

THE BRIGHT STAR

304 19th Street North
Bessemer, AL 35020
(205) 426-1861
www.thebrightstar.com

"The Bright Star, when it first opened up [at this location] in 1915, used to be open close to twenty-four hours a day. It was just people coming from mining towns[for] coffee, doughnuts, chili—whatever...Even when I was a child, [Bessemer] was so crowded that] people couldn't walk the streets."

--Jimmy Koikos

Opened by Greek immigrant Tom Bonduris in 1907, The Bright Star is Alabama's oldest restaurant still in operation. The restaurant has seen three other locations over the years, but The Bright Star has been in its current location in the mining town of Bessemer, just outside of Birmingham, since 1915. Bill and Pete Koikos (Tom Bonduris was their great-uncle) took over the restaurant in the 1920's, and Bill's sons, Jimmy And Nick Koikos, are still there, greeting regulars and overseeing the expansive menu that includes fresh fish, steak and some outstanding pie. The Bright Star's Greek-style snapper and Trout Almondine are legendary, but you can also find a rare delicacy like snapper throats or the unusual pineapple cream cheese pie. The interior of the restaurant is true to its 1915 glory, with handpainted murals on the walls, a marble-tiled floor, and even a couple of private curtained booths—a tradition that, as it turns out, is not unique to Mississippi. The Bright Star will be celebrating its 100th anniversary in 2007, and you can bet there will be one heck of a celebration.

Full Interview Transcription:

Jimmy Koikos, Owner
THE BRIGHT STAR
304 19th Street North
Bessemer, AL 35020
(205) 426-1861
www.thebrightstar.com

INTERVIEWER: Amy Evans
DATE: March 11, 2004 @ 9:00 a.m.
LOCATION: Booth in main dining room
LENGTH: Approx. 35 minutes

NOTE: Various sounds occur throughout this interview. Rather than mention them individually and interrupt the flow of the conversation, they are noted here: the restaurant's background music can be heard continuously, Mr. Koikos can be heard playing with the business card I gave him before the

interview began, the phone rings regularly, many employees pass to say hello, and employees can be heard setting up for service. When the sounds heard are an obvious interruption to the interview, they are noted in the transcript.

* * *

Amy Evans: It's—

Jimmy Koikos: That music bother you?

AE: I think it's fine.

JK: Okay.

AE: It'll be a nice background—

JK: Okay.

AE: --to our conversation. Um, this is Thursday, March eleventh, two thousand and four. And I'm in Bessemer at The Bright Star restaurant. And sir, if you wouldn't mind introducing yourself and also, if you don't mind, stating your age for the record here?

[Sound of microphone being turned around]

JK: Okay.[Clears Throat] I'm Jimmy Koikos. K-O-I-K-O-S. Owner of The Bright Star restaurant. It's been in business since 1907. Okay.

AE: Okay, and your birthdate?

JK: Birthday is fourth, twenty-first, thirty-eight.

AE: Okay. You can just ignore that. [Mr. Koikos was conscious of the microphone and leaning into it when he spoke] It will pick up—

JK: Yeah.

AE: --your voice.

JK: Okay.

AE: Um, and the restaurant was opened by Tom Bonduris, originally. Is—

JK: Right.

AE: --that correct?

JK: Right, a great uncle of my dad's [Bill Koikos].

AE: Okay. And when did he [Mr. Bonduris] come to Birmingham from Greece?

JK: He came to Birmingham in—in—in the—the history we got—in the late eighties. In the late eighteen—about eighteen eighty-s—eighty-eight or eighty-nine.

AE: Okay.

JK: He came to this country as a young thing. He—he worked as a waiter. And then he opened up a restaurant in Birmingham. And he called it The Bright Star, but it didn't last long [phone rings in background]. And he heard about Bessemer being the young, mining, progressive town, so he came here and [announcement about a telephone call on the intercom] opened up The Bright Star a few—[second announcement] with a few years experience in a restaurant in 1907. And we are now—you are sitting in the fourth location of The Bright Star. I can show some pictures of how the first, second, third—And, uh—and The Bright Star has been in its present location [clears throat] since 1915.

AE: Okay.

JK: We've been in this same location in 1915.

AE: Okay. Well, let me back up and ask you some more about, um, Mr. Bonduris. Do you know where in Greece he came from?

JK: Where—what part of Greece?

AE: Yes, sir.

JK: He came from it—it—it's a place—same place my daddy [Bill Koikos] ca—came. In, uh, in—in the south—southwest part of Greece. A country town--[Clears throat] Excuse me. --called, in Greek, Peleta, Greece [Peleta is a neighboring town of Tsitalia, where many other Greeks now living in Birmingham came from. George Sarris, owner of the Fish Market Restaurant, is from Tsitalia, for example].

AE: Okay.

