

May Archie

Church of Holy Smoke, New Zion Baptist Church Barbecue – Huntsville, Texas
(In Two Parts)

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Interviewers: Melanie Haupt, Carly Kocurek

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American Studies Department
The University of Texas at Austin

Group Members:
Melanie Haupt
Carly Kocurek

[BEGIN INTERVIEW, PART 1]

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Melanie Haupt: Okay, so today we are talking with Ms. May Archie of the Church of Holy Smoke, New Zion Baptist Church Barbecue in Huntsville, Texas. Ms. Archie, could you please state your full name and date of birth for the record?

May Archie: Yes, my name is May Walker Archie, and I was born June 16, 1944.

MH: All right, thank you very much. Let me take this off. Okay, so, my first question for you is how—can you please tell us a little bit about how you got involved with the Holy Smoke Barbecue and what you know about how it got started before you and your husband took over?

MA: Okay, in 2003, the lady that founded this place, Miss Annie May Ward, began to get a little ill and forgetful, and she came to the church—we all belonged to the same church, the New Zion Baptist Church—and she asked for help. So the pastor asked for a volunteer to come over here and help her out a little bit. And I came to help her, and my husband did too. And she had a stroke while we were here helping out. And, of course, she had to leave the business. And, to keep from just shutting the place down and letting the church go to pot, we just had to take over and keep it going. So that's how we got involved, in 2003.

MH: And is it—and this barbecue establishment is basically the financial lifeline for the church, is that correct?

MA: Yes it is. We have a small congregation, and most of us are on fixed income, so without this establishment we couldn't make it over there in the church.

MH: Do you mind—how much do you think—can you—if we're talking numbers, how much do you think the restaurant brings in for the church every year?

MA: Well, the majority of income for the church comes from the restaurant. If you're talking about, say, on a monthly basis we're talking like maybe twelve hundred to two thousand dollars a month. That's a good number.

MH: Okay, and that—does that cover the church's operating expenses?

MA: Well, no, we do have some people that are able to pay a pretty good amount of tithes, you know. But not a lot. We just don't have a big congregation, and those that we have, a lot of us are on fixed incomes, and we're not really able to pay a lot in tithes. But we do have some, so it helps out.

Carly Kocurek: How large is the congregation of the church? How many folks do you guys have?

MA: Well, I don't know the exact number, but I would say not over fifty.

CK: And how long have you been going to Mount Zion church?

MH: New Zion.

CK: What?

MH: It's New Zion, right?

MA: New Zion, right.

CK: Sorry.

MA: I've been going to New Zion since I married my husband in 2002. He was a member of the church already. I'm a former member of Mount Zion—

CK: Oh!

MH: No wonder it's confusing [*Laughter*].

MA: Right. But I married him, and I came to New Zion along with him.

MH: Okay. There are a lot of Mount Zions in Texas, for sure. Okay, so you mentioned and were very clear that you are semi-retired—or mostly retired and you're not here that often. But, to the

best of your knowledge, what is the sort of day-to-day operation of the New Zion Baptist Church Barbecue?

MA: Okay, now when you say what is the day-to-day operation, what are you referring to exactly?

MH: Preparation—I know that Mr. Archie has a certain routine of getting here quite early in the morning and getting the pit started and getting the meat, you know, seasoned, and so on and so forth. What is the—what does everybody else do?

MA: Now, Okay. Everybody else comes in at eight o'clock, and they start getting the potatoes peeled to make potato salad. Beans picked so that we can put beans on to cook and have them done by eleven o'clock. Wrapping bread to put on the tables, and just cleaning up generally: bathrooms, dining room, kitchen. Anything that needs to be done.

00:04:37

MH: So the beans are made fresh in house?

MA: Every day.

MH: And what about the potato salad?

MA: That's made every day also.

MH: And how about the pies?

MA: They're made as needed.

MH: As needed, okay. And you have sweet potato—

MA: Pecan and buttermilk.

MH: Buttermilk, that's right. Good southern—

MA: They're all good. They're all very good.

MH: And who makes the pies?

MA: We make them here.

