Name of Interviewees: Linus Hall
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Name of Interviewer: Theresa McCulla
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Theresa McCulla: It's May 4, 2018. This is Theresa McCulla of the National Museum of American History. I am interviewing Linus Hall, founder and brewmaster of Yazoo Brewing Company. We are meeting at the brewery in Nashville, Tennessee, and this interview is part of the American Brewing History initiative, which is a project to document and collect the history of beer and brewing in America. So, Linus, when and where were you born?

Linus Hall: Oh, well, I was actually born in Neenah, Wisconsin, which is a strange place for a southerner to be born, but my dad was working at a paper mill there, and so, yup. So, I'm a cheesehead, I guess.

McCulla: And did you grow up in Wisconsin?

Hall: No. Soon after that, my dad got moved to Ohio. And then, then they positioned him as an engineer overseas, so I lived in Africa for two years, in Tanzania. And I lived in, let's see, we moved then to, to Kerala, India. And then by the time, I think I was about eight years old, they were gonna move him to Australia, but not pay for his family to go, so he decided to get a new job and we settled down in Mississippi.

McCulla: And what was his job?

Hall: Well, he was an engineer, and that was with the tire business. And then he decided to go back and get into the family business, which was lumber mills. So, my, my dad's extended family owned a lumber mill in Memphis, Tennessee, and then one down in Vicksburg, Mississippi, where I was, where I'm from.

McCulla: And what were your parents' names?

Hall: They're still living. It's Parker Hall and Linda Hall.

McCulla: And how would you say, growing up in many different places changed you or shaped you?

Hall: I just, you know it, hmm. I didn't really grow up with the same culture I guess that a lot of Americans my age would have, you know? The television and fast food and Coca Cola. I remember the first time I came back to visit my grandmother and she took me to a grocery store in Memphis, and, you know, we turned the corner and there was like a whole wall of Coca Cola, which was, you know, a luxury thing to me. So, yeah, and then, you know, growing up in Missis-,

coming back to Mississippi almost felt like that was a, a foreign country as well sometimes. [Chuckles]

McCulla: What was, what was strange about it?

Hall: Oh, just, it was totally foreign to me. You know, I, I didn't know how to play American football. I thought, I thought, I thought that was soccer, you know? But, no, it's, it's a great place to be from.

02:31 McCulla: And what do you recall about food and drink when you were growing up, whether on your travels or in Mississippi?

Hall: Oh, well, you know, you learn to kind of be, that it's always gonna seem a little bit foreign to you, and you just kind of put your reservations to the side and go ahead and eat it and it's usually delicious. And, but beer-wise, you know, even overseas, you know, beer was just this kind of light lager flavorless thing that your dad would let you take some sips of, and was, it was too bitter to finish.

McCulla: And so, what did you study in school?

Hall: So, I went to school for an engineering degree, and then I started homebrewing when I was in college. Me and about five other guys lived in this kind of old farmhouse out in the, in the countryside in Virginia. I was going to school at the University of Virginia, and we were so secluded that we'd have just great parties out there. And so, they, the rest of them started a, a pot growing operation in the, in the backyard. [Chuckles] And I was a little bit more paranoid than they were, and so I said, "Well, I'll start trying to make my own beer." And that's when I got into homebrewing.

McCulla: What year was that?

Hall: That would have been, let's see, 19-, 1991 I guess. Yeah.

03:45 McCulla: And at that time where did you get ingredients or supplies to brew?

Hall: Yeah, it was hard to find, you know. I started with a kit from the back pages of the *Rolling Stone* magazine. You know, it was kinda where I got the idea, like, oh, “brew your own beer.” And, and it showed up and it was two cans of malt extract and some, some brown-looking hops, you know? And a packet of dried yeast and sugar. And so, after I started really getting into it, I found a homebrew store in Richmond, which was about, you know, an hour and a half, two hours away. And I'd go every once in a while and pick up some ingredients there.

McCulla: What was that called? Do you remember the store?

Hall: Oh, I don't remember. No, I'm sorry, I don't remember the store.

McCulla: And do you remember what was the first batch of beer like that you brewed?

