



We Just Call it Cush

Narrated by Stanley Woodward

1. A tradition from the Upstate (03:59)

<Video opens with Jerry "Butch" Nichols and Milford Howard>

J. Nichols: ...this gentleman been eatin' cush...how old are you Mil?

M. Howard: How old am I?

J. Nichols: Yeah.

M. Howard: Eighty one.

J. Nichols: How many years you been eatin' cush?

M. Howard: Well, probably fifty I guess.

J. Nichols: [And] not long. *<They both laugh>*

S. Woodward: How far back-how far back does cush go?

M. Howard: Cush go back, well...Mr. Henry Fletcher he died when-how old was Henry when he died?

J. Nichols: Eighty nine-

M. Howard: Eighty five or ninety.

J. Nichols: -eighty five, ninety.

M. Howard: He was makin' cush I guess when he was twenty-

J. Nichols: Yeah.

M. Howard: -so you're goin' pretty close to a hundred years.

S. Woodward: You ever heard where it came from, how it got started or-

J. Nichols: Started in Piedmont, didn't it?

M. Howard: Well, that's the only place I ever heard of it: Piedmont.

<Video shows Dusty Grogan>

S. Woodward: How do you come by cush? Does your family cook cush?

D. Grogan: My grandpa always cooked it.

S. Woodward: Did he?

D. Grogan: Yeah.

S. Woodward: And, uh, did you grow up eatin' it?

D. Grogan: Yeah.

S. Woodward: How does his compare to your grandpas?

D. Grogan: It tastes about the same.

S. Woodward: Does it?

D. Grogan: Um hum.

S. Woodward: If you had to cook it, could you cook it?

D. Grogan: I don't know. I might could. I've helped them a couple of times, but I ain't never cooked it on my own though.

S. Woodward: He was teasin' that if you stay around here much, you gonna learn.

D. Grogan: Oh yeah. *<Stanley Woodward laughs>* Oh yeah.

<Video shows Marsha Rogers>

M. Rogers: Yeah, that's good.

S. Woodward: Are-are you like most other people that it, you know, it's good, but it's not as good as your momma made?

M. Rogers: ...no

S. Woodward: [Anybody cooks momma's cookin']

M. Rogers: I don't know. Butch's is pretty good. He-*<She laughs>*-uh, I think he puts a little more tomatoes in it than my mom did.

S. Woodward: Is that right?

M. Rogers: And she did-she wasn't too fond of bell pepper, uh-

S. Woodward: So each cook-

M. Rogers: -she always put onions in it.

S. Woodward: So each cook sort of flavors it according to their taste?

M. Rogers: Exactly.

S. Woodward: I see.

M. Rogers: Exactly. Yeah, that's good, very good.

<Video shows Don Roper speaking to a number of people>

D. Roper: We don't want to take up a lot of time. The way we're gonna do this is, you'll have to get up and go get what you want. Come back eat what you want. Go back

and get some more. Come back eat what you want and uh, I know [couples of] ya'll'll go back again. <Everyone laughs>

<Video shows Jerry "Butch" Nichols speaking to a number of people>

J. Nichols: Cush is a Piedmont dish. Only around Piedmont, Pelzer, and [Welmsley] that you'll find it. You'll like it or you won't like it. <Everyone laughs> In-in between you got bell pepper, hot pepper, uh, cornmeal-

<Video cuts momentarily>

J. Nichols: -anything else? Everything in the kitchen sink we put in it. But, uh, you know, I hope you like it. You for it or you against it, but it goes good with fish here in Piedmont.

<Video shows Jerry "Butch" Nichols sitting in an office>

J. Nichols: I've tried to pass it on, because, you know, we all gon' die-

S. Woodward: Right.

J. Nichols: -and I want the secret of cush and chow-chow and this stuff passed on to the kids where, you know, today you go into a store and you buy a can of stuff. People don't know where it comes from scratch. And this is regular-I'm so interested in passing it on for the future of our young.

<Video shows Tracy Wallace>

T. Wallace: Well [????], me and my grandfather-he made it when we were kids. He would patty it out after it got cold and then fry it in the frying pan like a salmon patty-

S. Woodward: Yeah, I see.

T. Wallace: -and flip it. And it was good. He done that when I was a kid. I remember that.

<Video shows Don Roper>

D. Roper: My dad used to make it. I loved it with the good hot onions and stuff.

<Video cuts momentarily>

D. Roper: Oh, I can remember it in the late forties, after the war mostly, when everybody had got able to fish again, go out to different places. Dad and them-dad used to have a fishing club in the Piedmont plant. It'd be three hundred members. Twice a year fishermen would cook what they caught and dad was the ringleader and he'd cook

cush and everything. And we'd feed three hundred people up in that room that we're gonna go to after this is over. *<He laughs>* It was somethin' else.

