MARILOU AWIAKTA
Memphis, TN

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Date: March 8th, 2005
Location: Memphis, TN
Interviewer: Amy C. Evans, Southern Foodways Alliance
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs
Length: 58 minutes
Project: SFA Founders

[Begin Marilou Awiakta Interview]

00:00:07

Amy Evans Streeter: This is Tuesday, March 8th at around 1:30 p.m., and I'm in Memphis, Tennessee with Marilou Awiakta. This is Amy Evans for the Southern Foodways Alliance; Marilou, would you mind introducing yourself?

00:00:20

Marilou Awiakta: I'm Marilou Awiakta. I'm a Cherokee Appalachian poet, essayist, and storyteller.

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AES: This is Amy Evans for the Southern Foodways Alliance, and it's Tuesday, March 8, 2005 at about 1:30 p.m. and I'm in Memphis, Tennessee with Marilou Awiakta, and Marilou, would you mind introducing yourself, please?

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MA: I'm Marilou Awiakta. I'm a Cherokee Appalachian poet, storyteller, and essayist. My family has lived in the Southern Appalachians in East Tennessee for over seven generations, and I was born in Knoxville, Tennessee on January 24, 1936, 20 minutes after midnight—very important.

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AES: [*Laughs*]

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MA: And then when I was nine years-old we moved to the atomic frontier in Oak Ridge, [Tennessee], which was part of the Manhattan Project, and was a fenced and top-secret area and the living conditions, everyone lived in one of four kinds of cemesto houses, strictly according to how many children you had, not to economics. No one knew what their fathers did, and it was during World War II, which has a direct impact on—on what we ate and—and let's see. You want to go onto the food as—of what we had to eat?

00:01:58

AES: Well, yeah, because I know that that part of your life had a profound influence on your life and work, so—.

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MA: It had a very profound influence because we were actually living like the pioneers of—of the old days in that the streets were not paved, there were no sidewalks. It was very—it was a very classless society, and basically everyone did their own work. And it was a time when the government had asked everybody in America to have a victory garden. Everyone who could have a garden was to make a garden on whatever land you could do it for—to help feed your own family. And so we had a victory garden and—like everybody else, and it was a small garden to the side of the house and—which furnished tomatoes and potatoes and beans and things like that. And the—my mother prepared the food. In that era, even though both the mother and father in many homes were educated, and many of them with their doctorates, the women were at home. And the men were at

work. The women were at work at home because making a home on a frontier and during wartime and especially in a top-secret installation like that is a full-time job.

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So but in our region, it's not common—it was not common during my childhood that people had any servants whatsoever. The preparation of food and the maintenance of the home and the chores and everything were like a sustainable family. You know, everyone did their own work. So my mother was—always did the cooking, but then my sister and I had chores as we were able, helping with the cooking and the setting of the table and—and so forth.

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And now it will be hard for people to imagine today, but on the other hand we may be coming economically into some very hard times in America, so the food was rationed. And so we—during the War; sugar was rationed. Beef was highly rationed. So our—my mother was very—very adamant that the food be fresh and that we have a balanced diet, because she said, "You are what you eat." And so we always had a form of meat, a green vegetable, a yellow vegetable, cornbread, and iced-tea, blackberry cobbler or something for dessert. But—and then there was this food that everyone ate that no one eats hardly now; it's called Spam. **[*Laughs*]** And Spam, no one questioned. It came out of a can in a little rectangle and nobody really inquired too deeply about the contents. But it probably—you could find it out now. I think Spam is still sold, but it was very important, always impressed upon us that the dinner table was a place of peace and talk. You know, and anyone who came to the table was under the peace-bond, so to speak. You didn't cause controversy at the table, and you talked about different things and—and, you know, the food was passed around. And so all of my association with—with food is positive and

nourishing and convivial. You know, but we—mother was very strict about when you came to the table for—for the meal of the day which was at the end of the day on weekdays at 5:30 and was at 1:30 on Sundays. You had to be appropriately dressed. You had to be—have on clean clothes, you know, and your face washed and with—out of respect for her and my father, but her as the cook, and out of respect for the meal, you could not come dirty to the table. And anybody—my father or anybody—her, you know, everyone out of respect was clean. We always had the blessing, and then we went on with the meal.

