KAREN CATHEY
Arlington, VA

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Interviewer: April Grayson, Southern Foodways Alliance
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs
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Project: SFA Founders

[Begin Karen Cathey Interview]

00:00:02

April Grayson: Okay. This is April Grayson interviewing Karen—is it Cathey—on October 10, 2004 in Oxford, Mississippi, at the occasion of the Southern Foodways Alliance Symposium. Okay. I was wondering if you could explain to me how you became involved with the SFA.

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Karen Cathey: Well, it's—it goes back ever farther than that. I have always been interested in southern food because my family is very southern, and I love southern food. I've done a lot of programs, symposiums, on a much smaller scale than this one with southern food, and through that I've gotten to know a lot of the people who are like-minded and also wanting to try to start something like the SFA.

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So, there were a few different incarnations before that and I was involved in all of them. So, we kept trying to get it going and get it right and—and finally John Egerton, who I had met through some of my other previous work, had the very bright idea to line up with the University [of Mississippi], and also he knew John T. and—and he thought John T. would be a great leader. And as I'm sure is very often the case, John Egerton was, you know very, very right. So, luckily, the third time was a charm and we got—we got it going with this one, so—.

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AG: And were the previous organizations the American Southern Food Institute—?

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KC: The first one was the Society for the Revival and Preservation of Southern Food and Culture, and then the second was the American Southern Food Institute, and yes—.

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AG: Do you have any reflections on why you think those organizations didn't survive?

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KC: Well, yes, I think John was very right. I mean the—the support of the—of the University and just more coordinated efforts with—with that and because of the alliance with the University, there was a lot more credibility given to the organization and a lot more organized and informed ways of going about setting up the organization and getting funding for it and having dedicated personnel really devoting their time and attention to making it happen rather than just volunteers who were trying to spread the word and get other people involved, which can be very difficult and certainly very time-consuming, so—.

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AG: Were you at the first organizational meeting in Birmingham?

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KC: Yes.

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AG: Could you tell us what you recall about that and if there's any specific—?

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KC: What do I recall? Just that everybody was so driven to the same purpose. Everybody was very passionate, and we had a very intense time together, a very intense day of—we had lots of—we had a very strict agenda and some breakout meetings and brainstorming and things like that, but everybody was bound and determined that when we left town this would be a done deal. And—and so—and it was, so I mean it was—it was started in, you know, the very—they, you know, selected a number of people to—to be the—I don't know if it was the actual Board at the time or a steering committee or what they called it. But it—it was—it was very passionate and people felt very strongly. Everybody—everybody in the room was very dedicated to making it happen.

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AG: What was your original vision for the organization and has that changed over time?

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KC: The original vision—no, I don't think so at all. I think it's only grown. I think the original—the original vision in my mind was to—to really spread the word and—and record history and put down for posterity why southern food is so meaningful and what involves all aspects of southern food. And it—it only grows from there.

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I mean that's a very vague and all encompassing definition, but it's been both detailed and specified and also expanding at the same time.

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AG: Great. The notion of food as culture is important to SFA.

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KC: Uh-hmm.

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AG: I was wondering if you have personal and/or intellectual comments on—on that.

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KC: Well, I think all around the world people recognize that—that—that that's certainly an easy way to understand the culture of any country or people is through their food. And it's certainly a very welcoming way and it's everybody eats, everybody understands that—that if they grew up in one place, and they go somewhere else later in life that they miss the food that they had, and they yearn for it, even if they didn't particularly love it when they were there.

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So I think—I think that's kind of a universal belief, and it's—it's very easy to get followers who are **[*Laughs*]** very passionate and enthusiastic when—when food is the central topic, I think.

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AG: Stepping back a little bit, did you have—what was your role in helping developing some of the original vision and even the programming for SFA—?

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KC: Well, my involvement was on a couple of different levels. First of all I'm—I'm a marketing consultant, and I only work with food topics. So, I have had experience putting together just different single—with symposia or—or programs that have dealt with all sorts of topics, not just southern food, but always food topics. So, there were suggestions in that area or just feedback from experience of things that I had done.

