Bruce Johansen: It’s August 6, 2013. I’m Bruce Johansen and I’m at Big Daddy’s BBQ, located at 625 University Avenue West in St. Paul. This is one in a series of interviews I’m doing with business owners along University Avenue. My project is funded through a State of Minnesota Historical and Cultural Heritage Grant. Today I’m interviewing Ron Whyte, one of Big Daddy’s three co-owners. Thanks for accepting my invitation to be interviewed. [Audio at bottom]

B: I always like to start at the beginning, where were you born and where did you grow up?

Ron Whyte: I was born in Hopkinsville, Kentucky. It’s in the western part of Kentucky, on the Tennessee border. Southwestern, rather.

B: I bet it’s a beautiful area.

R: It is. Kentucky’s a beautiful state.

B: What was it like growing up there? What kind of an environment was it? What kind of a town was it (Hopkinsville)?

R: Well, it was an all-American city and I was born 66 years ago, so it was an all-American city when I was growing up. It was a very nice city, small but nice.

B: How large a family?

R: I have one brother.

B: What kind of work did your parents do?

R: My mother was a homemaker and my father was a cement layer.

B: What can you tell me about your business partners, Bob and Gene? Where did they grow up?

R: Gene grew up in Hopkinsville, Kentucky.

B: Oh, so you go way, way back.

R: Right. We went to high school, grade school together, and he’s the reason I’m in Minnesota. Bob Edmond, he grew up in Georgia. He ended up moving to the Twin Cities and that’s where I met him. I met him because my partner, Gene, and
his brother were very close friends, in college.

**B: What brought Gene here?**

**R:** Honeywell.

**B: How did you all end up in the barbecue business?**

**R:** Well, it kinda goes back 30 years ago where I guess Gene and Bob met, maybe a little longer than 30 years ago. They both lived in St. Louis and they were cooking and just kind of backyard barbecuing. When Gene came here, I moved here after he did, he’d been here maybe five years. But, anyway, so we kind of started cooking in Gene’s back yard, kind of, just mine tastes better than yours. And from there, friends and relatives kind of said, well, you know, you guys are pretty good, and we kind of came down to one way we did things and this is a good idea and we put our ideas together. And from there, we started doing community festivals. There’s one that’s in St. Paul here that’s called Rondo Days. So like we started doing that and we became pretty popular at that event. And then we started, we branched out to Woodbury Days, Grand Ole Days, Stillwater Days, we just kind of started going around and for years and we got popular at those events and from there we moved on to bigger and better things like the rib fest they used to have over in Minneapolis and that’s where we are.

**B: So this would have been during what period of years?**

**R:** We’re talking about 30 years of this. We started, I think, at least 30 years ago we started doing these festivals. We did Taste of Minnesota. So over 30 years this is what we’d done. We kind of stopped doing festivals and things, maybe 10 years ago. So maybe a 20-year period that we did it.

**B: You said Gene worked for Honeywell. Was he still at Honeywell while you were doing all of this?**

**R:** Yeah. We were. I was with Honeywell. My partner, Bob, he was at Control Data. And I was at Honeywell also.

**B: When did you open your first store then?**

**R:** We kind of broke up and I think in probably 2004 Gene had left Honeywell some time in there, he left Honeywell, and so he decided he wanted to try venturing out on his own and he opened a restaurant downtown St. Paul in the Union Depot. The only drawback in that was parking. You know when you’re paying to park and then paying to eat it gets pretty tough.

**B: Was it called Big Daddy’s?**

**R:** Yep, yep. It’s always been Big Daddy’s.

**B: From that location?**

**R:** We shut down for a few years and then we started to, we came back and it was, there was a bar down here on University Avenue. Well before, I’m sorry, before Gene went down there, we were approached by the manager of Cub
Foods Market. Up there in the Midway area. He just thought it would be a good advertisement for him if we barbecued right there on his lot so we did that and just kind of went all around. Then, after Gene had the restaurant and it shut down, then we started barbecuing in this bar down the street.

B: Which bar was that?

R: It was called Johnny Baby’s. We paid him to, we leased his lot rather. And then from there we got to the point where it was kind of a disagreement between the lease price we wanted to pay for it being a lot versus what we wanted to pay. So, anyway, we shut down. And one of the people that’s always been in our corner is a place called the Neighborhood Development Corporation (Center). And they’re involved in most small businesses along University Avenue and I think they have something even to do with the Global Market over in Minneapolis. So they’ve always been in support of us and so they came along and it was kind of a bar here on the corner of University and Dale called Lendways. And I wasn’t around but it used to be, probably, from what I’m understanding, a very, very popular bar. The city officials used to come up because they’d dine there, too, they’d come up for lunch, and so the Neighborhood Development Corporation owned that property and so they were going to tear it down. And, as you can maybe look, they’ve got a new project over there with senior citizens living, and so we stayed over there for four years and it was just very, very successful over there. And so when NDC decided to shut us down—or when they decided to tear down the building—they gave us notice and we moved out and we looked at different things around the Twin Cities here and we ended up right back almost where we started. Just right across the street here, and that’s how we ended up in this spot, okay.