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But everything was done in a—in an attractive way, you know. And on Sunday we had a tablecloth, and we had mats during the day, I mean on the weekdays. But the table was—was a place of care and respect and love being transmitted to the family and shared, so—.

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AES: With some ceremony involved in some ways.

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MA: Well, yes. I mean I guess you would say ceremony because certain things were just made clear, you know, and—and then my sister and I did the dishes. I mean, it was totally you know like a democratic unit. Everybody did their jobs. And I learned how to peel. I learned how to handle butcher knives, how to be respectful of heat, stove, you know and how it could burn you.

00:07:56

AES: Where did your mother learn to cook?

00:07:56

MA: From her mother, and my grandmother was a great cook. There was a difference between my grandmother's time and my mother's time in that in my grandmother's time, and I can remember visiting her and her still doing this, part of her work as the mother was canning. My grandfather, you know, took care of the garden mostly, aside from his profession—he was a minister. But—but my grandmother, canning—people didn't buy things in cans. My mother's era, they did but no frozen foods. My era, there's frozen food.

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But also one of my jobs when I visited my grandmother, even as about a nine year-old, was when chickens—chickens were killed for Sunday dinner on Saturday.

00:08:49

AES: Yeah.

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MA: And it was my grandmother, you know, two or three chickens depending on how many and so I learned from—and she was very particular how her chickens were raised. They had to be on the ground and not on wire, and they had to be fed corn and, you know, everything respectfully done. But when their time came **[*Laughs*]** and the family was to be fed, why then, you know, I helped. And my mother helped. So we didn't walk

into a supermarket in my—my grandmother's era and just eat chicken under Saran Wrap. We saw them from, you know, little chicks 'til they were grown. And the whole cycle of life; it was just all in the cycle.

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AES: Was there—

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MA: Of life.

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AES: Was there fresh meat or poultry to be had in your community in Oak Ridge as you were growing up?

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MA: No, we could not—it was against the law but at the same time, people in—like in Milan, Tennessee during these same years and Chattanooga and Knoxville, in the city people could keep a small amount of poultry and sometimes a goat or two but no real livestock like cattle or pigs. But—but a lot of people in the '40s and '50s in cities in the South had a chicken yard, had hens, so they had fresh eggs, meat.

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AES: And so your first book *Abiding Appalachia* was primarily about your experience in Oak Ridge and being in Appalachia and the—

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MA: And Cherokee and the atom.

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AES: And the atom and how—

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MA: Nuclear energy.

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AES: —all that came together.

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MA: Yes.

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AES: And there seems that at the same time a contradiction but also a mutual respect within those—those things. Can you speak to that?

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MA: Yes, because my family is Cherokee, and it's also Celtic. Like most Cherokee families there is **[*Phone Rings*]**—I'm going to turn that off so we don't get the phone.

00:11:05

AES: Sure. You can get that. That's fine.

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MA: No. I'm not going to get it.

00:11:10

AES: Okay. You're back.

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MA: So what—yes; *Abiding Appalachia* is really the eye of my work. That is where my synthesis of my heritages began. I had written before then, but this was the synthesis. And what I saw was—what I realized when I was about 38 was that the Cherokee way of believing—conceiving of the world that the—everything had a—a spirit, they called it, or a law within it, which was put there by the creator to govern the balance of the world. So, you can't—you're supposed traditionally to not throw off the balance of your environment or your relations with people.

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Now, of course, **[*Laughs*]** you know, it's like every peoples had their ideals, and then there are backsliders, and I could put myself among those many times but—but anyway, that's the ideal. So then when I came to think and we grew up educated about atomic energy in the '40s, you know, it was there. That was the only thing in town—industry in town, and so on the sub-atomic level the world is invisible, but that's where the reality is. It's energy, and the energy is in the atom and the release of the energy from the atom is the same material essentially as the star, the photon.

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So the sun is a nuclear reactor. But I saw that the—the principle of respect is the same whether you're talking about an atom or talking about a deer or the corn or whatever. It's the take and give back with respect and keep it in balance. And if it is in balance, then it will be positive. If it's not in balance, it will be destructive, and the atom is that you can have the mushroom cloud or you can have every radiological center that's in America—is due to atomic research, and the same reactor in other words that made the material for the bomb, made the material for cancer research—the isotopes.