Hall: Yeah. It, I was surprised that it actually tasted like beer. I was amazed that you could make something on your stove that would actually taste like beer. But we'd use so much, so much cane sugar instead of malt extract that after about two weeks it tasted like apple cider, and not good apple cider. And so, actually my friend had gone in with me on the kit. You know, he kinda gave up on it. But, I started reading a little bit, you know in the. There really wasn't anything, you know, the internet wasn't really a thing back then, but I found some, some homebrew books at the, at the university library and started reading up about it. And I was like, "Oh, okay. I need to not use sugar. I need to, you know, use actual good yeast. Hops are not supposed to be brown. That's a bad, that's sign of poor quality." [Chuckles]

McCulla: Do you remember what books those were that you used?

Hall: Definitely, you know, picked up Charlie Papazian's one. I think everybody in my generation knows probably the first book they picked up.

05:21 McCulla: Sure. And, and what was the reception among your friends? Or who was sharing the beer with you that you made?

Hall: You know, we would have parties and they'd be like, "Okay." You know. "We'll, we'll choke through this." And then they'd go, "Oh! You know, this, this batch isn't near as bad as the first one." And, so yeah, we would just have, we would have parties out there and share the beer. And then I kind of, when I moved back to Mississippi it was even harder to find ingredients, and so I kind of let it go for a little while. And then my wife and I were gettin' married. She was about a year and a half behind me in school. And when she got out of school we got married, and I said, okay, I'm gonna crank open the homebrew kit again and make a, I think it was a, a raspberry stout I was gonna make. And, I forgot to put water in the air lock and so of course when it came time to drink it I realized then, I was like, oh, this is probably horribly infected. I'm not even gonna try to drink it. And, so it sat in back by the laundry room, and about two weeks later we moved up to Nashville and she said, "Hey, the movers are here. They wanna know what to do with this bucket of homebrew." And I was like, "Oh, it's probably, it's probably not worth saving." And so, they, they poured it out and she said, "Well, I'll keep a little bit and see, so you can actually taste it." And I tasted it when I got home from work, and it was fantastic.

McCulla: Oh!

Hall: And I was like, "Oh my god! I can't believe we poured that out!" You know.

McCulla: Did you try to re-create that recipe at some point?

Hall: I did, yes. So, we moved up here, and I was working as a tire engineer for Bridgestone Firestone, which is headquartered in Nashville. And, and I really got back into homebrewing. One, because I actually had a lot of free time on the weekends for once. So, I kind of built an even more elaborate homebrew kit and started making a lot of beer, and it got better. And I joined up with the local homebrew club. There was about, a pretty big club for, for this part of the world. There was about a hundred people in the local club. And it had the support of the, the two brewpubs that were here in town. They would, they would lend space for meetings and kind of sit in and kind of critique the beers. And, and that's kind of where I got the idea of like, wow, it'd be great to actually be a pro at this.

McCulla: What were those brewpubs?

Hall: So, Bosco's was one, with Chuck Skypeck was the brewmaster there. He's now with the Brewers Association. And then, Blackstone Brewing with Dave Miller was the, the, the brewmaster there. He's written a lot of good, you know, really good technical books on homebrewing. Yeah.

McCulla: And what year was it you moved to Nashville?

Hall: So, that would've been '96. Yeah. Yeah.

07:54 McCulla: And, so the, the general culture of homebrewing at the time it, it, you said it was largely before the internet was the most important means of communication. Was it, it was face-to-face meetings, or, at this brewpub, that was the most important way to learn about brewing, would you say?

Hall: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, there was, yeah, that was the only way you'd, you would, we'd have big brew days out in the parking lot once a year. And you'd see how everybody else's equipment was set up. And then there was always some really knowledgeable people that would say, "Oh, you know, that, that taste that you're wondering where that came from, that's from doing this wrong, or using this wrong ingredient, or not filtering your water, or." And that, and yeah, it was just invaluable. And, I mean nowadays I think there's so much information out there that you, it's a lot easier to get up to speed, but, yeah. Back then it was just once a month taking your beers down to the club and seeing what people thought, and.

McCulla: What kind of styles were people brewing at the time?

Hall: It was kind of your classic, you know, start-up homebrew styles. You know, pale ales, stouts, porters. You know, if you got really crazy, a Hefeweizen, you know. Nobody really knew how to do lagers on a small scale back then.

08:57 McCulla: Okay, and so the leap to opening, to going professional. What was that like?

