SFA Founders Oral History Project

JOHN EGERTON

Interviewer: Angie Mosier, SFA Board Member
Location: Mr. Egerton's Home-Nashville, TN
Date: January 24, 2005

Transcript provided by:
Shelley M. Chance t/a Pro.Docs
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[Begin John Egerton Interview]

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Angie Mosier: There we go. Okay, it's Monday, January 24th and this is Angie Mosier interviewing John Egerton in Nashville, Tennessee at his home. So John how did you come to be involved in the Southern Foodways Alliance?

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John Egerton: Well, I came basically from the two earlier attempts to start an organization of Southern people, interested in food-ways. One in the late '80s that was spearheaded by Edna Lewis and the second--that--after that one sort of gave out, around I'm guessing about 1990 or '91 or a little bit later than that--we--we tried for several years to keep it afloat and made some headway but then there just was not enough--we didn't have the resources to keep it going and so it kind of petered out. And then a second effort was started by a handful of people, some from around Atlanta but--but the--the key person was--I'm blocking on his name--Terry Ford, Terry Ford from West Tennessee from a small town, Ripley, Tennessee. He's a newspaper editor and he is passionate about food and he was really the driving force in the second effort.

The first one was called the Society for the Preservation and Survival of Southern Food, I think. That was Edna's group. And the second one was called the Southern--I forget--.

0:02:10.9

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AM: The American Southern Food Institute?

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JE: The American Southern Food Institute, right. And a lot of the same people were involved in both efforts. I think Nathalie Dupree was involved in both; Terry Ford was; Edna Lewis was; there were differences of opinion and--and different ideas about what direction to go but there was and I think still is a--a kind of a core group of individuals who had Southern roots, who had a certain passion for the food—traditional food of this region, and I think who also saw beyond the food itself to the larger social and cultural issues that arise from involvement in Southern food. And all of this was a--was--all of these were attempts to keep alive some of the best things that we saw about Southern food. And I guess we'd all answer back, "What exactly is that?" We'd all answer that differently, but I think for me my answer is Southern food is--Southern food is--I'm straining to be profound here. Southern food is one of the few things that we have about us as Southerners that is to my view altogether positive. You can say it about our music, and you can say it about our literature, maybe. These are things the South is known for in a positive way. We've had a lot of great writers, and we've had a lot of great musicians.

Most everything else the South is known for is nudity, racism, poverty, violence. Now I know the church people and the family folks say I've left out those two important institutions. I don't mean to--to think of them in a lesser way but I'll just stick to my definition of Southern food is important because it is--it is one of the very few things about us that is positive--altogether positive and we can build on that to create a better life for everybody.

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AM: As far as--.

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JE: Let me hold this.

0:05:17.9

AM: Okay.

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JE: Are you cold?

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AM: I'm okay.

0:05:21.1

JE: You sure, because I can turn the heat up?

0:05:22.1

AM: No; it's cool. Thanks.

0:05:22.9

JE: Okay.

0:05:25.2

AM: Now I am supposed to ask you if you are were involved in those other two organizations and you already answered that and when I ask other founders how they became involved in the Southern Foodways Alliance several of them say *well I got this call or letter from John Egerton*. So when I asked you how you came to be involved I--you did answer it very well. I do want to ask you if the majority of the folks that were involved in these other organizations ended up wanting to be a part of Southern Foodways Alliance, too?

0:06:06.2

JE: Well I--I--that's a hard question for me to answer. Whether they wanted to--a good many of them did. Jeanne Voltz for example was--was closely involved in both of the previous efforts and

she was one of the founders of this one. Natalie was likewise; Terry Ford was; Edna's health had started to fail and she was not as able to--to move about as freely as she had before and by the time we cranked this up in 1999 she was not--not involved. She's one of our founders and her name is on the list and she agreed to do that but she was not at that point able to make--be a real presence.