MH: Here? Okay. So what sort of clientele do you have here—as we've been here it's approaching the lunch hour and I see, you know, some business men types, some ranchy types—

MA: Right. We have a lot of cowboys come in. We have people that work with TDC [Texas Department of Corrections], the prison here in town. We have a lot of business people that come in, and people that are passing through, going from Dallas to Houston and vice versa. We have all those people to stop in. And sometimes, depending on the day of the week, we have different

groups to come in—tour groups. They're coming to tour different places here—our prison museum, and Sam Houston's statue—and they come by here and eat with us. So sometimes we have busloads during the lunch hour.

MH: How many people do you usually get in a day?

MA: That's kind of hard to say. Some days we don't get very many. We end up—our normal hours are from eleven until six. But some days it's so slow that we can close around three o'clock—especially on Wednesdays. But then, on Friday and Saturday it's pretty busy. So it's just kind of hard to say—it depends on what's going on in town, who's passing through. The university has a big effect on our business. So when school is in and games are going on, we just have so many people we can't count them. And then when it's not—we get pretty slow. So it's pretty hard to say on a day-to-day basis.

CK: How many people work here every day—or most days?

MA: Three most days. When I'm here it's four *[Laughs]*.

MH: And how often are you here these days?

MA: How often am I here? Only when my husband gets a call from a big group coming in *[Laughs]*.

MH: He mentioned there's a motorcycle group that comes in and cleans you guys out every once in a while? What other types of groups, besides the tour groups—

MA: We have little ladies—church groups from Houston—we have a lady's hat group—

MH: The Red Hat?

MA: Yeah, the Red Hat Group ladies—they're so sweet. They come in. And then we have different high school alumni groups, believe it or not, we have black schools that have closed, like mine here in Huntsville, that have closed down—back in the sixties or the fifties in Houston. And they're alumni sometimes come here to eat. So it's just, you know, all the time, it's somebody coming through here.

MH: You mentioned that you have the Red Hat ladies coming in. Do you find that more men than women come in, or do you—how would you skew the—sort of, the genders coming through.

MA: On a day-to-day basis, yes, more men come in than women. Yeah. The men eat more than women [*Laughs*]. So, that's why.

MH: Now, this might be kind of a difficult question to answer, but what—do you think that—what are—I'm looking at the men, this table of three men and a women—a woman—over here—

and I'm trying to look at—figure out what they're eating *[Laughs]*. When I came in and ate here before, I automatically went to the chicken, so do you think men get more brisket and ribs?

MA: Right. Men get more brisket and ribs. Ladies eat more chicken and sausage. Yeah.

MH: I ask because I've been doing some research and there's a lot of discussion of, you know, brisket is a man's food, chicken is a woman's food—and I'm just wondering how—if that stereotype carries through into the actual restaurant.

MA: Yeah, it does, and I think it's because we as women try to eat healthy—that's probably why we eat more chicken. And men just—they just eat *[Laughter]*.

MH: That's so true. OK, so, we're going to kind of keep on that sort of discussion of gender and women and barbecue and stuff. So, last time we spoke, we talked about, sort of, your role as a woman in a barbecue—as a co-owner of a barbecue restaurant. And I kind of want—would like for you to speak again about how you feel your role as a woman comes into play, as a business owner and as a barbecue business owner or co-owner.

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MA: Okay. You mean as far as my responsibilities compared to my husband's? In the business, we're equal. You know. We—the only thing that I cannot do that he does is lift the barbecue pit up. I can't cut the meat before it's prepared. I can't do that.

MH: Because it's just?

MA: Weight. Because of the weight and stuff like that. But, there's some things that I cannot do as a woman; I just don't have the strength to do. But besides that, we do, we just do everything equally. Some things I do he can't do, like make potato salad, cook beans. He can't do that.

MH: Why do you think that is?

MA: Well, he just doesn't know how [*Laughs*]. He has—he hasn't paid attention to what I'm doing. I guess he just doesn't care to do the—those kind of things. I don't know.

MH: And how did you learn how to make beans?

MA: Oh, at home, with Mama. So, I've always known how to do those things. And he hasn't. This thing of cooking the meat is even new for him. But he learned before the previous owners left. They taught him well, so he knows how to do it all now.

MH: He told me that he also had to learn how to disperse—you know, distribute the wood appropriately, to make the meat taste the way it's supposed to taste.

