

ANN ABADIE
Oxford, MS

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Interviewer: Amy C. Evans, Southern Foodways Alliance
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs
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[Begin Ann Abadie Interview]**00:00:03**

Amy Evans Streeter: This is Monday, January 31, 2005 at about 10:15 in the morning and I'm with Dr. Ann Abadie at the Center for the Study of Southern Culture. And Dr. Abadie, would you mind please stating your name and your position here at the Center for the record?

00:00:16

Ann Abadie: Yes; I'll be glad to. I'm Ann Abadie, Associate Director of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture.

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AES: And this interview is part of the Southern Foodways Alliance Founders Oral History Project, and you're one of the original founding members of the organization. And how did you originally become involved in the Southern Foodways Alliance?

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AA: Well, that's because John T. came over here to do an undergraduate degree and stayed to do an MA in Southern Studies and through his work before he came and then while he was here and his—doing in his thesis on potlikker and his involvement with John Egerton and other—and lots of other people who are in the food world. He eventually with John Egerton proposed the establishment of the Southern Foodways Alliance. And John Egerton proposed that because he thought it was a—a wonderful

idea, and of course it's contributed so much to the whole study of food, now called foodways. And he had seen how other organizations had failed, and he thought we needed to have a base for the Southern Foodways Alliance. And he thought up the Center for the Study of Southern Culture, which is the obvious base—base and we thought so, too—Charles Wilson and I did. So that's how we were involved.

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AES: What did you think about foodways as scholarship prior to all of this—prior to John T. coming in and pitching this idea?

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AA: Well, when John T. came and this whole new field of academic and intellectual endeavor came about, I thought it was very exciting. I had—we had looked at food in the *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, and we always liked food and enjoyed it, but we didn't have very much in the *Encyclopedia* and now we're going to have a whole volume, because since 1989 when that volume came out and now, this whole new field has developed. And we think there's nothing new beyond English and history and anthropology and folklore, but there is. And food—nothing could be better that's particularly good for something that interests us in the Center not only with the academic program but in all we do. That is breaking down the barriers of communication between different people and particularly between different races and ethnic groups. And with food, people don't have time to fight and carry on. So, it's—it's been good in that way, too—a big plus.

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AES: So six or so years ago you were confident that this was going to be a plus for the Center and the University?

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AA: Absolutely. And we were so proud to be at that meeting. Charles and I had quite an adventure going over to the meeting. I don't know if he told you about it.

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AES: No; he didn't—to Birmingham. He claimed he didn't recall really so well the events in that fateful day in Birmingham, but do tell.

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AA: Well perhaps [*Laughs*]—now this really hasn't—hasn't very much to do with foodways except that we went over in his black car which we thought was appropriate for him to have a black car with black windows since we call him Dr. Death. He studies death and funerals and we were going over and about the time we got close to Natural Bridge [Alabama] his car broke down. And so there was a truck stop there and a restaurant up on the hill and they said well, their person who worked on repairs was out seeing about an 18-wheeler that had fallen in the ditch, not an ox but an 18-wheeler. And he'd be back after a while. And so why didn't we walk up the hill and get us something to eat at the restaurant while we're waiting?

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So we did and we sat and we sat and he came back and he couldn't fix it but—he said but let him try something else. And so we had more tea at the restaurant and went back and just tried the car by accident, and it started again. And so we drove down to Jasper [Alabama] and went to the dealership and they said that they could fix the—the car. And so then we finally got to Birmingham. But that was quite an adventure.

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AES: Did you see that as some sort of omen for the event ahead?

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AA: No, no—well maybe. No—I didn't really think about that, but we had a good time watching people and eating and seeing what they were eating and talking and so it was fun.

00:05:04

AES: Little primer for—?

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AA: Right—just right out in the country.

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AES: So what do you remember about the meeting itself in Birmingham?

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AA: Well, there were first—wonderful people. I had—had meetings at Southern Progress before. We've worked closely with *Southern Living* over the years and also with the *Progressive Farmer*. One of the original founders gave us photographs from the early days of *Progressive Farmer*, and so we've been over there and have been—been involved. But this was a fantastic meeting because the people that we met who are chefs and food writers and a few academics and others were just, oh, delightful. And we had a—a wonderful time talking, I think for two days. And John Egerton was leading the group, and he is a wonderful man. I admire him greatly. I like his books whether it's—whether he's writing on civil rights or food or whatever; he's just terrific.