And there--there were some people in--in both of the first two efforts who I think resisted the notion that (a) that they--they had failed--however you want to define failure. They didn't--they weren't willing to accept that and (b) they were--for whatever reasons--not really crazy about the idea of doing the one big thing differently that SFA did that the other two did not and that is to seek and--and find an institutional base from which to grow this organization. And I guess if I--if I had any major contribution to make to SFA it was my realization that we had to have an institutional base and I pushed for that. I--I saw that as--as essential and it needed to be upfront and we all had to buy into that idea if we wanted it to go forward. And the ones who couldn't buy into it just didn't go on. But looking back now, from--from five years I would say I feel even more strongly now that if it was necessary for us to do that and--and that the result has--has proved it was--it was the right way to go. All the numbers would tell you that SFA is--is thriving where the previous two couldn't thrive because they just didn't have the resources.

0:09:18.0

AM: Right; did you go to the organization--organizational meeting in Birmingham in the summer of 1998? And if so what do you recall about it?

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JE: It was a great day. I did go; I was--I was very much involved in it, and we met at *Southern Living*--Southern Progress in the big boardroom. As I recall we had about 28--27 to 29 right in there of the 50 people present. Most of us had not met one another; I suppose I knew more of them personally than anybody else because I had worked really closely with John T. to put the list together of people to be invited to that, and we worked on that for a long time to--and we set a goal of 50 people and we tried to build up to that goal keeping in mind as--as we got people to agree that we needed for it to keep its--its shape and character as a representative body of Southerners. It needed to be representative in terms of gender and in terms of geography and in terms of race and economic class. And I would say we succeeded pretty well on at least three of those accounts--not so well maybe on the economic, but I think I learned from that--that if--if--if you have an ideal that--that you are trying to reach, you have to work really hard to stay the course to achieve that ideal. It's not sufficient to say *here's what we think and we think this is inclusive and all that--all that good stuff; therefore we just know the right people who will--who will show up for this.* You just--you just can't do that because what you'll get will be maybe a bunch of replicas of yourself and that's--that's just not the right way to do it. You've got to have a real admixture cross section of people and in order to get it you have to work, you have to beg and plead and persuade and talk people into doing things. And if I were doing it over I think I would--I would do it--do it the same way. I think I would just try to work a little bit harder to get them all there for that first meeting.

0:12:26.9

AM: And that first meeting, I'm going to go aside of these--these questions here--was it planned over a weekend or was it--how long did it last?

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JE: The best I remember it was a one-nighter and I don't remember us making any arrangements for people but there's a motel just up the street from Southern Progress and we gave everybody that address hoping that the out of towners would congregate there. We--we met early in the afternoon at Southern Progress and we adjourned late in the afternoon and went to Frank Stitt's--Frank and Pardis--it's his wonderful restaurant [Highlands Bar & Grill in Birmingham, Alabama] for dinner and they had--they prepared a memorable dinner for that group and that really got us off on the right foot. It was fabulous.

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AM: That's great; what was your vision for Southern Foodways Alliance when it began? I think you already answered some of it, but would you like to add to that?

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JE: Yeah, well I think of it as much more than just the food. The food is very important and--and it's essential. You--you couldn't do what--what we were trying to do without food being a

part of it. I mean if you said *I want--I want to get a group of Southerners to do X, Y, or Z*, you'd still have to have food to lubricate the wheels. And so this was an organization with food as its--really as its primary focus but we wanted these larger social cultural ingredients to be a part of the mix. And I think--I think practically everybody who came and who lent their names to this--this idea, whether they bought into it as a--a philosophical kind of thing, I--maybe--maybe that's expecting more than was actually the case, but--but certainly as it has evolved people have learned that when you go to SFA on a field trip or the--the symposium in the fall in Oxford, you will be doing a lot more than just eating and drinking. You will be learning and teaching people about the--the larger dimensions and the power of--of this food to--to achieve some really remarkable things. And so I think it has evolved to more than I even dreamed it would.

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AM: Well and the next question is literally has your vision evolved and you just answered how that is so--.

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JE: Yeah, I--I would hesitate to say though that it was just my vision.

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AM: Sure.

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JE: I--I think really the vision has grown out of the group itself. And again I think that--that our--our faith or whatever at the beginning was if you get the critical mass of people together and you like the mix of the people that you have--have called to the table then you've already done that. That what they do then will be--will bear out the kinds of thoughts you had and then sometimes it's noisy and messy and there are a lot of prima-donnas and you know all of us have egos; we argue with us. I know that sometimes the newcomers to SFA symposiums are sort of open-mouthed at the kind of give and take that comes from--from the speakers and the audience especially in the first couple years. They wondered if we were--if anybody was really in control of this because it got pretty raucous but I--I never had any doubts that it would--that--that was a good sign. When you heard all that carrying on that was a good sign; this was--that was a sign it's working. People feel passionately about these things.