Hall: Well, you know, that just, I started, you know, talking to Dave Miller and Chuck Skypeck and kinda looking back at the breweries when they were back there, and, and kinda got the idea in my head and then, you know, I started kinda doodling about designs and recipes and. I remember my wife and I were walking through the park one Sunday, and I was just going on and on about it. "Well, wouldn't it be great if we did this? Oh, I know what the label would look like." And she, like, I really remember exactly where we were, she stopped me, she turned me, and she said, "Look. Either do this or shut up. Because I'm so tired of just talking about it." She said, "We're only in our thirties. We don't have kids. All we have is our house note. You know, if you're serious about it, do it. But, don't just keep talking about it." And so, I was like, "Okay, I will." And, and I went back to, I went, I, I realized that a lot of the breweries that were not having any success back, so this would've been, like, 1998, something like that, they were usually making bad beer, or they were making fantastic beer, but they didn't have a business background and they were just, you know, they were growing out of, too fast, and runnin' out of cash. And so, I was like, okay, if I'm probably gonna have to do everything myself to start up with. And so, I went back to Vanderbilt and I got a business degree from there. And then while I was at, done with that, I got a brewing degree at the, at the American, American Brewers Guild, which is kind of an online course and then you ended up with an internship. And so, I'd pestered, after that I pestered Garrett Oliver, at Brooklyn Brewery to, to give me an internship. And when I got done with that I felt like I had kind of the basics, you know, to, to start our own brewery.

10:38 McCulla: So, both, both sides of those experiences, the business degree, what, what did you feel is most valuable about that?

Hall: Well, you know, it kinda helped me see how to put together, you know, a P&L statement, how to, you know put together a business plan. And then, I would say probably the most valuable thing about it is that it opens up a lot of doors in Nashville if you, if you went to school at, at Vanderbilt and got a degree there. It was kind of funny. It, this, so this would've been, like, right around 2000, and all my classmates' plans were to, you know, start some kinda online business and, you know, and cash out with an IPO in a couple years. [Chuckles] And I was the only one actually, you know, thinking about doing some kind of brick-and-mortar building, and they're like, well like, "How are you gonna sell beer online? I don't get this." Like, I'm not. I'm just gonna put it in a bottle and put it on a shelf, and. So, it was an interesting time to be in business school.

11:29 McCulla: And Brooklyn Brewery, what did you learn there?

Hall: Well, you know, Brooklyn was making a lot of their beer upstate, but they had, they had a, a 20-barrel brewhouse in Brooklyn that they were doing a lot of

their draft beer for the city. And so, yeah, it was just the basics of how to run, you know, a mash, how to run a fermentation, you know, how to clean a tank. But the great thing was, you know, you learn that in school, but you don't really learn how to put together flavors in a beer. And so, sitting out with Garrett at the end of the day, he would, for my homework assignment, they were also operating their own distributorship because they couldn't find a distributor that would pick up their brand. And so, they weren't only distributing their beers, but a lot of good American craft beers and also a lot of imports. And so, he would go into their kit, their, their tax cage and pull out a bottle of all these different beers and he'd say, "Hey, I've been to all of these breweries. I know how they make their beer. I want you to sit down tonight and drink all this beer." And I was like, "Wow, that's great." [Chuckles] He goes, "No, analyze it, think of how you would come back with a recipe, or process, you know, where they're gettin' these flavors from." And so that was, that was really cool because I'd come back, and he'd be just like, "No. No. No. That's not how they're doing it. I've been there. This is how they're doing it." And so, it was, I could pick out the flavors in the beer and, and he knew how those were, where those were coming from. And so, it really helped putting together our recipes when I, when I got back here.

12:51 McCulla: What were some of the newer styles that you discovered there? Or, experienced?

Hall: Well, definitely Hefeweizen. I'd never really had anything like that there, and, and, and Brooklyn makes a fantastic version. And when I got back here, I knew that's one of the ones I wanted to try, 'cause I thought the trick to getting southerners to try craft beer would be to do a lot of beer pairings, a lot of beer dinners, you know? We have such wonderful food culture here. But, because there wasn't any breweries really before Prohibition, afterward, the big, the big guys kinda came in and it's all light lagers. And, so I think if you could turn people on to how well, you know, a beer pairs up with all the different foods that we have, I thought that would be the way to get people to try it.

13:32 McCulla: Why, and why has there been a lack of brewing in the South before Prohibition?