<Video shows Jerry "Butch" Nichols and Dusty Grogan>

J. Nichols: This boy right here: youngest man I got on the force

S. Woodward: Youngest? He's the youngest?

J. Nichols: Yeah. And we're gonna get him where he can cook this stuff too. 'Cause he's fixin' to get married and his wife will love him more. *<They all laugh>*

D. Grogan: Chief, I ain't about to get married! I ain't nowhere near gettin' married.

Man: That ain't what I heard.

<Video shows Jerry "Butch" Nichols>

J. Nichols: But this is-this stuff was handed to me as a kid. Like I said, my job was to stir the cush. And to me at seven, eight, nine years old, that was a big enjoyment for me: standin' up there in front of that stove and stir cush.

2. Fire Chief Jerry "Butch" Nichols prepares cush (03:34)

<Video opens showing Jerry Nichols>

J. Nichols: My name's Jerry. Everybody calls me Butch.

S. Woodward: Jerry.

J. Nichols: Yeah, my name's Jerry.

S. Woodward: Are you the chief?

J. Nichols: Yeah and administrator.

S. Woodward: And administrator.

J. Nichols: Yeah.

<Video cuts momentarily>

J. Nichols: Uh, wantin' to see how we make some cush and also we've got some sweet potater hush puppies.

S. Woodward: Now what is cush?

J. Nichols: Ever since I was seven years old, I used to-[J.P. Stephens] had a fishing club down here in Piedmont and my job-they used to have to put me on a milk crate and I'd stand up on the stove and stir the cush and, uh, it's a recipe I only hear in Piedmont usin' grease from the fish that you cook, usin', uh, cornmeal, usin', uh, onions, bell pepper, and

it really is just an ingredients of somethin' like, uh, a gravy. And uh, it goes real good with, we think here in Piedmont, with cush.

<Video shows Jerry Nichols in the kitchen>

S. Woodward: Once that starts boiling, what's the first thing you do?

J. Nichols: When it starts and I get ready, I'm gonna put onion and bell pepper to it. Which I'm doin' right now.

<Video shows Jerry Nichols adding bell pepper and then hot pepper>

J. Nichols: I'm gonna kick this cush up a notch, makin' it good and hot...for these women that like to talk.

<Video shows Jerry Nichols with a bag of cornmeal>

J. Nichols: Now I'm gonna put the cornmeal in this cush. [Terry] get you somethin' to stir it with, this here. And you'll see me start addin' cornmeal to it.

<Video shows Tracy Wallace>

T. Wallace: He taught me. I been here twenty two years and me and him's been cookin' ever since.

S. Woodward: Is that right?

T. Wallace: Yeah, well we keep somethin' goin' here all the time...far as foodwise.

<Video shows the cush being cooked>

J. Nichols: See, this is the hard part: is keepin' it movin' and keepin' the cornmeal from burnin'.

<Video shows Jerry Nichols stirring the cush>

Someone: Lookin' good.

J. Nichols: To make this cush good, where it's gonna be any good at all, is the secret is makin' sure that cornmeal that I put in there is done.

<Video shows two cans of tomato sauce>

J. Nichols: Alright, put them two.

<Video shows Jerry Nichols>

S. Woodward: Butch, what makes you know when you got the right tomatoes, can-

J. Nichols: Well, the color and we're gonna start samplin' it in a little bit. I feel like it's gonna need some more hot stuff. I ain't put the hot...uh, stuff to it yet. Yep.

<Video shows two women watching the men cooking>

Woman: How would you spell cush, Butch?

J. Nichols: Any way that suits you suits me. *<They all laugh>*

Woman 2: Any way you want.

<Video shows the cush>

J. Nichols: And people ask me, “Well how much of this do you put? How much of this do you put?” Ain’t no certain recipe, you just go by your own feel and sense of it.

<Video shows Jerry Nichols>

J. Nichols: I’ve been makin’ it and been eatin’ it ever since I was a kid. [I was only two foot]. But, you get out these surroundings: Pelzer, Piedmont, and, uh, a little bit of South Greenwood, you don’t know anybody know what you’re talkin’ about.

<Video shows Charles Brooks>

C. Brooks: What this is, this is over here: cush. Alright. We’re gonna have a little cush today.

<Video cuts momentarily>

C. Brooks: Yeah I heard of it, but I’m not quite sure about it ‘til I taste it. As a matter of fact, I’m gonna taste it right now. I think it’s got a little corn mush in it. With the-this is what you call sophisticated, exquisite mush. Let me see. *<He tries a bite>* Oh yeah, oh that’s some good cush. Thank ya’.

