

BILL SMITH
Chef, Crook's Corner – Chapel Hill, NC

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Interviewer: Ashley Rose Young
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[Begin Bill Smith Interview]**00:00:00**

Ashley Young: This is Ashley Young with the Southern Foodways Alliance. Today is Monday, August 29, 2011 and today I’m interviewing Bill Smith, chef at Crook’s Corner for the Carrboro Farmers’ Market Oral History Project. We are currently sitting in Chapel Hill, North Carolina at Crook’s Corner. Bill, would you please introduce yourself, stating your name and profession?

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Bill Smith: My name is Bill Smith and I’m the chef at Crook’s Corner in Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

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AY: Would you also please state your date of birth?

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BS: January 11, 1949.

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AY: In order to build a context for this interview I wanted to start off with some general questions. Where did you grow up?

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BS: I was born in a town called New Bern, North Carolina on the coast and I lived there until I was eighteen.

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AY: You wrote a cookbook called *Seasoned in the South* and in this cookbook there are some stories of your childhood or stories of your relationship with food growing up. Could you speak about your experiences with food as a child or as a teen?

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BS: Sure. I didn't really think about it while it was happening but looking back when I-- particularly when I had to think about it to write this book I realized that we grew up with the expectation of always having good food--that I had countless relatives, women relatives in almost every case who were fabulous cooks, my great-grandmother, grandmothers, aunts. And so it was always a treat; you know, it was never a chore.

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And that's just the way we were raised. We were lucky. [*Laughs*]

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AY: Is there anything in particular that you remember about your mother's or your grandmothers' cooking?

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BS: Actually it was my great-grandmother that cooked for us until she was very old, and so she was like the--the one that I think about most often at first. Her house was right downtown in New

Bern and she sort of presided over this family table at lunch every single day during the week where everybody that--I would leave school, people would leave the offices downtown, and things like that and we'd all go to her house and eat these fairly formal fancy lunches every day my whole life.

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So that's what I think of first and it could be anything. I mean it--it--sometimes it was light fare and sometimes it was more elaborate; it would depend--it was very seasonal of course in those days. She was a very good cook, very good cook and, you know, and gave it a lot of thought and didn't--never measured and never had recipes; just knew how to do everything. And she did that until she was surely in her eighties, so--.

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AY: When did you become interested in pursuing a career as a chef?

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BS: Well I never set out to become a chef. I--I backed into it. [*Laughs*] I needed--I used to have the Cat's Cradle which made no money at all and so I needed another job [Interviewer's note: Bill Smith co-founded the Cat's Cradle, a live music venue in Chapel Hill, in the 1970s]. I was going to Europe and I needed extra money. And one of my roommates was the head waitress at La Residence here in Chapel Hill; then it was--Bill and Moreton Neal owned it. And she said, "Oh, I think they need someone to peel potatoes and blah, blah, blah in the kitchen." And so I took the job. It was a part-time job because I was going away, you know, and I needed extra cash. And when I came back they hired me back and then that was sort of the beginning--.

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I had never set out to be a chef, but I realized during that work--or when I worked there that it suited me. So that's when it just sort of happened at that point. I just--jobs from then on--when I was looking for work that was what I looked to--to do, so--.

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AY: When you were traveling in Europe were there any culinary experiences that you had that stuck with you or that inspired you later on with your--with your cooking?

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BS: Probably, I travel a lot actually. Even--even today I travel a great deal and I always find that--I don't sit down looking for recipes ever but it always--you always pick up things. You're just always doing--I go to Mexico all the time now and I'm always finding things that I can apply here.

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The main thing about that kind--about traveling and food is it--if you have--if any curiosity at all you're just exposed to so many different things and you don't necessarily repeat them when you get home but you just--it opens your mind to whatever possibilities there are and that's the most valuable thing about it I think rather than gathering recipes or you know--so.

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AY: Are there any vegetables or other cooking styles that you picked up from Mexico recently that otherwise you hadn't cooked with before?

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BS: Yeah. Actually I try not to--I mean this is a Southern restaurant so I try to stick to that but--and people know how fond I am--have become of Mexico so I think they're always expecting me to just to flip the place over [*Laughs*], so I resist the urge. But there are some things that are--that are applicable. There's a lot of things in common. The Mexicans use lots of pork products and in fact, my last trip I was down I guess April during Holy Week, which is a time--a good time to visit Latin America and I spent a whole day in a pork rind factory, so--. And although I don't--I don't know if we'll have pork rinds on the menu here. They are certainly Southern and so the application applies in both--in both cuisines.

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I--one thing I stole outright years ago, actually this is actually in the cookbook, but it's been around so long, but in Mexico they often put hot chili pepper on fruit which is something I really like. And we do a mango salad based on something I learned in Mexico years ago where they take a mango and they peel it and they sort of score it all over with a knife and they roll it in cayenne pepper and squirt lime juice on it and eat it like a popsicle and put it on a popsicle stick and it's fantastic. And so, I make that salad a lot. And what I do is I don't serve it on a popsicle stick though. I chop--you know, I chop the mangos up and mix them with some mint which they don't do in Mexico, but that's the direct thing for Mexico that I've picked up.

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And the last time, like when I was down there this last time there was a woman in the neighborhood where I was staying that had a--a cart where all she sold was jicama which is that white root and she just cut it into all sizes of chunks and sticks and stuff and she rolled it in cayenne pepper and squirted limes over it. And then she had--it was all just sitting in piles of ice and it was fantastic. It was really hot and it was just like the best thing you've ever eaten. So that

may--that may show up at some point. I should have brought it back this summer when it was so hot. I just didn't get around to it.

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AY: You spoke a little bit about the experiences that you had with your family's cooking and as well as the experiences--culinary experiences abroad. Is there anything else that has really influenced your cooking style or any person in particular that has influenced your cooking style?

