

Tommy Tucker, Owner of Tucker's BBQ  
Interviewed by Jon Drawdy and Seth Thompson, April 17, 2013

Tommy Tucker is second-generation the owner of Tucker's Barbecue in Macon, Georgia. Except for a stint in the military, he has been barbecuing his entire life.

Jon Drawdy: Hey, Mr. Tucker. I'm Jon, and this is Seth. We're the guys that came to interview from Mercer.

Tommy Tucker: Nice to meet you. I'm Tommy Tucker. Y'all ask whatever you need to.

Jon Drawdy: We're taking our Southern Foods class at Mercer, and so what we're doing is project is gonna be an accumulation of a 10,000 word essay about barbecue. And so basically what we are writing about is we're writing that fact that barbecue throughout time has changed, right? So, it started off as barbacoa, and then it evolved through the highway process, and it evolved to what it is today. There's been a lot of speculation that barbecue is becoming more of a relic, and that, you know, it might be dying a little bit, right? And so, what we're actually writing is the reverse argument of that. We're writing that barbecue is a changing facit by nature, and so we're arguing that barbecue is still as alive today as it ever was, as long as there is still Southerners who like to go to barbecue places and like to go and eat it. So, we'd like to start off with, how long has your family owned this restaurant?

Tommy Tucker: Ok, we started, my daddy started here after World War II. He actually got his first license was in 1946 is a soldier's license, a disabled soldier's license, but he got his regular business license in 1947, so we've been here for what, 66 years? We've been here that long so...

Seth Thompson: And so was it just your father who owned it before you?

Tommy Tucker: Right, my father and my mother. She's still living. She's 93.

Seth Thompson: Wow, so when did you take over?

Tommy Tucker: I've been working here all my life. See that old white house out there?

Seth Thompson: Yes sir.

Tommy Tucker: I was born and raised in that little house there. So I've been here since, I grew up in it.

Seth Thompson: So how long have you been running it, though?

Tommy Tucker: I've been, well, I've been working in it all my life, and uh, I've been in here since I was old enough to be in here; let's put it that way. But actually running it and being on a so called payroll, I'd say 15 years old. And you know, I'm 64. So, that's a good while.

Seth Thompson: So, um, do you remember the first time you made barbecue? Or how long ago that might've been?

Tommy Tucker: Uh, you talking about start to finish?

Seth Thompson: Yes sir.

Tommy Tucker: Well, I used to go out to the pit out there with the curb-man and put it on before I was in even school, so I was 6 or 7 years and be out there with him while he was putting the meat on and lighting the pit to start the coals. So that's been, I've been around it since, well, 6 or 7 years old.

Jon Drawdy: Do you have any idea why your dad decided to come into barbecue? Or why he made that decision?

Tommy Tucker: Ok, alright, he was working with the railroad. Before he, well he graduated from Lanier High School, alright, in 1941. He started, he had started to work at, uh, the Central Railroad. After that, then the war hit, and then he was drafted. Well during the time he was working, he was working at the railroad, I mean at the time he was going to high school, um, you had downtown Macon here. You know where the Busy Bee is, on the corner? On Broadway?

Jon Drawdy: Yes sir.

Tommy Tucker: It used to be a restaurant in there. Over there, it was called the Busy Bee Corner, and it was a drive in restaurant, and he worked as a cook and a carhop. You know, waiting on cars and all, like we do right now. And uh, he liked that, and then he went into the army, he was in the combat engineers. First off, he was in there 5 years fighting the Japanese in their city. Well, when he wound up, [to worker] yeah, thank you. He was in the engineers; he went into the cooks part because he had been in associated with it, so he got to go into the cooking part. He was over 38 field kitchens at a time and fed 1,500 men each meal. So, uh, when he came back, he went back to the railroad, and he got a chance to borrow money and open this place up at night. So he did. And it started, it was a dive, this used to be a liquor hole. I mean, this used to be way out. This used to be in the county. No industry, daddy was here before Armstrong, before, there was nothing here. It was just, we was out in the woods, you know? And then uh, he started it, and he started, uh, you know, cooking barbecue and just a simple menu, hamburgers and barbecue and some French fries and some drinks and that's it, you know? He was going for that, and through the years an industrial area come. We got the paper mill, Armstrong Core Company, this is the largest seeding plant in the world. Next door to it used to be an arms manufacturer that made bullets and used to be a naval ordinance plant. It changed over to Magnum's and they made the bullets and the weapons for the Vietnam War. Then, it changed into seatbelts, Allied Chemical, and then it turned back into the city, when they moved out. But they hired 3,000 people out there.