Hall: Well, I just don't think we had the same kinda, you know, German and, and Irish and English kind of, you know, culture. It was, and then the climate, too, is really difficult to, to run a brewery when it's, when it's hardly ever cold and there's not ice that you can use for refrigeration. So, there were breweries starting up before Prohibition, but that kind of killed a lot of them. Gerst is, Gerst was a big one here in Nashville. Then you had, you know, like, like Dixie down in New Orleans. But, you know, after Prohibition, the big guys came in with refrigeration and shipping was a lot easier with, with the rail system, and then the inter-, interstate system. And I think they just were able to take over the market before, you know, and there wasn't any kind of history to fall back on.

14:21 McCulla: And you are brewing a Gerst recipe.

Hall: Yeah. Yeah, we can talk about that. That's fun. Gerst was a brewery in, I guess started here around the 1880s, and for a while, you know, before Prohibition, got to be one of the biggest in the Southeast, and didn't really make it healthily through Prohibition, and closed in like the 1950s. But the family owned a restaurant as well, so they kept a lot of the memorabilia. And, and then in the '90s they wanted to brew Gerst again, and so they found a brewery up in Indiana that would brew Gerst for them. That brewery closed. They found one in Pittsburgh. It wasn't very good. [Chuckles] And when we moved into this building and had a lot more capacity, I approached him, I said, "Hey, it's a shame that, that Gerst isn't being brewed back in Nashville. How about we give it a shot?" And, and so we worked on, you know, we didn't really have any recipes to go off of. They just kind of had a, an idea in their head of what it tas-, would taste like, and. We did a lot of test batches, and, and it came out, and it was fun. And we, we filled an old cask with it and had a, a tapping down at the Gerst Haus, invited the mayor to come down. And it was funny, we invited a lot of the news media to make it kind of a historical event. And when I, when we tapped the cask, you know, I had a, kind of an old German stein I was gonna give 'em. My daughters were there helping me and watching and so, I filled the stein, I was gonna turn and walk over to give it to the mayor, and my five-year-old daughter said, "Hey Daddy, can I do that?" I was like, "Sure!" And so, I handed it to her. So, she's walking up, you know, little pigtails, like, handing the mayor a beer, and on, like, live TV, and the look on his face was like, "Oh no. I don't know if I should take this or not." But yeah, that was fun. And, and he, he gave a nice speech. Said, this is, this is pretty cool to see the linking of, like, Nashville's current and future brewing scene with its past.

16:07 McCulla: So, back a bit to starting up Yazoo. What were the early days like?

Hall: Well, it was, it was rough. I mean, we, we, we found a used equipment from a place up in Iowa that had gone out of business. Brought it back down here. And we were lookin' for space and really didn't have much money at all to go to get off, off the ground with. And so, we found this old kind of abandoned car factory called Marathon Motor Works, which an entrepreneur had bought and was slowly trying to renovate it. And so, he said, "Sure, you can take that, that corner. I'm not, I'm not doing anything with it. I'll give you as much free rent as, as you put the labor in." And, so we repaired the roof, sandblasted, you know, did a lot of concrete work. None of the utilities were there, so we had to do all of the utilities. And, it took about fourteen months. My father-in-law and I were doing a lot of the work. We were trying to do it as cheaply as possible. So we got in and opened in October of 2003. Early days, it was me and my wife and a, and a guy that had gone through the same brewing school as I did, and had wanted to learn for, and I knew I couldn't pay him very much. So, we did that for the first year. I would, I'd help him get a brew started in the morning. I'd put some samples in growlers in my truck and drive around town trying to get taps, and if I got lucky I'd come

back and grab a keg and take it over there to get it, get it hooked up. We did that kind of self-distribution route for about a year before got the interest of a couple distributors and kind of figured out which one I wanted to go with.

17:44 McCulla: And so what was, what was the consumer palate like at the time when you opened, would you say?

Hall: Yeah, I mean, our, our pale ale, which I don't think is hoppy at all, right, you know, compared to the current market, was like *way* too bitter for most people, you know. I, true story, I really remember walking into this one restaurant and they're like, "Well, we already have all four beers on tap, you know? We have, we have Coors Light, Bud Light, Miller Lite, and Heineken." [Chuckles] And I'd have to, a lot of times I would have to figure out how to get another tap into their system just to get 'em, get it a shot. But, Nashville's also had a kind of a burgeoning, you know, food scene. And so, I was able to talk to a lot of them, say, "Hey, you know, I'm, I'm just like you. I'm kind of a chef-operated, you know, restaurant when you get down to it. How about giving another small business a chance?" And, and they would. They'd, you know, they'd taste and like, "Oh, this is good. This, you know, this reminds me of that trip to Germany I took. Or that trip to England." And so, they'd put it on, and it would do well. And, you know, before I knew it, I'd have some of their friends in the restaurant business calling us saying, "Hey, I wanna get a tap of the, your pale ale as well."