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AM: Did you attend the first symposium in 1998 and what do you recall about it?

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JE: Yeah, that was John T. out ahead of the game. See it was really John T. starting that symposium at the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at Ole Miss that really opened up the-

-the idea that we could formalize that as a part of--the first symposium pre-dated the formation of this organization. So you could say that the symposium which John T started at Ole Miss was the--was the physical manifestation of the idea of--that you could--you could use this as the base and build--build a group that--that was active in this manner. I remember that was--that was--that was a wonderful gathering.

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AM: And how many--how many folks do you feel that were there?

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JE: Well you know we met in that little auditorium at the--at the observatory and I think it only seats--it probably will seat 150 and we must have had between 100 and 125 I would say the first year. It was fabulous. John T's had a vision; John T has really had a larger vision for much of this I think than--than anyone because his vision began with how do you shape a program, a three-day you know--that's a different question. We could--we could have a three-day symposium in Nashville and you and I could sit down and work up a sort of plan for--for that and we would throw in all kinds of stuff that people would love doing and they'd come back to it. That's not the same as the--creating an organization around it. I think John T took that--that little kernel and created this marvelous program that people went away raving about. And then you know as far as I can remember he probably came to me rather than the other way around saying *why don't we do something with this*; *why don't we see if we can turn this into a--a base thing*? I guess he and I

are the two main culprits as far as the--as trying to formalize some of this energy into an organization.

0:20:11.4

AM: And from that symposium are there any moments that stick out in your mind or any conversations that--that really stick out in your mind as particularly notable?

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JE: I remember going to the catfish on Friday--Friday night at Taylor's and only--I may be mistaken about this but I think the first year there was a catfish fry on University Boulevard behind the house that belongs to the University and Mr. Scott, the--Mississippi Delta catfish guy was cooking and as I try to piece that back together in my mind I doubt we--we did catfish two nights back-to-back so that was probably the first year and then maybe the Taylor Grocery thing fell in after that. But in any case, whichever year it was, it feels like the first year to me, I remember standing in that backyard smelling the catfish and we had just--had just begun to eat hushpuppies. The air was just perfumed with--with the smell of all this activity going on. The weather was great; something good to sip on; very congenial company and I remember getting in a conversation with a woman who I learned subsequently in--during the conversation was from California and I said *why--how did you happen to get over here?* She said *well I'm from Mississippi.* And she learned about it somehow, maybe on the Internet, maybe on the University website--I have no idea; but she said *it sounded like something I really wanted to do*. She was a

psychiatrist in California. She said *it sounded like something I really wanted to do*. And I said *well it's a long way to come just for--for supper*. And she said *yeah; but it's so Southern and you know being Southern is kind of like being a Catholic. It's almost impossible to--to get away from it. You can't outgrow it or give it up or renounce it. It's just part of you*. And there were lots of people there like that.

I remember Norma Jean Darden came from New York--the Darden Sisters who wrote a wonderful cookbook *Spoon-Bread and Strawberry Wine* about the family recipes from Alabama, and Norma Jean came and--and did--did the presentation in the courthouse courtroom that has become a tradition of the fall seminars. The--the program always ends at the courthouse; usually the last--one of the last events is--is--for one of a better term, a dramatic presentation of some kind. Sometimes it's been speakers but every one of those has been memorable where the--the featured person either sits in the judge's seat and the rest of us fill the jury box and--and the courtroom or they're up moving around in front of the--of the judge's bench and it just somehow inspires people to some really wonderful stuff. Lee Smith did it one year; she was fabulous. Calvin Trillin did it one year and was just outrageously funny. Vertamae Grosvenor did it one year--just full of drama and wonderful stuff. Lee May from Atlanta Jaycee did it; and Norma Jean--that's five; I don't even--I've almost named all of them in '98, '99, '00, '01, '02, '03--this was the seventh year and I think there's been one of those every year and they've all been very--just great.

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AM: Okay; you've already done some of this, too but let me see if you have something to add. Tell us about your role in developing the SFA's mission and vision and programming.

