

Mike Samara

Although best known as the friendly owner of Celebrity Club, he also helped bring liquor-by-the-drink to OK.

Chapter 01 - 1:17

Introduction

Announcer: The son of Lebanese immigrants, Michael Samara was born in 1924 in Oklahoma City. He started working in restaurants for his brother, Jake, at the age of twelve. He managed the Jamboree Supper Club in Oklahoma City and moved to Joplin, Missouri, to open and manage Mickey Mantle's Holiday Inn for six years.

Mike opened the Celebrity Club in Tulsa at a location, which was then "way out east" at 31st and Yale Avenue in 1963. Beyond the Celebrity Club, Mike owned or had an interest in the Hilton Ivana Inn, Big Mike's Hamburgers, Utica 21 Club, and Sleepy Hollow, among others. He was also part of the team that brought the first Burger King fast food restaurants to Tulsa.

In 1984, Mike successfully campaigned for Oklahoma to pass liquor-by-the-drink. The Alcoholic Beverage Laws Enforcement Commission issued Samara the state's first permit for liquor by the drink on June 19, 1985.

Even though his eyesight was failing, he would continue to put on a suit and tie every evening and go into his restaurant to greet his patrons until he was ninety-one years old. Mike was ninety-four when he died November 1, 2018.

Mike's personality, which made him so successful in the restaurant business comes through in this oral history interview on VoicesofOklahoma.com.

Chapter 02 - 4:54

Oklahoma City Club

John Erling: Today's date is April 23, 2009. State your name, please, your age, and your date of birth.

Mike Samara: My name is Mike Samara, S-a-m-a-r-a. I'm eighty-four years old, I will be eighty-five next month. May 17, 1924 was my birthday.

JE: For the record, tell us where we are recording this.

MS: We're in the Celebrity Restaurant in my office, formerly known as Celebrity Club for many years, and we changed the name just a few years ago.

JE: Where were you born?

MS: I was born in Oklahoma City.

JE: Tell me about your father and mother.

MS: My father and mother were both immigrants from Lebanon, around the turn of the century. My father's name was Amin Michael Samara and my mother's name was Fulamena, F-u-l-a-m-e-n-a.

JE: What did they do? What was their profession?

MS: My father had a business meeting training, delivering suitcases and wardrobes or whatever they brought with them. My mother was a housewife.

I was the youngest of ten children.

JE: Did your parents live to be old age?

MS: Yes they did, but we thought it was then, but in today's standards, my mother lived longer than my dad, quite a bit. She passed away, I think, in 1971, maybe it was in '70.

But my father died in 1948. Birth records, there were none for them, so we just had to guess and estimate their ages.

JE: Let's talk about your life. You're the youngest?

MS: Of ten children.

JE: Of ten children.

MS: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: Was that tough?

MS: No, no, as a matter of fact, all of my sisters just really catered to their brother. They were all married and me being the youngest I seem to have gotten as much or more attention than the others.

JE: Where did you go to school over there?

MS: I went to Central High School in Oklahoma City. Right after World War II, I started back to OCU, Oklahoma City University, but I was working. My brother had nightclubs, this was immediately after World War II. I was working for him. He had showgirls, live bands, and comedians that came from vaudeville, about that era.

JE: How old would you have been then?

MS: Let's see, I was born in '24 and that was '48, so twenty-four years.

JE: So what was the name of the club in Oklahoma City?

MS: We had one called the Jamboree Supper Club and he had one called the Derby Club.

He had other places but those were the two main ones, and that's the one where I was working, the Jamboree. I dropped out of college, I thought it was a lot more fun than college and the allure of all the things that you endure there.

JE: Were there name personalities, name show biz people that came through that club?

MS: Yes, as a matter of fact, the man that become a female, the first one, I can't think of her name, but he had her there. She's a terrible act but it was a big name. He had an exotic dancer and her name was Evelyn West and her claim to fame was she had large breasts, and she had them insured with Lloyds of London. He didn't know whether he was going to book her another legitimate well-known singer by the name of Wee Bonnie Baker, that was before your time. She was very popular and he decided to go with this Evelyn West.

Well, it caused a sensation being an exotic dancer. You could see more on Prime Time TV today than you could there then, but it caused quite a sensation. The local gendarmes, the local police, came out there and they stopped the show and they took her down. I don't know what the charge was but it wasn't a felony though. It caused such a sensation the people just could not wait to get in there. They started crowding in there and their lines were outside the building.

So they finally decided that they were making my brother rich by doing these things. And they did it again, so they finally dropped everything.

I have another brother who's a lawyer that represented him. And all we gained out of it was a lot of publicity. That was the starting of the exotic dancers in Oklahoma City. Unlike the ones that are here today. These are more nude bars, I think. I've never been in one here but I grew up in those after World War II in the late '40s and the early '50s.