B: What was in this spot prior to you moving here?

R: There was a place called Caribbean Soul (West Indies Soul Café), I think it was. And so, NDC owns this property also, so they kind of said we’ve got this, so we ended up moving here.

B: I didn’t realize that they owned this building.

R: Yep, yep, yep.

B: I’m just starting to learn a bit more about how they work. I’ve met with Isabel Chanslor. She’s great. She introduced me to a number of business owners. How many properties do they own?

R: I have no idea, I have no idea. But they’re, what they, and it’s just a great thing that they do, and one of the things that they do, they call it neighborhood development, so they’re developing the neighborhood. And so, as you see, across the street where they built this senior citizen living, if you’ve noticed that. That was kind of an eyesore until they came in and put a nice new building. I think probably, in the future, I know one of the visions is to really do this whole corner here, you know. To where, to go all the way down to where the bank is, just clean it up, make it look nice, you know. So I think it’s a good thing. I wish I
had 30 more years to be here. I might be living, but not here.

B: This area's changed so much, thinking back to what it was like when I was in college. What are your first memories of University Avenue and University and Dale?

R: Well, my first memory is, like I said, I've seen the change. The library that's there, was not there. The corner that I was telling you about over there, it was not there. It was kind of an eyesore and so I see the development really, really going. The only thing that I've seen, I think there were a few other black businesses on University when I got here, and I've seen that diminish. Which is kind of bad, but it has diminished.

B: What are some of the other businesses you remember?

R: I think one of them was over here in the shopping center, was a liquor store that was owned by a black guy. There was a barbecue place down on the corner owned by a black guy. There was another barbecue stand right here on Dale owned by a black. I don't know everything that was owned by them, I just knew that those were.

B: What do you think accounts for that change?

R: I'm not sure, I'm not sure. I wasn't involved in the business. I don't know if they didn't have the support or just what. I'm not sure.

B: Because they were probably here prior to NDC coming in?

R: Yep, yep. I think 30 years ago we were introduced to Mike Temali, that's the head of NDC, and they weren't even in the bank. And we walked up to the corner, one of the most famous guys that was here when we got here was a guy named Tiger Jack. We moved on his lot, we barbecued on his lot. That's when we first really—really—started getting kind of known, really known, because you could smell it all the way down on 94. People were getting off and coming over, so it was a very good experience for us.

B: High visibility.

R: Yep, yep.

B: And NDC does trainings.

R: Yep, yep, my partner, Gene, he went to the training in 1993. And they've just been super helpful, anything that you would like to know, you can just go to them. It's kind of like somebody being on your board of directors that's steering you.

B: My impression is that small business owners in most cities don't have an NDC.

R: Right, right. As a matter of fact, most cities don't. I just happen to have been told, I know that in Detroit, Michigan, they're setting up one in Detroit, Michigan. So they're trying to learn what they do here, so I know it doesn't exist.
B: I lived out in the DC area for several years and I got the impression there that it was that Darwinian thing of the survival of the fittest, sink or swim, the big guys got all kinds of support but the small businesses not so much.

R: Okay, okay.

B: I remember this area being kind of a mini red-light district.

R: Yeah, I didn’t want to get into that but yeah, it was. It really was kind of a bad area. Prostitutes, drugs, what have you. And they still exist around here. But they tried to clean that up and I think that’s why they’re trying to bring all this out. To try to, let’s redo this area.

B: How many people do you employ now?

R: Let’s see, three people, plus the three. We’ll probably be hiring another person. One person kind of left, so we’re going to replace him.

B: Any other changes coming up?

R: Yeah. We’re going to try to expand next door, where we can have more of a sit down restaurant, if you like.

B: How much more space will that give you?

R: That’s going to give us 20, we’re looking at probably 20 seats and then plus another 12, 20 with the patio.

B: The patio will be off to the side?

R: Yes, it’s off on the side here. I can show you. The entryway will be off Dale. I’ll take you out there in a minute and I can show you and if you look at it you can say, okay, I can see the vision.

B: Who are your customers?

R: It varies. We’ve always had some of the community, but then we have people from the suburbs, too. We, and you pick the suburb and I’d say they’ve probably been here. I know we’ve been as far as Rochester. And I know we have one guy who’s always here from Hastings. I don’t know which one is the farthest. But I know we have this guy, a couple of guys, from Rochester.

B: It’s really a destination place for some people.