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BS: Oh lord. I admire many chefs. They're colleagues and that's one good thing about this profession is you have so many great people to--that you can--that are sort of associated with you because of it. And oh lord. Who would I say? I don't know if I could pick out one person. A person I admire very much and a woman from whom I've stolen at least one recipe is Leah Chase at Dooky Chase's in New Orleans. I met her through the Southern Foodways Alliance actually and met her--and been to her restaurant and then after Katrina I was down, you know, when we were doing that relief or whatever we were doing. We were helping Ms. Chase and Ms. Seaton around the corner with their restaurants that were completely trashed by the flooding [Interviewer's note: Willie Mae Seaton of Willie Mae's Scotch House in Treme in New Orleans]. And--and she is a wonderful person. She clearly has worked hard all her life. She--I don't know. I just--I love to hear her talk, I like--her outlook on the world is great and I stole her--well I didn't--I don't want to say I do it as well as she did. But when I was there one time [**Laughs**] she had prepared something called gumbo z'herbes which I've never heard of and--at the time I had never heard of it, and I thought it was collards, you know. And I--and I went wait a minute;

there's more--you know what--because it was in a buffet thing and we were like, "What is all this stuff in here?"

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And it was like, "That is the best thing. How could I not know what this is?" You know, it was one of those things where, "How could this be around when I didn't know it?" It was like when you--twenty years ago when I had pesto, I said, "Well, how come I didn't know about this?" You know? So gumbo z'herbes was one of those experiences. So every--every spring I guess when it's around Mardi Gras time we have gumbo z'herbes here. I just do it for a couple of weeks. But she's just one of many, but she comes to mind. I'm very fond of her, so--.

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AY: So Crook's Corner obviously is in North Carolina but are there any dishes that you bring from other regions of the South like gumbo z'herbes?

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BS: Yes.

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AY: Could you speak a little bit about those?

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BS: Yeah. I don't--the sort of the foundation of my cooking is Eastern North Carolina and that's a fairly large menu really but I like lots of things. I love well we have tamales from Mississippi almost all the time or from Arkansas. They have tamales all over that part of the South; a lot of

things from Louisiana. I love Louisiana. I love New Orleans and I'm often bringing things particularly around Mardi Gras. We do--we sort of celebrate Mardi Gras but--but there's some things that I might bring back. And we do gumbo on and off all the time. There's this fabulous turtle soup I got from a friend of mine in Louisiana that I use whenever I can get turtle.

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What else--oh I'm trying to think--other parts of the South? I guess some of the Mexican stuff we could count as Tex-Mex, you know. That's--people--I can't decide whether Texas is in the South or not sometimes but--what else, the Charleston things probably. You know, I do red rice every once in a while.

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AY: Do you think there are any unsung regions of the South, perhaps like the Panhandle in Florida, for culinary traditions?

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BS: They're known for their oysters, for sure. There probably are. Whenever I go anywhere I always try to see what's up, you know, and like I say I travel a great deal. I just had a wonderful time in Arkansas actually in Little Rock and the food there was fantastic. I'm not sure what was--what was really Arkansan--is that the word--or you know but--and that was--that was all new to me.

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I don't know. Yeah I'm trying to think. I feel like I sort of have some idea. I think Virginia cooking is--is a lot like North Carolina cooking. Appalachia cooking is a different thing. I don't think it gets the credit it ought probably, although that--that is seen as a very poor region

so people probably don't see it as appealing as--as like New Orleans or Charleston probably. But I think the food there is probably really good.

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Maybe the coastal area of North Carolina isn't--that's sort of part of Eastern North Carolina but it's a whole separate thing obviously. If you lived down there you see the difference and I think that might not be as--as well attended to as it could be because we--we grew up having fabulous seafood always, you know.

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AY: If you had to sum up East North Carolina cooking how would you do so in a few sentences or a few phrases?

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BS: A lot of it is--is what you consider traditional. We always had black-eyed peas and collards and fried chicken and that kind of thing. It was well-rounded it seems like; does that make any sense? Yeah, it was like--we had a little bit of everything at least in my family's households. We--we, you know, we had--it was lots of vegetables and lots of seafood and all kinds of meat and all kinds of desserts and--and yeah, well prepared. I don't know, it was nothing fancy ever. Not--not--very rarely was anything sort of elaborate, you know. We had to behave ourselves and we had to, you know, behave at the table and use table manners and all that stuff, but we didn't have like, you know, finger bowls and things like that. **[Laughs]**

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So but yeah. It was--it was a huge--a huge sort of list of things. So that--maybe that's--that's actually--I had never thought about that before until just now but that--that's actually what

makes it really great--because it was everything, you know. It could be just that my great-grandmother was so clever that she, you know, she was more expansive than other cooks perhaps but--but yeah that’s what I would say.

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AY: Can you explain a bit more about how you came--became a chef and how you came eventually to Crook’s Corner? I believe you also said you were at La Residence.

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BS: Yeah, I was there first. Well I became a chef because I was working in a restaurant and decided I liked that. I mean that--and that really--there really isn't much more to it. Once I decided I liked it then I became curious about all of its aspects and began to pursue them with travel and with going to other restaurants, with reading, but yeah I was--how old would I have been then? I was in my late twenties probably, maybe even thirty before I actually realized, oh, I guess you’re a chef now. **[Laughs]** So it wasn’t like a--a career path. I’m not sure that I can say there was any sort of planning. **[Laughs]**

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I came here--La Residence changed hands and they sort of changed out the staff and I was going to go back to Europe and somehow I got roped into--I was--they said come down here and work and I said “Oh, I will in a little while and I don’t want to be in charge of anything.” I remember clearly saying, “I’ll come work there but I’m not going to be in charge of anything.” I was sick of being in charge because I had been the chef at La Res and here I am seventeen years later and I’m very much in charge of everything.

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And when I got here it was very different. It was a lot busier than La Residence. La Residence was small. I worked from a French menu to a Southern menu and of course I had the background for it, but I didn't have the--I didn't know the sort of the repertoire here at all except for a few things. And it was--it was a difficult year or two, honestly, changing over and--and again I sort of was kicking and screaming because I didn't want to be in charge of another restaurant [*Laughs*]. So I was sort of resisting in my mind as I sort of ended up doing it anyway, so--.

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AY: What were some of the early challenges that you faced in that first year or two?

