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Mr. Deakyne has the most beautiful tearoom in New Castle
Interview with Horace Deakyne, October 23, 1973, in New Castle, Delaware. The interviewer is Rebecca Button.

Q This is an interview with Horace Lister Deakyne, lifelong resident of New Castle, the proprietor of the New Castle Courthouse Tearoom, which entertained illustrious visitors for years. Mr. Deakyne, could you tell us about the New Castle Courthouse Tearoom?

A Yes. My first statement would be that you are inaccurate in characterizing me as the proprietor. The credit for the original thought of establishing a tearoom belongs--is due to Miss Reba T. Hawkin, daughter of Thomas Hawkin, who lived at [inaudible--sounds like Lavonne] Hill about a mile out of town. And they were an old family here. Her brother was Gen. Thomas Hawkin, commandant of the Marines in the Second World War--early part of the Second World War. Miss Hawkin conceived the idea of a tearoom in New Castle and she and Mrs. Deakyne have worked together on a great many community projects, particularly where food was involved. And she came to see her to attempt to interest her to become a partner. And of course she started backward. She chose a name first, "The Cornucopia," and then they were looking for a place to start this operation and after looking at several, the word got around what they were attempting to do; and the courtroom in the courthouse, not being used at that time, and the commissioners of the old courthouse who had charge of the building suggested that might be a suitable place. Of course then they changed the name to the Courthouse Tearoom. And Miss Hawkin and Mrs. Deakyne were partners. Miss Hawkin was of a different vintage than Mrs. Deakyne and while they were only six months a year when they started, after about two or three years [she] found her health would not permit her to continue it, or that it was a rugged game. And Mrs. Deakyne carried it on herself for a full season and part of a season and found that it was too much for her and that's when I came in the picture. So I was a happenstance.

Q What was that year?

A That was 1926. And Miss Hawkin was there 'til she became ill in '28 and was not there at all in '29 and then I went in '30--it was too much for Mrs. Deakyne. And I take no credit at all for its success. I got very good friends of mine always used to say Edna ran the tearoom and Horace ran Edna. Well, of course she had to have an organization and they were all local people. Most of the kitchen people were colored. The dining room were girls of high school age. And I suppose we run from 15 to 20 people on the staff, kitchen and dining room. And then we started to stretch the season. The reason--it was from April 1st to October 1st--and of course there was no heat. And then we started to stretch the season, hold the organization together and provide for some of the people who came here quite regularly. And eventually--and then the Depression came in '29 and income was a factor to the people who worked there--more of a factor. And then we tried being open all year round. And of course the volume in winter was not anything like it was in the spring and the summer and fall. But it justified our staying open. And we had gotten a pot-bellied stove for the dining room and we did a reasonably good job of heating. I'm old enough to have lived in the days when they didn't have central heating, and I know with stoves you were warm on one side and cold on the other, but the stove had enough capacity to make the room reasonably comfortable.

Q All those people had [inaudible].

A Well, fortunately the tearoom was open about the same time the ferry line originated from New Castle to Pennsville across the river. And when the ferry started the ferry slips were at the foot of Delaware Street, and all that transient traffic went right through the town right by the courthouse. And then the Wilson Line came in, which is another story, and then the rival of the original line, which they called the White Line. And they bought land at the foot of Chestnut Street and built ferry facilities and started competition. Then after a short time they merged and had their whole operation there at Chestnut Street, but that didn't affect--I think if it had any effect it had a favorable effect, because there was less traffic in town and people had come to know us and those that were favorably impressed by word of mouth passed the word on that it was a place to eat. And we've always found that was the most effective advertising that you could have, a satisfied customer who passed on by word of mouth favorable impressions.

Q Mr. Deakyne, what were some of the favorite foods from the tearoom?