Seth Thompson: So this was a good spot?

Tommy Tucker: Yeah. In here, Armstrong had 1,500 people. There's 3,000 there at that other place, and the paper mill had 1,000. Alright, around the corner was Keebler's Manufacturing Company, they made the cookies; they had 1,000, so we had around 6,000 people in this little spot, in here. We was the only going thing. Back in that, there was no McDonald's, there was no such thing. It was only places like this in Macon. There used to be 15, 20, 30 of them all around Macon, but they was all family owned, not chains. And right behind us, we had a drive-in theater that came in a little bit later. There's a picture on

the wall, right back yonder. You see that back on that back wall? Back on that back corner there. It had about 250, 300 spots for a theater, you know, that you could drive in. And uh, so he kept it going, and uh, he grew, and he expanded this little small building, because he started with nothing. He borrowed money; he didn't have no money back then. And we sold, we had some old menus. I wish I had one I could give to you, and uh, ole hamburgers were a nickel, barbecue was a dime, Coke Cola was a nickel, beer was 10 cent, I mean, uh, a fried chicken plate was 75 cent, but the thing is, you could sell your food then and make money to buy cars and support families and everything else, still make money. Today, you got the same barbecue is \$2.75, and in reality, the money you make off it is not what you could buy with the money you had that you made off it because the buying power was so much greater. And so, you have to do a lot more volume to, uh, make things happen. Well, the success part has always been being in here working yourself. Now if I'm not here, or he wasn't here, and uh you just turned it over to someone else who didn't own it, then the feeling of owning it and having that little extra to do with it disappears. And your customers will feel that. They know that 'cause the average person you got working, when they come in the door, they greet them, you know come in and sit down, get to know who you are; well, your average worker won't do that. They're here for a paycheck, but I'm here to stay. Live, you know, out of it. There's a difference in that.

Seth Thompson: Do you ever plan on retiring, and passing this on to anybody?

Tommy Tucker: Well, one of these days, I may in about 50 more years.

Seth Thompson: So, is this the only Tucker's Barbecue?

Tommy Tucker: Yeah, there ain't but one of me. I ain't got that smart yet to go franchising and all that, but I guess I could. Uh, I do have a 4 year degree in business. I went to school at Georgia Southwestern University. I graduated in 1971, that was a long time ago. And I left from there, and I went into the army, and uh I went to Fort Jackson, South Carolina. I just did miss being called to Vietnam by just a little bit, uh, but I volunteered to go in to the National Guard in '71, and I wouldn't have had to go in 'cause I was the only son because my brother got killed in a car wreck, but everybody in our family had been in the service doing something, so I made my mind up. I was, that was what I was gonna do. And the reason I did that was because you could, uh, supposedly, you know, in the National Guard, you was once a month for 6 years. Well, you say that's not too bad. Well, went off 6 months for training; that's a half a year. See what I'm talking about? About 6 months, and then that once a month deal, it's not there. You won't think about that. Then, the brigade I was with, the great 48<sup>th</sup> brigade, that patch you see right there, they turned into that. I was moved, I became a military policeman, I went through that, and it became a combat infantry mechanized division. Well, that meant we had to go for training, and so, we would leave here on Fridays, and I'd go to Fort Stewart and all and come back Mondays for like 8, 9 weeks in a row. This is during peace time. On the weekends was the time we would visit. So, it turned into a lot more than you think, or what you thought. But I'd do that, and run this too. Uh, my mother, she's still on the books as my secretary and treasurer. She's 93. I guarantee she's the oldest living prior owner that's in anywhere around here.