R: Yep, yep. Exactly.

B: And people who work in the area, I’m assuming.

R: Yep, yep, we get some of them. We get a lot of construction guys. We kind of got a lot of the people who might come in from lunch, we don’t know exactly where they’re from, but they’re from local businesses.

B: Who do you see as your competition in the area?

R: To be honest with you, it’s in no way being cocky, I can’t think of another word
at the moment, but there’s really no competition as far as barbecue is concerned. You know, you might get some more customers if they weren’t eating Wendy’s, or you might get some more customers if they weren’t at Subway. It’s a price thing they look at, which is one reason that we have one thing on the menu that is less than $5.00. It will attract a person that wants to eat something good but doesn’t want to pay a high price for it.

B: Explain to me what it is that makes your barbecue stand out.

R: I don’t know if it’s because we care. But a lot of people come, and as you know, the man in St. Paul and probably a lot of other places is Famous Dave’s. And it’s just that we have a better tasting product than he does. We’ve done some things, and when I say we’ve done some things, we’re a family-oriented restaurant, very friendly in contact with the customer. Those kinds of things help us. We’re not going to maybe, like some of our close competitors around here, just going to yell, what would you like, boom, that’s it. We kind of go with a relationship with you when you’re here.

B: And a completely different scale from Famous Dave’s.

R: Yeah, that is true.

B: Now you’ve got the light rail out here. What effect has that had on you so far and what do you see coming as a result of it?

R: It hurt us pretty bad, last year. As far as what’s coming, it’s a guess. It’s kind of like, how many people are going to get on the light rail? You say, well, I’m not going to get on it, I’m going to drive, or I’m going to get on it and use it but I live 20 miles out, I’m not even looking at what’s in the area. So I really don’t know. I have some customers that say we’re going to do great, and I have other customers that say I’m going to take the light rail to come see you, so I really don’t know, I really don’t know. I just know that now that the construction is over with business is starting to pick back up.

B: Is it at the same level that it was before construction?

R: No, no, but it’s coming back.

B: I wonder about all of the people in Minneapolis who’ve become accustomed to using the Hiawatha Line, if this won’t make it a lot easier to think about coming to St. Paul.

R: I don’t know. The only thing that I can do is with, I think that the big thing is getting our name out there. Like you interviewing us. You wouldn’t be interviewing us if you hadn’t heard of us. There are people that have not heard of us because we’re too small. It’s like one of our marketing guys said, when you think of barbecue, you automatically think of Famous Dave’s. We want to get our name out there to the point that you think, yeah, Big Daddy’s is out there, too. That’s the main thing.

B: Are you working with a marketing person who’s helping a number of
businesses along University?

R: We’ve reached out to NDC as well as, I didn’t realize this, but when you’re in business people call every day, trying to sell something. And so, we use different ways of advertising. There was one that Cub Food Market has where they have the coupon on the back of the receipt. Just to kind of, oh, Big Daddy’s, oh. We’ve used City Pages, we’ve used them quite often, because I didn’t realize that so many people read City Pages. I guess because it’s free and then they read it. We’ve gotten a few customers who’ve said I saw you in City Pages and just wanted to try it.

B: And social media.

R: Yes, that’s been very good for us. People, we have kind of a Facebook person, and that came through NDC, too. We’re kind of in-between because the other person is moving on to bigger and better things, so we’ll see.

B: I see that Yelp is listed there, too.

R: Yep. And you know, I haven’t visited enough but I’m understanding that if you google “best barbecue,” our name comes up and so, and Yelp has a lot of good things on there. As a matter of fact, Yelp sent us this sign right here. They say, wow, you guys get, and they were trying to sell something, but yet, still, a lot of people go on Yelp.

B: In thinking about all of the years you’ve had in business, is the light rail the biggest challenge you’ve had to face?

R: Yes, yes. Nothing has hurt as much as that. I'll give you one other example and it’s kind of, but one day we’re sitting here, when they pour a sidewalk they don’t tell you, they just put a big plastic thing up and cover your doors and start pouring. So you’re kind of, wow, and customers are coming and they can’t get in, which, I guess if I was if I was doing this kind of business, I would say, well, look from here to here it’s going to take this amount of time. Maybe they pay the people to come in on Sunday so it doesn’t affect the businesses.

B: What are the biggest rewards for you as a business owner?

R: Owning your own business. You say, how is that, anyone can own their own business, but it’s kind of like, it’s almost what you put into it is what you get out of it and we put a lot into it and sometimes we think we put too much into it, you know what I mean, and we don’t get the reward. Example there of what I’m saying is, for instance if we cater something where I don’t want to really down Famous Dave, but if you cater from Famous Dave’s he just comes in, he lays it on the table, there you go, there it is. Us, we give you a rack, a burners, we have warming bags that keep it warm, you know what I mean, and sometimes people tend to misuse our equipment or it’s...

