

Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library

University of California
Berkeley, California

Chuck Williams

WILLIAMS-SONOMA: MASTERING THE HOMEWARE MARKETPLACE: 1994-2004

Interviews conducted by
Victor W. Geraci
in 2004

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VOLUME HISTORY

In the spring of 1992, Penelope Wisner, public relations director of Williams-Sonoma, approached the Regional Oral History Office about recording the history of the specialty cookware and home products company. Williams-Sonoma was then entering its thirty-sixth year, having grown from its modest beginnings as a small housewares specialty shop in Sonoma, California, to a multi-million-dollar retail empire with stores across the nation. The proposal fit well with the office's ongoing interest in documenting innovative entrepreneurship through its Bay Area business history collection. The project got underway in August 1992 with a full oral biography of founder Charles E. Williams. In 1956 Williams launched a business that had set trends in cooking and mail-order marketing and had reinvented the modern ideal of the American kitchen. To broaden the account, three shorter interviews were conducted with Howard Lester, Patrick Connolly, and Tom O'Higgins--all of whom played a central role in the company during the 1980s and 1990s. During this period, the company underwent a dramatic expansion and diversification. The addition of over two hundred stores nationwide was accompanied by the introduction of four new catalogs to the Williams-Sonoma mix: Gardner's Eden, Pottery Barn, Hold Everything, and Chambers. The resulting interviews were bound in a volume 1 titled, "Williams-Sonoma Cookware and the American Kitchen: The Merchandising Vision of Chuck Williams, 1956-1994."

In 2004 ROHO's newly hired Food and Wine Historian Victor Geraci decided to revisit the Williams-Sonoma story by reinterviewing both Chuck Williams and Howard Lester. Volume two, "Williams-Sonoma: Mastering the Homeware Marketplace; 1994-2004," serves as an updating of the phenomenal growth of a modern American Corporation based on the brand marketing of Chuck Williams and the entrepreneurial energy and guidance of Howard Lester.

INTERVIEW HISTORY

On March 8, 2004, Victor W. Geraci, PhD conducted an one and one-half hour interview with Charles E. "Chuck" Williams at his Williams-Sonoma office on 3250 Van Ness Avenue San Francisco, CA 94109. This follow-up interview, a continuation of a series of interviews completed by Ruth Teiser and Lisa Jacobson between 1992 and 1994, recaptured many past topics but also capitalized on the growth of the company over the past decade. The interview setting was Williams' spacious office in the corporate headquarters of Williams-Sonoma. Windows on one whole side of the office opened to a panoramic view of the San Francisco Bay and the island of Alcatraz. The wall behind Williams' desk is a large bookcase filled with hundreds of cookbooks. Williams is a spry eighty-eight-year-old man that goes to work daily and plays an active role in the Williams-Sonoma catalogue sales and the development of the cookbook program. His fashionable dress, light orange sweater over a button-down shirt and a tie, and his soft-spoken voice and manners reflect a very genteel manner and a sense that he is waiting on you. Williams's constant friendly smile and his carefully thought out answers provides good insights into his success. Some names, dates, specific people, and events appear to have slipped his mind, but this did not distract from the power of his story and his commitment to food.

The Regional Oral History Office was established in 1954 to augment through tape-recorded memoirs the Library's materials on the history of California and the West. Copies of all interviews are available for research use in The Bancroft Library and in the UCLA Department of Special Collections. The office is under the direction of Richard Cándida Smith, and the administrative direction of Charles B. Faulhaber, The James D. Hart Director of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Increased interest in social history and human foodways has provided new directions for food researchers and writers. By placing more emphasis on interdisciplinary studies that evaluate the individual's "food identity," food topics now include varying societal belief systems based on race, class, gender, ethnicity, geography, politics, and economics. Nineteenth-century American immigrants used food as one means to identify themselves in their new homeland. As a result, by the twentieth century sayings such as "American as apple pie," "garlic snapper," "beaner," "she's a dish," "two chickens in every pot," "real men don't eat quiche," "he's a bad apple," and "apple of my eye" provided the nation with a mixed bag of images meant to separate Americans by race, class, and gender. Added to these ingredients were the pressures of two world wars, a depression, and the Cold War that baked up a new American alimentary tradition built on science, the car culture, ease of cooking for increased leisure time, and disposable income.

By the 1950s America's consensus-era population served up new foodways that glorified consumption of hot dogs, hamburgers, French fries, Jell-O salad, Miracle Whip, and Spam, in what has been labeled as the fast food movement. Yet, in the 1960s and seventies, Bay Area social movements and their radicalized members, distrustful of science and filled with an anti-authoritarian spirit, rejected the larger society's absolute faith in science, big business, and government. The region's food radicals foraged for new ways to acquire quality, safe foods and struggled to create a food identity for themselves and the nation. From these radical activists emanated a philosophical foodway based on antiestablishment political beliefs, the democratization of class, multiculturalism, and gender and sexual freedom. Hippies on communes and mainstream rebels grew, sold, processed and consumed certain foods from small organic farms as a red badge of courage in their resistance against the system. From this struggle emanated the gastropolicies of a food revolution that eventually defined a new cuisine.

Throughout the 1970s and eighties pioneer chefs from the new food movement established specialty restaurants that utilized regional fresh produce with ethnic cuisines and fused them into a new foodway. They designed dishes that enhanced the health advantages of the Mediterranean diet and wine culture and gave birth to a democratized haute cuisine. As more and more middle-class and wealthy Americans ate their culinary creations and attempted to replicate their favorite recipes at home, these new food ideas became mainstream. Old World peasant foods with a California twist became the rage. Amazingly, at this same time, the "fast food nation" grew as many middle-class and poorer Americans found McFood. The question for food historians is to first document the food revolution of the sixties and seventies and then record the interplay between those of the fast food culture and the acolytes of the California cuisine. How will foodways develop in the new millennium amidst continuing concerns of overpopulation, agribusiness, scientific or "book" farming, global warming, and globalism, while never losing track of the use of food as a means to define one's identity.

Victor W. Geraci, PhD
ROHO Food and Wine Historian

INTERVIEW 1: MARCH 8, 2004

Minidisc 1

1-00:00:00

Geraci: Hi, I'm Vic Geraci, Food and Wine Historian from the University of California at Berkeley, Regional Oral History Office. Today's date is Monday, March 8, 2004, and seated with me is Chuck Williams, founder of Williams-Sonoma. The interview is being conducted in Mr. Williams' office on Van Ness Street in San Francisco, California. This interview is a continuation of the Charles E. Williams, "Williams-Sonoma Cookware and the American Kitchen: The Merchandising Vision of Chuck Williams, 1956-1994," interviews by Lisa Jacobson and Ruth Teiser between 1992 and 1994.

Mr. Williams, first of all, thank you very much for allowing us to do this again. In past interviews, one of the things that we always talked about was your growing up, your background, your early life, your beginnings and the beginnings of the Williams-Sonoma experience. One of the things I would really like to help us get into is, who is Chuck Williams today, how have you changed over this time, and where has Williams-Sonoma gone as far as being a company? One of the first experiences I think that I would like to talk about is that with, I believe it is the Sniff family, that was in Indio—

1-00:01:39

Williams: Indio, yes, which is in the Coachella Valley, south of Palm Springs.

1-00:01:39

Geraci: In Indio that you had worked with, and I would like to somewhat revisit that, because in the past interview you talked about how that left an impression on you, as far as marketing and what you do, and the clientele. Can you tell us about your experiences with the Sniff family?

1-00:01:59

Williams: Well, I think it was my exposure to the customers that they had in their roadside shop outside of Indio, and the roadside shop was only open in the winter time during the tourist season in the desert. They sold packs of dates that were grown on the ranch and also grapefruit that was raised on the ranch. In those days, the Palm Springs area and the desert really hadn't developed into the tourist attraction that it became years later. It was mainly interesting to the more upper class. Many of them had homes outside of or inside of Palm Springs. There actually was practically nothing in between Palm Springs and Indio at that time, other than a hotel at La Quinta.

1-00:03:23

Geraci: But you are saying that it was a more of an upper-class clientele. How did that play out? Did that have any impact on you later on in life as you started looking at retail-type sales?