JK: Just a country town, or whatever. That's the same place my daddy came from. My daddy came—you'll probably ask me later—in 1920 to The Bright Star.

AE: Okay. And, um, Mr. Bonduris—do you know wh--if he came to Greece—I'm sorry, to Birmingham by himself? Or what brought him here?

JK: He came—he had a brother that had come to—earlier--in New York. And so, we don't know exactly why—of the history, but he came to Birmingham. There were Greek immigrants in the late eighteen hundreds, early nineteen hundreds, coming to America for a better opportunity.

AE: Um-hmm.

JK: You know. Going—a lot of immigrants coming back then.

AE: Um-hmm.

JK: Now, why he came to Birmingham, I don't know. He—but he seemed like he—he brought his brothers—he brought my dad, and he just—a lot of people followed him from the same town.

AE: Yeah. And your father, um, came quite a few years after—

JK: Yeah.

AE: --he had already been here.

JK: Bright Star—my daddy came in 1920. He came straight to The Bright Star in 1920 and—until he passed away in 1988 at the age of ninety-four.

AE: Okay. And so—the quick math there—how old was he when he came to Birmingham.

JK: When he came to Birmingham, he was twenty-five years old.

AE: Okay. Okay. And he came straight to work at The Bright Star.

JK: He came from thing—came off Ellis Island--thing. They told him where his brother—now, his brother was already here.

AE: Um-hmm.

JK: Tom Bonduris, the owner of The Bright Star, we we're just discussing. And the owner was, uh—and—and--and my dad's brother was here. And he got here and walked through these doors and started working as a young immigrant to learn the language, to send his mother everything he made, so she could live in Greece and [taps business card he's holding on the table] then—oh, well.

AE: Can you talk about the size of The Bright Star at that time?

JK: The size of The Bright Star is—you are sitting right now where it's fifty [Mr. Koikos turns to point down the length of the part of the restaurant we are sitting in] by a hundred [feet].

AE: Fifty by a hundred.

JK: Fifty by a hundred.

AE: Okay.

JK: Yeah. That was the original 1915 Bright Star.

AE: Okay.

AE: And I understand that there was a horseshoe [shaped] bar in here somewhere.

JK: It—it was a horse—c—it was a horseshoe bar in number one—Bright Star number one—and Bright Star number two.

AE: Oh, okay.

JK: And there was a long bar that went over here [Mr. Koikos turns again to point down the length of the part of the restaurant o the back] all the way back to those private booths.

AE: Okay.

JK: These private booths—I'll show you—are the orig—they've been here since 1915.

AE: Have they really?

JK: Yeah. Right. Of course.

AE: Do you know how that—

JK: And—

AE: --tradition started with the private booths?

JK: It—ma'am?

AE: Do you know how that started? To have the private booths?

JK: Well, it's just, uh—it just—somebody--somebody, uh, had told him that people had liked six or eight private—private booths back there in--in 1915. So he—he has four private booths.

AE: Huh.

JK: Four private booths. [Sound of Mr. Koikos's hand hitting the microphone.]

AE: Because there are some restaurants in Greenwood, Mississippi, that are known for their private—

JK: Yeah. Yeah.

AE: --dining booths that started in the thirties.

JK: [Turns to man who is leaving the restaurant] Okay, I'll see you! [To the interviewer] I'm sorry.

AE: That's okay.

JK: Uh, we've added, uh, we've added a lot more.

AE: Okay.

JK: Yeah, the—now—sure do.

AE: Interesting.

JK: Yeah.

AE: And are these murals here that I'm looking at in this dining room--? [There are landscape murals above each booth in this dining room.]

JK: These murals are been up there since 1915. They were painted by a European artist. He painted that first one with--I'll cut the light here—with a guy fishing—

AE: Okay.

JK: --he painted it, and he painted in Brighton, Alabama, which is just up the street. He was kind of just—really, like a wino, but he had talent.

AE: Uh-huh.

JK: So he painted that thing, and Mr. Bonduris liked it, so he painted all European thing. And then he painted these murals one by one [phone ringing in background]—

AE: Uh-huh.

JK: Put them up. [Phone rings again] Then they fed him and wined him and—and he just wandered on through.

AE: So he did it like—

JK: He never dreamed they'd be up here ninety years later.

AE: [Laughs] I bet not.

JK: Yeah.

AE: So did he just do it for trade?

JK: Yes, ma'am.

AE: For food? Um--

JK: For trade and maybe we talk—talked to Mr. Bonduris a little bit—maybe a little money.

AE: Okay.

JK: Yeah, a trade but—go on.

AE: Okay. And so, um, how did the menu, um, come about for the restaurant? Do you have any idea?