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So and—and the Celtic peoples, the Appalachian peoples are predominantly Scotch/Irish, and they have—the Celts anciently had by tradition that idea that the real world is the world beyond the tangibles, the spirit, the world of spirit. And—and so those three things—three heritages, the scientific, the Cherokee, and the Appalachian or Celtic came together in my mind—that I could make a harmony of them through the law of respect. And that's why my emblem has the little deer, who is the hero of the story, the Cherokee story, one of them that teaches the law of respect for hunters with the deer and—and then the three orbits are in an atomic position with the little electrons in them that—. But they also stand for my three heritages and my very deep conviction that the law of respect is a central healing law for—for America, you know. And I think there are many people who agree that respect is one of the foundations.

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So respect for food is respect for your people and your family, care of food, and cooking. I cooked—I'm a grandmother, so I've cooked thousands of meals, but it's not

just to eat but to—you know, to create the family and friends and harmony—and of course to—to live.

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Now you asked—is there any other question you want to ask me regard—in regard to that? Let me see what I had here.

00:16:05

AES: Well, I'd be interested in just your roots that are in Eastern Tennessee. You're a seventh generation from that area in Appalachia and—and what maybe those roots are to you specifically to that region and—and what might be a food specific to that region or food item or—.

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MA: Well, I don't think the food was too different from West Tennessee except barbequing was not a big thing **[*Laughs*]**, which is a big difference as far as food. But corn was a staple of the time and cornbread and corn on the cob and always corn is a great source of protein—corn—and strength. And blackberries—very important part of my—like, wild blackberries. We would go in the morning and get up usually about 5 o'clock, about sunrise, and—or before sunrise and go—because blackberries are exposed to the heat. So in the summer in July go out real early with a pail, you know, and pick the blackberries, the children in the neighborhood. But we had to be taught how to deal with snakes because snakes also like the high grass and blackberries.

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So my father said, “Now remember, when you’re going into a wild place, the animals there, it’s their home. You’re going as a guest into their home.” And so be respectful and he said, “Take a—a long stick or switch of some kind and just rustle the grass ahead of you and wait because a snake doesn’t want to see you. And give a snake time to know you’re coming and to get out of the way.” And so consequently I never saw a snake, but I was taught the danger and the—you know, how to be respectful. In other words, I didn’t blindly go off into a blackberry patch thinking Disney like, that nothing would—that a copperhead wouldn’t bite me if I stepped on it because it will. **[*Laughs*]**

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You know, so I think I—I can't think of a food in the mountains that’s not—I think food tends to be, say if you compared the mountains to New Orleans, the mountains are more food prepared in its natural juices and without elaborate sauces and things like that, you know, but fried chicken, you know as a staple, well that’s all over the South and the cobblers and everything. People drank buttermilk a lot.

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AES: Can you describe that cobbler that you spoke of earlier when you were visiting—with the corn dumplings and the honey lard?

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MA: Oh yes; I—I—the very circumstance of this illustrates some of your questions because what I wanted to do for you was make a traditional Cherokee cobbler which I think the American Indian cobbler is a precursor of the floured cobbler with the pastry but it—the Cherokee recipe calls for dumplings with nuts, pieces of nuts in them, you

know, make little round dumplings. And you put those on top of the blackberries and little tiny, maybe one-inch dumplings, and then you cover it with a mixture of honey and lime juice or lemon juice and cook it. **[*Phone Rings*]**

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AES: We can pause again—cobbler.

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MA: Yes, and then I like to serve it with a cream, you know, with a little cream over it. But your answer of how life has changed; I think women's lives have changed very much, and so in my professional schedule that I had some things came up that I had to take care of, and so I—so I had to buy Pepperidge Farm cookies for you instead of making you a cobbler **[*Laughs*]**. But one day I will do it for you.

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AES: Well, is the cobbler something that you came upon the recipe later in life or is it something that you grew up having or—?

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MA: No, my mother by that time—my mother, all the family was making it with white flour you know because white flour was introduced, oh somewhere—1820 or something like that. So, but then some people like in Cherokee, North Carolina, you know, preserved the old recipe so—.

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AES: Yeah, well, so then that kind of—the question evolves from what we're discussing just now of how Southern foods have evolved over your lifetime and many lifetimes and what now—if you could elaborate on that a little bit more, buying things ready-made and—and mass production of foods and how that has changed southern culture and American culture for that matter.