1-00:03:37

Williams: Well, it certainly did have an impact on me, of working in a small retail store with customers like that, that liked good service, were interested in the place, interested in the desert, interested in how dates grew and the grapefruit and so forth. Of course, most of the business was gift business at that time. It became a natural Christmas gift for people to give.

1-00:04:25

Geraci: Okay.

Williams: And also the grapefruit too, because both of them were—the grapefruit was a winter fruit, and the dates were also winter.

1-00:04:35

Geraci: So most of this was wintertime—

1-00:04:35

Williams: Yes. It was wintertime. It was my first experience in that type of business, in the retail business, and meeting so many people. Actually, many of them became friends for a number of years afterwards.

1-00:05:04

Geraci: Now, what year was this? How old were you when this--?

1-00:05:12

Williams: I was sixteen in 1931 when I arrived down in the desert, and I was there for about six years.

1-00:05:25

Geraci: Okay, so that was a--

Williams: I finished high school there. I had three years of high school, and I went to school in the morning and worked in the afternoon in the shop. And finished high school.

1-00:05:44

Geraci: So it seems that working with these people, then, it did have an impact on you as far as—

1-00:05:48

Williams: Yes.

1-00:05:48

Geraci: How was that different than other retail?

1-00:05:50

Williams: And I lived with them too, they took me in and I lived with them and was part of their family. It was a little bit different.

1-00:06:01

Geraci: Okay. Would you like to talk a little bit about that, as far as we are—

1-00:06:050

Williams: Yes, you know, I thought it was extraordinary on their part, taking someone who was from the East Coast, a stranger, into their home and to become part of the family. I also spent the summers--there was still work to do on the ranch, but also we usually took a couple of trips in the summertime when it was hot, to get out of the heat [laughter].

1-00:06:45

Geraci: I've been in the desert, yes. [laughs]

Williams: But I think mainly, it was the experience in that type of retail that I got so much out of. When I did leave and moved to Los Angeles, I got a job at I. Magnin, and before that I spent one summer at Bullocks department store in Los Angeles. That was through Mrs. Bullock being a customer at the Sniff's shop, and that sort of made it possible for me to work in—

1-00:07:37

Geraci: Pretty similar clientele?

1-00:07:39

Williams: Yes, very similar clientele, and it made it possible for me to work at the department store during the summer.

1-00:07:47

Geraci: What is it about Chuck Williams that—it's obvious that you and this type of retail and this type of clientele click. What is it—I mean, they must like you. What was it about you?

1-00:08:01

Williams: Well, I don't know. [laughter]

Geraci: Well, I think you are far too modest.

1-00:08:04

Williams: Well, maybe it was probably mutual [laughs].

1-00:08:06

Geraci: I mean, there seems to have been some sort of gel, some sort of overlap that took place.
1-00:08:07

Williams: I don't know. And of course, in those days, that type of store had a great appeal to many people: the service was a given, and so forth.

1-00:08:32

Geraci: Well, it's part of the tourist trade also.

1-00:08:34

Williams: Yes.

Geraci: Okay. So I guess what we can say, then is that from this experience, you did bring something to your Williams-Sonoma from these earlier experiences. What types of things do you think you were able to carry over from your days with the Sniffs and with—

1-00:08:54

Williams: Well, it was sort of creating a small store, but with the same sort of--and placing importance on service and quality and so forth in the store. Actually, it was being done at a time when service was sort of disappearing out of stores, out of business. The importance of service in stores sort of disappeared in a sense during the war, during the Second World War.

1-00:09:51

Geraci: Talk a little bit about this. What do you consider to be service, as far as a business? What is it that people are looking for when we say service?

1-00:10:02

Williams: Well, it is a personal thing. It is giving a person extra service. Not just walk him into the store, just saying, "Hello," but it's seeing what they can do to help that person while they are in the store, to make their visit in the store a more pleasant one.

1-00:10:27

Geraci: So it's a person skill.

Williams: Yes. It's not a matter of trying to sell merchandise, it's not that. It's just making a person comfortable, and--well, actually, it's treating them as a friend and wanting to make a friend of them. And it actually does work, you know, because that person, if they are close to the store later, they will always go in because they have made a friend in that store and will go in to see that friend.

1-00:11:15

Geraci: Sometimes that is more important than the first sale.

1-00:11:20

Williams: Yes. Yes. It is--[pause]

1-00:11:25

Geraci: How has that changed? You mentioned that this has been changing. In particular, you said it started during the war.

1-00:11:31

Williams: Well, you know, in a department store, I would say, I don't know--I don't think it existed or lasted too much after the Second World War, but before the Second World War, if a lady wanted a pair of gloves, for instance, even in a department store, Macy's or that kind of a store, you went in and you were waited on by somebody that had to get the size glove to fit you, to fit you. It wasn't the way it is today in that type of store, where the counter is covered with different size gloves and you find your own to fit yourself, and you took it up to the cashier and paid and walked out. I mean, there was no communication. There wasn't any communication between you and the salesperson.

1-00:12:36

Geraci: Just simply the ringing of the cash register.

- Williams: It's just sort of self-service. But in those days, it wasn't that way. I mean, you had to be waited on. If the person that was waiting on you wasn't the type person that wanted to make friends with someone, you probably wouldn't want to go back again [laughs].
- 1-00:13:02
Geraci: So could we project, then, that people at that time were more willing to pay for service? Why, if people like service, why was it changing?
- 1-00:13:13
Williams: Yes, they enjoyed patronizing a shop that gave good service. It may cost a little bit more, but usually in many cases it didn't cost any more. At the upscale store, I think it's probably a rule, they are a little bit more expensive, but not much.
- 1-00:13:44
Geraci: Well, that brings us I think—
- 1-00:13:47
Williams: And it's certainly worth that extra for a person who enjoys having that kind of service.
- 1-00:14:01
Geraci: I think that brings to your second point, then, would be that definition of quality. You mentioned that there were two things that you have learned to provide from this early experience. One was service, and the other was quality.
- 1-00:14:18
Williams: Well, quality has nothing to do with price. You know, there are very inexpensive things that have good quality, but it's up to the person who is buying for that store to recognize quality of merchandise: how it's made, how it's designed, and so forth. And it could be something that's inexpensive.
- 1-00:14:53
Geraci: Was that then a skill that you think that you had within Williams-Sonoma?
- 1-00:14:54
Williams: Yes, I mean, that's something that we've always strived to have, that I have always strived for in the beginning and for the first twenty years when it was more or less, it remained one small store.
- 1-00:15:21
Geraci: How does one go about getting the knowledge to know, to, as you said, to be able to identify this quality? I mean, from selling dates to eventually by the time you get to the 1950s, you begin Williams-Sonoma, selling household goods.
- 1-00:15:38
Williams: Well, that is something that a person has to recognize [laughs].
- 1-00:15:43
Geraci: [laughs] Just almost an innate thing; it's natural.
- 1-00:15:44
Williams: Yes. It's something that you have inside of you of recognizing something that is well designed and well made and so forth. I think that I have been fortunate that I always

bought what I liked, what I found to be high quality and good design. I never went to, say, the wholesale market shows and went to the different vendors and asked them to show me what other people were buying. I wasn't interested in that. I looked for myself of what I felt was the best in quality and the best in design.

1-00:16:51

Geraci: Which means that—

1-00:16:53

Williams: I mean, just because other people were buying a specific thing from a vendor doesn't mean that it is the best in quality and design.

1-00:17:05

Geraci: Not at all.

1-00:17:06

Williams: So, in some cases it may be something that the manufacturer or the vendor was promoting and want to sell, and was able to sell it and convince people that this is what they should buy and this is what the customer would like. I never went that route. I found things on my own that I thought were the best in quality. And I would say I was usually right.

1-00:17:44

Geraci: [laughs] Well that's good. What does it take to—

1-00:17:46

Williams: I mean, I appreciated good things. I appreciated good design.

1-00:17:49

Geraci: Yes, see, it's obvious that you appreciated those things. As you put it, you bought the things that you liked. How then do you go about getting people to buy that? I mean, Chuck Williams has made a decision: "I like this item. It meets my standards of quality." How do you educate people then that—

1-00:18:15

Williams: Well, that's a matter of displaying it in the best possible way, to show its design and quality.

