

EDNA STEWART
Edna's Restaurant - Chicago, IL

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Date: March 26, 2008

Location: Edna's Restaurant

Interviewer: Amy Evans

Length: 54 minutes

Project: Chicago Eats/TABASCO Guardians of the Tradition

[Begin Edna Stewart Interview]

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Amy Evans: I'm fine. All right, this is Amy Evans for the Southern Foodways Alliance on Wednesday, March 26, 2008 in Chicago, Illinois. And I'm at Edna's Soul Food Restaurant with Miss Edna Stewart, herself. And, Ms. Stewart, if you wouldn't mind saying your name and also your birth date for the record?

00:00:19

Edna Stewart: My name is Edna L. Stewart; my birth date is June 6, 1938.

00:00:26

AE: Uh-hmm. And now, we're at your soul food restaurant here, which I know has a reputation that it—that precedes it, but I wonder if you could tell me about your early days, before you came into the restaurant business.

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ES: Well, my early days before I came in the restaurant is—well I went to school in Chicago. I started nursing school in Chicago [at] Harold Washington downtown in the loop. And I just was a regular worker at the time when I was going to school before I started in the restaurant—just a mother, that's all.

00:01:08

AE: Now, are you a native of Chicago?

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ES: Yes, I am. I was born and raised in Chicago on the South Side of Chicago, came to the west side in 1955, and I've been over here ever since.

00:01:22

AE: Now what made you leave nursing school and decide to open a restaurant?

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ES: Well the reason that I quit nursing school [was] because my father wanted to open up a restaurant, and I'm thinking that I would go back to school. But after I got into the restaurant business, I just kept going.

00:01:42

AE: So you started out in your father's restaurant, then?

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ES: Well him and I both was going to be partners in the restaurant, and my ex-husband he was a cook and so all three of us started together.

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AE: May I ask your—your ex-husband's name and also your father's name?

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ES: Okay, my ex-husband's name was Johnny Stewart—is Johnny Stewart. He is still living. My father's name is—was Samuel Mitchell, Sr.

00:02:11

AE: And so how about how old were you when you all decided to get this restaurant venture going?

00:02:16

ES: Okay, I was around about twenty-three years old when I started into the restaurant business. And he wanted a restaurant, so I said, “Okay.” And out of the family of five, I was the only cook at home, besides my mom, so I liked to cook anyway. I was always in the kitchen at home with my mother. And I could cook a meal when I was almost seven or eight years old, so it was an adventure for me too.

00:02:43

AE: Do you remember one of the first meals that you ever made by yourself?

00:02:47

ES: No, no way. No, I don’t remember.

00:02:51

AE: Yeah?

00:02:52

ES: But we always had regular soul food, you know, like I would fry chicken and just different stuff like that—just regular cooking.

00:03:02

AE: And what was your father doing before the restaurant?

00:03:05

ES: Well my father used to work for a machinery company, and he worked for them for about thirty years or more. So he was mostly in the machinery business—new and used machines—and he could break them down and put them back together and stuff like that.

00:03:21

AE: So was he wanting to be his own boss and rely on his daughter to do all the cooking?

00:03:26

ES: Yes. Because he couldn't cook, okay. [*Laughs*] He couldn't cook at all. But on Sundays he would cook—every Sunday he would cook our Sunday—Sunday breakfast and I remember that now; I remember that every Sunday we would have—first of all, he'd start out with grapefruit and then when he finished that we would have brains and eggs. And I know you probably don't know anything about brains and eggs, do you? [*Laughs*]

00:03:50

AE: Uh-hmm.

00:03:50

ES: Oh, okay. And he would fry bacon and ham and he would fix breakfast now. That was—that was his main thing on Sundays was breakfast before we went to church on Sundays, yeah.

00:04:05

AE: And so is that restaurant that you opened with your father this restaurant or is that—is that something else?

00:04:11

ES: Well, we're right at Edie [Avenue]; it was right at Albany, so like it's a half a block east of here, where the housing is now, okay. But that was before the riots, you know, uh-hmm.

00:04:22

AE: And so what was the name of that restaurant when y'all first started?

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ES: Of course it was Edna's. [*Laughs*] Yeah. Yeah, it's always Edna's. We opened up two or three places and always Edna's, yeah.

00:04:33

AE: And so that would have been in the [nineteen]'50s sometime that you opened?

00:04:34

ES: No, '66, 1966.

00:04:39

AE: Oh, really?

00:04:39

ES: Uh-hmm. So I did forty-two years a couple of weeks ago, March 9th. Uh-hmm, forty-two years on this block, yeah.

00:04:50

AE: So can you tell me what it was like when y'all first opened your doors at the original Edna's?

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ES: Well, when we first opened, we happened to be renting in a bowling alley and a dance hall/skating rink so automatically, when we opened the doors, we had customers. It was a bowling league there like three or four nights a week. On Sundays they had a great big bowling club and so it was you know—it was just regular, you know. We had customers right away, yeah. And then after—then about a year later we opened up the lounge, so we had the restaurant and the lounge in the same building, yeah.

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AE: And what—what went on in the lounge? Did you serve food over there?

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ES: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. If you came in the restaurant and you wanted a cocktail, all you had to do was walk across the hall and you'd be in the lounge, and then we would just serve you in the lounge, yeah, uh-hmm, yeah.

00:05:46

AE: And so that first location you opened in '66 and that was—the '60s were a turbulent time everywhere but particularly in Chicago and—and I—I remember reading about Martin Luther

King [Junior] coming in and eating with you, though, because he was working at a church nearby.

