeah.

**WM:** Um hmm, yeah.

**AB:** It's real, I don't know, it's just . . .

**WM:** Yep

**AB:** Seems spaced out, it's quieter over there.

**WM:** It is, yep.