A Mrs. Button, since you raised the question of me talking about the tearoom, why I've asked several people what they felt was the most popular dish, and I had three different answers, and I didn't think any of them were correct. I think the hot rolls made a bigger impression on our guests than any other item, although I don't mean to discourage what else was served. But even now after it's been closed--what, 30 years or more, every once in a while I'll run into somebody that says, "I'll never forget those hot rolls." Well of course the waitress would serve the first course and then a pan of piping hot rolls would come out of the oven and be put on the table with butter. And then the guests would start right in on them, and if they were cold before the dinner came, they'd be removed and another pan of hot ones put there. I think people still talk about those rolls. Now I think we served thousands and thousands of broilers, which were fried, and of course meats on the menu--chops, steaks, but they were a minor item compared with the fried chicken and the chicken king and the deviled crabs in season and oysters in season--oysters and chicken salad. And I would--and I don't think I'm simply reciting my own preference, I would say those popular items, but I would put the hot rolls at the top. Mrs. Button, it might be interesting to note that there was never any frozen foods or mixes or things of that character that you'll find so frequently these days. But the broilers were bought there every day and the vegetables--at time we had difficulty in getting fresh ones, but there was never a frozen or a canned vegetable used. Everything was just as it used to be prepared and which I think most of us who lived in those times like now. On the matter of desserts, ice cream with angel food, and then butter cake with chocolate icing, and lemon meringue pie and fruit pies, and the lemon meringue was particularly popular. It was made by natural ingredients and Mrs. Deakyne knew how to make the filling and was noted for her meringues which stood two two to three inches high. They were not conducive to reducing.

Q Mr. Deakyne, the tearoom was famous for the Washington people on their way to New York to the ferry.

A Mrs. Button, I think one of my favorites among our guests was Charles Evans Hughes, who was then Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. And we looked for him

at least twice a year. When the newspapers announced the Supreme Court would adjourn a certain date, we'd know in about another week he'd turn up. And when they announced in the fall that they were gonna reconvene, we knew that within a week or so of their convening, he would be heading back to Washington. And he was a wonderful person, had the reputation when he ran for the presidency of having cold water in his veins, but we never found him that way at all. He was very friendly, not effusive or gushy or anything like that, but I mean just naturally and normally friendly. And the first time he came there he asked the little girl who served him if she would bring him a small pitcher of lemon juice with his water--drinking water. And every time he came after that, when he sat down there would be that glass of water and a pitcher of orange [sic?] juice, and I think he was thoroughly appreciative of it. And another one who came frequently was John L. Lewis and Mrs. Lewis, the first Mrs. Lewis. And at that time the labor organizations were holding a lot of their meetings at Atlantic City. And he attended those, of course, and usually stopped at the tearoom. And they had a boy at Princeton. And he had a hide like an elephant or he never would have gotten where he did with the labor movement, but he had an Achilles heel. One night he and Mrs. Lewis were there for dinner and a couple--people didn't have to say, "Is that John L. Lewis?"--you'd know right away, he had such distinctive facial characteristics. And they said, "That's John L. Lewis. Our boy's in his boy's class at Princeton, and the fellows up there think he's a wonderful guy." Well, after that he was opened up and was as funny as he could be. And Mrs. Lewis was a delightful person. She was a school teacher and took a lot of the rough edges off him. They had a place in Alexandria and she wanted Mrs. Deakyne to come down and spend the weekend with them. She said, "I'll either send a car over to Washington to meet you, or I'll send a car up here." But Edna never went, and I'm always sorry she didn't have that experience. And I think one of our guests who made the most fuss was Shirley Temple. She'd been down at Washington at the White House. It was right at the height of her career, 1938, and the fellow who ran the Mayflower, Nolio [sp?], called me one morning and said, "Shirley's party is coming to New Castle today and I suggested they stop at the tearoom for lunch." And he said, "The Maryland State Police are escorting her party to the state line." So I didn't tell anybody about this call but Mrs. Deakyne. And I called the state police and asked them if they would pick her up from the Maryland State Police, which they did and brought her in. And she hadn't been there but a very short time before the kids were going around town like Paul Revere announcing that Shirley Temple was in town. And it took about six state police to get her out. But she was a delightful child and she sat with her back to the kitchen. And of course the people in the kitchen wanted to see her face. And when she finished her lunch, I said, "Shirley, won't you get up and stand up and turn around and let the people in the kitchen see you?" And she took my hand, hopped out to the kitchen, and said, "I had a delicious lunch," without any prompting at all. And she wore her hair [inaudible], her mother said that they'd been annoyed so at people clipping her hair. But she was very interesting. [Tape is interrupted here.]

Q Who was [inaudible]?