00:06:01

ES: Right, on Warren [Boulevard] and—well just—just in the 3100 block on Warren, which is like—a block—half a block from here. And one day in the restaurant it was a white girl and a black guy, and they had on jeans, and in 1966, you know, we didn't see too many jeans, okay. And we didn't see a mixed racial couple on Madison Street. And so they would come in and they would say, well, "Oh, that looks good." So finally, they would probably have a piece of cornbread and some syrup. And she would always sit on her legs; you know how you sit on your legs like? And they would stay probably three, four hours, you know. Every day they would come in. And they didn't bother anybody. And then—so I just let them sit there, you know, and they would talk and they'd have a book and some writing they would be doing like they were in some kind of school or something. So one day Benét asked me, he says, "Would you like some customers?" So I looked at him and I kind of frowned, you know, and I said, "Customers? What do you mean, customers?" He said, "Would you like some more customers?" I said, "Certainly, I would love some more customers." And that's how Dr. King—well, the scouts came first. So he [Benét] was one of the scouts, but he didn't tell me that he was one of the scouts for Dr. King's organization. And that's how everybody started—Jesse—Reverend Jesse Jackson and Dorothy Tillman and Reverend Bernard Lee, Reverend Bevel, Reverend Al Sampson, and Reverend Al Sampson was the one that Dr. King—the only one I think that ordained—he ordained Dr. King, you know. I mean Dr. King ordained him, okay. So that's how I got the civil rights workers, yeah.

00:07:52

AE: So tell me about your interaction with them. I'm just curious, you know you're—

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ES: Well, you know, at that time, we were just opening. I didn't know you know when I—when they said, “Well, I want some more beans; I want some more cornbread,” I would just go back there and give it to them, you know. And my dad said, “Well give it to them; give them what they want.” They would go out and they had a special place over here on Jackson and—Jackson and California—California—Sacramento [streets], where they used to sit-in. And so I went one time; I didn't know what it was, but I followed them over there and they would—they were protesting about rental rights of—of—of property and stuff, you know. And when I went in there and opened the door and saw they were just packed on each other. That's how they were doing—and then the police would come and—and remove them, you know. But I used to stay open; my dad—we were supposed to close but my dad said, “No, don't close. Stay open until they come.” And after they would be on a march or something, they would come to the restaurant. And a lot of them wasn't making a little money, you know, and I had a little box that I used to keep their name in where they owed me, you know—like a little tin can I had. So it was fun; it was exciting. It brought a lot of people. And I didn't know at the time—I think the guy's name was Ed McCollum or Ed *Mac*Collum or something but anyway, he sent me a letter and he was with the police department at the time, but he went to the NACCP [*Note—NAACP*], and he said he remembered being in Edna's Restaurant and the people that didn't have money, they could eat and how I treated them so nice, and he invited me to lunch, you know. So I saved that letter; I don't know exactly where it is now. But it was so many people, and I guess it was a lot of reporters. But you didn't hardly know it because they would just be seeing what was going on,

seeing what the scouts was going to do and where they were going, you know. It was—it was exciting.

00:09:59

AE: So how do you explain that they descended on you and—and came to you as this kind of haven of food and support?

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ES: Well because—because of Benét and Ann; that’s the only thing I can say. Because I guess, you know, they wanted a place on the West Side, and this was like a half a block from where Dr. King would be speaking at, you know. Now I only met him one time; I—I don’t remember seeing him but once, you know. But Reverend Jackson and all of them, they were here daily, you know. They would come in every day.

00:10:30

AE: And I understand Jesse Jackson is a fan of your sweet potato pie, is that right?

00:10:35

ES: Well that’s with the sweet potatoes but—that’s what they—he—he’s not supposed to eat sweet potatoes [*Laughs*] but he do—he do like sweet potatoes, yeah. I have a picture of him up there.

00:10:49

AE: So it sounds like things got going pretty fast, pretty quick for you and your father in the restaurant business. What—what did your father think about that when—when you became so popular?

00:10:57

ES: Oh, he was excited because my father was a sharecropper, you know, and he was from Tennessee—Covington, Tennessee, you know. So him being in the restaurant business and he's his own boss and people is coming and reporters is taking pictures and he—my dad was—he was—he was such a good person, good-hearted person, you know. And he would just almost give every thing away. Yeah, he was excited. He—he enjoyed it.

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AE: Is—was your mother from Tennessee also?

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ES: Yes. They both was from Covington, Tennessee. They met and they married down there and then they came here in—in Chicago in 1936. My oldest sister was just a couple of months old when they came to Chicago. And my mom was a homemaker; he didn't want her to work at all: "Just take care of my girls." And, at the time, it was just three girls. And then my brother came like, oh, he was—he was born in '47, I think, uh-hmm. So my mother never worked but she baby-sitted, and I was able to work long hours and—and she was just the ideal mom and a grandma, okay. And she used to call herself working in the restaurant, but she didn't know what she was doing, you know. [*Laughs*] She would help pick greens or something like that, yeah.

00:12:22

AE: So do you think, given that your parents are from Tennessee and you learned to cook from your mother who was cooking what she knew from living in Tennessee, do you think there's anything *Tennessee* about the food you make here? Would you say that?

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ES: Well mostly I say I've never really lived in the South but cooking is—soul food is seasoned food, as far as I'm concerned. Because when I go down there—we used—we used to go every summer, you know. My Auntie, she would fix the food, and it would just be tasty, you know. It's seasoned food. Basically, it's like I call it soul food from the—from the soul, you know. Yeah, it's the same.