Seth Thompson: Yes sir, probably.

Tommy Tucker: And she's still sharp as a tack. And she still draws a salary. And what we do is, she lives in a house right through here and the house is facing Houston Avenue, that next road. And she lives in that, and when daddy first started here, all he had was this building. That canopy and that parking area wasn't part of this. It was actually 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 pieces of property that he was able to buy, and then I was able to buy the last one, over the years. You buy a little. Then when you get the money you buy, and our goal, talking about retiring, was fence to fence to the other road, we own this 5 acres square. Flat, you ain't gotta do no work on it, as far as dividing it or subdividing it or whatever. Um, next door to it, you see all the buildings and places along there?

Seth Thompson: Yes sir.

Tommy Tucker: Well, [to worker] alright, I'll see ya. That's 5 acres, and there's 5 businesses that rent from 1 guy, so that was gonna be initially, we coulda had that and had a retirement from that, from what you rent and still maybe kept this place over here in the corner. You see? And still operate it. So, that was a long time ago, but he died in '07 and uh, I've been pretty well running it ever since then, as far as by myself. We used to open 7 days a week from 8:30 to 9:00 in the morning til, uh, til 2:00 in the morning. We sold a lot of beer back then and all, but I don't sell it now. No profit in it for me anymore, but back then, we'd have all these plants, these guys would flock. This place would be packed, flooded. I mean, just packed up. That curb out there, at one time we've had as many, well they'd, how it evolved from when he first started here, you know, white girls, curb-girls, waitresses, ok? It went from there to white men, then it went from there to black men, and that is where it still is today because the reason you had white women was back then there was no factory jobs, no jobs, and there were the only things around were just starting up. So this was a starting, like uh, entry level type job, and uh, but they'd make plenty of money in tips. And uh, there was no taxes on tips, nothing like that then. They just made it and they'd go home. 1964 changed all that with the minimum wage laws and all this and that ruined this type of, as far as people in entry level 'cause the record keeping you had to do, you had to match, pay taxes on the wages and all that and the reason you have tipped employees is that it's an extinction of you, but the government allows you to have them without having all that paperwork, and it gives them a job to start off with. Not that they gonna stay there forever, but it's a place to start.

Seth Thompson: So, do you guys still do the drive-in part?

Tommy Tucker: Yes, my curb-man, he just left a while ago. I have one out there today. Well I was now, like I said, for 50 something years we was from say 9 till 2. For you'd have to be here, if you were cooking meat, at 7:00, and at 2:00 in the morning, you run everybody out, and then you gotta clean up. So then its 3:00 in the morning!

Seth Thompson: Nowadays, would you say you get more people drive-in or come in?

Tommy Tucker: Uh, we get different parts of the year it will fluctuate. Real cold weather and real hot weather, you'll be flooded in here. They don't wanna sit out in the car in the heat and the cold too much. But our mainstay now is lunch, and we got a mixture of customers. We got from the suit and tie guys to the blue jean guys and whatever you wanna find. But the worst thing that's happened to us is this last when the recession hit, in uh '07, '08. When the housing industry bubble burst, that's the worst

thing that coulda happened, as far as anything ever 'cause that's a fueler for everything. It's like an engine, and it runs. All these guys, the companies that we have traded with us are still here trading with us, say 100 companies, I don't care, plumbers, electricians, drywall guys, whatever they are, each one of the companies had like 50 guys working for them. Now these same companies don't have but like 20, 25 guys with not near the amount of trucks running around with them in it, so I lose that ability to even draw them in. I could give away barbecue, but if they're not out there to come in, you can draw them. And there's only so many pieces of the pie. And that's where your chains move in, and they, uh, they got that stockholder putting the money up. I'm the stockholder, I ain't got but so much. I gotta make it before I can do any expanding. These guys, well they can start out with a budget you know for next year, you know, but I can't make that. I gotta make my money first.