B: How much of your business is catering?

R: Maybe, it varies, month to month, for instance we did a lot of graduations. And
then it drops off. I would say, 15% to 20%, you could file either way.

**B:** Has that grown?

**R:** It has, it has, it has. We kind of laughed about it because, when I was telling you we were at our most popular, the place across the street, we didn’t do any catering. And now we got here and now we do catering. I don’t know if it’s the ambiance when you come in here or what.

**B:** How do you three partners work together?

**R:** Well, you do different things. One of us does the interviews. Another one of us, all three of us can cook, but we’ve kind of just said one of us will take care of the cooking, and if the other one’s off, I’m here or the other partner is and he’ll do it. Some people take care of the advertising. So we don’t tend to step on each other’s toes.

**B:** And it all works out.

**R:** Yep. It all works out.

**B:** You hear stories about friends going into business together.

**R:** It’s tough. It’s tough and like you said, friends, wives, or whatever. You have disagreements at home, you’re going to have them here, too, but we tend to overall get along very well. We do. You kind of know each other ways and I can’t think of the name of it but it’s, one of the board of directors came in and there’s a test, not just test, but kind of a quiz of personalities. And he kind of gave it to us and said this is going to help you, you know how he, you know how he is, you’ll know how he is. It was very, very good thing to do because it taught you a little something about somebody else.

**B:** Was that like a StrengthsFinders test?

**R:** I’ve forgotten the name of it. I really have no, it’s not strengths, it’s personalities. It’s about personalities.

**B:** Is it Myers-Briggs?

**R:** Myers-Briggs, that’s what it is, that’s what it is. That’s what it was, Myers-Briggs. You don’t think so, but it really tells you about a person’s personality. It really does. To be honest you, I don’t know if you’re, I kind of forget how he did it, but anyway, two of us were kind of alike and the other one was kind of a little different, and the other one is more process-oriented, I want it like this, I have to do it this way. And the other one is kind of like this. So it was a great thing.

**B:** My sense is that St. Paul is maybe trying to do what Minneapolis did with Eat Street, branding University, planting the idea in people’s minds that this is the place to get good food, interesting food.

**R:** Right, right.

**B:** It sounds like some plans are going forward to make this more of a
cultural corridor?

R: The only thing that I could see, I guess it is a few different businesses. I look down there and I would just like to see a better mix of things. But then again, it might not be coming to me.

B: What would you like to see added to the mix?

R: I don’t know, I don’t know. When I look at what’s on there, it’s got some things, but when you look, they did put the diner over there, the Daily Diner, so that helps a lot, but before that, you look for fish, barbecue, chicken wings, there’s just fast food. There’s a lot of Asian, a lot of Asian, and there’s no way, I hope this doesn’t come out wrong, but if I was new to this area I wouldn’t know where to start. There’s one there, one there, one there. It’s everywhere.

B: I agree. You almost have to seek out advice.

R: Exactly.

B: Any other types of businesses, outside of restaurants, that you think this area could really benefit from?

R: I don’t know. I really don’t know, to be honest with you. It’s just, one of the things that they really, St. Paul, overall, it needs, more draw-in. I really wish, I really wish we had gotten that Vikings stadium. I wish we’d gone after that with all our might. We just need more people in St. Paul. You know, and I’ve been here, in September it will be 33 years, and I really didn’t know until maybe 10 years ago, I went over to Minneapolis to see a basketball game and I just couldn’t believe all the cars on the street. Wow, it’s busy over here! It’s really busy! It’s no different than St. Paul, it’s just busy. And I’m saying, wow, and that’s why I’m saying we need more something in St. Paul. I wish we’d gotten that Vikings stadium. I don’t know what businesses draw over there. I don’t know if we need some more upscale restaurants or something but we need something here.

B: It is quieter over here.

R: I like it. I like St. Paul. But I’m saying, I always kind of laugh, when I first got here I dated a girl over in Minneapolis and every time we’d come here, she’d say, 'Oh, we’re going to the country.' And I’d say, 'I like the country, I like the country.' But anyway, I just, that’s the only downfall. I don’t know what we need, but we need something to draw people over to St. Paul.

B: And do you live in the neighborhood?


B: Nice area.

R: Yeah, thanks. It’s just that being from outside and how we got here is that my partner, Gene, he used to live three or blocks down. So he wanted to stay in the community. Well, when I first got here we stayed, I stayed in Roseville, and then I met my wife and she stayed close to there and the next thing you know you’re
looking for houses and where do you go. So we ended up in White Bear Lake.

B: Is there anything that I missed?
R: Nope, nope. I’m going to take you over to the side and show you what I was talking about.

B: Thank you very much.

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