JOHN T EDGE
Founding Member and Director of the Southern Foodways Alliance - Oxford, MS

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Interviewer: Sara Roahen
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[Begin John T. Interview 1]

00:00:01

Sara Roahen: This is Sara Roahen for the Southern Foodways Alliance. It's April 16, 2010. I'm in New Orleans, Louisiana, at the Pere Marquette Hotel in downtown New Orleans. And I'm sitting here with John T Edge. For the record, could I get you to say your name, please, and your birth date?

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John T Edge: Sure. My name is John T Edge, and I was born December 22, 1962 in Clinton, Georgia.

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SR: And could you tell me what your position is currently in relation to the Southern Foodways Alliance?

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JTE: I'm the director of the Southern Foodways Alliance and have been since its inception in 1999.

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SR: Could you—this is a long—this could be a long answer, but to the best of your ability, could you tell me a little bit about how you got involved with the Southern Foodways Alliance? How that came about?

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JTE: Sure. I mean, I'll have to tell a little bit of my own personal story to say how I got involved in the SFA. I was living in Atlanta in the mid-90s and had learned about the Center for the Study of Southern Culture, which is now the parent organization for the SFA, and had noticed the public programming that the Center was putting on—on everything from William Faulkner, to Eudora Welty, to the [state of the] book in the South. I was fascinated by that and had also been reading pieces in *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* about Oxford as a cool, hip town with lots of bookstores and good bars.

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And I had a regular corporate job at this point. The most recent corporate job was, I was working with companies that were going through reinvention processes, and I was a management consultant there to help them. And a lot of my colleagues had PhDs, and I hadn't quite finished my undergraduate degree. **[*Laughs*]** It was my own "don't ask, don't tell."

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But I basically went to visit Oxford one day, fell hard for it, fell hard for the Center for the Study of Southern Culture, and moved. I mean, within a couple of months. Within going to visit Oxford, meeting Ted Ownby, who is now the director; Bill Ferris, who was then the director; Mary Hartwell Howorth, who ends up being the godmother to my son; and all these

people in one afternoon and just said, "What the hell, I'm going to go do this." So I quit my job, sold my house, and within three months was living in Oxford.

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And when I got there, this public programming stuff I had mentioned earlier was really inspiring. The first summer I got there, there was the first International Conference on Elvis Presley. And it was an academic conference that was—that still appealed to a popular audience. So there was Stanley Booth, the great documenter of rock and roll music in America, giving a talk about Elvis and gospel music—or attempting to give a talk on Elvis and gospel music, falling out in the middle of his presentation—the beginning of his presentation—the effect of out the night before with—with **[*Laughs*]**, oh a photographer dude, first color photographs in the MOMA…anyway—

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So this was a serious conference. This was with people that worked hard and played hard. This was—there was a talk at that conference by Will Campbell on *Elvis Presley is Redneck*, wherein Will concluded his talk on saying, you know, the—the last kind of epithet that we accept in America is calling someone a "redneck," and we don't—we shouldn't be able to get away with it when—when it's used as short-hand for "bigot" or "stupid person." And he concluded that talk by saying, "Yeah, I'm a redneck and I'm a proud one, and so is my lesbian daughter." You know, and it just—it's like that complicated message. I was like, "Holy shit, this is beautiful."

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So that's how I got to Oxford, and a lot of what inspired the way the Southern Foodways Alliance came to present the South was inspired by that sort of public programming that would

bring in, you know, Stanley Booth—a renegade, rock and roll documentarian—along with someone like Will Campbell, an Ivy-League-educated Baptist minister, to talk about Elvis Presley.

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And what we've tried to do through the years I think is—is leverage that, and being inspired by that, and use a bunch of different perspectives to talk about southern food.

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SR: That does sound similar to me, to what I've experienced at symposia and—and other—other programming with the Southern Foodways Alliance. Who organized that Elvis conference?

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JTE: The Elvis conference—the Elvis conference was predominantly Bill Ferris, who at that point was the director of the Center and went on to become the head of the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Director of the National Endowment for the Humanities, during the Clinton Administration. Bill was and is a great kind of champion of, and documenter of, American folk culture. And Bill, along with Ann Abadie and Charles Wilson, Ted Ownby—all these people that are still a part of the Center family—have all looked at their work as a way of working toward a better South. Like, there's this undercurrent of civil justice and racial harmony and attempts to, you know, bridge gaps of gender, too, that informs all this work. So you're documenting, you're studying, you're teaching, but there's always—there's a progressive force within it. And that's something that really, when I showed up and kind of understood that, that really got me going and inspired me to think about what—. Because, at the same time, I didn't

show up to study food. I showed up because I hated the hell out of the place I grew up and I loved the place I grew up. I was embarrassed deeply and profoundly to be from the South. And I loved my place and was proud as could be of some of the cultural creations of the South and the people I knew.

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And I showed up to try to resolve those two things, and that's not anything unique. I mean, you know, Faulkner wrote about that better than I could ever mumble about it. But—but realizing that this place would help me work through that, the Center for the Study of Southern Culture would help me work through that, and at the same time there—I saw this progressive streak that ran through it. So those two things, you know, I was afforded that at the right time of my life where I could quit working for a while and indulge myself and try to figure out, you know, me.

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SR: So you finished your undergraduate degree in Oxford?

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JTE: Yeah, I did. I—I had—I think when I left the University of Georgia I had a 1.82. A lot of semesters I quit going to class. I mean, I just didn't give a damn. I was very socially engaged, which is a way of saying I was obsessed with the music scene in Athens during that time. But I came back to Ole Miss and I got an undergraduate degree in southern studies. So, you know, I'm the geek in the front row with a bunch of freshman in southern studies 101. I was such a freaking geek. But I loved it.

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SR: I recently met someone who knew you during your Atlanta days. I wish I could remember his name. He worked—he is involved in Putumayo music here. He told me that he remembers you cooking like crazy there, and I—I'm wondering if you can explain what your relationship was to food before you went to Oxford?

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JTE: Sure.

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SR: And then explain how this sort of, you know, discovery of yourself as a Southern person you could like led to food once you got to Oxford.

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JTE: Well, I had a strong interest in food from the time of a boy. I remember my father would—we lived about an hour outside of Atlanta, and on the weekends we took a lot of trips into Atlanta. And my father loved to drive Buford Highway, which is kind of the international corridor in Atlanta where most of the Chinese restaurants are—not most, but the early Chinese restaurants, kind of beachheads for Korean, Chinese, Salvadoran, and all the different new ethnicities that have come to define that area—where they all were. And we'd drive up and down Buford Highway, and my father would stop like at a Chinese grocery store and start rummaging through—you know, rummaging through the freezer case. And he'd bring home, like, black

preserved chicken. And I'd be on the—and some of this is in response to we're from a very small town. Like, you know, we're living in a town of sixty people and we go to the big city.

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SR: Sixty?

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JTE: Yeah. Maybe 100. Clinton was tiny. **[*Emphasis Added*]** Now then, Gray—which, you know, [at] various points in my life I tell people from Gray, which meant I was from a 3,000-person town as opposed to a sixty-person town. But some of that is a response of an intellectual curiosity about the world and about the big world out there, and in this case that's Atlanta. But my father would—we'd go to ethnic grocery stores on Buford Highway looking for stuff.

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And I—I mean one of my favorite treats when I was young was dried eel. I'd like to snack on dried eel, you know. I don't know what possessed me, but there was an interest in food—my father's interest, mine—early on. I never dreamed of making a—a living at it. Like when I had corporate jobs, my friend Greg Coulson and I used to—we'd go on long lunches. He was—he's an electrical engineer and I was in sales and marketing, so you know, we just kind of disappeared and we'd—we'd go somewhere at 10:00 and come back from lunch at 1:00, you know, and said, "work is what we do before and after lunch." And we'd go looking—you know, we'd go drive out Buford Highway and go try a new Thai place, or we'd go in this hole-in-the-wall French place that we used to love called Violette, and this chef Guy Luck would do like a salade assiette, and beautiful brioche, and escargot in butter sauce, and we'd just—we'd be

digging into that at lunch. But all those were indulgences and curiosity. I didn't think I'd ever make a living at this world.

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SR: And so, when did food come into play once you were in Oxford?

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JTE: When I moved to Oxford, I had done one thing in Atlanta. I had written with two other friends, a guy named Boyd Baker and Nelson Ross—we wrote a book called *The Belly of Atlanta*, and it was—it was a guide to eating and drinking in town and the neighborhoods in Atlanta. Spiral-bound, and we—we published it ourselves and sold it on the streets of Atlanta during the Olympics. So we wrote that, and I went and I moved to Atlanta—I had moved to Oxford by the time of the Olympics; went back to sell that on the streets. You know, and—and I love the written word. It's so badly done, like that book. I didn't know what a semi-colon was, I don't believe. At least I didn't know how to use it.

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But there—there was an inkling that, well, maybe I could write and stuff. But moving to Oxford, it—my intent was not to study food culture. My intent was to focus on race relations, and that still is a big part of what I'm interested in. I've just ended up saying from my approach that I can get at race by way of food. But I showed up there to study race.

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SR: And so, then, at what point did food come in?

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JTE: [*Laughs*] I'm sorry, yeah, that's the question you asked, wasn't it? Shit.

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SR: It's okay.

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JTE: The food came in—a number of things happened. I remembered reading an article in *USA Today* that profiled Rick Bayless, and Bayless was taking his—and I think he still does this—taking his staff at Frontera Grill and Topolobampo on a bus ride to a particular—to a particular town in Mexico, or to a particular state in Mexico, to learn about it. And he described it as "culinary anthropology." And I went, "Holy shit, there's such a thing?"

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And that combined with, you know, when I was beginning to read in southern studies, I realized that so many people look at the South from a different—a bunch of different perspectives. And I didn't realize how indulgent graduate school is. It's like, "You're interested in that? Okay, well then, use what you're learning and use the theories you're reading and go approach what you're truly interested in." So that's what got me into food.

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I remember one of my fellow graduate students, a woman I've stayed friends with, Caroline Herring. She actually, as a grad student, helped—did the kind of organizational piece of the first symposium. Caroline was studying the Association for the Prevention of Women—

Association of Women for the Prevention of Lynching. Very serious woman. And she said, "You're going to study grits?" I said, "Well shit." You know, I—I—that was kind of a moment for me. There's something here; there's something worth studying. Stop, that's it.

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SR: [*Laughs*] Does she believe you now?

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JTE: She believes me now. She believes me now. You know, I didn't—I didn't expect to study food. I expected to study the South, and I expected to try to make sense of the South and my conflicted notions about the South and about race when I was there. But I realized early on that—you know, I met a guy who was a fellow grad student who was studying the front porch as a social space in the American South. And I met another woman was studying beauty queen culture in the American South. And I realized that—all those kinds of approaches were liberating, and I realized, "Hey, I love to eat. I'm really curious about it." You know, I can marry the two. So it was southern studies that taught me that was possible. I didn't think it was possible to think about the South that way.

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SR: And did you—. I mean, what was your dissertation, or equivalent of?

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JTE: Sure. I—I wrote a—my thesis was called *The Potlikker Papers*. And there's a long subtitle of this inspired by the work of Eugene Walter with, you know, lots of dependent clauses, and I can't even remember what the hell the dependent clauses are. But *The Potlikker Papers* was my examination of a debate in 1931 between the editor of *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* at that time, Julian Harris, who is the son of Joel Chandler Harris—Joel Chandler Harris, who collected the Uncle Remus tales. So that's his son. And then Huey Long, senator-elect, US senator-elect at that point, from Louisiana. And they debated at a time when, you know, Prohibition, Depression—it's a tough time to be alive in the Deep South. They engaged in a debate over the relative merits of dunking or crumbling cornbread into potlikker. You know, one took one side, and it didn't really matter who was taking what, but one gentleman took one side and one took the other. And there were movie tone reels cut, there were ladies' tea groups that got together and, you know, with their finger extended sipped potlikker in china teacups. There were letters to the editor; this is what I used. I found at Emory University a cache of letters, about 600 letters to the editor with people responding to this debate. It was on the front page of *The New York Times*; it was on the front page of almost every paper of the day. It was silly, but the cool thing about these—these letters to the editor is they were ways for people to talk about race, class, gender, and kind of provincial identity. All the big issues were in those letters because people were saying, you know, "I'm—." A man would write in and say, "I'm all for this potlikker as long as a good woman makes it." And a woman would write in and say, you know, "We modern women don't find ourselves slave to the—the stove all day. We put our greens on the back and come back later in the afternoon." It was fascinating—to me, a geek boy, yeah.

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SR: So I imagine that—I'd like to get to the inception of the Southern Foodways Alliance, and I think that that has something to do with your relationship to John Egerton.

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JTE: Uh-hm.

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SR: Can you tell me when you met John Egerton and—and how your friendship evolved?

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JTE: Sure. I met John at—one of the continuing themes of this has been the public conferences and symposia that the Center for the Study—Center for the Study of Southern Culture puts on, and I met John at the Conference for the Book, which has been going fifteen years now. And John's book, *Speak Now Against the Day: The General Before the Civil Rights in America*, had just come out. You know, and it had just won the Robert F. Kennedy Award for best book of history that year and was—you know, it was considered by many a probable Pulitzer winner. Should have been.

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But I met him, so here's this guy, like he's written—he's written like a defining book about race relations in the South. And he's also written this great book, *Southern Food at Home on the Road and in History*. So you know, here was—here was this guy who had done all this stuff I was just starting to think about doing, and had done it with panache and done it with—you know, not in a ruthless way; in a very sweet and kind and—and just amazing way. So Mary

Hartwell Howorth—at this point I'm still an undergraduate. Mary Hartwell set it up so I would do an oral history with him, so I would sit there and interview him about his reading experiences and the like. So usually it would have gone to a graduate student, but Mary Hartwell Howorth said, "Ah, the hell with that. Let John T. interview him because he'll care about this." And we hit it off. And that—that would have been—that would have been in '97, I think. Something like that. Yeah, probably '96—'97. And we talked, and I asked John if I could come up and visit him in—in Nashville. And he let—and he tells the story now that I was looking at his bookcases like I was casing the joint and was going to knock him over and take his shit.

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But that—you know, that began a real strong mentorship for me, second only to my father in terms of what someone older than me has offered to me.

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SR: Can you tell us what Mary Hartwell Howorth's position was/is at the Center?

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JTE: Queen Bee. Mary Hartwell is the center of the universe. If you need something done—and I'm—I'm being flippant, but I'm being serious, too. You know, I can walk downstairs and say, "Okay Mary Hartwell, I'm trying to figure out how to get to this person. I'm trying to figure out how to get this done." We can figure out anything in ten minutes.

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She's—she's socially progressive, socially astute. She does not suffer fools, and she's a great read on human beings, and she's—her official title is, she's I think administrative manager

for the—for the Center. But she's the person at the front desk working the phones. She's—there's—there's a—a kind of defacto bar at that desk, and I always—you know, I always imagine, and everybody leans up against the bar to talk to Mary Hartwell. I think if they'd just have cocktails it would be a really good bar. But she really—I mean she's—she's a big part of the formula because we get a lot of random calls and people saying, you know, "I've got my grandmother's chicken dressing recipe." And Mary Hartwell will help screen those and helps them and says, "This is what you might want to consider doing," instead of—instead of us ending up—. And part of what we do, though, is listen to people who are proud of their food and proud of their family story and want to tell us about it. That's a large part of our job. But the ones that are like three-quarters bonkers, Mary Hartwell screens them.

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SR: I didn't realize that she was around there before you were.

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JTE: Oh yeah.

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SR: And so she set you up with John Egerton. And how did that lead to-—I mean, I understand that he became your mentor in all things—race relations, food, etcetera—but how did that lead to something that's now called the Southern Foodways Alliance? Can you give me a little, like, chronological timeline?

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JTE: Well there were—there were a couple of other events, a couple of other organizations, that preceded the Southern Foodways Alliance. There was the—the Society for the Preservation and Revitalization of Southern Food. That's a lot of words.

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SR: Yeah, where did that exist?

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JTE: That was in Atlanta. And at least it was founded in Atlanta. The founding father and mother were Edna Lewis and Scott Peacock. And I remember there was a picture of them in *Time* magazine. They're out in a field, like a cornfield, and Miss Lewis is in a rocking chair and Scott is standing above her. They look majestic. They were very much the—the—Christiane Lauterbach wrote a piece about them a few years after that called *The Odd Couple of Southern Cooking*. But they were the—the drivers of this kind of rediscovery of Southern cookery; kind of the intellectual end of it as well. And that was '92 to '95, is when that's going on.