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And so the meetings were very productive, and Charles Wilson and I said yes, indeed; we really liked what they were doing and that we, if they wanted, would serve the organization by providing a home, an office, as well as somebody to answer the telephones and some telephones and a fax machine and office support that would be needed and also support from the Public Relations Division, people to—to write about what we were doing and also designers and other support that we have at the University, plus as an educational institution we really were an appropriate place for the organization and because at the Center with our Southern Studies program and all we do that we—we bring together people and academic disciplines. And so it's—we get historians to talk to people in literature and all other areas and so it just seemed to be a natural fit, and—.

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AES: So you would you say that for lack of a better phrase that your involvement and—and you and Charles being at the meeting in attendance is representative of the University and of the Center that—that was kind of a selling point to jump start the organization?

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AA: Yes; absolutely then because the people there, a lot of them had not heard what the Center does and didn't know about our pioneering academic program and *Encyclopedia*, but they soon heard from the others who were there who did know and they felt comfortable that we could provide what was needed. Plus, we could also help with fund-raising, being a not-for-profit group. And so I think that that we did offer confidence to the people who were there and we also enjoyed the meetings and the eating.

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Frank Stitt had a memorable meal at the Highlands Bar and Grill and it was—it was one of the best meals I've ever had. It was fabulous food and a nice place, and so we enjoyed that a lot. And we got to talk with the people who are food professionals in—in various categories and so that worked fine. And we drew up a Memorandum of Agreement and presented it to the people at the University, and the Administrators were enthusiastic about it and it just worked out. And I've been fortunate because Charles Wilson asked me to be the Center Liaison with the Southern Foodways Alliance Board, so I've had an opportunity to go to the board meetings as well as to field trips and the symposium sponsored by the group.

00:09:17

AES: And so the Center's support of the Southern Foodways Alliance is pretty clear. What would you say that the Southern Foodways Alliance has brought to the Center?

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AA: Well working with a whole new area and the—the academic and the intellectual part and as I mentioned earlier, the—the idea of being together for food and talk. And also for communicating with other people like with the—**[Interruption]**—it's okay; communicating with people who are alike and unlike or—and bringing people together, bringing, you know, like the dinner on the grounds between white churches and black churches. And—and also having an opportunity to show that there—it's not just black and white—with the Vietnamese coming into the—the Gulf Coast in Mississippi and other states here and then of course the great Hispanic influx and the Chinese in—in the Delta, so as to help us in a way to recognize that there—the South has great diversity and help tell that story. And food helps with that.

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And of course the field trips have been just delightful because they go to different parts of the South. And one that meant a great deal to me was the first one in Greensboro because I was born in the Piedmont of the Carolinas and grew up there. And somehow the Piedmont gets lost with the Delta, the Mississippi Delta or the Appalachian Mountains, or the Lowland—Low Country, and a lot of the time, the Piedmont is forgotten, and so that gave recognition to a somewhat neglected area.

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AES: So how has your vision, your original vision of what the Southern Foodways Alliance could be and might become—has that been met or exceeded or—?

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AA: Greatly surpassed. I knew that it was going to be very good but I had no—I had no idea about how good. [*Interruption*] My—I knew it was going to be a really wonderful alliance, but I had—but I’ve been overwhelmed with the tremendous success of it. People have just been enthusiastic from all kinds of places and—and the interest in the media from little town newspapers published once a week to the *New York Times* and *Chicago Tribune* and all the other papers that have paid attention to what’s going on. And—and this—and what the Alliance—Southern Foodways Alliance [*Phone Rings*] does is to—with a particular topic, what we try to do in all areas looking at the South and humanities and the arts.

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AES: Uh-hmm; what about the programming that the Southern Foodways Alliance has organized over the years? How would you say that that differs from other organizations that the Center, or yourself personally, might have been involved with and how that has affected its mission or been a great illustration of its mission or otherwise?

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AA: Well in general, the programming has been consistent with what we do—conferences, field trips, oral histories, documentation of various kinds, so in general it fits

[Phone Rings], you know, it's the hand and glove—exactly alike. But because it—it does bring together—.