Seth Thompson: So, would you say barbecue is or is not dying out? You know, like smaller barbecue places like this?

Tommy Tucker: Well, you know, the original old time barbecue place is not like it used to be because it started from, uh, a family that had they own recipe, their own, uh, they started with that, their own stew, slaw, sauce, see I still make it the same way my daddy made it. I don't buy any of that. I make everything from scratch. Well, you could start a barbecue place tomorrow because you can go buy any sauce. In fact, I could put mine on the market. That's a label I got for it just to do that one day; that's one of the things I wanna do. I wanna put it out, be competitive.

Seth Thompson: What kind of sauce do you use?

Tommy Tucker: I use that mild; that's a mild right there. Then, I have a hot somewhere. This is my hot sauce. That's the mild and the hot. See the difference in the color? Here try some of the hot.

Jon Drawdy: That's pretty good.

Tommy Tucker: Good, ain't it?

Jon Drawdy: Phenomenal. Now, what kind of wood do you use?

Tommy Tucker: We don't use wood. What we used to use is a wood based charcoal. Now I use a electric pit with, that you put wood in it, and it chars. Because we've had it for 40 years. But it's because mainly, it's something I can handle myself. I don't have to have any personnel to help me with it anymore. Now, the hole pit, like I still have out there, is high in maintenance. When you cook in it, you gotta have someone go in and clean it out, and you gotta start it, if you start it at 5:00 in the morning, you gonna get through at 10:00 at night. But you here working, and you able to go out and look at it all the time, but it's very slow cooked. But the electric pit I got does the same thing, except its more controlled, the heat, you don't have to turn it because it heats from the top and the bottom, so you don't have to do that. The only deal is you gotta be able to use this type of equipment. And that gets to a point, another point, where y'all could go into a barbecue business because of the equipment that got today. They don't have that, uh, high hard work that you had to do. Now, it's made simple by the machines. You can get a machine and stick it in there, and it rotates, and you mash a button and turn around and walk off.

6 hours you come back, and you got everything done. And you can even buy now meat whole shoulder, I cook whole shoulder and whole ham, there's bone in it. They got 'em now with no bone in it, or you can buy it and cut the bone out, you know? So, what you do is you just take that and throw it in a big chopper, and you got everything chopped up for ya. It's easier to do. That's the reason you see a lot more, uh, people that are open. [random guy walks in and tries to order] We're closed. We already got it all put up back there. But uh, say it again. He was asking me something, and I can't remember what.

Seth Thompson: You were talking about using only shoulders.

Tommy Tucker: Oh! Shoulders and hams, that's what I use. I like to take hams and shoulders and mix 'em. A shoulder is more leaner than a ham. A ham is more firmer, not as much fat. You chop and mix 'em together you get a little better texture to the meat.

Seth Thompson: I see that you have a Golden Spatula award.

Tommy Tucker: Yep.

Seth Thompson: Do you have any other awards?

Tommy Tucker: Oh, I've got over the years I've got things that I've done with civic groups or school groups or Kids Yule Love, things like that we've done over the years that we've done, but like with that I've got...

Seth Thompson: I see you've got a couple of them.

Tommy Tucker: I think I've got probably about 17 or 18 of them. They can't beat me on that. They can't beat me on the cleanliness and the spatulas and, because we have this building is over 66, its 70, 75 years old, when it first come here. And uh, it's difficult to keep clean. It's something maintenance you've got to do all the time to keep things clean. This floor in hear was not in here when we first got it. It was a wooden floor, and uh, so, they put this floor in here and we never closed. They put it in piece by piece.

Seth Thompson: So you just kept it open while they were doing it?

Tommy Tucker: Well, yeah. All this used to be over there. Alright, now, remember I said we didn't have the canopy up here? Used to, when you walked in the door, there used to be that little old house right there, used to be glass enclosed to out here and the curb-person used to be out front, and back then, the road, our property went out to almost that yellow line. And that's how much the roads have taken. When I took the parking, he was able to buy this part here, put that canopy up there, and before then, they was Mimosa trees that people parked under. They didn't have no canopy.