00:13:05

AE: Uh-hmm. And so let's—let's talk about some of your food. You have all kinds of things: fried chicken, ox-tails, brains and eggs you mentioned. Tell me about what's on your menu.

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ES: Okay. On the menu we have a lot of fried food, we have a lot of baked food, we have a lot of boiled food, we have short-ribs of beef, we have barbecue ribs, baby-back ribs; we do a great thing on the salmon croquets. We make our own salmon croquettes. Of course we're kind of known for our macaroni and cheese; I was on Oprah once, and she said I had the best macaroni and cheese. But in the contest I didn't win, but I don't think she judged it either, okay. We have fresh picked greens; we do fresh sweet potatoes; in the morning we have fresh hash browns for breakfast. Of course we have fried chicken; Edna's Golden Fried Chicken, they call it. We just have a big menu; we have about sixteen, seventeen different sides every day. We have a changed

bean every day, specials every day; we do a wonderful thing and it's my recipe on the chicken and dumplings, which is on Thursdays, and they're real good. A lot of people say, "Oh, no, I don't want no dumplings." But when they try them, they say, "Oh, these dumplings are good!" because they're well cooked. They're not gummy and stuff like they used to cook them a long time ago, you know. So we have a big menu.

00:14:36

AE: Has your menu always been the same since you opened?

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ES: No. We've increased it a whole lot, you know, since then. We don't do any pork; we don't cook with any meat, so a vegetarian can eat here—no pork in the vegetables at all. We do the trans-fat, you know, so it has changed a whole lot, yeah.

00:14:59

AE: Yeah. And I notice on your—your listing of your vegetables that your candied sweet potatoes are set apart from all the rest of your vegetables. Are they a little bit special?

00:15:07

ES: Well they're special because we put a lot of seasoning in them, and sometimes the sweet potatoes grow up so high [in price], sugar is high and so because we have so many different selections on the menu, we charge a little bit for the sweet potatoes, yes.

00:15:23

AE: And if I could ask you to describe your dumplings and kind of the style and how you do them without giving away any—any secrets?

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ES: Well first of all, it's the ingredients that we put in the dumplings. And then we roll the dumplings a certain thickness, you know. It's—you got to know—if you got them too thick, they're not going to come out right; and if they're too thin, they're going to break, so you got to know how you—you roll them out and that's the—that's the real secret in it, yeah.

00:15:57

AE: And tell me about your World's Best Biscuits.

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ES: Uh-huh. They the best biscuits on Earth. I have a sign out there [*Laughs*], and when we do have new customers coming in, we automatically give them a fresh biscuit when they come in and they say that it's true to the sign, you know. A lot of people stop now just because of the sign out there: "The Best Biscuits on Earth." A lot of times, recently, I been up there and they said—I says, "How did you know about Edna's?" They say, "Well, we've been traveling down Madison Street, and we decided to stop." Plus, we was in The Taste of Chicago and people say, "Well, I've been coming, but I just never got here." We be in the newspaper and, quite naturally, everybody that I talked to, they know that we have the best biscuits, yes.

00:16:43

AE: Well, I have to confess; I didn't have a biscuit today but I did have the—the corn cakes. Tell me about the corn cakes—cornbread.

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ES: Cornbread, okay. That's my special recipe, too. When we first went in business, we tried to figure out how we could keep the corn muffins hot and not—hot and not be hard and not moist. We couldn't figure it out, so I said, "Okay, I know what we'll do. We'll do it on the grill." So every time a person ordered cornbread, we do it right then and there. So it's—it's my recipe, yes, so I'm glad you enjoyed it.

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AE: Very good. And now your—your biscuits, are they buttermilk or sweet milk biscuits?

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ES: Buttermilk. They're buttermilk biscuits, yeah. I'm—I'm on—I'm working on the process of hoping to—to write a book and a recipe and put something on the market, so I don't like to give out my recipes. *[Laughs]* Yeah.

00:17:43

AE: So if you—if you do put something on the market and do a cookbook or something, are they going to be your true recipes, or are you going to change them up a little bit differently for the public?

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ES: Oh no, they would be my true recipes. I was in the *Chicago Tribune*, and they asked me would I give a recipe, and I did, at the time. I don't know what year it was, but I gave them short ribs of beef and the peach cobbler. I think it was the peach cobbler—not the biscuits—and she

said, “Now you got to make sure that it’s right, because if not, we take it—we do a test in the kitchen and it has to be right because we don’t want them to call us and it’s not—it didn’t come out.” So it has to be right; yes, it has to be the recipe.

00:18:32

AE: And so tell me about—tell me about soul food in Chicago in general and—and what—what it was like when you started. Were there many other soul food restaurants, and what it’s like now?

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ES: Well it’s—it’s—it’s a lot of soul food restaurants now but when I started, it wasn’t. Plus I’m one of the original owners; it’s a lot of restaurants, but they’re not the original owners. Plus I have where I can seat maybe 200 people, if I put both of the rooms together, you know. Everybody wants to go into the—into a restaurant, okay, but it’s not as easy as it looks, you know. It’s a lot of restaurants but ours is like soul food, you know. Some of them don’t have fresh greens and stuff like that, you know.

00:19:32

AE: So what year was it that this specific location was open?

00:19:38

ES: This one here? Okay, 1991.

00:19:42

AE: Oh, okay.