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BS: The numbers of people that I suddenly had to serve. The kitchen is very small here also-- that was difficult. I don't know. Any time you take over a new place and you have a new staff there's always some frictions. We actually didn't do very badly in that regard. I don't recall ever be--having like unpleasant--unpleasantness in the kitchen because it was a new guy in charge or something, although that can happen. Just--just sort of realizing the scope of what you were doing, you know, and saying, "Oh that--oh that too? That's me also. Oh, all right." [*Laughs*]

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So yeah, it was just--like I said it was a difficult transition and mainly though because I was coming from a place that was sort of sedate to a place that was very busy and just learning all the new rules.

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AY: And did you have any mentors here in Carrboro or Chapel Hill or could you speak about your relationship to Bill Neal?

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BS: Sure. I worked with--he was at La Residence. I never worked with him here. He and his wife divorced and he came down here and started this place. I stayed at La Residence for, I don't know, a good many years after that. I learned a lot in that kitchen. Both of them actually were very good cooks and had a very good eye for sort of the culture of food. He--you hear about him more--but honestly Moreton--Moreton was as talented a cook I think and she also had a sort of--this wonderful sophistication that came. There's a--there's a kind of southerner that sort of--sort of broad-minded and open-minded and--I don't know sort of well-bred that's a real treat and she's one of those. And--and often people are always saying, "Oh, your place is so pretty." And I always think, well it's because of Moreton showed me what--she showed me how to do them, you know.

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Bill had a--a way of making you realize that there were no limits to possibilities that everything was, you know, on the table sort of and encouraged us always to--to sort of always be scouting out new things. We--we had like stacks--and then in those days there were all these European cookbooks coming out, you know, just all the time. We always would get them all and read them and--and so we were always scouring for new ideas and stuff like that and he always encouraged that. There was no--no fixed anything which is a good thing in--in a restaurant. Like this restaurant is the same way; I--there is no fixed menu here. We could change every single day every single thing if I had--if I had to, you know. **[Laughs]** I don't but--so that's a very good

way--. It's a hard way to make money in a way but it--until you learn how to do it but it's a very good way to do a menu.

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AY: Can you speak about how Crook's Corner has changed since you've been a chef here, how it has changed over the past years?

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BS: Well let's see. I'm not--I guess it must have. Our clientele is fairly steady. Well I think we've become more respected perhaps. We're more well-known. I've had the same guys in my kitchen most of them for ten years now so there's a level of expertise that I can rely on. So there are probably less misfires, you know [*Laughs*] in the kitchen. I'm sure every restaurant probably has those; we don't have very many anymore.

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I think it runs really smoothly now. I--I've never allowed that sort of kitchen/waiter, you know, conflict that some restaurants seem to thrive on. I've never allowed that. I don't see the point of it honestly. I don't know. We've had the same waiters forever too, you know. People always mention that, "God, these guys have been there forever." They--they like that. They like to come in where people know them and--. I have--I guess it's changed for the better. I--I--but there wasn't really anything wrong with it when I got here either I suppose. Our--our reputation is--I guess is more sturdy than anything. Our food has evolved as I have evolved. It will be hard to point to one thing in particular, but--. You know, I just--I guess we have just improved-- improved it little by little and I have a great deal more confidence of course than I did when I first got here, so that probably is reflected in the front of the house, too, so--. [*Laughs*]

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AY: Are there any dishes in particular here that you created that have taken a leap for national recognition now and--?

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BS: Yeah, a lot of them.

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AY: I’m sorry. Please speak about those.

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BS: Actually, a lot of things. Now I don’t even think about it so much but--there’s the tomato and watermelon salad that everybody in the world does [*Laughs*] that--that was on the cover of *Southern Living* a few years ago and that was--that was--if you ever need to spend money advertising let me tell you that is where to go. I never--I still hear--my mother even, she says, “I’m so sick of that damn salad of yours.” I said, “What do you mean?” She said, “I can’t go anywhere now without that being shoved in front of me.” [*Laughs*] So they seem to think they’re honoring her by presenting her with my recipe. So that was one, certainly.

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The honeysuckle sorbet is one that we do here every spring. What else? Gosh, I don’t know. I’m trying to think of what other people--people ask me about stuff all the time now. And I get requests. The watermelon salad I get an amazing number of requests; “Is it okay if I use it?” Of course it always is, you know. I don’t care. I mean it’s nice that they ask, I suppose, but--.

[Laughs] Oh lord, we do lots of things. I don't know if I can--I'll think about it some more and maybe something will crop back up but I'm trying to think of what people have asked me for lately if they can do this and that. They did the honeysuckle sorbet when I was at that thing in--in Arkansas. That was sort of nice. Somebody else had to go out and pick them for a change instead of me.

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We do--we do that cold fried chicken; that gets a lot of attention that we do every summer when it gets really hot. I did it for about a month this year and then it was like 100-degrees every single day and I said I'm not frying chicken all day anymore so we switched to cold pork loin which has been fine. We have lots of desserts and things and ice-creams and stuff we're known for. The honeysuckle is the most famous but--but people often mention other ones too.

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The catfish almandine actually which is not anything I made up but it was just a marriage of an old technique and a local fish and that gets a lot of attention and that sort of surprises me. It's so simple. I can't have been the first person to think of that. **[Laughs]** You know, I'll think of--I'll see if I can think of some more while we talk but--.

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AY: Also I wanted to ask you, how do you think the restaurant scene in the Chapel Hill area, in Durham, in Carrboro has changed over recent years or has it changed and if so in what ways?

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BS: It's changed a lot. There's a lot more of them for one thing and there's a--even in this economy there's the clientele to support them. We are like--I think New Orleans is a good example of this where people, going out to eat is part of their--their culture of entertainment. It's not just to have--because you have to eat. It's like an evening at a restaurant is considered a night--you know, it's a pleasant thing to do. You just can't wait to get together with friends and stuff. We have that culture here. We also--it's an area of very busy people and we're fairly well off and if you're busy you don't go home and cook at nine o'clock at night. You go out, you know, and so we have that. And so we have this sort of this--at least so far knock on wood, who knows with the economy--you know, I'll laugh in a minute now but so far we're--we're holding our own here very well it seems like to me. So there's--there's lots of people that go out to eat all the time myself included. I never cook at home. You can imagine--I don't have many nights off and I'm certainly not going to go home and make a mess in my kitchen, so I go out all the time, you know. **[Laughs]** And that's important and it's just--it's a town where people are used to going out.