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And they—there was a woman, her name was Ann Logan, who was a graduate student at UNC, if I remember that correctly. And Ann agreed to act as kind of the manager of that, and they pulled off one conference, maybe two, and there was a lot of interest and momentum, but ultimately there was not like a—you know, there was not a supporting organization to drive it. You know, they didn't have an academic affiliation. They were starting a small nonprofit in essence on somebody's—you know, at somebody's kitchen table, and—and that hurt the effort.

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That kind of dissolved, faded, and another group came in, and that was the American Southern Food Institute. And that was led by people like Jean Voltz, a food writer out of Florida; Terry Ford, a publisher of a newspaper—Ripley, Tennessee; you know, there were others that were involved. That organization—actually, the very first Southern Foodways Symposium we hosted—the Southern Foodways Symposium precedes the Southern Foodways Alliance.

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But this is—this is May of '98. That American Southern Food Institute was beginning and they hosted a cocktail party the night before the symposium started, like on a Thursday night, at Nathalie Dupree's house. And at this point, Nathalie Dupree is living in Oxford around the corner from where I live, and they hosted a party, and so those two efforts were linked for a little while. But the American Southern Food Institute, there were some structural issues and there was some discord within the—the founding board. And I don't say that to be gossip-mongering. You know, I've kept all the records and I've got all the kind of—because I'm interested in how these things start and how these things fail. But there was discord and it didn't work. Ultimately, Terry Ford, who is kind of the last man standing with that American Southern Food Institute, the second attempt before the SFA. Terry and John Egerton and I meet in Jackson, Tennessee at a—at a Barnes & Noble in Jackson, Tennessee, in a little—dumpy little coffee place, and broker the rolling of the membership rolls of the American Southern Food Institute and the Society for the Preservation and Revitalization of Southern Food. All that is rolled into the SFA, so all those people that had membership to those two previous organizations get a free membership in here.

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There's a little bit of money that comes into the SFA coiffeurs. Like, I think it's like $7,000, which at that point helped a lot. But all those previous efforts come into the Southern Foodways Alliance. The Southern Foodways Alliance starts with a far more broad and inclusive and big tent philosophy thanks to Egerton. I'll stop there.

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SR: It's hard to know where to—where to go from here.

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JTE: Yeah, sorry.

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SR: No, it's okay. So both of those organizations were sort of ready to—to pack up, I guess, and—and to—?

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JTE: Yeah. I think people involved in it realized that it just wasn't working and realized—and the SFA didn't have grand designs, and the SFA didn't, you know, had no intention of becoming what it is now today. But what we realized—what John Egerton realized and Nathalie Dupree, who was a big part of this, too—was that there couldn't be three organizations. And if two were flailing, then this third—it either worked or you just gave up on the whole thing. I mean this is the last ditch effort to—to make something work. And the Center for the Study of Southern Culture as kind of a supporting partner, as a host, was a great idea because the Center—at this

point, the Center has been in business twenty years. It was the first regional studies center in the—in the country and was so stable. And the Center could act as host, could bring this group in and kind of incubate it and grow it.

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SR: That makes a lot of sense. I mean, I never thought—as a board member, we talk about how the Center supports us, the organization, a lot, but it makes a lot of sense why—. Well, it makes sense to me now that the—that the organization has lived for so long and done so well. A lot of that has to do with the support of something like that. Otherwise you're just sort of out there just foundering around.

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JTE: Right, and you get—I mean, this—it's interesting because there has been debate among board members over time saying, "What does the university do for us?" Well, there are a number of things that are important. One is affiliation with an academic institution gives you credibility. It also gives you—you know, you don't have to go out and file for 501(c)(3) status. You don't have to go out and buy a fax machine. You don't have to go out and say, "Okay, who is going to answer our phones?" You know, we in essence, we inherited this holistic system of how to run an organization and we got some offices.

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We're really lucky in that, if you know how most of these institutes work—most of them, the university would take "a load," is what they call it. So 30 or 40-percent of your money that comes in, the university would say, "Grab it," **[*Gestures*]** and that was—you would pay

operating costs. We don't pay operating costs. We just—we get free office space. We get, you know, the help of the PR Department. We get the help of the—our money gets invested. All that stuff without a load because Charles Wilson and Bill Ferris cut a good deal with the university when the SFA started. So you know, it—it was a great partnership. Still is.

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SR: So the SFA was officially founded after that first symposium. Could you tell me a little bit about what the first symposium was like?

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JTE: The first symposium was when my wife was stalking me and wanted to date me. And I remember her quite clearly, a woman who wouldn't eat a pig ear if you held her down and forced it to her. She was wearing a little apron and serving Frank Stitt's pig ear appetizer with fresh dug potatoes in a ham hock vinaigrette and roasted asparagus to, you know, 100 people, but—. I'm joking.

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SR: Was she in the program?

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JTE: No, she wasn't in the program. She was—we were just getting to know each other and that was the beginning of our—our relationship.

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SR: Wait. Maybe—maybe you should introduce, for the record, who your wife is.

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JTE: My wife is Blair Hobbs, and she—we met and started dating right in May of ’98, which is when the first symposium was. So we were just starting to date.

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SR: And so she was a volunteer?

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JTE: She volunteered. She did. And she had, at about that same time, asked me to go speak to her class about something I had written. And then she dropped a bottle of wine up on my front porch. We had our first date like the Sunday—Sunday or Monday after the symposium. I mean all these things kind of bubbled up at the same time.

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SR: Classic stalker. **[*Laughs*]**

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JTE: Exactly. **[*Laughs*]**

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SR: So was it a weekend long?

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JTE: The symposium?

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SR: The conference—or, what was it called?

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JTE: Yeah, it was a weekend long. It was a Friday, Saturday, Sunday, and it was there was everything from—I wrote down some of this stuff to help me remember. Oh yeah, yeah, the first conference: Norma Jean Darden gave a performance of a one—one-woman show that she had done on Broadway about her book, along with her sister, Carol Darden, called *Spoonbread and Strawberry Wine.* So, you know, that was held in the courtroom of the courthouse, the Fayette County Courthouse on the square in Oxford. That was Sunday morning, and that was—that was kind of at the moment I knew this worked because it was so emotional for so many people. It was—you know, she basically told the story of her family through food. And someone in the back stood up. I don't recall the guy's name. He's from Birmingham, you know, and basically they realized that their families—white and black—had been related in those times.

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And that was when I realized that—that, you know, I'd come to Oxford because I wanted to deal with race. And here I was doing it. I was doing it through food, though. And—and that was like a light-bulb moment for me, that—that something as inconsequential, as some might

say—not as I might say—but something as inconsequential to some as food could get you to race really quick in a non-threatening way. All of a sudden, you—you know, you thought you were talking about your grandma's cornbread and you ended up talking about the desegregation of your high school and—and what that meant to you. So that was a real kind of watershed moment for me.

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We also did stuff like Ed Scott, who was the first African American catfish farmer in the Mississippi Delta, and who when—when the kind of the white power oligarchy wouldn't give him a loan to dig catfish ponds, he just went out in his backyard and said, "The hell with it. I'll dig my own ponds," and ends up running a catfish processing plant. Ed came up to fry fish—

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SR: At that first one?

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JTE: —at that first symposium. You know, there was a—there was a gentleman from the University of Illinois who gave a talk. Chicken—William—William Wiggins: *Chicken are Dying so that Men Might Live: A Look at Food and the Black Religious Experience*. Richard Schweid, who wrote a great book on catfish in the Delta and also wrote a book on hot peppers, Cajun, and capsicum in New Iberia. He gave a talk about community and how food defines a community. John Egerton gave a talk. John Martin Taylor, Jessica Harris. Our opening speaker was Betty Fussell, and Betty stepped up to the mic and said, "We don't need Proust's madeleine; we got Twain's corn pone." And, you know, people just hooted.

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And we later got t-shirts printed with that slogan on the back. It was—it was a really pretty amazing thing for that first time because a lot of people found each other. And that was the beginnings of this kind of SFA ethic that, you know, is inclusive, is fun, is serious, is a little bit of a bunker mentality, too. You know, that we're—we're engaged in this dialogue and we'd welcome you in, but you've got to pay attention. And—and that symposium felt all those ways.

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SR: And that was pretty intentional, it sounds like.

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JTE: What was?

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SR: That ethic, setting that tone.

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JTE: Yeah. The intentional nature of it was, and I'll come back to that because not really. I'll start with that. You know, the thing about the symposium, which has become kind of our premier event—I remember the first one and just thinking, "Oh God, this was horrible." Like we didn't do the job worth a shit. There was so many things that went wrong over here and went wrong over there. But then I get the back channel from people that were there, and as with all symposia, it was the kind of interstitial—the interstitial moments for people. When someone starts talking

to someone they didn't know and they find common ground and they start talking about some element of a speaker's presentation, then they're creating this moment in knitting kind of their worlds together. That's what really matters. You know, the—the presentations are catalytic; they—they push people forward. What—what really matters is the human interactions. So I didn't see that then. You know, I just saw that the fried chicken delivery was fifteen minutes late, and you know we had to hold the Sunday brunch inside because the ground was too wet. That sort of thing. But I learned a lot then that—that, you know, if you curate—. It's important about how you send your message out in terms of who you attract. I remember Donna Pierce, [who] is an African American woman and was an SFA Board member, is up in Chicago now, but she saw the program and realized that—that half the speakers were African American. And she said, "Okay, I read that. I read what you're trying to say and I know I'm welcome, so I'm going to come."

00:36:26

And that kind of thing was—and I don't say that to be self-aggrandizing; just that's the kind of thing we tried to do with the first symposium and all the other ones, is send people messages that—to curate a crowd of people that would be open-minded and inclusive and, you know, not a bunch of pain-in-the-ass-moonlight-magnolias-kind-of Southerners. I got no tolerance for them.

00:36:55

SR: And yet a few of them show up, probably then and now. Can you talk about—is it challenging? I mean, what you're talking about is—the way you're describing the sort of ethic, this tone, sort of philosophy that was present and that you tried to curate at the first

symposium—. I mean, that sort of thing is why I—after my first symposium, I thought, "I need to get involved with this group." You know, there's something really sort of unique and precious—and precious in a good way—going on here. It's unusual and I want to be a part of it. The organization has grown so much since that first one. Is it challenging to hold on to that, or has that gained so much momentum that it's—that ethic, philosophy—is natural now?

00:37:53

JTE: I think it's natural. I mean I—I looked—I thought about this the other day. Back in—the first of April 2010, there was an interview in the Nashville *Tennessean*, and they interview Thomas Williams, one of our members in—in Nashville. And they asked him why he comes to SFA events. And he said it exactly the same way I would. He said what you're saying. You know, he said, well we're trying to showcase a diverse American South where everyone is welcome; this isn't about the past. This is about making sense of the present and documenting. He said all that stuff, and that was the best—best read; made me really happy and made me realize that, you know, we spend a lot of time doing social engineering work behind the scenes that nobody knows. The idea when you write a—when you write a brochure like this—the new one we've got out for the Buford Highway Field Trip to Atlanta—you want to make sure that every restaurant gets the same number of lines and description. You want to make sure that no one is called a chef unless everybody is called a chef. Like, you know, the five-star, white tablecloth person doesn't get called a chef if the potlikker meat-and-three gumbo cook doesn't get called a chef, you know. We try to break down some of those barriers.

00:39:21

SR: I know that you're maybe too modest to admit it if this is true, but does that come from you, do you think?

00:39:29

JTE: What do you mean?

00:39:32

SR: The sort of, I can't—I don't even know what the word is. The sort of striving for equality, putting everyone on a level playing field. Because, I mean, that—that really does exist in every area of the—the organization that I've been involved in, from just being a member at an event to working on the community cookbook with you. I guess, is the ethic driven by you primarily, do you think? Or where does it come from?

00:40:06

JTE: I don't think so. I mean, it came from Egerton. That—that ethic came from Egerton. I remember we were sitting down; you know, the idea was to pull together fifty founders to sign on as the founders of the SFA. And I remember Egerton saying to me, he was like, okay, we're going to get—if the population of the American South is about thirty-five to thirty-eight-percent African American, then we're going to have that same percentage in our founders. He said, "Now you don't tell any god-damn body, but that's what we're going to do."

00:40:33

So the idea of doing the right thing, applying some social engineering but not tooting your horn about it and just doing it, and—and failing at it, like, most of the time—. I don't think

we—I think we are well-intentioned, but I think a lot of the social engineering work we try fails, but we're going to keep trying.

00:40:57

SR: In what way do you mean that it fails?

00:41:00

JTE: Well I mean, you know if our membership—if our founding members were thirty-eight-percent or thirty-five-percent African American, our attendees and events aren't. I mean it's ten-percent, which is—it hurts my heart. And—and you know, we've got—we've got an enlightened board that cares about that sort of thing, and I think we make fitful attempts to fix it, but we're still not there. I mean, why are we failing at that?

00:41:32

SR: Do you have an idea?

00:41:34

JTE: No. I'm asking the question. **[*Laughs*]** It's a rhetorical. I mean, why are we failing at it? We, as an organization, will continue to struggle with this idea that—like this brochure. We'll look at the—the brochure for the Buford Highway Field Trip. The cost of the brochure is $285—not the cost of the brochure. The brochure is free. The *event* is $285, and that's our cost. In other words, that's what it will cost us to put it on. We don't expect to make any money off of it. It's just—.

00:42:06

Even though that's what it will cost, and it's cheap compared to a lot of food events, can we—can we get working class Southerners into a $285 event? Can we appeal to them? Can we make a rational argument that they should be there to understand the culture around them? It's a hard argument to make.

00:42:31

You know, I think some of the things we're doing now—and doing these Potlikker Film Festivals have potential because the price of admission is $40 or $45-bucks, and that to me is the great model going forward because I think we can make an argument that most anybody can afford to—if they're interested in this sort of thing—to put up $40-bucks to come to an event. But we'll struggle with that.

00:42:52

SR: And also probably the time element.

00:42:54

JTE: Yeah.

00:42:57

SR: A weekend versus an evening?

00:42:57

JTE: Well, and that's—as you know, we've shortened the symposium by a day. And I think that—you know, I think that helps because so many people can't take off what amounts to five days from work.

00:43:09

SR: Okay, a few more questions about the beginning, yes?

00:43:13

JTE: May I go to the bathroom?

00:43:15

SR: Yes, you may.

00:43:17

JTE: Sorry.

00:43:17

SR: No, it's all right. Okay, we just had a little break, and I'd like to get back to the beginning of the—the Southern Foodways Alliance for another minute and ask you, how—. So, I know how you came up with the percentages of the founders. You know, how many African American founders there would be, for example. What were other criteria for choosing who to ask?

00:43:45

JTE: And these criteria were—were Egerton's, and you know once he hears this and sees this in print he's going to be mad as hell at me because—but I think it's important to know. He wanted there to be a mix of African American and Anglo; he wanted there to be a mix of working class and white tablecloth when it comes to cooks and chefs. So if you look at that, you'll think—you know, take Birmingham as an example. Frank Stitt and Pardis Stitt were founders—Highland's Bar and Grill, one of the best restaurants in America. So was Van Sykes, owner of a small barbecue joint in Bessemer, just outside of Birmingham. But that balance was important, too. One based on class, one based on different representations of the world of food. And gender was important, too. There—you know, there are, I'd say forty-percent of the people represented are women as founders.

00:44:41

It was important that people, like—I remember that meeting; there were, I think of the fifty founders, I think thirty-seven of them came to the organizational meeting. And the greatest entry was done by Kathy Starr. Kathy is from Hollandale, Mississippi; wrote a great book called the *Soul of Southern Cooking*. Kathy's husband is a long-haul truck driver. And you know, we went around the room to introduce ourselves: "How did you get here?" And—and Kathy—you know, somebody would say, "Well, I've been studying food." And Kathy said, "My husband drove me. He's down—the truck is idling at the bottom of the—of the hill. He couldn't get up this damn hill." And—and that moment really was important for everybody that—to realize that this was not a bunch of, you know, Southern elitist intellectuals who were going to forge this thing. That there would be other voices, and that was important.

00:45:39

SR: Can you tell me—tell us—what the mission statement of the organization is right now?

00:45:52

JTE: Yeah. I can tell you what it is now, and I've got the original one, too. So now the mission of the Southern Foodways Alliance is" *To document, study, and*—it's *to document, study, and celebrate the diverse food cultures of the changing American South.*

00:46:11

SR: Okay. There was a bit of noise. Could you say that entire phrase again, the mission statement?