00:19:42

ES: Yeah. My father wanted—we were in a smaller place and he wanted a big restaurant, and I was saying no, and he was saying yes. We found out that he had cancer and so I—I granted his wishes, and I said okay because I was thinking about going back to school because I love children and sick people. I like to be around and help people, you know. So, but he wanted a restaurant, so I said, “Okay, let’s—let’s do the restaurant.” So this was October 31, 1991 that we moved to large quarters and since then, you know, we’ve been able to accommodate a lot of the meetings and things that the politicians have. And where I was, it was just too small, you know.

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AE: Tell me about that and—and—and soul food’s correlation and your personal relationship with politics in Chicago.

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ES: Well, I’m not really a politician. My sister is a Judge [Hon. Judy Mitchell-Davis]; she just retired off the bench. And we started like that because she was running for election and my other sister was—my older sister, she used to work for the county jail, so we always kind of been into politics but not—not just—we were in politics but not in the restaurant. But then when she started running, we was in the restaurant and then we was having different functions and things. So, quite naturally, on the West Side, just like I said, we’re about one of the largest sit-down service restaurants. We have waitresses; a lot of them don’t have waitresses, you know. So we were able to pick up a lot of business like that, you know. Whoever is somebody always wanted to come to Edna’s, okay. Yeah.

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AE: Well what is it about like food and community and that feeling of—of home that you think kind of draws that kind of crowd?

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ES: Well we have—we're on Madison Street, and we get a stigma of being Madison Street because when the riots was, a lot of things burned on Madison Street—all the way. But at Edna's, we just have a beautiful clientele of customers. Even the young people—teenagers, we right here at Marshall High School—it's like home, you know. We have—we have order here. It's order. It's nothing playing and, you know, carrying on, so a lot of people like to come. I had a young man last week, his mom called and she wanted to know the address, and I said, "Well, how old is he?" She said he wanted to come to Edna's. I said, "Well, how old is he?" She said, "He's fifteen." So I said, "Great, bring him on." So I got a chance to meet him because I was here that evening, you know, so it's just like being at home. It's a sit-down type restaurant, you know.

00:22:38

AE: And you mentioned the riots; I read that your restaurant was one of the places that was left untouched during the riots of [nineteen] '68.

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ES: Right. In this block—one block west of me—the whole two or three blocks burned, but this block didn't burn. This block was—well we stayed here for—we stayed here, I guess, probably a

week or two. I don't—I don't remember, it was so long. But when the National Guard came in, you could either go or leave, but you couldn't come back, so we stayed.

00:23:11

AE: Yeah? And so tell me now about your employees that you have here because I know that you're very well known for giving people a second chance.

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ES: Well I do have some—some ex-defendants is here, but I don't have no problem with them, you know. They're—they're great guys that have been working for me, and I've been hiring them for years. I don't know exactly how long, but a lot of them have come through here, okay. Just like I said, this is like a family-type environment. I have people that's been working for me like thirty-some years. The kids grew up in the restaurant; they'd bring them to work when they were little and put them over there, and then they would work their seven or eight hours and then they would go home and they—now they're grown, okay. So it's—it's just like a family restaurant.

00:24:09

AE: And I saw in the window out there today, you have a sign that a waitress is wanted, and she must have five years soul food experience.

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ES: That's because now days—and—and these days, the young people don't know pork from beef, and it's a lot that they don't know. So I—I get tired sometimes of just—I got to bring from the woods all the way up, so I ask for five years experience, but I can't get it. But the sign is up

there. I got a little girl that's—I just hired her, but she's going to school; she's in college, and she knows nothing at all, you know; so I have to watch her because I got to be careful how she serves. The other day she said, "The lady said this is not turkey sausage." So I said, "Bring it back and let me look at it." *[Laughs]* But it was turkey, okay. So I do ask for experience now because it's important, you know. You got to know how to serve, how to serve the water, and don't do this and don't do that, yeah.

00:25:09

AE: But do you think that a lot of the young people today—that you—you say don't really know, you know, pork from beef and all that; what do you think that says about this generation not—not learning to cook in their own kitchens?

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ES: Well, Amy, the thing of it is, it first starts at home. And then when I was in school, we had Home Economics. They took that out of the school, you know, for young people. I think it's real important that it should be in the school. It should be in the school. It's very important because as they grow up, they automatically, you know—. And then when I was coming up, we had family time. Everybody ate at the same time. We passed the food. Whatever, you know. It was in bowls or platters or whatever it was and if you put it on your plate, you had to eat it, you know. We had to set the table at home. We had to wash the dishes. It was so much that—that my mom, she really wasn't school educated but she had a lot of mother wit, and it was automatic. We—I knew it, like I said, when I was seven or eight years old, you know, so it—it really—they really need to go back to the basics of old things like we used to do. It's a lot of things I—I really, you know, would say it's just like you can't whip your children and all that stuff. It's—it's really the—the

way the country is structured. It's—they need to go back to the old timey stuff, you know? I have a school list—I'm helping Calhoun School. These two ladies call me and they're doing etiquette at a grammar school—eighth graders. And so I'm donating a lot because, I said, "Oh, I wish I could get my staff over there," you know. And it—it's important, you know. They need it back into the schools; they really need that real bad.

00:27:05

AE: So do you see that as—as part of your responsibility, just being a restaurateur is education in general?