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Like in New Bern, where I'm from, they don't. I mean they--they do sometimes but it's considered sort of a big deal or whatever but now people here just--it's one of the first things they think of doing when they're going to get together with friends and stuff I think. They're too busy to entertain I think around here. I am--certainly am.

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AY: I wanted to ask you--thinking about defining cuisine once more, what do you see as the spirit of Southern cuisine because you described this as a Southern restaurant? So what do you think the spirit of this restaurant is or what is so special about Southern cuisine?

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BS: Well to me it--well everybody says this but I'll say it again it's what grandmamma cooked; it's the stuff you grew up with but--. And in my case as I said it was always really good. And I suspect that was true--maybe everywhere where there were home cooks once upon a time. I think when--when I was growing up, more than likely women didn't work and so they were called homemakers and they--part of homemaking was cooking. And so there was more time to devote to--to cooking and stuff. And that's the people that my generation grew up with that. I don't think that's true anymore but people remember that still.

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Now women must work. People can't afford to have one--one person stay at home. It doesn't work like that anymore. So but I think it harks back to those days when there was someone who--whose job it was to cook, you know, in the home and it was a seasonal thing. It was--it often had something to do with the farm because in New Bern there was farmers' markets and everybody knew somebody to go buy this and go buy that and--or they knew farmers themselves or fishermen for that matter being on the coast like that.

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And it's--I don't want to say nostalgic but in--I guess in a way it must be, you know, or--or sentimental even, you know. **[Laughs]** And it--and it's framed by the culture of the South which is, you know, the things that grow here and the--the history of the region and whose--who came and who--you know, and so that's--it's context.

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AY: At this point I was hoping to move onto a discussion of the Carrboro Farmers' Market and I was wondering how you came to establish a relationship with the farmers at the Carrboro Farmers' Market.

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BS: Well actually I have been dealing with those farmers before there was a Carrboro Farmers' Market. I've been at this a long time now because I started--I was at La Res in--oh gosh probably '76. Well not--I don't even remember now when I started, but I have known some of those people--I've known Ken Dawson since we were hippies together like in the '60s and I've known Kathy Jones and who else--Bill Dow. So I--I bought from those people before there was an established market. And a lot of the people that I deal with don't sell at the Market. I mean there's lots of people from out in the county that I used to--that just--well it started with a lady named Mary Andrews. She's almost--she's probably eighty-five or eighty-six now and so twenty years ago at La Residence I got this phone call and it was Ms. Andrews and she was going through the phone book. She said she had a yard full of mint and she was going to pull it up and would I give her \$6 for a hundred stems? And so I'm still dealing with Ms. Andrews, you know.

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And her neighbor Mr. Atwater now and her sister Blanche and so these people--they don't sell at the Farmers' Market; they just have the big gardens and I get probably as much from them as I do from the Market [Interviewer's note: Blanche Norwood and Walter Atwater]. I--I go to the Market as well. I get all my cheese from the Market now and all kinds of odds and ends. But anyway it's just something--it--it was a natural to me, you know. I knew these people, why not? It keeps somebody in the community; it made sense. In that regard it was obviously fresher. Sometimes they call up and say, "We're--we're going to plant. What do you want," you know?

So both market and out of--in market and out of market I've been dealing with these people since way before I came to Crook's Corner.

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AY: Often when I've spoken to farmers about their relationships with chefs they say, "I've been influenced by chefs. They tell us what they would like and we see if we can accommodate that." How have--how have the farmers influenced your cooking? Is there a reciprocation here?

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BS: Uh-hmm. Sure. In fact, there's a big one. **[Laughs]** Like those peppers you saw in the thing I didn't expect those, but now they're going to go on the menu this week. Yeah. I--I go out of my way actually to see what there is. I mean like I say our menu is not fixed. It can be anything any time. So I always go and see what there is. And then that's what we do, you know. I don't--I don't say bring me, you know, fifty pounds of lima beans. Like if they have that--that day good. That's what we'll do and if they don't then we don't, you know.

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But so yeah. One thing I got--in--in the winter I get a lot of hams from Eliza McLean at--what is the name of her--what is the name of her farm? [Interviewer's note: Eliza McLean of Cane Creek Farm]. How can I not think of that? **[Laughs]** You know Eliza. And there's an Eastern North Carolina specialty called corned ham and I always use Eliza's hams to make that. And I do that because she's there, you know, because she--she has these, you know. I mean I might have done it anyway but I'm very pleased to be able to take her--her hams and turn them into something that I grew up with and--and so--. What else?

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Well the cheese that we--all these wonderful cheeses they make here, I almost always have some of those on the menu somewhere, you know, and I do it because they're here. I mean I wouldn't have--I wouldn't have bought--sent off--for this restaurant--I wouldn't have sent off to France for Camembert and stuff--but because we have, you know, Carolina Moon she calls it here, which is fabulous, you know. I put it on the menu, so--. And then vegetables, they just show up like I said. You know, gosh, there's so many people I deal with but Walter in particular, he's always--he--he's Walter Atwater. He's--he's probably almost ninety and he--"You want any Swiss chard?" I say "Well no, Walter. I don't really need--I didn't really count on it." He says, "Well I got a lot." He said, "I'm just going to plow it under if you don't get it." I said, "All right, Walter. I'll--." That kind of thing. And you know, you can do something with it, sure. **[Laughs]**

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AY: Is there any vegetable or story involving a vegetable, say a farmer had x and you decided to take on the challenge of cooking that. Is there anything that was particularly challenging that was locally grown and you kind of just took by chance and tried to make something of it?

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BS: Probably, I don't know if I can think of it right this minute, but it almost has--almost has to have happened though. Well actually these peppers; these peppers you saw, I--as I told you I admired them last year. They sent me like, you know, I had two handfuls to make pepper jelly with and I love the flavor of habaneros but and I like the heat of a habanero but you can't put that off on the public very much. But anyway they had this little kind called a tobago that had that flavor but hardly any of the fire. And I commented on how good they were. And--and we're going to do--I'm going to use them again in the Chili Festival. It's in October I think.