Chapter 03 - 4:30

Mickey Mantle

John Erling: Let me ask you about World War II. Were you in the military?

Mike Samara: Yes I was.

JE: What did you do?

MS: I was a surgical technician in a medical clearing company. I ended up at several places in the United States. Had my first basic at Camp Roberts, California. And went to Paso Robles there was a camp there and then up to San Francisco and Washington and back down to San Francisco and finally was sent to Camp Carson in Colorado. Then they sent me to Fitzsimons General Hospital and that's where I trained to be a surgical technician. And then from there I went to Ft. Riley and then New Jersey and to Europe. I went to France and Belgium and Germany.

I was in Germany when the war ended. They were assembling the troops, a large number of them to go direct to the Pacific war zone. I'd become ill with appendicitis and I was in the hospital. I thought I was going to get out to go with my outfit. I'd been in there a couple of weeks with that appendectomy, which is kind of a long time, but the appendectomy there was about six inches incisions.

Anyway, I missed going with my outfit and I stayed on Europe until I sent back a year or so later.

JE: Let's pick up on your life then as you were with your brother in the Jamboree Club—

MS: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: ... in Oklahoma City. And again, you were about twenty-four years old.

MS: Yeah, about twenty-three.

JE: So they had this publicity. You stay there with the Jamboree Club for a while?

MS: Yes. I was there and he put me in charge of some things and pretty soon I was managing it.

In 1956, I met Mickey Mantle. He started coming in there. We become friends and a man who was more or less his benefactor, a man by the name of Harold Youngman, H. D. Youngman, a well-to-do road contractor, as a matter, was one of the main, if not the main contractor on the Will Rogers Turnpike.

They were friends so one night they came to me and they said, "We want to talk to you."

And I said, "Sure." This might have been in '57, because I had known them for a while, early part of '57.

And they said, "We're building a Holiday Inn in Joplin, Missouri, and we'd like for you to go up and run it."

I said, "I don't know anything about a hotel or a motel."

They said, "Neither do we."

So they sent me to Memphis and I trained under the man who opened the first Holiday Inn in America. Incidentally, the Holiday Inn in Joplin, Mickey Mantle's Holiday Inn, was the fiftieth Holiday in the world. Now, I think, what is there? It must be fifteen thousand Holiday Inns throughout the world. It was really in its infancy.

I went to Joplin, we were still under construction. We finished it and opened. It was in '56 or '57 that he won the MVP award. He was already well-known then, so well-known that wherever he would go he would attract a crowd. A great guy, just a wonderful friend. We'd become very good friends and we ran around together.

JE: How would you describe beyond that he was a great guy, at that time of his life?

MS: He was rather humble. He was very shy, very shy. He eventually grew out of that and he was a very generous person, very generous. I think there were times when his teammates might have taken advantage of him. But he was just a nice guy. And, of course, my association with him was such a good friendship.

When I went to Joplin, he spent a lot of time there.

JE: What's his connection to Joplin?

MS: His home was Commerce, Oklahoma, which is just a few miles from Joplin, right across the border. I got to know his mother. I never knew his dad, his dad died before I was there. I got to know his aunt. He had twin brothers and I really didn't know them. I met one of them later.

JE: Did any of the other Yankees ever come to visit him?

MS: Oh, yes, yes.

JE: Like who would that have been?

MS: Whitey Ford came. I don't know whether Billy Martin ever got there or not because Mickey's wife wasn't too thrilled with him because he had a tendency to drag Mickey out and they would go out and they would drink and have a good time. Yogi Berra was there, I think. And Warren Spahn was there. Of course, later I knew Warren here. He used to come in here, he lived here. There were a bunch of them.

I enjoyed two years there and went there in '57.

Chapter 04 - 8:18

Celebrity Club

Mike Samara: In '59, my brother called me. The club that he had in Oklahoma City was directly across the street from the state capital. And he said, "If you'll come back, you can take the club and do whatever you want to with it."

Oklahoma had voted legal liquor, that's why he called me. Not liquor by the drink, just legal liquor in liquor stores.

I came back, took the club, and remodeled it, changed it and named it Shangri-La. And it was a private club. Prior to that the Jamboree had become a private club too. I was doing very well and enjoying it.

And the governor, who was J. Howard Edmondson, decided that they were going to build some new office buildings across the street, just the north side of the capital. They condemned everything by Eminent Domain in a four-block area, squared four blocks, that took the club, the restaurant where I was, and my house. I had a house in that area. To build those two new capital office buildings. Right where the Will Rogers and the Sequoyah buildings are now. That was the very spot where I was in that Sequoyah building. But it was probably the biggest break of my life because it sent me to Tulsa.

