

An Interview With
MRS. FRUCHIA TUCKER

September 12, 1977

Interviewed by
Daisy Greene

Mississippi
Department of Archives and History
and the
Washington County Library System
Oral History Project:
Greenville and Vicinity

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Interviewee: Fruchia Tucker

Interviewer: Daisy Greene

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Scope Note: The Washington County Library System, with assistance from the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, conducted oral history interviews with local citizens. The project interviews took place between 1976 and 1978. The interviewees included long-term residents of the Greenville-Washington County area in their late 50's and older.

GREENE: September 12, 1977. This is Daisy Greene, Oral History Project Interviewer for the Washington County Library System, interviewing Mrs. Fruchia Tucker at her home at 204 Colorado Street, in Greenville, Mississippi. The subject is: "Making Hot Tamales in the David Tucker Family."

Mrs. Tucker, please give me your father's name and something about his background.

TUCKER: My husband's name is David C. Tucker. His father's and mother's names are Mr. and Mrs. James Tucker, of Anguilla, Mississippi. My mother's parents were Mr. and Mrs. Tom and Alma Thomas, of Detroit, Michigan.

GREENE: Do you know your mother's maiden name?

TUCKER: My mother's maiden name is Thomas.

GREENE: Now, the date and place of your birth, Mrs. Tucker.

TUCKER: I was born March 11, 1910, in Trail Lake, Mississippi, on April 14, 1911, and we moved to Greenville in 1922. I became acquainted with them in the year 1927. They were making hot tamales then, and David sold them at the school.

GREENE: So that is how he got into the hot tamale business, through his father? Working after school?

TUCKER: Yes, working after school with his father.

GREENE: Over the years, has the method of making hot tamales changed?

TUCKER: The method of making hot tamales has never changed.

GREENE: Would it be stealing secrets from the business if you told me what you put into them?

TUCKER: No. It is not a secret. We use spice, pepper, cumino seed, chili powder, powdered garlic, and, of course, for your meal, we use plain, and for your meat we use beef, which is called "plate", or the hind quarter of the steer.

GREENE: So the real secret is in knowing the proportions and knowing just how to season it?

TUCKER: Yes, the quantity that you are making.

GREENE: When you married Mr. Tucker, where were the hot tamales made?

TUCKER: When I married Mr. Tucker, they were made at his father's and mother's home. This was their only means of livelihood.

GREENE: How many children did your husband's father have?

TUCKER: One son.

GREENE: Just the one son?

TUCKER: One son.

GREENE: And you live on Colorado Street now. When and why did you move from his father's home?

TUCKER: We moved from Colorado Street in the year 1955 for a larger place to make hot tamales from our own house we lived in.

GREENE: Are they made in your home now?

TUCKER: Yes, they are -- no, we have changed since the death of my husband. We use the house next door to us for only the business of making hot tamales.

GREENE: Now, formerly, you used shucks to wrap the tamales in. Where did you get them?

TUCKER: We used to get them from barns and different places in the country - go to different people's barns and they would let us cut the shucks from around the ear of corn, and after we did that, we would have to boil them to get them soft. After that method we began to order processed shucks, from Los Angeles, California. Now we are using ripple paper, which is cut in the right size for tamales.

GREENE: When you went through the process of cleaning the shucks that you picked up from barns, was it a very time-consuming process?

TUCKER: Yes, it was, because after boiling them, we had to silk them, cut them, boil and then re-rinse them.

GREENE: You say you use some synthetic paper - or some paper now. Is it more expensive than the shucks?

TUCKER: Yes, the ripple paper is a little more expensive than the shucks, but it is more convenient.

GREENE: So that's the advantage. What would you say are the best nights for sales?

TUCKER: The best nights for sales are Friday and Saturday.

GREENE: Is there any special season when they go faster?

TUCKER: Well, most holidays, and during the summer months vacationing we have a lot of out-of-town orders.

GREENE: During your husband's experience selling hot tamales, has he ever been held up?

TUCKER: No hold-ups, and we have been thankful for that.

GREENE: Where do you operate now?

TUCKER: We sell now from a stand on the corner of North and Nelson Streets. In the early days, the method was a tamale wagon, and it was pushed over the streets - around the streets in Greenville to make a sale.

GREENE: Did you have to have a license for that?

TUCKER: Yes.

GREENE: How did you keep them warm?

TUCKER: They are kept warm by the newspaper packing around the can.

GREENE: Where on earth do you get enough newspaper to keep that up night after night?

TUCKER: Well, once you have them packed, it can remain the same.

GREENE: Oh, the same paper?

TUCKER: It will keep the same. You put your container in, and the fitting is already there for it.

GREENE: Of what material is the container made?

TUCKER: Aluminized pot.

GREENE: Say that again.

TUCKER: Aluminum pot - a heavy aluminum pot.

GREENE: Now that your husband is dead, Mrs. Tucker, who operates the business?

TUCKER: Since my husband's death, my son, Verdell Tucker, operates the business, with his sister's help -- Flora Peyton.

GREENE: Does anybody else help besides the two children?

TUCKER: No.

GREENE: Just the two. I guess that keeps them pretty busy. How often do they make hot tamales?

TUCKER: Every day except Sunday.

GREENE: Do you have any idea about how many they make per day?