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And I said but tell whoever grew those that I'm--I'm interested in them because I thought they were pretty tasty. And then this guy shows up at the backdoor with them. And so as it happens, I've got this cold pork plate I was mentioning. And I've been like filling it in with whatever because I don't know. I've got--like there's lots of nice melons and we have cantaloupe on it and there's--we've got--. Oh green peach salad. That's--that's one of those dishes that comes back to haunt me from--. **[Laughs]** Anyway it's got green peach salad and we'll go back to that--green peach salad on it because it's been in the *New York Times* ten times lately but **[Laughs]** I feel obliged to keep it on the menu even though the peach season isn't--they aren't green anymore, but if you--if you go to the grocery store you can always find green peaches, I've found.

00:28:58

So that's on there and then you need something else to fill it up where we've got nice tomatoes right now so I slice a nice tomato and put a little vinaigrette on that, so I need one more thing. So people would always bring me all their weird peppers, not even just this guy but other people too. Betsy will come in, she works here; "I've got all these peppers. Do you want them?" "Yeah, sure." And they're all weird shapes and different kinds and different colors and you can't--there's not really enough of any one to do anything particular with, so I thought okay, I'll make piperade which is that French thing--that's peppers and onions [Interviewer's note: piperade is made of peppers, onions and sometimes tomatoes. It is cooked down and seasoned with herbes de Provence and is usually served as a sauce or relish]. So I--I am now going to make piperade out of those peppers and I also used the--all the scraps from the--all the tomatoes we have. **[Laughs]** You know, we slice tomatoes and we usually have the tops and the bottoms but you can mince them up and so the piperade--I'm very pleased with the piperade and I put a can of

Mexican hominy in it, so--I--I've said I've invented something out of sort of circumstances.

[Laughs]

00:29:47

And everybody goes, "Oh, this is--what in the world is this?" And I said, "Just piperade with hominy, you know." But I didn't set out to make that. I just--like what am I going to do-- here let's make that, you know. Does that make sense or not, you know? **[Laughs]**

00:29:59

AY: And can you speak a little bit about the green peach salad that has become so famous?

00:30:04

BS: Yeah. I don't know how--why--how can I didn't think of that to start with. In my cookbook there is a recipe for green peach salad and the reason we had to use green peach--make green peach salad because whenever you order peaches in bulk you invariably get a bunch that won't ripen. And I remember in--I used to have a Vietnamese dishwasher and she was a fabulous cook and she would make green mango things. And so I thought okay; well let's see what we can do with these--these peaches. So I--sort of hark back to what I had seen in Mexico with hot chilies on fruit and instead of hot chili I'd put black pepper and fresh mint which I use in lots of fruit things. I love mint; I think it's under-rated. I put fresh mint in everything. And so it's--it's just unripe peaches peeled and sliced, lots of black pepper, lots of mint, a-pinch of salt and a little bit of sugar. You toss it all up so it juices itself up which fruit does when you put salt and sugar on it and serve it really cold. And I like--I thought it was great. I mean I liked it. I thought oh, this is really good. Well people love it.

00:30:58

So I put it in the cookbook and forgot about it and then about--you know, every once in a while we get a bunch of peaches that aren't ripe and it comes up again but--but I didn't really think anything about it. So a couple years ago I come home one night and I turn on the computer and I have like 1,000 emails. I'm--what in the world; and they--and they all--"Have you seen the *New York Times*?" "Have you seen the *New York Times*?" [*Laughs*] So Melissa Clark had--had mentioned it [Interviewer's note: Melissa Clark writes a weekly column in *The New York Times* food section called "A Good Appetite"]. She wasn't--she didn't even give the recipe for it. She was talking about using green peaches and she just referenced this--this recipe. So I thought oh my god. So I went and got green peaches and we kept that on the menu for a while.

00:31:27

So then it went away again for a while and then like a month ago I opened my email and they said, "Oh have you seen the--?" Well on Amanda Hesser's blog in the *New York Times* called *Food 52* or whatever it is, she's--it was listed as a *recipe of genius*, so--. So that's one that--that keeps coming back around, so it's on the menu again. I feel obliged with that kind of attention that people ought to be able to get it when--. Like I said you can always find bad peaches, so it's like--. And they really are improved by this treatment, so that's--that's one.

00:32:00

AY: So for this next section of the oral history I was hoping to dive a little bit deeper into the Carrboro Farmers' Market and I was hoping you would describe what the Farmers' Market was like when it started in the late '70s and then through the '80s.

00:32:16

BS: Well it was in a different place. It was beside the Rescue Squad in Carrboro. It's much smaller. It was only on Saturday instead of Saturday and Wednesday and there weren't all these offshoots. You know, there's a whole bunch of other ones around now. I never get to go to the rest of them but--so it was--it was a lot--it was Ken was there and Kathy Jones was there and Bill Dow was there and Alex and Betsy were there [Interviewer's note: Ken Dawson and Alex and Betsy Hitt]. It was considerably smaller, but the same vibe, you know, pretty much.

00:32:46

These people--all of those farmers have gotten a lot sort of more accomplished over the years obviously, I mean weather accepting, you know, but by and large they've learned a way to grow in bulk and to keep the quality high and everything is always clean which was not always the case to start with because a lot of people thought if it was organic it had to be filthy, you know, like leave dirt all over the--. [*Laughs*] That's true. I mean I would sort of pull it out with this dirt clinging to the roots out of, you know, grocery bags in my kitchen and get sand everywhere. So anyway it's a lot more professionally done and--and they're--they're--they figured out how to grow more and how--I think they probably widowed out things that weren't practical. And I talked to Betsy Hitt a lot. You know, she grows the flowers. I mean she's one of the people that grows flowers and she's always talking about--"Well, those were nice but they didn't produce properly or they took too much water or they weren't reliable enough or like some years they didn't do anything." And so I'm--I'm thinking everybody does that.