John Erling: Why did you go to Tulsa?

MS: Well, I had bought a liquor store over here and I had a little restaurant on 11th Street, next to the liquor store, directly across the street from where TU, University of Tulsa, is.

Now that location is a Arby's, they bought the property.

JE: What was the name of it?

MS: The liquor store was Stadium Liquor. The restaurant, when I moved over here, was Sussy's Pizza.

JE: You had purchased this liquor store in Tulsa.

MS: Yes, I was living in Oklahoma City, I wasn't running it. I had a lady running it.

JE: And then the pizza place?

MS: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: How long did you have that?

MS: A few years. I had a partner in there and he ran it. We changed the restaurant and made the Library Restaurant out of it. It did very well, it did fine. We eventually sold it.

But I was in the liquor store in '62, and a man that later become a very dear friend and partner was a liquor wholesale salesman came in and we greeted each other. I really didn't know him, he didn't know me. And he was telling me about a little club out east of town. Well, remember, we were at 11th and College. He said it was really a cute place and he was very complimentary about it. And he asked me if I would like to go out and see it.

And I said, "Yeah, I'll go out, I'm not doing anything."

There was a little bar, half the size of my present lounge, and they had no food, it was just a bar. It was a private club. Two men, the second man was running it, it had been open less than a year, and he was losing money. The first man went broke.

A third man came in after that, well, they had called and asked if I'd be interested in leasing it. And I said, "No, I wouldn't." They told me what they wanted.

Later a man called me and said he would like to sell me the Celebrity Club. And the name of it was the Celebrity Club. And I kept it.

I asked what he wanted and he told me, and he said he would carry it. I knew nothing about Tulsa then.

So I called a friend of mine who lived here and knew the city, asked him if he thought that was a good deal, he said, "Yeah, if you think you can make it."

I said, "I can make it."

Three people had already gone broke in one year in here. Maybe a little over a year.

JE: You're talking about this location?

MS: This location, 31st and Yale. This friend of mine, when he told me about this little club, I said, "Where is it?"

And he kept saying, "East of town, way east of town."

Finally I said, "Well, where east of town?"

He says, "Way out there, 31st and Yale." It was way out, it's a two-lane street here.

Well, I ended up buying the little bar, had no food, and business was good, very good. I took over on February 18, 1963. Incidentally, that was the same night that a disc jockey, a very well-known disc jockey that used to be with you, Johnny Martin.

JE: On KRMG.

MS: KRMG. That was the night that he started his show on the radio, which was big bands music. Great disc jockey, wonderful music.

Every year on February the 18th, as long as he had that show, he would call and dedicate the night to me.

JE: Because you both had started on that very same day.

MS: On that very same day.

JE: In '63, you just had a bar here.

MS: That's it. I put in food very shortly, within a matter of months. It was a very small kitchen, very small room, you know, the lounge. The food was good, we did well with it.

And then decided within a year to build on. That property included the building on my north side that had to be destroyed it was so bad. A big hole in the roof, you could see the sky from there. Had several of them. But any-who, we built on to it. This was a private club and it's continued to be a private club for many, many years. Up until the time we got legal liquor.

JE: How was liquor sold in '63 when you started?

MS: One would bring their bottle in, we would put their name on it, and we would serve drinks out of their bottle, and they paid for the service and the setup.

JE: Known as liquor by the drink.

MS: Liquor by the wink, they called it then. It was not legal liquor by the drink. As far as I'm concerned there was never any legal liquor by the drink until we got the laws passed.

JE: That's true, it wasn't known as liquor by the drink; it was liquor by the wink, right?

MS: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: You referred earlier to legal liquor.

MS: Legal liquor was voted in, in Oklahoma, in 1959. That was what brought me back from Joplin, Missouri, to Oklahoma City again.

JE: So legal liquor, we go to liquor by the wink.

MS: Um-hmm (affirmative). There would be many, many clubs and restaurants and to say that they adhered to the law of having to bring your bottle in, wasn't so.

JE: How did they get around that?

MS: The most common way was they were all private clubs, all of the operations there, unless it was a restaurant, they had a bar. They would put names on bottles whether it belonged to them or not. And they'd say, "This is out of your bottle." But they would actually be selling you a drink out of their own bottle, I mean, out of the house's bottle.

JE: So there were many raids on these clubs by the liquor commission.

MS: Yes there was. Yes there was.

JE: Were you ever raided?

MS: No. I was very fortunate. We operated pretty tight. You know, if someone walked in off the street, we wouldn't have served them.

JE: But you had them come in and investigate you, probably.

MS: Oh yes, yes, they have.