1-00:18:29

Geraci: Okay.

Williams: And it's not just piling things on tables or cramming them on shelves. It's a matter of displaying a piece of merchandise so that they saw it at its best possible angle.

1-00:18:46

Geraci: Could that have been something you learned from your Bullocks and I. Magnin experience?

1-00:18:51

Williams: Yes. Yes.

- Geraci: I mean, they were both upscale department stores known for their displays.
- 1-00:18:57
Williams: Yes. But I would also say that it is something that you have to have inside of you, too. It's something that you may find that you can learn more about something like that from being in that kind of environment, but it's something that you have to have inside of you to begin with, or else you're not going to be able to absorb it. Unless you happen onto somebody that tells you, "This is it. Don't do anything else," and that they're right on it. But you can't depend on that.
- 1-00:19:40
Geraci: Is this almost artistic, then? I mean, this is a skill—
- 1-00:19:49
Williams: More or less, yes.
- 1-00:19:51
Geraci: --that you have.
- 1-00:19:55
Williams: More or less. I've always recognized good design, good quality.
- 1-00:20:06
Geraci: Well, good. One of the things that I think comes through this is that we know you are able to recognize the good quality and you have this innate ability to do that. How about the cooking part of this? How did Chuck Williams get to become someone who is so interested in cooking and--I mean, is this something you learned at an early age from family, at an early age working with the Sniffs, obviously, parents? How did we arrive at a point where Chuck Williams was an educated person in the culinary arts?
- 1-00:20:39
Williams: Well, I learned to cook from my grandmother. My grandmother, I felt, was a good cook, being that she had had a restaurant when she was younger. In those days, when somebody like that would have a restaurant, they did the cooking. In order to have a restaurant like that, they would have to be very interested in cooking, otherwise it wouldn't work [laughter]. I mean, it's the combination. In any case, I was around her a good bit of the time when I was growing up. In those days, there were households like my grandmother's where she cooked three meals a day, and they weren't small meals. My grandfather loved to eat, and there was an awful lot of cooking going on.
- It was sort of a routine that went on in a household in those days. Like Monday was wash day, Tuesday was ironing. And those two days, the cooking had to be a little bit different, because they had to spend most of the day washing and ironing, so it was very possible that there was a pot of beans put on in the morning to cook for a couple of hours for lunchtime. But on Friday and Saturday, those were cooking for the weekend. That was pie baking, cake baking, roasting, preparing Sunday dinner, which was usually more than what dinner would be on Wednesday.
- 1-00:22:59
Geraci: So this seems to be a very family-oriented, traditional-type foodway. It seems you're talking about simplicity, first off.

1-00:23:07

Williams: Yes.

1-00:23:10

Geraci: And yet, there's the special occasion cooking, which weekends could even be considered a special occasion. But would you say that it was a simple, just family-based—

1-00:23:22

Williams: Yes, I mean, it was very simple food, but it was well cooked. And it's something that interested me or else I wouldn't have been there. I mean, I would have been out playing outdoors. But—

1-00:23:40

Geraci: So you did participate in the cooking?

1-00:23:43

Williams: I was fascinated with pie baking and cake baking, and also making stews and roasting, and I was fascinated with it. I just naturally would spend the time around my grandmother, and in doing so, she put me to work doing some of it. Like beating egg whites and so forth, which in those days was—

1-00:24:20

Geraci: It's a skill.

Williams: --a little more difficult than it is today. The egg whites were beaten on a big oval platter with a fork and beating air into it, and it required time and effort. So I can see why she let me do it. [laughter] Put me out on the back steps with a—[pause]

1-00:24:45

Geraci: How old were you at this time?

1-00:24:48

Williams: I think it was probably from, by the time I was around six or seven years old, I started that, up until I was thirteen or fourteen.

1-00:25:00

Geraci: Did your grandmother use recipes, or was this—

1-00:25:04

Williams: She never used recipes. That was the other thing about her, because she was just a naturally good cook that had a restaurant. When she had the restaurant, it may have been that she was baking eight or ten pies every morning, and she knew exactly what to do, it didn't vary. Plus the fact that there weren't cookbooks in those days anyway. The only cookbook that I'm sure that was around, for the people that even had a cookbook, was the *Fannie Farmer* cookbook, and then the *Joy of Cooking* came along. But I think that was a little later. I don't think that was even out when I was growing up.

1-00:25:52

Geraci: So cooking then was something that would have been learned from parent to child, or from grandparent to child?

1-00:25:58

Williams: Yes. It just went from generation to generation. But there was that book that probably most everybody had, and there may have been one or two regional ones that were around, but I don't remember any of them. This is the only one that I remember. And there weren't new cookbooks that came out during the year, or even once a year would there be a cookbook. It was just something that wasn't done, you know. The only other place that recipes were exchanged was in newspapers and in magazines, like in *Ladies Home Journal*. There were a number of ladies' magazines that dealt with household matters such as cooking and so forth. And they would have recipes sort of passed around.

1-00:27:17

Geraci: Okay. It seems that, in speaking of your grandmother and this cooking, it's a very good feeling, just from the look on your face. It was something—. What were some of the things that she cooked that you just—we always tend to love the things that we learned or ate as a small child.

1-00:27:32

Williams: Well, my grandmother, my grandparents--my mother and her parents--came from Ohio, and they were of Dutch and German extraction. I think both of them came over from the old country, but they were in Ohio, and they moved down to northern Florida, and that is how I happened to be born down there. But my grandmother's food was very European--German, Dutch--heavy food. It had nothing to do with the Southern food that they moved into. Anyway, it was basic cakes, layer cakes, and fruit pies, stews, roast chicken, roast beef, that sort of thing.

1-00:28:49

Geraci: But very ethnic, then, in its--?

1-00:28:52

Williams: Yes, you know--you have to realize that there wasn't that much available as far as variety of vegetables and that sort of thing in those days. There was one kind of lettuce, and that was iceberg lettuce [laughter]. And most of your vegetables had to come from a vegetable--sort of a roving vender that drove around the street selling vegetables. You didn't find that much in a grocery store. A grocery store was mainly the—well, they would have the potatoes and onions, but any really fresh vegetables you usually had to get from a wagon that was driving around the streets once a week.

1-00:29:58

Geraci: So that meant then that the meals were very seasonal.

1-00:30:01

Williams: Very seasonal, yes.

1-00:30:03

Geraci: And it also depended upon what's available within a region?

Williams: 1-
00:30:09

Yes. So, things like string beans, you only had for maybe a month, and that was it for the whole year. You would go through the whole--all the months in wintertime with no fresh vegetables at all. It was all—. They managed to keep potatoes, onions, cabbage,

that sort of stuff, in the cellar, be able to keep that, so that you had it for the winter months.

1-00:30:47

Geraci: Okay. Just to shift, still stay with the cooking idea, but just shift a little bit here--in your previous interview, we I think did a fairly good job of establishing when you started Williams-Sonoma and the process of going through. One of the things that interested me, though, is that you stated that, "Between the years 1947 and 1958, that it" (and I am quoting you right now) "was socially for me almost entirely based on the interest of food." There is almost a decade there where it seems, as you stated in an earlier interview, that you just became almost overwhelmingly interested in food. A lot of it came from the Sonoma friends that you had.

1-00:31:30

Williams: Yes. That's where it all came from. I found so many people that I became acquainted with and made friends of, and we all liked to cook and get together for dinner. There was probably six or eight of us that got together quite often, and one of them was French. There were a couple of others that had spent time in France, over the previous decade.

1-00:32:27

Geraci: So this could have been part, then, of your learning process, this ten-year span cooking with these people.

1-00:32:34

Williams: Oh, yes. I learned an awful lot with them. They, especially the French person—

1-00:32:47

Geraci: Do you remember this person's name?

1-00:32:53

Williams: She was teaching all of us about soufflés and omelets and that sort of thing.

1-00:32:58

Geraci: What was her name? Do you remember?

1-00:32:58

Williams: Her last name was Bacon. Therese Bacon.