MA: Learn all that, he sure did. He knew absolutely nothing about this business when we came, when we took over.

MH: And what did you have to learn?

MA: Well, the only thing I had to really learn was how to make the sauce, how to make the tea—the barbecue sauce. How to make the iced tea, because I'd never made tea in this quantity before. And that's about it. As far as the register's concerned, I already knew all those things, payroll and all that. You know, that was stuff I already knew, so—

CK: What did you do before? Because obviously you knew—you knew how to cook from home, and you knew payroll and things. Where did you pick up all those skills?

MA: Well, when I worked, I worked for Southwestern Bell Telephone Company. And I was there twenty-three years, and I managed in the business office where we took money. And I had twenty-one people reporting to me, so I also did payroll and I worked with people, you know. And I guess I've just known all my life, basically, how to do these kind of things.

CK: Had you done any food service before? Have you ever waitressed or anything?

MA: No, no, I'd never been a waitress. I'd never done that before. So, I just kind of watched Miss Ward when I first got here, as far as waiting on people. And I've always been a people person, so it wasn't hard to know how to talk to people and relate to them that way. But as far as waitressing, I didn't know anything about that at all.

MH: What was Miss Ward like as—when she ran the place?

MA: Oh, she was a sweet old lady, just as dear as she could be. She really was. And she was interested in helping everybody. She was kind of bossy. She was kind of bossy, but everybody was used to her and loved her so it didn't bother anybody at all.

MH: And last time I spoke to Mr. Archie, back in July, Mr. Ward was doing poorly and Miss Ward was still plugging away. Is that still the case?

MA: That's still the case. Yes, that's still the case. He is in a nursing home now, and I think she's still—last I visited her down there in Houston, she was still with her sister.

MH: Okay.

MA: But I haven't checked with her in about two, three months. So, I don't know now, but I feel that if she was in a nursing home that I would know, so—I think she's probably still with her sister.

MH: And how long do you think you and Mr. Archie are going to run the restaurant?

MA: Well, that's kind of hard to say. I don't know—right now, this is a source of income for my husband. Of course, I'm retired, so—but this is a source of income for him so, it helps—it helps us out that way, financially as well as he loves doing it now. So, I don't know. I think he's kind of stuck here. Maybe until we're disabled. I really can't say. We're not going to give up on the church, that's for sure.

MH: Right. Well, so—do you want to ask this one about the—? Okay, so, talking—speaking about the church, how has working with the restaurant sort of been a part of your faith? Or how has it been an expression of your faith? Or has it?

00:14:43

MA: I don't—well—I don't know that it has been exactly an expression of my faith, other than loving God, loving the church, and not wanting to let it down, as far as you know, just give up on it financially. I can't think of any other way that it has been. So, is there something specific that you're—you're speaking of?

CK: Well, I think you touched on it a bit when you were talking about the—you know, this was something—in a lot of ways this was something you guys originally got involved with because you were really concerned about your church community and really wanted to help support and sustain it. So—

MA: Right, right.

CK: I have a question, which is that the recipes for the, like the potato salad and the beans and the pies—where did all those come from? I assume some of those are yours, maybe? Or did you pick them all up from Mrs. Ward?

MA: No, no, they all came from Mrs. Ward. Everything is exactly the way it was when she was here. She founded the place; she started making all the stuff on her own; and it has stayed the

very same way. She taught me how to do and make all the stuff that she made before. And everything is still the same—all the ingredients and everything. Nothing changed. I didn't change anything.

MH: Do you know where Mrs. Ward came from? Did she come from Houston?

MA: She came from Houston. Houston was her home until she moved up here.

MH: And she—so, her family originates from Houston?

MA: I think so. I know they are all there now. So, if they didn't it must have been pretty close to Houston because that's where they all are now.

MH: What do you think of—what do you think is one of your favorite parts of being a part of Holy Smoke? What's your favorite part of running the business?

MA: Well, I'd say meeting people—I meet people from all over the place. And I take their pictures and as you can see I put them all on the walls. Talking to people and learning things about different places. I've never done a whole lot of traveling, so it's—it's real interesting to talk to people from different places. So, I would say that's the most important thing for me.

CK: When did you start taking pictures of customers?