JK: Menus? Uh, we've got some nineteen twenties and thirties menus. Uh, but, uh, we understand that over there in the early nineteen tens there were, you know, uh—soup was a nickel, and, uh, you know, it included a drink and, uh—you know, uh, fif—ten or fifteen cents for—for hamburgers and, uh, chili. They had chili back then.

AE: Okay. So it was a little more casual place than it is now.

JK: Yeah. He had a little more casual place and then, when he built this, it was a really kind of an upscale restaurant with a marble—this--that's a nineteen fifteen marble floor there.

AE: Okay.

JK: Yeah. We've, uh, changed it around a few—

AE: Yeah.

JK: Yeah.

AE: [Laughs] And so when did the restaurant start being a steak and seafood restaurant?

JK: It became a -it—a—it—it—it became a seafood restaurant and a steak restaurant in the nineteen—I would say, thirties. When we--they started getting fresh snapper. And it's still a specialty today called "Bright Star's Snapper Greek-Style."

AE: Okay.

JK: Fresh snapper, broiled with a little oregano, olive oil, lemon juice and s-- [sound Mr. Koikos's hand hitting the microphone]—I mean, it's still today one of the drawing cards, you know--

AE: Okay.

JK: --that we have.

AE: Well, you say that you started that kind of menu style [staff member singing in background]—or that was started in the thirties. How did the stock market crash affect business?

JK: The stock market crash—my daddy was here in 1929 when the stock market, uh, crashed. They could hardly pay their rent. Uh, they could, uh, just, you know—of course nobody was doing, uh--they, uh, even they said sometime they would just feed people. You know, they would feed people. And, uh, they didn't know, uh—and going, of course, nobody was doing business. The stock market had crashed. The economy was zero. And, uh, they just, you know, made it from year to year until I—I—until the stock market was over and then, of course, Roosevelt got elected and things picked up in forty-five.

AE: Okay.

JK: And, yeah. Well—oh, he [Roosevelt] died in forty-five. And business picked up in the early thirties.

AE: Okay.

JK: Yeah.

AE: And what was the town of Bessemer like during those days?

JK: The town of Bessemer was booming. The Bright Star, when it first opened up here in 1915, used to be open close to twenty-four hours a day. It was just people coming from mining towns—coffee, doughnuts, chili—and, uh, and whatever. And it—there—maybe about [short pause] I've heard of four-thirty or five [in the morning] they would clean up and get—get ready.

And then there'd come breakfast and people going—there was about twenty-four—it was a—the towns were [phone rings in background]—on Friday and weekends or whatever—even when I was a child, you'd go just like--people couldn't walk the streets, you know.

AE: Uh-huh.

JK: Going and just a real booming town.

AE: Was this [announcement on loudspeaker]—well, is this now or has this been—primarily an immigrant area? Are there a lot of Greek im—immigrants or other immigrants in Bessemer.

JK: No, uh, uh—not in Bessemer. There was—there was a few Greek restaurants, but most of the Greek immigrants were in Birmingham.

AE: Okay.

JK: Which is, you know, not far. Thirteen, fifteen miles from here.

AE: Um-hmm.

JK: Oh, I know a lot of people travel from Birmingham regularly—

JK: Yeah.

AE: --to come visit you.

JK: Yeah. We have, uh, wer—we're blessed. We have a—a nice restaurant, good people and [sniffs] we still f—serve the, uh--the, uh, Greek snapper, and we have the snapper throats, which is the throats. And, uh, we've expanded, as you can see. You know, a lot.

AE: The snapper throats, you say?

JK: Yeah, we have snapper throats, which is the throats of the snapper, and we fry it, with vegetables. It's got bones. It's one of the—it's different. It's—it's a delicacy. It's a—people just love it.

AE: Huh.

JK: And—you know. Long as it's fresh, you know.

AE: Um-hmm.

JK: We, uh, get the whole snapper. We've got a fishing room. We cut all our fish, all our steaks.

AE: And you get them shipped fresh from the Gulf?

JK: We get fresh from Panama City Beach [Florida].

AE: Okay.

JK: We get them two to three times a week. With—like he'll deliver about fifteen hundred pounds in a morning. Of snapper—to town, you know.

AE: Wow.

JK: And sometimes you can't get snapper, and we get black grouper, which is fresh.

AE: Huh. And how did the name "The Bright Star" come about?

JK: That's a good question. We had done a lot of research on that. My sister is at—that's—back in the late, uh, in the early nineteen hundreds, they were opening a lot of—lot of restaurants. Like—there—there was a restaurant called "Gold Star" in Birmingham. There was a restaurant called "Silver Star." And there was a restaurant in, um, in Taladega [Talladega] called some kind of—they we're named "star." And so, Mr. Bonduris was—he was a very smart man. Not a very educ—no, he couldn't get educated but smart and a good businessman. And he said—he looked--he said this restaurant is a "Bright Star." And so, uh, he—he—you know, with a vision of, uh, nothing but a land of opportunity.

