

# **Bernell Turner**

## **A Transcription of an Oral Interview**

405 N. Mathews  
Urbana, Illinois  
June 27, 1983

Interviewed by:  
Melinda Roundtree

Champaign County Historical Archives  
Urbana, Illinois  
2001

## **Introduction**

This interview is with Mr. Bernell Turner, the owner and founder of Turner's Rib House, 405 North Mathews, Urbana. Mr. Turner opened the rib house on July 11, 1978, and he came to Champaign in 1946.

This interview is being conducted on June 27, 1983, at the rib house on Mathews. The interviewer is Melinda Roundtree representing the Urbana Free Library Archives Department.

## **Bernell Turner, Oral Interview**

Melinda Roundtree: Hello Mr. Turner. How are you doing today?

Bernell Turner: Fine, fine.

Roundtree: All right. First of all, if you could, I would like to know a little history about Turner's Rib House, when it started.

Turner: Okay, hold it right there. (He goes inside his business to get a booklet that gives the history of his business.) Okay, I think we started February 2, 1972, but we didn't get open until July 11, 1978. So, it was a delay in the zoning system and various other things of concern in the city. Eventually, we got the clarification and we got started.

Roundtree: Okay. How did you get started into this business?

Turner: Well, it really was something that I always wanted to do. I've been in the restaurant business, frankly, all my life, and I felt that it was time for me to open my own business. So I set out to do that, and the reason for this — there's so many times I worked in restaurants and people is always pushed for time, and the hostess, the head waiter want the table because they had other people standing. I wanted a place where a person could come and sit down, and relax,

and feel at home, where you don't have a bunch of people gazing down your back wanting you to get up. And I think it puts an awful lot of pressure on a person when he sitting and other people is waiting to be seated, especially when they don't have anything to do. Say for instance, they're going to be out for the day, and they like spending a little time talking, and then when you have this type of situation, it just puts them under pressure.

Roundtree: Okay. Has the service that you've had during the years changed, has it changed, or has it been pretty much the same with the people, the customers that you have?

Turner: Well, one of the things is this, I always try to stay with the same type of service — good service and relaxation, and the finest quality of meat that is possible, because I do the cooking myself and I check it all out before I prepare it.

Roundtree: Have you been at this location since it started?

Turner: Yes, soon it will be ten years.

Roundtree: Do you employ a lot of people here?

Turner: Well, at one time we employed about four people. At the present time, you know with the economy as it is, we've been kind of operating as a family. But as my kids get older, quite naturally they wean away from the mainstream. So, I do have a girl now helping me part time and hope that she would look forward to keeping the job if her qualifications come up to what I feel is necessary for the dining room, because we're still trying to have the image where peoples don't feel that they're being rushed through a meal. We want them to be able to relax and enjoy.

Roundtree: Now I would like to know a little bit about yourself, your life before coming to Champaign.

Turner: Well, I think I came here in 1946 and all of my life I've been, kind of been with the food business. Then I worked at various places here. I worked at the Urbana Country Club, Champaign Country Club, the Inman Hotel, and also Wheat's Steak House. I spent about 25 years there. Then we went over to open up this Century 21 when it just got off the ground. It was Century 21 back then.

Roundtree: Where were you born in?

Turner: I was born in New Orleans.

Roundtree: Could you tell me a little bit about your education?

Turner: Well, I finished high school and I had, I say, 35 or 40 years in the food service. Then I met some of the highest peoples it is in the United States, and quite naturally will appear the years if you have any \_\_\_\_\_ at all, quite naturally some of this will to rub off on you. Also, I'm a photographer and I went to Parkland and I finished a course there, two semesters. Then I did six weeks Photographic Nature for the nature center there in Urbana, and we explored at Busey Woods and plant life. And also I do weddings and various other things along with my restaurant. I hope to retire and go into photography full time.

Roundtree: Could you tell me a little bit about your family?

Turner: Well, my father died about 95, my grandmother died at about 110, my mother's still living and my mother have her own business. She is a spirited lady located in Louisiana. And my father and mother have always owned their own home, and we kids at one time only worked for them, until I come of age and thought I was ready to leave home. (Laughter.)

Roundtree: So you've been influenced by your parents. Did they give you ideas, you know, to get into your own business?

Turner: Well, I think most fellas from the South — you know they always hear the word of the North being the land of promise, and quite naturally the average

young fellow that have any ambitions at all, want to explore the North and see is it really the way people say it are. Then I finds that it's not exactly the way you see it. It's a nice, I guess a nice country you might would call it. But I do feel that we have got on the bandwagon here, as well as the peoples in the South. And when I'm speaking of that, you have most like business, like your undertakers and your restaurants, and some of your banking business, and your country clubs and various other things. And I find, here we are a little behind, in a lot of ways, and I think our social activities with each other is very poor.