Seth Thompson: What would you say the most popular thing on the menu that people order when they come in?

Tommy Tucker: Well, uh, it's barbecue; barbecue and French fries. We make our own French fries. And uh, the stew, Brunswick stew. We make our own slaw, stew, French fries, and uh, hamburger steaks, and barbecue chicken is a big seller too. Now, one thing on the hamburger side is that deluxe

hamburger. It's a quarter-pounder with lettuce, tomato, slaw, and French fries and uh, you know, it's just a seller for these working guys.

Seth Thompson: And what's the Pig Special?

Tommy Tucker: That's the barbecue sandwich, that's the old time sandwich. It comes back from the pig whistle era. I don't know if y'all'd know. It's an old restaurant that burned down years ago. And it, it's a barbecue sandwich on toasted bread with slaw and tomato on it and a few fries. [another customer comes to the window] We done for the day.

Seth Thompson: It seems like you're very popular.

Tommy Tucker: Oh yeah. They wanna come in and get it.

Jon Drawdy: Now have you seen a change in your customer base over the years?

Tommy Tucker: Yeah. Uh, you see from...if you just think about what I said earlier about the plants, your base customers were them with the plants, and they had hour breaks. Those guys all at Armstrong, they worked 8 hour shifts and take an hour for lunch. Everybody did. Alright, they'd leave, and they'd go somewhere to eat and go back. Nowadays, they get 15 minute lunch breaks. Where you gonna go in 15 minutes? You gotta clock out, drive somewhere, come back, clock back in. If you're 5 minutes late, you're in trouble. So, that base you don't have as much anymore, so you got to depend on, uh, a base that you've built over the years of families, mainly thing is the families that have kids. I've got generations coming in here.

Seth Thompson: How many regulars do you think you have?

Tommy Tucker: Oh, regular customers, I got regulars that come in just about every day, not every day for say, but they come stay with me at least once, twice a week. You know, like that? Some've been doing it for years and as you get families coming in having kids, they get older and have some more kids and they bring some more, you know? And I've got at least 5 generations, I know that grown and have youngins that grow and have other youngins and that have more coming and I get to see them, you know? And that's, that's just, like it's just like that picture there, a customer and his 2 boys. Well, I knew his daddy. He had him, and he moved up north, and he was just coming through one time, and he wanted to take a picture. He sent that to me. And all these pigs you see in here and things like that, I ain't bought one of 'em. Kids, mostly kids, will bring those things in here, put 'em down, and if they come in here again, they wanna see their thing that was in here. And I mean, you better have it too. You better not give it away. I've had people wanna, well what ya take for this or that, you know, and then just little things like that. And uh, a lot of my customers are on that wall over there hanging up. That right there was the Byron Raceway. They had, uh, out in Byron they used to have a NASCAR racetrack, and they're trying to build it back. In fact, 2 years ago they used to racecar drivers from around here race out there. And uh, all them guys there, first started out there. And we even had the Popfest. Ever here about when we, Byron had the Pop Festival? Almost a million people out there. You've hear of Woodstock, in Atlanta? That was the Woodstock of the South, I hear. That's when everyone got initiated

on everything what was going on around the world. And uh, girls and boys coming from California and all, jumping out there naked in that creek naked as jaybirds. I'm serious. In fact, that's some pictures there of it. There 2 or 3 of them. Now those people, those are 40 year old pictures now. Those are your leaders and, uh, people in bank presidents, whatever CEOs or whatever in those pictures there now. That was rampant out there. I mean, it was everywhere. And that was all college age kids. It's funny isn't it?

Seth Thompson: Yes sir.

Tommy Tucker: I like to keep busy, sponsor ball teams, like those kids right there. I sponsor teams. Then, they come in and eat with me. They might have a meeting here or something. Then the next thing you know, they're coming in with their families. You know, you kinda keep it growing like that.

Seth Thompson: Yes sir. Um, earlier you said there were a lot of places, a lot of little places like this.

Tommy Tucker: That's right.