A Yeah. We had a fellow come there in an open car, and I was never able to size him up--not very loquacious. And one day he came late for lunch, but in no hurry, and we sat around the stove and he told me he was J. P. Morgan's

chauffeur. He would drive him down to the Tusquehanna flats for duck shooting and down in South Carolina for grouse and Scotland for grouse--he was more of a companion than he was a chauffeur. So he called me one day and said, "I'm bringing Mr. Morgan through tomorrow and I want him to stop and have lunch in the courthouse." So we reserved tables all around him so he wouldn't be annoyed. And when he finished his lunch, I had a lithograph of the courthouse done by Al Kruse [sp?], which in the latter part of the time we were there I started to get some autographs--I should have started earlier. But I had this under my arm, and I said, "Mr. Morgan, I hope you enjoyed your lunch," and so forth; I said, "I'd like you to do something personally for me. I don't want to exploit it." He got his head about halfway to a "no" and he looked up and he saw Charles Evans Hughes, and he said, "I'd be honored to put my name under Charles Evans Hughes." And then we used to have all the--'course the [inaudible, sounds like Balanca] Plant was here then. We had most of the early trans-Atlantic flyers. And Bert Balkan [sp], who flew to the poles with Byrd, and the trans-Atlantic fellows, George Haldeman, who flew with Ruth Elder, and Yancey and Roger Williams, and most of the early trans-Atlantic men when going across the ocean was some feat. And there used to be a group from the Balanca Plant come for lunch regularly every day. And G. M. Balanca usually came, and he was a small man, his feet would never touch the floor from the chair. And he always asked for a bottle of milk. He didn't want a glass of milk, he wanted a bottle of milk and he didn't want it shaken up. And he'd just pour the top out and fill the glass and that's what he would drink. Wallace Peery had a Balanca plane and used to come in here. And I think Nada Luce got her inspiration from him when she wrote Gentlemen Prefer Blondes, because he had a new blonde with him every time he came.

[End of side one.]

- A I used to try to get down home in the afternoon, both of us get a little rest between meals, and one of the girls called me one day down home and asked me to come up. Well, you never knew what you were going to run into, are you gonna have trouble in the kitchen or trouble with the food or trouble with a guest or something. And I went up and she said, "Katherine Hepburn is out there." And this was late for lunch time. I don't know if there was anybody else in the tearoom or not. Anyhow, she was sitting there, had finished her lunch, and she was done up in her gray flannel slacks and mink coat, and had reared her chair back and had her knees up on the edge of the table as she was prone to do. And she came there a number of times and came there with her sister. And I always admired them. They were keen girls and she was there one time right after she had done the Philadelphia Story for the screen. And we'd seen her in the Philadelphia Story on the stage in Philadelphia and then of course we went to see the screen version. I said to her, "Which did you prefer, the stage version or the screen?" Well, she said, "Really, I've never seen myself on the stage," which was a pretty good answer.

Fred Stone was one of the few that had me buffaloed as far as identifying, because he wore on his lapel--you know he had a pilot's license and flew--this was after he'd had that crash in Connecticut and been broken up--but he had this quiet birdman [?] insignia in his lapel and I associated him with some of the flyers out at Balanca. And he was there with one of his daughters and her husband and finally I got the conversation so I could find out who he was, and he really had me buffaloed on that one.

Norman Rockwell used to come there frequently, and Patsy [inaudible--sounds like Kellily], and Sir Frederick Banning, the discoverer of insulin, and I say that knowing that there's been a controversy that he had another man in on that. We had a friend who knew--had diabetes and went to Toronto for treatment all the time and knew the inside story, and thought that Banning was the discoverer. And he came with his nephew, Dr. Hipwell, and Mrs. Deakyne had met Mrs. Hipwell in Atlantic City and they made themselves known when they came and I spent the afternoon taking them around town, and took 'em up to meet Dr. Booker, and I took photographs of him, and took photographs around the town. And I never knew until the next day that he'd been knighted, he was Sir Frederick Banning, and you'd never know it by his manner. He was just a regular guy.

Wallace Beery had a ~~Balanca~~ ^{Bellanca} plane, and he also preferred blondes.

Q Did you have people who traveled regularly from places like Philadelphia?

A Our local business we always spoke of as within a radius of 35 miles, which took in Philadelphia. Of course a great many came from Wilmington, but anything within an hour or an hour and a half's driving range we called local people. And then we had--we were on a direct route from New York to Washington, New England, Washington, the South. And they got in the habit of stopping there--it just made a good stop for lunch for anybody driving from New York or from Washington north. And we had a great many people that were what you might call transients, but I wouldn't attempt to estimate the proportion of local people compared with the transients--I couldn't do it.