00:13:40

AES: Uh-hmm; we'll pause for a moment. We were talking briefly about programming and whatnot, but also I wonder how the Southern Foodways Alliance being housed at the Center and it being integrated into the Center's mission and programming and—and scholarship, how that's affected the graduate student body that comes to the Center.

00:14:01

AA: Well, the Southern Foodways Alliance has I think been very valuable for the graduate students. Some of them perhaps—I would say probably 90-percent, 99-percent of them really didn't think about food as being a part of their academic career, so it's helped to stretch their minds and understanding of—of what everything is about, and not only does it help with their education but also it helps with things that they get to do. For instance, they've been able to be volunteers at the Southern Foodways Symposium in the fall. And so they've done everything from learn to serve or take people back and forth to the airport and meet interesting people in that way. And they've also helped with oral history interviews, and I think of Joe York who's sort of developed a film career. I don't think he came here really interested in film. He was sort of interested, but because he helped to videotape and then make some films that grew out of what the Southern Foodways Alliance was doing and what he was doing with it, so that he's—he went in another direction or went in a direction that has been very good for him and for the

Alliance and the Center. And I think of Amy Evans, who is an artist, who came and painted and has been a great illustrator for us, and we're not going to let her go.

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AES: Oh, you're very nice. [*Laughs*]

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AA: She's turned out to be very good with the oral history interviews and organizing everything that goes on, particularly, say, the Delta trips not only for Foodways Alliance, but then it spilled over to now we have for the second year—we're offering a pre-conference tour for the Oxford Conference for the Book. So really, what the Southern Foodways Alliance has done has really enriched the—the Center and spread its work.

00:16:18

AES: Uh-huh; expanded the community that is the Center—.

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AA: Yes.

00:16:22

AES: Well, what is it about—I know the Southern Foodways Alliance has its own personality, and there are such an energy and momentum within the group and especially annually at the Symposium. And what do you think that is that gets people so excited about food?

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AA: Well, that food is not just nourishment, not just fuel for our vehicular bodies, but it has—it brings—it has stories, and it makes us think about our growing up and our families and our link with our own personal histories and with the past, and also it helps make the region a better place. I think the local foods movement, like—like Southern Foodways Alliance, John T. and other people at the Center and Oxford—people at the University and Oxford have established the Farmers Market. There used to be sort of a Farmers Market when I first came here to school in 1960. The farmers would bring their trucks and park on the north part of the square and you know you'd just have to stop traffic if there were a lot of people buying tomatoes or watermelons that day.

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And but—so we—we had that Farmers Market. Then it moved over to the old library. Then it moved down to a space where the new library is, and then it disintegrated. And so the Southern Foodways Alliance through local people and John T. and Mary Hartwell who works at the Center started the Farmers Market, which now goes from spring to fall. And so it's been good in that way.

00:18:13

AES: For the Oxford community?

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AA: For the Oxford community and then—I mentioned Frank Stitt earlier, who hosted the dinner for the first—for the meeting—the founding meeting, he's been very important

in Birmingham and as an example has spread other places with his interest in buying local foods and encouraging local farmers and food manufacturers and so he's just one splendid example that has been replicated across the region and the world.

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AES: Well, and now back to the Symposium, do you remember the—the first one from 1998 and what that was like?

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AA: Yes. Oh, that was exciting that it brought together people that I had met in Birmingham at the founding meeting, but other people I had heard about, and I was amazed at the people who signed up. There were of course you know people from—who—who work in the food business who are—are chefs or—. I learned something then that I hadn't really known until we went to Birmingham. We saw the people at Southern Progress setting up shoots for *Southern Living* and *Cooking Light*, but then at the first Symposium, I met someone who is a food designer. And I said, "What is that?" And she said, "Well when we do photo shoots, my husband is a photographer and so I help make the arrangements", not just, you know, what you get up and put on the table, but it's all beautifully orchestrated. And so—so I learned something there.

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But then there were people, physicians and people who just you know maybe you know actors or work in retail and dry goods, who—people from all walks of life came to this—.

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AES: Do you remember about how many people were there at the first Symposium?