And I don't feel that we have strong enough leadership in the community where we could find each person as a whole, instead of fighting against each other we should try to work together. And I do feel, since I opened a restaurant here it hadn't been exactly what I expected, because I expect a lot more of my peoples to visit the restaurant. And, they show no interest whatsoever, and I do feel maybe the problem is our churches and our leaders that's in the community don't inspire the youngsters in order to make them want to do other than what they are doing, really, it's terrible. The facts about it is, we can stand a lot of improvement, that includes the adults, along with the kids. I say if you're up on a mountain hollering for some help, someone could hear you but they may not find you. If you're up on a mountain hollering for help with a light they can easily walk up there and find you. And I think what is happening here, the light is out and we do need more lights shining so we can improve our people. Because I feel if we're asking for equal opportunity we shouldn't ask for things that we are unable to anticipate in, because the first thing we got to do is learn how to get along with

ourselves. Once we learn how to get along with ourselves, I think it would be much easier to get along with other people because I don't feel that we have absolutely been fair to ourselves as a whole.

Our ladies for instance, we don't give them attention, we don't make them feel proud of themselves and our young men, we don't inspire them to get the proper haircut or how to conduct themselves with other people. And I do feel that the education point that we have had is automatical being slightly demolished, because we are lacking leadership and it's absolutely terrible. And I don't know where you would ask the federal government to step in, I think the thing it is that we need to have some inspiring of our peoples. And I think one of the things it is we come to get a little money, we move out of the neighborhood, and we move so far away. So we have nothing left for our kids to want us to do nothing. And maybe this person only comes back to this end of the town maybe every now and then, and the kids don't get to know them and they have no goal because the reason they have no goal is because they don't have no pattern. You know if you're doing photographs you have to have a service in order to focus on, and I think this is one of the things that's really been bad, our focus is very bad. And I do feel urban renewal has been a lot, but I do feel that they really sent us back instead of really helping us, because anytime that you destroy a group of people, I think it's bad for the city, bad for the community, because eventually these people will learn how to cooperate with each other and work together, but if people split up it will never happen, really.



Roundtree: Have you served in any military service?

Turner: No, no military service whatsoever. I had a lot in the merchant marine years ago, but I'm kind of glad I wasn't in the military because I felt that I would've taken an awful lot out of my life, and I might not been able to get this started because I was young enough and ambitious enough to try to go about that in my surroundings and trying to show my people that these things can be done, and it's not an easy job.

Roundtree: Well, that's just about all I had, do you have anything else you wanted to say?

Turner: Well, one other thing I'd like to say — I do feel that some our \_\_\_\_\_ very southern things that's considered underprivileged people. I would use that word not only speaking of blacks, but people some even who were if the state continue to help them which I appreciate. But I do feel that it should be a place set aside for peoples that's now on food stamps, and various other things because I feel a person has no reason to want to up their grade if they can have the same identical privilege that people that's working have.

What I mean by this is you have a grocery store set aside just for people that's just using food stamps and stuff like this, and I feel these people would get shame of going to this store because they don't want their neighbors to know that they ain't on equal basis. But if you give a person a same identical treatment that

you're doing a person that's working 365 days in a year, and he can sit down and enjoy the same thing that you enjoy, it's no reason for them to want to improve themselves. For what? I know they call it discrimination. Maybe there comes a time when we do need discrimination because we need something to make people want to do and still they're dragging their feet. Because I think they should be exposed where when be a type of thing where you'll have them shoved off in a corner, but if they would have an image to the point to where they don't want to do nothing. This is where you would have to spend the food stamps, because this has been set aside for you to go there, and you'll have the same thing in this store that you would have in any other store, but this store is special for food stamps, clothes, and whatever you want to get.

And I feel that would kind of paint a picture where peoples want to up their grade and don't want to be there. And I do feel, like some of our little misdemeanor problems that we have with the police department and our federal. If they had someplace to put these people where they could be seen by the general public, they would think twice before, because they don't want be drug down because we talked to them. Say, "What do you call yourself doing, lowering or making me feel little." Okay, if they don't want to upgrade themselves, what else for them to feel? Do you agree?

Roundtree: So, do you feel that the community has changed for the better or do you think . . .

Turner: Well I think the community really has taken a step backwards, because we don't have enough jobs with the state, helping people that could help themselves. Of course, I know the state don't have anything to do with this. And I feel as long as people are on a gravy train, they don't care to improve themselves. Really, they really don't, and I do feel that our courts is a little strong language in how they handle various peoples. Because I feel this, most of the people from the South come north, and they had the great white father in who they fainted for them. When you put them on equal basis they are not ready for equal basis in our court system, because the American white man in this part of the country, you can't believe a thing he tell you. But in the South, if a white man told you something, he did what he said. But here you can't believe him, and they'll come out and connive and fool you and you turn state's evidence and the first thing you know you're going to prison.

In the South the basic background training — and I do feel the courts should give some leeway in this way because there's a lot of us come from the South, and the American white man told you something, we believed it. And it'll take a hundred years before we can raise ourselves up to not trust everything peoples told us. Because the southern Negro was taught if Mr. Loo Loo say something, that's the way it is, and it was the law and rules and regulations. But here we have the rules and regulations law, but it don't amount to nothing. It is a defense against us. And I think it's terrible, and I think it should start right on down on there in the court and finding these weaknesses that we have had for years for it to happen as it is. It's terrible.

Roundtree: Do you have any pictures of this restaurant that you can let me have?

Turner: Yes.

Roundtree: Well, I thank you for the interview.