

CHARLES REAGAN WILSON
Oxford, MS

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Date: January 31, 2005
Location: Center for the Study of Southern Culture – Oxford, MS
Interviewer: Amy Evans, Southern Foodways Alliance
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs
Length: 45 minutes
Project: SFA Founders

[Begin Charles Reagan Wilson Interview]**00:00:01**

Amy Evans: This is Monday, January 31, 2005, and this is Amy Evans at the Center for the Study of Southern Culture with Dr. Charles Reagan Wilson, the Director of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture. And Dr. Wilson, would you please state your name and your occupation for the record?

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Charles Reagan Wilson: I'm Charles Reagan Wilson, Director of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi and Professor of History and Southern Studies.

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AE: Wonderful, and we are here to discuss the founding of the Southern Foodways Alliance and you're one of the original founding members of which I believe there are about fifty or so. And to just begin, why don't you speak a little bit about how you became involved in the Southern Foodways Alliance?

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CRW: Well the—I became involved through John T. Edge. John T. was a student here at the University in our Southern Studies Program and I had taught him and read papers he had written about food, so I knew he had this interest. He had started making contacts with people in the kind of food world. I—it was about the time that I became Director of the Center in 1998, and I had started getting contacts myself with people who were trying to start Southern food groups, and

they were people I hadn't really worked with and mostly didn't know and nothing really came of them.

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But John T. kept kind of working away and—and making contacts and—and then he made the suggestion. I don't remember exactly the details at the time—about the contacts that he had made, the network that had begun to come together of people who were interested in starting an organization that would bring together a lot of people who had talked about different—about their own separate groups but to kind of merge them. And they were looking for an institutional home. And he and I talked about the Center as that institutional home.

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So out of that kind of gradual interest and focus came the meeting in Birmingham and Ann Abadie, our Associate Director and I drove over and had a—had a—an interesting meeting with all of these people. We kind of were all feeling each other out because it was clear that a lot of what was needed was—was trust among us because we were different kinds of people. Some of us were academics. Some were food writers at newspapers and magazines. Some were chefs. And just a variety of people, who for whatever reason were interested in—in more than their own interest in food.

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I think what—what was going on was that there needed to be some—the time was right for some larger coming together. So we all—as this happens in those kinds of meetings we all have to kind of get to know each other and see what everybody's position was and all of this. And I wanted to be welcoming you know for the Center, on behalf of the Center; that was what I saw my job as being, to let them know we really were interested in this, saw the value of it, understood the dimensions of it—that it was not a purely academic kind of endeavor even though

we're a university. The Center for the Study of Southern Culture has a long history of bridging the worlds—the gaps between the academic research and—and teaching with broader public audiences and it struck me this was a prime way to do that.

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AE: So if we could back up a little bit for a second, and you were speaking about some other people who had approached you about Southern food and kind of beginning conversations about organizations or focus on Southern foodways, and then there also were the American Southern Food Institute and the Society for Preservation and Revitalization of Southern Food. Did you have any knowledge or involvement in those organizations?

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CRW: I had knowledge of those. I had somehow been on the—in the loop in terms of correspondence with some of those but I was not really involved. I don't think I had even really responded. I don't know that—I think I may have been invited to meetings and I hadn't been able to—to go.

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So I knew about them, but didn't really have any working knowledge of them.

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AE: Uh-hmm, so in a general sense what would you say kind of the landscape of Southern Foodways' history or academic pursuit or organizationally speaking, what kinds of things were going on that you would describe the genre of study or appreciation?

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CRW: Hmm, well I had—as a historian and someone who—whose areas are social history and cultural history I knew that food could be an entrée to understand culture. European historians had pioneered in this in many ways the **[Inaudible]** School of History. So I knew—I could see the research potentials. I didn't think that this had really hit the South yet; there weren't very many people working on kind of academic works, but I saw the value you know of this—the potential that's the word—the potential at that point.

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I had of course noticed the cookbooks that had begun to appear, which suggested a kind of popular interest in food that was beginning to crest or to—to crystallize. And then so it was I guess a sense of the potential of the area. And in terms of the Center's work, we get lots of proposals for projects and so it's always a matter of evaluating of all these—is it something the Center should be doing or could be doing and so that was certainly part of what I was trying to evaluate.

