

Interview with Jason White

April 18, 2000

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Transcription date: 9-1-00 to 9-6-00

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RM: The topic of the interview today is the fudge business on Mackinaw Island. Jason, could you tell us a little bit about your background? When did you work there? How did you get the job? Where did you work on Mackinaw Island?

JW: I went up there on the 27th of April in 1997 and was looking for a job. When I was coming across on the boat, there were only 5 or 6 people on the boat. One of the people I happened to sit next to was the assistant manager at Joanne's. I told him I really didn't have a place to stay and that I was just looking for a job. He said he would take me to Joanne's, introduce me to the manager, and get me an application. He also said I could stay there that night. I thought that sounded pretty good. It was raining that day and I went and looked for other jobs at bars and stuff, but nothing really seemed too interesting. I came back and talked to the office manager and she told me she called and talked to the owner's daughter, who actually ran the show at Joanne's, and said to go ahead and hire me. She asked if I could start the next day. I told her not really because I had to go back down state so I could get a few things. So I came back on the first of May and worked until October 31. When you work on the Island, at most places you get a bonus if you sign a contract saying you still stay so long. It doesn't necessarily have to be until the end of the season. So if you stay your given amount of time then you get a certain amount of bonus. At Joanne's, when you started, it's a fifty cent bonus. You can either put your raises on your bonus or your paycheck, so that your bonus will get bigger. So I stayed until the end. It was really funny because I was coming from downstate and I got there on the first of May and there was still some snow on the ground. I had never seen snow on the island before. When I left, there was snow on the ground again. So it seemed as though I was there for a long time. I just planned on going for a little while in the summer. I really enjoyed my time there.

RM: Were you a student at Northern at that time?

JW: No. I had just left a computer company that I owned. I was a co-owner of a computer company and decided I wanted a little break.

RM: Ok. So we got you on the island, you got the job, what kind of training did you get? Did you start making fudge right away? How did that work?

JW: When I started, there was the assistant manager, Paul, who was the guy I met on the boat. I also met his friend Nathan who was working there and just started a couple days before. I was the new guy of the three. Since the two guys had known each other for so long, Nathan was sort of progressing a little more. When you start as a fudge guy, your only job is to weigh up the ingredients, dump them in the pot, cook them, and make sure they don't burn. So you stand there over a pot that is 250 degrees and you stare at it all

day. It's interesting watching what is happening. So you go from stir/pot boy to slicing. Then from there you progress to slicing. You have to learn how to slice every slice at a half pound, within a gram. When you are learning, you cut a slice and you put it on a wax piece of paper and bring it over to the scale and weight it. It is usually a .75 instead of .5 and then they all laugh at you. You just practice and you have to weigh every slice until you get better then you weigh every third slice. Every fudge is different too, depending on the density of the ingredients. The ones with peanut butter are extremely dense so they have to be really thin. So every fudge is different so this is a kind of gradual learning process. When you first start it probably takes like 15 to 20 minutes to cut an entire loaf off the table and it is really poor. By mid-summer you are cutting the entire loaf in under 5 minutes, which is about 60 to 80 slices. You are slicing every one really close to .5. They have to be really accurate because if you buy a pound you get a half a pound free. If they are just picking random slices, they have to make sure that everything is going to come out to a pound and a half. Most people don't make it past slicing because usually the fudge maker is someone who has been coming back for a long time. There are a couple of people like that. There were two fudge makers at the time I worked there. One was the manager and one was the assistant manager. It is always a contest of who is the best. There were two fudge makers and it was getting really busy, I had so far improved myself to be the most proficient at the job we were doing. Nathan and myself were the two people who had the most experience over everyone else. One of us was going to get trained to be fudge makers. Nathan didn't seem to pick it up that well and I picked it up a little quicker. So, I became the other fudge maker, at which time Jeremy, the manager, took to a lot of other responsibilities. All of a sudden I was making 18 to 20 a day. I was getting blisters on my hands and my hands were getting sore. Jeremy said he didn't care and then told me when he started they made thirty a day. Of course he was exaggerating. He did start out at about the same time because he has been making quite a bit. It is really quiet hard. You look at the fudge makers and it is fun to watch. It is a really hard job using your whole body. You do laps and laps around a table for one fudge. You walk around the table at least a hundred times. So if you are walking around this table and you so many circles all day and running around and getting ingredients and making sure that everyone else is doing their job properly. You have to make sure the slices are being sliced ok and you have to check and make sure the fudge is the proper consistency when it is finished. You have to make sure the guy stirring the pot knows what he is doing and is making the right fudge. You have to be behind the counter to make sure the list you wrote in the morning is still applicable because you go in the morning and check what you are lowest on. The fudge has a priority. You always make the white fudges first because you don't wash the pot each time. If you put chocolate in first you will have to wash the pot if you need to make a peanut butter or a vanilla. So you go behind the counter and you make your list and look at the whites. Those have the priority are the ones that sell the fastest and depending on how low you are on each one. You have to start looking at the chocolates. Almost always the chocolates are going to be one of the first ones to go. The five most popular flavors at Joanne's are chocolate, chocolate pecan, chocolate walnut, turtle, and chocolate peanut butter. So if any of those are low, you have to make those as soon as possible. You have to consistently maintain this because if you go to lunch for an hour and come back, then you have to make sure the five fudges haven't been sold out. Sometimes you don't even have it on the list and