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AA: Not as many as wanted to be [*Laughs*]; I think that we had—we limited—I can't remember if it was ninety or 100 at most and I think 200 or 300 people wanted to come and, so now people have learned to sign up in a hurry, the minute the call goes out. You know, not to do any foot-dragging on that, but it—I guess we could have two or three times the number of people who came. But we needed space for people to sit, and also because there were not only talks, lectures, and panels, but food and we just wanted to serve wonderful food to all the people here and we—you can't do that by having a sit-down lunch for 500 people in The Grove, and—.

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AES: Well, how are you, or how is the Center involved in creating the program and designing this—the itinerary each year?

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AA: Well John T. works with the Southern Foodways Alliance Board, but he also consults with Charles Wilson and—as Director of the Center, and with members of the faculty.

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AES: And is—what is the timeline of—of planning for the next year’s Symposium, or is it years ahead?

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AA: Years ahead because the—they’re already talking about 2007 and 2008 and they’ve developed a—sort of a rotation which I think probably came out of a talk with people at the Center or other academics and—and people like John Egerton who is not an academic as such, but who is certainly the—the sole founder of having—looking at a food and then a—a topic and then a region and so that rotation is helpful for the Symposium and the field trip and I think it also helps with the tugging that the—that John T. and the other Executives with the Alliance feel because the field trips have been so popular that everybody wants them to be at their place.

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And so you could say well we—we need region here and theme and so on and so on, so it really helps to deal with the admiring public.

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AES: When the Southern Foodways Alliance visits a place, whether on a field trip or any other related event, what do you think they leave in that place?

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AA: Contact with people who admire what—learn about and admire or come to understand, whether it’s admiration or not, what a place is like. For instance, when we went to Birmingham this past summer, that there was—it brought together a lot of the

history with Birmingham with the racial problems with black and white. And—but I think our being there and asking questions at table and around food helped some of the people who lived there to look back and see what had happened. So I—I think that the—the contacts are good for a community on a whole when you go out and visit farms and fisheries and other places and it sort of gives them a recognition and the importance of the people there and what they're doing whether they were part of the Civil Rights Movement or were at Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, which was just such a moving program there, or whether they bring food into sell at the market or whether people go out to—to get cornmeal or whatever—honey from—from them.

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AES: Uh-hmm; is there a particular place or subject that the Southern Foodways Alliance hasn't touched on yet that you would like to see become a project or a location in the future?

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AA: Oh, well, there are quite a few. We talked at the board meeting this past time about some of the places that I think are important. We talked about the—the Gulf Shores and that area and then someone said, “Well, nobody has paid attention to Arkansas, the Arkansas Delta, the Arkansas Mountains,” and then we've been to Texas and then we've talked about the First South, the—the Tidewater, the Upper South—it has so many different titles. But with Mount Vernon and Monticello and homes of the founding fathers and the founding mothers who were associated with them, and so I—I think that's important too.

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AES: Do you foresee a time at all when the subject matter for the studies and exploration of southern foodways might become exhausted?

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AA: Absolutely not [*Laughs*]. There is so much to do that even the youngest people involved with the Southern Foodways Alliance, we'll have plenty for them to do, and it will continue. One thing that I noticed in recent discussions with the—the need for—and look at what “region” means in general, and when you say *the South*, the South is not just one great big place, but we need to look at the many Souths, and I think that this is something that the Southern Foodways Alliance can help us do, too.

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AES: Uh-hmm. And so the Southern Foodways Alliance looks at food as culture, and so what does that mean to you both intellectually and personally?

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AA: Well, I had never considered myself anyone who has been involved with food culture except for eating along the way, and I have my own memories of, you know, growing up and going to my grandparents to spend the summer or at least one Sunday a month go to one grandparent or another. They both, my grandparents lived on farms; one not too far from Greenville, South Carolina, and the other one in York County [in South Carolina]. And so I had that farm culture and food and I've—I like to cook and to eat,

and I have—I have quite a collection of cookbooks because I guess—. Well, one thing, I grew up in the Carolinas and had never—but in the backcountry—had never had pizza or spaghetti until I went to college. I went to Winston-Salem, and there was a wonderful Italian restaurant there so we really went into that.

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And then I ended up marrying someone from South Louisiana, whose mother was a great cook, and it's a very different culture food-wise and every other way. And so she was a fabulous cook and she taught me how she cooked. But then I also found out that one mile down the River Road from where my husband grew up and where she lived, they cooked in a different way, too. And so that was exciting. And with John T. I had the opportunity to help him as he was going over *Gracious Plenty*, his collection from—of recipes from community cookbooks and—and I used some of—of mine that I had and others. And so that was just fun for me.