00:46:17

JTE: The mission statement of the Southern Foodways Alliance is *to document, study, and celebrate the diverse food cultures of the changing American South*.

00:46:25

SR: And that was settled on maybe a year ago, that—?

00:46:31

JTE: Yeah. I mean, that—that mission statement has changed over time. That most recent one was—was honed in 2008—2009. And there was some additions to that language. The *study* was inserted; *changing American South* was inserted. So that—because one of the things that we're very careful [about] is when people talk about, "So y'all work with preserving Southern food

culture?" And, like, no. Not really. We're not—we're not—we're documenting it, but we're not trying to preserve it in amber. We're not trying to prevent it from changing. We're interested in that evolution. You know, and I think even some of our early stuff—and we—we didn't figure this out from day one. I think some of our early stuff, even like the meta-tags in the—in the website for the SFA, which we're trying to get rid of, say "preserve and promote," like we're some kind of policemen of Southern food. But you know, as the organization has grown and as we've refined our mission and vision, you know that's—that's it.

00:47:35

SR: So you said that you have the original mission statement. Can you tell us what that is/was?

00:47:38

JTE: Yeah, these are—these are talking points that John Egerton devised back in April of '99, and he said that an organization like we're working towards should recognize the worthy efforts of the previous organizations. And there was another to think about there that I didn't mention before: the Salute to Southern Chefs at—at Charleston Place that Marlene Osteen and Louis Osteen did. That was the high-end version of what we're doing now. It was the—the chef(ly) version, and Marlene and Louis were the organizers of that.

00:48:15

Recognize divisiveness within the Southern food community and that no effort will succeed unless it seeks to unite. Let's see if I can get—scroll down a little bit more. *This effort will not just strive for inclusiveness; inclusiveness will be elemental. Indeed one of the chief aims of the organization will be to make the general public, not to mention potential members, aware*

of the unique potential that a better understanding of southern foodways holds for a better South. So a better understanding of Southern food leads to a better South, and that was in the beginnings of the discussions, this progressive "we're going to fix this place by way of fixing collard greens and cornbread."

00:48:58

Our efforts will be three-fold: public programs and education, sponsorship of scholarship, and social advocacy.

00:49:16

SR: Yes, please. If there is more I'd—I'd love to know it.

00:49:17

JTE: There is—there is more, but—but you know, I think it might make sense for when we post mine, for me to post like—let's take like ten documents that were part of the thinking behind the SFA and let's append those with it.

00:49:32

SR: I think that would be a great idea.

00:49:34

JTE: Yeah.

00:49:35

SR: So, I'm a relative newcomer. My first symposium was the barbecue symposium. I can't remember what year that was in.

00:49:41

JTE: 2002, I think.

00:49:43

SR: 2002.

00:49:45

JTE: Yeah.

00:49:45

SR: And it felt—I mean, when I'm hearing you talk about the dates of the beginnings of the organization, it's more recent than it felt like when I started. It felt like a very solid, working, organized organization when I started coming. And I'm on the board now and I noticed that—

00:50:10

JTE: 2001.

00:50:09

SR: Okay, 2001.

—that you and a few other people who were around in the—in the beginning need to keep us on track a lot of the times to keep in mind these sort of like beginning principles, what Egerton was about. Always keeping race in mind—that kind of thing. Can you talk about the—. I imagine if it's sometimes a challenge to keep the current board on track with that, it must be even a bigger challenge to help the organization as a whole to keep those kinds of things in mind and not just make a bacchanal of things. Is it a challenge? How do you work that out?

00:50:58

JTE: It—it—you know, I don't see us as the—the gatekeepers on this. I don't see the staff as the gatekeepers. I do say—I do think that as our staff has grown—you know there's five employees now, and you know our decisions are made collectively and they're made by consensus and they're always informed by race and class and who is getting left out and who is getting included. And—and we will always make our decisions that way, and I think our—I think our board gets that. I think we all need to be reminded. It's that idea that any institution is naturally corrupting because the institution's reason is to support itself and to perpetuate itself.

00:51:43

And you've got to realize, like, why are we—why do we exist? You know, do we need to exist? I've had fallacious moments when I said, you know, we should shut this down at year ten, or we should shut this down at year twenty and just walk away and say, "Look, we did this. We did it well. That's it."

00:52:00

And—and I worry that there's a point at which we're an organization that just pulls off events. That pulls off really great events, but there's no takeaway beyond a go-cup full of really good rum or bourbon. And that worries me. A lot.

00:52:26

SR: I guess that leads me to a question that I had written down before we started talking. What—what surprises you about what the organization has become? Or what doesn't surprise you?

00:52:47

JTE: I'm surprised by we're now grownups. You know, we were insurgent. We were the people that didn't have any money, didn't have any real muscle, always had credibility. People trusted us to tell them an honest story. But we weren't at the center of the table in those discussions. We were over on the side, and we were the kind of punk rockers of—of the food world. You know, the people that—that constructed bacon trees and bacon grease dripped onto you as you walked into an event.

00:53:23

And I think we have to be really careful we don't lose that—that kind of vibe, that kind of ethic, that kind of, you know, just a real attitude that says things aren't always the way they have—they've been before. The kind of ethic that says we're going to stage a chitterling ballet. It doesn't make any sense to you, but just trust us; it's going to. This is—this is the kind of stuff we should be doing. And that's my greatest fear, is that losing that—that kind of spark, losing that ability to surprise our members and to challenge them to think in new ways. I think that's what

they want from us, and I think they trust us to do that for them. And we've got to keep performing and over-performing.

00:54:09

SR: Well the chitterling ballet was in the past year, so I don't think you've lost—.

00:54:13

JTE: But now what—what the hell am I going to do this year? I mentioned the chitterling ballet because I was really proud of that. I thought that was—I see so many food events, and you and I both go to them, and they consist of this: there's food; there is more than likely—you want me to stop?

00:54:33

SR: It's okay. **[*Background Noise*]**

00:54:34

JTE: But you go to a food event and there is food, there is wine. Somebody talks about the wine; somebody talks about the food. That's it. And that's pitiful. Come on, bring some cultural context into it. And I think it's deeply important. Like, bring a poet in to read a poem about—you know, Kevin Young. Just beautiful gossamer poetry. Kevin reading between courses transforms a dinner into an event. To have—you know, to—to have—like I remember one year we—we had this guy dress up as Soggy Sweat. I don't know if you were that year. Soggy Sweat was a Mississippi Legislator who debated on the floor of the Senate whether alcohol was the

scourge of all—or, was the kind of balm of—of all men. And it was theater. Like, think about food as just—as—as another aspect of creative culture, and then pair it with other parts of creative culture and show it to people. And I think people will gain a deeper appreciation of food.

00:55:37

That's the thing that most excites me, and—and I think—I think we're still there. I fear when we slip.

00:55:46

SR: For the record, could you just explain a little bit what—about the chitterling ballet, and what that was?

00:55:51

JTE: Sure. That was, about three years ago we started working with Ballet Memphis, which is a really great avant-garde ballet company in Memphis, Tennessee. And they asked us to help them because they do an annual food event that's a fundraiser for them. But they've been doing, you know, the *Dance of the Sugarplum Fairy* for tens years and realized they're boring everybody to death. So how do they reinvigorate it? Well, we had gotten this collection of food songs from Roy Blunt. We talked Roy into letting us digitize his 3,000 food songs he had been collecting for years as cassette tapes.

00:56:24

So Roy sent us the cassette tapes, we digitized them, and then when Ballet Memphis asked us for some ideas, we said, "Well, what about Roy's stuff?" And we said, "Well, what's

your food? What is the food of Memphis?" And they said, "Pork. Barbecue pork." So a—a—they did a collaboration with a guy named Trey McIntyre, who is—who is a choreographer. So Trey McIntyre set a variety of songs, including *Gimme Gimme Chitterlings* by Huey Piano Smith, and they staged that maybe two years ago for Ballet Memphis and then they reprised it for us at the 2009 Symposium as the kind of Sunday closing moment. And it was magical. It was really, really magical.

00:57:18

SR: I agree. I want to get back to a couple nuts and bolts things. You had the first symposium in what year?

00:57:29

JTE: The first symposium was in May of 1998. It was about—we set it up for seventy-five people, a budget for seventy-five people, and we had probably eighty people. It sold out. We didn't have enough sense to know that you shouldn't do that the same weekend as the Beard Awards, so it was—it was like the first weekend in May and we had no idea. What the hell is the Beard Awards? I don't know. So we didn't—this was also back before the Beard Awards had the sense to recognize the fact that Frank Stitt is one of the best chefs in the country, so we were able to get Frank because he wasn't nominated for any damn thing. **[*Laughs*]**

00:57:58

SR: It's hard to imagine.

00:58:01

JTE: Yeah. But Frank was our—was our primary guest chef for that Saturday lunch, which we continue to do. But yeah, that was May of ’98.

00:58:08

SR: And then the organization was officially founded. Did the organization have a name at that point?

00:58:14

JTE: No, the organization did not. That was called the Southern Foodways Symposium, and there was no organization. It was just a thing put on by the Center for the Study of Southern Culture, run by me as a grad student with help from Caroline Herring, another grad student, the same grad student who looked at me in one of our discussions and said, “Are you going to study grits?”

00:58:35

But so, that was May of ’98. By—by maybe August, September of ’98, John Egerton is thinking about this idea that the Center for the Study of Southern Culture could be a host to a food organization. By—by January there’s a compilation of a list of people that could be the founders. And then in July of ’99 there’s a meeting in Birmingham at a big conference table at Southern Progress’ headquarters that brings, I think, thirty-seven people to the table. And it’s only at that meeting that a name is established, the Southern Foodways Alliance.

00:59:20

That night there's a dinner of all those people that came together at Highland's Bar and Grill that Frank and Pardis hosted and where we toasted the new organization, and it began in that moment in—in July of '99.

00:59:32

SR: Okay, great. And so, at what point do you become an employee of the organization?

00:59:39

JTE: At that meeting, the founders and a steering committee formed like—like of the thirty-seven, fifteen to seventeen stepped onto a steering committee. And they made the decision at that meeting to hire me as the director. My title has always been, to them, executive director, but I've never used it because I think it sounds pompous. But so, that decision was made at that meeting and there was some money. While a graduate student, I had written a cookbook called *A Gracious Plenty*. That had been my graduate project, my graduate assistantship. So there had been—and that had gotten a good advance. A woman named Ellen Rolfs had worked at the book packager that brought the idea of the project to the Center, and then the Center hired me as a graduate student to execute it. But there had been like $30,000 leftover from that. She had gotten like a $100,000 advance.

01:00:40

So $30,000 leftover from that became the kind of seed money for the SFA. And then a little bit of money, as I mentioned, down the road from the—from the Association for the Study—the American Southern Food Institute, a little bit of money from them, about $7,000, and then at that point I—I joined. There was money to hire me in—I think November of '99 is when

I officially stepped on as an employee of the University of Mississippi, although I had been working from July on. I finally get a paycheck and get recognized as an employee in July—in November of ’99.

01:01:23

SR: This was a full-time position?

01:01:26

JTE: That was a matter of big debate. It was—it was a full-time position, but I had flexibility. It was a full-time position. I wasn’t paid like a full-time position. I think I was paid, if I remember, it was something like $21,000 a year. And that was—that was really—it was great in so many different ways because at the same time I’m beginning to write. My first published magazine piece had been at about the same time. It was a year after-—about the same time as the second symposium was about my first published magazine piece.

01:02:05

SR: And what was that? Where was it?

01:02:05

JTE: I worked a Lucky Dog Cart here in New Orleans and wrote a piece for the *Oxford American* that ran in—that ran in probably February of ’99, yeah. So the idea that I would have a full-time job but with a great deal of flexibility to allow me to write—but at that point to support my family because Blair and I were getting married. By then we were married—in June of ’99,

so I had to have that flexibility because I couldn't support—. My wife, I mean she buys so many—no, I'm joking. **[*Laughs*]** But that flexibility, and that flexibility continues to serve me today. I mean, I have time to write. I basically work two jobs. I work the SFA, and then I work at my own writing, so—.

01:02:55

SR: I feel like I need to step in here and say you have time to write because you work all the time; not because it's not a full-time job. **[*Laughs*]**

01:03:03

JTE: It is a full-time job.

01:03:08

SR: Yes, it is a full-time job.

01:03:08

JTE: Yeah, and—you know, there are—there are moments when I think I'd love to have a job where I go home at 5:00 every day and all that goes away. But a lot of my creative output is here, and—and I love conceiving events. I love—I love the kind of social engineering of all this. I love bringing people together and then realizing what—what relationships are forged in an event. It's one of the greatest joys. I love—.

01:03:40

Somebody told me they went to Mas Farmhouse in New York two weeks ago. They walked in and someone had an SFA button on. I went to Sean Brock's restaurant, McCrady's in Charleston, a month ago and there was an SFA sticker on the door, you know. I saw some—I saw someone had a *Make Cornbread Not War* bumper sticker maybe a month ago driving through Atlanta. I don't know who the hell it was. It's great.

01:04:09

SR: I liked how you just said a lot of your creative output is here. You said *here*, and we're nowhere near Oxford right now, or your office. It's—the *here* of the Southern Foodways Alliance like you're describing right now is in many different places.

01:04:26

JTE: I don't understand. **[*Laughs*]**

01:04:29

SR: It's not *here* at the Center. The—the *here* of the Southern Foodways Alliance is not in one specific place?

01:04:34

JTE: Correct.

01:04:34

SR: It's with you; it's with its members.

01:04:37

JTE: Yeah, and it's—I mean it's also that interaction, what all these different people bring into it. It's amazing. Now there's—now there's a farmer sitting down next to—somebody like Will Harris, the cattleman from South Georgia, who did not know Julian Van Winkle, the whiskey maker from—from Kentucky, who did not know you and did not know Brett Anderson and did not know that they would be out until 4:00 in the morning somewhere in New York forging something. Yeah. They're loaded and they're having a great time, but there are these bonds that—that emerge from those encounters; that's where the SFA—. God, this sounds so kind of loose-y goose-y, but that's kind of where the SFA lives. It lives in all those relationships from all those people, who—. I saw Sissy Van Winkle, Julian Van Winkle's wife and a big supporter of the SFA, and I overheard her trying to explain the relationships that people have forged. She said, "I can't really explain it to you, but it's really profound and you just need to start coming to stuff."

01:05:47

And that was a great compliment. And it's those little gleanings that matter. And this sounds almost—this does sound self-aggrandizing, and I really don't mean it that way. I'm just humbled by it and proud of it.

01:06:03

SR: Well you should be, I think. At what point was the second employee hired on?

01:06:09

JTE: The second employee. Well there were—I should say there were a number of graduate students who for the first few years kind of ran the symposium. So you know, that first year was Caroline Herring. Molly McGehee did it for two years and was really expert and great. And we had—we had others. The—the person that really stepped in and became our true second employee was Mary Beth Lasseter. Mary Beth is a Georgian like me. I'm from Valdosta. I met her and got to know her when we were working on a Civil Rights memorial on campus. It comes back to race.

01:06:46

And we had sent out a call for entries. You know, it was an international call for entries, and like 300 entries came in to be a part of the juried process and would winnow down to five finalists. And we needed somebody to organize the slides and everybody was going, "Oh my God, this is just a nightmare." And Mary Beth just stepped in and was like, "I got it." And that pattern has emerged so many times **[*Laughs*]**. She's so great at organizational, so great at through-puts, such a great kind of analytical mind. And she stepped in and had that. And then she began working for us as a graduate assistant and began organizing the symposium; then went to get an MBA at Ole Miss, because her strong interest has always been running a nonprofit. She's a Catholic by raising and by education at Notre Dame and believes in service and has always thought of herself as running a nonprofit. So she wanted to get an MBA to better understand the processes and money and systems.

01:07:54

So she did that, and when she started working on her MBA she came in and was working more regularly with us. We were paying her like a consulting fee or something, and then we eventually hired her as our second employee as the associate director of the SFA, and she was

our first employee. And I can't even tell you what year that was. I think it's like 2002—2003—2003 sounds good.

01:08:26

SR: [*Laughs*] Around then anyway?

01:08:27

JTE: Yeah.

01:08:29

SR: Okay, and now—now there are five employees, you said?