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But I've also been involved in other nonprofit organizations, most notably the American Institute of Wine and Food, and I started the chapter in the Washington, DC—Washington, DC area. So—and I have been involved on their Boards of Directors locally and nationally for many, many years and still am. So, I had a lot of input onto membership ideas and programs and just the way the organizations are set up and, you know, those kinds of foundation-type of—of input and—and ideas.

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AG: Great. Do you have any specific ideas for the future of SFA and specific topics or projects that you'd like to see it take on?

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KC: No, I don't actually because I've been very willing to go along with **[*Laughs*]** what everybody else—. I have not been as involved on the Board of Directors. I've not been on the Board of Directors or been as involved, and—and I think that everybody so far has done such a wonderful job that I haven't had to really worry about it too much. And I am sort of willing to go along with the flow because I know that southern food is so vast and so diverse and that we've just started to touch on a lot of the different aspects of it.

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So, I see it as a very rich field or fertile soil you know from which to—to pull and grow all of our projects; so actually you know I have to admit I've—I've sort of sat back and just really taken it all in and—and enjoyed everything that comes out of the Southern Foodways Alliance. And—and I—I—I sort of take it for granted that there's a lot, you know, that I—I really don't—I don't worry that there's going to be any—any lack of material or interesting subjects and things like that. And, you know, I do think that at times you know later I'll try to become more involved, and—and—but I—but I haven't.

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AG: Uh-hmm. I'd like to shift a little bit to a portrait of the personal. I was hoping you could tell me when and where you were born.

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KC: **[*Laughs*]** Okay. I was in born in Calcutta, India, on September 11, 1961. So, I spent the first six years of my life in Asia. My father and my mother, before she married my father—but they were both in the diplomatic service, and so I was born in Calcutta, lived in Rangoon, Burma, and then lived in Hong Kong; had lots of servants over there as part

of our family, but they were Indian or Asian servants or—or Chinese rather. So, it was different, but then that was really because of the diplomatic service.

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When we came to the United States when I was six, lived in Murphy, North Carolina, with my grandparents—with my grandmother and—and my other grandmother was in Simpsonville, South Carolina, which is right outside of Greenville. And we visited quite a lot, so all of my family was there in North and South Carolina, and I really—that was really my first exposure to the United States. But, you know, my family was southern, so I didn't really know that—I don't know if that was because of my youth that you know I just was starting to become aware of—at that age of what that sort of thing was going on around me, or—or whether it was the warmth of family as opposed to people that I spent all of my time with every day, but they weren't necessarily family.

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I mean, I think that I was well loved overseas, but it—but it was different. I was very aware that all these people were my cousins and my **[*Laughs*]** uncles and aunts, and—and there was more a sense of belonging I think once I got to the United States and—and lived in the South. So, I very definitely consider myself to be southern even though my very early years were not spent in the United States at all, so—.

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AG: Interesting. What do you remember about your—let's take you to once you are in the South in the United States—about meal—meal time and—

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KC: Meal times?

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AG: —and who prepared the food, and was there a ceremony around it or what—what was the typical meal like?

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KC: Well, most—well both—what—depending on which grandmother I was with at the time, in general, it was always my grandmother—either one of them doing all the cooking, and—and my mother would help as well. But what I noticed in hindsight after growing up was that my mother being in the—and my father being in the diplomatic service, they entertained all of the time. I mean, almost every night. And my mother had menu books that she kept, and she had dinner parties two days after I was born.

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And now granted, she wasn't doing the cooking, but she was the hostess and she was doing the planning and making sure everything happened. And that was really an obligation. But when we were in North and South Carolina, my grandmothers—those were their kitchens. What I noticed—my mother was an entertainer, but she wasn't necessarily a cook. So I always thought as a child that I loved her food, but I realized as I grew up and started to cook myself and really develop my interest in food more, that—that she wasn't—she didn't consider herself to be a cook, and she followed recipes and she knew how to put together a party or a menu. But she didn't really have that natural ability and feeling for cooking.

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But my grandmothers certainly did and they didn't follow cookbooks, so they just—they had their standard foods. But I did notice between—I was very aware of the differences between one grandmother's grits and the other grandmother's grits or one grandmother's bacon and the other grandmother's bacon or desserts, you know, or even fried chicken. I mean, their fried chicken was different. And I was very aware of that. And, you know, I think my mother just thought I was persnickety and weird. **[*Laughs*]** But of course now she says, "Well, you know, you always were interested in food." But, you know, they didn't encourage that because they wanted me to go to college and—and be you know a—I guess I was sort of thinking I would be more of a corporate type of person or something.