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I'm not sure that I answered your question. *[Laughs]*

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AES: Sure, you did; sure, you did, and you took me to another place in the interview where if I may ask you a personal question and that would be when you were born and what town you were born in.

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AA: I was born in Greenville, South Carolina on August 15, 1939. And I—my parents, as I said, grew up on farms, and they married right at the end of the Great Depression.

And my father was a great athlete. And it was hard to get jobs and so—because he was an athlete, he was recruited to play basketball for the Textile League, and so he got a job working in the mill, in the textile mill. And my mother went to help one of her sisters whose husband for a while worked at a textile mill before he became a full-time minister. And so that's when she met my father. And I was born on the—on a mill village called Judson in Greenville.

00:30:02

AES: And what kind of food do you remember growing up—your mother cooked or your favorite meal?

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AA: Oh well I loved fried chicken and I also liked—of course, we had our own chickens, and they were fresh, you know, and—and of course we had pulley-bones. Now if you go to Kroger or even Fresh Market, I don't think you can get a pulley-bone. You have to cut your own chickens that way. And my grandparents had pigs and cows and so they had a smokehouse and also they cured their own hams and my father's grandparents had an apple orchard also.

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And so I just—I guess I liked everything. And then after my—my father had been—was in the Second World War in the Navy, and when he came home, he had been to Alaska and Hawaii and so we—one thing he really liked was salmon. And of course in the '40s in the Piedmont you couldn't get any fresh salmon, but my mother would buy cans and she would make what we called salmon croquets and so that sort of expanded

[Laughs] my view from the—from the farm. But—and then of course the—the peach country, and so we would have peaches. And then after the Second World War people didn't have freezers at home right afterwards. But there was a—you know companies that would allow people to buy space to freeze, and so my parents would put up peaches. And my mother had—used to make pickled peaches, but then—so she expanded her cooking so that she would have—we would have fresh peaches all year long because they could put up their food and go down and get it and bring it home for us to eat.

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AES: Are there any—any things from those days that you still make at home today?

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AA: I don't fry chicken. I just can't do it the way my mother did. And I guess Hoppin' John Tatum might be right in—in one of his cookbooks. He says, "You know, it's really okay to—some of the fast-food places make really good fried chicken and you don't have to mess up your house," so I don't fry—I don't—I don't do that. But I—and I don't make my cornbread dressing that I grew up having because my husband likes oyster dressing, which his mother made and I learned to make, but I still miss the cornbread dressing. But I use three-pounds of pork and two pounds of ground chuck and six dozen oysters and a whole—inside of French bread for my oyster dressing.

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AES: So your own family's foodways and—and traditions have—have merged with another family's and some things have gotten lost. That—speak—can you speak to that a

little bit more, and then also talk a little bit about the changes that you've seen in Southern food over your lifetime?

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AA: Well, I mentioned spaghetti and salmon, and of course now we can have food flown in from anywhere. And I didn't mention something that I used to have squirrel and possum. People thought, "Oh, how could you eat that?" But if you cook it right, it—it's good and today I still love wild things. I have a dear friend who brings me a deer every fall and—and I like fish. But the changes, I guess we—I think perhaps half—partially because of the work of the—people in the Southern Foodways Alliance and—and like souls, we appreciate what's been in the past and sort of try to bring the best of that to what's available now that can be brought in from different parts of the world.

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And I didn't mention this earlier when we were talking about you know racial reconciliations and so on, but I think that we've learned to appreciate what different groups have given you know for instance okra, just for one—one example of what has—what was sort of brought from Africa and sweet potatoes. Goodness, I couldn't live without sweet potatoes. And we used to have candied potatoes or baked potatoes, but now there are lots of wonderful ways including a recipe that I'm going to try soon, sweet potatoes with horseradish.

00:35:10

AES: Oh my.

00:35:11

AA: Doesn't that sound good? [*Laughs*]

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AES: Let me know how it turns out; yeah. [*Laughs*]

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AA: Yeah; I will. If it's good I'll give it to you.

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AES: I'm fond of sweet potato casserole with coconut myself.

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AA: Oh.

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AES: Would you say that there's too much of a tendency to over-romanticize Southern traditions in food and cooking, or is that pretty accurate and valuable and how so?