18:46 McCulla: So, and so, you know, aside from the, this, having to work for taps, what were some of the other challenges or hardships in the early days?

Hall: Really just, just managing, well, one, trying to manage a balance between personal life and, and, and business was really tough, because I was working really late hours. My wife was working with me. She was pregnant at the time, and so we had our first daughter, like, two months after we opened. But yeah, those things. Just the, all the regulatory things that you have to figure out along the way. The taxes, the reporting, what licenses you need to have. But, once we got open, I had a five-year business plan, I thought we'd hit, you know, around 5,000 barrels after five years. And, and after about, it seemed like after about six months, I was like, okay, we're so off of this, it's not even worth the paper it's printed on anymore. We were growing so fast.

19:44 McCulla: Okay. And so, what, what was the process like of a, of growing and, and evolving in your brewing as well?

Hall: Well, it was, it was challenging because, you know, when you're growing, and you don't have a huge line of credit, you're, you're always using your cash flow to, to buy the extra, the new ingredients that you need to make more beer, and so. And then you need to buy more equipment, and more tanks, and, you need to hire more people, and so, it's, it's crazy. You, you can be so per-, so successful that you don't have any cash. And so, managing that was, was tough. You know,

we had to turn down some opportunities to grow even faster than we were because I was like, no, I don't wanna, I don't wanna take on other investors. And we're just gonna buy equipment as we, as we can afford it. But, no, I mean, everybody says that's a good problem to have, and it is. It's, it beats the alternative. But it's still, it's still a challenge.

20:37 McCulla: And so how does recipe formulation work here?

Hall: Well, our, the ones we started out with obviously were, were ones that I'd kind of homebrewed over the years. And then here lately, you know, we have, we have a small system that our, our brewers can take turns generating recipes on, and we can make a keg at a time, put it on tap in the taproom, and if, if people really like it that might be one that we, that we come out with for a seasonal or for something like that.

McCulla: And, on that point, what is it like to be an employee at Yazoo?

Hall: What is it like being an employee? Well, you know, everyone's expected to work hard, to understand kind of the big picture and not just their, their role at that time. And, you know, to feel free to jump in and help, help out, where, where it's needed. There's not anybody here who has just one role and that's all they do and when they're done they can, they can kick back and watch other people, you know, workin' hard. So, I think we're, we're all, you know, kinda do-it-yourselfers, self-starters, like to work hard, you know, like to have fun. I mean, kinda the coolest thing that I see is, you know, every, all the people that work here, even though they're sweating and hot and, and probably yelling at each other during the day, you know, they like to get together after work and, and go out and have fun together. So, it's a pretty tight-knit team.

22:02 McCulla: So, thinking a little bit about your, your brand, the design, the name of your brewery, can you talk a bit about those?

Hall: Yeah. You know, growing up in the, in, in Vicksburg at the end of the Delta, you know, Yazoo was something that, you know, just always was around us. I mean, the Yazoo River came into the Vicks-, into the Mississippi River there at Vicksburg. I had a dog named Yazoo growing up. And so, when I was thinking about starting the brewery, I was like, let's, you know, just something that would remind us of, of being in the Delta was what we were looking for. It was actually, like, the quickest decision probably of anything that we made. And our logo, it, you know, kind of the, the red one with the rays coming off of it, I just, my wife is the artist and so she, I just, she said, "What do you want it to look like?" I was like, "Well, you know, my eyes are pretty bad. I just wanna be able to see it from across the bar and know that that's our handle." And so, she came up with something that was pretty, you know, pretty graphic and striking and that, that I could see, actually. [Chuckles]

22:59 McCulla: When you brew, do you imagine a particular kind of customer? Or are you really brewing more toward a, a recipe or a style?