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JE: I don't think I've had a whole lot to do with that. Much of that--has come from two sources. When I was on the Board I had--I had a role in that but there was a program committee and I--I don't think I was on the program committee. It's come from the Board and--and committees or from the staff being John T and--and now Mary Beth. Mary Beth is--see we've been so lucky. Without John T in that role this organization would have foundered. And when it got to be more than he could do, he found Mary Beth and I'd say right now that SFA would be in a similar danger if Mary Beth Lasseter left as it would have been four or five years ago if John T. Edge had left. She's--she's just kind of the person who holds it together. And somebody has got to do that work. And they've just been the best; so.

0:26:46.6

AM: Okay, the Southern Foodways Alliance focuses upon food as culture. What does that mean to you both intellectually and personally?

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JE: Well personally it means to me that this is--this is how--this is my favorite way to socialize. This is my favorite way to maintain close relationships with people I love. Some people play golf, some people play Bridge, some people will go on trips together, some people get married and have families **[*Laughs*]**; you know I--I enjoy all that but this is--this is sort of like my avocation. It's more than a hobby; it's--it's a--it's restorative to me of energy and enthusiasm to--not only to do this mess with foods personally but to be around people who have a similar feeling for it. So that's the--that's the personal side. I think in a more--in a more impersonal definitive kind of way, Southern Food is--is--it works really well as a sort of lubricant for so many useful activities in--in society. You can build a conversation around food; you can build a trip around food; you can certainly build a great meal around food, and people love to talk about it and--and this opens up a way for us to become more--our--our--our own individual selves and self-conscious selves and our relationships to other people. I love the idea that people come to the feast bringing their own riches and--for us all to bring--to put those together and make--make a real banquet out of it. That's--that's really lovely.

0:29:38.1

AM: Do you have ideas for the future of the organization--projects you'd like to see happen or topics that you'd like to see?

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JE: Other people come up with great ideas for topics. I like--you know three different ways that the themes get chosen. There is the category of places, so it's like sub--sub regions of the South--Cajun country or low-country South Carolina, Appalachia, the Black Belt, cities, and so you get a lot of--you--every third year you get to do that kind of thing. Then there are types of food; that's another category, so it's barbecue or this year it's sugar, which is I think is--in a way is a wonderful topic because it cuts across the--it's not just the food per se but it's a part of the whole cultural fabric of how the South has evolved. It goes back to slavery and a lot of other aspects of Southern life that are not altogether admirable and quite the contrary. And then we have the issue kinds of things--food and race, food and politics, food and music, you know and there are a lot of things that we could do--I mean there's an endless number of topics. I don't think we'll ever run out of themes to build topics around. I'd love to see a--a--a symposium on food and music, one on food and humor. I'd love to see one on seafood as a foodstuff, one on low-country which I've always thought was kind of a charming area; there's--there's the Piedmont. I mean there's just lots of things you can do for themes, so I don't--I don't ever worry about that. But the larger question as I take it is what else can SFA do and I tend to have a more--my interests go beyond the food itself to--to the issues, the larger issues we've talked about like race for example and I think some of the--the next challenges that I had for us are things like addressing the issue of social class and its relationship to--to food in the South and how more often than not the food accelerates the divisions across economic climates. It just prices a lot of people out of participation and I think that's an issue we need to talk about.

Another one which you're not going to trick me into taking credit for because I--I think I know where this idea came from **[*Laughs*]**--maybe a lot of people are--are thinking about this but I've heard you articulate it so now I know that--that there's plenty of people that do think

about it and that is how--how does this society, not just the South, but America, get people back to the simple straightforward ways in which they used to feed themselves and their children? Without really even noticing enough we have drifted so far from self-preservation and--and fallen into the hands of sort of a corporate mentality that--that wants to provide all the food we eat processed and pre-prepared and for the sake of convenience we are paying a huge price for it--it's too expensive; it is far more risky to our nutritional well-being than any of the stuff that are Southern staples and have been hammered down through the years for being too fat, too greasy, too sweet, too you know rich. We're dying from too over-carb(ed) and over-processed. And people are--are growing up to be adults without knowing how to boil water and it's just going to kill us. And so I would really love to see SFA address this big problem and be a part of the solution to the problem rather than as we are--the South has always been considered the problem itself. We--we could be a part of the solution. As in--you know and some ways I think the South has been part of the change, social change in race relations in this country rather than being the problem. We're still thought of as the problem in other parts of the country by a lot of people who just--that's just their stereotype--stereotypical view--the South it's racist, it's--it likes people fat because it feeds them bad food. I think we can prove that we're leaders and--and not problem makers. We're problem solvers in those areas and I think we've made a start on the race thing and I'd love to see us make a start on these other areas--economics and so forth.