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MA: Okay. Well, when I was growing up there weren't fast-food places and—and also we couldn't eat between meals—not allowed. And not allowed to have dessert unless we ate our dinner; you know, dessert was something you got if you were still hungry. And now—and also, it was a lot easier to get fresh food because there were people who would come with you know a flatbed truck with a little awning on it, and in Oak Ridge, like they would permit that in that top-secret place. They would permit the farmers to bring in direct from their gardens their carrots and different things. And—and then the women would go out, you know, and buy direct from the farmer the food.

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And now there are places like that but for example, in Memphis, Easy Way is a place where you can buy fresh vegetables, but direct from the farm is very hard—very hard to do. And I think women's lives have changed a lot, and people have professions that they're following, and—and it's one thing—as I said, I grew up where the—the mother—where there were no—people didn't have cooks, but that's very different from West Tennessee or the deeper South. But we did our own cooking. And I think when you do your own cooking it's very much tailored to the other things you have to do for the

family and your own profession. And so, I myself am not an elaborate cook at all though I have cooked, you know, a wonderful Julia Child meal from time to time, but routinely I don't. But I cooked a lot more when the children, of course—three children.

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AES: And I'm curious, too, about your—your time spent in France and what maybe you missed about Appalachia and your life in East Tennessee when you lived there and—and then what you were eager to come back to when you moved back and came to Memphis.

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MA: Okay; what I missed was number one, peanut butter. Peanut butter. **[*Laughs*]** Jimmy Carter would be glad to know this, but peanut butter I think is a southern food that peanuts are grown you know in the South, and I grew up on peanut butter, and we couldn't get peanut butter in France. Isn't that ridiculous? But it—and besides you couldn't get white bread. Peanut butter cannot be eaten on French bread. I mean, cheese is wonderful on French bread but peanut butter—French bread is just awful. So you have to have right there—one food requires another food **[*Laughs*]**.

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And I missed—I missed greens a lot. They don't have the same—they don't eat greens in France, and then of course **[*Laughs*]** corn is for the beasts in France, and it's not for people. I remember getting my feelings hurt one night because I fixed a typical Southern meal for French people, and of course, it was cornbread; there was corn on the cob and so forth, and they wouldn't eat it. They said, "Oh madam, you know, excuse us, but in France corn is for the beasts." And so I just told them that they didn't have the

right variety of corn. They had just brought field corn over, and they hadn't brought the really fine corn and were missing a lot, but—.

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AES: Do you remember what else that dinner consisted of that night?

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MA: Yes, it was a pot roast, and—and we had—we had a wine with it. I don't remember what wine because that was in the '60s. But anyhow, it was—and—and probably a cobbler. I think I had a cobbler which wasn't to the French taste either **[*Laughs*]**. In other words, I bombed on that dinner as far as the French goes. However, I have a very great appreciation for French food and—and also the French are very attached to their food, very much in the way that Southerners are. And many—I remember when de Tocqueville and other French people came through, I think it was the 18th century or later through the South, they noticed many similarities between the southern ceremony of food and enjoyment of food and conviviality with food and the French attitude toward food, so that was a very compatible experience food-wise.

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But I will say that the French, unlike the Americans of our time, take the time for the food. Every civil employee, everybody gets two hours for lunch. And then you—they work 'til 7:30, and then they have—they have dinner. But Americans are more speed-driven people, especially now, and—and I think we don't—it's very hard to make the time, you know, to even—to sit down and linger over food and linger a long time and just talk and chat. And—and I really liked that in France.

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I wanted to—you had a question here, "When did you first cultivate an interest in food? What—who was the catalyst?" Birth, and it was my mother because the elders noticed that I nursed immediately and avidly. And they took that as a sign of good health—that I was hungry, and I had a lusty cry and a good head of hair. But I ate avidly. You know, so they, in their experience with little newborns, thought that the life force was very strong in me. And sure enough it has been **[*Laughs*]**.

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AES: Yeah. Well, it's made itself throughout your life.

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MA: Right, so—and then food, I've just always loved food and eating. And but I think as—from what we talked about before that it—where the interest is—is coming from the family. The primary root is the family and what meals were for us. It was time to talk and share the day and eat and feel good and—.

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AES: Well, I'm curious, back to the—the meal that you prepared in France for a minute.

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MA: Okay.