Seth Thompson: What made Tucker's so special that it was the only one to survive really?

Tommy Tucker: Well, I guess it's, uh, well we're not the only one, but we are one of the few left. Fincher's over here is one, Fincher's Barbecue, y'all heard of that?

Seth Thompson: Yes sir.

Tommy Tucker: They're still here, but he's there. He's got 2 sons that are running it. Alright, I don't have any, other than me. So, he's got 4 places. So, they're running it, and he's sitting back and letting 'em run it. That's how that works. But uh, they've got tremendous business. They've got good barbecue too. We stay because of having the sheer having the place to work and make a living. You gotta work somewhere, everybody's gotta work someplace sometime, so if you do something right, and you do it good, and you enjoy it, why not keep trying to do it? You know? And that's what we try to do, and I've got some great customers and good people working with me, so you know, as long as you got that, you can pretty well stay, you know, and stay and do what you want to do and stuff like that.

Jon Drawdy: Well, we can tell that you love it, so...

Tommy Tucker: Well, we're having a good time, you know, it's times now. It's times like anything. There's gonna be times when you're like, why didn't I do this? Actually, my first love, when I got through college, was, I woulda went into the, uh, stayed of military and gone through officer school, if I had had the opportunity, but my brother got killed and my daddy needed help so I elected to, you know, that's just the only thing I needed to do. So, we did that.

Seth Thompson: How often do you think you eat barbecue now?

Tommy Tucker: I taste it every day. Every day. I try to taste it to see if it's good. Just try outta the pot I mixed. I hate to give somebody and it ain't good. If I can't eat it, I know for sure he can't eat it. You know

what I mean? And another big seller we have is tea. We make our own good sweet tea. And that's the southern wine, that's what we call it.

Jon Drawdy: Well, that's about it. Anything else you can tell us?

Tommy Tucker: The only other thing I can tell y'all is that it takes a lot of hard work and desire to stay in something like this. And it's difficult to motivate other people whose not in your family to want to run it like you do. But I've got a good group. You don't do it over night. It has to grow. A lot my cooks, the least one has been in there 10 years, you know. This, uh, the girls have working in there, a lot of places have waitresses that come and go quickly, my tend to stay. I, uh, at night, when I was running a night shift, I had 15, 16, 17 people working here, before that crunch hit. Then I dropped down to 4, and me, is 5 now. I just got it back under control where I could handle it. When I had 17 people, you gotta think, you gotta schedule shifts so one crew's coming when the other is leaving. It gets into being, you gotta have enough people available that really want to do it, and then this government comes along that we got right now, and uh, they give so many freebees right now, that it's difficult for me to hire someone now and pay them what the free stuff is gonna compensate them for. I mean, we're not a doctor's office, a lawyer's office to where we can do that. It's entry level type work and how it's winded up, is the only entry level job you gonna get is at McDonald's or Burger King or something where at like that, and they can't have but so many, and they don't, you go in there, you get a hamburger, you stick it on a grill, mash a button. The buzzer goes off, it's done. Mine go in there, and they cook it. They mixing stuff up, putting it together, making coleslaw, good stuff, you know? They go get it outta box somewhere, frozen somewhere, and open it up. And the thing is, the population, is a younger population coming along, is eating that all the time, and they don't know what the other stuff is, like mine. They just don't understand the difference. They just used to that. They used to something. It's just like, uh, North Korea right now. You got South Korea, South Korea is flourishing, but North Korea, those people living there, their information is blocked. They have no information whatsoever, 'cept for what the government tells them. That's all they know. Those young kids are growing up, they're taught an American soldier will eat them. They believe that. They have nobody else to tell them that. That's why you see what happened over there in, uh, the Middle East, when they finally had an uprising, why? Because the internet. They see what's going on in the other world, and they say hey, well we want a little bit different idea about how we gonna do things around here now. That's what happened. And, you know, it's an interesting thing that's going on there.

Jon Drawdy: Well thanks for the interview.

Tommy Tucker: Oh, don't mention it. Y'all come back anytime.