00:33:40

You know, and some things don't sell perhaps and I know Kathy Jones tried growing celery root which I love but, you know, I don't think enough people bought it so she didn't want--their space is limited and their resources are limited and their time is limited so they have to make it work, you know, to the most advantage as well as do the other things they do, you know,

like try to hang onto their philosophy but not go broke basically I guess is what I'm saying. And--and so then when they moved to Carrboro, you know, that--that is a wonderful locale and it's--there's a lot more places to park and it's easier to--sort of easier to get to than that place behind the--beside the Rescue Squad. That street sort of is difficult. I mean it's--it's small and--I don't know; it just--and I think they began to manage it differently and I think there was--there was--they gave more--more thought to professional management and--. **[Interruption]**

00:34:36

Oh let me look; will you excuse me one second?

00:34:39

AY: We took a brief pause there and now we're continuing our oral history. I wanted to ask you briefly, could you describe your relationship with farmer Bill Dow?

00:34:50

BS: Yeah. I've known Bill forever. He was one of the first people that would come around and deliver. See that was the big deal. If they--if--if the farmers had time to deliver that was better. I mean you--it's nice to go to the Market but honestly you often need such quantities of things that if they had--if they could work a delivery into their--into their system it--I was more liable to deal with them than not.

00:35:15

I don't remember how we met. I think he just showed up. That's often the case. People just came or called or whatever and--. The main thing I remember about my relationship with Bill was that I suggested he grow fennel. Now fennel grows very well in--in North Carolina but it wasn't part of the regular vegetables that were grown here in the South. I had--I always felt

like if--like people like my grandmother if they had known about fennel they would have used it but it just wasn't habit--you know, accustomed to--to grow it. And he just has gone great guns with fennel. He does beautiful fennel now. **[Laughs]** And has it, you know, all--into the early summer usually every year.

00:35:52

I don't get stuff from Bill anymore and I think the main reason is--is that the people that--there's a couple of people that work here that started growing things like Betsy--basil and I just started buying more and more things from her and then just ended up buying less and less things from him. And it wasn't a conscious decision; it just sort of worked out that way. And Betsy comes every day and will bring me five pounds of this and that and it just sort of--it was handier. But--but I like Bill and I've always, you know, enjoyed seeing him and stuff.

00:36:22

But he would--leeks, fennel, radicchio, all that kind of stuff he would--.

00:36:27

AY: Can you describe a little bit about the introduction of radicchio into kind of the restaurant culture here and how you might have--did you encourage--because radicchio wasn't necessarily well known, so did you encourage farmers to grow that?

00:36:43

BS: It was one of the suggestions that I made and I'll tell you the reason. I remember it very precisely actually. The French name for it is Rouge de Verone and in the early days at La Res we were always trying to find French things and I remember someone was going--in those days you had to go to New York to find things like that. **[Laughs]** And one of our--our cooks was--had to

go to New York and so she came back with a couple of Rouge de Verone in her purse. And so we decided that--and it's one of those--it's a-chicory. It's one--and it grows well in the winter in the South. All these things--endive and--and what is that thing they make, the Italians make soup out of--it looks like endive? I can't think of it right now but--anyway there's a whole family of things that do very well in the--in the South in the winter or in the fall. They can be a fall crop and--and fennel is actually another one that is not in that family. It's a different family but all the chicories. And so it just occurred to us that this would be a good thing to grow. It would be sort of exotic. It was something we were sort of interested in because it was so--there were lots of trendy things cropping up in the '70s. You know, you had to have this and you had to have that and--and that was one of them, you know, that showed up. **[Laughs]**

00:37:52

And it--and it grows well here. The trouble with--with radicchio or Rouge de Verone is that you must grow it in the dark. It has to blanch. So you have to put those closures--if you don't it's too bitter to eat. Same thing with Belgian endive, those long endives so there is a little more effort involved so you have to shield it from the sun once--once it grows. And people don't grow it so much because of that because it really is too bitter to eat if you don't do that. If it has any green in it at all it isn't edible, so--. Whoever thought of it--whoever--you know, who thought that up to start with? Probably the Romans, they did stuff like that, you know. **[Laughs]** So that's--that's why it showed up around here because we were all saying, "Oh you need to grow this." And I think probably once they realized what you had to do they--they sort of backed off on it and I haven't seen much of it lately but--. **[Laughs]**

00:38:35

AY: Returning back to the Carrboro Farmers' Market would you describe what a typical Saturday looks like for you when you head to the Market?

00:38:43

BS: It really depends on what I need that day, how busy I am. I guess the weather to some degree and the season as well. One thing I love about the Market and--and there are a couple of times when this happens is that I love it when you can either--as you approach it you can already see all the flowers or you can smell something that--that's there. And that--you--there's a certain couple of weeks when you can smell the strawberries from the street. That's a good time to go.

00:39:09

I'm usually in a big hurry. I'm usually late. I'm on my bicycle. I go tearing down I guess Jones Ferry Road and I go in that entrance. And I've usually order my cheese in advance. If I'm getting a ham from Eliza I've already ordered that too. I run around and see who has got what after that and I don't know. I--if you have time it's great because you can walk around and talk all morning but I usually don't, so I try to like duck people I don't know so I don't have to seem rude. **[Laughs]** And you know, I like to talk to the guys who are selling things but I don't want to get caught by someone that wants to ask me about recipes or something, so--.

00:39:50

And sometimes in the year--the earlier the better, you know, and I like--I like--and I need to be back here as soon as--I really should be back here by 8:30, so--but then I don't get off work until midnight so we'll see. You know, every--every week you never know--it's a crap shoot sort of what time I actually get there. And every once in a while I don't--I won't have ordered anything and so I don't really have to go and sometimes I don't, but I try to go almost every

week. I like to get a lot of stuff from April McGregor, Farmer's Daughter. I use lot of her things. Lately I've been using her pickled blueberries on the cheese plate, actually. It's just--you know you want a little something on these cheese plates, a little bit of fruit or something or relish or whatever and so her pickled blueberries have been there lately.

00:40:28

I also usually buy one of those--those *Sunshine* buns and that's sort of my breakfast as I walk about. And then Sam is there from Pig and so now every once in a while I get hotdogs for breakfast because he's got his little hotdog cart. **[Laughs]** That's actually a good way to start the day because they say you need to eat something in the morning and I'm not really a big fan of breakfast but--but that's also to get me going.