all of a sudden it is almost gone and you have to make turtle and chocolate peanut butter. Those two take a special preparation so you have to rush that into your schedule. The goal is to always have a fudge being poured on the table right as you are finishing another one. You consistently want to keep the table full especially in peak season. You don't want any time where there is not something happening. It brings in customers to see the people working on things. You just can't run out. It's quite a hectic process especially in peak season. It is a little more relaxed in the spring and fall. The job is pretty relaxed at the same time though too because you could go to lunch for an hour and a half one day if you wanted. The fudge maker pretty much sets that. Paul was the king of the two-hour lunch hour. He would always go upstairs and take a nap. He would tell the guys to go back at a certain time and then he would go back to bed and sleep while they were cooking and slicing and would come down when it was time for the paddle. Paddling is what the actual fudge making process is called. You have a long board like paddle. Some places use one about 5 feet long which is ridiculous to use and is super heavy. We had more of a speed paddling style of 3 feet long and it was pretty light. It had a metal blade on it, sort of like a paint scraper only a lot wider. What that does is get air into the fudge and mixes all the ingredients in consistently and cools it down really quickly. There are different shaping processes you take from there.

RM: Is the paddle is used in the pot or is it used on the table?

JW: In the pot, there is a wooden stir stick and you are just moving it back and forth in a figure 8 pattern so you are moving all the fudge around. You have to make sure you are getting the bottom so that nothing burns. The paddle is for making fudge on the marble table. So you are flipping it around and you can get quite showy with it. It is extremely liquid and you can stick the paddle in at a 45-degree angle and flip it up. You can make these huge ribbons that go almost to the ceiling. Not really too many places do it. I think Joanne's was the showiest and had the most fun doing it. I think part of that is that we were a pretty young crew. The guys at the other stores are a little older and have managers that have been there for about 15 years. So that was really fun. When you are learning how to do it, you try to do your first ribbon and make sure noone is looking and it goes flying off the end of the table. When you are really close to the fence it is really funny to be at one end of the table and do it going all the way down to the other end of the table when there are some kids standing near the fence because they get all scared like it is going to come and hit them. That is extremely hard to do. I tried once. Normally guys work behind on the fudge side and girls work behind the counter packaging the fudge and selling it. I had one of the girls come over to the fence and I was trying to hit her with the ribbon I was doing. It was extremely difficult to do because it is such a distance. Another thing that we would do to entertain the customers, which I would do a lot, is knife flipping. We would take off a slice of fudge and do the flips while the fudge was on the knife. The knife has an 18-inch blade and has a hand sized handle on it. It is weighted extremely well and the fudge is usually warm so it sticks to the blade. I could do about four flips without the piece of fudge falling off, on occasion. Normally I could do 2 or 3. I could do them behind my back and all sorts of stuff. It was really fun. It was always a contest to see who had the coolest flips. That was as much entertainment for ourselves. Another cool thing was when someone from the island would get sent to work

in Mackinaw City because we had a Joanne's store over there. It was fun to go over there because they would pay for your lunch. The island had a meal plan but it was fun to get off the island and you get paid to go on the boat ride. You get your lunch money and get to go wherever you want, which there is a huge variety compared to the island. It was just a more fun store to work at because the guys over there were even younger. We were all high school guys. It was a much more laid back atmosphere even though they were busier. They tended to make a couple more fudges than we would during the day. When you are making that much fudge, you really have to take care of the tables.

RM: When we talked before, in the slow season, like in May, when they were warming up, they made how many a day?