3. The Fire Department and communal cooking (02:42)

<Video opens with a shot of the Fire Department and then shows Jerry Nichols>

S. Woodward: What’s goin’ on-what’s goin’ on here today?

J. Nichols: Well, we were asked to cook a supper for Mr. Roper.

<Video cuts momentarily>

J. Nichols: Wantin’ to see how we make some cush and also we got some sweet potater hush puppies.

<Video shows Jerry Nichols>

J. Nichols: And-you know, everybody [that] cooked cush in this town, just about-the old people did.

S. Woodward: That was a standard dish?

J. Nichols: With fish.

S. Woodward: With fish.

J. Nichols: Yeah. And you-you go outside of, uh, Piedmont, and probably outside of Pelzer, you're-people never hear anything about it. I-I've cooked cush in South Union. I've cooked it in Laurens County and people never heard about it. And when they eat it, they really like it.

S. Woodward: So it's local to Piedmont.

J. Nichols: Yeah, but now it's fading out. They very-I say maybe ten families that cooks it or know anything about it...unless they eat here at the station. If we cook fi-fish here at the station, we usually cook a pound of cush with it.

S. Woodward: And when you cook fish at the station, who do you cook it for?

J. Nichols: Um, we just invite different one and, uh, most of the time it's just some firemen, and some of the business people, local guys that come by [and there were certain ones].

S. Woodward: Um hum. So it's not a fundraiser. It's just-

J. Nichols: -Oh no.

S. Woodward –just to socialize a bit.

J. Nichols: Most of the time, Mr. Wilson, uh, will come in and buy the fish and stuff and we'll have a fish fry and we'll just get together with him.

<Video shows Jerry Nichols in the kitchen>

J. Nichols: This is two boys right here, Dusty [Grogan] and my assistant Tracy Wallace.

S. Woodward: Yes sir.

J. Nichols: They're the ones gonna carry this tray home, 'cause I'm gonna leave it with'em...one of these days.

<Video shows Tracy Wallace>

T. Wallace: He taught me. I been here twenty two years and me and him's been cookin' ever since.

S. Woodward: Is that right?

T. Wallace: Yeah, well we keep somethin' goin' here all the time...far as foodwise.

<Video shows cush being cooked>

J. Nichols: I seen people use an electric frying pan. To make this stuff, you got to have a big cast iron pan.

Man: Makes a big difference.

J. Nichols: Yes sir, it sure does.

Man: Only way to cook it.

<Video show Tracy Wallace>

T. Wallace: Fire department's kind of different from other places you work. You live together. You work together. You train together. You fight fires and put your life on the line together and it's, you know-

S. Woodward: So how important is eatin' together?

T. Wallace: It is. It's socializing. And we even, most of all our guys, we socialize pretty much when we not at work...time's off. Not-not all of us, but different, you know, groups and then all of us at times together too, so we're pretty close knit department. We've been that way for years.

<Video shows a Piedmont Fire Department shirt>

S. Woodward: It's a brotherhood isn't it [Terry]?

T. Wallace: Yeah it's a brotherhood. It really is.

<Video show Jerry Nichols>

J. Nichols: Ain't nobody can make a sheet cake like Ms. Brown. When you get to heaven, there's gonna be a sheet cake and cush there to eat. *<Ms. Brown laughs>*

4. Sweet potato hushpuppies (01:31)

<Video opens showing Jerry Nichols>

J. Nichols: But, I-I like this mix here, is a hushpuppy mix is Huey Family, Steve Huey's Family.

S. Woodward: Yes sir.

J. Nichols: And he gave it to me some years back and it's made out of sweet potatoes and-and I really like it.

<Video show Jerry Nichols in the kitchen>

J. Nichols: I'm just mixin' it. I got it all together in this pot and I'm just mixin' it up.

<Video shows Jerry Nichols and Sylvia Brown in the kitchen>

S. Woodward: You ever heard anybody tell you where the name, 'hushpuppy' might have come from?

J. Nichols: No I hadn't. Even-it's in the stores. You know, hushpuppies I-I have no idea.

S. Woodward: How about you? Have you ever heard that?

S. Brown: No, but I imagine it's because the people that eat the fish tell so many fish tales that they had to have a hushpuppy to tell them to hush. *<Both the men laugh>*

S. Woodward: That's as good as I've heard.

<Video show Jerry Nichols>

J. Nichols: C'mon let me show you these hushpuppies.

<Video shows Sylvia Brown preparing hushpuppies>

S. Woodward: Now Sylvia.

S. Brown: Yes.

S. Woodward: What are you-what are you doin'? Kind of watchin' the grease temperature? Or how do you watch?

S. Brown: Yes I do watch that because we don't want them to burn and I like for them to get nice and brown so we're sure they're done in the middle. They-they used to say that when you put a hushpuppy down in hot grease, that when it would was done on one side it would turn over by itself, but it will flip over.