

**MARTHA JOHNSTON**  
**Birmingham, AL**

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Location: Unknown  
Interviewer: Jake York, SFA Member  
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs  
Length: 52 minutes  
Project: SFA Founders

**[Begin Martha Johnston Interview]**

**00:00:02**

**Martha Johnston:** Did you have any trouble finding it?

**00:00:04**

**Jake York:** Not at all. Your directions were perfect. It's December 27, 2004. This is Jake York with Martha Johnston, the Southern Foodways Alliance Founders Oral History Initiative.

**[Writing]**

**00:00:40**

**MJ:** When did y'all get back?

**00:00:44**

**JY:** When did we get back?

**00:00:46**

**MJ:** When did you get here?

**00:00:47**

**JY:** I guess it would have been a week ago on Christmas Day.

**00:00:53**

**MJ:** A week ago on Christmas Day, I don't think so.

**00:00:56**

**JY:** So whatever that's been—like nine days we've been—.

**00:00:57**

**MJ:** Oh a week before, Friday before Christmas? I got it; there you go.

**00:01:11**

**JY:** Yeah, it's been a good time. I rested up.

**00:01:13**

**MJ:** That helps.

**00:01:13**

**JY:** I've been tired.

**00:01:16**

**MJ:** Have you?

**00:01:16**

**JY:** Yeah.

**00:01:16**

**MJ:** I have too but we don't rest.

**00:01:18**

**JY:** I'm always doing thirty things you know.

**00:01:19**

**MJ:** Well, I know. Me, too. I kept thinking I was going to get that way and then they got here and drove in snow and ice getting here, so it's like oh. But this is daddy's first big outing, so that was his goal to get here for Christmas, so—.

**00:01:37**

**JY:** Right; it sounds like they had a time getting here, but I'm sure it's good to be out of that—.

**00:01:44**

**MJ:** Yeah, they're not used to winter like you are. [*Laughs*]

**00:01:48**

**JY:** No, winter in Denver is a lot different than—than winter in the rest of the country.

**00:01:50**

**MJ:** Winter here.

**00:01:53**

**JY:** Right that's true. Well I'll start with some biographical questions and then the majority of the interview will be about your involvement in the Southern Foodways Alliance.

**00:02:03**

**MJ:** Okay.

**00:02:05**

**JY:** Can you start by telling me when you were born and where you were born; how you grew up?

**00:02:10**

**MJ:** Sure, I was born in Little Rock, Arkansas, January 20, 1946. My dad was in the Service then and he and mother were living down there in Little Rock. We spent a lot of time there in my younger years in Arkansas and then moved briefly to New Mexico and then Arizona for ten years and then back to Arkansas.

**00:02:37**

**JY:** This is all movement with the Army or with the Military?

**00:02:40**

**MJ:** Part of it was and then after a while daddy got out of the Service and he went back to New Mexico 'cause he and mother had liked it there so much. So we lived there and he ran the Production Credit Association and had a small packing plant before that, so I got my first live packing plant experience then.

**00:02:59**

I grew up on the farm. When we moved to Arizona he went over there to farm also, so we farmed there for several years and then he ran the Brasero Labor Program. And that's where I actually got started heavy-duty into food working in 4H. Came back to Arizona—or to Arkansas

after that and went back to my dad's hometown. He and mother were both from Arkansas and we moved back to Newport and I went to high school there—from there.

**00:03:31**

**JY:** Great; and so you said your first experiences with food were in the 4H.

**00:03:38**

**MJ:** Right; well mother—mother was very involved in food and she cooked a lot and we were involved in that. And with daddy farming you just grew up knowing—knowing a lot about food, where it came from, how to do it, and what to do. We lived in New Mexico very near a lot of the Hispanics; learned a lot about chilies and New Mexico and Mexican cooking. When we went there my mom didn't know a lot about it but what she would do is go into the local family run restaurants and order a takeout order and eventually talk her way in the kitchen. She'd get to know them. And they'd let her into the kitchen and teach her how to do those entrées or appetizers or whatever they were making at the moment that she was ordering for carryout. And then she'd come home and try it 'til she could do it.