We had some unusual experiences with pets. People would want to bring their pets in, and of course we wouldn't have pets in the dining room. And there was a sister of a senator from Philadelphia--or from Pennsylvania--who used to come there quite often. And I can't remember whether it was Sen. Reed or not, but I remember she came there one day and had these two cats with her, and she wanted to know if we could arrange for her to have a room so the cats could have their lunch without being annoyed by anybody around them. Well, we purposely didn't find a room, so she rented a room over at the hotel and had chauffeur take the cats over there and feed them. Then we had people come there with dogs and they'd want to serve them tenderloin. And we'd cook it, put it on an old tin pan or something, and they'd take it out and have them eat it. And one day we had a party there and they had brought a can of dog food--this must have been a very plebian dog--and the girl who was serving them brought it out and opened the can and took it back and Chick Gant--Charles H. Gant, who was a well-known citizen of Delaware, he began the Marine Terminal and managed it for years, and during the war he went back with Hercules, who he was with when he first got out of college--and he had a keen sense of humor, and he said to the girl, "What was that?" He said, "That's the most delicious thing I've seen since I've been coming to the tearoom." And he used to come almost every day. But you can guess the rest of it. The next day he got a can of dog food without ordering it. And he was very fond of oyster stew, but he never ate the oysters. He would eat the milk or cream, whatever was there, and that of course had the oyster flavor. And during the war, as I said, he went back to Hercules, and he was running that Badger plant out in Wisconsin. And he had about ten or twelve thousand men there in construction and operation. He called me up one day, he come into Wilmington,

and I asked him over to lunch, and he said O.K., so I went over when he told me he'd be ready, and he was standing out in front of the Delaware Trust Building there with his hands in his pockets and looked like somebody loafing on Market Street and here he was running a plant of ten or twelve thousand men. Then he came over and Edna had broiled oysters. And when Chick finished his lunch, we'd invited several of his friends to come along, he walked into the living room and he said, "Some of those oysters looked very familiar to me."

One day we had a large, impressive, dignified man come in and I greeted him and he said, "Do you have a washroom?" And I said yes and I directed him to it. He said, "I've been traveling," and he said, "Is it co-ed?" He said, "I've been traveling in the South, and I find a great many places down there where the washroom is co-ed."

Q Did the waitresses change their costumes at any time during the year? Did you always have the same color scheme? What did the tearoom look like when you came in and entered?

A Well, it always had the same color scheme. We had yellow drapes at the windows and the girls wore yellow uniforms. We had yellow tablecloths and napkins--not paper. And the tables always had fresh flowers on them; there was never anything artificial there--I mean, it was always--Mrs. Deakyne's father had some land around his place out south of town and he put in a tremendous amount of flower seed in the spring, and as a result we had fresh flowers all the time. Now in the fall, of course, we changed to autumn leaves and that sort of thing, and in winter you'd have to go to some of your winter decorative plants and shrubs, but nothing artificial, either in the food or in the decoration, or in the people who run the place.

Q Was Sunday afternoon your big time, your biggest serving time of the week?

A Mrs. Button, nobody can ever outguess the public, and I notice that when I go to these restaurants now. Sunday as a rule was a heavy, very heavy day. And of course we would have special groups there that wouldn't make it as busy, but you could prepare for them. But you could never outguess your crowd. I mean, I remember one day particularly, the [inaudible] Glee Club was going on tour in the spring. And they had left New Haven that morning and were going to give a concert that night, and they stopped at the tearoom for lunch. And we'd been fairly busy, and I don't know how many there were then, a good-sized group, and they got in there, and of course they were all exuberant, being the first day of spring vacation, and off on a trip. So they started to sing, and of course none of the guests who were there when they came and started to sing would leave. So the place was pretty crowded. And then they had lunch and then they sat there and sang for some time after that. And we got a kick out of it as well as the guests who happened to be there.

Q What was the capacity for the tearoom?

A As a rule the capacity was the number of people that came--we would make some provision for them. I was trying to think about that, and I would say it ran between sixty and eighty. We had one group there one evening of eighty, and of course everybody else had gone, but that was unusual. We had some temporary

facilities there to handle a group that size. And I would say it run between sixty and eighty, something like that.

Q Did you have round tables, or were they square?

A They were square, and I was trying to think how many tables for four we had. They predominated, of course the tables for four predominated, and then we had several tables for six, then we had a large dining room table set up in one corner of the room there that would take care of about twelve. At some of the tables we had these old kitchen chairs with the original padding on them. And the Balanca group usually sat at one table, a six-table, and Dick Morgan, Ricard Dorsey Morgan, who was one of the early blind flyers, came and he brought Johnny Mack and Ran Holliday, they ran air service and they came with the Balanca group, and Dick would rear back after he finished his lunch on the back legs of these kitchen chairs, which were not too sturdy, much to the disgust of Mrs. Deakyne. It didn't seem to change Dick. But I don't know how many people knew Ran Holliday. He was another one of the early blind flyers. And, oh, a number of years after the tearoom closed, he called up Mrs. Deakyne one day, and he said, "Miss Edna," he said, "How'd you make that lamb gravy?" He said, "I haven't had any lamb gravy like that since the tearoom closed."