TUCKER: Well, possibly 150 dozen a day.

GREENE: Do you have any left-overs?

TUCKER: Sometimes a few left-overs.

GREENE: Can they be re-heated?

TUCKER: Yes, they can.

GREENE: It would be interesting to know what hot tamales sold for when you first married, compared with what they sell for now.

TUCKER: When we first married, tamales were sold for twenty cents a dozen, when my husband took over the business from his father. Now they are \$1.70 a dozen.

GREENE: Was this his only means of livelihood?

TUCKER: Yes, this was his only means of livelihood.

GREENE: And at twenty cents a dozen he could still provide for his family?

TUCKER: He could provide for his family at twenty cents a dozen.

GREENE: Are there any other blacks in the hot tamale business now?

TUCKER: Yes, there are quite a few blacks in the hot tamale business. Two that I personally know, Spots Hot Tamales, in Greenville, and Peyton's Hot Tamales, in Indianola, Mississippi.

GREENE: You've been dealing with hot tamales practically all of your life. Do you enjoy eating them, Mrs. Tucker?

TUCKER: No.

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GREENE: What about your daughter and your son?

TUCKER: Yes, my daughter loves them.

GREENE: She has them all day and yet she eats them at night!

TUCKER: That's right.

GREENE: Have there been any instances where, through haste, they were either over-seasoned or under-seasoned, and they were not salable?

TUCKER: I don't know of any complaints about the seasoning.

GREENE: Is there any interesting side of the business that we haven't touched?

TUCKER: Well, we've practically gone over all of the main points of it.

GREENE: Oh, I should have asked you about Health Department inspections.

TUCKER: Yes, we have to have health inspections. Everybody who works in the place has to have a Health Card, and the place is inspected once a year.

GREENE: Do you have much waste from bones - scraps left over? Do you have any trouble with rats?

TUCKER: No, because the type of meat we use, usually doesn't have many bones in it.

GREENE: You said you sold hot tamales from a stand on Watson Street. Now, during the bitter winter

nights, how do you protect yourself from the cold?

TUCKER: We have an electric heater in the place to keep warm by.

GREENE: Do you have any white customers?

TUCKER: Yes, we have many white customers. Some of our white customers will probably bring a container to the house to put their tamales in when they are serving for a large party.

GREENE: I think he has had a very successful life with his tamales.

TUCKER: Yes, he has had a very successful life with his tamales, and in the raising of our four children.

GREENE: And where are the boys -- no, one boy is here, operating the business - where is the other boy?

TUCKER: My oldest son, David Tucker, is in the Veterans Hospital in Jackson, Mississippi, at this particular time.

GREENE: And your daughters?

TUCKER: My daughter Myrtle is living here in Greenville, and operates Patterson's Florist Shop. My baby daughter, Flora Peyton, lives here in Greenville and helps her brother with the tamale business.

GREENE: Each time I pass your house - the hot tamale house - Mrs. Tucker, this is what I think: "There is the house that David Tucker's hot tamales built." It's a

beautiful little white house on a half-acre plot. I also think of this quite often: Do you remember I taught your husband, David, in the Ninth Grade at Lizzie Coleman High School? At the end of the first six-weeks' test, I was distributing papers, and I asked, "Where is David Tucker?" Someone said, "Oh, he married!" And I thought to myself, "Why didn't he marry before I graded this paper?" You know, at that time teachers were over-loaded, and each paper that one didn't have to mark was a great relief. I never think of hot tamales that I don't think of David Tucker's first test.

(End of Interview)

(Transcribed by Alice C. Nagel)

FINAL
1/18/78
Alice C. Nagel

INDEX
OF FRUCHIA TUCKER
BY SHERILYN D. ALLEN

Aluminum pot, 5
Anguilla, Mississippi, mentioned, 1
Colorado Street, mentioned, 1, 2
Detroit, Michigan, mentioned, 1
Health Card, 7
Health Department, inspections, 7
Hot tamales, 1-9
Indianola, Miss., mentioned, 6
Jackson, Mississippi, mentioned, 8
Lizzie Coleman High School, 9
Los Angeles, California, mentioned, 3
Myrtle (Fruchia Tucker's daughter), operator, Patterson's
 Florist Shop, 8
Nelson Street, mentioned, 4
North Street, mentioned, 4
Patterson's Florist Shop, 8
Peyton, Flora, daughter, 5, 8
Peyton's Hot Tamales (Indianola, Mississippi), 6
Ripple Paper, 3, 4
Shucks, 3, 4
Spots Hot Tamales (Greenville, Mississippi), 6
Tamale Wagon, 4
Thomas, Alma, grandmother, 1

Thomas, Tom, grandfather, 1
Trail Lake, Mississippi, mentioned, 1
Tucker, _____ (Mrs.), mother-in-law, 1
Tucker, David (family), the, 1
Tucker, David, son, 8
Tucker, David C., husband, 1, 2, 8, 9
Tucker, Fruchia: born in Trail Lake, Mississippi, 1; hot
tamale business, 1-9; children-Vernell, 5; Flora
Peyton, 5, 8; Myrtle, 8
Tucker, James, father-in-law, 1
Tucker, Vernell, son, 5
Veterans Hospital (Jackson, Mississippi), mentioned, 8
Watson Street, mentioned, 7

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