AE: Um-hmm. Do you know what year that neon sign went up outside?

JK: Yes, nineteen forty—forty-one. We've had the same neon sign there—

AE: Yeah, it seems to be a trademark out there.

JK: Yeah. Yeah.

AE: [Laughs] Um, and so what was it like for you growing up in the restaurant business?

JK: Well, I grew up, and I finished Bessemer High School down here—and thing, you know. And my daddy was—of course, he'd work and I'd come and I'd work and, you know, and pick up dishes and mop the floors, and he taught me to work. But—and I went to the University of Alabama and graduated and then—[sniffs] in 1960, um, my dad's brother, Mr. Pete was here and kind of retired. And so he said are you—come in and—I said, "No, I'll come in and work." "But," I said, "I don't want—I don't want to work in this business," you know. Anyway, I came in and [sniffs]—and you know, started working and saw that, if you're going to make any money from

yourself, that you've got to go into business for yourself and not work for the other fella.

AE: [Laughs]

JK: So I got in it, and then my brother [Nick] graduated—Niki is with me now. He graduated the University in—in, um, sixty—sixty-seven, sixty-eight. And he came in—and so were both in here.

AE: What did you all major in, uh, in college?

JK: Business Administration.

AE: Okay.

JK: And accounting.

AE: Okay.

JK: Oh, yeah.

AE: And so under you watch, what kind of changes have happened here at The Bright Star?

JK: Oh! Golly, gosh, there's lots. There's been a lot—from minimum wage when it hardly wasn't anything. From a dollar and a quarter to now. We've watched the Civil Rights transition of —of, uh—[sniffs] of, uh—you know, passing the Civil Rights Bill and, you know. Uh, getting minorities to, you know, come in and the little turmoil that was. Uh--

AE: Was this always an integrated restaurant, or did some of those changes happen with the Civil Rights Act.

JK: No, no. It wasn't in—it wasn't integrated in, uh—when--fifty-seven, fifty-eight. And, of course, when the [armed] service[s] started integrating, you know. People thought it would be—you know. It just passed over and today, of course, there's not even a second thought about it. Uh, we've seen, uh, expansions. We've seen four different expansions here at the Bright Star. We bought this building in the late seventies. It's got three stories upstairs. We've renovated it. Got a UDAC grant. We've renovated the whole thing. We've—it's got offices--accountants and lawyers and stuff upstairs. Uh, we've, uh, exp—expanded a room called the "1907 Room" over here. We've expanded over here for banquets. And in 2001 we added a bar.

AE: Okay.

JK: And it's kept together. You—I—it's something that you had to do with, uh, to fight, uh, modern-day competition. And, you know to do these things

are—I don't think we'd be in business today fighting all these--the independents—fighting all these chain outfits.

AE: Um-hmm.

JK: To have to, uh, fight every day, you know.

AE: Um-hmm.

JK: Oh, I—there are a lot of, uh [short pause] restaurants in Birmingham that are—Michael's, La Patee, uh, Joy Yung's, Greenwood Café—that are not here today, you know.

AE: My mother remembers eating at Joy Yung's. Ac—

JK: Uh-huh.

AE: She's from Decatur [Alabama].

JK: Yeah.

AE: And, uh, she—

JK: You know.

AE: --has fond memories of that place.

JK: So we're blessed. And, as you know, we're, uh, working hard on our hundredth year anniversary.

AE: Yeah.

JK: In 2007. We're, uh—I got a niece in there and we're—we're writing a book, and we're researching. Called *Bright Star: The First Hundred Years*, you know.

AE: Oh, really?

JK: There was a woman in here—I thought--it happened about a month ago. She was eating one Saturday. She said, "Are you the owner?" I said, "Yes, ma'am." She said, "May I ask your last name?" I said, "Koikos." She said, "I just want to know one thing: Is there going to be a Bright Star in Heaven"

AE: [Laughs]

JK: Because your place is just so wonderful." And that's one of the nicest things that I've heard. So, we're thinking about naming the book *Bright Star in Heaven*, you know. Which is, you know, we know a lot of history that has

happened and, like I've told you, the changes we've made and, uh [snifs]—you know, we've spent a lot of money, but we're here. Because [short pause], you know, we keep improving, you know.

AE: Um-hmm.

JK: From, uh—you can imagine, from 1907 to computers.

AE: Sure.

JK: You know, to just writing a book and whatever. And—and, uh. But, you know, you have to be—have to work hard.

AE: Uh-huh.

JK: You have to be a little lucky, you know. To be at the right place at the right time.

AE: Do you and your brother have children of your own?

JK: No. I've got stepchildren. I have got a wife—I have—I have—I have a step—I have a stepson, but he's probably going to be a doctor.

AE: Yeah.