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ES: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. You have to keep telling them. You know, you have to—everybody that comes through here, it's not that I'm mean or nothing like that, but I try to instill in them the right things that they're supposed to do. I had a young man that come back the other day, and he come in the kitchen and there must have been five or six people back there. "Miss Edna,"—and he wanted to hug me and he says, "Thank you, thank you, thank you." I said, "Thank you for what?" He's been going at least three or four years. He said, "You stayed on me so much—how slow I was and blah, blah this and blah, blah that and," he says, "because I've said some—." I used the pattern of, if you're working in a grocery store, you got to be fast; you got to get them supplies up there and, you know, and he's a manager of a store about four or five blocks from here now. And he had his tie on, and he was looking good you know and I—I at least let them, "Know that this is a job where you want to go higher. This is just a start; this is just a beginning. And if you listen to me, you can go anywhere." I got girls that's working at Bloomingdale's and—you know, you got to have personalities to be a waitress and, you know, and you've got to

open your mouth and smile, so that helps them when they go out to look for a job that they have all this ready for them, you know.

00:28:29

AE: So how would you say you learned all of those—those traits?

00:28:31

ES: I learned all that from my parents. We were in plays; I used to dance for one of the black dancers, which was Sadie Bruce; I danced at the River—the Regal Theater, the Opera House. I used to tap dance. My sister died, you know. So it—it comes from home, basically, you know. And then it doesn't really come from home, if people want to listen. And—and take everything. I tell my people, don't take it for a down. Maybe I didn't say it just right to you or something. Take it for an up. That's all. So it comes from home, basically, you know, either listen to someone—I worked in a factory, and they were getting ready to lay-off, so my boss asked me, he says, "Would you like to go to another company?" So I said, "Yes, I guess so." He said, "Well, I have a friend that has a company." And I was working in a factory doing machinery, you know, making nuts and things that goes in everything—a car, anything that was mechanical had to have a screw in it. And so when I went to this place, they hired me because of—of the recommendation that I got from the other job. And when I got there, I was the only black there; I didn't know that because you—you interviewed downstairs, and when you get upstairs the next week, you know, when they hired me, I'm the only black girl there. I listened to—I had never did this type of work, and I listened to what everybody said. I didn't take it for—"Don't tell me!" And I learned by listening. And then when I—when I learned, then I was on my own, you know. They didn't have to tell me nothing. So it's just about listening and trying to learn, okay.

00:30:21

AE: So tell me how that translates in your—your kitchen in the staff that you have back there.

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ES: Oh, okay. Well it—it translates like I don't have written down recipes. And I can tell exactly when they do something wrong. I can tell them the reason that they did it because they didn't come out like this here, because you didn't do this, you know. So it's about listening—listening and taking heed to whoever is supervising you to take it for an up and don't take it for a down. And I'm—I am the worst nightmare in the kitchen, okay. **[Laughs]** I'm in the kitchen every day; they don't—they hate to see me coming. Sometimes I say—they get busy, I says, “Y'all want me to help you?” “ No, we can handle it.” **[Laughs]** Yeah.

00:31:03

AE: Is that right?

00:31:03

ES: Yeah.

00:31:03

AE: So if you don't have any—any recipes written down, do you—you personally train all the cooks that come through the kitchen?

00:31:09

ES: Yes. Yes. And then, if I don't I have the—two girls that's been with me for years, but it's very few cooks that I hire. I don't really need cooks; I need grill people—people that can turn eggs over and maybe fry some chicken and you know we do the batter ourselves. They don't have to make the batter; we make the batter you know. So yeah, I do—.

00:31:36

AE: And so when you're—you're teaching them your recipes, do you teach them, you know, in addition to quantities and—and all that? How it's supposed to taste and—. Can you describe how you transfer that knowledge?

00:31:49

ES: Well first of all, we taste. We taste and I always tell them, never fully put the ingredients in. Add. You can always add, but you can't take away. So if we doing dumplings, well, basically, we know the recipe now. These girls know the recipe. But if it's somebody that don't know the recipe, you get a side dish, and you dip you some juice out, and you taste the juice. And then you know what you're doing, you know. But basically, the—the people that's here now it's—it's just like it's wrote down; it's in their heads. It's wrote down in their heads now, yeah.

00:32:27

AE: And is there anything on your menu that you serve or maybe something that's not here that you cook at home that's your—your favorite thing to make?

00:32:33

ES: At home—?

00:32:35

AE: Or here?

00:32:36

ES: It's—say that again now.

00:32:38

AE: I was just wondering if there's something that's your favorite thing to cook, whether it's here at the restaurant or at home.

00:32:46

ES: Oh, no. All of my favorites is all my favorites. I—I like making the biscuits and then we do our own pie dough. I like to do the pie dough, too, because a lot of times it doesn't be as crispy as I think it should be and flaky, and so sometimes I'll go in there, and I don't say nothing. I just say, "Here, I made you some pie dough," you know. And then they say, "Oh, it rolls out so good," you know. Yeah.

00:33:09

AE: And what kind of pies do you make with your dough?

00:33:12

ES: Well we make apple pies; we make peach cobblers. Basically, those are the two that we make.

00:33:19

AE: And tell me about your cakes; you've got at least five cakes out there on the counter.

00:33:22

ES: Well we have a lady that makes our cakes. She comes in and she makes the cakes for us. So we don't make the cakes.

00:33:30

AE: You have—I'm trying to remember what they all are—coconut, German chocolate—.

00:33:33

ES: Coconut, German chocolate, Devil's Food. We have yellow chocolate with the chocolate icing on it; sometimes we have a red velvet cake, pound cake; sometimes I just switch up, you know.

00:33:50

AE: Uh-hmm. They're beautiful cakes. And tasty. I had the coconut today. I don't remember if I told you that.

00:33:55

ES: I don't—I don't really eat the cakes. I don't eat the cakes; I don't eat the biscuits; I don't eat the peach cobbler no more. [*Laughs*] I used to—if I do a dozen pans of biscuits, I'd eat a biscuit, so that's a dozen a day, okay. I'm not kidding. But I don't—I don't hardly eat them now.