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AA: Well, I think it's easy to romanticize anything when you start thinking about the past and the good old days or—and what comes up. But because we—it certainly is the reality of the poverty in the South and the Pellagra and other diseases that came from people not having enough food and so it's—to have real health problems. And then a lot of the ways that you know maybe too much pork, too much lard, although thank

goodness, now we hear that lard is really okay if you don't eat too much. And I think being balanced is probably good. Yes; I think we can say too much about the good old days, but I think we can look objectively and at what is good from the past and what we can keep and understand the bad parts and its good parts.

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AES: Uh-hmm; do you have an idea in your mind of—of a meal or a food that would be characterized as totemicly Southern?

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AA: Well, fried chicken, I guess everybody says that. Rice because I grew up eating a lot of rice and still do because Dale, my husband, will—I laughed when we were first married; I said, “You eat everything over rice. I bet you even put potatoes over rice.” He said, “That’s one of my favorite dishes,” because his mother would do potatoes and the little river shrimp. You could get river shrimp then; the little boys would come to the backdoor and so she would make a rye and make it very brown and put fresh potatoes from the garden cut up very small, little river shrimp, cook that and then some onion in there and then lots of fresh parsley on top and serve that over rice.

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Okay. Chicken, rice, green beans straight from the garden, and of course with fatback. Now I use olive oil rather than fatback when I'm cooking, but I have to have something in green beans and other vegetables. And I would like to have some greens along with the green beans because I really love turnip and all kinds of greens either separately or together. And this is a big meal.

00:38:20

AES: You're getting me hungry. [*Laughs*]

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AA: I've got to have homemade biscuits, and I have to have cornbread. No sugar in that cornbread, please, and sweet tea with lemon, and I guess—

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AES: For dessert?

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AA: Banana pudding. I love banana pudding and don't indulge myself in that anymore, but I really like it the way my mother makes it—or made it. She doesn't really cook much anymore.

00:38:54

AES: So where do you think that idea—that idea of that meal comes from because it's—that would be a lot of people's answers or something close to it?

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AA: Because that's what we had most of the year. As I said, we had chickens in the yard and my grandparents of course did, too. And we—

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AES: But as far as the generational thing, I mean I—I would say someone my age would be quick to say that same meal.

00:39:18

AA: Really?

00:39:19

AES: And they may have not grown up with chickens in the yard, so what is it do you think that makes that such a symbolic plate of food?

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AA: Oh, I wish I could answer that. Maybe people talk about it, and then serve it a lot. And then I guess now that if you go to a country restaurant or a town restaurant that serves country or the foods that we like—three veggies and a meat and those veggies and meat and—. Could I also throw in candied potatoes?

00:39:54

AES: Of course, of course. [*Laughs*]

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AA: [*Laughs*] And pickles made from cucumbers; oh and then of course, cucumbers and salad—you have to have cucumbers and tomatoes because we really didn't have much—.

00:40:09

AES: And homemade mayonnaise?

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AA: Homemade mayonnaise, absolutely. We really didn't have much lettuce at all when we were growing up you know. So now people do grow that, and Dale's family had lettuce all the time of various kinds including one that I have learned to love. It's my very favorite—arugula or roquette or rocket. I like that.

00:40:35

AES: Well, is there anything that you'd like to add about the Southern Foodways Alliance and being affiliated with it and being a founding member?

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AA: Well, I am very proud to be a member and a founding member of it, and I'm very proud of the organization, and what it has brought to the Center, I like very much. I was a founding member of the Center I guess you could say, too. And it's really made me realize that the Center can be even more than I had thought because I never thought of studying food as such in the 19—1976 and '77 when we were starting the Center. You know, we would have meetings over meals, and we'd talk about food a little bit, but we never really had the imagination to think of studying that. And then as I said, when we—we had to—we talked about okra and pigs and chickens and possum and so on in the *Encyclopedia*, but that was sort of a very minor part of it. We never thought of a whole book on food. And—and so that shows how greatly it expanded. I find it exciting, and I'm—as I say, I'm very proud of it.

00:41:58

AES: Wonderful. Well, thank you so much for the time given to this interview, and I do appreciate it.

00:42:02

AA: Thank you.

00:42:10

[End Ann Abadie Interview]