JE: Or that's—

MS: They came in once. They were upset because they couldn't find anything wrong. So the arresting officer says, "Well, we're going to cite you."

I said, "For what?"

He said, "Improper display of a club license." And I had it in the office. And they said, "See, it says on here, 'Must be posted in a conspicuous place.'"

It was such a minor charge that the chief of police called me and said, "Put that thing up on the wall. Put a ribbon on it, do anything." He was really irritated and it got a lot of notoriety and publicity. But that was it.

JE: We operated that way in Oklahoma for many years.

MS: Many years. Many places would get raided regularly and they just figured that as part of the operating expense.

We enjoyed a nice business. Our strong suit become food, we had a very limited menu but whatever we had it was very good.

JE: What items were on the menu?

MS: Steaks, fried chicken. Fried chicken is still a very popular thing. So are our steaks. And lobster tails. The chicken is cooked in a heavy cast-iron skillet, it still is, just like your mother, your grandmother used to cook it. There were no tricks, no secret seasoning, it was just good, good cooking. The lobster tails are cold-water tails, I started with those and still do cold-water lobster tails. They're marvelous, they're wonderful.

Chapter 05 - 3:56

Remembering Names

John Erling: You were here to work the club and restaurant and greeted people. This was very much about you, Mike.

Mike Samara: Oh, I don't know about that. I was here and recognition of customers certainly helped. To remember their names, we worked at it. We really did, I did. I was younger then.

My memory was better and I did all right, you know, in remembering people's names. It was remembering something about them to bring it up.

Well, I think I did that with you yesterday.

JE: You did. So you worked at that.

MS: Yes.

JE: Did you ever take notes?

MS: Well, once in a while, if I'd think I couldn't remember I'd write the wife's name or something like down and go back and look at it.

JE: So when they came in that door ...

MS: That's right, that's right.

JE: That was building the business.

MS: Service. There are two things in the restaurant business that you need to succeed. Number one is food; number two is service. If you don't have those you're born dead, you're not going to make it. I think probably the third most important thing would be consistency. There are many other important things that you should do but if you don't have food and service, and in fast food, service is equally or more important than food itself. We were very, very fortunate here to keep some good help and keep that service going.

And as I said, I was here every night in recognition of people, and their name's the most magical word in the world to them.

JE: What were some of the names of the employees, the waiters, the waitresses, you remember any of those?

MS: Oh, gosh, yes. It was a pretty nice place to work, I think, because I had one lady that was here for twenty-seven years. She was a cashier, her name was Shirley Smith. Last year she passed away.

Then I had one server that was here for twenty years. I had a bartender here for eighteen years. The bartender was Tommy Ray, he was a very, very good bartender and nice guy. The waitress that was here for twenty years, she's still working. I talk to her a few times a year. She is food and beverage manager at Country Club in Arkansas. She's been there twenty years now.

Gee, I went through dozens and dozens of servers.

JE: Yeah.

MS: In all that time.

JE: People that worked for you probably followed you and your remembering names and all that. So it wasn't just you, it was others.

MS: Yes, yes.

JE: You told them to.

MS: I had a very dear friend, we'd gone to school together in Oklahoma City growing up. I got him in the business, actually, he came with me after I moved back from Joplin to Oklahoma City. He was with me at the Shangri-La there. He worked several restaurants and clubs in Oklahoma City after I left Oklahoma City. Then he eventually came over and joined me here. I don't know whether you're familiar with Oklahoma City or not, but his name was Junior, he was here and he had an opportunity to go to Oklahoma City and put in a place, and he called it Junior's. It's still going, still there, although he isn't, he's long since passed away. But he patterned it after this place.

The man that has it now is still doing a similar type thing and he's doing well.

JE: Yeah.

MS: And that's been since before the oil boom, back, when was that? In the '70s.

JE: Right.

MS: Early '70s. He did very, very well.

JE: Your business has been in the '60s, '70s, '80s, '90s, and now the thousands.

MS: Yeah.

JE: As you look back at all of those years, were there peaks and valleys? Were there times that you thought you couldn't make it?

MS: I don't know that there was ever a time when I didn't think I could make it. But there were times when it was really slow and I probably lost money, I'm sure I did. But always there was enough excitement here to where I stayed.

JE: You never thought about quitting?

MS: No, I never have.

JE: Or closing the doors?

MS: No, I haven't.

Chapter 06 - 7:42

Celebrities

John Erling: You've got a ton of stories of people, don't you?

Mike Samara: Yeah, but at my age now, my memory isn't so good that I can remember them all. I guess I do as well as anyone should for my age.

JE: I guess that was just your way of life.

MS: Yeah, it's something I really, truly enjoy.

JE: I guess that would be your advice to anybody who gets into any kind of work.