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AES: Only because it's a good segway to a question we've been asking all the founders if they have—if you have in your mind an idea of the iconic southern meal, and I wonder if that was it—in France in the '60s or if it's something different to you now, or what—what your idea of that would be.

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MA: Well, this is not iconic for all southerners. It's just mine. But there was a tradition in the family that when you reach puberty, when you—my sister and I, then there was an—an announcement you know that you were a woman now, and you could pick your dinner for the night to celebrate. My sister was seven years younger, and she was so jealous because I got—. Isn't—isn't that awful; children—you have to grow out of that jealous thing but—and also enjoying someone else's jealousy. But anyway, you don't have kids—"Oh, it's my dinner." But what I picked I think is my favorite southern meal, and that is fried chicken, mashed potatoes and gravy, fresh green beans, cooked with bacon, you know and slaw, corn on the cob, cornbread, iced-tea, blackberry cobbler with ice-cream—homemade, all—all of it homemade. And that's what I picked, and that's my iconic meal for my life. I love—that's the meal I love; I love that.

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AES: Do you prepare that for yourself these days?

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MA: No, not now. I'm in a different season of life, but I prepared it a lot, you know, when the children were little.

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AES: Yeah.

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MA: I'm particularly fond of pork. I love pork, and I think lots of southerners love pork.

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AES: I'm sure.

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MA: Of all kinds.

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AES: Well, shall we change gears a little bit and talk about the Southern Foodways Alliance and your involvement there? I guess just a simple question, how did you become involved with the Southern Foodways Alliance?

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MA: Well, I became involved because John Edgerton called me. And he explained to me the philosophy of the Southern Food Alliance, you know, that it was to strengthen the—the southern tradition of food and in so doing to—to help the—the diverse peoples in the South to gather around the table and to bridge racial differences and employ food as it's been employed in the family and among friends and on a broad scale now through an

organization to the South. And I thought that was a really—a genius idea because we need more harmony among our diverse peoples in the South. And for example, a conference on racism will come at it directly, and there will be papers and different things presented, which is good. But it needs—we need the Southern Food Alliance because this is a way of talking about food, and the—then what happens is that people began to know each other and exchange ideas with each other and everything on a very convivial and family basis, I think which makes people more comfortable doing it. I mean, it's more—I've noticed—I noticed I was able to go to the 2003 conference in Oxford, [Mississippi], and it was such a wonderful feeling among the people there, you know, eating together, talking here and there, and I really think it's—it's a marvelous idea. So I was very eager to support it.

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And he also wanted me to bring an American Indian and the Appalachian perspective into it. And the year I was able to work was 2003, and I was invited to speak at that conference regarding Appalachia and Cherokee ways of—.

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AES: Well, so at its inception, very early on, what did you imagine that you could eventually contribute to the Southern Foodways Alliance?

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MA: Well, what I—what I hoped to do was to—to encourage—and I think the reason I was asked was for diversity, so what I hoped to do was to encourage that a component of the Southern Foodways Alliance be about the American Indian peoples in the Southeast

and the heritage that they brought because—and are bringing because when we think about it these peoples—and just take the historic period—the Cherokee, for example, have been presently identified—I mean, identified as the Cherokee for 2,500 years. So, there have been really approximately from—I guess the early 1600s settlement of Europeans and also Africans here—so we really if we look at the southern tradition of food, we have a 3,000 year-old tradition if we include all of our peoples. And I noticed last year was a wonderful conference, a black/white conference—wonderful. And what my hope is—is that someday that—perhaps it wouldn't be a whole conference—but still that there would be a concerted effort—I need water.

00:35:10

AES: Of course.

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MA: To go into the Native—to the American Indian foodways in the South, settlers coming in, many of them were helped by Native peoples when they came in and showed how to grow corn. The French were shown some corn they could eat at the table, and—and many of the settlers had to learn what berries were here, what—how—how they were used, how the corn was used, the fishing, the hunting, you know and many—. For example, the Cherokee already in the 1500s—1600s had—excelled in participatory democracy in—by each town on the local level which included women also in the government.

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So—so along with the—the food, people also saw a different style of government than they were used to. A lot of—there used to be more, you know, when people were farmers and there weren't too many settlers before it tipped, there were a lot of families like that would go to the Cherokee Council as guests and eat together and celebrate the harvest together and, you know, and then of course there were the wars and the terrible removal and that kind of tragedy in the 18—in 1838. But I don't think a lot of people are aware of what was here when others got here, and I think that would be a natural part of the circle of the Southern Foodways Alliance.