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And I—I had—could see that there were—there might be ways where food could be like music and literature that the South had—that the Southern Studies Center had long-been studying and teaching about and maybe food was another way to extend that.

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Now I wasn't sure about that because you know you could—you could see interest in food as just being a popular interest. There wasn't a lot of scholarship at that point or a lot of—a lot had been written, so I wasn't really sure but that's what I thought would be interesting about it in terms of the Center's mission and what we do.

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AE: And so what was it about the energy of the group that convened in Birmingham at the organizational meeting that made this happen?

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CRW: Well there were smart witty people and there's always something to be said for people like that. I was impressed with them as a group. There—there were many large personalities involved. And so—and I think it's safe to say there was some tensions in terms of people being very outspoken about what they believed and you know they might have you know the—the chefs might have a different viewpoint than the—the food writers and the scholars and all of this—this mix, but they were very willing to talk about it and—and you know you could see the passion that was there in their work. And that was what impressed me also.

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AE: Was the Southern Foodways Alliance's mission solidified at that meeting or was it just kind of a meeting of the minds to see how to proceed or—?

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CRW: To be honest I don't remember fully. I know that we talked about; yeah we talked—we did talk about the—the mission of why—why we needed this group, you know what did we really need as an organization. So I can't remember whether—I think we did talk—we talked about a kind of agreement between the Center and the Organization. We did talk about that. We talked some about the kind of vision of this but we also talked about the logistics of how we would work out the details of it being anchored at the—at the Center at the University and what

kinds of things we needed to put in a kind of memorandum of agreement. So we—we made a lot of progress at that meeting, a lot of real hands-on progress.

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AE: And so as far as the nuts and bolts and the Center being an umbrella for the Southern Foodways Alliance and—?

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CRW: I think that was worked out at the meeting. Everybody kind of agreed to that and we made some progress on working out the details of it.

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AE: And then how do you—do you have a recollection of how you left the meeting and what the next steps were going to be or—?

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CRW: Hmm; well I think the next steps were to—my memory is to actually do a formal agreement between the Southern Foodways Alliance and the University to—to make this happen and to work out the final details. I think that was the next step. And I can't remember whether we—we had talked about—I think we had talked about a Symposium at that point and I—but I can't remember really how much we talked about that or whether we planned some of that.

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AE: Well as the Director of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture here at the University of Mississippi internally as far as the University community is concerned what was your job to—did you have to convince anyone here at the University that this was worth letting happen or as Director was that just your say-so?

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CRW: It was more or less my say-so. We did—and this was—as I said, this was about the time I was becoming Director. I hadn't been Director very long and so we were going through this period of meetings with the faculty and graduate students at the time and our advisory committee and—and of course I met with the Dean periodically so I—I kept them all informed about this. And—and kind of portrayed this as part of—part of my agenda or whatever as the new Director. And I think because I was the new Director people gave me a lot of leeway in terms of trust at that point and so I—I can't remember any really questioning about the value of it from—from that period. And so it fell into place pretty—pretty easily. I think people you know if they had doubts they didn't really share them with me. And it—I tried to explain it in terms of the things we did with music and literature and you know the Center has a long history of—of convening meetings and convening public audiences, gathering public audiences to talk about the South, to tell about the South as Faulkner said.

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And so this was an extension of all of that, so I—I thought it was an exciting new project. I didn't see it as a radical break from the kinds of things that we had been doing.

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AE: Sure. Well did you attend the first Symposium that was in '98 that was prior to the organizational meeting?

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CRW: I did. I did but I was not really very involved to tell you the truth. I can't remember much about it, but I was—I was there.

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AE: Right; and then what about the Symposia that followed, the first—after the organizational meeting, the first big event that was the Southern Foodways Alliance?

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CRW: Well John T. was always good to involve me on the program of these meetings to kind of welcome people and asked me to—I would say something with some content to help frame the whole meeting, which I appreciated and enjoyed. I always enjoy doing that thinking about the Symposium topic that year and what I can say to place it in terms of broader framing in terms of Southern culture. But again, I can't remember exactly that—that one.