MS: Oh, absolutely.

JE: They have to.

MS: How many people do you know that really, really enjoy their job, their profession?

JE: You kept all these late hours, two, three o'clock in the morning.

MS: Unfortunately, unfortunately, it took its toll on me on that. My wife, we divorced in the '70s, late '70s. But we had three wonderful children. We're still a very, very close-knit family. And she has since remarried and her husband died and then she remarried again. And we're together on every holiday. She was, a great, great relationship.

JE: Would you blame the business?

MS: Absolutely.

JE: Because you were gone so much?

MS: Yes, no question about it, it was my fault.

JE: Did you remarry?

MS: No, I haven't. I've been seeing a lady now that I'm with sixteen years. We don't live together.

JE: There are celebrities who came through this club.

MS: Oh yes. Celebrity Club was not named for that, it was just a name. But we have had many celebrities.

JE: Bob Hope, tell us about that.

MS: Bob Hope. This was in the '60s. He was at the peak of his popularity, which carried on up through 2000. Someone called and said that he was coming out. He came in and we had a full house. I've never seen this happen before or since then, he came in and when he stepped into the dining room everyone stood up and was applauding.

I'm sure that he had similar type incidents happen with him. But I know that he was very pleased and none of the people came up and bothered him and asked him for autographs. He enjoyed his evening.

JE: Other personalities that have come through here?

MS: Well, of course, Mickey, every time he would come to town he would be out here. Mickey Mantle. There have been many, many famous names to remember, I don't remember all of them, everything from Henry Mancini to Al Hirt. It's interesting how he came out here one night. He did a concert downtown. He said, "Where can I go and get a good lobster?"

And Jay O'Meilia was in the audience, you know Jay?

JE: Yes.

MS: Jay is a good friend of mine, wonderful, great artist, great artist. Jay stands up and hollers, "Celebrity Club!"

Sure enough, here he comes, pretty soon here comes Jay after him. [laughing] There was a lot of people following him out here.

JE: You had a relationship with Don Tyson.

MS: Yeah, still do. Several years ago, and this was just within the last ten years, I had met him years ago through a mutual friend. He came in for lunch and we were full in the dining room so they seated him in the lounge. I passed him two or three times and he stopped me, and he said, "Pardon me, sir, are you the manager?"

And I said, "Yeah."

He says, "My name's Don Tyson, I'm in the chicken business." Little understatement.

And I says, "Oh, I've met you." And we reminisced and I said, "I think we have some mutual friends." And one of them is a very good friend of mine that had a barbeque place over in Fayetteville. And I asked him, "Herman Tuff?"

He said, "Herman and I were roommates in college."

So we got acquainted and he started coming back. I'll see him some time this year, once or twice. His daughter showed, I don't know what kind of horse, it might have been Appaloosas. Every time she would show, he would come here, and he would always be out here a couple nights. And enjoyed it and bring people out.

One of his very close friends is Willie Nelson. He didn't bring Willie out here but he brought his band out and then they sent some food to Willie. I think he's going to appear here in person in October. If he does, if Don's not off fishing, that's his passion, deep sea fishing, he'll probably be here. And if I ask him, he'll bring him out.

JE: There's a story about Willie Nelson that you need to tell.

MS: Oh, it was a long time ago. You know, I tell this story, I personally did not see it. I was here but I had a man working for me, and as I said, we were a private club, we were careful about who we let in. This had to be in the early '70s. Supposedly, Willie Nelson come to the door to try to get in.

And he said, "No, we can't do that, it's a private club," and turned him away. [laughs]

If I'd known that I darn sure wouldn't have turned him away, I would have welcomed him with open arms and catered to him.

JE: Did that upset you?

MS: Later when I found out about it. But he was just doing his job.

JE: So when Willie Nelson was told he couldn't come in, he hasn't been here since?

MS: Huh-uh (negative). That's right.

JE: And that would have been in the early '70s.

MS: Yes.

JE: So you want to see if he can be welcomed back again. He's probably forgotten that.

MS: I'm sure he has.

Last year I went over to Fayetteville and we had lunch with Don Tyson and this friend of mine that I said they were roommates in college. While we were there, Don got up and went to the phone. He came back and he's sitting next to me, and he said, "That was Willie

Nelson. He's in Norway." He said, "Today is his birthday and I sent him some flowers." He said, "I do on every birthday of his." And he said, "He just called to thank me."

JE: [laughing] Tim Conway?

MS: He was here. Tom Poston was with him.

JE: Marilyn May?

MS: Marilyn Maye is a very dear friend, she has been for many years. And she's a great singer, a great vocalist. She appeared on *Johnny Carson Show* more than any singer. Johnny Carson would always say it was his favorite redhead from Kansas City. She has got to be in her seventies now, and she still looks good.