01:08:32

JTE: Yeah. There is—there is Mary Beth. Amy Evans followed Mary Beth. Amy was a southern studies student as well. Amy got a—was set up with an internship, an externship in essence, with Viking Range right—right as she's finishing her degree, and she does an oral history project documenting the food culture of the Mississippi Delta underwritten by Viking. And she lived in the Delta during that point. That forged a great relationship between Viking and the SFA. Also kind of showcased Amy's talents, and when she completed that she was doing freelance stuff for us. I had a meeting with Jim 'n Nick's—with Nick Pihakis—and Nick in typical Nick fashion looked at me and said, "What do you need?" I said, "What do you mean, what do I need?" He said, "Well, you know I admire what y'all are doing. How can we help?" I said, "Well, we need to hire Amy as our oral historian." And he said, "How much money do you

need?" And I said, "Well, we probably need $35,000." And I said—I said, "What if you pay half of that and I go find the other half?" And he said, "Okay, done."

01:09:44

And then it was like, "Would you like a beer?" It was that kind of—. So Amy came on as our—our third employee. Joe York, you might call our fourth. It depends on—you know, Joe isn't an employee of the SFA. But also a graduate of the southern studies program. Joe came—like me, Joe came with an interest in—in race relations. He's from North Alabama. He came to the Center; was going to do work—film work—on the Freedom Riders in Mississippi and on—and on civil rights work up in North Alabama where he's from. We started working him when Randy Fertel comes to the barbecue symposium that we have. Randy—you know, I had the same kind of conversation. Like, "How can I help?" It's like, "Well, we've been thinking about doing some films." So Randy begins underwriting the SFA. We get some money, and through that partnership Joe starts making short films for us with support from the Fertel Foundation.

01:10:49

Andy Harper, who was at that point starting a Center for Documentary Projects at Ole Miss takes some money I've got and some of his own money and hires Joe. And that relationship has grown to the point where we basically buy Joe's time back from that department. The amount of money and the amount of time makes him in essence, you know, a defacto employee of our department, but he's lodged somewhere else. And it's good because they've got the technical expertise and the like.

01:11:19

So then comes Melissa Hall from Kentucky. Melissa, a lapsed attorney, who—real strong interest in foodways. She's friends with Katie McKee, who is a Professor at Ole Miss. They went

to Center College together. She says, "I want to volunteer." Poor woman. We stick her making deviled eggs and pimento cheese sandwiches and she makes them in volume and she executes really well and she's got like this field marshal kind of **[*Gestures*]**, "It's got to be like this," you know. And you realize she's kind of obsessive. She could be good.

01:11:51

SR: She could put together a bacon forest.

01:11:52

JTE: Yeah; she can put together a bacon forest. Melissa, we initially hired as kind of a—a communications person but then realized that her real strength is in events—is in a short-term focus on an event—execute it. And that's what she does now. And then last, Julie Pickett from South Carolina came to us as a recommendation from a gentleman named Robert Barber, who had been an oral history subject—our oral histories on Bowen's Island in South Carolina. Robert called us and said, "I've got this friend. He and his wife are moving to Oxford." He—her husband, Otis, was coming to Oxford as—as a PhD student in History. "Julie is great. You need to know her. Look, if you ever need somebody else, think about her."

01:12:40

And there's been a fertility craze in Oxford, so Mary Beth—pregnant. Amy, pregnant. Mary Beth gave birth. Amy gave birth. Julie is now pregnant herself.

01:13:00

SR: She is not. **[*Laughs*]**

01:13:01

JTE: Oh yeah, yeah.

01:13:02

SR: I didn't know.

01:13:02

JTE: She's pregnant, too. Lord help.

01:13:08

SR: This is turning into a sitcom.

01:13:11

JTE: Yeah, but Julie—Julie is great. I mean, she's proved her mettle. But she has her baby right about the time of the symposium.

01:13:19

SR: Perfect. She's got the Amy Evans timing.

01:13:24

JTE: Exactly. It's 12:00.

01:13:28

SR: So—hmm? It's 12:00? Okay, we are going to have to pick this up again at another time and place, but I do want to ask you one last question. Yeah, we need to hang this up, but let me ask you one question that's sort of related. Right now there's a lot of focus on oral history as far as time—time spent and money spent within the organization. Was that an idea from the beginning?

01:14:02

JTE: It wasn't. I mean there was—there was a—and I think I've got some early emails, but it was put on public conferences, study, educate. But oral history was not handed down from on high by, you know, the Pope, Mr. Egerton, who said, "Ye shall do oral history." It wasn't that. We came to it kind of in an off-handed way. We got a little bit of money from a funder and we were—I sent Joe and Amy out when they were still graduate students and said, "I've always been interested in the iconography of barbecue rigs and barbecue shops." So they went around shooting photographs of the—the kind of iconography of barbecue. And they shot the photographs and then crafted stories behind them. But they weren't true oral histories.

01:14:59

And—and that website still kind of lives in—deep in our website. We've hidden it. But what Amy did in the Delta was closer to what we've started to do, you know, which was focus tight on a place and on the foods of that place and try to tell a story where the oral histories are interconnected and tell some greater story. That followed with Amy, and I think the interest in it—you know, the Tamale Trail really drove it. That collection of oral histories from one place that can then catalyze cultural tourism. All those things made it work and now we're closing in on 500.

01:15:44

SR: It's amazing.

01:15:45

JTE: Yeah, you're a big part of that.

01:15:47

SR: Well, we'll end there. We clearly need to come back to this because I don't know anything about your upbringing or when you learned to use a semi-colon. But we'll do that at another time. Thank you for your time.

01:15:59

JTE: Thank you.

01:16:00

[End John T Interview 1]

[Begin John T Interview 2]

00:00:01

Sara Roahen: Okay, this is Sara Roahen for the Southern Foodways Alliance. It is Monday, February 13, 2012. I'm in Oxford, Mississippi, and I'm sitting here with John T Edge. John T, could you, just for the record, tell me your—your full name and what you do for a living?

00:00:20

John T Edge: My name is John Thomas Edge, Jr. I've been called John T since birth, and I was born in Clinton, Georgia. And now I live in Oxford, Mississippi, where I direct the Southern Foodways Alliance and do some writing too.

00:00:35

SR: Could you give me your birth date please?

00:00:36

JTE: Sure. It's December 22, 1962.

00:00:40

SR: Thank you. Okay, this is our second interview together, and we—we've covered a lot of ground. But one thing that I think would be a little bit helpful to go back to, is if you could tell me a little bit about your upbringing. Did you have siblings?

00:00:55

JTE: Only child, and my mother and father were fairly old when I was born. My mother was forty-one; my father was thirty-seven. So I was a late-in-life surprise for them. I grew up out in

the country, a little town or village called Clinton, on the edge of it. Clinton had once been a thriving town in the middle of Georgia, but the town fathers decided when the railway came through that they didn't want the railway and they didn't want—. It's like—it was like, you know, a suburb now saying they don't want mass transit to show up in their suburb because it would bring the wrong kind of element to their town.

00:01:35

Clinton decided that about the railroad, and Clinton kind of dried up. And by the time I was growing up there, Clinton really wasn't a town, and it wasn't even a village. It was just a collection of older homes and trailers. Probably about an equal measure of trailers and older homes. And I grew up on a—in a house that was built in 1814, Federal style farmhouse, which means it wasn't fancy. But it had Federal touches, like beautiful mantles and reliefs on the ceilings and wainscoting and the like, but the house itself was a fairly basic farmhouse.

00:02:12

And I grew up cutting three acres of grass when I had to cut the grass, which I hated doing. And there was an old spring that ran through our property. It bubbled up at the edge of our property and ran through our property, making for a stream. At one point in my childhood I conspired with my father and thought I was going to start bottling that spring water. And there was a huge gully back behind our house where I'd play with friends, and you could keep going through the woods and you'd end up in—where there used to be a tannery. And my father and I would dig for bottles and other stuff because when they would dig the tannery pits, they'd move from one to another and they'd kind of fill it up, and they'd fill it up with refuse. So you could dig in and find old bottles, and so it was kind of, you know, archaeological. I was interested in those kinds of things—exhuming old places.

00:03:10

So I grew up with—and you know, there were two historical markers out in front of our house, both for a Confederate general who owned our house, and his father, who had been a US senator, built the house. So I grew up with a sense of history, both in my activities as a child digging for junk, but also with that framing—the historical markers out front and this knowledge of history of my place.

00:03:35

But I also grew up with parents who were—my mother was interested in Civil War history and the like, but they were as interested in what was going on in terms of the civil rights movement and kind of the Modern South as they were the Old South. And that's kind of informed my look at things ever since.

00:03:54

SR: Well, there's a lot in there that's really interesting to me. First of all that you had an entrepreneurial spirit as a child.

00:04:05

JTE: I did. I mean, if you look back you could see it manifesting in that—that spring water idea. But also Little League tickets. Like **[*Laughs*]** I used to sell raffle tickets for Little League. So I would—you know, everybody else would sell $1 tickets and they would raffle off some trip or something. So what I did was I went to corporations and got them to buy 50 tickets instead of just going door-to-door and getting people to buy one. It worked. **[*Laughs*]** So I went to, like, S&S Cafeteria, where my father and I would go all the time, and I talked to Mr. Smith who

owned the place and stuff. "Would you buy fifty tickets for Little League baseball?" And he did, you know, because I was ten and I asked him.

00:04:45

And I realized through stuff like that—that, you know, if you ask somebody to do something and you give them a good enough reason, they'll do it.

00:04:57

SR: Did your dad have that?

00:04:58

JTE: No, that was more my mother. My mother was a real—was one of the most socially gregarious people I've ever known. She also—I mean, she had flaws too. My mother, if we think about in these modern terms, my mother was bipolar or at least some variation on that, and—and had problems with alcohol too. So it's hard for me to—looking back, it's hard for me to sort out—was my mother really gregarious, or was that some of—was some of it chemical? I think a lot it was my mother was really gregarious.

00:05:33

I remember I was on the Falcons football team in midget football. They used to call it "midget football" **[*Laughs*]** back then. When I was on the Falcons, my mother—we had a pretty good season, so my mother called Rankin Smith, who was the owner of the Falcons in Atlanta, and got him to send us a signed football from everybody on the Falcons. And my mother just cold called him. She could—she could talk people into things, and she had, you know, this kind of uproarious side to her.

00:06:01

We won a baseball game one time, and my mother pissed off all the Baptist parents because she took, I think, equal measure of champagne and Sprite and put it in a champagne bottle and then shook it over us. And the Baptists went just crazy because, you know, their children had been anointed with—with the devil's wine, the devil's spirits. You know she—she was—I think now about a lot of things I get to do, and whether it's eating great food or traveling—. My mother was a small-town girl, and she never got to do any of that. And I think some of—she ended up living in a really small town in Georgia, and I think was very frustrated by that because she grew up in small town but had kind of big-town aspirations. She wanted to move to New York City when she was young and she never did, and so I think about her a lot.

00:06:53

You know, she passed right when—she passed two months before our son, Jess, was born. So it was a lot of—a lot of sadness when I—when I think about her, but also just to think about things I'm getting to do with my life the things that she wanted to. So there's hopefully a generational exchange there that brings some closure to that.

00:07:19

SR: Did she work?

00:07:22

JTE: My mother worked intermittently. She—she was a civil service employee, so she worked like at the Naval ordinance plant, and she worked at—at a recruitment facility during World War II in Atlanta. So, and then after my parents moved to Clinton, Georgia, and my father worked in

Macon, my mother had various government jobs over time, but they were intermittent. She didn't have a career in that sense, but she did work, and—and that was important to her and was part of her identity, is that she worked and she wasn't a housewife. Not that there's anything wrong with being a housewife, but that was not part of her identity.

00:08:05

SR: Well, what about your father? What did he do for a living?

00:08:07

JTE: My father was also a lifelong civil servant. He was a child of the Depression and thought government was a solution to the nation's ills and learned that by way of FDR. And he worked initially in the federal prison system, and then worked for the United States Probation and Parole Office, and then rose to be the—the director of that for—for Middle Georgia, which was the district at that point that includes Macon and Athens and the like.

00:08:40

So you know, with him I went to trials when I was young that he did the presentencing work on. Like, one of the trials I went to was Lemuel Penn, who was a serviceman who was killed on the road outside of Athens during the civil rights movement, just gunned down. And I went to that trial with my father, and I remember it so clearly and it scared the hell out of me because, you know, there is the person who killed someone facing down a jury, and my father has done the work that will—once this guy is sentenced, that will determine how long he's put away for and what chance he has at parole. And I ended up going back and writing about that years later. It's one of the pieces I'm proudest of. It's about this place called Blanche's Open

House in Athens, and it was where I went when I was in school when I was in college when we were drunk. It was where you went to feed up on grease and grits and eggs and pork chops, and she had goat omelets. But it's where we all went, and it turns out—. My father had told when I went off to school, "Don't go there." You know, "That's not a place you want to go." Of course I went. And that was the place where that murder of Lemuel Penn was hatched and later celebrated. It was a Klan hangout.

00:10:01

And so some of those moments of, like you know, being with my father in court rooms in Athens connect back up in my later life. But they hit me again in college, and it comes back around when I'm in my, you know, early 40s writing about these things.

00:10:18

So my father is—my father is—I talked about, you know, a child of the Depression. My father also believes in government and believes in a penal system and believes in reform. I remember he always subscribed to *The Angolite*, the—the publication of the—prisoner publication out of Angola Prison that was—it was a literary magazine. He subscribed to that and would just cuss at the television at—at Nixon, Wallace, **[*Laughs*]** Lester Maddox, and at you know— And any kind of—he had a really expansive view; he was really inclusive, far more so than my mother. My mother was socially inclusive and my father was—was kind of politically inclusive and always valued words. He taught me to read and taught me to value writing and—and still does. He's—he's really—as you get older, some people get more conservative and get—you know, they close down. My father continues to open up. Like, I remember hearing him rail about an arrest at a rock-n-roll show where people had been arrested for taking mushrooms, I

think it was. And he was like, you know, "There are worse things going on that we need to focus on"—other kinds of crimes.

00:11:47

SR: How old is your father now?

00:11:49

JTE: My father is seventy—wait, eighty—no. Let's see, he's eighty-six.

00:12:01

SR: Where does he live?

00:12:01

JTE: He lives in Macon, Georgia. So he is remarried, and he and his wife live in Macon about fifteen miles from where I grew up. So there's a lot of connectivity in his past life and his present. Even though we grew up in Clinton, he worked in Macon, and a lot of social life and a lot of school, business dealings—all that was Macon, and he's still there.

00:12:25

SR: You talked in our first interview a lot about how it was really trying to understand race and study race that brought you to the Center and brought you to Oxford. It sounds like that was something that was started really early.

00:12:45

JTE: Yeah. I mean, I—I grew up—grew up in a white world and—and ended up going to private school about half the time between, you know, kindergarten and—and twelfth grade—and public school about half the time. If you left my house, and I often did, I rode my bike like a half-mile up the road and it was an all-black community. Dwight Bohler and all these kids that I grew up with—Joe Farrar—all these kids I grew up with were—were as much my playmates and as much my companions. That was the world I knew. And yet, I grew up in a—in a segregated world wherein my father tried to use—some grant he could have gotten that would have started a country club, but it would have been a country club that would be an integrated country club. My father tried to start that and, you know, worked the community and built all these coalitions, and then ultimately it fell apart.

00:13:55

So I saw him trying to do those sorts of things, and he wanted—you know, he wasn't an agitator. He was just a kind of honorable person who saw some of the ills of segregation, and that informed my outlook. But I'm sure as a kid—I'd choose not to remember it, but I'm sure as a kid I was as senseless and, you know, I didn't think about race. I think the lessons my parents taught me came out in the end—kind of what's bred in the bone comes out in the flesh—but I bet when I was ten I called people "nigger this" or "nigger that." I bet you I did, like before I formed—before my parents' lessons kind of came out in me. I bet I was a senseless little shit. I really do.

00:14:50

But I think that's—I say that just to be honest. I think your ideas about race begin—you know, at least mine did with my parents and reacting to or embracing their take on this, and

thinking for myself and watching my world go by and watching people act in ways that are not sensitive or—or respectful. And now I'm talking to my son about the same things, you know.

00:15:20

And he processes stuff. He hears kids say something. We were at breakfast the other day, and one of the children we were at breakfast with said, "That black kid did this." And Jess stopped him and said, "Now, do you say—do you describe the—do you describe the color of everybody you talk about, or do you describe the color just of the black people?" And my son is 10, you know, and that—that made me really proud because he's listening and he's paying attention. And I think I did too over time, and you know, whatever I might have heard from friends growing up, I processed it by way of what my parents taught me and started to think for myself and came out whoever I am today. And my son has got a head start.

00:16:05

SR: What did his friend say?