Geraci: Okay. But she was French, then, and—

1-00:33:15

Williams: She was French, yes. Her family was French.

1-00:33:18

Geraci: What about the cooking utensils you were using, was this—

1-00:33:21

Williams: Well, that was just ordinary American [laughs]—

1-00:33:25

Geraci: So there was nothing—

- 1-00:33:27
Williams: Nothing. I didn't know about that—
- 1-00:33:28
Geraci: Nothing as a specialty or—
- 1-00:33:29
Williams: They were just, even though she would talk about some of the things that her parents had, or what her mother had, a few things that she brought from France, but we didn't have any of those available [laughs].
- 1-00:33:53
Geraci: So it wasn't a matter of experimenting with new types of cooking utensils, or—
- 1-00:33:57
Williams: No. No. Nothing like that.
- 1-00:33:59
Geraci: Now, these were just done at each other's homes?
- 1-00:34:00
Williams: Yes, in each other's places.
- 1-00:34:04
Geraci: That sounds like a fascinating—
- 1-00:34:07
Williams: Yes. But we were trying a little bit of everything, you know, and learning about making a soufflé and how you made a proper omelet and so forth. And there were other things, too, that we did. What new things were being talked about in the way of cooking, and there were things that were talked about. Because the *Gourmet* magazine had already been published, it was the beginning of that, that was out. And I think one of the gourmet [or *Gourmet*?] cookbooks, the first one, was out and published around that time.
- 1-00:35:06
Geraci: Cookbooks started appearing then, during this time.
- 1-00:35:10
Williams: Yes, just those, nothing else, but it just happened that that happened. But I don't--there wasn't any others.
- 1-00:35:17
Geraci: Did any of these people have ties to restaurants? Were they chefs, or were these just friends who loved to cook?
- 1-00:35:23
Williams: They were just friends.
- 1-00:35:27
Geraci: That's a great experience.

1-00:35:30

Williams: And there weren't chefs in restaurants that were--like it is today. That didn't happen. No. That was a time that if you were growing up in family and you thought that you would like to work in a restaurant, and talking to your family about it, they would tell you to go to your room and stay there until you changed your mind. [laughter] They didn't want a son of theirs working as a fry cook in a beanery [laughs].

1-00:36:11

Geraci: Well, isn't that the image that it was, almost fast food in and of itself? It was workman's food, let's put it this way.

1-00:36:19

Williams: Yes. And I would say the few restaurants that were, say, in New York, and there were a few in San Francisco, that were the main ones, the top ones, in San Francisco. They were French restaurants, but they probably had a chef that immigrated from France that was working in the restaurant, doing the work.

1-00:36:50

Geraci: So it would seem as that at this point the high end, at least for cooking, would have been French food.

1-00:37:04

Williams: I would say so, yes. Especially in San Francisco.

1-00:37:08

Geraci: Do you remember the names of places?

Williams: Yes. Jack's was one of the best ones. The Old Poodle Dog was another one, a French restaurant. The Fly Trap was one. Ernie's, that was another one. There were probably more good restaurants in San Francisco than in other cities of its size outside of New York. And of course, New Orleans was famous for their food. But there really weren't that many restaurants in Los Angeles that were outstanding at the time. There were a few. But I would say the ones in San Francisco were closer to the New York restaurants.

1-00:38:14

Geraci: Okay. Would it be a fair observation, then, to say that during this time, this ten-year period when you are in this great cooking experience, that at least this was the intellectual impetus for you to open your Williams-Sonoma operation? Did this really give you the energy to say, "I can do this."?

1-00:38:35

Williams: Yes. Yes. I did have the customer forte[?]. There is probably one thing that I should really mention in regard to this. Before I started the store I, through a friend of mine in Sonoma, who had worked in an antique shop in San Francisco and had done work with one of the decorators in San Francisco, Arthur Bacon, and knew about furnishings and design and so forth. Anyway, in Sonoma, at one point a friend that I knew as well as my friend knew--from San Francisco, and also from the Peninsula, Hillsborough--and she was a Folger, the Folger family, it was a coffee company. I knew her in Sonoma, they had a summer home there that they were beginning to spend more time at, and also my friend, having worked in an antique shop, knew her. She had a beautiful house in Hillsborough and had this house in Sonoma as a summer house.

A friend of hers in Hillsborough wanted to have a debut party for his daughter, and he was asking Elena Teller, or Folger, if there was any possibility that she knew somebody that could do the party for him, put together the party for him, do the decorating and so forth. She asked my friend if he would possibly do it, would he want to do it, because her friend had lost a lot of his money, and he didn't have that much money to spend. So he asked me if I would help him. And so I made--and I was good at that, I had been building houses and so forth--so I was able to make some centerpieces for the tables. They put a tent up in the front yard of the home in Hillsborough, and I made a chandelier for the tent out of little bit of nothing, because it couldn't be heavy and so forth, but I made it. It was a big, round chandelier. I made wall sconces, and the table decorations, and so forth. And, being this was all sort of a friendship arrangement, we were invited to the debut party. So I met about 450 people [laughter] that went to the debut party all from this upscale group of people that lived in the Bay Area. So when I opened—and from doing that party, we did a couple of parties each year for the next few years of these debut parties.

1-00:43:01

Geraci: So that was really a good kickoff for you.

1-00:43:02

Williams: So when I opened the store, I had all my customers. I didn't have to worry about it. They were all there when the door opened. They knew me [laughs].

1-00:43:16

Geraci: But it is amazing, then, that the idea was there, you knew about service that you had learned about in the past, you knew about the quality, your cooking had started to come along, and then this is in some ways a real opportunity to do something you loved.

Williams: So it was sort of a natural thing, but it was also the fact that I put it in the right location. I think that anyone that knows about the retail business will always tell you that "Location, location, location" is the most important part of starting a business. Being in the right location. And that's what I did. I was encouraged to do that also by a customer of the shop in Sonoma who was from New York who had a couple of restaurants. She was one of the ones that encouraged me to move it to San Francisco. But also, she emphasized that I should find the best location I could and not worry about the price of it. Which I did. I didn't realize at the time, but I got the best location that I could have possibly gotten. That was on Sutter Street in San Francisco. It was across the street from the Francisca Club, which is the best women's club in San Francisco. It was in the same block of Elizabeth Arden's beauty salon and fashion and so forth, where all the ladies went to have their hair done and so forth. And it was one block each way from the two medical buildings in San Francisco where everyone had to go to see their doctor or dentist, and they all walked by the door [laughter] when they came downtown.

1-00:45:42

Geraci: So your location had good foot traffic.

1-00:45:45

Williams: Yes. Good foot traffic. So they all went by the door. It was convenient for them. And that's another aspect of the location, of being convenient to them.

1-00:46:04

Geraci: In your 1992-1994 interviews, one of things that's somewhat hinted at, and I know we have talked about before, has been this, quote, "California cuisine." One of the things I really liked when you were writing about that is that first of all, you periodize it differently in that "California cuisine" isn't something that's new. You talked about it in the 1930s, the 1940s, the 1950s. And what does "California cuisine" mean to you? I mean, it's a very undefined term. To Chuck Williams, what is California cuisine?

1-00:46:44

Williams: Well, I felt that I--I don't know. I think I recognized how much different the food was in, say, southern California, when I first came there from Florida. Of seeing an artichoke--I had never seen an artichoke before. Of seeing so many vegetables that were grown in such volume in the San Joaquin Valley at that time. Of having string beans, say, at Christmastime. They were able to grow string beans in the late fall and have them available for Christmas. You couldn't get that in the East.

1-00:47:47

Geraci: Well, as you said, your experience growing up—

1-00:47:50

Williams: Or asparagus, for instance. I knew what asparagus was, but all I was acquainted with was white asparagus that came in a can. I had never seen it fresh and green [laughs]. But, seeing that, and seeing the way they emphasized salads, green salads, with fresh tomatoes and green onions and--it was still iceberg lettuce, but it was the way they used it. So the emphasis on salads. I sort of identified it as California food. To me, California food wasn't a big pot of dried navy beans, that sort of thing, where it was in northern Florida where I grew up.