Hall: Well, yeah. It's kind of a cliché that brewers say that we brew for ourselves, but, it's true in a way because it, it's hard to go out and, and be enthusiastic and sell your beers if it's not something that you're personally really proud of and that you like to drink. So, yeah, I think its styles that we know that we can sell, you know, you wanna sell people more than one or two pints at a time. It could be something that's great and, but it's so strong, or it's so bitter, or it's so sweet that nobody really wants to have more than one pint of it. You know, where we're, where we are in the South, you know, you need something kinda light and refreshing most of the time to com-, you know, combat the heat. So yeah, I think we tend to do more sessionable styles, more traditional English and German styles. As we've kind of established ourselves, we've kind of branched out into, you know, we have a line of beers called Embrace the Funk that we do that are a lot of sour and wild beers. And then some of our seasonals, we've kind of stretched our, our legs a little bit on that, you know, we've done some Goses, some Belgian styles, you know.

24:13 McCulla: What are you most excited about in terms of styles to experiment with going forward?

Hall: Well, you know, it's kind of weird, like, we're, we're excited about lagers here lately. So, our pilsners and then some of our seasonals have been, a lot of them have been lagers. We finally have enough tank space that we can let it ferment for the extra week or two that it needs. And, and then on the Embrace the Funk side, that's been a lot of challenging, because with our regular styles of beer people expect them to be consistent and repeatable and, and what with our funky stuff, it might just be a one-off and we might not ever make it again, and everybody's fine with that. So, yeah, we're, we're kinda going in a lot of different directions right now.

24:52 McCulla: Okay. And, related to that, you are, as you mentioned, you are moving and so, could you describe what's coming in the future?

Hall: Yeah, you know, when, when we moved here eight years ago, the, the Gulch part of town wasn't really a neighborhood, even. This building had been vacant. The condos were just getting built. And so, we thought with this, we'd be here for a long time. And then if we needed to grow past our walls we could probably buy the property next door. But the property values have gone through the roof as people, more and more people wanna live down here, and more and more developers are putting up high rises. So, two things. It's gotten harder and harder for us to, you know, run an, kind of an industrial business, getting trucks in and out. And then the, the value of this real estate has gotten to the point where like, well, you know, we could pretty much finance a new building. And so, we bought some property last summer out along the Cumberland River north of town. Big,

six-acre lot. Beautiful land. It's zoned the proper, industrial zoning. And so, we'll be breaking ground it looks like in about two to three weeks and hopefully we'll be in there by about this time next year.

26:06 McCulla: I, it seems like Tennessee in particular has a really unique legislative history related to alcohol production, which.

Hall: Yeah.

McCulla: I have not encountered before in my research, so could you describe that a bit?

Hall: Yeah. Well, it's kind of hard to describe. So, back in the ‘50s, each county in Tennessee had the right to impose their own taxes on beer. And it got to be just a crazy, quilt work, patchwork of different tax rates, different authorities. And so, the, the distributors petitioned the state to just impose one common tax. It's still paid to each one of the counties, but it's the same tax. And back then it was a 17% tax. Well, back then, beer prices being what they were, that was kind of the middle of the road for comparing it to other states. But since it kept multiplying the effects of inflation by, you know, by the time we started brewing, it was the highest in the country. And at 17% it added such a huge tax burden. And so, we kept trying to find ways to attack it, and finally formed a state guild of brewers back in, I wanna say it was probably like 2012, 2013. And I was the president of that. And so, we, we teamed up with the, the beer distributors lobbying group and kinda just, you know, made it instead of a case to give a tax break to all the big brewers and the big distributors, you know, we put a face to a small business, you know. So, we were able to say, "Hey, look, this is hurting all these small brewers because, one, because of the economies of scale, their beer is, is actually more expensive and is priced higher. And so, that means the 17% tax is actually a huge tax to them compared to some of the light, the, the light beers. And so, we had to make it a revenue-neutral thing for the state. So, they converted it from a percentage to a flat per-gallon tax, which is what most states have. And since we are always on the high end of the pricing point, it really lowered our tax rate. So, that was the first kind of big thing we got done as a guild. And then the next year we started working on their, the, the cap on alcohol content. That was another kind of crazy Tennessee thing, is that anything over 6% [alcohol by volume] was considered a liquor, and you had to go to a liquor store to buy it. And there wasn't even a license to make beer above 6%, even though it was legal to sell it. So, we got that fixed as well. We raised the cap up to 10%. And so, now if you have a regular brewing license as a brewery, you can make beer up to 10%.

McCulla: But before that was possible, you did make a high alcohol beer?