JE: So—

MS: Any time she's in town she'll come by.

JE: How did that start?

MS: We had a mutual friend. He has since passed away. He and his wife both have since passed away, and especially his wife, who was Marilyn's closest friend. She told me later. As a matter of fact, Marilyn was with her when she passed away. And if she comes to town she will be here.

JE: Yeah.

MS: I promise you. One night, this has been two years ago, she was here and everyone had left except a friend of hers, an attorney by the name of Pat Cremin. She and I were the only ones left here. I don't drive, I'm visually impaired, as you well know. So Pat said he would take me home. Because my ride had already left.

We start to get in his car and she insisted that she get in the backseat. So I get in the front seat, he turns the ignition on, he has one of her CD albums playing. And as we were going home, she was singing live to us from the backseat. It was quite a thrill to hear her sing like that along with the CD.

When we get to my house, I ask them if they'd like to come in. They said, "Certainly." So they go in. And in my kitchen I had one of those little Bose radio and CD players. I have hundreds of CDs. And lo and behold, I happened to have one of hers in there playing at the time I turned it on.

There again in my kitchen, she was sitting there singing to this along with that CD. Quite a thrill. One of the most memorable nights I've ever had here.

JE: That's great.

Chapter 07 - 5:18**Utica 21**

John Erling: I'm thinking about your dining area, which is all decked out in red. How did that come about?

Mike Samara: It's a burgundy. It used to be three colors; one was red and white. Then we changed it—we had a fire in '66 and we rebuilt it and come back and it was red and black, flock, which was popular then. Then about fifteen to twenty years ago, we had a total remodel. We closed down and everything from the floor to the ceiling was replaced. The carpets, the walls, the fixtures, every piece of equipment in here was replaced. It's one, well, we take care of it, but, you know, there's a lot of age on this building. It's a constant maintenance problem but I think that it's in good shape.

JE: While you were here running this business, Celebrity Club, you did invest in other businesses.

MS: Well, I had another club that was really kind of a dream club, it was Utica 21. I opened it in 1976. It was on top of the Utica Bank building and it was really a beautiful place.

JE: Twenty-first and Utica.

MS: Twenty-first and Utica. The chairman of Utica Bank at the time was a man by the name of Vic Thompson. He wanted a club restaurant up there. He talked to me and we visited and finally agreed. And he made me some very favorable offers on financing and so I opened it and it was doing well. It was a very beautiful place.

JE: Was that a private club?

MS: Yes it was a private club. They had to pay a membership there. I never charged memberships here.

JE: And that was before liquor by the drink was voted in?

MS: Yes, yes, yes, long before liquor by the drink.

JE: But that was a private club.

MS: Yes.

JE: And you had to join, for how much? Do you remember how much it was?

MS: It was just a hundred dollars. And then there was an annual fee. Everything went well and then I become ill. I had colon cancer and I asked for the prognosis. And they said, "You've got to divest yourself of all your innards."

I said, "Wait a minute, that doesn't sound good." But cancer was Stage 4. But fortunately, I survived.

In the interim though I had to sell the place and I had to almost give it away. And then I carried the biggest part of the note. The man did well for five years after he purchased it. But unfortunately, he didn't make it, he had some problems after five years.

The interesting thing on the name of that club, Vic Thompson, who was the CEO and chairman of the board of Utica Bank, his favorite place in the United States was the 21 Club in New York City. And we mulled over names, we looked down on Swan Lake there so all I was thinking was something Swan on the name of the club.

So one day I'm driving in there and I get to the intersection at Utica and we're on 21st and I said, "Gee, what a great name that would." So that's how the name was created on Utica 21. Twenty-first and Utica. Many people thought it had some connection to the 21 Club in New York City, but it doesn't.

JE: What are your overall recollections about the city of Tulsa itself? Because even in the early '60s, downtown Tulsa was still quite vibrant.

MS: Yes. When I came here, Bishops was still open twenty-four hours.

JE: And Bishops was?

MS: A restaurant downtown, and it was a good restaurant. Some of their old recipes are still sought after and they're still famous. Some of the things that they did.

JE: Did you have competition to the Celebrity Club?

MS: Yeah, I think so, but not much.

JE: Who would it have been?

MS: Well, when I came here the top restaurant in town, in my opinion, was the Louisiane. A man by the name of Herb Colemeyer had that. And it was a very, very nice restaurant, really nice.

I took my interior designer over there before he decorated this place. He was out of Oklahoma City. He looked at that and he said, "I can beat it."

I says, "Good, go for it." And that was how he designed this. He did not do it the last time that we remodeled, had a total remodel. A local lady interior designer did it. She did a nice job, I think.