MA: Oh, I would say about a month after I was here. Because so many people would come in and they would have cameras. And some would have these digital cameras. And they would say, do you have a computer? And I'd say, yes. And they'd say, well give me your email address and I'll send you a copy of this picture. And they started doing that. And I got interested in it, so I went out and bought me a little throw-away camera, you know. And started snapping pictures—and that's what I still use, the little disposable cameras. I take pictures of—

MH: That's a great wall. Whose—what's—what's the farthest that you are aware that someone has traveled to come to your—

MA: Japan. Yeah, I have a picture over there from someone in Japan, so—

MH: What's the best or most interesting story you've heard from your guests, your—

MA: Well, let's see if I can think of anything—I think the most interesting one that I can think of right off the bat, was from a little man that had been traveling for a while. And he had—he said that he liked to go from city to city and check out the barbecue places in each town that he stopped in. And he had stopped in some place in North Carolina and it had a sign up that said, “The Second-best Barbecue Place in the United States.” And he ate some of the barbecue and it was very good, so then he asked the man—he said, “Well, if you're the second-best barbecue place, where's the first?” And the man told him, “It's a little place called New Zion Church Barbecue in Huntsville, Texas.” So, he came here after eating there at that place. And that was the most interesting story, I tell you.

MH: That is a fantastic story [*Laughs*].

CK: That's got to be—that's pretty high praise too.

MA: Yes, it was, it really was.

00:19:20

MH: Of all the barbecue joints. Okay, so one question I want to ask you, so many of the barbecue places that we have visited in Texas—central Texas—were formerly segregated. And so—I kind of want to ask—this is clearly a segregated—not segregated—an integrated space [*Laughs*]. Do you—has it—how has the clientele changed? Did it start out as mostly, you know, people of color from the church that were here? Have there always been giant groups of white men coming in here [*Laughter*]. I say this as a huge group of youngsters come through the door—

MA: The majority of our customers are Caucasian or some other nationality. We don't have a lot of black people that—that come here. We really don't. Probably because most of them do their own barbecuing, I think. But, I'm—I'm not real sure—I don't know why, but it's always been this way, even when Mrs. Ward had the place. I used to come here to eat, and it was the same way. So most of the clientele is just what you see today.

CK: And, well you know, it's hard—it's always hard to impress people that do their own barbecue. Because they're always going to think they're better than everybody else.

MA: Right [*Laughs*]. That is true.

MH: Do you think that this is a progressive space for that reason? You know, that it, that—that you're—

MA: I really do.

MH: Why do you think it is? Hang on, I'm going to push pause so I can get up and move.

[END OF PART 1]

00:20:53

[Interview moves to different, quieter part of the restaurant, then resumes]

[BEGIN INTERVIEW, PART 2]

00:00:00

MH: Okay, so, this is the second part of our interview with Ms. Archie. We've had to relocate from the actual restaurant—the restaurant space—to the cafeteria in the kitchen, and you were just saying that—I mean, the cafeteria in the church. You were just saying that you often have to put your overflow in here because the space just fills up. So, what happens when you have to move over here?

MA: Well, we only have seating over there for about sixty-two people. And when we have larger groups, we have to bring some of them over here. And what I do is I have to come then, and I take care of food over here. We just move food and drinks and everything over here. We just have to bring everything over here. And, of course, we have a stove in there, microwave, and everything, where we can keep stuff hot—and cold—refrigerator. And I just bring everything I need over here—plates, utensils, everything. And serve them from here. And, you know, a lot of times, the ladies, of course, in the group, will get up and come over and help me serve *[Laughter]*. They sure will.

CK: Which—who seems to be—I mean, obviously you said it's the women that come help you. Is it certain women that come help you? Is it people you know or is it just—

MA: No. No one I know. Just the women that are coming to eat with the different groups. They'll just see me up there working hard, and they will say, "Come on, let us help you" *[Laughter]*.

MH: They are probably mothers [*Laughter*].

MA: They are. They are. But they help, and we get it all done. And they're nice too. When everything is over, they'll help me even clean up too.

MH: Wow.

MA: They sure will. They'll help me clean this place up before they leave.