00:16:07

JTE: His friend was like, "Oh okay, I get it," you know, because Jess wasn't a parent lecturing. Jess was just saying, "Hey, think about this," because we've talked to him about that a lot. You know, about how even though you don't intend—intend an offense, your language signals to people certain things. And he's heard us talk about this a lot. Even the use of diminutive. You hear people say, "Oh, this little man over there," and what they mean is that's a person of color and it's, you know **[*Laughs*]**—it's somebody is Mexican, somebody is Asian, somebody is black. We've talked to him about that. We've talked to him about describing people by way of

race, and he doesn't do it. If you ask him, like, "Who was there?" He'll describe that person's attributes and not—.

00:16:51

And I talked to him about that in terms of writing the other day. We—we went to a barbecue restaurant and I said, "Well, so, what was that place like? And he said, "Well, it was a shack." And I was like, "Well, is that really descriptive, Jess, or is that—are you passing judgment on the place? Tell me what it looked like; what was it made of, you know? Was it—was it made of concrete block? Was it made of roofing tin? Describe it for me instead of passing judgment on it. Shack—to say it's a shack is to say it's a heap. It's not a—it's to dismiss it almost, and it's not descriptive either. And it's the same way with people. Like, tell me what that person is like. Tell me how they act. Tell me what their voice sounds like, you know. And we talk about things like that because it's—it can make for good writing later on if—if he chooses to write. Or, heck, if he just chooses to write a letter, he needs to know how to do this kind of stuff.

00:17:43

You know, and he's ten. He still listens to me a little bit.

00:17:48

SR: [*Laughs*] This is off-topic, and I'm going to go back to topic after this, but I am curious: with two writer parents, does he enjoy writing—Jess?

00:18:01

JTE: I don't know. He enjoys drawing. He is really—he has a really strong vocabulary, and he's really expressive verbally. I don't see it in his writing right now, no, but I doubt my father

could have seen it in mine when I was little either. He enjoys reading. He's not at the top of his class in reading. But he shows an interest, and—and who knows. Who knows?

00:18:34

SR: Tell me about in your house growing up. I know you talked a little bit about how your dad was very adventuresome. You know, you would go into Atlanta and eat dried eel. Is that what it was?

00:18:49

JTE: Yeah.

00:18:49

SR: But who was the cook in your house growing up?

00:18:51

JTE: It was kind of a decision of labor in terms of cooking. My mother was like the person who made vegetable soup and cornbread, salmon croquettes; you know, greens, black-eyed peas. She was a pretty traditional cook. And my father was—my father was the guy on the grill. You know, very kind of typical, and the same patterns that Blair and I fall into. You know, I'm the person that works the grill.

00:19:24

And my father was more the weekend cook and my mother the weekday cook. The—you know, my mother was not a—she wasn't an entertainer known as like the best cook in the

country and that kind of thing. And neither was my father. You know, it was—it was simple, straightforward food. There was no—you know, other than this barbecue place I went to as a boy, there was no like formative moment for me at the table. You know, I do remember my parents—like when we had relatives over, my father liked his roast beef rare and my Aunt Ruth didn't want to dare anything that was rare. She wanted everything cooked to hell and back, and Daddy would cut down the lights and serve her rare roast beef and she loved it, you know.

00:20:22

This was the same era when—when the salad—I can remember the salad. It was like, you know, two or three leaves of—of iceberg with a peach half on top pulled from the can, and then a dollop of store-bought mayonnaise on top of that, and cheddar cheese on top of that. You know, this—this was that era and that wasn't stunt food. That was just food. That was special occasion food.

00:20:47

SR: But you all—did you have meals together?

00:20:51

JTE: We did. I mean, it's a three-person family. We had a little kitchen table. We had a galley-shaped kitchen, a really tiny kitchen since the house was built in 1814. There wasn't originally a kitchen in the house. The house—I mean the kitchen would have been separate. So to retrofit into this really small house, a kitchen was difficult. And so it was a really tiny galley kitchen, and—and then separated by a half-wall was the kitchen table. There was a separate dining room table, but we'd eat at that kitchen table, which really only accommodated three people. And one

of the leaves was against the half-wall that separated it from the kitchen. But we'd eat breakfast there. We'd eat lunch during the summer. And we didn't have—there were air-conditioners set up; we didn't really ever turn them on. I don't think they really worked.

00:21:44

We had such high ceilings, and we were in a grove of oaks and—and walnut trees and cedars—it was mostly cedars and walnuts—that I really grew up without air-conditioning and grew up with a really tiny kitchen and grew up with one bathroom in our house. Again, it's this old house and there weren't bathrooms built into it, and my parents had never—. So many people now take an old house and renovate it within an inch of its life. We just lived in an old house.

00:22:16

SR: So I guess you weren't Baptist, judging from the—. **[*Laughs*]**

00:22:20

JTE: We weren't Baptist. We were Methodist, and in our town Methodist—it was the next town over, Grey—Methodist was pretty conservative too. I remember my parents were really involved in the church kind of before I was born, and my father was an elder or deacon. I don't know what they call them in the Methodist Church anymore. But a new preacher came in, and my mother and father had been working with youth groups to try to—like kids thirteen, fourteen, fifteen—to have dances for them at the church in the fellowship hall, and the new preacher came in and he was, you know, pretty arch-conservative and refused that. And my parents pulled out of the church. Messy small town stuff.

00:23:03

But we were fairly active, and by the time I came along, it was a way to meet girls. That's what I was interested in. I never was good with girls, until college I guess. But it was a pretty conservative church. It was—it was Methodist at least in its outlook, but Baptist, but just conservative. You know, Baptist isn't the right word for it—conservative. But that's a big part of small-town life, church functions and the like. You know, by the time I'm in high school, they tried to—the church tried to get me to join when I was about twelve. I may have told you this. I'm not sure, but my mother said, "Well, they want you to join the church. Do you—what do you believe?" And I said, "Well, I guess I believe what I've been learning in Sunday school." She said, "Well, let's do something." So my mother took me around to like **[*Laughs*]** a Jewish synagogue. She took me to a Catholic church, and she took me to like—it wasn't a mosque at that point, but she took me to I guess an Islamic prayer service. She took me to everything she could find that was not Methodist.

00:24:20

And at the end she said, "Well, what do you believe?" I said, "I don't know." **[*Laughs*]** And she just kind of walked away.

00:24:27

SR: She walked away because she was frustrated or—?

00:24:30

JTE: No. She walked away because she made her point.

00:24:33

SR: Right.

00:24:33

JTE: She made her point. Her point was I was twelve; I don't know what the heck I believe.

00:24:41

SR: What does that mean then? Who is—who is *they* wanted you to join the church?

00:24:44

JTE: The church, you know the—the—

00:24:45

SR: That you had been involved with.

00:24:47

JTE: Correct, but she didn't know—I mean, she wanted me to think about what my belief systems were.

00:24:58

SR: Well, I really like your parents. **[*Laughs*]** I can see a lot of—. You know, it's really interesting to hear about your beginnings because I can see a lot of it manifesting in you as an adult. I think that we should probably move on—even though I kind of want to stay back there because it's really fun—and talk about—. You know, in our first interview—you probably don't

even remember, but we talked a lot about like what happened while you were in college and living the corporate life and what brought you to Oxford. And we talked about the beginnings of the organization, and then we kind of hit a wall and we felt like it might be helpful to look at some of the old symposium brochures and historical documents, things that are now historical documents, beginnings of the SFA. And that might—that might trigger some memories. Look at all this stuff.

00:25:57

JTE: Yeah, I found a bunch of stuff. I'm looking for one thing in particular, which was—I had it out—bumper stickers friends got me when I moved here. Oh yeah, so **[*Laughs*]** so my friends got this made when I moved.

00:26:13

SR: **[*Laughs*]** Can you read it?

00:26:14

JTE: Yeah, it says—these are bumper stickers my friends made up when I moved from Atlanta to—from Atlanta to Oxford. "My Friend John T is an Honor Student at Ole Miss Elementary." In other words, you know, I was—I was going back to school.

00:26:29

SR: Did you know anyone here before you came?

00:26:33

JTE: I didn't know anyone. I mean, I literally knew no one. I had friends in Atlanta who had one friend in common who lived here, Susan Lee and her husband, Tim Lee, who were musicians, artists, photographers. Susan worked at *Living Blues* magazine and designed periodicals and such for the Center for the Study of Southern Culture—and still does. And I guess Susan—I can't remember if it was Tim or Susan; I think Tim got a masters in southern studies. So I knew them, but I didn't know them. I just had friends say, "You should look these people up." And I didn't know anybody. I didn't know anybody.

00:27:16

I just wanted to take a chance. I had this interest in the South and I wanted to figure it out, and that point I'm thirty-five and I can go take a chance and fall completely flat and it would be okay because nobody else was taking that chance with me.

00:27:32

SR: Well, what—what did your parents think?

00:27:34

JTE: Um, my father was kind of incredulous because I grew up [in] small town Georgia to make it to Atlanta, and I lived in Little Five Points, a hip little area, and owned my own house. You know, I had a really good life. All my friends lived, you know, within a mile or two of me. I had a great social life. And so my father was incredulous. He was also proud that I was going to go back to school because, you know, I think he had been disappointed in me that I—I hadn't

finished college my first time around. I *know* he was disappointed. I mean, I was disappointed in myself. So he was both incredulous and happy that I was doing it.

00:28:17

My mother at this point was—you know, was not in the picture of those decisions. Toward the end of her life we were somewhat estranged, and it worked back towards a relationship. But—but she wasn't a part of that, in decision-making, at that point.

00:28:43

SR: Do you have—what was this—do you have any materials from the first symposium, or what—what do you think we should start with here?

00:28:54

JTE: Well, I mean, to my mind it would make sense to start with this brochure, which was the brochure for the Southern Foodways Alliance, the first one we did. This was—you know, the member rates are about the same. **[*Laughs*]**

00:29:10

SR: Yeah, $50.

00:29:13

JTE: Yeah.

00:29:13

SR: And what are they now?

00:29:14

JTE: I think they're $75 now, after thirty years. So—go ahead.

00:29:22

SR: Did it feel steep back then, or did it feel democratic?

00:29:25

JTE: No, yeah, it felt democratic. I mean this was—this was an amount we came up with, $50 for individuals, $200 for nonprofits—and I think it's still $200 for nonprofits—$500 for corporations, and it's still $500 for corporations. You know that's—is that democratic, or is that just not a good move? I don't know.

00:29:43

This is part of the John Egerton ethic, which is democracy, which is I've always adhered to. But, you know, should we have gone up? Perhaps.

00:29:52

This document is interesting me too. It—it has, you know, our web address, www.olemiss.edu/depts/south/foodways, and it also has my name and phone number. We don't put my name on stuff now, which is—I mean it's an overall SFA decision of keeping our names kind of buried within. This was all—all the organization had at this point was a brochure with the WPA photograph of a young black girl and a young white girl holding a melon. And you know, it—at the point we developed this, we thought that was kind of bold. Like, okay, people have this

idea about African Americans and watermelons and melons in general, so we've got this picture of a young black girl, and a white girl holding the melon, and that was symbolic—you know, that moment—to us.

00:30:47

You know, and this—this—here's the original kind of part of the mission statement: "Celebrate food and promote the American South and preserve tradition and nurture culture, honor diversity—." Diversity is a part of it from the beginning. We had never set out to preserve tradition. We'd—we'd talk about documenting it, but not preserving it.

00:31:09

SR: Well, a couple things.

00:31:10

JTE: Yeah, sorry. I went through a lot.

00:31:11

SR: No, that was great, but can you talk a little bit about why you don't have your name on things? You said that that's an SFA decision, but what does that—?

00:31:19

JTE: Yeah. I mean, it's interesting. So my writing career has grown up along with the SFA, you know, and—and I—I think it's arguable I'm kind of a public persona in the world of food. And early on I realized that for the SFA to grow and to prosper I can't—I have to do my damndest to

make sure that I never leverage the SFA for my own good; that my name is never out there in a way that benefits me. If my name can be used—and—and my writing can be used to help the SFA, great, but it should never work the other way around.

00:31:55

And that's something I learned from Egerton, and it's also something I learned from watching the SFA form and watching people who had been working in this field for a long time who felt like it was their time—you know, as the SFA was forming—it was their time to be on the board. It was their time to step up. And that's great; that's exactly where they should be, and should have been, at that time because we needed those people. You know, we needed their—their buy-in for the SFA to grow and to prosper.

00:32:29

But at the same time, we've learned, too, that you'd look at a lot of organizations and there would be a picture of the director of the organization smiling on the brochure, and I think that's really egotistical, and I think it's all wrong-headed. Like, you know, the organization—this organization should—we should promote what Amy [Evans Streeter] is doing, we should promote what Joe [York] is doing, we should promote people we interview. But not *us*. We shape the mission. We tell you the stories. And our names are—I mean our—our footprints are all over what we do, but I don't think our—*my* face and *my* name should be all over what we do. And you know, we didn't always know that. I mean, at this point it didn't make—. I was no threat to anybody, **[*Laughs*]** to have my name on a brochure in 1999. But now somebody can look at something and go, "Oh yeah, that's—that's John T Edge's organization, and we want to stay the heck away from that."

00:33:30

I don't think we've been successful. I think a lot of people may—may identify the SFA with me and think about this as something I created for my own—so I have a job, and you know—. Well, I mean that's—that's fine, but—. And I'm not saying that I knew how to do all this from the start, or intuited from the start. I just think we've figured out a way that I think shows humility and respect for our subjects and for our members. And, like, you go to the symposium—I should never give a talk at the symposium. People—I'm the guy that tells them to shut up and sit down. That's fine. But I shouldn't ever give a talk at the symposium. It's wrong.

00:34:18

SR: It's funny because you've just hit on two of—. I don't have very many questions down, but I have two of them. You hit on two of them, and one was: From my experience as a member of the organization, I've experienced it as a very personality-driven organization. And I think that because of who you are, and also because of—I think that you've made some very smart decisions about the people who you work with. There aren't many of you, but I mean it matters who they are. But at the same time, yeah, your names aren't all over the brochures. So I was going to ask you about the sort of balance of being a personality-driven organization but not having the personalities drive the organization.

00:35:15

JTE: There's a balance, and that continues to evolve. Now it's 2012 and we're revising the website. And you know, one of the things that our media committee is telling us, advising us, [is], "Okay, you need a picture of Amy on the website. You need a picture of Joe next to his films." You need a picture of me. And, you know, are we getting to the point we'd feel more

comfortable with that now? Maybe. If it—. But coming back to your question, there's a—there's a balance. I think it's all about humility and respect for the subjects, that they should go first. The people we document, we want to tell their story, and if we can use our personalities to get those stories out that's great.

00:35:59

There's a real irreverence about the organization at the same time, so there's reverence for subjects and then there's an irreverence among the people that work here who are smart and playful, and if I do anything as director it's to challenge them. It's like, you know, people say, "Well, we did it this way this year." "Well, let's do it different next year." You know [the staff will say], "This organization has always done—." You know, if there's a comparable organization who does work like ours [they will say], "Well, this is how they do it." Well, who gives a damn? Let's do something that's—let's do something that challenges people. Let's stage a—you know, let's put a bacon forest that people will walk through and grease drips on them from the bacon. You know, let's do things that confound people and show real personality, show attitude, like real attitude, that says we don't have to ascribe to other people's ways of doing things. You know, we're free thinkers and we want to push the boundaries of what we do as far as we possibly can.

00:36:57

Now, if you can see our personalities through our programming, that's great. But if we're—if our personalities become dominant and they're the people at the front of the room, then we're doing our job badly. If we're the people at the back of the room pushing other people to the front, then we're doing great. Does that make any damn sense?

00:37:15

SR: Uh-hm, yes. And I suspect that that probably wasn't really on your mind at all in the very beginning.

00:37:23

JTE: No. But you know, I don't mean to lay so much of the burden for what has gone right and wrong with the SFA on Egerton, but it is part of what Egerton does. So many things that—you know, the two things that Egerton would always—like, when we were starting the SFA, I'd call him and be like, "There's three members yammering on about this and they're arguing and they're divisive. What do I do?" And he said, "What do you think you should do?" And I said, "I think I should do this." He said—Egerton would just say, "Fuck it. Do it," you know, and this is—this is my mentor, and he—he would—he'd say, "Fuck it. Just do it."

00:38:01

And that's the way we operated and kind of still do. I—I think we're learning processes, but we're also learning how to trust our guts, still, and—and do things right. So Egerton said, "Never mind the divisiveness. Let people talk it out and then do what you think is right." And he also said—you know, he showed me a bunch of different ways to get things done, and then you don't have to take credit for it. And I don't know if I've learned that well. But we try to.