**00:04:28**

I started cooking with mama when I was old enough to stand on a chair in the kitchen. And I can't remember ever not being involved in cooking and food. So it was something that came very naturally to me. When we went to Arizona I was old enough then to get involved in 4H so I decided to make foods my specialization in terms of 4H and record books and trying to get a college scholarship from that standpoint. And I had a wonderful extension advisor there, Burl Burt who is still a close family friend. We got to be very friendly. I thought she was much

older than I was. It's sort of embarrassing to say she's not that much older than I am. But when you're ten, eleven, twelve years old it seems like a huge difference.

**00:05:16**

And she worked with mother and helped me a lot in terms of putting together a plan of how I would go about building the records that would be necessary to do that. And I ran across them the other day; it was sort of interesting to look at the family menu planning we did and how many cartons of this, that, or the other were in the freezer. I can't believe I still have it but I—I did run across it. And some things I was like, “Gosh, I don't remember eating that.”

**00:05:44**

But I think two other experiences other than family really affected my beginnings of loving food and trying new foods and seeing what was going on. One was the fact that Daddy ran the Bracero Labor Program at one point when we lived in Arizona. And because a lot of the Mexicans were coming in to work the crops and work the fields in Southern California and Arizona he had to keep a cafeteria and a place for them to live set up. Well my favorite place and our favorite place as kids to go eat was the cafeteria because they had the Mexican cooks. And I remember that's the first time I ever had chicken mole. There was no such thing other than fresh tortillas, both corn and flour, and to be able to go in there and eat and eat with the guys that were up in the States working the fields and crops was great fun. That was our—our best place to go.

**00:06:48**

And I guess the other thing that I remember from the influence out there about eating was going over to Mexico. And we would go over there to eat and we would either eat Mexican food or Chinese food because there was a huge settlement down in Mexicali of Chinese people who had come in with the railroad. So you would go in and we would decide where we wanted Chinese or Mexican and if we had Chinese and went into a Chinese restaurant there would be

three generations of Chinese, the older reading the newspaper, speaking Chinese, down to the youngest generations which spoke Spanish, Chinese, and English.

**00:07:29**

So it was a fun upbringing and it was an opportunity to try a lot of new things. Mother and daddy always encouraged us to do that. And I guess that's why I'm big on that today. I always want people to try it. You don't have to love it; you don't have to like it. But you have to have an open mind and try it and see what happens. And as a result of that even when we moved back to Arkansas I decided I still wanted to be in foods and someday be Betty Crocker. I mean that was my goal.

**00:07:57**

**JY:** Were there heirloom foods that your mother taught you to make or that were sort of perennial—perennial choices in your menus?

**00:08:04**

**MJ:** I think there were a lot of things. Particularly at the holidays we looked toward a lot of heirloom foods and I can remember her making turkey and dressing and dressing had to be made just a certain way and put together in just a certain way. And there wasn't really a recipe written down I didn't think for a long time. And finally oh maybe fifteen years ago I found a recipe written down but it was all by touch and feel and taste and that's the way she remembered it. And we always had a lot of the foods that she had—had growing up. Mother's family focused more on food in terms of occasions and heritage foods than my dad's did I think.

**00:08:49**

But mother for the holidays, always coconut cake and ambrosia were two things that she remembered growing up that we always had. So we learned that. She taught me to make biscuits very much like she had grown up at home eating. She grew up on a farm too not in a high-income family by any means so it was sort of make-do with what you have. And all the vegetables and all the fruits, all of that came along with it.

**00:09:22**

Later I learned to do pound cake from someone on my dad's side of the family and that's still a very special thing with me. Obviously fried chicken; I can remember frying it and I think because of our moves we ended up integrating some of the foods from the Southwest into ours that we brought from the South so that it very much ended up being a mixture. But barbecue was another one. I mean daddy and mother—daddy always cooked on the grill or barbecued or smoked meat and when he was running the packing plant in New Mexico they developed a barbecue sauce that we still have the recipe for that they decided if they ever really got in a tight spot and had to earn a living, if nothing else they could open a barbecue joint and make this sauce and make a living. So I think that part of the heritage still comes through and carries with you.

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**JY:** Great. So you said that when you were in 4H you were trying to get a college scholarship. Where did you end up going to school?