0:36:35.7

AM: Okay, now the next series of questions are going to be a little more about you.

0:36:40.8

JE: Okay.

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AM: So can you tell us your place of birth and the date of your birth?

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JE: I was born in Atlanta at Crawford W. Long Hospital on June 14th 1935; next June 14th I'll be 70 years old.

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AM: And please tell us about the food of your childhood. Who prepared it; what were some typical meals? And describe the ceremony of some of those meals.

0:37:08.9

JE: My mother was a great cook and her mother was a great cook and there was--there was one black woman who sometimes cooked at my grandmother's house who was a great cook and those three women, they inculcated me with--with whatever it is that--that makes me care so much

about the food. They--they were great cooks; I--I loved to eat their food and I--I aspired to--to learn to make it myself. And I would say they're the main--they're the main people. My mother--my mother had a pretty heavy load to carry. She had five children; she lost her first child at age eight to disease and by the time I came along as the fourth surviving--the fourth living child, the last one in this batch, and we had moved to a little town in Kentucky--Cadiz, Kentucky--which was her family home place, she had most of the--the burden of--of family raising on her shoulders because my father was a traveling salesman and he was--he was gone more than he was at home. So I just remember mainly growing up with--with my mother as the head of the household, and she put dinner on the table every night and you had to be there. There were no excuses unless you had a--an excused absence to be at somebody else's house. If you--you know if you were on the premises you were at the table. And I liked almost everything she fixed, but the rule was you ate everything she fixed even if you didn't like it. And I have--I have bootlegged many a piece of calves' liver literally out in my shoe to get away from that. But most of the stuff I just loved and I--I still love today. And it was--it was basically a very simple and very recognizable **[*Phone Rings*]**--I'll just let that ring--recognizable affair--mashed potatoes, green beans, all kinds of vegetables, fried chicken, some kind of beef, pork in all its many forms. My grandfather used to kill hogs and had a wonderful smoke house with a sawdust floor and all of that you know is part of my sensory recollection. Eating it, smelling it, hearing it sizzling in the skillet, and of course tasting it; you just--you just--it was there.

And she learned too, though, and because she was--she was pretty creative, she learned to some other kinds of things. Like one of the dishes she made that I was crazy about and I make today was what she called Spanish rice. It's variously called red rice or Savannah rice or Spanish rice; it's a Creole rice. It's essentially a--the trinity of--of onions, peppers, and--and tomatoes

sautéed in a skillet in some bacon grease and mixed in with rice and crumble bacon over top of it and bake it in the oven. It's just a wonderful, simple little dish, but something that I don't think of as originating at all in that little town that I lived in. I don't even remember us eating much rice. We were strictly potato people. But she picked that up somewhere out of a Louisiana cookbook maybe or a Carolina cookbook, and she--she was good about finding things and--and adding them to her repertoire. So that was my food.

0:42:21.8

AM: And when did you first cultivate an interest in food? And what or who was the catalyst?

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JE: It would have been my mom, and you know I can think of lots of dishes that she would make that--that I associate with certain situations or circumstances. And this will--this will probably puzzle you; when I was sick she fixed milk toast and I don't know if you've ever had milk toast. Most people think that's a horrible dish, but I bet you if you sat me down to a steaming bowl of milk toast right now I would--I would start salivating. She'd use pieces of toast put in warm milk and seasoned with a lot of salt and pepper and butter--that's it. And it's just something about it and it would make you want to get sick. And I liked it; I really liked it a lot. And she made fabulous desserts; she had a real sweet tooth all her life. She--she was always [making] something sweet. **[*Dog Barking*]** So she was my inspiration really.

0:43:45.1

AM: How did you get your first job working or writing or dealing with food?