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AES: How do you envision that be best fulfilled—with a specific project or—?

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MA: Well, I would think maybe as part of a—an emphasis at a conference or even a full emphasis because you have in Mississippi not far from you the whole Choctaw nation which is—they were—have been and were traditionally fabled for their growing of vegetables and—and food. And I'm sure—I know in Cherokee there are Cherokee who own restaurants and different—the Seminoles and, you know, the Creeks and different people who own restaurants or continue—. There's a big movement now to recover the seeds of traditional times. And so, I think that would be interesting, and also, I think in the present economic state of our country where the economy is sliding—it's not sliding for everybody, but it's sliding for a lot of average people and people are losing their jobs, and families are being hard-put—that to look at some of the patterns, for example, that were in what they refer to now as the great generation, which is my mother's and daddy's

generation, in surviving acute—acute scarcity or rationing of food and everything, maybe we need to bring back the victory gardens for example, so that a family, you know, it would be—if it would be the in thing—anybody who didn't have one was considered unpatriotic in the '40s. You know, even people in apartments would have little window boxes with something in it. But—but we may—just to take a tiny detail, that concept might be updated for our time for families, you know, in—. So, I think it would be interesting to study or to have as a component of some conference a study of just how people made it through the last World War because if we should suddenly lose our electricity, or there would be a great national disaster or terrorist attack, we would have to go back to old ways, and then that means there has to be someone who remembers them.

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And I'll give you a really good example: do you remember about five or six years ago a huge ice-storm hit Memphis overnight and completely shut the city down and parts of Mississippi also, Northern Mississippi? Well, I believe it was Channel 5, but there were two people who stayed on day and night, and they alternated and people would call in and say, "Well, I remember my grandfather used to do this or my grandmother used to do this to get fresh water because our electricity was gone." Everything was gone. We were put back 50, 60, 70 years overnight by Mother Nature. You know and—so people would call in and say now, what my—like this, "What my grandmother used to do to get fresh water was lay a tarpaulin out in the yard at night, and then bring it in before the sun-up and gather the dew." I didn't know anything about gathering dew.

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You know, or somebody called in and said, "Back in the days when we—there would be a coal shortage, people would take a—like a soup can and hook it like with a

beer opener, you know, like you make a—a punch, a hole, and then put a candle in it and you could warm your hands on it." I mean, we were really cold up here. So I think an interesting project or an interesting component would be what—what patterns of survival do we have in the South under extreme conditions that might be of use to us should we have another extreme condition, you know? And—and the phrase "There's no one left who remembers" is very scary because unless it's down like you're doing—recording it—things will be forgotten, and that's one—another one of the great strengths of the Southern Foodways Alliance is to preserve, so the traditions can go on. And I think that—I just—I love—I love the whole idea of Food Alliance.

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AES: Were you at the original meeting—

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MA: I think it's a wonderful—

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AES: —in Birmingham?

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MA: I—when I accepted to be on the board I was in very good health, and then I suddenly had a critical illness and—which was—took about two—two years to be healed. So—so unfortunately no, I was not there.

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AES: And so you really didn't take part in a lot of the developmental—?

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MA: No, I did not because—because of my health but it's restored now, so—. You know and I was happy in 2003; I was well, and I was so happy to be given the opportunity to contribute.

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AES: Uh-hmm, certainly, and we were certainly grateful to have you there as a guest speaker.

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MA: Thank you.

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AES: Well I wonder if—if now given kind of I guess a revitalization in your health and—and interest in other things and time to devote to such things, would you have more interest in participating in specific projects with the Southern Foodways Alliance and—and really exploring the Cherokee connections and histories and—?

00:43:33

MA: Well, not just the Cherokee. I mean, I would be interested in helping facilitate the American—the American Indian. I'm—you know in the South, the whole idea of that,

and I know that the Museum of American Indian now will be—in DC—will be a tremendous resource. But right there in Philadelphia you have the Choctaw Nation, and so how do you feel about that? I mean, would you be interested?

00:44:03

AES: Certainly, yeah. I think it would be a crime to ignore that. I mean, not that it's being ignored at all, but it is so important.

00:44:11

MA: It hasn't come up in the circle yet.