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**MJ:** Well I ended up going to Oklahoma State in Stillwater, Oklahoma. I looked at a number of schools, Arkansas included, and I chose Oklahoma State because the Food and Nutrition

Department was bigger than the whole Consumer Sciences Department at Arkansas. And I thought someday I might have to earn a living. How fortuitous was that?

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So I went there with—and took a major in Foods and Nutrition with a minor in Journalism and Communications. And the idea was that I wanted to be able to talk to the person in the Research Lab and communicate it to the consumer on the street and vice versa. So I took every single Foods course they had in what was then called Home Economics, and then took most of the ones they had over in the College of Agriculture in the Institute of Animal Science and Industry.

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After undergraduate school I worked in Restaurant Management Training with a corporation out of Kansas City and did both oh, the food side of that internship as well as a management side. It was very—I've never worked harder. I've never learned more. And that's right then when I decided I never wanted to be in the restaurant business.

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**JY:** Which—

**00:11:52**

**MJ:** But then—that was Gilbert Robinson in Kansas City. And it's very interesting because a few years ago they came back in my position now with *Southern Living* as an advertiser and wanted some consulting done. And there were a few of the same people involved and I never mentioned that I had worked for the company. And it was very interesting; they were having a problem with barbecue not selling on their menu on one of the small restaurant chains they had

purchased. And I kept looking at it, and they kept talking to me about it and finally I said hand me your menu, and I looked at it. Well it turns out what they had was roasted meat with barbecue sauce, which is the obvious reason it wasn't selling in the South, it wasn't that.

**00:12:36**

But I learned a lot up there and had some great experiences and had some not-so-good experiences, real world, but it was very good. And then I went from there back to Stillwater for graduate school. I did my Masters in Food Technology through the Institute of Animal Science and Industry at Oklahoma State and other than Biochemistry and Statistics they let me just choose what I wanted to do.

**00:13:05**

So with that I was able to finish in one calendar year, which was real important to me. I did not want to be around there forever and another two years of school because after a while it was tough. I was paying out-of-state fees at those times and there were two kids coming behind me to go to college, so I needed to do what I could do to get out.

**00:13:27**

But I guess the other experience I had there that helped—again based on the fact that I knew I wanted to do food was that I worked in a test kitchen and research lab through the Dairy Science Department going through school. And I also worked in the Agronomy Department on a seasonal basis grading peanuts and counting them, and then I worked in Student Entertainers which required talking or entertaining and that was a great job in college because you got paid from when you left campus to when you got back and got an extra bump in compensation for whatever show you did, and a great meal. And you got to choose whether you wanted to go or not. So all those sort of worked together to give me the background I had to go into the commercial business.

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**JY:** Great. And then where did you go from there? How did you get from there to *Southern*—?

**00:14:21**

**MJ:** Well I went via Chicago. I finished school and had the opportunity to interview several places, one was Chicago. And I went up to talk with a food service company who had never had a woman in upper management and at the time they were looking for women to go into upper management. So I interviewed for the job and decided it was a little boring; it really wasn't what I wanted to do but in the midst of being there, started calling friends of friends, contacts, working those contacts, and ended up with a job in Chicago for a trade association, the American Meat Institute.

**00:15:02**

And that was an interesting experience because they never had anyone right out of school. They never had anyone under thirty in the position and they ended up hiring me. And I didn't know 'til later, actually almost a year later that it was on a contingency basis. But my boss that hired me was so sure it would work out he never told me. And that was a wonderful experience because I got to learn a lot about the business. I learned a lot about how different companies work. My job was to communicate with all the newspaper and magazine food editors across the United States, so that gave me a wonderful entrée to get to know a number of those people and communicate with them on a regular basis.

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I'll never forget one of my first challenges there was a food editor from San Antonio called and wanted to know just what really was a serving of steak. And so I quoted the usual

dietitian standard of three to four ounces was a serving based on nutritional needs. And she said to me, “Young lady, we’re talking Texas. And we’re talking steak. Now you need to get real here.” And we had a great laugh over it and she and I became lifelong friends. She’s no longer living, but she said to me—now is it a twelve-ounce steak or a sixteen-ounce steak? And I said, “Well, since we’re in Texas let’s make it sixteen.” and just keep going; so that was sort of one of the real world experiences that I got very early on.