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JE: Hmm, I've actually never had one. I never would have written about food at all had it not been--I was--started freelancing. I had various jobs in PR and magazine journalism from the time I got out of college in about 1959 or '60 until I started freelancing in the early '70s. So I worked for 10 or 12 years--PR magazines, and--and I started freelancing, writing magazine pieces and I was--by that time also writing a book occasionally. I think I did my first book in '69 or '70 and somewhere along in that process I'd sort of eke out a living doing that. I got up to about 1984 and I had--I'd been trying to get myself aligned with a--a subject, a guy I wanted to write a biography of, Claude Pepper who was the Democratic--a Democratic Senator and then Congressman from Florida. And I got to know him pretty well and I was real interested in his career. It went back all the way back into the '30s and I wanted to write a book about him and I spent about six months courting him and his staff in Washington to get them to agree to this. I did a piece on him for the *New York Times* magazine in that period, and that was--that piece was not only what got me interested in him but what kept him on the phone with me as I was trying to do it. But we--we ran aground finally because they--his staff wanted to keep control of what I wrote about him, and I just wasn't willing to be that kind of book I did. And writing a book is like painting a--a picture, you know. You--you can't--if you let the subject of--you know help you decide how to--how to do the picture that won't work. It just--it just simply doesn't work and so I--I couldn't do that and

they--they finally bailed out on me. And just about the time that happened I got a fellowship out of the blue from the Lyndhurst Foundation in Chattanooga, which at that time gave three-year fellowships to a handful of people every year who were doing work that they thought was creative or promising or what not. And they just called me up and said *we want to give you one of these fellowships, a chunk of money each year in a lump sum for three years*. And wow, suddenly I--I had time and money to do whatever I wanted to do. And I had just lost this Claude Pepper project so I--I felt like I had just a totally blank slate to work with and sometimes that's more intimidating than you think. But I--I did have some ideas of things I wanted to pursue and one of them was this kernel of an idea about food. And like most ideas I have about writing anything of any size, they tend to sort of first arrive in your conscious mind as a question you can't answer. In my case the question that I--that I wanted an answer to I couldn't find and it was if people who write cookbooks generally don't know much about history and they don't put much history in the cookbooks--they just put recipes in cookbooks--people who write history, don't value food and they very seldom put much in--in their books of history about the food. And I was sitting there toiling with the idea that somewhere between those two--those two things, there was a huge area of material that nobody was really paying attention to because food interested me as an eater and a cook, and food interested me on a social cultural level as this thing that brought people together, as this thing that gets immortalized in brotherhood dinners and church suppers and all day singing and dinner on the ground and all those kinds of--of great cultural experiences that we have. And the South was especially right with all that. Festivals all over the South, you'd just go from one state to the next and there's some kind of a festival that's--that's food related just everywhere. And I thought *this is rich; there's just all kinds of stuff here and nobody has ever done this and this is my chance*.

So I put together a proposal and I--this is the only book I ever wrote that I really felt like I could see the whole--the whole thing. I could see the layout even, what--what its elements were. It had recipes, it had restaurants, so it had travel and it had home-stuff and it had a lot of history and it had literature in the margins, quotes about food from Southern books and what not, and it had art--photography and if I could have thought a way--of a way for it to have music it would have had music, too. If--if it had been possible in 1987 when that book came out for you to have a CD in a little slip case in the back that would have been the book to have it in. You could have put recipes on it, you could have put music on it; I mean I wish I could do that book again because it needs a CD to go with it.

0:51:15.0

AM: Well, maybe there will be a reprinting.

0:51:16.9

JE: Maybe that--that's something that I could--or somebody else will do. But anyway, I put this idea together in--in a little treatment, a package, proposal--just a few pages, and there was a woman in Atlanta then named Caroline Harkleroad who worked for--she had a little PR--I mean a little agency, literary. She was representing some writers and I met her at a party and we--we got to talking about this idea and she said *well geez, I--you know I--I love that idea. I'd love to show that to some publishers and see what--what we come up with*. And so I said *fine; I don't have an agent. I have never had an agent*. She took the little proposal and sent it out to about 15