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But finally I realized you know that food was something that I couldn't get away from. But I did—I was very—and my South Carolina grandmother always called grits hominy and I didn't understand. "Well, they're grits." **[*Laughs*]** "No, it's hominy," you know. "They're grits!" And she put bacon—or pepper in everything including the hominy, which I thought, was very strange. Her—she always made pecan pie, and my other grandmother always made cakes. So, the one thing that I think was universal was that the desserts were you know very, very important. **[*Laughs*]** We have one—a family cookbook that my mother's side of the family put together, and over half of it is the dessert chapter and then there are 10 other chapters in the other half. **[*Laughs*]** So, that's typical.

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Even the juice was different, and I don't know why that is. I just—I remember the—I remember the food was the same though. Well, now, in South Carolina they had

country ham, and in North Carolina we had baked ham. And I don't know why that is. We didn't have red-eyed gravy. The gravy in North Carolina was creamier and thicker. The—the South Carolina gravy was darker and thinner and probably, you know, more of a meaty flavor. And with that grandmother it was just as much—you couldn't have enough pepper in the gravy. And they did have red-eyed gravy although I probably didn't like it because I don't remember the taste of it. I probably just said, "I don't like that; I'm not eating it." And that's what I always did.

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But all the vegetables—squash, beans, beans, beans, beans—canning; both grandmothers canned and pickled and did those things, you know, put up foods. So I was very exposed to that, and I took that as just a given. Although I don't do it myself and I wish that—I'm trying to learn how to do that myself with my—things from my own garden. But I have to admit I'm a little intimidated by the whole, you know, I just don't know—you know I don't know why I'm just sort of afraid of—of getting too experimental. But I think also it's because of time that I—I don't really have time to sit down and devote to that. But—but the difference—the observations I made about food were really about the contrast between the two grandmothers and their—because, I suppose as a child, I thought that they were both in my family so why were they different? So that was kind of an interesting thing, yeah.

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AG: So, could you tell me a little bit about your professional—the path of your professional experience with food?

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KC: Well, after—I got a degree in European Studies and then I went onto work for companies that had nothing to do with that. And sort of around my mid-20s, I started thinking that my work didn't mean anything to me. And I finally just thought to myself, "If I had all the money in the world and all the time in the world, what would I do?" And I didn't really come up with the answer. I just thought, "Well, it's going to have to be something with food." And I was always consumed with recipes and food and things like that and I think a lot of the reason was social. I mean I—I always was sort of standing at the counter looking at—watching my grandmothers cook, and I can remember saying—my grandmother in North Carolina had an apple tree, and we always had apple cobbler. And I would stand there and say, "How do you know how much sugar to put in?" "I just know." "Well, how do you know how much flour to put in?" "I just know." "Well, how do you know?" **[*Laughs*]**—and just I never got how she figured this. She never, you know, she just made it and it always tasted the same. And it was always delicious. And I just was baffled by that.

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But we also would go and sit on the porch and shell peas or string beans and—or shuck corn, and that was a very social time where we would all go out and sit on—she had a swinging porch swing and some chairs, and we would all sort of go out there and sit. And it was just very social. And I think that—that was part of the appeal, the social, you know, again, like with SFA, the coming together of—of all the people and that is probably at the root of it for me. And I like food, and I like to eat. But food was very much love, and so I think that was probably why it was so appealing. And—and after I finally decided, well, I'll do something in the food business, I didn't really know what.

And I thought well, I'll just start getting involved and—and doing different catering jobs and things like that and having parties and just cooking. And then I realized that I really knew—I thought I knew a lot, but I realized that I really didn't know a lot. So then I went to cooking school, and I knew that I never wanted to actually be a chef in a restaurant or something like that, but I needed the background of real technique and—and learning about other cultures' foods as well.