Q Did Mrs. Deakyne always have a hobby of cooking, from the time she was a young girl?

A She always said that she didn't like to sew and she would let her mother do the mending and that sort of thing and then she would take over the kitchen. She must have had a natural bent for it.

Q The tearoom was open on a seven-day basis, lunch and dinner, and beginning at 12:00 on Sunday from the time that you began to work with Mrs. Deakyne at the tearoom, is that correct?

A Not quite. We commenced to stretch it after I got there, stretch the season, and then when the Depression hit and the money meant something to some of the people up there, we finally stayed open all the year, but it was a grind, wasn't any question about that. And I don't think anybody does it now--they close a day a week or something like that.

Q Who were your suppliers? You were probably the person buying the food, were you?

A We bought practically everything locally. We were in a public building; we felt some obligation to do it. In those times, in the '30's, the business meant quite a bit to 'em--it was substantial. And our meats were bought locally and nothing better be sent down there that wasn't top quality--chops or tenderloin, a side of beef, that sort of thing, it had to be tops or it would go back. But we tried to keep all the money, all the money we could spend in the town here. Now when vegetables became scarce we'd have to scout the country around to find them, that sort of thing. And I think particularly lima beans. I've driven, oh, ten miles for lima beans, something like that. But basically we did all of our buying right here in town.

Q Did you have a man who bought you crab?

A Yeah, down from Graysonville, down near the Bay Bridge near [inaudible]. And he would come up and bring this backfin crabmeat, but there was never any attempt to slight on quality, save a few pennies. I mean, I've always said, if you're gonna have good food, you've got to start with good ingredients. You can't take poor ingredients and come out with good food. And that's what we worked on. Our oysters we got from a local supplier, came from down at Chincoteague, and they were known as Tom's Cove oysters, which we felt were tops, certainly as far as flavor was concerned. And we served those almost exclusively. You didn't have any law requiring solid pack and have all the flavor washed out before they were canned and sent up to you. I mean, they were opened right here, came up in the shell by the barrel and then opened right fresh and fit to eat.

You asked me about Mrs. Deakyne's recipes. There were a number of them published, with a [inaudible, sounds like record] or not, I don't know. I don't think she made the same thing the same way twice. But she had a natural bent for turning out an excellent product. And some of her recipes have been published. One, I know, which we never served in the tearoom but which she served here at home, which is angel food and it's a meringue crust, just like a pie crust, with rich whipped cream, and I don't know what else she put in it, some flavoring, and then sprinkled it with chocolate on top, and I always say "it'll make you sicker quicker," because it was certainly rich. But it was one of her favorites when we were entertaining at home. And there was never any difficulty in having the guests partake.

Q Were there any special salads that she did? Did you have tossed salads much then, or was it other kinds?

A No, we served a lettuce and tomato salad with our own homemade mayonnaise and a lettuce with pineapple on creamed cheese in the center and a homemade mayonnaise, and they were the standard salads with the dinner. But no fancy ones or no tossed. I think they're something new. This was just a plain salad, made of good vegetables and mayonnaise. We always made our own mayonnaise there. I'd say almost by the barrel.

Q You had to make it for the chicken salad--that was a staple, wasn't it?

A Oh, yeah. That would be of course the cut-up chicken and celery and homemade mayonnaise and it seemed to have quite an appeal.

Q Did you use any other advertising other than good food and word of mouth?

A Well, I don't know whether I should say this, tell about this or not, but we used to keep on pretty good terms with the police, who saw--lots of times were asked about information about a town, and traffic directions, and we had one man, a special officer, I can't mention his name because some of his family are still living here. And the tearoom was between Second and Third on Delaware and he was up on Fourth and Delaware. And the cars stopped and people would ask him about someplace to eat. "Well," he said, "if you just want a snack, you go down here on the right," but he said, "if you want a gut-full of honest-to-God food, go over there to the courthouse." Now, as you see, no

professional ad-man wrote that.

Q Mr. Deakyne, those were the Depression days. Did you have any backdoor patrons?

A Yeah, I had one very colorful one and very regular. Of course, nobody ever came there we didn't feed them. And he was an alcoholic and he got to the point where he had no place to

[Tape ran out here. End of interview.]