00:34:13

AE: Do you serve breakfast all day?

00:34:15

ES: Oh, yeah. We serve breakfast from opening, from Tuesday—we close on Monday—Tuesday through Sunday. Sunday, we stop at three because we do the cornbread and the pancakes; sometimes they mix them up and so we just stop at a certain time, which is three o'clock on Sundays because it's kind of busy on Sundays when the church people come, you know.

00:34:38

AE: So what are your hours that you open and close during the week?

00:34:39

ES: Our—our hours are 6:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m., and we're closed on Mondays. And just like I said, on Sundays at three o'clock we stop breakfast. But if you come here ten-minutes-to-seven, five-minutes-to-seven at night, you can get breakfast; and we have a big breakfast menu, too.

00:35:00

AE: And what do you hear from the people about—about your food?

00:35:05

ES: Well on Sundays we have so many things. One day I was passing and it was two police officers was here, and I said, "How y'all doing?" And I'm in a hurry, and they said, "We're not doing too good." And I doubled back, and I said, "What's the matter?" He said, "We getting ready to pull guns." I said, "Pull guns?" He said, "Yeah, he's getting ready to get that last biscuit." I said, "Oh, no. You don't have to do that." **[Laughs]** Okay. And I had a little girl in here, oh, she must have been about four or five, and she said, "Oh, these the best greens in the world." And I said, "Oh, my God, I wish I had her on TV saying that," you know. But—and a lot

of times I'll pass and people will say, "Don't bother me; this food is too good," you know. So everybody loves Edna's food. If they come here once, they—they love it.

00:35:56

AE: And—and soul food is, you know, to me, it's comfort food. It's—it's stuff you get at home or, you know, down South, of course. So I wonder if your—your clientele here, do you have a lot of people who come in here who came from the South and [during] the Great Migration and come here and feel like they have a bit of home?

00:36:12

ES: Oh, yeah. Mostly—mostly the people that come—come from the South. I have a mixed group now. I have people that comes for the [Garfield Park] Conservatory, which is maybe six or seven blocks away. And on Saturdays and Sundays it's mixed, you know. And so they're used to—if they maybe had a nanny, you know what I'm saying, in the South that could cook, and so they're really used to soul food, you know. Some people maybe never had it; I have students coming in from, oh, I can't think of it right now but anyway, they love—they come here; I got pictures of them eating all kinds of food because they love it, you know. They're from—oh, I can't even mention but anyway, they—they love the food, you know.

00:37:00

AE: And you mentioned earlier being on *Oprah* for your macaroni and cheese and all these newspaper articles. What does it mean to you to be recognized for—for making food and feeding people?

00:37:12

ES: It just makes me feel good. Okay, because when I started out forty-two years ago, I couldn't imagine that I would get all the recognition and the ooh-ahs that I have gotten in all these years just by cooking. I—I never—the time passed; I can't really believe that I've spent forty-two years on this block. I mean people don't even—when they have apartment or buy a home, they don't stay that long, you know. But I've been here forty-two years and it's—it's—it makes me feel real good.

00:37:49

AE: And I'm—I'm remembering that earlier was that a picture of Rosa Parks in the—by the cashier stand there?

00:37:56

ES: Yeah. Yeah I—I guess this must have been about [nineteen] '96—'97, something like that. It's on the back of the picture. But anyway, they called me and asked me could Rosa Parks come? And I said, "Who is this? Rosa Parks?" I said, "Yes." I said, "Oh, I would be honored to have her." So she came, and she came with her niece and some of her grand—a couple of her grandsons and we took pictures and she autographed me a book. They don't—they don't let you—they didn't let you hug her but they said I could hug her, so I got a chance to hug her, and I felt so honored. I never would have thought I would have been that close to Rosa—and here some come to my place of business, you know. So I feel—I felt real good about it. Yes, I did.

00:38:48

AE: So Edna's is—is really a—a landmark in Civil Rights history in Chicago. Do you feel that way?

00:38:56

ES: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. It was so many Civil Rights people that came through Edna's. I just read in *The [Chicago] Tribune* where one of the civil rights [figures] which was—was James Forman, and he would come all the time with overalls; and he was real tall, maybe six-something and looked like he weighed 300-pounds; and he just passed, yes—yes. It felt good to have him here.

00:39:23

AE: Is there anything in Chicago that's like a Civil Rights tour or anything that that brings people around to sites and maybe includes your restaurant?

00:39:31

ES: I don't think so. I don't think so. They—when they come to Edna's, they know that I was part of the Civil Rights era, you know. I know down in Atlanta they're trying to get people to donate to give a—have a big monument for Dr. King, which I think is real nice because I know, being in business, and I saw the difference right away after Dr. King had passed, you know. It was a movement that was going to—it had—it has—if he hadn't have come, I don't know if it would have started and I could—I know the difference. You know what I'm saying? It has been a change. It still needs to be more change, but it has been a change. It has been.

00:40:19

AE: And what do you think about Barack Obama's run for President?

00:40:25

ES: I'm over-excited. I hope I get a chance. He was here about—about two years ago; he had a meeting here, and I got a chance to meet him, and I'm in the newspaper with him, you know. I never—I never would have thought that he would be the one that would be running for President, so I'm over-excited. I worked on the polls when I was seventeen, going on eighteen—just a checker—so I've been voting all these years, and I would have never thought that I would have got a chance, and I hope I live to see it. So I'm excited about Obama. Really, really excited, yes.