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AE: And so that was your role in kind of developing programming I guess if you will to participate in each Symposia each year and have a role in welcoming and announcing and kind of book-ending the Symposia theme or what have you. Do you have a favorite Symposia year that you can think of?

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CRW: Well the barbeque year and it was because of the topic; there were a lot of good people here, a lot of people that I know, knew already on the program probably more than the other—other Symposia. But I also liked that topic because of the field trip. I went to Central Texas on the summer field trip and that was a very memorable experience to—to do all of that barbeque eating and I'm from Texas and had gone to school in Central Texas in Austin. And so that was kind of a homecoming and I gave a presentation about barbeque geography and that was fun to think about. I felt more involved I guess that year because of giving that presentation at the field trip—on the field trip.

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But I've enjoyed all of—all of them. I mean the one last year on Food and Black and White and Race Relations I thought was a highly meaningful and the most significant of all because of the topic probably and the way served as we hoped it would as a—a kind of new way to get into the whole issue of racial reconciliation. And so I thought people were very engaged in that Seminar, in that Symposium and I thought the story that came out of it in the *New York Times* certainly focused attention on the Southern Foodways Alliance as a very substantive kind of group in their conversations. So I thought that—that Symposium was a real kind of landmark in terms of the recognition of the Southern Foodways Alliance for their work.

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AE: Would you have imagined that an organization so young, five or six or seven years would have gathered that kind of momentum to have a kind of Symposia like this last year?

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CRW: Well you know I—I was so impressed with that—at that original meeting with the group and I’m always impressed with the—the people who come to the Southern Foodways Alliance and the people who are so active in it, the leadership of it, you know people who are willing to sacrifice their time to serve on the Advisory Board or do a lot of other things that have to be done—fund-raising and other things. So I—I—early on I could see the energy that was in that; of course you—you never know how things are going to develop and it’s—it was hard at that point to know whether we’d do more than another Symposia you know and see how it goes. But I could certainly see the—because of the individuals involved, the likelihood of some kind of success at that point.

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AE: So then on that note what would you say that the Southern Foodways Alliance has brought to the Center?

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CRW: Well I think the Southern Foodways Alliance has linked the Center to a whole new group of people who are interested in the South, a very focused group, who are passionate about the South itself. You know I think that their passionate about food but they’re also passionate about the South and so that’s been good for the Center, kind of energizing every fall as we think about the Symposium as it comes and it’s—I think it’s brought together an interesting mix of people on the Symposia you know the scholars who may be used to going to different kinds of Symposia where—where they may go to an Academic Symposium where they prepare formal heavily footnoted papers and present them and the Southern Foodways Symposium is more of

conversations and to present their—their work they've already done, the research they've already done and engage with interested people.

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Trudier Harris last fall I thought was a wonderful—had a wonderful role on the panel raising all sorts of questions and—and looking at—at the role of gender and race and—and how they intersect with food. And I think to involve scholars who are major scholars who may or may not have worked specifically on food, but it's a way to get them to think about the value of food as—as an entrée to understanding Southern culture more broadly, I think it's—it's a different perspective. And I think the—I think the interdisciplinary study of the South in the last twenty years or so has moved into areas that—that can intersect with food, issues of race, class, and gender, issues of different places within the South, different regions within the South, I think that issues of—of you know dominant cultures, subordinate cultures, accommodation of cultures, resistance to cultural dominance, all these kinds of sophisticated intellectual concepts relate—can relate to food. Food can be a way to look at them.

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There's a great interest in folk culture and popular culture and foodways certainly is very revealing of both of those in particular. So I feel like in the—the—the research and scholarly and academic areas of Southern studies, the interdisciplinary study of the South that food has been for the whole area, all of us across the country and the world who are interested in Southern studies it's been an infusion of new curiosity and—and a new way to look at the South.

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AE: Has that been reflected in the graduate students here at the Center?

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CRW: Um, yes; it has been. That's one of the interesting things over the last five years or so. We now attract students who are interested in food among other things. And sometimes they get interested in food whenever they get here and see the work of the Southern Foodways Alliance. We had a student who graduated last year, Brooke of course, who did her thesis on greens and has gone on now to a doctoral program in Interdisciplinary Studies at the University of California at Davis where she will continue studying food. They have—that's one of the areas they specialize in cultural studies is foodways.