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And the knowledge and the exposure to the people who were working as food editors in those days was wonderful. They ended up—a lot of them becoming heroes to me in a lot of ways. They taught me an awful lot and they were always very anxious to help me learn, which was a great gift.

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**JY:** So what years were you there at American Meat Institute?

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**MJ:** I was there from about 1970 to '73.

**00:17:23**

**JY:** And then where did you go?

**00:17:23**

**MJ:** Then I went to John Morrell & Company who was a member of the American Institute—Meat Institute and at that time John Morrell was the fourth largest full-line meat packer in the

US. And I went in there as Director of Consumer Affairs, reporting directly to the President and my charge from him was to make sure the consumer was looked after and protected. So I was able to work on everything from product development to consumer complaints to oversight on all the radio and television commercials they did, packaging information; it was a very interesting job. And that's when I got the opportunity to work a little bit in television too. I did a weekly *How to Buy Food* show on WGN TV in Chicago for five years, which was great fun.

**00:18:17**

**JY:** Was that a thirty-minute show or—?

**00:18:18**

**MJ:** It was a thirty-minute show and I did about a ten-minute segment in the show every week so that was great fun and I loved that. I had a lot of people that I got to know through that opening and that opportunity and it also gave me a chance to hone my skills in terms of speaking and television.

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**JY:** Great. And then how did you get to Birmingham?

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**MJ:** Well it seems as I did consumer affairs work there at Morrell for three years. It's a sort of a little bit of a long story. But then we got in a new boss from the West Coast from the wine companies out there who decided the consumers really didn't have any rights. And the meatheads needed to go and he was going to hire some savvy marketing people for a commodity business.

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The irony was he decided there were two people worth saving out of all the meatheads in marketing. I was one and the other was a guy who had also gone to Oklahoma State, which I found very interesting. He liked the two of us. So he called us in separately and said, “Consumers no longer have rights in this company. You can either be a Brand Manager and put your money where your mouth is, or you can leave.” And since I didn't have another job I decided to stay. So I stayed in for two years and was Group Product Manager and Marketing Manager for the Grocery Products Division there, which was a real education too because I got in the Grocery Products Division the canned meats line which is chili, hash, and stew as the main products but then you get into some of those fun products like Vienna sausages, Vienna—depending on where you live and tripe in milk gravy and I got to deal with the buyers who wanted me to taste it with them at seven o'clock in the morning before they would buy it. Those were in the days when grocery buyers actually tasted what they bought. So that was a fun education. And then I had to hire all of our co-packers and develop a whole new line of products. And actually we developed a couple of lines of products that were way ahead of their time. They were international entrées like Swedish meatballs and beef stroganoff that were available—were not available at that time even in a freezer case. And then we worked on another line of products that were lean sausage products. So it was a—a big learning experience; did a lot of business with the Japanese in the fresh meat area, so I got involved in that some.

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And then came the big day that United Brands which owned John Morrell decided they needed a higher bottom line, so they fired half the corporate office and all the divisions in one day and I was in the half that got fired—had the highest ROI in the company and they said adios. So I started job hunting—

00:21:20

**JY:** What's ROI?

00:21:23

**MJ:** Return on investment.

00:21:24

**JY:** Oh okay.

00:21:24

**MJ:** So it was sort of like, "Okay; how are we deciding what's going on here?" You know and then it was interesting because it was—the meat business at that time was truly a man's world. So I had a lot of unique learning experiences through that and they did, but it all worked out. And we had fun.

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So when we got laid off I spent seven months hunting a job and ended with five job offers and I ended up deciding coming to Birmingham and going to work with *Southern Living*. A friend of mine knew a man who was doing consulting for *Progressive Farmer*, which was the original parent company of *Southern Living Magazine*. And he had told my friend that they had a cooking school program in Birmingham that they needed someone to run and they needed someone with a background in food, writing for newspapers, sales and marketing, someone who had done television and someone who could manage people and someone from the South which was a little tough to come up with. And she said, "Oh, I know the perfect person; she lives here

in Chicago.” And of course everyone was like totally undone that this Chicago woman was going to come down and interview.