1-00:48:58

Geraci: So to you it's more availability to fresh produce.

1-00:49:02

Williams: Yes. It was availability of fresh produce, and for that time, of seeing so much of it in a store or in a vegetable market. I mean, to me, that is what California cuisine has been about: is the fresh vegetables and fruit and nuts and so forth that was available here. It was grown here, and because they didn't have the facility to transport it, and a distribution system that would transport it all over the country, if it was taken by train, well, it took three or four days to get it there. Well, what was the condition of it after sitting in a freight car in the heat?

1-00:50:10

Geraci: Not very good.

1-00:50:11

Williams: Not very good. But today they fly it, so it gets there fast.

1-00:50:17

Geraci: So it's not so much when we talk about, then, this idea of California cuisine, it's not so much a cooking style as it is just availability of fresh fruits and vegetables.

1-00:50:27

Williams: Well, as far as I am concerned, that was the only difference that I saw, and the emphasis was on fresh produce, and cooking fresh produce, and salads, and the use of fruit for desserts, and that sort of thing. To me, that was California cuisine or California cooking, and they made use of it. The other thing I experienced in the desert in the thirties, the ranch across the road from us, in the fall when peaches--in the late summer--when peaches were available, they were making fresh peach ice cream. I had never seen fresh peach ice cream before [laughs]. I mean, ice cream was—

1-00:51:38

Geraci: It was ice cream.

1-00:51:38

Williams: --an official flavor, and basically just a few. I mean, it would be vanilla, chocolate, strawberry, and that would be about it. But here, a neighbor was making on Sunday fresh peach ice cream. It was absolutely delicious, and it was made with peaches and cream [laughter].

1-00:52:02

Geraci: But all fresh ingredients.

1-00:52:05

Williams: All fresh.

1-00:52:08

Geraci: Do certain ethnic foods tends to complement this California style or California availability of fresh fruits and vegetables?

1-00:52:18

Williams: Well, I think so. I think especially in San Francisco at that time, the Chinese community contributed a lot to the food world, because they were raising their own food, the food that was necessary for their diet. And that wasn't available in Jacksonville, Florida. I knew nothing about Chinese vegetables.

1-00:52:54

Geraci: So it introduces new vegetables on the scene.

1-00:52:58

Williams: New vegetables, yes. And they had their own farmers that raised vegetables. I remember being in southern California, and this was in the thirties, down in the desert, of two Japanese families moving to the desert and buying a piece of property back of where the Sniffs' date gardens and grapefruit were. They bought land that was close to the mountains, and we were a ways from it, but they were right close to the mountain. They were raising string beans that were available at Christmastime. They were down in the desert. And that was unheard of in the rest of the country. But that was what was happening here.

1-00:54:03

Geraci: Okay, so part of this is an agricultural story.

1-00:54:06

Williams: Agricultural, yes. And certainly consider that sort of adding to the title of California cooking or California cuisine, but that's all it amounted to; it wasn't cooking a dish in any special way. It was just a matter of providing those kind of ingredients to cook with. And I would say that the cooking here was a little bit more advanced away from the Middle West cooking, which is basically German, Dutch, European, of heavy cooking, cooking everything a long time. Here in California, it was coming from a different direction of not cooking things so long, and cooking them a little better, not cooking string beans forever.

1-00:55:27

Geraci: Until they're mushy.

1-00:55:27

Williams: Yes. It was the first time I had seen string beans cooked with onion and bacon, and that was a dish that was introduced in southern California at that time. It was sort of basically cooking in the way they were cooked in the East, of cooking them for a longer time, but adding something to them that made them a more interesting dish.

1-00:55:58

Geraci: Okay, so many people talk about this food revolution occurring in the Bay Area in the sixties and seventies. It seems that from what you are telling in your story, that this really is then just availability of produce, and when Easterners now talk about California cuisine, it's a matter that they can get fresh produces more today than they could back then?

1-00:56:29

Williams: I think so. And you speak about the sort of beginning of California cuisine here in the Bay Area--I remember that part of it. I don't know whether actually it was the beginning, but I would say that it contributed a great deal to it, and that was the introduction of raising little lettuces. Just raising the lettuces when they only had two or three leaves and harvesting them and selling them. And that all started sort of out of the blue. It happened. In fact, there was a young fellow who worked for us, his father was one of the first ones to do it. He had a little piece of land in the East Bay. They lived in the East Bay, and they had a little piece of property over there and he started raising these things the sell. It didn't take long for them to grow; it was only maybe a month, and he had lettuce to sell. But it was just little lettuce, with just two or three leaves.

1-00:57:46

Geraci: So people like to try different foods, and we just have the climate to grow those, that you didn't have elsewhere.

1-00:57:55

Williams: Yes. At that time, there was nothing special that was done as far as dressing that would create a want of raising that kind of lettuce. That seemed to be first, and then it was sort of dressings for that kind of lettuce came afterwards.

1-00:58:26

Geraci: Okay. So one drives the other, then, in the order that they come in.

1-00:58:29

Williams: Yes. And I think at the beginning of that, it certainly was something was done by an individual. It wasn't done by a big corporation, or a big company. It was only an individual that started growing this, and it was a good many years before--several years before it really got to the point where it was interesting to the big growers to grow little lettuce.

1-00:59:10

Geraci: Could that then have been part of the success of farmer's markets?

1-00:59:14

Williams: And seeing that it was going to take off, which it did, and I would say the lettuce that you get in the markets today I'm sure is grown by a big combine, a big company.

1-00:59:31

Geraci: Well, let's go ahead and take a break.

[End Minidisc 1].

[Begin Minidisc 2].

2-00:00:00

Geraci: Mr. Chuck Williams, this is disk number two, Victor Geraci, interviewer. This is March 8, 2004.

Mr. Williams, one of the things that I would like to start in with now is a little talking about Williams-Sonoma as a store, as a business. One of the things that I found in your past interview, and this is a quote from you that just fascinated me, was, quote, "By all standards today, it would be said that it wasn't the practical way to run a business, having such a big inventory with such little turnover during the year." I guess the real question is that, what kind of businessman did you consider yourself to be? Because this is a very different company than what you originally I think probably envisioned. Or is it?

2-00:2-00:45

Williams: Well, I suppose if I was comparing myself to a businessman today going into starting a business, I don't know if it would even work the way I did it. I mean, this was the day long before computers and electric cash registers and all of that sort of thing. When you take what the income tax form today is, I would say that it is almost impossible for the average person to even understand what the income tax form is all about. They have to have help. It was something that was only a couple of pages in those days, and very little to it. It didn't take any extraordinary knowledge to be able to do that sort of thing. I mean, I wouldn't consider myself an experienced businessperson going into this. It was something that I was interested in doing. It wasn't a business that I was creating that I was figuring at the end of one year it was going to produce this much income, and the second year, and third year, and--I had no thoughts of that at all. I was just starting a little business of selling French cookware and French tools and so forth for people that liked to cook and that would like to learn about French cooking. And that's all it was about. It wasn't about making a lot of money.

Geraci:2-00:03:04

It was more of a way for you to earn a living, as opposed to creating a business.

2-00:03:11

Williams: And it wasn't a hobby, because I has no other income [laughter]. It was something that I hoped would afford me a living. And that's all I expected out of it. I didn't expect anything else for the time being, in any case. And I didn't know what it would grow into, or whether it would grow into anything. I did spend time in Europe each year looking for things that I liked and that I knew that the people that liked what I liked would find interesting. And which, I would say, on average I did very well on finding merchandise that attracted people. It was an interesting shop for most people. The display was interesting. It was attractive. It attracted attention right from the start.

2-00:04:43

Geraci: And you offered the service that you were so in tune to.

2-00:04:50

Williams: Yes. To give an example of how it was operated: we had charge accounts for most all of our customers. If they wanted something sent to them rather than carried with them, we would write their name and address. That is how we usually just opened a charge account. We'd say, "We'll send you a bill. When we send it to you, we will find out how much it cost to send it to you." This was out-of-town customers. Local customers, we would send it free of charge, and we didn't charge for delivery in the city, the same as I. Magnin or Saks Fifth Avenue, Tiffany, they didn't charge for delivery. So we didn't charge for delivery. That was sort of the standard that I thought that the shop should follow. And because it was that customer we were attracting and the customer that came into the shop.