Hall: Yeah. We had found a loophole that the state could issue a brewery a distillery license, and that would let us make liquor, even though legally we couldn't with the federal license. But, so we made the first beer above 6% since

Prohibition. It was a really dark, rich imperial st-, porter called Sue. Named after, in reference to the Johnny Cash song.

29:02 McCulla: Along these lines, I'm interested in thinking about the regional differences in brewing culture in America. Would you say, do you think region matters in brewing?

Hall: Yeah, it, it does to a certain extent. A lot of, we're all using a lot of the same ingredients. And, you know, a lot of the same hops and grain are available to, to everybody who wants to find it. But I think what happens is the, the, the food culture and then the climate really kinda dictate what people are wanting to drink, you know. I mean, down South, I think, people gravitate towards lower alcohol, lighter beers, ones that you can have, you know, more of in the heat. But that can stand up to our really spicy, you know, Cajun food or, or Nashville hot chicken, for example. And, I think if you go out, you know, especially out in California, in that area, you know, the IPAs were, that's where that I-, that craze kinda got started. And then if you go to the Northeast with all the immigrants from traditional brewing countries, they're more focused on, you know, I'd say traditional lagers and German styles.

McCulla: Mississippi brewing culture: how does that compare to, to Tennesee?

Hall: [Chuckles] I mean, I'm proud of the number of breweries that are starting to pop up down there, but it's definitely lagging behind. You know? The joke's always like, hey, if, if a nuclear war starts, go to Mississippi 'cause it won't happen there for ten years. And, you know, yeah, it's, I mean I love, I love having grown up there. But it's definitely more of a struggle. The big brewers have, definitely have a lot more, a tighter control over the market I guess down there.

30:38 McCulla: So, I have some kind of bigger picture questions now. This is clearly a very competitive moment of transition and change in the brewing industry. And so, what's your strategy for growth going forward?

Hall: Yeah. We've kinda had the same strategy for the last five years. We haven't really opened up any new major markets for our distribution. We're just focusing on our, on our home base. 'Cause I feel that, you know, even if things tighten up, the brewers that have a strong local presence will be fine. And so, about, about 85% of our sales come from, I'd say, within, you know, fifty to a hundred miles of Nashville through one distributor. So, yeah, I, I think people will, and I think it's happening now, that there's so much choice that people are going back to, to brands and styles and beer and breweries that they know are a good value and that they know that it's, it's good quality. They may take a, you know, take a flier on a new six-pack of beer they'd never heard of before, but they'll put another one of, that they've had, back in the, in the grocery cart as well. And so, I think, yeah, you know, breweries that have really expanded their distribution and that have invested a lot and tr-, and projected growth that's not coming, are the ones that

are, that are hurting right now. But, I don't think people are gonna quit drinking good beer. But it does seem like a lot of, more of the younger crowd is, is, they're not loyal to beer itself. They might switch from beer to, to spirit, to cocktails, or to wine, or, you know, to marijuana now. So, yeah. It's, it's pretty uncertain times in the craft industry with a lot of breweries our size feel like we're getting, you know, we're getting attacked by the, the, the big breweries who have bought a lot of craft breweries and are folding those into those port-, their portfolios. And at the same time, a lot of our traditional business with bars and restaurants is now going to breweries that have, you know, their own taprooms and do most of their business there. So, it's, it's, it's a strange time. It's definitely not like it was the last, you know, ten years or so.

32:44 McCulla: What do you think consumers want now, and will want from a kind of flavor perspective? Or, you know, from, from, in terms of a sense of taste?

Hall: Yeah. I'm thinking they like to take experiments if they're going out to a brewery. They'll try everything that's there. And that's where you're seeing things like glitter in beer, and, you know, hazy IPAs. But then when they're taking beer to, home for dinner, or they're going shopping, they seem to be picking, you know, more traditional styles. You know, you're seeing a lot of the Mexican imports kind of have a resurgence. You're seeing brands like, like Blue Moon, you know, by MillerCoors, really growing steadily even though it's a twenty-five-year old brand. So, it's kinda hard to tell what consumers are demanding right now, because when they, when they go out for an experience, they're wanting just the craziest thing that you can give 'em. But when they were going to the grocery store to buy something to take home, they seem to be going back towards, you know, lighter, more sessionable styles and, and bigger brands that they, maybe that they have a, you know, more of a trust factor in.

33:56 McCulla: So, in terms of the role of a brewery within a community, how do you see that? What role should a brewery, or could a brewery, play within a community?