JK: And then my brother don't have any [children]. So we—we got a niece that's in the business and is very active right there. Now, what's going to happen to the future? We're going to wait until 2007 and then kind of worry about that, you know.

AE: Yeah.

JK: It's a—the restaurant is, uh--it—it's popular, uh, people, uh, have got, you know, uh—like I told in another interview, uh, there's a lot of respect for The Bright Star. Uh, we've had to fight location. We're off the beaten path. People have to come down here to us. We—we in a —we're in a city that was booming that is not exactly, you know, booming anymore, you know. Of course we're not far from Hoover, [Highway]150, we're not far from the freeway and, um, I'm sure that if we had probably—

[A female server walks by the booth where the interview is taking place and addresses us]

SERVER: Good morning!

AE: Morning!

JK: Morning. We'd probably have a different location, we'd probably be but—we still average about five thousand people a week. Forty-eight, forty-nine hundred people a week. And, you know. And, uh—

AE: How many people can you serve here at a time?

JK: We serve—we seat about three hundred and fifty people.

AE: Okay, and how many employees do you have?

JK: Huh? Eighty-two. Seven days a week.

AE: And I understand some of them have been with you for some time.

JK: Oh, we've got some great people. We've got one girl, thirty-five years, and one twenty-seven years. One seventeen years. Uh, our chef's been here twelve years. [Phone rings] The waitress is just—is off today, Ann, uh, twenty-three years.

AE: My goodness.

JK: And, uh, you know, that's a success of the restaurant is to have people like that. We take a lot--pride in our people. [Announcement comes over the loudspeaker: "Brandi to the front, please] We have a lot of meetings, you know, and talk to these people. And if--we've got a real good—people. Of course, we try to take care of them, you know, and whatever and go on. Because being open everyday it's—it's a tradition, you know, the—we'd like to probably close one day a week but—I guess we—It's a tradition, you know. And me and my brother work very good together and, you know. He leaves and when he leaves, I go to work. And when I go somewhere, I go over there. So we have a—we have a nice working relationship, which means a lot. You know, a lot of restaurants don't close up. Of course, they do in Bessemer. You know, a lot of restaurants close up because they can't get along, you know. As you probably know that.

AE: [Laughs] Um, have you visited Greece?

JK: Yes! Love it!

AE: Do you visit often?

JK: Uh, I've visited twice and plan to go back next August.

AE: Oh, okay.

JK: This coming August. Yes, ma'am.

AE: Okay.

JK: It's [unintelligible phrase].

AE: And do you visit your father's hometown?

JK: Yeah, I have—my—my—I've have slept in the house that my dad was born.

AE: Really?

JK: And everything. And so when—I've got some first cousins over there. One first cousin over there. I've got two first cousins and—three first cousins, all boys, [clears throat] in Tallahatchie, Florida.

AE: Uh-huh.

JK: My—uh, dad and their dads were brothers.

AE: Okay.

JK: And we're very close. And, uh, we keep up with each other. And, uh, so, you know. We go and, uh—of course, you know, good food over there too! [Laughs]

AE: [Laughs] Do you speak Greek?

JK: Yes.

AE: Okay.

JK: I—I don't speak it the best, but when I go [clears throat]—like if you could—if you spoke Greek, I could probably carry on a conversation with you.

AE: Uh-huh. Well, we won't be doing that today! [Laughs]

JK: [Laughs]

AE: So did you grow up in the Greek Orthodox Church?

JK: Yes, ma'am.

AE: Here—is there one here in Bessemer or did you go to Birmingham?

JK: No, no. The one in Birmingham.

AE: Okay.

JK: One ch--used to be two, now there's one. Yeah.

AE: And what was that like growing up? Did you go to Greek school and—

JK: Yes, we went to Greek school. Uh, we—you know, of course, The Bright Star was always open on Sunday and when—when we—my daddy would take me and the next week my uncle would take me, and we'd go to Greek school and Sunday school. That way--of course, we went to Greek school when you were six or seven years old—eight years old—went to Greek school, you know, how boring it was.

AE: [Laughs]

JK: And have to go and—but, uh, my sister was—finished Birmingham Southern College and, uh, she speaks—she speaks Greek pretty well and can write it and, you know, write it there and can carry on a little better conversation than me and my brother can. Yeah.

AE: Um. [Short pause] Well, what do you think about the rest of the—the Greek restaurants in Birmingham? It's such a rich community here—

JK: Yeah.

AE: --and there are so many Greeks in the restaurant business.

JK: Yeah. I—I guess the restaurants, you know, John's is a—is a popular—I don't think it's a Greek restaurant much anymore. Uh, I don't, you know, I don't know who—who's really, uh—can you name—have you interviewed—

AE: Sure, uh, George Sarris at The Fish Market—

JK: Yeah.

AE: --and all the hot dog stands. Gus—

JK: Yeah.