00:38:38

SR: He showed you that by example, or he told you that?

00:38:40

JTE: By example. Like, you know, if you talk to Egerton about this list of fifty founders of the Southern Foodways Alliance, he'll say, "Yeah, John T, you—you did that. That was great that you pulled this list of fifty founders together." It's utter bullshit. I mean, he pulled this list of fifty founders together. He had built these great relationships working on his book *Southern Food*, and when it came time to pull together that group of people—you know, these are people he met who had helped him with his book, or he had interviewed over the course of his book, and he respected. But he made the gathering of those fifty people seem like it was a collective enterprise. But it's mostly him.

00:39:25

SR: I do want to get to that list, but first I wanted to stay where we are for a minute. I want to—this is sort of connected. Film and—and oral history documenting are a huge part of what the organization is about now and what it devotes its resources to. So, you didn't have—you don't have "document" [in the mission statement] in the beginning. And I was wondering: Joe York is the filmmaker for the SFA, and Amy Evans is the head oral historian. Do you think that the importance of documentation today in this—for the SFA is because of who those people are and what they happen to bring, or do you think you would have ended up there anyway?

00:40:24

JTE: We spent a good bit of time in '99, 2000 as a Board and as active members talking about what the SFA was going to do. You know and one of the refrains was, "We don't want to be just the people that throw a good party."

00:40:42

And you know, the symposium, from its inception, had been a really good party and a smart party. The first—'98, '99, 2000, 2001, we were staging events, and that was predominantly what we did, but you know we had a staff of like .5 people—me. And then we had graduate students who would—would work on the symposium for one—you know, for the—for that year that they were a graduate student. So we were aware that we wanted and needed to do more, but we hadn't found a way to do that and hadn't found an efficient way to do that.

00:41:22

And then along comes this class of students, which included Joe and Amy and Mary Beth, and, you know, that kind of two-year packet of students showed abilities. Mary Beth showed this insanely great organizational ability by staging the symposium; by, when I was working on the civil rights memorial at Ole Miss, which failed miserably, not by my own fault, Mary Beth organized and we were trying to pull together like 300 slides. Mary Beth spent a weekend organizing it, and she just **[*Gestures*]**—you know, just figured it all out. Joe showed up here wanting to do film especially about the civil rights movement. You know, Amy showed up here with an interest in art and photography, and those people kind of helped us define what we would do. Their abilities helped us define.

00:42:21

I remember when we first sent Amy and Joe out to document barbecue signage—this was 2002, you know. This was leading up to the symposium, because they were going to go out and document barbecue signage, which they did, but then it evolved into going back and interviewing barbecue pitmasters and Amy doing the work in Greenwood interviewing old garden restaurants in Greenwood. So we didn't—all that to say we didn't know that documentary work would matter so much, but we knew that the SFA had to be more than a great annual event, a great annual

party. By that point we had started a second event, a second symposium, a second event, being the field trip, which started in ’01, I think, was the first one. That was in Greensboro, North Carolina. But what else were we going to do? You know, people were pushing us like we need cooking classes. We need like an annual gathering where people will share their best recipes, and how to make beaten biscuits, and things like that.

00:43:35

And I knew that wasn’t it, because we spent the first five years of our existence really trying to help people say, you know, this is about food as a cultural product. This is not about teaching people how to cook. This is about helping them understand food as a product of people and place and helping them frame it and understand it and think about it, and think about race and class and gender and all that stuff. So we were so busy doing that that—you know, now we’ve got a cookbook. But we would have never done a cookbook in the first five years of the SFA’s experience because we were so busy trying to tell people, “This isn't about recipes.”

00:44:12

SR: Do you think that the cookbook—I mean, in retrospect, do you think that it was established enough that this organization isn't about recipes, or do you think—?

00:44:21

JTE: Yeah. I mean, I think that’s the reason we got to do the cookbook, is because we established that this is not a recipe-collecting organization. This is an organization that does documentary work and also likes to eat really well and knows a bunch of good cooks. So we do a cookbook.

00:44:37

SR: Well that—that is sort of fascinating to me because it seems like, yeah—. You knew what the organization wasn't, but it really did take these individual personalities coming along to figure out what it was.

00:44:51

JTE: Yeah. I think—you know, and the Center has a great long history of documentary work. When Tom Rankin was here, who is now at Duke; David Wharton, who is here now—and there's always been somebody here teaching documentary studies. So there's students coming out of this program who have—who arrived here with an interest in that, and they exit the program with—with a stronger ability in that area.

00:45:17

You know, *Living Blues* magazine, which has been here since the—since the '70s, has been interviewing old guard bluesmen and transcribing the interviews and putting them in a magazine, so there's a long tradition of documentary work here. So it makes sense that was our next step.

00:45:37

But you know—and—and I'm sure if I look back through old emails I'll find—I would find examples of us debating this, but I don't think we knew from day one that that's what we were going to do. I'm trying to see; here's our original—. Yeah, here's the first mission statement of the SFA. This is from 19—it means this was devised in 1999. "Simply put, the

mission of the SFA is to celebrate, preserve, promote, and nurture the traditional and developing diverse food culture of the American South." That's a mouthful. **[*Laughs*]** Yeah.

00:46:22

SR: Can you talk a little bit about why you don't use "preserve" anymore?

00:46:27

JTE: Well because we realized that—that culture isn't static; you know, that culture continues to evolve, and to preserve something is to preserve it in amber. We're not trying—and we realize that when we talk about what we do, originally—especially when we talk about what we do, people say, "Oh, you're trying to preserve the South." It's complicated; we're not. I mean, that's the last thing in the world I want to do.

00:46:52

The South has a really complicated history, and if—there's so many people, when they talk about "preserve our southern heritage," it's—it's—you know, they're preserving the southern heritage I'd just as soon kick to the curb. So those ideas are very loaded in the South. Preserving southern heritage, you know, sounds like a neo-confederate effort, and that's further from the truth than—it's *very* far from the truth.

00:47:23

What we realized is that we want to *document* the South, and it's the South of this moment, and it's the South of this moment with a tether to the past. So it's an old guard barbecue pitmaster who is four generations deep in the South. You want to tell his story, but you also want to tell the story of the new Mexican immigrant who is cooking barbacoa in southeast Texas. You

know, that person's story is relevant in this southern moment, too, and that's different. It's not preserving a South of the past. It's documenting a South that has a past.

00:48:04

SR: Can we talk about the founders a little bit and who they were?

00:48:07

JTE: Yeah. So. On the back of this brochure, which based on some of this—let's see, it looks like this was printed in late 1999. So the fifty founders of the SFA included Ann Abadie, who at that point was the associate director of the Center and was really an important figure in this and the cookbook *A Gracious Plenty,* which I worked on when I was a grad student. The advance from that, after it was all—you know, all the permissions were paid and the like—it was maybe $12,000 or $13,000 or $14,000 left; that was the seed money for the SFA. And Ann saw that and wanted to do that.

00:48:50

Kay Adams was an editor at *Southern Living*. Jim Auchmutey, at that point writer for *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, had written a book with Susan Puckett on barbecue sauce and was, like, their man exploring the South—really fine writer. Marilou Awiakta, Native American from Memphis who wrote a book called *Selu: [Seeking the Corn-Mother's Wisdom]*. Ben Barker, chef from Durham, North Carolina. You know, here's a mistake. What the hell were we thinking? There's Ben but not Karen? You know, there's—there's a mistake right there. Did we eliminate Karen because she was born in Brooklyn? Did we eliminate Karen because we were a bunch of— a bunch of men? I don't—I don't know. Ella Brennan, restaurateur from Commander's

Palace in New Orleans. Ann Brewer, a writer and farmer from Covington, Georgia. Karen Cathey, who was a—she's passed now—was an organizer of food events and public relations in Arlington, Virginia. Leah Chase, of Dooky Chase in New Orleans. Mary Ann Clayton, along with her husband, Al Clayton, both from Georgia. Al is a photographer; Mary Ann, a writer about food.

00:50:14

Shirley Corriher, from Atlanta, was a—is a cooking school teacher and researcher about food culture. Norma Jean Darden, along with her sister, wrote a book about growing up in North Carolina in an African American community learning to cook. She also had a one-woman play just off Broadway. Crescent Dragonwagon, from Eureka Springs, Arkansas, was from, I think, New York State or Vermont—one of those two—moved South like hippie-gone-off-into-the-woods of Arkansas. By this point she's writing pretty broadly and well about—about everything from cornbread to vegetarian cooking. Nathalie Dupree, one of the first kinds of grand ladies of television, was a cooking instructor and was a huge deal at that moment in time. My name is on here as a founder. John Egerton, from Nashville, who had written the book *Southern Food: At Home, on the Road, and in History*. Lolis Eric Elie, whose book *Smokestack Lightning* had come out maybe a couple years before. John Folse, chef from Donaldsonville, Louisiana, entrepreneur ends up writing a number of books about Cajun and Creole cooking as well.

00:51:45

Terry Ford of Ripley, Tennessee. Terry was a newspaper publisher in Ripley and befriended a lot of people within the food world, including Julia Child and others—big cookbook collection. Damon Lee Fowler, who had written a book called *Classical Southern Cooking,* had come out a few years before. Damon won great acclaim for doing hard research on the kind of

early years of southern cooking. He argued for kind of a grand moment of classical southern cooking that passed.

00:52:18

Vertamae Grosvenor, who wrote *Vibration Cooking* and was kind of a member of the black zeitgeist. You know, she danced with—with Sun Ra. She was a wild woman and is still going strong. Jessica Harris, Brooklyn, New York, and now spends part of her time in New Orleans, an expert on African American foodways. Cynthia Hizer, another writer from Covington, Georgia, farmer. Portia James with the Smithsonian in Washington, DC, with an expertise and interest in African American foodways. You'll notice there's—there's—you know, this list was formed as an attempt for gender balance, as an attempt at racial balance, and as an attempt to geographical balance, too.

00:53:07

Martha Johnston from *Southern Living*. Sally Belk King from Richmond, Virginia, had written a really fine cookbook a couple years before and was working with *Bon Appétit* too, I think, at that time. Sarah Labensky worked for the Mississippi University for Women and was an administrator and taught food classes. Edna Lewis, the kind of grand doyenne of African American food, wrote *A Taste of Country Cooking*. Rudy Lombard, who edited *Creole Feast*—was one of the editors of *Creole Feast*—to look at the old guard Creole cooks of New Orleans. Ronnie Lundy, who had written well about music and food, based out of Louisville. Tony Tipton-Martin, who grew up in LA, at that point was living in Austin, Texas, had written for *The LA Times* and was the first woman, black woman, food page editor in a—in a major daily in the US. Do you want me to keep going?

00:54:18

SR: Uh-hm.

00:54:19

JTE: Damnit, okay. Louis Osteen, chef, Pawley's Island, South Carolina. Marlene Osteen, his wife and the organizer of—see, Marlene is in here too. I don't know why Karen isn't here. Is it—you know, I think we're going to get the same problem with Frank and Pardis. No, Pardis is there. So Marlene had written—had—had come up with the Taste of the South, which was one of the early gatherings of chefs and brought together Emil Lagasse and—who else was—and Louis [Osteen] and like these old guard guys who were like the nouveau Southern interpreters. And Marlene had staged this event in, like, 1995, '96, '97—

00:55:08

SR: Where?

00:55:08

JTE: In—originally—where was it—originally in Charleston, when Louis had his restaurant at Charleston Place. So that's where they gathered. Later it moved to Memphis, and then later it went away.

00:55:26

Timothy Patridge. Tim Patridge worked at Morehouse and was a cooking school teacher, but also an administrator in academics at Morehouse. Paul Prudhomme, great Cajun chef and New Orleans chef. Joe Randall, who had written a book with Tony Tipton-Martin called *A Taste*

of Heritage, about African American culinary culture. Marie Rudisill, Truman Capote's aunt and one of the—one of the most sharp-tongued women I've ever met in my life, and had written a really fine book called *Sook's Cookbook* about growing up in Alabama. Dori Sanders, peach farmer, from Clover, South Carolina. Dori, who just received in 2011 the SFA's Lifetime Achievement Award. Richard Schweid. At that point Richard was living in Barcelona, Spain. Richard wrote a great book called *Catfish in the Delta* and has written other books that involve food. He's from Nashville, but at that point, as I said, he was living in Barcelona.

00:56:38

Ned Shank, in Eureka Springs, was the husband of Crescent Dragonwagon. Not long after, he—not long after, he became involved—he was killed in a bicycle accident. Kathy Starr, from Greenville, Mississippi, wrote a great book called *The Soul of Southern Cooking.* And Kathy, I remember, she showed up at that first meeting of the Southern Foodways Alliance—the 35-odd founders that showed up, of the total of fifty who had committed—she came up the hill because her husband couldn't get his semi-truck up the hill at Southern Progress' Headquarters. But anyway, Kathy made a grand entrance.

00:57:25

Frank Stitt and Pardis Stitt, who hosted the celebratory dinner which occurred just after that founding meeting in '99, and the menu for that is on my wall. It's everything from, like, rabbit purloo to butter bean crostini; Sand Mountain tomatoes. Marion Sullivan, from Mount Pleasant, South Carolina, right outside of Charleston. Marion is still involved in part of the Charleston Wine and Food Festival. Van Sykes of Bob Sykes Barbecue in Bessemer, Alabama. John Martin Taylor, known as Hoppin' John, who wrote *Hoppin' John's Low Country Cooking*. Hoppin' John now lives—I can't remember where it is. His partner is out of the country and

working for—working for AmeriCorps. His partner is like the number two person at AmeriCorps.

00:58:21

Jean Voltz, Pittsburgh, North Carolina. That's right outside of Chapel Hill. Jean Voltz was a longtime food editor, and she's died a few years back. Psyche Williams, now Psyche Williams-Forson. Psyche got a PhD at Maryland and has written widely and well about African American foodways. And then, finally, Charles Regan Wilson, who at this point was the director of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at Ole Miss. Shew.

00:58:52

SR: Thank you for doing that.

00:58:55

JTE: Sure.

00:58:56

SR: So—

00:58:57

JTE: May I take a water break?

00:58:59

SR: Yes.

00:59:02

JTE: Okay.

00:59:05

SR: Okay, we're back after a little break. I wanted to ask you—so, you mentioned, of the founders, about thirty-five attended the first meeting. And you kind of dropped in there that it was at Southern Progress. Can you talk about, like, what the first meeting was, and where it was, and how long it lasted?

00:59:18

JTE: Yeah, the first meeting was—I think the date was—it was June 29, I think, of 1999. I can look. I've got the picture up on my wall of everybody gathered. But it—the center of Southern Progress, which is the publisher of *Progressive Farmer* and *Southern Living*, this monstrous conference room, and we gathered there. And you know, we had flipcharts; we had—I think Ned Shank, Crescent Dragonwagon's husband, was the guy writing stuff down on the flipchart, and we spent a pretty open-ended day of conceiving what the SFA could be. You know, the—the symposium had preceded it, so the Southern Foodways Symposium—there was no Southern Foodways Alliance linked to that. It was just a symposium, and then a bunch of people got excited about the possibilities and then formed the Southern Foodways Alliance on that day in June of '99.

01:00:20

So we talked about what the future of the Southern Foodways Alliance would look like. We hadn't settled on a name. I remember, at the end of the day I kept pushing for Southern Foodways Alliance because I liked "alliance," and I tried—and we couldn't settle on it, and I tried one more time. And—and by the end of the day we had—we settled on that and voted on that.

01:00:45

The—

01:00:47

SR: I'm sorry to interrupt, but can you tell me what some of the other names were?

01:00:49

JTE: I can't remember because mine was so damn good. **[*Laughs*]** I can't—I really can't remember. Please interject, "he laughed then." But I can't—I think it was—a lot of the argument was about whether "foodways" would be the term. You know, it was like Southern Food Culture Organization or Alliance. And I thought, because "foodways" was a term—at that point really an academic term—was important and because it was inclusive of all the different ways we relate to food. And not just about consumption, but about production, and that mattered. If you look at the—the dinner menu from that night when we had dinner in the bar at Highlands, you'll see that Frank and Pardis wrote on the dinner menu, and it just says "Southern Foodways Dinner." So I don't think—I think by the time they had to leave the meeting, we hadn't settled on Southern Foodways Alliance. I think we had just gotten to Southern Foodways by the time they left. But by the end of the day we got to Southern Foodways Alliance.