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So and we have others—other students who are interested in food and do seminar papers on food and will do theses and will go on to do more work and so I think it's making the University a Center of Foodways Studies which are growing as an academic area across the country. There are a lot of people now who teach courses in—in anthropology or folklore or cultural studies programs across the country, so our students can link up with not only the study of the South but this broader field of cultural studies and foodways.

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AE: Do you foresee adding some course listing in the Southern Studies Program that is specifically food-related?

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CRW: Well I don't know whether we would add a specific course. We try to—to not have an overloaded curriculum of specifically Southern Studies courses because we defer to the Departments often to let them offer specific courses. We like to have core courses. But we can

offer foodways courses through special topics courses and we can have students make use of independent study courses to do focused readings and research on foodways. So I think we can accommodate student interest that way.

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We don't really have an academic professorship that is dedicated to foodways studies and we really probably need that to—to expand our academic offerings on foodways.

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AE: Well to change gears a tiny bit, speaking again to the Southern Foodways Alliance and its mission and—and food and culture, we've—you've spoken to how—what that means to you intellectually but on a more personal note what does that mean to you?

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CRW: Uh, well, I think all of this talk about food has gotten me thinking about it more in terms of my own research and writing and teaching. So I make use of foodways as illustrations often now in ways I wouldn't have before. I wouldn't have done that before. Whenever I give lectures about the South I often bring food into it as illustrations of points. I think that in studying culture you have—there's so much now about the importance of symbolism and ritual about the imagery and the performance of culture and food can relate to that. So I talk about that just as I would—in a lecture might use—play some songs to illustrate something you know from the great reservoir of Southern music, to illustrate some points about culture now I'll talk about food, you know as part of the illustration of what the South is or who Southerners are.

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I have written some. I wrote the Introduction to the *Geo-Gracious Plenty*. That was a wonderful piece for me to have the chance to write about the geography of food in the South. And so I see myself doing more of that probably in the future, writing more about food in terms of Southern culture.

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AE: Do you have any ideas about projects you'd like to see happen or topics covered within the Southern Foodways Alliance in the future?

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CRW: Hmm, well, I would somehow like to see us do more on campus. You know the Southern Foodways Alliance is a—a very distinct group off-campus and that's really—and it's like a lot of the things the Center does. We have a very broad network across the region and across the nation of people interested in—in our work on music and literature. It's not just in Oxford; it's not just in Mississippi. And the Southern Foodways Alliance is like that. And that is a great strength but I would love for us to be able to do more on campus with having guest lecturers that aren't part of the Symposium but would just come in and scholars who have written about—maybe about you know food in the global context, but maybe not—have not have thought about the South, you know major scholars to get them to come and to think about the South in terms of their theories about food around the world and to have more student involvement. You know I'd love to attract more students who will do more theses and—and I think you know there's so many topics in terms of the Symposia that I wouldn't know where to start. But certainly I think bourbon would be a good topic. **[Laughs]**

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AE: Definitely.

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CRW: Beverages perhaps; perhaps beverages.

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AE: Yes. Well, and what do you think about the oral history campaign that the Southern Foodways Alliance has initiated over the past couple of years?

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CRW: I think the oral history project is superb. I think it is a—one of the best things the Southern Foodways Alliance does. I think it—it—um; it really documents food in the South in a very tangible way. I think it creates this archive that will be one of the most valuable archives the University has and that the field of Southern studies has. I think the—I think the focus has been good in terms of not trying to do too much, to try to focus on documenting certain groups, to—to get some—some depth in that, so I think it's a kind of model of an oral history program and I'm very proud of it.

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AE: Wonderful. Well we're definitely going to take a turn now and go back to the more personal questions and get an idea of your personal background and growing up and your ideas about Southern food. And to begin that, could I ask for your date and place of birth?