AE: --Koutroulakis at Pete's Famous. Um—

JK: George Sarris does a terrific job.

AE: --Niki's West.

JK: --uh, I know him. And I've never seen anyone more dedicated to the business and, uh, and Gus Koutroulakis at, uh—at Pete's Famous—

AE: Oh, yeah.

JK: It's the—it's the same hole-in-the-wall that's been there—out there. There's not a better hot dog.

AE: [Laughs]

JK: Yeah. Yeah. Uh, Michael's was a good Greek restaurant. And John's was a good Greek restaurant. Uh, and, uh, La Patee was an excellent Greek restaurant. And all of them have, uh, gone, you know—and you would think that us being out here in Bessemer and them in Birmingham, that—that we wouldn't last this long, you know. Going—but, uh—one thing or another.

AE: Well, can we talk about your menu a little bit?

JK: Sure.

AE: Um, that I have here in front of me.

JK: Sure.

AE: You were talking about soup being a quarter or a nickel—I forget now.

JK: Yeah, uh-huh.

AE: And I see now you have seafood and steaks at eighteen and twenty dollars and—

JK: Yes.

AE: --um, I've heard about—

JK: You see these—

AE: --your—

JK: You see the historic pictures that we—

AE: Yes, sir.

JK: --have here. [He points to the photographs on the menu] There's the marble floor and the counter. That's my dad—that's my Uncle Pete over here and my dad. That's me and my dad. That's me and my brother.

AE: Uh-huh. And that—yeah, so this interior looks a lot different.

JK: Yeah.

AE: With the counter and the stools and everything.

JK: Yeah, um-hmm.

AE: Um, and so you have a lot of things that are described as "Greek-style."

JK: Yeah.

AE: And is that just the oregano and—

JK: One of the—

AE: --spices?

JK: One of the most popular—popular steaks in—in the Birmingham area is the beef tenderloin Greek-style. It's a--it's beef—beef tenderloin, we split it, marinate it, and—and p—put a little olive oil a little, uh, Worcestershire sauce we make [phone rings] and we marinate it. [Phone rings] And we put it—and really, I don't know if, um, if you've ever heard of it, but it was a real great restaurant in Montgomery, Alabama, called the Elite [Mr. Koikos pronounces this *eee-lite*]. It was a[n] excellent restaurant and it went and--everything-- and it was in downtown Montgomery and all the leg—state legislators and—and that's where we got [Mr. Koikos's watch hits the table as he points to the menu] this—my dad was—was, uh, good friends with [unintelligible] was the name of it, and that's where they split beef tenderloin steak. That's one steak that I recommend everybody eat. Of course, your Greek snapper's on there. The--the, uh, all—you got Trout Almondine, which is the—which is—which is on the lunch menu, uh, every day.

AE: Uh-huh.

JK: We've got a [Mr. Koikos gets up from the booth to take a phone call] Excuse me.

AE: Sure.

[Short pause in interview with music in the background. Mr Koikos can be heard in the background discussing a fax with one of his employees. Mr. Koikos is held up for a bit, so the recording is stopped for about five minutes.]

JK: Our luncheon menu—

AE: Okay.

JK: From a quarter to eleven 'til three-thirty—you can see all our things. [Mr. Koikos picks up the lunch menu] And you can see, uh, Trout Almondine, which is a specialty. Um, Greek-style chicken, which we have most—and so we just change a little every day. We change our menu [sound of Mr. Koikos

sliding the menu back across the table] every day, and that's—that's our luncheon menu.

AE: Okay. And I know that you're known for the Bananas Foster and some desserts—

JK; Yeah, uh—

AE: --you serve on the weekends.

JK: --Bananas Foster, shortcake.

AE: Yeah.

JK: That came from Commander's Palace in New Orleans.

AE: Really?

JK: Yeah. We had a—want to say—we had a—we had a ch—a chef, Jamie Shannon, the head chef. And he came—brought with him--here about twenty years ago, from Commander's. And he would visit us, and we'd have a New Orleans night here.

AE: Really?

JK: For three nights. And we would serve like six hundred people, eight hundred people, and he—he—and he would come—got publicity and he would have a new—and we would come—James had a very tragic—a great fella—and Ja—when--every body has probably heard of James. And, uh, to make a long story short, he c—he caught cancer and died at the peak—at the early age of forty [phone rings]. And, uh, just a real tragedy to the restaurant industry. To everything. And now we've got one of his assistants that comes. And we've got the Bananas Foster—is a thing. And the Commander's Palace bread pudding.

AE: Okay.

JK: Which is—thing.

[A female employee comes up and says, "Line two, Jimmy."]

JK: [In response] Uh, can you take a message? [To the interviewer] Can I get this phone?

AE: Oh, you sure can.

JK: [To the employee] I—I'll get it.