01:01:53

SR: I'm sorry. I interrupted you, so—

01:01:54

JTE: You didn't.

01:01:56

SR: —that was part of your discussion that day.

01:01:57

JTE: Yeah, so the discussion was whether "foodways"—and what was the last term? We knew we had "southern" in it, and then what were the—would it be an alliance, an association, or an organization? And there was something collaborative about "alliance" that—that worked.

01:02:14

SR: When I interrupted, you were telling more about what happened that day.

01:02:20

JTE: So that day was—you know, it was one of those flipchart kinds of days where people brainstormed different ideas and envisioned what the Southern Foodways Alliance could be. And there was a lot of talk, you know, about cooking classes, and there was a lot of talk about event—or classes within the university, which is only now coming to—to fruition, you know,

thirteen years later. And there was talk about diversity of membership. There was a talk, too, about this existing group, the American Southern Food Institute that Jean Voltz and Terry Ford and a number of others had begun working on. And the question was: Would all that fold into the Southern Foodways Alliance? And—and eventually they did. John Egerton and I drove to Jackson, Tennessee to meet with Terry Ford. I remember we met at like a Barnes & Noble in Jackson and—and talked it over with Terry.

01:03:25

They had I think about seventy-five people on their member roster at that point, and they had some funds in the bank, and eventually when it was determined—I don't think they'd ever achieved 501c3 status, or if they had it was provisional, but eventually Terry agreed to—with the Center for the Study of Southern Culture as kind of the backing for the SFA—to turn those member rolls over to the SFA, and to—to also turn the dollars over to the SFA. I was looking at that roster of people just the other day, and it was interesting to me because there are quite a few people who are still members.

01:04:05

SR: That's one thing I was going to ask, yeah.

01:04:06

JTE: Yeah, so—

01:04:09

SR: Terry is, right?

01:04:09

JTE: Yeah. Donna Pierce. I don't know if Donna is still a member. She's certainly still involved. Joyce and David King from—from Arkansas, members from the very beginning. Chris Hastings, from Hot & Hot Fish Club, still a member. Tom Sasser, still a member. Mark Sohn is still a member. Belinda Ellis, still a member. John Folse. Who else is here? John Fleer, which I didn't even know; that's funny. Billy Coleman. I had joined this thing. Marcel Desaulniers from Williamsburg. Let's see—oh, S.N.O.B., and Elliott's Restaurant, so that's Frank Lee, Slightly North of Broad. Marion Sullivan, still a member. Paul McIllheney—

01:05:17

SR: Yeah, not only a member but a supporter.

01:05:17

JTE: Yeah, a big supporter. Yeah, there's Martha from *Southern Living*. There were always people from *Southern Living* and Southern Progress—a big part of this. There's Nathalie. **[*Laughs*]** That was my favorite. I remember thinking, "Wow, we got Nell Harper Lee's address. But, you know, Harper Lee was a member. Marlene Osteen, Damon Fowler, people who are still involved. I'm trying to think—Walter Royal from the Angus Barn, one of the few African American chefs. There's a—you know, this is one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten—that's thirty—say sixty, eighty—about eighty people. And I'd say twenty of them are still members.

01:06:12

SR: What about the founders? What percentage of the founders do you think are still involved somehow with the organization?

01:06:23

JTE: I'd say about a third of them, or maybe more—a third to a half. That's something John Egerton and I have spoken about often, is how to—I'd say half at least—how to re-engage with them and thank them for lending their name to the SFA. Because, you know, when the SFA began it's all we had, was their names on the back of—if you look at this original brochure, there's one, two, three, four, five panels, you know, and the most prominent thing on it is their names. So that was all we had. So, how to reacquaint with them, those people who are not members, and say, "Thank you," and, "Here's what we've done with your vote of confidence," which is important. It's something we've been talking about doing at Highlands Bar and Grill this September.

01:07:11

SR: Hmm, soon.

01:07:13

JTE: Yeah.

01:07:13

SR: And so it would be a meeting?

01:07:16

JTE: Well, it would be just to report to them, I think, "Here's what we've done." You know, maybe show one film and have a brief report from the membership and staff to say, "Here's what we've done with your vote of confidence." And also bring them back together for whatever might come out of that.

01:07:38

SR: Do you ever have founders come to you and give input? You know, "Look, I was there from the beginning and this is what I think"—?

01:07:49

JTE: Not in a way that is instructive. Like, Nathalie Dupree used to wear my butt out. Nathalie—I remember we took a trip to Viking, to meet with Viking one time, and Nathalie just basically yelled at me in the car for like an hour. Drove me bat-shit. But we've gotten past that, and Nathalie and I now have a good relationship, I think, and some of it is I've matured and learned how to deal with—how to take input from a lot of different people and channel some of it. But I think also Nathalie trusts me now in a way she probably didn't then, too.

01:08:29

I'd say, of the founders, I still talk to Egerton. I haven't talked to him enough lately, but you know really for the first ten years of the SFA I talked to him at least once a week if not twice a week about what we were doing and what the right path of what we were doing was. And here's Lolis still on our board—

01:08:51

SR: And Pardis?

01:08:55

JTE: And Pardis is still on our board, you know. Ronnie Lundy—we are talking to Ronnie Lundy about perhaps doing some oral history work of the Up-South now, and Ronnie is interested in doing it. So, you know, there is Charles Wilson. I still like—I'll call Charles when we're looking for a speaker who has some academic backbone to them, and Charles knows who is both personable and smart and who would be a great fit. There is—Dori Sanders is our last year's Lifetime Achievement Award winner. Marlene and Louis—you know, they were at Blackberry Farm with us a couple of weeks ago—couple of months ago. I'll see Nathalie and Marion Sullivan in Charleston in March. There's still strong connectivity with the founders. I think—I think John would wish it to be more, and I would too, but I think there's enough connectivity that we feel like we haven't—you know, we haven't gone off in a new direction that is devoid of contact with the founders.

01:09:56

SR: And, well—and you've made some of the founders Lifetime Achievement Award winners?

01:10:01

JTE: John Folse, Jessica Harris, Nathalie Dupree, Dori Sanders. Who else? Who am I missing? Ella Brennan, Edna Lewis, Ronnie Lundy—all Lifetime Achievement Award winners. And you know, all quite appropriate I would say.

01:10:18

SR: You talked a bit about how when you—

01:10:22

JTE: John Egerton too.

01:10:26

SR: When you were—

01:10:26

JTE: I'm sorry.

01:10:27

SR: No, no that's fine. When you were coming up with the founders, you know, and John Egerton—

01:10:32

JTE: Egerton was coming up with the founders and I was helping to write letters, yeah.

01:10:36

SR: But there was a look at diversity of region, of race, of—I don't know—career?

01:10:46

JTE: Yeah. I remember Egerton saying, "Don't tell anybody we're doing this, but here's what we need to do. We need to make sure that at least thirty-percent of the people here are African American, at least fifty-percent of the people are women, and that we've got geographic diversity. But don't say that you're doing that; just do it."

01:11:06

SR: Can you talk about how you still keep those things in mind in different ways?

01:11:11

JTE: Yeah. I mean, you know, it's—it's one of those things that, again, we don't say we're doing it, but if somebody comes to an SFA conference, they're going to see African Americans on stage. They're not going to just see a bunch of old white men talking about southern food culture. And I think that's important, and not just because I'm a guilty white liberal, which I am. I think it's important to get disparate views, to—to showcase disparate views, and I also think it's—it's important that if you're going to talk to a diverse audience and—and encourage a diverse audience, they need to see themselves on stage—you know, for our participants. And I think we do a—a not-good-enough job at diversifying the SFA and the membership, but I think one of the ways that we can broadcast that we're an inclusive organization is by, you know,

whomever is—by showcasing a diversity of people at the podium and asking a diversity of people to tell stories about the South. Because it's their South, too. It's all of our South.

01:12:21

SR: And why do you think that you don't do a good enough job?

01:12:24

JTE: Because, well, I think some of it—you know, I think race is the great quandary of the South, but I think increasingly our issues are based on class and how much it costs to pull off the symposium. You know, one of our biggest problems is we pay people to speak at the symposium. We pay everybody $500, and it pisses me off to hell and back that I get asked to speak at a lot of events where there's no honorarium for anybody. And if we're a smaller organization that has paid honorarium from the very first, so can all these food conferences, all this—you know, Charleston Wine and Food Festival, Atlanta Wine and Food Festival; you know, all those public events that aren't paying somebody an honorarium is just—it's got to change.

01:13:11

And we've always paid people, but that's the reason our event costs so much, is because we're not asking for freebies. And I think it will make us sustainable for the long-term, but I think all these other organizations need to do the same damn thing because their model won't be sustainable. People will get tired of showing up and they'll get tired of the calculus being, you know, the reason you do this is because you get great publicity.

01:13:36

So I think our great struggle is: How do we make our events more affordable for everybody while at the same time paying speakers, paying chefs, treating people with respect? It's the big quandary. Like, we need—we need somebody to give us, you know, $5,000,000, that will yield $250,000 a year. That will cut the price of the Symposium and other events in half. That would be great. And specifically if the funder told us, "That's what I want to do," because otherwise we'd need to spend it on a professor or something. But if we had a funder who said, "Okay, I want you to cut the price of everything you do in half," it would be great.

01:14:17

So, if you're out there—.

01:14:19

SR: Yeah, you never know. But in the meantime, when it comes to, yeah, I guess booking people for events—and also, I can say from personal experience, finding oral history subjects, that ideal is kind of—.

01:14:35

JTE: Yeah, it is.

01:14:37

SR: The original ideal?

01:14:39

JTE: We don't—we don't talk about it a lot. It's so inculcated within who we are and what we do, but we do—I mean, there are moments—. You know, for everybody who thinks that—that affirmative action has insinuated its way into every part of American life—yeah, it has. We'll sit there literally like we're looking at the symposium brochure right now, and we're saying, "All right, and we've got these—these people cooking. We don't have a woman cooking." We have a symposium on barbecue. So our primary meal, Saturday lunch, will feature Ashley Christensen. We have one woman cooking. We don't have any women of color cooking, and we don't have any men of color cooking anything but barbecue. So we need a—we need people in roles that are not expected. And right now we don't have it, and we got to fix it, and we've got to—you know, we've got to figure out how to do that. I don't know.

01:15:35

SR: Okay, can you talk a little bit more about that term "foodways" that you knew from the beginning would be part of it? Was that at all part of non-academic conversation—that word, at the time?

01:15:50

JTE: Was it part of non-academic conversation?

01:15:52

SR: Yeah. Was it a term used in non-academic conversation when the Southern Foodways Alliance began?

01:15:57

JTE: Not really. No. I mean, that was—that was an academic term. It came out of Don Yoder and his work at the University of Pennsylvania. And that term was not in common parlance until long after the SFA began. I bet if you did a newspaper search to find that term "foodways," and you went '98, '99, 2000, 2001—I mean, you would find a good many of the citations that are going to be tied to us.

01:16:35

The other ones would have been academic, and when you start seeing it in popular press is when the SFA kind of comes—comes to the fore.

01:16:45

SR: Let's look at some of these other things from the beginnings.

01:16:51

JTE: Okay.

01:16:53

SR: The first symposium brochure. Wasn't that somewhere? Not brochure, but—

01:16:57

JTE: Well, the first symposium brochure is somewhere here too.

01:17:01

SR: Yeah, okay.

01:17:01

JTE: Here it is. So it had a general theme, the evolution of southern cuisine. We used the Sam Doyle from St. Helena Island off the coast of South Carolina. You know, we wanted something that would show people of all races, and we got it. We got **[*Laughs*]** white, black, somebody who is—is red tinted, somebody who is yellow tinted. That was important, to find this image that said "the welcome table"; used folk art, but you know, I remember we were sitting around, "How are we going to find an image that shows not just black and white but all people?" You know, all range—or a wide range of colors in people? And this piece was just perfect. The High Museum let us use the reproduction of it. It was important.

01:17:49

The whole thing was apparently broad; it was about the evolution of southern cuisine, and we used the word "cuisine," which we wouldn't do now, and it was broad in its focus. It wasn't about barbecue or about race relations or about some*thing*. It was, you know—

01:18:06

SR: What would you use now, instead of "cuisine"—?

01:18:08

JTE: The Evolution of Southern Foodways or Southern Culinary Culture, or something that would be more inclusive and descriptive than "cuisine," which sounds exclusive and gentrified.

01:18:29

Let's see.

01:18:32

SR: You pointed out earlier that when you open this brochure up, you see—you see Viking, and you see brand names.

01:18:41

JTE: Yeah, which we—you know, Viking and Bryant were underwriters of the first symposium. But we used their logos here; we never do that now because we've learned that—what we, hopefully, say to donors is, "We welcome your contribution. What you get in return is this opportunity to interact with attendees and other donors and speakers and chefs and the like"—that putting your logo on it is not the exchange we want.

01:19:15

We've also learned, too, is that now we thank donors with signs, but we create the signs. We don't use their logos. So, that way, we don't have to deal with what color scheme of 25, 2, 32 you want to use. We create our own imagery that pays homage to the donor, but we don't have to deal with replicating their logo. We don't want to. We took control of it, in essence.

01:19:46

SR: And Viking is still a donor?

01:19:48

JTE: They are, they are, and have been the longest donor and the strongest donor to us through the years.

01:19:56

SR: Well, and now I'll just say, we didn't always use that term "donor" even in my time. Can you talk about that?

01:20:05

JTE: Yeah. So, it's one of the things we're trying to emphasize at the SFA, that—that money comes to us as—as a donation and we do good work with it. It is not about a sponsorship wherein you give us money and we do something for you. If we're doing our good work and you believe in what we do, then you're donating funds to that good work and you're not—. You know, we have—we have begun to weed out donors who want quid pro quo out of it, and if we do our job well within the next—within the next two years, we'll have—none of our revenue stream will be about quid pro quo.

01:20:47

SR: Okay, so when I was looking this over, it struck me how similar this actually looks, to me, to what you might currently draw up, just the structure of the weekend. And I'm—there are little differences that we can talk about, but registration at Barnard Observatory. You had catfish, and I know you had catfish at the second one. You had a catfish fry. We now do it at Taylor [Grocery]—

01:21:18

JTE: Taylor, right. Yeah, I mean the reality is when you **[*Laughs*—**you saw. We were working on the 2012 symposium, and I still had stuff in from 2011. So you're taking the old template and filling it back in, because you need to know how much time you devoted to X, Y, or Z. So, yeah. I mean, even some of the language. "This event will provide an opportunity for curious cooks, gourmands, and food writers alike to better appreciate—." So, we have rewritten that over time, but it's the same basic language even of the start. You know—you know, on Sunday morning here—or, excuse me, no—Saturday night we had a performance by Norma Jean Darden of *Spoonbread and Strawberry Wine*. You know, that is linked very explicitly to the ballet we did a few years back and the opera we did last year. It's about public performance, as well as presentations from journalists and academics. That's still there.

01:22:26

And we've changed some other things. One of the things we learned early on from this, in the first Saturday chef, we have "lunch and cooking demonstrations with Frank Stitt."

01:22:42

SR: I saw that you have a cooking demonstration on the first day as well.

01:22:44

JTE: Yeah, I can't even remember what that was the first day. But you know, it didn't end up being a cooking demonstration. The food was prepared and people could walk by and see it being done. I think Frank gave a talk about—there were fresh dug new potatoes in a ham hock vinaigrette. He did crispy pig ears. But one of the things we learned from Marlene—I asked

Marlene, who helped me bring Frank that first year, Marlene Osteen and she said, "Well, what you should do is you should pay them an honorarium and then pay their food costs instead of paying—." I talked about how it's important for us to pay, but it's also important for us to get a good deal, too.

01:23:29

So instead of paying them to cater something, which a chef might give you a price of like, you know, $25 a head, if you pay them an honorarium and then pay them for their food costs, then you can afford to do it. And that was Marlene's advice way back, and it's helped us because it's allowed us to pay chefs but not pay an arm and a leg, and make sure the chef is not out money, but—but we also can afford to do it.

01:23:55

SR: Where did they cook back then?

01:23:58

JTE: That was—huh. That's a good question. Frank showed up with his stuff—like he showed up from Birmingham with his stuff— and we had—we had ranges from Viking out in the Grove where they cooked. And this is only seventy-five people. It's pretty small.

01:24:21

SR: And now, for the record, where does the cooking happen?

01:24:23

JTE: Now the cooking happens at John Currence's catering kitchen. For the longest time it was the National Guard Armory, and now it's switched to John Currence's catering kitchen, which is on North Lamar. And, you know, they're feeding—instead of feeding seventy-five people with twenty guests—ninety-five total—it's 350, 375 people in total. It's grown a bit.