JW: In May when they are first starting to stock the store and the Island is pretty slow, we are making anywhere from 5 to 10. It's been getting busier so that has been going up. In peak season, the most I ever made in a day is about 25 and that was pushing it. I worked from 9am to 11:30pm on those days, so 14 and a half hours. What really sucks is that at the end of the day of making 18 or 20 fudges and you have to make a peanut brittle or something because that is also made in the pot and cooked to over 300 degrees. So you are at the end of this long day, it is extremely hard to stir because it is so thick and has all these nuts in it, and you have to stir it for a long time and you get really tired and hot. Then you have to put it on the table and when you pour it on the table you have to stretch it out with your hands. It's about 200 degrees when you are stretching it and you have to do it very quickly. You are pulling it out and slapping it on the table. It is a huge mess to clean up. It is the worst thing to hear that you need to make 1 or 2 brittles at the end of the night. Nobody ever likes to hear that.

RM: Now what were the various candies that you made then?

JW: There is fudge, peanut brittle, cashew brittle, and caramel corn. Actually we made rice crispy treats that were covered in chocolate, and English toffee. Those were all made by the fudge guys in the pot. There were a variety of small chocolates that were made in the candy dipping room. That was usually handled by somebody else. There is also a sugar free fudge but that came from someone on the main land. Over in Mack City is the only place that makes sugar free fudge. That is a really weird object in itself. The tables are extremely important to take care of them properly. Early in late part of the season, when it gets really cold at night... the one store had better climate control and the second store would get really cold at night so we would have to put electric blankets on the table to keep it warm. Otherwise, it would be too cold and would draw the heat out of the fudge too quickly which would cause it to not set. At the end of a long day when it's 90 degrees outside and you are making 18 to 25 fudges, your table is getting extremely hot because you are putting fudge on it one after another. There is hardly any time when it doesn't have fudge on it. All you really wash the tables with is water because it takes the sugar right off. If you use anything like soap or bleach will stain the table and leave that flavor in the fudge. Late in the day you will have to wash the tables with ice. You put the ice on there and rub it around a bit and it melts into water quickly. Sometimes the tables get too hot and you have to stop and there is nothing you can really do about it. It doesn't

happen that often but once and a while it does. Sometimes you just say it so you can go home early that night.

RM: Another thing I wanted to ask you is about flavors. What were the flavors at Joanne's?

JW: Some of the flavors that other stores make: Ryba's makes pistachio and strawberry, which are like white fudges with food extract flavoring in them. There is a bubblegum fudge at Murdock's or May's which looks gross. It's pink and it's got gumdrops in it. Murdock's and the owner of Joanne's are very good friends. There is always a little competition between us. They would try to copy some of our flavors like the turtle and the chocolate peanut butter but nobody has been able to figure out how we do either one properly. They always have cheap imitations. Kilwin's comes up some more exotic flavors too but that is because they are made in a factory and they have people experimenting with this stuff all day.

RM: Now is this on the island?

JW: No, the Kilwin's factory I think is in Cheboygan or Petoskey. It is some little city in the UP. They tend to overload some of the fudges. They have fudges with a lot more ingredients and sugar. They have a blast of sugary flavor like cherries, coconut, nuts, and marshmallows.

RM: All in the same one?

JW: Right. Joanne's flavors... there are the whites: vanilla, vanilla pecan, there used to be a vanilla walnut, butter rum, butter pecan, maple, maple pecan, and a penuche which is brown sugar with pecans. The first fudge ever made was the penuche fudge, historically. There's a total of 23. We had creative control. One time Paul made a peanut butter and jelly fudge that sold really well. I made one but I can't remember what it was. It was okay. I am not going to be able to remember all of them. There's chocolate, chocolate pecan, chocolate walnut, turtle, and chocolate peanut butter... Turtle is chocolate with pecans and 5 strips of caramel inside the fudge so when you slice the fudge there is 5 little round caramel nuggets in it. Chocolate peanut butter was done pretty much the same way. Those are the two most difficult chocolates to make because you have to put those strips of peanut butter or caramel into it and then fold the fudge over that and keep it within certain size proportions and make sure it is all covered. You have to make sure the ingredient isn't too low on the table so that it is flat against the table. Those are particularly challenging. Another really hard one to make is rocky road because that has marshmallows and walnuts in it. Walnuts are huge chunky masses and then you have the marshmallows, which are all soft and gooey.

RM: Now these ingredients like the marshmallows and walnuts, those are added at the end when you are paddling?