[Recording stops for about five minutes]

JK: --interrupted sometimes. I'm sorry.

AE: That's okay. It's perfectly fine. Um, okay. So I'm just looking here at your lunch menu, and you have banana nut pie and pineapple cheese pie.

JK: Pineapple cream cheese pie. We make all our pies.

AE: Okay.

JK: We got our pies, uh, fifteen, twenty years ago from different people. The, uh—we make all our pies here. We make them—we got two pastry people that does nothing but make our pies, you know. And we make them every day. We try to keep them fresh, um, lemon ice box is—we've got a lemon ice box that people just—we sell—we serve a lot of them to go. Probably our most pie—then you've got your peanut butter pie, the pineapple cream cheese pie, and coconut pie. Chocolate almond cream pie. They're made from the finest ingredients and—whatever. You see, what we believe in here [phone rings]—and I think it's kept us—is one thing that probably my dad taught me is—just use the best ingredients. [Phone still ringing] We would—you know, a guy called the other day and wanted—said, "I'm Jimmy so-and-so." Wanted to sell me some fish pre-frozen. I said, "You're wasting your time and mine too." If we cannot get fresh fish—if they have a tornado or a hurricane or something. Hurricane—then we put "no fresh fish available." All our pole beans, we shell them. The squash is fresh. The cream potatoes—the potatoes are not instant. And, you know, that's what we believe in and---and that's one, I think, thing will help us reach our hundredth year anniversary.

AE: Um-hmm. Well, was your father a cook? Or your—your uncle?

JK: My father came here—was not a cook. His—his brother h—had—he had , uh, somebody. Uh, Gus Sarris, was a cook back then for a long time. He'd go back in the kitchen—and he would [phone rings], uh, you know, do things and whatever, but he wasn't a—a cook. He—he was not a cook. He was a very—a very, uh, a very—probably as a gentle—gentle man that, uh—anybody—he was just well respected. He—he had the little mints that he would give out to different, uh, people.

AE: Uh-huh.

JK: And whatever. And, uh, my daddy was real thankful and a lot of people—he was thankful for being in America. [Phone rings] Thankful for th—the showers, the toilets, you know, that we take for granted. The air condition that came. And, uh, just a very humble man.

AE: Did he travel back to Greece?

JK: Yes, he went back. He took my sister and went back to Greece in nine—nine—he went back to Greece, uh, one time. Saw his mother. She lived to be a hundred and one before—lot of longevity in the family. I don't—I don't know how long I'm going to get it but, uh—And he went back—

[EMPLOYEE: Need any singles up there, babe?]

JK: That's what—that's what—go on.

EMPLOYEE: Excuse me, Jimmy.

AE: And what's your mother's name?

JK: My mother's name was Anna-Anastasia Micros--M-I-C-R-O-S—Koikos.

AE: Okay. And—

JK: They got married in 1936.

AE: And they met here in Birmingham?

JK: And they met in Birmingham. He—my—my mother was a lot younger than my daddy. My daddy was about thirty—late thirties when he got married, and she was about twenty.

AE: Do you know any of her family's history?

SERVER: You're going to trip me, boss! [An employee walked by our booth, and Mr. Koikos's leg was extended out into the aisle.]

JK: Hold up.

AE: [Laughs]

JK: I'm sorry [To interviewer]

AE: Any of her family's history—when came from Greece to Birmingham?

JK: Uh, my—my—my mother had an aunt that was here—uh, that brought her here. And then her sister and her came. And—go on.

AE: Okay. Well, do you have any, um, stories—great memories from your times here at The Bright Star? Some people who've passed through these doors?

JK: Yeah. One time Vice President Barkley came in here in nineteen—he was Vice President under Harry Truman. They had a Bessemer corn and livestock

festival. And, uh, he came, uh, probably in the late forties. And he came in here. [Sniffs] Of course, George Wallace has been here. Oh, Senator Shelby comes in here, of course. Uh, we have a lot of memories, uh, of—of different famous people, uh, coming in here. You had, uh—you had, uh—a hur--a tornado came through here and blew a sideline down and whatever, uh, that closed us for a few days. Well, you know, as you—as you said, we went through the Depression. And the—good times. Now, I think, we're fighting [short pause] the [sound of employees sorting silverware], uh, chain outfits. There's a new restaurant on every corner, you know.

AE: Um-hmm.

JK: As you know, you know. And, uh [sound of employees sorting silverware]—but there's been a good many—uh, coach Bear Bryant was a, uh, figure, uh—ate here a lot. In fact, we got—we got his booth back there.

AE: Do you?

JK: Uh, there've been a lot of [phone rings] lot of, uh, members of--famous people. Uh, Attorney General Ashcroft came here. Uh, right after Bush got elected. Uh, he came in here and ate some Greek snapper he'd heard about. Uh, we would love to get a President of the United States here when we get our hundredth anniversary but, you know—of course that remains to be seen.