01:24:43

SR: Okay, so at what year did you start going to Taylor Grocery for the catfish on Friday night?

01:24:49

JTE: That was in the third year. So, first two years were Ed Scott. Ed was—he won our third—or our second. He won one of our early Keeper of the Flame Awards, and was one of the early subjects of a Joe York film. He was the first African American catfish farmer in the Mississippi Delta. Had a hard time getting some catfish processed and built his own processing plant, a really heroic great figure who had been profiled by Richard Schweid, who spoke at this same Symposium. In Richard's book *Catfish in the Delta*, he had written about Ed. Ed, after two years Ed got ill, and Ed is—is still on a dialysis machine. But that third year, I think it was, we invited Ed and we cooked at Taylor, and Ed won the Keeper of the Flame Award that year. So we still served catfish; Ed just didn't have to cook it. Ed got to be honored for his cooking of it.

01:25:51

SR: So there's—you know, from the very beginning there's this mix of sort of academia and good food and fun.

01:26:03

JTE: Yeah. Betty Fussell was our first speaker on that Friday morning. Betty just spoke at Blackberry Farm as a scholar in residence at Blackberry Farm a month ago, two months ago. And Betty, I remember she ended her talk talking about Proust and his madeleine, and how many people refer to that all the time, and she—we had tee-shirts printed with this later. She said, "We don't need Proust's madeleine; we got Twain's corn pone. She was fiery and great and talked about the history of corn in the South. And Jessica Harris talked about greens as a metaphor for black and white relations, and that we both recognized the import of greens. So we had, you know, both of those women have PhDs—really bright—but we also had this mix of people like—like, hmm, who else? *Life Story*, Lawrence Craig, barbecue pitmaster from De Vall's Bluff, Arkansas. And Ed Scott. We heard from people like that.

01:27:13

But you know, here we had somebody talking about wine, somebody talking about drinks and drinking in the South—Leigh McWhite. It was—it was a mix of academics, journalists, and regular folk.

01:27:29

SR: Now, John T, I see that John Egerton spoke at this first symposium, and you said that you never have and never will. And that was actually one of my questions for you. So, why is it okay for John Egerton to present and not you?

01:27:45

JTE: Because he wasn't the director of this thing. Plus, I don't—I mean, to be frank, I also don't have enough time to come up with a talk and execute it for this—crazy.

01:27:58

SR: I was thinking about your *Potlikker Papers* and how—. Anyway, one of my questions for you was going to be, "Have you ever presented that?" And the answer is no.

01:28:07

JTE: I mean, I've presented variations on that, yeah, but I don't need to—I don't need to speak at the symposium. I got enough other shit to do.

01:28:17

SR: Okay, all right, so that's the first one.

01:28:18

JTE: When I retire.

01:28:21

SR: [*Laughs*] The second one—talk to me a little bit about—so the second topic was the Creolization of southern cuisine.

01:28:30

JTE: We switched then. If you'll notice, the first one was May 1st through 3rd 1998. So we switched to October. We switched to the fall. The first symposium, we didn't know—like, we were—we scheduled it the same time as the Beard Awards. The Beard Awards didn't matter as much then either, but we had no idea there could be conflict. Fall ends up being a better time for all involved, and we moved to that focus on a specific topic within southern food with this one—Creolization of southern cuisine.

01:29:05

You know, some of the formats are similar. Some of the speakers are similar. You'll notice that Lolis Elie shows up here as a speaker. He looked at *Creole Feast*, a book by Rudy Lombard. I remember Lolis speaking, and after he got through he was like, "You taped that, didn't you? I was like, "No, Lolis, we didn't. **[*Laughs*]** Should have.

01:29:32

SR: And now you do.

01:29:34

JTE: Yeah, now we do. Now we podcast and tape everything. But you know, there were two speakers who repeated—Jessica Harris, John Martin Taylor. You'll notice John Egerton slips back from the fore. Jessica and John were both really smart presenters. They both wanted to speak, too—part of the reason they were there. You'll notice Kathy Starr popping up here. Joe St. Columbia was a tamale maker over in Arkansas. *Catfish Fry*, Ed Scott—this is Ed Scott cooked catfish again at the Alumni House, which is at the edge of campus. I remember—I think

part of the reason we didn't go back there is Ed—some grease got on the grass, and like the grass caught on fire, like—you know. **[*Laughs*]**

01:30:26

This is the same year Vertamae Grosvenor did her folk opera, *N'Yam*, and Steve Cheseborough, who was a student here in southern studies and studying blues music, accompanied her and did a fantastic job. If I remember correctly, Steve had like this epiphany experience where he decided that he was probably African American because he felt that music so deeply. I may be misremembering that, but that's the way I recall it. Ronnie Lundy gave a really fiery great talk about—about the foods in the Mountain South and how they dispersed throughout the country.

01:31:09

The first kind of grand—the—the lunch, we moved from Frank Stitt and entered John Folse, and I remember John Folse—like, his chef came in and they came in with all these trucks. Like, I think they flew some stuff in. They—they killed it. They killed it, and there was like a little mini Eifel Tower on one of the—on one of the tables **[*Laughs*]**. Folse threw a lot of ammunition at it and did wonderfully well.

01:31:35

SR: And that Saturday lunch has sort of maintained as—

01:31:42

JTE: Yeah.

01:31:40

SR: A big deal.

01:31:44

JTE: Yeah, it's kind of the—if there's a keynote speech, there's also a keynote lunch, and that's the keynote lunch.

01:31:52

SR: I didn't know that it started out that way.

01:31:54

JTE: It has been from the beginning, yeah.

01:31:57

SR: You know, in—in our first interview you talked a lot about how you've always—you have concern, and you've always had concern, that you don't want this organization to just be about throwing a good event, throwing a good party, and yet there is so much emphasis on the annual symposium. Why is it important?

01:32:16

JTE: Well, I mean, there's two reasons it's important for the SFA. One, is it becomes this kind of annual gathering of the tribe where people get jazzed about what we do, they reconnect, they build new alliances. It is a very social—and also, I think, entrepreneurial—event for a lot of

people. It's also really important to SFA fundraising. Our model is you get people excited about what we do by way of their encounters with the oral histories or watching a film, or most especially coming to the symposium, and that leads—it helps us drive fundraising and everything else. We program the symposium on a break-even budget, but I would hazard a guess that three-quarters of the people who are donors of the SFA got excited about what we do at that symposium and took that forward and became donors. Everybody from Randy Fertel, who came to that first barbecue symposium with Bud Trillin, and Johnny Apple and all those people—it was like this is an amazing thing. "How can I help?" You know, and that's—we count on that, that we stage a great event. People jazz about what we do and it re-energizes those people who have been with us for a long time. It also re-energizes the staff. It's a lot of work, but it's joyous work, like we—we love it. It wears us out, but we love it.

01:33:44

SR: Okay, and then we haven't necessarily found the brochure, but do you remember: What was the third Symposium? Was that barbecue?

01:33:52

JTE: The third was *Southern Food En Route*, traveling on, so it was a look at what happens when southern food leaves the South. And I don't know if we have one of those brochures right here or not. Let's see, yeah. This is—

01:34:14

SR: That is a great painting.

01:34:15

JTE: Yeah, this is a painting done by Taylor Bowen Ricketts, who now is the chef at Delta Bistro in Greenwood. She was living here, and she's a painter as well, but she did the painting, so it was the idea of: What happens when southern food leaves the South? You know, and we opened with Roy Blount, who talked about what it was like to be at the point—I guess he's in Connecticut, Massachusetts—I can't remember where the hell Roy—. He lives up there.

01:34:59

We had a panel on selling the South with Bill Williams of Glory Foods, John Floyd, who at that point was the editor of *Southern Living*, and Nathalie Dupree, moderated by Kathleen Purvis. Matt and Ted Lee spoke at that symposium on the secret life of the peanut. There's our first Keeper of the Flame, goes to JC Hardaway, given by Lolis Eric Elie.

01:35:24

SR: And JC was?

01:35:25

JTE: JC Hardaway was pitmaster at the Big S Grill in Memphis, Tennessee, and was one of the—kind of the last of the old guard barbecue men. By the time of the next symposium, he's passed and everybody takes up a collection for his tombstone. Really sad.

01:35:44

I remember him. I remember JC walking down. He had a chef's coat on that Lolis, I remember, had gotten made up right after Smokestack Lightning, and JC walking down the center aisle of Barnard Observatory with a standing ovation. A beautiful moment.

01:36:01

SR: Was that Ted and Matt Lee's first involvement with SFA?

01:36:07

JTE: I think so. I don't know if they had—I think that was their first time, yeah. We had a talk on Chicago, the northernmost southern city. I can't remember who the guy was. He punted completely. He just—

01:36:23

SR: That happens, huh?

01:36:24

JTE: Yeah, it does. I mean, it really does happen. We had lunch. We had Leah Chase, Fritz Blank, Johnny Falk. Fritz Blank was doing like a pepperpot stew. There was Peter McKee from Seattle, who—who talked about doing a backyard barbecue in his Seattle—in his backyard of his Seattle home, in homage to this place called Fresh Air Barbecue in Georgia that he found when he was a vista volunteer in Georgia in the '70s. This woman Monique Wells, who had written a book about black southerners in Paris, in a cookbook. Leah Chase got this Lifetime Achievement

Award, the first one from—Jessica presented it to her. Alexander Smalls, who had a restaurant in—he's an opera singer and restaurateur in New York, from South Carolina, though—

01:37:29

SR: And he sang or he cooked?

01:37:32

JTE: He no-showed. He cancelled, I think two or three days before. William Rice, longtime food writer and one of the founding editors of *Food and Wine Magazine* gave a talk on Craig Claiborne as a native Mississippian. Paige Osborne, who had Yacona River Inn, which has since burned, did duck hash. And she had done that the year before, too.

01:38:04

SR: So you had this—talk about the pattern of themes.

01:38:07

JTE: I need to [make a call]. Is that okay?

01:38:09

SR: Yes, let's pause.

01:38:10

JTE: Thirteen—

01:38:13

SR: Okay, John T, I have three more points that I'd like to cover before we wrap this up, and then, like I said, I'll interview you in another two years. But the first one is: We've gone through the symposium brochures from the first three years. Can you talk a little bit about how you choose the themes for each year, and—and also about how the theme isn't just for the symposium, but it's an annual theme?

01:38:38

JTE: Right. I'd like to say there's some grand process for the themes, but it's staff sitting around in staff meetings brainstorming and coming up with ideas. We do try to balance—at one point we did a three-part balance. It was place, idea, and food. So it would be, you know, we're going to do the Gulf South, we're going to do something on gender, and we're going to do something on barbecue. So there will be different sub-sets. Now what we do—at least I think we do—is we look for something that has great broad popular appeal—which this year we're doing barbecue—and then something more serious-minded, and more kind of geekish the next year. So a balance between something broadly popular and something kind of more tightly or more intellectually focused.

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And so next year will be gender or sexuality. We don't know what we're going to call it. "Gender" sounds, I don't know—boring. "Sexuality" sounds sexy. So **[*Laughs*]**—

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SR: Kind of.

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JTE: We need and want to focus on issues of gender. And that doesn't mean we're just going to focus on issues of women and gender; it will be issues of men and gender, too.

01:40:11

And then the year after that, we'll do restaurants as the focus. We've never done the restaurant as an icon of the South. And that will tie into 2014, which will be the fiftieth anniversary of restaurant desegregation of the South. So, and then the year after that there is a suggestion from Elizabeth Simms—talking about how founders or old board members and presidents are still involved—Elizabeth suggested a while back in an email that it would be interesting to do pop culture in the South. And I think that food and pop culture will be great. You know, you look at Cracker Barrel, you look at Waffle House, you look at people who—you know, Conway Twitty and his Twitty Burgers. You look at you know broadly how—. You look at Jimmy Carter and Walter Mondale running on the ticket in '76 as Grits and Fritz. So, the themes are based on that loose, like, let's go pop, and let's go deeply intellectual; with a balance between the two.

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SR: And last year was?

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JTE: What was last year? What was it? It was the Cultivated South, that's what it was. So last year, when you think about—

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SR: I think I spoke.

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JTE: —yeah, I think you did. So last year was the idea that it would be a little more oblique and a little more earnest and a little more, you know, inside baseball. And barbecue is populist and has great broad appeal. We were a little scared because the last time the SFA doubled in size was the symposium, and it sold out in like three days—was when we did barbecue. So we expect a kind of similar thing to happen this year, and we hope we're ready for it.

01:42:11

SR: Okay, question number two: Could you give me, briefly, ten years out—it's more than 10 years out, but—the state of the SFA?

01:42:24

JTE: Right now?

01:42:24

SR: Yeah.

01:42:26

JTE: I think a number of things are happening. I think Amy and Joe are becoming stars in their own right now, which is I think where we want to be—that our oral history and film program is so vital and so recognized around the country by people who pay attention. Not by the broad public, but by people who pay attention—that people see the import of that and see the import of the work Amy leads and that you and Rien and some of the other people do. I think that's important. I think we've led a national dialogue about the import of oral history and food.

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And I think we have defined a way of doing the food symposia that is setting national standards. People understand this is the way the SFA programs things, and they take cues from us in doing that. I think we are financially stable. We're in good shape, and I think our funders now are people who for the most part buy into what we do—not into what we can do for them—and I think that's exactly where we want to be. We need to make a transition now from programmatic funding—which means we do cool stuff; give us money—to endowment-based funding, wherein we get big dollars which yield yearly interest which we use to fund professorships and the like. I think that's our next big step—is: How do we contribute to scholarship and this new generation of students who will make sense of southern food and of all American regional food going forward? How do we contribute to that? And I think the way—one of the ways—we do that is by doing things like hiring a post-doctoral fellow like Jill Cooley, who is teaching with us now, and continuing that program and having a full-time professor who teaches foodways, so that we're giving back to this next generation. I think we've done a great job of giving back by way of oral history and film, but there's also: How do we give back to this field, and how do we help this field?

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We've seen from Foodways Texas, and from Sabores Sin Fronteras and other groups that are beginning around the country, that we're inspiring other foodways groups, and that means a lot to the SFA staff, and I think to the membership too. So we have to figure out how to do that. One of the things we're working on now is Foodways Congress, where we bring in people from around the country to talk about best practices and how to conduct this work. And I think that will be really important going forward. I think all of those things hold promise, and I think we also need to come up with one other big idea. Like, what's the thing that—if ten years ago we started thinking about oral history and film, what's the thing—what's the next big thing we're going to do? I don't know what that is yet, and that to me is the most exciting part. Like, you know, what are we going to do? And I think we've got a lot of momentum and a lot of goodwill, and we've got a good reputation, and I think we can be real leaders in the food world as a whole and have responsibility too.

01:45:40

I talked earlier about—saying to these food festivals that are popping up everywhere need to invest in their communities. And it's more than your community's backdrop, and it's more than, if your budget is $2,000,000 for your event, giving $30,000 or $40,000 away. You know, that's not it.

01:46:00

But I think it's incumbent upon us to teach them that. We're a small nonprofit running on about an $850,000 a year budget, but we've got big reach, and I think we have the responsibility to help others see the value of food culture and what it can accomplish.

01:46:22

SR: Okay, thanks. My final question is: What is your favorite part of your job?

01:46:31

JTE: Programming events and thinking about ways that programming can communicate messages to people. So if Melissa and I are going back and forth about the field trip and figuring out who is the right speaker, who is the unexpected person to plug into something—you know, those kinds of things are the big challenges. It's trying to figure out: What do we do on Sunday morning? If we've done a ballet, and now we've done an opera, what the hell are we going to do to top that? That's the biggest challenge, but it's also—you know, if we're going to think really broadly about food culture, we say that food is as important to people as literature is, music, as a representation of their place, then it's incumbent upon us to be really expansive in how we depict food and how we introduce people to those ideas.

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That is the most exciting part, to me, is that we've got—if you take those examples of that opera and the ballet as an example, we've got—our membership says, "Yeah, do that. We like that." I think it's some of the most affecting things we do. So, what do we do with that imprimatur? What do we—how do we expand it? How do we tell a story of food that gets people to think about race and class and gender and all that stuff, but gets their attention in new and unconventional ways and doesn't beat them over the head with messages but sneaks up behind them with messages?

01:48:05

SR: Thank you. We'll wrap this up for the next couple years. Thanks so much for your time.

01:48:09

JTE: My pleasure.

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[End John T Interview 2]