2-00:06:11

Geraci: Could part of that had been, after World War II, historians in particular have done a lot of reevaluating that we created a very important middle-class ideology of consumption. Americans after the war--I mean we are talking in 1950s, the sixties--have more disposable income and are spending money on things that are more luxury as opposed to just everyday items.

2-00:06:43

Williams: Yes.

2-00:06:43

Geraci: They want quality. They're willing to pay for service. Could that have been part of your initial--you were able to tap into that energy?

2-00:06:52

Williams: Yes. And also, another thing I didn't realize at the beginning, but so many of those people in that category had help in the kitchen. They had a cook, or else they had someone working in the home that helped them cook if they preferred to cook themselves, but an awful lot of them had a cook. After the war, that started disappearing, of cooks in private homes. It started disappearing.

2-00:07:43

Geraci: Interesting.

2-00:07:43

Williams: I don't know whether it was they couldn't afford them all of a sudden, or whether they just weren't around, anyway, they were having to learn to cook themselves. This was an

attractive idea of cooking for entertaining, which a lot of it was, in a little bit different manner than what had been going on before. And it was the sort of introduction into French cooking. Not so much of just the traditional recipes, but also the French way of cooking, of not cooking vegetables for an hour, an hour and a half, but only cook them for a few minutes, and that sort of thing.

2-00:08:48

Geraci: So there's even more of an emphasis on it.

2-00:08:53

Williams: Yes.

2-00:08:53

Geraci: Through the years, then, considering you started the business in the mid-fifties, has your clientele changed? Are you now selling to a different group of people, or is it—

2-00:09:09

Williams: It's just a broader, a much larger group of people. We still have the nucleus of that customer, the high-end customer, but we also have a customer that aspires to be in that category, and the customer that likes to cook, no matter where they are.

2-00:09:38

Geraci: Within the social—yes.

2-00:09:38

Williams: Yes.

2-00:09:39

Geraci: And they are willing to invest, then, in finer cookware.

2-00:09:42

Williams: Yes, yes, yes. But they like to cook, and they are intrigued with--being that they like to cook, of having the best equipment that they could find or can afford. Because what was available for the home cook in those days—I mean, the pots and pans were not made for anything more than just cooking. I mean, there wasn't anything special about the pot being heavy and having a comfortable handle, having a tight-fit lid. It wasn't that. That wasn't built in to providing cooking equipment for people in those days. It was all the same, and it was inexpensive.

2-00:10:44

Geraci: It was more utilitarian then.

2-00:10:48

Williams: Utilitarian. I mean, it had nothing to do with what was available for the restaurant cook, of heavy pots and pans, and pots made for specific purposes.

2-00:11:09

Geraci: Okay, now in mentioning that this business begins to expand, you have broadened the base that you are appealing to, you obviously then make the decision in the seventies to expand. But in doing so, why? Why not just leave it as the small little business that you had? It seems that it was doing fine, from all indications in your past interview, business was fine. Why all of sudden now did you want to expand?

2-00:11:43

Williams: Well, a lot of it had to do with—well, how I did the business. How did I do it? I started it myself, there was only myself. There were only actually two of us that were in the store. I did most everything myself. I swept the sidewalk. I mean, I cleaned the store every Sunday. And I continued to do that even after we had other people in the store. I continued to do it. I wouldn't ask them to do it. I would do it myself. I was never any good at delegating other people to do things. It was much easier for me to just do it myself. That certainly isn't the type person that would be thinking of growing and increasing a business.

2-00:12:57

Geraci: Right.

2-00:12:57

Williams: It just doesn't—it's not in the thought process. So when it came time to—you must remember this is about seventeen years, fifteen years later, where it was still just a small shop. It did increase in size at double the space, but it really didn't increase it that much. But that didn't sort of go with the idea just thinking, "Now if we increase this and borrow money to do this and do that--" that wasn't part of the equation at all. I never borrowed any money. I didn't know how to borrow money, I didn't want to borrow money. I didn't want to be in debt to anybody. I wanted to do it myself.

2-00:13:59

Geraci: Well, see, that's the reason I was saying, I am trying to get at the decision then to expand was a very—that's a different move for you.

2-00:14:07

Williams: Yes.

2-00:14:07

Geraci: Because the original Williams-Sonoma is—it's you. It's your livelihood.

2-00:14:14

Williams: And even doing the catalogue, it was done in a very economical way. It was something that I wouldn't have done by myself, but Jackie Mallorca, I happened to meet her. We were doing a little event—it was Princess Alexandra from England was here, and they had a British Week, and they encouraged for ones in the downtown area to do something about windows and so forth celebrating British Week. And so we did it. I got busy and made some things for display, like some well-known English dishes that would hold up for the day, and had the shop done up in a British manner. And Jackie Mallorca, who was British, and working for an advertising agent, knew the shop, and she came up and was looking around, being that we were doing English things, and we got to talking. She brought up the question about a catalogue, wouldn't I be interested in doing a catalogue. It's not that I hadn't thought of it, because I had, but I really didn't know about how to go about doing it, and it wasn't that pressing, and I wasn't that way anyway.

She encouraged me to think about it, and if I would like to do it, she would help me with it and would do all of the main part of it: of getting the photography done, and getting it printed and all that--she would do that. She would do it not through the advertising agent, but on her own, so it wouldn't cost very much to do it. So we did it. That's how it

was done. It didn't cost hardly anything. And we only had printed—we kept customers' names, and we had about 5,000 names, which I think was considerable in those days for a little shop. A good many of them were people that lived in other parts of the country that we had sent merchandise to, and they had been customers, and we had 5,000 names. So we had 10,000 catalogues printed, which was expensive in its way, of having so few done. But in any case, those 5,000 names were all we had, so we sent out to the 5,000 names, and we thought we would send out the other 5,000 later, and it was successful. We had a very good return on it. For the number of catalogues we sent out and the response that we got, it was considerably very good.

2-00:17:34

Geraci: Was there a point then that you couldn't keep up with your catalogue sales? In other words, people were demanding more than you were bringing in supply? Because you are still traveling to Europe at that point.

2-00:17:47

Williams: Oh, yes. No, it wasn't that big.

2-00:17:52

Geraci: I guess what I am trying to get at is that the decision is made to expand, to refinance, to sell shares. That's a very different business.

2-00:18:02

Williams: That didn't happen until after that, and the only reason that happened was that I talked to Edward Marcus, who was one of the Neiman Marcus brothers. And that's the reason I did the catalogue, too; I called him to see whether I should do it or not. And there weren't that many catalogues in those days. It was an adventure. And he felt that I should. He knew the store. He had been to San Francisco a number of times and knew the store, and he thought it was a great store. So then I called him about what I should do with the store. I basically said, "It's gotten to the point that after the store closes at night, I go to the back room and sit down and have a glass of wine." I said, "Doing everything myself, not being able to delegate other people to do things, what should I do? I am going to become an alcoholic or I am going to have my heart attack over it, one or the other."

And he was the one who suggested, maybe the best thing to do was to incorporate it and get someone else in. He said, "If you would like to do it, I will go in with you on it." And so we formed a little corporation. But then I had to go to the bank and borrow money.

2-00:19:39

Geraci: Which was a very different process for you.

2-00:19:41

Williams: Which was a very different process. I had never done that before. But doing it my way, I only borrowed money to buy merchandise for Christmas. So, we started selling the merchandise we bought on credit and I was able to pay the bank back by the end of October and November. Well, they didn't go for that. They said, "We don't want you to pay for it now."

2-00:20:12

Geraci: We don't get the interest [laughs].

2-00:20:15

Williams: "We want you to wait until after the first of the year." But that's how naïve I was, I didn't know anything about it. But forming the corporation didn't bring, as Edward Marcus said it would, of bringing someone in that had business experience and for them to run the business. I was still doing it all [laughs].

2-00:20:47

Geraci: So really, it boils down to, and it seems as if this is a story of, it was wearing you down.