**00:22:44**

But I did and ended up eventually accepting the position and moved to Birmingham and have been here ever since. I started managing the Cooking School Division in the days when we took cooking shows to 100 cities in C&D counties which would be the smaller cities in the South; it would be the Gadsden(s), the Jasper(s), those sized cities, the Newport, Arkansas where I grew up—to do a cooking show using advertiser products to show people some new ideas, maybe give them some help in getting more interesting foods on the table.

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So we did 100 of those shows a year and we did twenty shows in the B-markets at the time which would be the Birmingham(s) and Charlotte(s) under the label of *Southern Living*, so that we had both of those going at the same time. And [**Coughs**]—sorry; eventually it wasn't too long before we merged the two together and ended up doing forty shows a year in markets, forty cities a year at that point—not shows, under the *Southern Living* name because *Southern Living* had come out from under *Progressive Farmer* in the late sixties, about sixty-seven. And it was originally the women's section of *Progressive Farmer*.

**00:24:13**

**JY:** Hmm; and they just split it off—?

**00:24:15**

**MJ:** So we split it off into its own magazine as the South started to become more urban. And with that came the opportunity to straighten out this cooking school program and it basically had

to be straightened out or discontinued because it wasn't working right. So I had a staff of thirty-two people and I came in and it was my job to fix it. So we spent a number of years fixing it, made some great lifelong friends doing it; I was able to travel the whole South from Texas to Maryland, to Oklahoma, Arkansas, Kentucky. I've been in a lot of little Southern towns most people have never been in and people are always surprised about how I know that town. But I just have wonderful memories about meeting the people of the South and talking with them about what they do and where they eat and how they like to cook and they would always share with me and with the staff their favorite recipes, their favorite foods, their favorite ideas, and to have that opportunity and to be able to do educational seminars for a staff that size on a yearly basis was a real gift. I just ate it up because we would go places like New Orleans or Charleston and spend a week studying the cuisine and the chefs in the city and what they did and the history of the area or touring the back country of Louisiana down in the bayou area to see what was going on there. So it was a lot of fun.

**00:25:47**

**JY:** So during this time did you—I mean would it be right to say you kind of re-oriented this program so that it was thinking about the way food was done culturally? I mean the culture of food and that sort of—?

**00:26:02**

**MJ:** Absolutely. We started studying the culture of food and the history of food in the South as well as looking at where it's going, because one thing *Southern Living* has done exceptionally well over the years is reflect where the region is and where it's going. It's not even so much about a region anymore, but when I first joined the company it was. And because we ran at that

time probably ninety-percent reader recipes it was a pretty accurate reflection of what people were really doing in their homes.

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And that background and that knowledge became invaluable in terms of talking with advertisers and building long-term relationships as they were trying to market to those people and talk with them about what's going on. So it's not that we're dwelling in the past but you understand the past and the history in order to be able to get to the future and where it's going.

**00:27:00**

A great example of that is the fact that *Cooking Light Magazine* came out of the pages of *Southern Living Magazine*. We had a column called *Cooking Light* after we realized that people really were starting to lighten up their recipes and in those days it was mostly by reducing salt and sugar. But we started watching it and did a test with our book division on an annual *Cooking Light* book that now is around full-time. We did that several years and then rolled into introducing *Cooking Light Magazine* and getting it out on the newsstand. And I was fortunate enough to be able to work on the startup team of that too. So we're still doing that in a lot of ways.

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We celebrate the past but we don't live in the past in terms of what we do with food and how we present it.

**00:27:53**

**JY:** And do you feel like there are particular types of Southern foods that you're you know maybe personally invested in preserving or that you see other people invested in preserving?

**00:28:05**

**MJ:** Gosh I guess I'm pretty invested in preserving all of it as that goes, but what I find is and then depending on where people are from, where their home is, the foods of that area tend to be the ones that are interested, invested, and preserving and—and taking a heritage from. I think because I've been fortunate enough to travel and know so many different people, be in so many different areas and get down to the source and the root of the foods that I have probably a broader perspective of what goes on.

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As an example, this week I was at a friend's home and they had ordered a Smithfield ham for the holidays. And they called me in and they were greatly upset because it wasn't a Smithfield ham. Well the ham they ordered was a Smithfield ham; it just wasn't an aged, dry-cured Smithfield ham. So the nuances in understanding those basic differences in something like a ham without getting—I started to say in anything more complex, but a ham in itself can be very complex. And—and in terms of that it is. But the flavor and the taste they knew wasn't right but they had no clue why.