AE: Do you have, uh, other things already in the planning for the anniversary's events?

JK: Yes, we were talking about that book, we've got a lot of historic pictures that a woman's redoing [sniffs], I have the founder and all the people like you saw in there—we got a lot of—a lot of pictures, a lot of people. You know, some pictures with coffee clubs eating here, and we're going to have—you know, have this new room we got here. We want to have some nice historic pictures. We think—we're doing a book. [Sniffs again] We want to have a--we want to have a 1907 day—a menu, you know. So you—I think it will be real good publicity.

AE: Uh-huh.

JK: Um, but we're all working on different things and meeting with people. We want to have a m—a—a—it's going to—uh, have the murals restored.

AE: Oh, wonderful.

JK: I've got a guy coming that's probably—they're so expensive. Probably about fifty or sixty thousand dollars to have them all restored, but it'll really be worth it.

AE: Oh, sure.

JK: You know. And, uh, to get it—I think the e—e—economic view of Bessemer's been kind of—but it's out—it's on a—it's on a[n] up-rise.

AE: Yeah.

JK: Uh, you know, down the highway—Tuscaloosa highway and [Highway]150 and, you know. I think—I think downtown Bessemer is on a--a program to be restored and old buildings being good and, uh—you know, they're be a few people moving. We—we just stuck it out here, really. When—when, uh—when Bessemer was going down, but we just decided to stay out here. We did buy a restaurant on Highland Avenue [in downtown Birmingham] in—in, uh, nineteen, uh, ninety-one. And, um, it was where Pillar's used to be, and we started it and called it the Merritt House. We had it for seven years—very successful—with a partner. And, uh, we—it's just this kind of thing and, uh, we ran it and it was good. And so we decided to sell it. And—and, uh—but we kept on running the Bright Star too.

AE: Um-hmm.

JK: So we've ventured out to real estate and—

AE: Yeah, do I remember correctly that you have a hotel in Florida?

JK: We named--we built a hotel in 1979-80, called The Bright Star Motel. My daddy was living and it—we named it in honor of the Bright S—Star. [Sound of employees sorting silverware] And everything. And it's funny you ask because, uh, we had one—and we—after we—we—expanded—we sold the motels. Uh, we just sold all the motels to expand into condominiums. Being beach front property to expand into condominiums, you know.

AE: What made y'all get interested in the m--hotel business?

JK: Well, I just had a friend—that's a good question—and, uh, we became friends. And he got in a motel, and I said, "I got—I would love to [short pause] go into the motel business with you. And, you know, in Panama City." So one thing led to another, and we got together; and he was the contractor, and I was the investor. And, uh, we enjoyed it, you know. We had a penthouse down there that we built on top of the motel that we enjoyed. We had, you know—we—we—Take a message [Mr. Koikos responds to an employee telling him he has a phone call]. We hated--Take a message and I'll call them right back. [To interviewer again] We hated to sell, but there's a time to buy and a time to build and a time to sell.

AE: Uh-huh. Do you happen to know Aleck Choraitis, who has Andrew's Bar-B-Q up in East Lake?

JK: Yes.

AE: He also has a hotel down there somewhere.

JK: Yeah. Yeah. I've had—I've visited his hotel a lot.

AE: Have you?

JK: Yeah. Yeah, he's got a nice place in the [unintelligible phrase]. I don't think—most of them have been sold a long time. I don't think she's going to sell hers.

AE: Yeah.

JK: Yeah, she loves them. Yeah

AE: [Laughs] Well, my goodness.

JK: Um-hmm. Well, I don't want to keep you here, um—

JK: No, that's fine.

AE: --too long. Do you have anything that you'd like to add to the interview?

JK: Well, uh, no. We're just looking forward for our hundredth year anniversary. It kind of—it kind of just all of a sudden, you know, we started thinking about it and last--it's—all of a sudden it's—won't be too long [and] it'll be here, you know?

AE: Sure.

JK: Were excited about that. We're, uh, we're p—we're probably--we are the onl—the oldest restaurant in the state of Alabama.

AE: In the entire state, really?

JK: Yeah. And, uh—and, uh—and I don't know if we're doing right—of course, there are a lot of older restaurants, as you know, in New Orleans. And I don't know how many hundred-year-old restaurants in Georgia. You know. Something like—okay—we have survived a lot of —a lot of, uh, you know—thing of being in downtown Bessemer. [Sniff] We could say, you know, "You're not going to last here. You're not going to last here." You know. "It's going—it's not safe" and all that, but thank God it's--you know. Thank God it's been safe. I'll be glad to show you the rest of the restaurant.

AE: I would love to see it, yes.

JK: The rest of the restaurant and whatever.

AE: That would be fantastic. Okay.

[END]