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CRW: I was born February 2, 1948 in Nashville, Tennessee, Vanderbilt University Hospital. My family on both sides were from small towns north of Nashville in Robertson County, tobacco-growing country; my dad grew up on a tobacco farm. And hmm; we moved to Texas when I was nine years old to West Texas and so I was plunked down in the middle—on the border with Mexico in this very bicultural area, but every summer we would return to Nashville and spend two months or so with my grandparents in a little town called Green Briar, Tennessee, north of Nashville. So I grew up with this—all these different kinds of cultures around me, this small town South being one of them, but also the suburbs in Texas and—and the Hispanic culture of West Texas around me.

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So all of that was part of my cultural inheritance I guess.

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AE: Can you speak a little bit to the differences in regional foodways growing up and what you experienced in Nashville during the summer as opposed to growing up in El Paso?

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CRW: Uh-hmm, well, yeah, in—in Tennessee it was Southern—what I would think of as Southern traditional food often. My—and—and the small town context was awfully important because of my grandparents. My grandmother by the time I was old enough to really know her had stopped cooking much. She cooked some; she cooked big Sunday dinners that was one thing, but she would—and she would cook breakfast. My grandfather liked a good hearty breakfast, but they would eat out at lunch and evening. And there were two cafés in this little

town, Mrs. Wade's and Buster's. And so lunch every day was one and dinner was the other usually.

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And they would always argue over whether they were going—where they were going to go for lunch. You know he would want to go to one and she'd want to go to the other even though they knew they were going to go to the other one at night, it didn't—you know. But that was the—they were the grandparents, and so we would go and they both were just little cafés. But Buster's had his garden right next to his café. And so you could—he would go out and you'd see him picking the fresh corn in the summer when we were there and then we'd have these wonderful—this wonderful corn.

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Lots of plate lunches; I grew up in a world of plate lunches. And my grandmother had a real eye for plate lunches. We would sometimes drive thirty miles or so to a plate lunch place that she liked in the summers and get our fresh vegetables and—. And you know we would—when we were up there we would go out with my cousin and aunt and uncle in Nashville, around Nashville, and usually go out to eat catfish or eat barbeque—a lot of that. We also were you know this was the fifties and sixties and so this was the world of fast food coming to Nashville also. And so that was part of our summers. You know we would—at lunch for you know kids going out to a fast-food that was—that was—that was new you know. I think that is a great topic about that transition in the South from the cafés and the plate lunches into a world of—of fast food.

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I remember going with my grandmother one time who certainly was not used to McDonald's but there was a McDonald's in—in Madison, Tennessee near Nashville where we

would go. And we took her one day and she couldn't quite get why she couldn't get mashed potatoes rather than French fries you know. So and—and then the—of course the big family reunions and Sunday dinners, my parents were both church people and so there was a lot of Sunday dinners with family, extended family, family reunions every summer, all of that and everybody bringing wonderful food.

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AE: Do you have a favorite meal or food item from those days?

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CRW: Hmm, well, you know, my grandmother's fried chicken is very good and I remember she would—even though she didn't like to cook, it didn't seem to bother her to do a big Sunday dinner. You know and then we'd have the food left out all day; you know so we'd have the fried chicken and mashed potatoes and squash and fresh tomatoes and all of this for lunch or dinner as it was known. And then she'd just leave that out on the dining room table and we'd snack on it at night and all of this.

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I also remember watermelon on the back porch of my grandparents' house just a big slice of watermelon and spitting the seeds out. And it was just wonderful. Fourth of July also in Green Briar, Tennessee they had this wonderful picnic and it was the—just a classic Southern picnic where you'd have the barbeque that had been whole-hog cooked all night and fish sandwiches that were you know fresh catfish that—just wonderful stuff. And then you'd have the politicians speaking and—and all of that, so that was a very memorable meal, very memorable meals for me you know in that Fourth of July picnic in Green Briar.

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In Texas, it was different. We—I guess we didn't eat as much of those iconic Southern foods. We ate more beef, which may be part of going to Texas, but I remember eating lots of beef growing up in Texas, lots of steaks of different sorts.

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AE: Did both your parents cook?

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CRW: My dad didn't. Well no, he didn't really cook much—usually my mom. And then my mom when—about the time that my brother and I were early teenagers she started working; she became a real estate broker. So she was gone a lot and my brother and I learned to cook a little bit, enough to you know get by or whatever. So we were often doing a very simple meal but that usually was some kind of steak and potatoes, so it was kind of meat and potatoes in—in Texas.