00:41:02

AE: Uh-hmm. Well what do you like—I feel like I know the answer to this, but what do you like best about what you do?

00:41:08

ES: Being able to—to get up every morning and thank God and praise him, and so far my health is so good and I'm still able to do what I like to do, yes.

00:41:27

AE: And what is the future of Edna's?

00:41:30

ES: Well right now I have no idea because I have two children, and neither one of them want the restaurant. I have nieces with degrees, and they don't want the restaurant. They had to work in the restaurant to—to stay out of the streets and have something to do when they come from school. And I got one that's a principal, and I got one that's this and one that's that, but they don't want the restaurant. And at first they said, "Look, Auntie, we're going to take the restaurant over." I said, "Beautiful." But when they found out that they had to start in the

kitchen, they said, “No way.” *[Laughs]* Because I believe that in order—if I hadn't been able to cook, I wouldn't have lasted. You have to know how to do it because people will tell you they're gone, you know, and I'm the last one to leave. I'm the last one. I'm the one that opens up, okay, so—and I've enjoyed it. I had a blast. I had—I have had a blast because I have met people from all over the world. I was in The Taste of Chicago for three years and they came here and see—what, CBS? No, it's London over in London.

AE: The BBC?

ES: Yeah, they—they came to our house and did a segment on us, you know. So I've met people everywhere, you know, and I've not—I probably would have never met as many people all over if I hadn't have been in the restaurant business.

00:43:04

AE: And what has it been like, being a woman in the restaurant business and running your own place?

00:43:11

ES: Well it's like being the head of something, you know. It's people, when they come, they have to see Edna, you know, and I—just like I said, I have enjoyed what I have done and I've had a good time, and I have a lot of stories. I've got a lot of things in my heart that I can't tell. I'll just to have to go—go with them, you know. So I have had a good time. I've had more good days than bad days and that—that's the truth. Calling the police—when I have called them I said, “Why y'all send all this artillery out?” They said, “Because we know when Edna calls, she must

need us.” Because other than that, I handle it myself, you know. And I’ve been lucky; God has been with me all the way—all the way. Because very few times I’ve had to call the police, okay, so we’ve been lucky here.

00:44:06

AE: And why do you think being a part of the neighborhood and—and having—have the respect of the neighborhood and being where you are and—and—where that comes from and what that means?

00:44:15

ES: Wel I think the respect comes from when everybody comes in that door is somebody, and I respect them and they have to respect the restaurant—automatically, you know. If I hear some noise that I don’t like the words, you know, I’ll go over there, and I’ll say, “I’m sorry. You can’t do it in here.” You know sometimes the parents want to holler at their children and go, “Oh, mother,” you know. So they understand, you know, that—don’t do that, you know. Sometimes their words is not too good with the children and just like I said, I feel like this is a family-type restaurant, you know. And with no argument or anything I—if I see it, I will mention it, you know. So I think it’s just because of how I treat them and they treat me, you know. I don’t have people standing outside and [loitering]—nothing like that, you know.

00:45:07

AE: And now we’re sitting in—in your back dining room here and behind you are a bunch of pictures of Nelson Mandela and Jesse Jackson and—and some other folks. Can you tell me about some of the other people who have been through the restaurant here?

00:45:18

ES: I couldn't even name all the people that's been through here. I—it's been so many of them you know. I've had Brian McKnight and oh, so many people. You name them and I—they've been to Edna's, you know.

00:45:36

AE: Now are these pictures of Nelson Mandela with Jesse Jackson—pare those here in the restaurant or are they—?

00:45:41

ES: No, that was John Davis, Channel 2. He went to Africa and he met Mandela, and they were out there and he was—he loved my father so much and he brought the pictures and gave them to my father, yeah.

00:45:53

AE: Would that happen to be your father in the center of that wall [of photographs]?

00:45:54

ES: Yeah, that's him in the center, and that's him over there. He's out in the front, yeah. They—he's over there, yeah; he's behind you. He's all over the room. **[Laughs]** Yeah.

00:46:10

AE: Tell me about these altars you have back here in the corner.

00:46:13

ES: The what?

00:46:16

AE: These little altars with the angels and whatnot?

00:46:18

ES: Oh, the people, yeah; those are little church people. Yeah, I—I just like little novelties, you know. I collect dolls, too. Yeah, I love dolls. And I got my angels over there, and I got dolls on the other side. Sometimes they come in and people play with them, you know, and they break them. They done broke one of the heads off, you know, but that's—

00:46:40

AE: How long have you been collecting dolls?

00:46:41

ES: For years. And if I knew how special dolls was, you know, when we were coming up, I'd have all my dolls, you know, but you don't realize, you know—mother said don't break them, you know. I—it's been a long time.

00:46:56

AE: Is there a certain kind of doll that you look for that you like to collect?

00:46:59

ES: No, but it's black dolls. It has to be a black doll, yeah. So I have so many of them I have to hide them because I don't have enough room for them. And I have one granddaughter and I have

two great [grandchildren], and I said I hope that I'll keep them for them, and I hope that they keep them. I even have porcelain dolls, but I have them put up, you know.

00:47:27

AE: Well back to the business side of things, I understand you do some catering also, is that right?