00:44:12

AES: Exactly, yes. But I think that there's certainly you know time needs to be devoted to that, and I think that the membership and the board would certainly be open to that because that's an important foundation for all of us.

00:44:27

MA: And something very interesting I think would be interesting to Southerners is, you know, corn began to be developed and cross-bred 7,000 years ago in Central America. And then the Pueblo, the Navajo and all the Southeast and Northeast are great corn-growing nations. Traditionally, in these nations it's the women who care for the seeds. And the men, you know, take care of the heavy part like the plowing and so forth, but it's the women. It's undoubtedly true that corn is the gift of women to society, and that's what the Cherokee story says. And also we just know that by tradition, the women were

dealing with the seeds. And I think that's very important because we deal with the seeds of the people—the children—deal with the seeds of nurturing. But you see there was this idea, too, that women being on a cycle like the earth and being of the Mother Earth would have a special affinity for the seed and for the corn.

00:45:48

And then you can see what happened when a culture came in that thought a woman in the field is of—you know is—you're really not treating women right if they're in the field because they ought to be in the house. But this really disrupted the ceremonial and everything in the—for example with the Cherokee, because the women—the first woman was named Selu—was named corn, and was born from the corn in the Cherokee creation story and the man and the woman—Kana'ti and Selu were always in balance. So, in order for the nation to be balanced then the women and the men had to share in the government and share in the ceremony and religion and everything.

00:46:38

So, the women, you know—the Cherokee Stomp Dances always alternates, man-woman, man-woman in religious ceremony.

00:46:46

So, when they disturbed the relationship with food for the people and how the people had worked it out, the Native people, when outsiders destroyed the relationship with food they destroyed the culture. I mean it—you know, it went down for a long time until it could be brought back as it is now, and the reason it's brought back is because there were people who remembered.

00:47:13

AES: Yeah. Well, and there is a question that we have before us about the Southern Foodways Alliance approaching food as culture and what you just explained is exactly that and—and so profoundly.

00:47:26

MA: Yes.

00:47:26

AES: And so to explore that is—it would certainly be very important.

00:47:30

MA: For example, the women in the ceremonial dance, there was a point where it was—one—one part of the role of women was to judge the food supply for everybody in the community. So because everybody falls on hard times sometimes, the women would dance and people would bring a portion of their harvest to the center. And no one could leave the ceremonial grounds as long as the women danced because they were gauging how much would be there for people whose crop didn't come in quite as well that year. But there was not a charity thing to it. It was everybody put something in and then the community, when somebody needed some—like if I needed some this year, you might need some next year. You know it wasn't a—. But—but you see how it disrupted—to disrupt a people's food is one way of disrupting their culture. You know and so that's another reason I'm glad of the Southern Foodways Alliance because we want to preserve the traditions of the South and our food and the one way to destabilize them is to have us all eating packaged foods and give up our ways.

00:48:53

I was thinking food is like poetry too. I had that—there's always something beyond the line of a poem, and there's always something—a spirit beyond a particular dish you're eating or food. You know, what we were talking about—the care and love is transmuted through food.

00:49:12

AES: Uh-hmm, and something else from Selu that I got in an excerpt from that about unity and diversity and adaptation and survival and—and corn—.

00:49:28

MA: Yes, and we had spoken, you and I, before we began this interview about what each of us perceived as—as a difference in the way of looking at food culturally and in ancient times like in the Book of Job way back, one of the seven great books of wisdoms in the whole world of literature it says, "Ask the plants and they will teach you. Ask the beasts, ask the fish, and they will teach you for whom among them does not know that the breadth of God is in them." And that is the basis of American Indian as far as looking at the—everything in nature, the laws of nature is instilled by the Creator, and therefore a plant can teach you concepts of living or an animal can teach you concepts of living because the principles are there.

00:50:38

Now I don't know if in a highly-industrialized technological society people are still looking in that way that is ancient not only to American Indians but the Judeo Christian roots to plants and animals as beings of another—of another kind. They're not

human beings, but they are beings of another kind and—and so when—if you look at a corn plant from that aspect and that's where the Corn Mother comes in, the spirit of the corn or the life force of the corn as the Cherokee would say, if you look at a corn plant as a teacher, right away you see the strength, balance. You see the balance of male and female in the tassel in the ear. You see adaptability because it's been bred to adapt from the mountains to the plains from hot to cold. You see unity and diversity in—particularly in the speckled variety commonly called Indian corn where the major races of the world are represented like red, black, white, yellow, brown, but each kernel respects the space of the one next to it and doesn't require it to be like it; yet they all make a whole. So, it's unity and diversity which is like democracy which is like the family and the community and the nation, and that's what you see if you—if—if you have the cultural story or the tradition to see that the plant is a teacher.