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And the older I got though the more Mexican food we ate. We didn't eat a lot of Mexican food at home. My mom would make tacos a lot, you know or often, but when I started eating out more on my own then Mexican food was definitely what I—what I liked. And what else. We didn't get catfish much out there in those days—I don't think ever. You know there were catfish cabin kinds of places though that we would eat sometimes I think in—I guess in El Paso. But every summer would be going back to Tennessee, so that was like every year the—the eating as well as everything else was a little different when we went back to Tennessee.

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AE: Uh-hmm. Do you cook?

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CRW: I do cook; yes.

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AE: What do you like to cook?

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CRW: I cook—I like to grill and I like to smoke. I have a smoker and I love to—that’s been just within the last couple of years. I have become a smoker with wood and I love that. That’s very satisfying somehow to spend a day smoking. I cook other things, Mexican food some, and very specific things but we grill a great deal so I cook a lot—quite a bit.

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AE: Uh-hmm. So you’ve held onto those ties to both the Mexican traditions in El Paso and the Deep South traditions in Texas and Mississippi now?

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CRW: Yes. Yes, definitely, definitely.

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AE: Well would you say that there was a moment when you cultivated an interest in food as scholarship or was there kind of a moment that—that light bulb went off prior to the Southern Foodways Alliance being—?

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CRW: Ah, prior to the Southern Foodways Alliance, hmm; not really exactly. I mean I've tried to—to you know be up-to-date with scholarship in terms of what's going on, so I'm trying to think when—of course when I was editing the *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* the first time we were aware of food there was—we had food entries. I guess that was the first time I really became aware of it. John Egerton, I don't know how I got onto John Egerton because this was before had published his landmark book on Southern food. But I somehow discovered him as the—the food man, so he wrote several articles for the original *Encyclopedia* and a guy named Joe Gray Taylor wrote one of the earliest books, history—historical accounts of food in the South and I asked him to do an overview. So I guess that was the point where I began to see food as an important topic in the South. There wasn't a lot of scholarship to draw on though at that point, so but you know the—one of the things the *Encyclopedia* did was to focus interest on these kinds of topics that often had not been—the scholars had not often written about or researched in-depth and to try to open them up as areas. So I hope the *Encyclopedia* did some of that with food in terms of just focusing on that.

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And now we're doing the new *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* it's called; the second edition and we're having a whole section on food, Southern food, and John T. Edge is the editor of that section. And so that reflects I think the growth of scholarship and popular interest in—in food in the South and the fact that there's so many people now working on it that we have a

whole base of contributors to draw from that you know twenty years ago, ten years ago we would not have had. And I think the Southern Foodways Alliance is partly responsible for stimulating that interest and the Center's role is a connection with academics kind of bridging that gap and letting the academic world know about the people out there who have been writing about food has I hope been important.

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AE: Well have you seen Southern food evolve or change at all during the course of your lifetime and not really insofar as scholarship is concerned but as tradition and family and culture?

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CRW: Well I—I think yes; when I was growing up you know food—food was pretty simple and it was often in the family context that you ate whether you were going out for a plate lunch Sunday after church or you ate the Sunday dinner at your grandmother's house or all of that. And there was—there were lots of cafés and kind of roadside food that was very—had the Southern elements to it. And of course a lot of that has changed. Families have changed. There's—there's more scattering of families you know the way the life—the way lifestyles are now. People don't always sit down to dinner every night as a family. And there are fewer certainly roadside cafés, I think the old-time cafés to go to get plate lunches and all of that. But I think there's been a real renaissance of interest that I think you see in several ways. I think in terms of cookbooks you know now when we cook Southern food it's often on special occasions or it's on the weekend, you know whenever we have time to cook we'll pull out John Martin Taylor's cookbook of *The New Southern Cooking* and we're still cooking Southern food but maybe it's got a different

sauce on it you know or it's got a sauce on it, it wouldn't have had before. But it's still making use of the same ingredients, the same cooking techniques that go back a long way.