or 20 editors of her acquaintances just sort of fishing you know for--saying *here's--here's an idea that I have a lot of enthusiasm for. I think this guy can write this book and I'm looking for an editor who understands what he's getting at.* And she got like three responses saying *show--show me more* and one of them was from the best--the most prestigious publishing house in the country, Alfred Knopf. And there was a response from an editor named Ann Close, who I came to find out had grown up in Savannah and had been in New York for 20-odd years as a--as a book editor who still had a wonderful Southern accent and knew--knew exactly what I was talking about and it didn't need translation to her at all. She--she thought it was a marvelous idea. It was not a cookbook; it was a book about food and I--I had clearly my own ideas about--like the--the recipes in the book are in paragraph form; they're not in columns. You have to read the whole paragraph to pull it out and she--she was able to make it happen that way because she didn't work for the food editor at Knopf. She was a general editor; she did fiction, poetry, all non-fiction, all kinds of stuff. She just simply liked this idea and she liked the idea of it not being a traditional cookbook and--nor a traditional social history book--but this sort of middle piece that had all these different elements in it.

So I wrote *Southern Food* it came out in '87 and that's really where--that's how I got into food and--and how I've stayed in food really. That book is still in print in paperback and it--it--it did better for me than anything I ever wrote and it got me a reputation among the food people of out of all proportion to my actual knowledge of the subject. **[*Dog Barking*]** I'm--I'm not an expert o any of this--on--on the food history or the cooking but I had enough professional experience that I could take the subject and grow with it and learn with it and it became a journey for me as kind of a journey of discovery and those are the kinds of books I like to write--that you don't know it when you start--exactly what it is but--but you--you kind of see the shape

of it and you're headed to something that you think you can attain. And if you truly knew how--how little you knew and how unqualified you were to do that you would be totally intimidated and you'd never do it.

It's like you--it's like you learning how to bake. It's like anything that anybody does, if you learn it by just throwing yourself into it; it's just so much richer than if you become a trained person. So that's how I got there.

0:56:07.1

AM: How have you seen Southern food evolve over the course of your lifetime?

0:56:13.9

JE: It's evolved from the home to the--to the public places of eating, from homes to restaurants and carry-out places. It's evolved from--it's evolved from survival diet for the poor and a super rich diet for the rich to a forgotten diet for both of those extremes, an abandoned diet--I don't want to say forgotten but--but abandoned. People have walked away from this food for all kinds of different motives; some out of shame, some out of fear, some out of boredom, and they have left behind the most tasty and utilitarian regional food in America. It's so much more diverse and rich and useful than the common fare of other regions; that may be a totally unfair comment for me to make but I--when I think of New England or the Southwest or the West Coast or the Midwest, I don't think of the great vast array of meats and vegetables and hot breads and drinks and salads and--that I think of as being a natural part of what we grew up with. This is the only--

this is the mother-load right here in this region and we've--we've never fully appreciated nor embraced that--that fact. And--and now it's almost gotten away from us entirely and I think if we go back and rediscover it we'll find it not only is good for us but it will rescue a lot of those people who have abandoned it.

0:59:06.2

AM: Much talk about Southern food is talk of continuity, of--and of tradition; in this age is such talk merely romantic or is it accurate?

0:59:17.0

JE: I--I tend to believe it. It's--it is about continuity and tradition and to the extent that we decide that those things--that we don't need either one of those, then we drift farther away from it and what we put in place of it is--is not going to carry us far enough. It's--it's an entertainment; it's--it's a temporary kind of--of indulgence but this is the--stick to the ribs kind of food that--that you need for the long-haul. Now maybe people are going to come up technologically with ways to package food that will--that will--people will be able to survive on but it's not going to be fun to eat, and I'm--I'm just not looking forward to that. I'm going to be resisting that effort I think.

1:00:25.6

AM: Please describe a meal that you would characterize as totemically Southern.