JE: So in the '60s, then, it was those two fine restaurants?

MS: Well, there were others. There was the Petroleum Club downtown, which is real private. I don't remember when the Summit Club started. But it's been here a long time. And they really do a nice job, they have done, and they still do. Their service is really good.

JE: Were you interested in food from a chef's standpoint?

MS: Preparing it myself? Personally?

JE: Yeah.

MS: No, now I have in the early days jumped back there and helped in the kitchen, run the broiler or something like that. I was young, nothing scared me then.

JE: Did you ever have a houseful of patrons and electricity went out or plumbing went out?

MS: Yeah.

JE: And you're asking yourself, "What do I do now?"

MS: Oh yes. I've had all those problems, John. All of those problems. Power failure. But plumbing on several occasions. I've had plumbers out here in the midnight and all night. The same thing with the electricians. Those are hazards that you're going to encounter.

JE: People get upset?

MS: No, not really. That's amazing, they were very, very nice and very acceptable to the problems.

Chapter 08 - 2:20

Burger King

John Erling: Your businesses, other than Utica 21?

Mike Samara: Oh, I had some hamburger places, kind of upscale hamburger places called Big Mike's. I had three of them, they're beautiful hamburger places, as far as hamburger places.

JE: Three in Tulsa?

MS: Yes. There was one in Southland Shopping Center. There was one on 51st Street next door to Steak and Ale.

JE: 51st and?

MS: Yale, just west of Yale. Then there was one at 36th and Sheridan. But a friend of mine and I sought the Burger King franchise. We got it but they said I have to get rid of my Big Mike's because it was a conflict of interest. I didn't think it was and I don't think it is now. But I did. I got rid of those and we got into the Burger King business. We had three Burger Kings, had a lot of problems, we finally got them worked out. I hired a man for director of operations. He turned them around and got them going good. So we bought the fourth store. Then he said he didn't want to do anything with my other partner.

So we bought him out. We ended up with six Burger Kings and operated them, they did very well. Then we sold them and we sold them well.

JE: Was that in the '70s, '80s?

MS: No, that was in '80s.

JE: 'Eighties.

MS: Uh-huh (affirmative).

JE: You were obviously in competition then with McDonald's.

MS: Yes.

JE: Can you tell us—

MS: Someone would say to me, "What do you think of McDonald's?"

My answer was, "I think they're the smartest operators in the world. They're the largest restaurant chain in the world. They're the largest users of beef in the world. They're the largest users of potatoes in the world, the largest users of bread in the world. And they do

things right, whether you like them or not, they're the smartest operators I've ever seen.

Consistency is one of the great features that they have. If you like their french fries, which are really excellent, if you like them here, you're going to like them in Paris. If you don't like the hamburger here you're not going to like them in Hong Kong. Wherever they are, they have consistency. They know how to operate.

But I think Burger King has done very well and they're still doing well. But McDonald's are just smart operators. So many things that are standard are things that they have proven to work well.

Chapter 09 - 7:15

Recognize Voices

John Erling: Were you offered opportunities that you turned down that maybe you should have acted upon?

Mike Samara: Oh, many investments, yes, certainly. Yes, absolutely.

JE: I was thinking in maybe other cities if somebody said, "Why don't you come to ...?"

MS: Oh yeah. Now if I had kept with Big Mike's it would have been a great opportunity to franchise. They were really good looking, handsome hamburger places. We had telephones, the candlestick telephones in each booth and table and you would order your food like that. And then they would buzz you when it was ready and you'd come up and get it. That was kind of gimmick, but it worked. It was kind of classy.

JE: Big Mike's, was that a nickname of yours?

MS: Well, the man that did the interior design, he named me Big Mike. Other opportunities?

One time, I was young, I was aggressive, and I thought, "You know what would be a good idea is to take Big Mike's and tie them in with some of those big stations on the interstates and the turnpikes." This was before McDonald's ever did this.

Do you remember an actor by the name of Dale Robertson?

JE: Yes.

MS: Dale was a friend of mine and he came to town once. He'd come by here and he said, "I'm going up to Phillips and see them." I told him about this restaurant idea I had. And he says, "Do you want to go with me?"

I said, "No, no, I don't want to go up there, it's your deal."

He says, "No, come on."

So I take my renderings and my idea of tying this in with one of their stations. And it had not been done. He was personal friends of Booth Adams. We go up in a private dining room and Dale said, "Mike, show him what you have."

And I showed it. And so that was all right. But this one guy kept coming back and

looking at it, came back, looking at it. Nothing ever happened. And I don't know whether I could have done it or not, but eventually it ended up McDonald's is on a similar thing. Mine was a little more upscale. I'm sure that McDonald's would have adapted to anything, as smart as they are. But they weren't the giant then. They were big but they later become even bigger.