2-00:20:55

Williams: Yes. But we did add a second store in Beverly Hills, in the best location in Beverly Hills, and it was very successful because we had--the reason it was Beverly Hills was because we had so many customers from Beverly Hills that came up to San Francisco. And the third one, that was the next year, the year after that, was Palo Alto, and then the year after that was Costa Mesa. The year after that was Dallas--out of the state. And that brought us up to 1978.

2-00:21:40

Geraci: How did you feel about the business, then?

2-00:21:42

Williams: Then Edward Marcus decided that we should really do something about bringing someone in to run the company, and he picked out a friend of his in Dallas who had been in the catalogue business, who worked for a catalogue company there. He brought him into the company, and that's where the problems started.

2-00:22:12

Geraci: Now when we say the problems started—

2-00:22:14

Williams: Of borrowing too much money to increase the catalogue, and it didn't produce, so there was no money to pay the debt. So, what do you do? Plus Edward Marcus had died before that.

2-00:22:33

Geraci: Leaving everything very--

2-00:22:34

Williams: So he wasn't around for the whole thing—so, you know.

2-00:22:37

Geraci: Could that be the problem that many small businesses face, is that they try to go for that initial expansion? There is a point where you can expand or not expand.

2-00:22:45

Williams: Yes, I'd be the first one to admit it, I don't know anything about finances. It's something that's never interested me that much.

- 2-00:22:59
Geraci: Well, when we left the story off in your past interviews, Williams-Sonoma had at that point just about 120 or 130 stores. And today, just going online, it looks as if you have 239 or 240 Williams-Sonoma stores today.
- 2-00:23:20
Williams: Yes. Yes.
- 2-00:23:20
Geraci: So in the last ten years, that's almost doubling the size of that.
- 2-00:23:26
Williams: And plus the other—
- 2-00:23:29
Geraci: Plus Pottery Barn, Hold Everything—
- 2-00:23:31
Williams: Pottery Barn Kids, Chambers Catalogue, Pottery Barn Teens--I mean, it's grown considerably now.
- 2-00:23:37
Geraci: And that has been something that Howard Lester then has—
- 2-00:23:41
Williams: Yes. He has accomplished all of that. He's the one that—I continued buying the merchandise all through those years, but basically he's the one that had the brains on that.
- 2-00:24:08
Geraci: Did you ever think that it would become something like this?
- 2-00:24:11
Williams: No. No, never that. And I don't think anyone did, when we first started expanding, even though we had five stores, I don't think there was any thought of it being the size it is today. No.
- 2-00:24:36
Geraci: How has it changed over this span of time? Are you still able to provide the key elements that you wanted to provide in starting—
- 2-00:24:50
Williams: I think we still have maintained, and I think it's probably very interesting that it has happened, that we have maintained the main elements of what it was started with, and that is: dedication to service, to quality, and so forth. We still have that. And we have it in the stores.
- 2-00:25:25
Geraci: I understand that you still do many of the training sessions.
- 2-00:25:28
Williams: Yes. But we had that in the store. We had the people that understand that and have a feeling for it, not that they understand; they have a feeling for doing that, of giving that

service to people. Of taking care of a problem immediately, not dragging it on. I don't want the people in the store to say, "Oh, I will have to see the manger about that. I don't know if we can do anything about that or not, I have to see the manager." We don't want them to do that. Take care of it.

2-00:26:12

Geraci: [laughs] Deal with it at that point.

2-00:26:14

Williams: Deal with it there. Don't say, "I will have to find out about it." And if they don't do it quite right, that's the least of it. At least they tried.

2-00:26:31

Geraci: Right. And the customer then still feels—

2-00:26:35

Williams: The customer usually understands that. The service of delivering a package to a customer that expected it, say, two days before Christmas, and something happened and it didn't get there. And of having that person deliver it to the customer on Christmas Eve, in the snow. I mean, I would say that's service. Extra service. And it happens. It happens.

2-00:27:12

Geraci: How do you go about finding these people?

2-00:27:14

Williams: We have had some extraordinary things. We had a thing that happened in Florida about two or three years ago. A customer lost a pendant off of a necklace that she had on. The pendant was a diamond ring out of her husband's mother's ring who had given it to her son just before she died. And the woman left the store, she had been in the shop, she had gone to another store, and when she was walking in, somebody stopped her and said, "You have lost something off your necklace, a pendant or something." And she was horrified, she was just distraught. She had no idea where she'd lost it and she was just beside herself. She decided that she would go back, and she had been shopping for a couple of hours, and she started back to where she had gone before. She stopped at Williams-Sonoma and looked around, and she couldn't find it. She happened to mention it to explain why she was looking around, to the person in the store, and she continued on and couldn't find anything and couldn't find anything.

And she had gone on, and about a half an hour later she was in one of the other stores, and the person at Williams-Sonoma went out looking for her and found her and told her that she had found the pendant on the floor. She had looked around all over the floor and found this tiny little thing, this little diamond, and found it. And then went out to find her. She didn't know where she went, and found her.

2-00:29:26

Geraci: That is amazing.

2-00:29:29

Williams: Yes, so this happens, and that's service, that comes from the heart of somebody. That's something that you don't read in a book, that you have to do this. That's something that just automatically comes out of your heart. To look, even just to look.

2-00:29:58

Geraci: Right. To find.

2-00:29:58

Williams: Most people wouldn't have. "She didn't lose it here, why should I spend any time looking?"

2-00:30:05

Geraci: "I don't have the time to be bothered with that."

2-00:30:07

Williams: Yes, be bothered with it.

2-00:30:09

Geraci: One of the great accomplishments that I have seen, at least for you personally in Williams-Sonoma over the last ten years, has been the proliferation of your cookbook series. I think in a previous conversation we talked about, there are 18 million copies in print at this point, of cookbooks that you have either edited or have been part of this process. Is Chuck Williams becoming the next guru to pass foodways on to a new generation?

2-00:30:43

Williams: [laughs]

Geraci: Can we talk a little bit about this whole phenomenon that you have been able to really kick off here?

2-00:30:51

Williams: Well, I think it has been very interesting. The books were presented or the idea was presented to us by a very small publisher from Australia, and not a publishing company that distributes books. It only creates books and only on a very small scale. They came to us with the idea of doing single subject books, like *Pasta*, *Salad*, and so forth, and doing them with attention to doing them well. And they have been very successful, but I would say the one thing that has happened is that we had the first series and they sold very well, extremely well, especially for two or three of them, like *Pasta*. *Pasta* at that time sold more than all the other books together. There were about thirty-five in the series. It sold more than all of the others.

Those books have sold completely different than the other books. The first series we did, we put them in the catalogue. We felt they should be put in the catalogues to introduce them, and devoted a whole page. They did okay, but nothing extra. They didn't do what they should. They didn't do as much as the other merchandise does on a page. These books sold ten times what they were expected to do. It was a matter of making a book visually attractive so that you didn't have to think of what was inside. You automatically knew that the picture you saw on the cover of this food was going to be multiplied inside. Just simple. And the first book sold in singles, although you could

buy a set of four. This one was sold as a set of four, and you could buy the single. Ninety-five percent of the sales were in sets of four. Not the single book. It was decided after about six years whether we shouldn't change and do something new. So a new series was evolved out of that, and it was interesting what we found out in doing a new series. Basically all we could do was change the jacket, maybe the size of the book a little bit, but when it comes to recipes, no different selection of recipes and so forth. There is really not much you can do to change it, but it evolved into quite a change that made a terrific difference, and learning about books, about how books are attracted to people. And this one really proved something. But the book is about the same size and the same thickness, but the jacket was done entirely different, of having on the jacket just a picture of beautiful food, nothing around it. It's in a dish, but you don't notice the dish. It's just focused on the book, and the only thing else on the cover is "Williams-Sonoma" in small letters, and then the name, but only one word, like *Salad*. But nothing else. Except for the background is a piece of material that was sort of like maybe a velvet, I don't actually know what it looks like--personally I haven't seen it--but in a color, not a primary color, but just a little off color, maybe a tan, orange. And it's sort of in little folds here and there, so that it isn't perfectly smooth underneath. Each book has a different color, but it's the same material, but it's a different color. In photographing the picture, the food with this background, sort of some areas are very bright, other ones are shadows and so forth. It gives an interesting background to the food.