JW: All the ingredients except for a couple that go into the pot are added on the table so that they don't flavor in other fudge and so that there is not any nut oil left in the pot because some people are allergic to nuts. So you don't put many ingredients into the pot. The pot is sort of a sterile environment that you don't want to contaminate with anything but chocolate. You pour the fudge on the table in these metal bars and you take the nuts and pour the nuts on top and mix them in. The marshmallows sometimes come in later. The peanut butter and caramel come in later when the fudge starts to solidify so you can place it exactly where you want it.

RM: Now would that be after you paddled it and mixed it and done all that and it is settling? Then you would put all these other ingredients in before you started moving it around?

JW: What you do is you paddle the fudge with the paddle... this is how Joanne's does it... then you switch to a 6 inch a scraping tool that you use to fold the fudge over and over again. Its gets thinner and thinner and higher each time so you are making a basic shape. Then you use a 3-inch scraping tool to put on the decorative swirls and straight sides at the end. Nuts and stuff usually go in after the fudge goes on the table but before you start paddling. Marshmallows, caramel, peanut butter... that stuff comes in while you are using the 6-inch. That is basically the siding to a house and the 3-inch does that finishing touches while the paddling is like constructing the framework.

RM: The other question I had, you have kind of mentioned them, can you go through the names of the companies that make the fudge on the island and then if they have any branches on the island?

JW: On the island there are several Mackinaw Island fudge places. Mackinaw Island fudge is defined by fudge is made on a granite or marble table using the process of paddling. There are Joanne's, Murdock's, May's, Ryba's, and Kilwin's. There are a couple of hotels that make their own fudge. The Murray and Grand Hotel bake their own fudge.

RM: The Murray hotel bakes it?

JW: Right. The Murray and the Grand Hotel both bake their fudge in an oven. That is not typically Mackinaw Island fudge, it is just fudge. Joanne's would cater to some of the hotels for parties or something. So say in addition to your 15 or 16 fudges you had to make in a day, you might have to make 3 extra special, high quality fudges. You take the best fudge maker and they will go down to Mission Point Resort for a conference or something. We got most of those types of things just because most people knew we had the best fudge. Unless they had some business tie to other companies, they almost always came to Joanne's. Off the island, most of those same companies have at least one store in either St. Ignace or Mackinaw City. I think there is Fort Fudge Company in Mackinaw City, which is independent. They make the sugar free fudge. I think there are one or two other stores that actually do the paddling but they don't have a branch on the island.

RM: Is it pretty much a closed system? Could I go over there and open up a fudge shop on Mackinaw Island?

JW: Sure, if you had a lot of money. You would have to get all the equipment, find some kind of recipe, some kind of training... it's not really an easy thing to do. It is extremely expensive to run a business on the island because of property tax, etc. They don't look upon outsiders very kindly as far as you coming in and starting a business. For instance, there is one store that opened up and received a lot of negative feedback. It was called Claymakers or something.

RM: Does rumor kind of spread?

JW: There are two local communities. There is the local community of islanders. Those are the people who are born and bred there and live there. Then you have the summer islanders. The employees are basically who they are. There are the islanders, the employees, and the fudgees, which are the tourists. The islanders coexist with the employees pretty well because they know their economy would be nothing without the people who support it. As far as coming in from the outside and trying to change something on the island or trying to put something new in, they really hate that. That is their home and they are very protective of it. New people are not going to be well received at all. Joanne's started 30 some years ago. I think because he has been established on the island for a long time... he has several restaurants there and he was really good friends with one of the other guys who had a fudge store... that was more acceptable and it worked out pretty well.

RM: Did he start with the fudge shop or a restaurant?

JW: He started out with restaurants. He owns half of the Lilac Tree Hotel and owns the Chippewa. He owned a restaurant called the Pickle Barrel, which burned down in one of the fires. Fires are one of the huge dangers on the island. Every person on the island is extremely concerned about fire. Fire hazards are the number one concern of any islander followed closely by wild horses.

RM: We should have mentioned this earlier. I have a question on ingredients. What are the basic ingredients that go into a fudge?

JW: Sugar, cream, and butter. There's granulated sugar, a form of liquid sugar, corn syrup, and several other types of liquid sugar. Basically it is just an invert of some form or another, which means the sugar has been cooked to an extremely high temperature and will never be able to resolidify. It is permanently in a liquid state. If you did refreeze it, it would be a completely different compound than raw sugar is. Cream and butter is sometimes replaced by lard because that is the traditional format. Lard is beef fat. I am vegetarian so it just makes it worse. There is only one place that still uses that and it is May's but they really don't advertise that.

RM: It's interesting because my wife said she and her sister considered May's the best fudge and then I told her it was made with lard and she said that was the reason.