That was one idea that if I had gotten it, it could have been very, very good, and very lucrative.

JE: How about elected officials, mayors, counselors, commissioners, do they come around?

MS: Only a very, very few have missed this place.

JE: So the mayors—

MS: The mayors, I knew every mayor that they've had with the exception of the present one, I do not know her. I don't think she's been here. Now her husband has been here, I think prior to their marriage. And she may have been here but I didn't know it. Every mayor since 1963.

JE: Maxwell?

MS: He was the first one. Nice guy, nice guy, yeah, we got along good.

JE: Here you are at 31st and Yale, we have the Broken Arrow Expressway not too far from here now.

MS: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: That wasn't built when you came in.

MS: It was just being finished, just being finished.

JE: She probably saw that as good for your business.

MS: Yeah, if we'd only known and if they'd only known and made it bigger and better. Yale was a two-lane street. I love Tulsa, love Tulsa, and I say about J. Howard Edmondson, when he condemned all of the properties in Oklahoma City where I was, I should say thank you, because it sent me to Tulsa.

JE: Yeah. Well, here you are after all these years, successful. You must feel like you're a lucky man.

MS: I am very lucky, John, very lucky. I count my blessings.

JE: Grandchildren?

MS: I have three children, eight grandchildren.

JE: How would you like them to remember you?

MS: I would like them to remember as the relationship that we have right now. It's so good, we don't have any disagreements, hardly at all, and I think that they have a lot of love and respect for me. And I could not love them any more than I do.

JE: Yeah.

MS: They're just terrific, all of them, my kids and my grandchildren.

JE: You can't anything more than that, I mean, that's the top of the list, isn't it?

MS: Yeah, yeah.

JE: You were born in Oklahoma City, you came here, have enjoyed a very nice lifestyle, as a result of your business.

MS: Yeah, I've never lived lavishly but I've always been comfortable.

JE: You know this business, as I referred to earlier, yeah, it's good food, but it takes a personality like yours, remembering names, people enjoy walking in because they feel good as soon as they walk in.

MS: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: Isn't that true?

MS: Yes. And it's so important, I think, still is, to recognize whether you know them or not, but recognize people as they enter with a kind word softly spoken, puts them at ease and relaxes them. Especially when they come into a place that's kind of an upscale place. Not like a hamburger place, but, you know, if they come in here, they're going to be here for a little while. If you welcome them, it puts down the barrier as they walk in, especially if they're strangers.

Now if they're regular customers, on the majority of them, I can't see now but I'm recognizing voices. When you came in today, well, of course, I was expecting you, but I recognized your voice.

JE: You know, if people like a place they may be less inclined to complain. Sometimes your service could be off or even the quality of food. And if they liked you, which they did, don't you believe that were able to work with you on it?

MS: Absolutely. I tell me friends that, "It's nice to receive compliments when things are good, but if things aren't right, please tell me about it. I can't do anything about it unless I know. And I appreciate the fact that you are telling me." And believe me, that really puts them at ease and they do that.

JE: So as students listen to this the restaurant business is a good business.

MS: It's a good business if you like it. You know, I have a friend in Oklahoma City, a restaurateur. We were discussing it one time and he says, "You know, I think you have to have the insatiable desire to satisfy in this business."

JE: Yeah.

MS: And it's true.

JE: You're a servant.

MS: Yeah.

JE: Really.

MS: Uh-huh (affirmative).

JE: I mean, they don't look at you as that.

MS: No.

JE: But you really are a servant.

MS: We are servants. Absolutely, absolutely. If you had the top three things I said, food, service, and consistency, many years ago, remember the Lucky Strike ads? They'd say, "American Tobacco Company. Tobacco is our middle name." Well, you could say that about this, "Service is our middle name."

JE: Absolutely. And it's one of the toughest businesses, hardworking, and it's also tough to keep people in the restaurant business.

MS: It is, yes it is. We're fortunate with our employees, they usually stick around.

JE: But that means you've treated them right.

MS: Well, we hope to, yes. And I think we do.

JE: Well, thank you for this time.

MS: Well, thank you, John, I've enjoyed the visit.

JE: You're a fixture in this city and you belong in the big names that we have in our city. And I appreciate you giving your time.

MS: Thank you, that's very kind of you.

Chapter 10 - 0:33

Conclusion

Announcer: This oral history presentation is made possible through the support of our generous foundation-funders. We encourage you to join them by making your donation, which will allow us to record future stories. Students, teachers, and librarians are using this website for research and the general public is listening every day to these great Oklahomans share their life experience.

Thank you for your support as we preserve Oklahoma's legacy one voice at a time, on VoicesofOklahoma.com.