00:52:32

And I think that was here—that has been in all cultures anciently. What I hoped is that, you know, in writing my book for example about Selu that—that concept, people could put together what's alike in their cultures or in their backgrounds and concentrate on making a balance and a harmony.

00:52:56

But how did you find that idea? I mean of learning from the plant.

00:53:04

AES: Well, I think—

00:53:07

MA: For example—corn?

00:53:08

AES: Yeah. Maybe not specifically learning from the plant per se but, you know, in that excerpt talking about genetic diversity and the unity of diversity and adaptation and survival, just all of that seemed to me a metaphor for the South itself.

00:53:23

MA: Yes. I think so, too.

00:53:24

AES: That's really valuable, and I—I like the visual associations that I personally made to that as well. And it's—it's just a great history interwoven with culture and food and—you know, it gives life to so many things that so many people don't think about every day.

00:53:45

MA: Right, and—and—and when you eat it then you're eating a wisdom really. I mean it's strengthening, corn—and corn—

00:53:54

AES: And it's cyclical and ongoing and—.

00:53:59

MA: Uh-hmm, and you know—can you stop for just a second?

00:54:03

AES: Sure. And we're back again.

00:54:07

MA: Wonderful, after a little break for cookies. You were asking if I was involved in any other food organizations before this one—no.

00:54:18

AES: Okay.

00:54:20

MA: No.

00:54:20

AES: Were you aware of them, the Society for the Preservation and Revitalization of Southern Food or the American Southern Food Institute?

00:54:26

MA: I was not. And there's a question on there about when I began writing about food. But I—you see how I came into this was not because I was writing about food but because I was writing about people and culture and food was an integral part of it just because it is.

00:54:50

AES: Yeah.

00:54:51

MA: And for example, Selu, you know, the Corn Mother and—and so—so I came to it from a different direction but was pulled in by John Edgerton who has done so much to—you know he has that kind of mind. It's a holistic mind to include others and include a very inclusive kind of mind.

00:55:17

AES: Yeah, so since your involvement then with the Southern Foodways Alliance and, like you were saying, previous to that you were approaching your life and your work from a personal and—and cultural experiential and—

00:55:32

MA: And scientific.

00:55:31

AES: —and scientific realm, and then to then be involved with some—an organization like Southern Foodways Alliance, did that put food on a different scale for you? Did you think about it differently, or do you, now?

00:55:45

MA: No. What I think about is I think when you're a grandmother what you're thinking about is your grandchildren and that generation. And so what—what I'm thinking about is rejoicing how much Southern Foodways Alliance is going to insure that the next generation that it's passed—that the tradition is passed on.

00:56:08

AES: Yeah.

00:56:08

MA: And that's what really thrills me about it, because it does have to be—in order for tradition to be passed and preserved there does have to be concerted effort I think and formal effort to do so. And so I'm—I'm just delighted about it and glad to do what I can to contribute.

00:56:37

AES: Well, I'm certainly glad that you've contributed here. I think that's a lovely note to end on thinking about the future.

00:56:41

MA: Thinking about the future.

00:56:45

AES: And we'll look forward to involving you more regularly and—.

00:56:47

MA: Thank you, and—and I'm looking forward to giving more now that I'm you know in a restored health.

00:56:55

AES: Wonderful. Thank you so much Marilou.

00:56:58

MA: You're welcome.

00:56:58

AES: All right, we're back on.

00:57:02

MA: Yes, I had a PS to add that in talking about my iconic meal that is when I became a woman, a young woman, at my house I left out my most favorite—favorite vegetable, the sweet potato, which is what I had for that dinner also with butter. That's the way I like it, and I like an orange potato and not a yellow potato, but an orange potato with butter.

00:57:32

AES: Baked with butter?

00:57:33

MA: Baked and then split it and put the butter on it, and that's what I love and I hope this love is passed—.

00:57:40

[End Marilou Awiakta Interview]