JW: It leaves a bad taste in my mouth. When I first got there, my friend Nate and I were on lunch and were talking and said if we were going to work in a fudge store that we would go around to every fudge store and try the fudge. I don't want to work at a store if I don't think it is the best fudge. So we went to every store and tried the fudge and Joanne's was, honestly, the best. It didn't have a bad aftertaste and had good consistency. A lot of it depends on the fudge maker. If you have a bad fudge maker it is not going to be as good. I think the reason why their fudge is so good is because they use the best ingredients. Being on the island, you see what kind of shipments are coming into the companies around there. You can see what is lying outside the door in the morning. We honestly have the best ingredients, it's from scratch, and it's completely fresh. It's all completely done by hand. I think May's and Murdock's have electric stirrers. It's all just part of the process. Those are the basic ingredients and then you have chocolate. Even the kind of chocolate is going to make a huge difference. There are a ton of different chocolates. Joanne's doesn't make their own chocolate; they get it from a large chocolate factory. I don't think there is anyone on the island that makes their own chocolate.

RM: Does the chocolate come in liquid form or is it just pieces?

JW: It's like chips or chunks, it depends.

RM: The other thing we didn't mention is the amount made.

JW: In peak season, we are making anywhere from 15 to 20 loaves a day. Each loaf weighs between 30 and 40 pounds. If you make 20 fudges in a day at 35 pounds, that 700 pounds of fudge in one store. Joanne's is one of the highest selling fudges. Between the 3 stores Joanne's has, that is 2,100 pounds a day in peak season. May's has 3 stores on the island alone. They are probably selling 1,500 pounds a day. Murdock's is probably selling 1,500 pounds a day. You are just putting out gross amounts of fudge. It's amazing to think of how much fudge is going through people's systems on the island. People will come in and spend \$80 on fudge. I was so confident in Joanne's fudge and my fudge making ability that when I would see someone come into the store with fudge from another store, I would usually give them a free slice. One woman came in one time and she had just bought 3 pounds of fudge from Kilwin's. I was really upset so I asked her what kind of fudge she had and she told me. So I went over and gave her a free pound and a half of fudge of the same flavors she got. In my opinion Kilwin's is the worst fudge on the island. It's hard and just not good. It's the most artificial fudge. They use a powder base. She actually called back a few weeks later and talked to the assistant manager there to order some fudge and told her what I had done when she came in. She ordered \$70 of fudge to ship to her friends. It made me feel good and kind of reinforced my feelings. It was kind of a silly job and humorous to talk about but it was a really good job that I had fun at and was proud of the product I made when I worked there. Unless you really go and do it, you are not really going to understand what its like.

RM: You talk about recipes. These recipes are developed by... for instance, Joanne's, you said they got into the business later. Did he develop them or pick them up from his friend?

JW: I think they started with a basic set. You have some fudge and through in some nuts. Some people like nuts and some don't. It just kind of goes from there. There are some things that just go hand in hand with chocolate. Like chocolate cherry, that is sort of a natural chocolate partner... peanut butter.

RM: Like you were saying, when you were there working, you would sometimes experiment. So this is how they kind of make it? Once you get the technique down of making fudge, then you start playing around with flavors.

JW: Their flavors are pretty set now because they are happy with what they have.

RM: Didn't you say they had a Kahlua?

JW: They have a Kahlua and chocolate mint. The Kahlua does very good. It's very close to chocolate. There is a butterfinger and there was a hazelnut but the fudge I made replaced it. For the life of me, I can't remember what it was. I modified some of the recipes while I was the manager there. I put more Kahlua in the Kahlua. The fudge makers are really the ones who dictated new flavors coming in because they are the ones who have to make them and experiment with them. German chocolate is also very difficult to make because it's not quite like the other chocolates. It has less chocolate and has nuts and coconut in it. The coconut completely changes its texture because it has so much moisture content. Basically it is all just one big experiment. If you wanted to get an exact flavor list, you can call.

RM: When you told me that, I tried to but I don't think they are open for much business yet.

JW: The one number I gave you is Sue's office number and she should be in there most of the time. You can look right through the window and the flavor list is on the wall. The chamber of commerce would also be a very helpful resource.

RM: What did you say the number was of the chamber of commerce?

JW: Lisa Wade, 800-4-lilacs. When you get there you are in a menu system and if you hit 0 then you will go to whoever is on duty.

RM: Well I think that wraps up the interview. Thank you for coming here.

JW: Thank you.