2-00:36:30

Geraci: Interesting.

2-00:36:32

Williams: And it's learning something. Learning what it takes to attract a person's attention and keeping their attention for just a few minutes.

2-00:36:49

Geraci: So it was a marketing lesson for you.

2-00:36:51

Williams: Yes. A great marketing lesson, and we worked on it for several months. In fact, I went over to London with Welden Owen and they hired a graphic designer in England. I met her in London, and we talked, and she was the one that did it. She was the one that created this, and she created it and watched over it completely until it was finally printed. She even went to the printers in Singapore and spent several weeks there getting the color exactly right and the exposure just exactly right. Proved to be—

2-00:37:46

Geraci: Very valuable.

2-00:37:46

Williams: A complete winner of producing something that, well, I would say sort of exemplified what we have been all along of quality service and so forth. The quality of a book.

2-00:38:09

Geraci: The quality of the book. It is back to the quality issue.

2-00:38:10

Williams: The quality of the book.

2-00:38:11

Geraci: Because as we sit in your office, beautiful, one whole wall filled with cookbooks. Obviously cookbooks are something you are very in tune with. What is it that Chuck Williams is—I mean, you are educating a lot of people in cooking.

2-00:38:30

Williams: Yes.

2-00:38:30

Geraci: What is it that you really think that people need to know? And that's a very simplistic question.

2-00:38:39

Williams: Well, I think it's sort of interesting, it's a different customer today than it was. That person is a different customer than they were maybe twenty, thirty years ago. Today, the feeling is, that they buy a cookbook—I mean, it's not just one cookbook that they buy, that they think, Well, this is going to change my way of cooking. They have the feeling that if they get one or two recipes out of that book, it's well worth it. Well worth the price. That's all they need to get. So they're not buying that book with the idea that this is going to be the only book as they did maybe fifty years ago, they bought *Fanny Farmer*. That was the only one that they were going to have. Period.

2-00:39:34

Geraci: They were going to try every recipe.

2-00:39:38

Williams: They were going to try every recipe.

2-00:39:37

Geraci: Right.

2-00:39:38

Williams: They had no alternative, in fact. But they have an alternative today. So they, and I have heard it many times, that people collect cookbooks today, if they get one or two recipes out of it that they think is just right for them, they are happy.

2-00:40:03

Geraci: They're happy.

Speaking of people cooking today, you started off in telling your own story, the story of--it was family cooking. As we look at a world filled with fast food and obviously differences in the way that families prepare their meals today, how is this affecting cooking? What about single people today, cooking just for yourself?

2-00:40:31

Williams: Well, I think people cooking for themselves have a difficult time, because cookbooks don't really do that person much good because the recipes are all four, six people. And you can't divide, you can't cut it down reasonably well. You can, but unless you know really how to cook, it really doesn't do you much good. Someone that really knows how to cook can just look at a recipe and just sort of glance at the ingredients and go off and do it, a simple little recipe. But I think people that are cooking for themselves have a difficult time. There is an awful lot of them. And they—

2-00:41:31

Geraci: I mean, you as an example yourself, how does Chuck Williams cook for Chuck Williams? Or do you prefer eating out [laughs]?

2-00:41:38

Williams:

I cook for myself, but I don't use recipe books. I just cook, and I am able to—I know basically how to cook vegetables and so forth, and about how long it takes to cook them, and I do little things, you know, combinations, do maybe little stews and things like that, but that's being creative. But I think most people have a difficult time. There are so many people on diets today, doing these diets that are being publicized. That's creating a problem for lots of them. I don't know how they are all managing, but there are basically a good many people that are cooking, but they are only cooking on weekends. They don't cook during the week. They are just eating. They'll go buy prepared food, but on Saturday and Sunday they entertain. So that's when they are cooking. And they need recipe books for that. They are trying, and you know, if you are cooking for entertaining, you're cooking for other people, you're not cooking for yourself, so they're trying to cook something they think will impress their friends, which is natural. Nothing wrong with that. It's natural to do that. So they do need recipe books today. But it's not easy.

2-00:43:32

Geraci: It seems at this point you are talking in a very optimistic outlook then, that cooking is very strong in American culture, that people are—

2-00:43:40

Williams: Oh, yes, there are people cooking. But it is entirely different than what it was fifty years ago.

2-00:43:48

Geraci: What has been some of the major changes that you have seen? I mean, fifty years, this is just about how long you have been with your—

2-00:43:57

Williams: People were cooking, they were cooking breakfast. At least they were cooking at least two meals a day. But now, most everybody is working. Husband and wife, they're both working. They may not get home until seven o'clock. Their commutes are so bad. Of course, I'm talking about the cities. Well, that's where so many people are living today, in cities. They're not living in small towns, the small towns have sort of disappeared. But how are they going to go into the kitchen and cook a meal at seven o'clock at night? You can't expect them to. But I would say the idea is still there, and they will do it on weekends. And I will say that where we have lost a lot of women cooks, we've gained a lot of men cooks. Because there is an awful lot of single men that have an apartment and they cook. They cook for themselves. You see them in the grocery store at night, buying vegetables and fruit. And I would say in many cases they do pretty well for themselves, they are trying things.

2-00:45:38

Geraci: [laughs] So, there is always that human need to cook even though we—but it has changed, then, over a fifty-year period. Have there been any recent trends that you have seen in cooking, that are changes?

2-00:45:56

Williams: Oh, I don't know. I haven't seen too many of them, other than, as I say, not cooking many meals; it's only for entertaining. But I think people are watching their diets more. They're more concerned with what they're eating, even though this obesity thing has sort of gotten out of hand. I think an awful lot of that is in the Middle West and not so much on the coast. I don't think there is as much of it in this area as there is in others, and it is a serious problem. And it's too bad, and we have to do something about it. But I think cooking-wise, I think it hasn't gone away completely.

2-00:47:19

Geraci: [laughs] Which is good!

2-00:47:20

Williams: They are getting an awful lot of help, I mean, there are many things that are partially prepared now that they can buy. In some of the markets, like even here in San Francisco, there is Brian's Market, there is Whole Foods, where you can buy prepared stock, broth--you can buy that. It doesn't have to be a can. It can be, you know.

2-00:48:01

Geraci: So there at least is a fresher quality.

2-00:48:02

Williams: That's just made there and it's under refrigeration, which makes a big difference. They can buy vegetables in some cases that are already prepared, I mean, they are cleaned and cut up. They can buy things like that. They can buy all kinds of preparations for salad so that they don't have to spend a half hour or so doing that when they get home.

2-00:48:33

Geraci: I mean, the whole idea that even grocery stores have rotisserie chickens you can just walk in and buy.

2-00:48:40

Williams: Yes. And there are places where they are doing more in prepared foods. It's done up to almost done, and then take it home and finish it.

2-00:48:54

Geraci: One last thing: over the last few years, you have received a few honors. And I think those are worth mentioning. In 1995 you have the Lifetime Achievement Award from the James Beard Foundation. In '96, *Celebrating the Pleasures of Cooking*, in publishing it. And then in 2001 you were inducted into the Culinary Institute of America. First of all, congratulations. I guess what I am leading to is, what would you like Chuck Williams to be known for? All of us have something. What is it that we should remember about Chuck Williams and what he has created here?

2-00:49:37

Williams: I think that [laughs], I would like to be known for introducing Americans to good cookware, good tools, to encourage them to cook.

2-00:50:02

Geraci: I think you've accomplished that [laughs]. That's quite an accomplishment.

2-00:50:06

Williams: Yes. I also like to think that I have contributed to their appreciation of good food, what good food can be if it's properly cooked.

2-00:50:36

Geraci: And how nice it can be.

2-00:50:38

Williams: Yes.

2-00:50:40

Geraci: Well, Mr. Williams, thank you very much, I appreciate your time. This was a long interview. I kept you going for quite a while there.

2-00:50:46

Williams: That is fine.

2-00:50:46

Geraci: So I very much thank you again.

2-00:50:50

Williams: Good.