00:40:49

And I'd see what's what, you know. I don't have any like I said any real--I might have a shopping list. For a long time I got this salad mix from Kathy Jones at Periwinkle Farms and she's quit growing it. I think it was just too labor-intensive and I'm really sorry but it was like herbs and flowers and I would toss it into our regular salad greens and stuff and I did it for years and years and years and then last year she said it's--it's too much trouble, you know, because everything is really little and it was always so beautiful and it changed all summer long. And I--I really lament its passing but-- **[Laughs]** I don't blame her, you know, at all but it was so nice and people always commented on how--you know, we would have fennel and arugula and I don't know bachelor button flowers and runner bean flowers and calendula petals and it was fabulous, you know. But I think she decided she couldn't make it go and she did it for a long time. I bought it for years from her until last year. I keep hoping she'll change her mind but I--she's close to my age and I can't--I can't imagine that it would be any fun to--to plant and--and

tend and then wash and pick--pick and wash all that stuff for \$7.50 a pound or whatever. It can't be worth it. **[Laughs]**

00:41:57

AY: So the noise that you're hearing in the background now is the thunderstorm that's coming in but we will--we might be pausing really quickly so we could step inside.

00:42:09

And we're back after a brief pause. We relocated inside to avoid the rain and I wanted to ask you now do you ever see restaurant patrons at the Market and what is that experience like?

00:42:23

BS: I do **[Laughs]** and it's a pleasant experience. However sometimes they'll want to talk more time than I've got to talk. But people most often will collar me and say, "Okay, I just bought this. What can I do with it?" And it's usually because they know me from here. Or they'll come-- they'll come up and want to know what I've got so--what they'll know to expect if they show up here. Yeah, it happens--it happens virtually every week. And either I have time to talk or I don't and I excuse myself if I don't and if I do it's nice and **[Laughs]**--yeah so--.

00:42:51

AY: Have you ever picked up any special cooking techniques or have you ever gotten any ideas from people at the Market or farmers at the Market that you've brought to your own cooking here at Crook's Corner?

00:43:05

BS: Probably. It's hard to imagine that I wouldn't have. I can't think of anything right this second. Let's see--I don't know. I must have. I don't know. I'm drawing a blank but it seems unlikely that I--that I would--that wouldn't have happened. I just can't think of anything right this minute, you know. **[Laughs]**

00:43:30

AY: How do you think the Carrboro Farmers' Market contributes to the sense of community in the Carrboro/Chapel Hill area?

00:43:40

BS: It's huge I think. Everybody tries to go every week if they can, just--or at least the people I know. I mean it's like--it's on everyone's list if they have time. I think if people are entertaining on the weekend they certainly try to go to bring their guests or to pick up things to feed their guests. I see us all--the restaurants and the farmers and the cheese makers, and all this, I see us all as sort of a community. And that's sort of the--maybe the touchstone for everybody, perhaps. But it's sort of--a central part of this sort of this whole thing in all of us that we do here and why it's such a strong scene and, you know, why we're so successful and why we're so well known for it. It's just part of--it's an important link, you know, in that sort of chain of things that make the food thing around here so remarkable. I think it's remarkable. I don't--you know. **[Laughs]**

00:44:35

AY: In the early years--so you've been sourcing from farmers for a long time. Did you ever encourage other chefs in the areas to follow in your footsteps and start sourcing as local--like locally and sourcing locally often?

00:44:49

BS: Yeah. I always talk it up. You know, I don't remember specifically doing it to one person or another but I always recommend--I mean even people like--like you know, the pizza place and stuff. I tell them you ought to get tomatoes when they're in season and they do, you know. So yeah. I've always talked it up. I've always encouraged it. But most of us are like-minded to start with so it doesn't--it's not much of a nudge, you know. It makes sense to--to most people.

00:45:16

AY: And when we're thinking about the community of the Farmers' Market and how it's related to home consumers and restaurants what do you value most about the Carrboro Farmers' Market?

00:45:29

BS: Like with everything, the--the friends you make, you know. That's the most important thing. People always say, "What's the best--what's the best part about the dinner?" And it's always the company. You know, it's not the food [*Laughs*] and it's the same thing. I mean it's the--the people you become involved with. And we're sort of self--we support one another and encourage one another and, you know, that sort of thing. It just--I don't know; it just seems like a natural to me but that's the best part, and I mean all the good stuff you get from it is almost a byproduct of the--of the camaraderie or whatever, so--.

00:46:02

AY: And for this last section of the oral history I was hoping to talk about the farm to table movement which is a buzz phrase that has been circulating among foodies and in general among anyone who eats. How would you describe the farm to table movement?

00:46:19

BS: Yeah, well I don't know. I--I do it but I don't--I'm not ideological about it. **[Laughs]** If it's practical then good; if it isn't then you can't, you know. I don't know. It's some people are quite doctrinaire about it. I don't--I'm not sure--I mean I'm not--I'm not ready to give up vanilla and coffee and lemons myself but **[Laughs]** I mean, you know. Like I said, as far as it's practical it's a good idea.

00:46:45

I--I think it's the way we once all lived. I mean it's the way people once--before there was such a system of transportation as we have today. I think probably when I was growing up that was all we did, and you would get like oranges and stuff, but otherwise, you know, you didn't--most of what you got was from nearby anyway. So it's not that radical a concept. I think modern refrigeration and modern transportation has sort of caused it to not be necessary but I think it's certainly probably healthier, don't you think, I mean just because things are fresher. And again all the thing about keeping your money in your community I think is a very good idea, a good sound economic policy whenever you can do that--particularly if you--if supporting small businesses and stuff because that really is like the backbone of things to me. You know, when you spend money at McDonald's that's fine, you know, but it--it doesn't--I mean, it pays the wage of the person that served you perhaps but the--the big--the big benefits go somewhere else, you know, of the money so--.

00:47:41

AY: Do your restaurant patrons come to you with specific questions about the dishes you prepare and how your ingredients are acquired?