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So you—and you can go to restaurants that are upscale restaurants but you can get shrimp and grits you know which is a very signature Southern item now all across the South. And so I think you have certainly a homogenization of food, of Southern food, like the rest of the country with fast-food places and—and all of that but I think the contrary impact has been through cookbooks, through restaurants, through popular interests in adapting Southern ways to the modern world and in effect and so it becomes kind of a metaphor for the South in the general I think that—that even though things change you can still make use of that traditional South and Southern culture in—in new ways.

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AE: Does that parallel your area of specialization, which is religion in the South? Are there some parallels there with loss of tradition in the Deep South as far as any of that is concerned?

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CRW: Yeah, I think that's a good point. It is—it is a parallel tradition—parallel situation. Southern religion is no longer the old brush harbor and camp meetings and all of this. But religion is still important in the South whether you're in a traditional Southern Evangelical Church or you're in a new large community church or whatever. I think people in the South continue to take religion seriously; often whether they go to church or not it's still part of the value-system and all of this, the world view, but it's a matter of adapting things from the—from

the past into new—into new forms and—and new ways and—and I think that’s parallel with food.

00:40:15

AE: And how does foodways history and cultural crop up in your religious scholarship? Talk about that a little bit.

00:40:26

CRW: Um, well I’m curious about that but I haven’t really found a way to do that you know. I would like to find a way to do that. I think there’s some things like funeral food and dinner on the grounds that can be nice cultural rituals and symbols that I talk about and that you could do more with. But I could see those as separate studies; you know a study of dinner on the grounds as a kind of anthropological study would be a wonderful study involving the meanings of that. Those of us who study culture often talk about it in terms of what do things mean; that’s what cultural studies is about. And I think you could—you could deconstruct funeral food and dinner on the grounds of the Wednesday night meal the church ladies cook and all of that would be very rich in meanings for analysis.

00:41:16

So I would like to—to get into that in the future.

00:41:20

AE: Would you say that talking about Southern food as tradition and continuity and the reminiscing and the iconic Southern food, would you say that today that—that is kind of a romantic vision of Southern history and—or would you say that it’s pretty accurate?

00:41:41

CRW: Well I think it can be romantic and it can—it can be easily sentimentalized, you know remembering your grandmother’s meals can be very sentimental and an emotional thing to do. I think whenever you try to go beyond that though and to do a kind of analysis and look at the kinds of concepts that cultural studies looks at that—that can diminish that romanticism. It depends on how you approach it I think and what perspective you put on your—your writing about it or talking about Southern food because it certainly can—can be a kind of narcissistic thing you know to talk about food and—and how we love our food. And that can—that can be very narcissistic. And Southerners aren't given to that you know definitely in terms of not just food but other things—pride in our culture and that’s—that’s something but I think to really understand the importance of food, you won't—you won't get to the real understanding of the significance and importance of it if you just leave it there. So we need to go deeper; eat a little more.

00:42:53

AE: [*Laughs*] Okay, well on that note, can you describe a meal that is totemic(ally) Southern?

00:43:01

CRW: Ah, hmm, well there are so many ways to do that I think. And I guess there’s just so many ways to do that I don’t know where to start. One of the things that—that I have written about and like to talk about though is my—my wife’s family because they are Southern with a twist in a sense. It—they are Lebanese by ancestry and so I think of the—the meals that my wife’s grandmother used to cook as being very Southern because they were—they had fried

chicken and black-eyed peas but also kibbeh and stuffed grape leaves. And they had come with this ethnic identity and ethnic background and they retained it through food. But they accommodated the South and the South accommodated them.

00:44:20

And so I see food—you know fried chicken may be the most totemic Southern food, certainly a case can be made for that. But I think now we understand that things like tamales can also be in parts of the South very totemic and iconic and so I think that—that meal explains the diversity of the South and yet the power of the South to really unify people's identity and culture through food.

00:44:59

AE: Well that's a wonderful and perfect note to end on I believe. Might there be anything else you'd like to add though that we didn't cover?

00:45:05

CRW: I don't guess so. I think the Center has definitely benefited from the work of the Southern Foodways Alliance. I think a lot of us around the Center have broadened our interest in the South because of this focus on foodways and I see that continuing.

00:45:24

[End Charles Reagan Wilson Interview]