00:47:32

ES: Oh, yes. I do catering, yeah. I don't do as much as I would love to do, but I used to cater for the world's largest law firm, which is Baker and McKenzie, which is on North Michigan [Avenue] and, at the time, it was—well, it's the world's largest law firm. They've got the most lawyers than any firm all over the country and the lady that—that was a lawyer there, she used to call me up; and I was working for a shelter; I used to work for a homeless shelter. I went to volunteer and they liked me so well, they put me on staff, which is Rehabilitative Systems, 415 North on South—South Kirkpatrick. But anyway, she was on the Board there and she—when I would cook for the homeless, she might be there. And she enjoyed the cooking because when I went there, they wasn't used to the kind of cooking, you know—seasoned food and stuff. And so I brought that to the shelter. So she said, “Well, would you cook something for us at—at the law firm?” I said, “Certainly.” So I would—I would cook pork chops, greens, sweet potatoes, just anything that she would ask for, but she would make her own menu. So one day she said, “Well, what else?” So I says, “Well I don't know.” I said, “What about, oh, some macaroni and cheese?” She said, “Oh no, we had that when we were going to college.” So then the next time she called she said, “Well throw some macaroni and cheese in there.” And so the next time she called she said, “First of all, I want macaroni and cheese, and I want peach cobbler.” So I did that

for about three or four years. And when I would take the food, I could look in the dining area and they had all that fine china and stuff set up for my food, you know. And I've catered for—I don't—I don't know if it was Oprah. I didn't know—I don't say Oprah ate the food, but my check came from Harpo [Studios] before she moved to her new place, you know, when she used to be on State Street you know. I've catered for a lot of people, yeah.

00:49:39

AE: Well is—you mentioned earlier, we were talking about some of the projects that SFA does and—and that you went down to New Orleans and ate at Dooky Chase's restaurant.

00:49:51

ES: Yeah.

00:49:51

AE: Leah Chase's restaurant, Dooky Chase.

00:49:53

ES: Yeah. When—when we had the Super Bowl—I don't quite know what year it was—and I went down there—and I went down there with a group and quite naturally, we had to find a soul food restaurant, and I got a chance to meet her, yeah. And then I was in New York the year before the disaster that we had, the 09/11, and I got to meet—well, I had met Sylvia [Woods] in Chicago. I don't know if you know—are you familiar with Sylvia's [restaurant] in New York? She's supposed to be one of the—oh, okay, well she's a black restaurant. And she had food on

the market here in Chicago; she have seasoning and hot sauce and this and that. So I got a chance to meet her too, yeah.

00:50:36

AE: So you had an opportunity then to leave the restaurant and go have a vacation or two?

00:50:41

ES: Well I got a few days off here and there, yeah. I do—I get—well one year I took a whole month. Sometimes, you know, you get burned out and you need to—to do a lot of cleaning and whatnot and so just a week don't—you can't do it in a week, you know, so I usually take a couple of weeks off, yeah, in—in July, yeah.

00:51:05

AE: Okay, summer. And I'm looking at your pretty pink blouse and—and your restaurant is—is pink. Can you talk about that and the decorations out front?

00:51:12

ES: Well when we first come here, a guy—he was an artist—and I was in the back, and when I came up in the front I looked because my dad did all this decoration. I really stayed in the kitchen, you know, and I was in the planning stage of what's going to go in and this is where the stove is going to go and where this is going to go. And he must have been here—this artist, he must have been here maybe three hours, and when I looked, he had flowers everywhere, you know. So sometimes—my car is burgundy. I have a van; it's burgundy, and the restaurant is pink and burgundy. So sometimes I try to stay in that scheme, you know. So the girl was saying the other day, she said, “We need to paint the front [dining room].” I says, “No way. We might can

touch it up, but we'll never paint it." Yeah. A lot of people like to see it like that; it's flowery-like, you know.

00:52:05

AE: Now the name of the restaurant, Edna's, I don't know that we talked about this before but maybe we did but was it—when you and your father decided to go into business together, was there ever any question that it was going to be called Edna's?

00:52:16

ES: Oh no, because my father, he was—he was so special; he was all about love. And after we started into the business, he says, "Everything is—is—revolves around you, Edna," you know. He didn't even want me to work that hard; he said he didn't want me to work, and he was crazy about me. But he—I was special to him, and I was special to my mom, although I was the second child. They loved all of us, but we all played a different role, you know. And I was right up under him. Years ago, before we had the restaurant, he used to sell on the side. It was a place down on Madison and Halsted [Streets] where he would get little games and watches and little novelties; and I would go up and down the street with him and hold the money, you know, while he was selling. My brother used to sell eggs and—fresh eggs, you know—so I would always be the one that was into the management of the money. So nah, he said, "It has to be Edna's," you know. Yeah. And he would tell a lot of people sometimes, "I own a restaurant." I never say that, you know; he'd say, "I own a restaurant," and most of the time it would be the ladies, you know, and—but—it's named Edna's, but he would never say that I was part owner of it, you know.

[Laughs] Yes, him and my husband started it out. They put the money together, so when we divorced, he paid him out so—yeah.

00:53:48

AE: Well, we've had a good visit here. I wonder if there's anything that you want to make sure to add that—that I haven't asked or we haven't talked about.

00:53:56

ES: I don't think so, Amy. I think I gave you a little variety of what has happened here in these forty-two years, you know. It's a lot of stories. I was with the Judge the other day, which is my sister, and we got to laughing about different stuff that have happened in the restaurant because, quite naturally, I share with my family, you know, because I have a real, real close family. We are very, very tight sisters and brothers, you know. Well the whole family, what part that we have. I have two grandsons that work for me, you know. No, I think I've gave you a little variety of what my life has been like.

00:54:36

AE: All right. Well that's quite a history—quite a legacy you have here.

00:54:39

ES: Thank you.

00:54:40

AE: Thank you for sitting with me. I appreciate it.

00:54:42

[End Edna Stewart Interview]