1:00:34.9

JE: I remember back in the '70s, for some reason that I--that I no longer remember or can explain, the United Nations which had never, the General Assembly which had never met outside of New York City, decided to have dinner in Nashville. Now that just seems ridiculous on the face of it, but it--it was true and there was some--there was some explanation for that--that I'm sure made sense; but I--I can't remember what it was. What I remember is for weeks and weeks leading up to it, the town was all gaga. The United Nations is coming and we've got to fix dinner for them and what are we going to have? And they were talking about French this and European that and it just--it was just a hopeless--there was no way we could pretend to be Italian or French or Brazilian or--or Asian and--and have food that would--I mean they would have laughed at us. So finally common sense prevailed and they called in a woman named Phila Hach, H-a-c-h, Hach--Phila Hach had a restaurant in Clarksville which is about 40 miles up the road from here, a kind of a--a classic Southern upscale nice place to go, sort of a homesteading almost but traditional Southern food, the kind you would of as like Sunday dinner, you know. And they called her in and she's sort of a no-nonsense kind of person anyway. And they asked her what--what she thought they ought to have. And she said *well I--I'll just jot you down a menu* and she just started writing out all these things and suddenly all the people began to realize that this was--this was really the right direction for them to go. So they hired her to supervise dinner at the Centennial Park outdoors for the Representatives for the United Nations General Assembly. And I think let's see--I think I can read you the [story]--if I could find a copy of *Southern Foods*. And I think it would be a good idea to do this anyway because this--this comes pretty close to being

an ideal answer to your question. Phila Hach went onto write some real good cookbooks and--there she is.

1:04:14.8

AM: For the record, I'm going to say that you're looking through your very own book *Southern Food* to find the story of this meal; is this right?

1:04:23.2

JE: Yeah, there it is. This is my kitchen copy--June 14, 1987 of this *Southern Food*.

1:04:35.7

AM: That's what Mr. Egerton has written in the front of this particular copy of his book which he just now walked into his kitchen and--and procured.

1:04:44.9

JE: The first and only time the United Nations General Assembly met outside of New York was on June 7, 1976 on the grounds of the Parthenon in Nashville. The Delegates and guests, some 1,200 people, were served a Southern style lunch, and prepared by Phila Hach, noted hostess and caterer from Clarksville. Here is Mrs. Hach's menu--mint julep frappe, orange juice frappe--that's

for people who don't know it just means nice and cold, baked Tennessee country ham, fried catfish and hushpuppies, Southern fried chicken, sliced breasts of--breast of turkey with dill sauce, hickory smoked beef tenderloin with horseradish, green beans cooked with ham hocks, sweet boiled corn on the cob with chive butter, sour cream potato salad, raw vegetable slaw with spring onions, sliced peeled sun-ripened tomatoes, ice-water melon, honeydew and cantaloupe, cottage cheese with homemade mayonnaise, deviled eggs, bread and butter pickles, beaten biscuits, corn-like bread, yeast rolls, fudge pie, black walnut pie, pecan pie, chest pie, iced tea with mint, sweet milk, and butter milk.

Now there's some things left out that should have been in there like mashed potatoes, but serving mashed potatoes to 1,200 people would be a little rough. I'd have maybe thrown in some speckled butter beans or limas or something like that or maybe some greens, a pot of greens either turnips or collard greens would have been nice, but you get my drift. That's a long list; you and I could make up another list almost that long and we'd still talking about the same food, recognizable food in the South. And I just don't think you could go to any other region and do that. And so people would say *well you guys can't claim fried chicken for gosh sakes*. But we can; you know if you go back to the very earliest American cookbooks, like the *Virginia Housewife* in 1820 there's a recipe for fried chicken and that was the first cookbook that was ever published in this country that was not simply a reprint of an English cookbook. It was really an American cookbook--1820--1828 or something like that. And there are those dishes, you know; fried chicken--if you fried chicken like Mary Randolph fried it in that time and you--you just get it right--that's still the right way to fry chicken. So I just think this is--this is what--this is why this is such a valuable resource, and we ought to be able to you know recognize that and--and see

it for the asset that it truly is. That's where we're headed but we're going to have to work at it. It's not just going to happen without our--our making a real effort.

1:08:13.3

AM: Well John that's the last question.

1:08:16.2

JE: Oh man.

1:08:17.0

AM: So--

1:08:17.9

JE: Glad I ended on a good high note.

1:08:20.8

AM: And it looks like perfect timing. I think your wife just drove up.

1:08:22.0

JE: Well that's great.

1:08:23.9

AM: So we're going to sign off.

1:08:26.1

JE: You'll meet her.

1:08:27.2

AM: Again this was John Egerton in his Nashville home.

1:08:29.2

JE: Angie Mosier, you're--you're the best. This has been a wonderful interview. I've enjoyed it so much.

1:08:35.2

AM: Thank you very much.

1:08:40.2

[End John Egerton Interview]