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And so once I did that it was a few years a transition time where I would—I had always—have always loved marketing but have never had any experience in marketing before I started my own business. And I met a lot of people and would call people that were CEOs that worked at corporations and things and say, you know, "I'm looking for a job," and, you know, "Could we meet for lunch or have a drink and talk about that?" And to my great surprise nobody ever said no. **[*Laughs*]** And—and I met a lot of great people. I never got a job because nobody—either they didn't—nobody had a job available or I would have to start at a very low salary which I had a mortgage at the time, and I couldn't do that.

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So, finally, I just decided—I was terrified, but I just decided I would just try to—. You know, I had met a lot of people. I had made a lot of contacts, and I had no idea that it would be excruciatingly difficult, and if I did I probably wouldn't have done any—you know, started it. But I just started my own business, and luckily, I didn't have a family. I had—I—I did have a mortgage, but it wasn't a very—a high mortgage. I was able to live frugally and survive the up and down roller-coaster of income that—that still persists

[*Laughs*] but—but, you know, I've been very fortunate also in hindsight to think that I have been able to learn a lot of what I'm doing along the way.

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So, but southern food was always a big love of mine. It was never a central focus, but it was always, always there. And I never wanted to let that go. I mean I—I had many interests but one thing that—going back to one of the first questions that you asked about southern food was when I would talk to people about southern food that—people that weren't southern, there was an ignorance about it and—and a sort of disdain that you know it's all grease, it's all fattening, it's not good. And I completely disagreed with that, so I think that's something that SFA has in the short five years that it has been around has come a long way to just really letting a lot of people know that—that certainly is not true. And I think there's a long way to go still because I think in many ways the South had sort of a lot of people, you know, thought that we talked funny and that our food was funny. And, you know, the food is so vast. I mean, it's like saying, you know, one—I mean as I say, those two grandmothers, they didn't live all that far apart, but their food was greatly different. And my mother, which I didn't know—but she said that they never had grits when she was growing up until she went away to Mars Hill to college, and her roommate had grits. Her roommate was from the other side of North Carolina, from the coast of North Carolina. So then she went home and said, "Oh, we've got to have these grits." And so, then the grits became a part of their diet, and I guess, you know, when we were kids or something—I mean, maybe it was my mother's doing that we always had grits.

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But—but I know okra, I loved okra, and my mother didn't like it when she was growing up, so she thought I was kind of crazy. But fried okra is—you know my—and to

this day **[*Laughs*]** I mean, when I have a birthday and visit my mother, and she always—we were always allowed and—and we still are you know if we having our birthday dinner, you know, with my mother—if we do, and I'm the only child that lives close to my mother, so I do have this every year **[*Laughs*]**, but we're allowed to choose our foods. And my—my birthday dinner without fail every year is fried chicken, and, you know, fried okra and corn off the cob which is what we called creamed corn, but—and sliced fresh tomatoes because it's in season and biscuits and, you know, cake for dessert, and that's—that's our—that's my birthday meal.

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AG: Would you consider that your sort of quintessential southern meal?

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KC: Yeah, I would.

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AG: That's one of the questions, and you've already answered it.

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KC: Yeah, yeah, that's it. I mean and the other—the only thing I've added to it is sweet potato biscuits, and that's not something that we ever had when I was growing up. But I discovered that afterward, and I love it and sweet potatoes are a huge crop in both North and South Carolina, so—. But it's interesting that we never had them on either one of those tables, so if—if I insist on having sweet potato biscuits then I have to make them.

And interestingly enough, I have tested a lot of sweet potato biscuit recipes, **[*Laughs*]** and my favorite is to use Glory Foods canned sweet potatoes because I think they're moist and they just are more reliable. They produce a more reliable biscuit. And I didn't even know I was using Glory Foods. I mean, I had bought them at the grocery store, and I didn't even know the significance of Glory Foods until one of the SFA Symposiums a few years ago when Bill Williams talked about his business.

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And then I realized that I had been using his sweet potatoes all these years, and—and I have tried many different ways of—of using, you know, cooking my potatoes or using other brands of sweet potatoes, you know, canned and I just, you know, I like those the best. I think they make the best biscuit, you know, the more—more moist biscuit and it's easier to mash them, and they don't become complete mush. You still get a little bit of texture in there, so that's **[*Laughs*]**—yeah.

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AG: Have you seen southern food evolve over your lifetime?