MH: That's pretty funny. We were at a restaurant last weekend, and our waiter disappeared. And a man in the—at a table next to ours got up to get the coffee pot to refill his coffee and refilled mine while he was at it and said, "Where's my tip?" [*Laughter*]. Something tells me that probably wouldn't happen in this space.

MA: No, no. It doesn't happen here—sure doesn't.

MH: Do you think people act differently here than they do at most restaurants?

MA: No, no, they don't. They don't—they just—they're just at home here. They really are. They just feel so down-to-earth and at home. And that's everybody. They have a good time here. They really do.

MH: So maybe—maybe they—in the fact that they feel more comfortable and at home than they would in a restaurant space, maybe they do act differently?

MA: Yeah.

MH: Or maybe not. I don't know. So, before we had to relocate the interview—let me take these off again—you said that you think that—you would say this is a progressive space. And I was about to ask you, what you—you particularly think it's progressed?

MA: Now, when you say progressive, are you talking about—progressive in what way?

MH: I think in terms—socially, in terms of, sort of, the integration of the different people of color and different nationalities. That was what I meant by progressive, but you may have a different sense or a different definition.

MA: Well, uh, no. No, actually, I don't. People—everybody that comes here interacts with everybody. I mean, there's no such thing as anyone coming to the barbecue and wanting to move to another table or not sit close to someone that may be sitting at this table. The just all just come right in and sit down. And nobody has ever had any misunderstanding—nothing. I mean, it's all just been like one great, big, happy family. It's always been that way.

MH: And you raise an interesting point because of the way the tables are set up. It's almost enforced community seating.

MA: Right.

MH: And a lot of restaurants have, you know, you have your table where you and your dining companions sit. And there are some community tables. And, I know, when my husband and I go out to eat, we do *not* want to sit at the community tables because we do *not* want to talk to other people [*Laughs*]. But this almost, sort of—

MA: Forces you doesn't it?

00:04:21

MH: Forces you, yeah. But I don't want to—you know, forces is almost a negative connotation. But in this way it, sort of, I would say, encourages.

MA: But it's—you know what used to happen, before we took over, when Mrs. Ward founded this place? She had a group of little, old ladies around her same age working here. And there was one little lady that took care of the front—all the time, she never went in the back to do any cooking. She would—she was a greeter so to speak. She was out front and whenever people would come in, white, black, blue, green, she would say, "Come in, have a seat." And if they stood around and looked as if they didn't want to sit, she'd say, "Hey there's a seat right over there. Go and sit down. And I'll be with you in just a minute." So, she kind of just made people sit. And one man came in not very long ago, and he told me, he said, "You know what? Where's the little lady that used to work up front here and she wore a cap all the time?" And I showed

him a picture of her and explained that she was deceased. And he was so sorry. And he said, “You know, I met a lifetime friend because of that lady.”

MH: Oh, wow.

MA: He said there was a gentleman sitting at the table. The only spot that was available was next to him. And he said, “I was standing around at the door, waiting to see a seat some place, find a seat some place and she told me to go have a seat right by that man there and talk to him because I want y’all to sing with me.” And she came over and she made them sing a church song with her. And when it was over, he said he and that man laughed and talked for so long. They sat there for hours. And they kept in touch with each other, and they were still friends.

MH: Wow.

MA: So, you may not want to use the word force, but, I mean, you know, it was kind of like forced on them. I mean, she just made everybody, “Hey, this is just one big happy family, so if you come here, you’re going to have to sit wherever I tell you to sit. You’re going to have to eat. You’re going to have to do whatever”—she would pray with them. She would sing with them. And she—that’s what everybody is used to. I had a customer tell me also, not long ago, she came in and we had done a little painting on the wall or something. And she noticed it, and the place has, kind of, fallen a part. You know, let’s face it, it’s not a very nice looking place. But we were trying to do some repairs. And she said, “Well, just don’t do too much.” And I said, “Well, why? We’re thinking about getting a new barbecue place here.” And at the time, we were. My husband

and I were talking to the pastor about it. She said, “Oh, no. No, no, no.” She said, “If you do, you’re going to lose an awful lot of customers. She said, “This is the reason we come to this place. Because this is the way it was, when we first started coming, and it’s still the same way.” So, they don’t want to see any changes made. They don’t want a new building. They want it just like it was from day one. It’s amazing but it’s true. It really is.