00:47:51

BS: Yes, and--and more--even more than that. People bring me things they've gotten elsewhere and ask me to figure out what it is, and that's happened a lot lately. There's this woman that spends half her year in Alaska and half her year here and there's this buffalo wing sauce that she's found in Anchorage and she's--has brought it back and come into the kitchen and demanded that I analyze it--the stuff. *[Laughs]* And I've tried. It is really--it is really good. I don't think it's--I don't know if it's worth all the trouble she's gone to but--so yeah. And--and people--the phone will ring and it'll be like, you know, six o'clock and--and okay, I'm standing at the stove and I--you know *[Laughs]*--it happens all the time.

00:48:29

AY: Is there anything else that you would like to add to this oral history or anything that you think that I didn't bring up in our conversation that should be noted?

00:48:40

BS: Well I don't know. I don't know if I stressed enough that how cool I think the--the interaction between all the different components of this food scene here are. I want to make sure everyone realizes that it's a very good thing. It's good for sort of the spirit of the place we live in I think. It's one of the things that make it--it's like the music scene here; it's--it's--it's an equivalent to me of one of the things that makes this like a fantastic place to live. We're so lucky

to be here I think. And--and I think it's gratifying that these people have made--I mean Ken Dawson put like his daughters through college on that farm of his and I think that's a remarkable thing. **[Laughs]** I think we owe it to him to buy his tomatoes as long as he wants to sell them just for--just perseverance. I mean I--I find these people sort of--they've deliberately, it seems to me, chosen a modest life with hard work and I find--I find that admirable, you know.

00:49:46

You know, instead of--you know, I mean I'm sure they're all very smart and they're probably highly educated and could have done other things and become wealthy and--and whatever but they--they chose this and I think that's sort of--that's quite admirable.

00:49:57

AY: Why do you think this--this community, this tight-knit community of consumers and producers of food happened here near Chapel Hill, near Carrboro, why this area?

00:50:08

BS: Well the University would probably be the main--this--this was always the place. This was--you're from Pennsylvania so you--Chapel Hill was always the place where you sent the--the person in your family who you didn't know what to do with. So **[Laughs]**--so anyway so it was--it was more receptive to new ideas I think, less--I've often thought that the world was divided into like--I call it the potato salad thing like there's some people that think there's only one kind of potato salad and there's some people that are always interested in any kind of potato salad. And the ones that liked all kinds came here, so--. **[Laughs]**

00:50:48

AY: I've noticed since we've moved inside to the dining area in Crook's Corner that you have all of this beautiful artwork up on the walls and you're in the process of changing the artwork. So could you speak about that?

00:50:58

BS: I could. Yeah. This is actually a good friend of mine, her name is Kaola Allen, Kaola Allen Phoenix, actually. I've known her for a million years. Actually I knew her as long as I've known Ken Dawson and she is--she's an artist and this is her work and this is the style of--I think it's lovely too. This is her--her present style. I mean I've known her forever, like I said, so her work has changed.

00:51:17

The guy that did these oils that have just gone down--I don't know this guy. He's from Beaufort and he's a fantastic painter. His name is Womble [Interviewer's note: Jimmy Craig Womble]. And it's like scenes from the coast and stuff and they were just beautiful. They were a little expensive but they weren't too expensive but in--in this economy people just don't snatch things off the wall like they used to. It used to be people would come in and say, "\$300? Sure, I'll take it." It happened all the time.

00:51:36

We don't have people do that so much now but I think he probably will pick up a lot of clients from this show because everybody loved it, you know, scenes of--of marshes and fishing boats and--and all kinds of things down East. He's just a wonderful painter. I didn't know him before. Kaola like I said I've known forever and she does collage and this seems to be prints, as well. This just went up this morning so I haven't even had a chance to really look at it, but we change things out every month. More or less things hang a month and it takes probably a year to

get on the list because Gene, the owner, has to just--has to like it first of all and then yeah; and-- and things are for sale. We don't take any commission and it's--it keeps the place, you know, sort of lively and changing. I think it's a real--it's good for all around, you know, for us and them and--. And this show is really warm and nice. It really makes the room look nice I think, yeah.

00:52:26

AY: I also see, looking around, that you have a wonderful collection of various sculptures of pigs and images of pigs. Can you talk a little bit about that collection?

00:52:36

BS: Sure. Actually it's not mine but it's all Gene's stuff but people bring things. It just--they just show up with them like that winged pig. It's like a cast iron thing or something. Someone's mother brought us that. Laird Dixon made the pig with wings up there and that gourd thing; I don't remember where that came from. People just show up with them. It's amazing. They're--they're endless examples of pig art and it makes sense because we have the pig on the roof that Bob Gaston did years ago. Bob Gaston later went on to make Mardi Gras floats for a living so it was perfect. But you know, and even though--I mean we certainly serve pork here but it's not the main thing we serve but it's just our--our deal now, you know, whether we like it or not, so--. **[Laughs]**

00:53:19

AY: Before we end the interview is there anything else that you'd like to chat about?

00:53:24

BS: Oh I don't know. I'm very pleased the SFA is doing this. I love the oral histories. Yeah, I will. I'll give Amy a compliment because I'm a great fan of hers [Interviewer's note: Amy Evans Streeter of the Southern Foodways Alliance]. And I--I've been--like I said, I've been to most of the fieldtrips and I've seen her sit down with these people and like--I know when she came here she did Cliff, in particular because I deal with Cliff all the time, and--and Dip too but I think she has a talent [Interviewer's note: Cliff Collins of Cliff's Meat Market in Carrboro, NC and Mildred "Dip" Council of Mama Dip's Country Cooking Restaurant in Chapel Hill, NC]. I don't even know if she even knows this--where she doesn't make the people she interviews feel like they're a specimen of sorts--you know what I mean? And they love her. I mean Cliff asks about her every time I see him--every time I see him practically. Or, if I say I'm going to Oxford, "Oh, tell Amy hello." And all this stuff. I think she has a real talent for this and I'm really grateful that--that you all do this. I mean that--I know Sara does it too and lots of people but yeah [Interviewer's note: Sara Camp Arnold]. I think it's a really good thing to--to document whatever.

00:54:16

I mean yeah I was--the subjects are limitless of course, so but I'm really glad that this is part of the SFA Project.

00:54:25

AY: Well thank you very much, and that concludes our interview for today.

00:54:29

[End Bill Smith Interview]