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KC: Well, I—I think that American food has evolved. I don't know—I do see southern food as going right along with that in that American ingredients have been celebrated more, and we certainly are using more fresh ingredients and sort of returning from that renaissance of canned and processed foods. So, I see that across the country, and southern food is—is right up there with that. And—and I think when—when you—when you ask that, I think more of—of restaurants and—and food that is outside the home, and I—I

think it's—it can be extremely sophisticated, and that's something that I think in general people don't perceive southern food as being sophisticated at all. And I think that—that could also have been said of a lot of different regions of American food. So, I think American food in general is much more sophisticated and southern food as well.

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AG: One last question: a lot of discussion about Southern food focuses on continuity, tradition. Do you think that—that is accurate, or is it a more romanticized view?

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KC: Well, I think that it may be changing now because I think, like my grandmothers, they learned—the recipes were passed down, and I think that was just the way things were done. And—and now with television and with movies and with travel being cheap and, you know, people going to school all over the place, I think that—and education being much more accessible to so many more people, I think that—that those ways are probably changing because they're changing everywhere and not just in the South.

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But I do think that people are interested in history and I think that's one of the great values of the organization of Southern Foodways Alliance because those traditions are—you know, we're catching it right now very early to try to keep those traditions alive. But I think, you know—I always think of biscuits. I mean, I learned how to make biscuits from my grandmother and then I've learned from Shirley Corriher, who many people know, you know, is very specific about certain biscuits, and—and you know I've made many—many different kinds of biscuits, and I like them all. I mean, I would never

say one biscuit is better than another. And, you know, I've heard a lot of people say—try to you know put labels on, you know, whether your cornbread should have sugar or no corn—sugar. I mean, my grandmother from North Carolina would never have put sugar in the cornbread. But, you know, frankly, I like it both ways. **[*Laughs*]** I mean I—I mean, I just, you know, depending—. And—and also, you know, they would never have used white cornmeal. And—and my grandmother in South Carolina would never have used anything but white cornmeal. So it was, you know, just—I think they were—I don't know whether it was personal preferences or, you know, their family or that region. You know, I don't really know that many specifics about it. I just know those were the ways that they did it.

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And my—my—I love country ham. I have country ham every year at Thanksgiving, and I visit my father, and I carry this big vat down because he doesn't have anything big enough to soak it or cook it. And—and so but my mother's family never had country ham and she likes it okay, but you know it would—well, you know, I shouldn't say that it wouldn't—it would not go to waste if my mother had it. **[*Laughs*]** But—but she doesn't think of it. It doesn't occur to her in her menu-planning or thinking about her food. So, you know, what I have is a mix of the two.

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My sister cannot make gravy without putting as much pepper as possible into the gravy, and that's from one grandmother, and—and we all love it. So, when I was growing up, peppered bacon—I thought that was kind of weird, but it's my favorite kind of bacon today. So, you know, there are a lot of—you know, it—it gets mixed up. And I think, you know, we'll probably always pass down certain things, but it has to be more than just,

you know, we like this or we—you know, there has to be lots of stories, and—and I think that's what the great value of Southern Foodways Alliance is because—because we're making efforts to record things, and we're—we're putting together libraries that have the information, and we, you know, are encouraging scholars and students and people to—to keep those things in their memory and to—to really appreciate the value and the history that—that went with all of that.

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So—so I do think it's—it's getting, just because of the way the world is becoming, and it's getting to be more valuable to keep that information.

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AG: One last thing: they're putting together a radio show, *Cornbread Nation*, and they would like to have each person say a little riff, "This is April Grayson. I love fried okra, and you're listening to *Cornbread Nation*." I was wondering if you—

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KC: Would it have to be fried okra or anything you know?

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AG: It's your thing; whatever you want to do.

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KC: Well fried okra is **[*Laughs*]**—. All right. Well I'll just say my favorite meal, then. This is Karen Cathey, and my favorite meal in the whole world is fried chicken and fried okra and corn off the cob and sweet potato biscuits and fresh sliced tomatoes.

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AG: And you're listening to—.

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KC: And you're listening to *Cornbread Nation*.

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AG: Great.

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KC: Thank you. **[*Laughs*]**

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AG: Thank you very much.

00:34:18

[End Karen Cathey Interview]