CK: How old is the building? And what was it before it was barbecue.

MA: Well before I think it was like a little—the building was built for Mrs. Ward. When she first got started, she came here with her husband who was working with the pastor building this church. They were building this church. And she was making barbecue for the pastor and her husband underneath an umbrella with the little barbecue pit and a table. And men were driving by and they smelled the barbecue and they started coming back asking her if they could buy a sandwich. And she first said no because “I’m just cooking for my husband and the pastor.” And so many people stopped that the pastor finally told her, “Well, you know, maybe you should start selling. That will be money for us, so maybe you should start selling them sandwiches.” So, they started getting enough for her to cook and started selling sandwiches. And the business got so big that they had to put her up a little building. I don’t think it was that one, but they put something up for her. And then, it went from that, to what you see there now. And as far as how many years it’s been here, I’m sure it’s well over, I’d say, twenty-five for sure.

00:09:11

MH: When was it that Mrs. Ward started selling the barbecue?

MA: That's what I cannot remember.

MH: Oh, I see.

MA: I don't know the exact—she didn't even know to tell me because I tried—I tried to find out from here. But it had been so long, she didn't know the exact date. But the pastor can tell you probably the nearest. He can probably get closest to it than anybody else. It's been well over twenty some odd years.

MH: So, you mentioned the women who would direct traffic and facilitate new relationships. And you mentioned that she had passed. What—how does the—does the restaurant close down when a member of your congregation passes? Or—

MA: Uh-huh. Yes. We certainly do.

MH: Is yours an aged congregation? Is everybody kind of—

MA: Yes. Everybody—we don't have a lot of youth at all. We—we don't have a lot of—we have some college students that come here under watch care, but most of our congregation is settled people that are older folks like me and my husband—older than us. So, that's what were made of.

MH: Can you talk a little bit—I know this community is really important to you—can you talk a little bit about what the community is like and why it, you know, what it's meant for you?

MA: Well, you know what, before I got married and moved to this church, I didn't really know much about this part of town because I always lived on another end of town. So, once I married my husband and came out here and started coming to this church, that was the first time I actually knew anything about this end of town. And, as far as the community is concerned, I think it's close-knit. The people are all loving people, they really are. There's not a lot of people left out here really. I've seen pictures of the church from years back, and the people that went to church here, and I've talked to some of the decedents of those people, and they're all just kind of died out. So, it's not very many left. Those that are have moved away. There's a lady across the street there—a couple of ladies and some down the street a little bit further. They don't go to this church at all though. But I happen to know them. So, it's not a lot of people in, say, this community per say.

MH: What has—you—you mentioned this part of town. I get the sense that this is kind of on the outskirts of Huntsville proper. Is that correct?

MA: Yes, it is.

MH: And so, is this sort of an older part of town?

MA: Yes, very old. It sure is. As a matter of fact, this—this Montgomery Road has always been called Possum Walk Road [*Laughs*]. During all my childhood days, it was called Possum Walk Road. And I just didn't know people out this way. So, that's why I didn't—didn't come out this way. I was from the other end—you know where Eleventh Street is in Huntsville? Are you familiar with Huntsville?

MH: Not terribly.

MA: No. Okay, across town on the other side is the area that I lived in. So, I didn't know much about this side of town out here at all.

MH: What is your favorite food item here at New Zion Church Barbecue? If you came in to order a meal, what would you order?

MA: I would say brisket. The brisket it my favorite. It really is. Of course, without the sauce.

MH: And why is that?

MA: Well, I'm diabetic.

MH: Oh, okay.

MA: I can't use the sauce.

CK: That's a good reason [*Laughter*].

MH: And so no pie either?

MH: Well, no. No. Not any pie either. Every now and then I get a piece of pie [*Laughter*].

CK: Which pie is your favorite?

MA: The sweet potato. I like the sweet potato pie.

MH: I was just thinking about taking some of it home with me today [*Laughter*]. Okay, is that? I think that pretty much wraps it up. Thank you so much for your time today.

MA: Welcome. Thank you for coming.

[END OF PART 2]

00:13:49

[END OF INTERVIEW]