Hall: Well, you know, we've always felt that the best thing we can do is be a big part of, of Nashville's community. And, you know, we support a lot of charities. We, you know, we give away a lot of beer for sure. And, I just feel like, it, it's not really marketing. It's just, you know, you want people when they're, when they're thinking about your brand to have a great, positive feel to it. And if they see you out, you know, supporting local charities or doing, doing fun events that, you know, kind of help tie the community together, I think that's the best thing you can do instead of, you know, plastering your brand on billboards all around town. So, I'm, I'm proud of that, that people think that we're a part of, of Nashville's community. And, and that's something that we definitely take really seriously.

McCulla: Are there some examples of, of causes or, you know, charities that you have supported?

Hall: Yeah. You know, we're big supporters of, of Shelby Park, Friends of Shelby Park, one of the older parks in East Nashville where a lot of us live. So, we support the, the Hot Chicken Festival every year where a lot of the proceeds go to that. We've been big supporters of, of CASA [Nashville] which is, you know, helps find, helps children get out of neglected, sorry, neglected homes. And then just, you know, the, the fun thing about, you know, a lot of our employees have special things that they like to support, and they'll come to us and say, "Hey, would it be alright if, you know, we donated beer, or we, you know, helped support this or promote it." So, yeah, it seems like a lot of times, you know, our head brewer will be really interested in this charity and we'll support that. And it's always been things that are, like, that we can get behind and, and personally feel like we're doing something good.

McCulla: That's great. How would you describe how Nashville has changed within the last ten years or so? And what do you see for its future?

Hall: Yeah. You know, I moved up here twenty-two years ago and, at that time Nashville felt like a small town-, a lot of small towns kinda knit together around a downtown where, you know, everybody left after 5:00 pm, and nobody came down there anymore. So, that, that appealed to me 'cause co-, coming from a small town in Mississippi you could find, you know, we lo-, we settled down in East Nashville, which with all the old homes and the restaurants kinda starting up, it reminded me of, of places down in, down south. But here lately there's so many people, it's got, you know, it had a reputation as the 'it' city, I guess, thanks to that *New York Times* article. And, so a lot of young people are moving here from other parts of the country, and, and they're bringing a lot of, you know, excitement and enthusiasm. But they're also, you know, the culture's changing pretty rapidly. More and more people are living downtown, so you're seeing all these cranes and condos going up. The restaurant scene has just exploded, and, and there's the, the diversity of food is amazing. And it's brought a lot of people who are used to drinking, you know, say west coast style beers, or, or, you know, they're from Chicago and they're used to drinking, you know, from there. They're starting up their own breweries here. So, we went from, I think about five years ago there was only four of us here to, I think we have about twenty-six now in middle Tennessee. So, it's changing rapidly. And a lot of it is because of all the, the younger people moving here.

37:12 McCulla: And so, just a few questions to wrap up. This term craft beer. How might you define it? Do you like the term?

Hall: [Chuckles] No, I mean, I understand that, you know, you had to use some kind of descriptor of what we're doing versus what the big guys are doing, but, you know. I do like the idea of calling us independent more than calling us craft, because, you know craft for a while, you know, you try to define it as a certain quality. But then, you know, what do you say about, you know, craft brewers who

obviously aren't putting out great beers? Well, so I think it was a, it was an attempt to kind of define, you know, who was in the club and who wasn't. And that's, there's always gonna be that attempt, but, you know, it, it, it served its purpose for a while, but I don't think it has a whole lot of meaning right now.

McCulla: And, final question. What do you value or enjoy most about what you do?

Hall: Oh, well, you know, you know, coming from making tires, it wasn't that exciting. [Chuckles] And, you know, even, I mean the worst day in the brewery beats the best day as a tire engineer because, you know, I mean, at the end of the day you can sit down and enjoy a pint of the beer that you made. And beer is something that make, seems to make people happy. And it, and it generates conversation, it generates community, and, people get excited about it even though it's just, you know, when you get down to it it's, it's beer and, and so, yeah, that's the part I love about it, is that, you know, it carries conversations. It creates, you know, it's a social lubricant, so, people love to get together and talk about it and enjoy it and, you know, it makes a great meal even better. So, yeah, there's just so many things that you can enjoy about beer.

McCulla: Well, thank you so much for your time.

Hall: Yeah, this was fun. Yeah.