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So I guess I'm vested in that and I think probably the travels and the history of my family in growing up has influenced what I am most vested in. As I look around I think of the fact that we eat enchiladas every Saturday night—period. I mean that's a family ritual that we've had and we also have enchiladas for Christmas Eve dinner, which comes from the time in the Texas, New Mexico area, Arizona. But at the same time my gift that I make for my friends at the holidays is pound cakes. And pound cake is one of my very favorites. And I still use a recipe from a great, great aunt on my grandmother's side I guess. I have to think about that a little bit, but way back there and it's very simple. It's the original recipe. And even though the recipe as it was passed to

me had time and temperature on it I find it still varies every time I make it and I find myself setting the timer but then watching it and going from there. So I do have that.

**00:30:36**

I love Cajun Creole food. I love Low Country food. I have lots of friends in Virginia. I just think I've been very blessed in terms of being able to travel and take advantage of learning the foods here. Kentucky, Tennessee, I mean each one has its own gift to bring to the table and I think that's what I enjoy most about it.

**00:31:01**

**JY:** So what brought you to—to Southern Foodways Alliance?

**00:31:03**

**MJ:** Well I got involved with a group that had started prior to Southern Foodways Alliance. I think because of the history of *Southern Living* and *Southern Progress* and my particular career anything relevant to food is of interest to me. That's how I study history.

**00:31:22**

**JY:** Which organization was that you said?

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**MJ:** Let's see; what was it called?

**00:31:29**

**JY:** Two of the forerunners were the American Southern Food Institute and then the Society for Preservation and Revitalization of Southern Food, was it either one of those?

**00:31:36**

**MJ:** It wasn't either one of those; there was another one somewhere. I'll think of it in a minute—maybe. **[Laughs]** But I got involved in one of those through the request of one of the food editors I had known a number of years ago. And the group just couldn't get off the ground and they couldn't get it together. And they had asked us to underwrite part of it. And I felt like the fact that *Southern Progress Corporation* is so—so much of it is based on food and recipes and has been the mainstay for so many years that we as an organization (a) ought to be involved as an organization, and I individually wanted to be involved.

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So from that standpoint when the opportunity came and we saw the association prior to this one was not going to make it, I suggested that we were going to probably in all honesty pull our support if they didn't get it together and get something done. And in talking with them over the years, one of my feelings had been in the two years they were trying to get it up and running that it needed to be connected with a university, somewhere, to give it some stability, to give it a home, and not make it a volunteer social organization 'cause I felt like that wasn't the setting it needed to be in. And when I started talking with John Egerton and John T. and Nathalie and some of the other folks that were involved in the original beginnings of this group it became apparent to me the right people, the right place, the right time, the right opportunity and if we didn't make it happen now it wasn't going to happen.

**00:33:19**

**JY:** How did y'all know each other or did you know each other—?

**00:33:21**

**MJ:** Well we did know each other through the food world and the International Association of Culinary Professionals and reading and, you know it seems like I've known them all forever, just through the profession I guess and their writing and they had done some things for *Southern Progress Corporation*, for *Southern Living* historically. And when we were doing training with the cooking schools, Nathalie had opened her cooking school with Riches in Atlanta and I had taken our staff over there for her to do some classes for them and give them a little French technique and background. So I knew her from there from the very beginning. And the two John(s) I've just known through *Southern Living* for years.

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So it seemed like something we should do. It seemed like something we wanted to be involved in. Again, a number of our people on staff were very interested and it's something that's relevant to what we do every day. And I'm a big believer based on the way I've been brought up in giving back. And if you don't get involved and you don't give back it doesn't happen. So you don't sit and wait for somebody else to do it; you just dive in.

**00:34:39**

**JY:** So what—what was your role in getting that first meeting, the fifty—the fifty first players, the founders together?

**00:34:49**

**MJ:** Well I guess my role was like a lot of other people's. We talked about who the fifty players ought to be and I approached our corporation about hosting the meeting as *Southern Progress Corporation* in Birmingham, which is what we eventually did. We hosted it in the summer, very hot, very warm, but we made arrangements to bring people in, have them stay one night, and in that two-day period got an amazing amount of work done. We do have—actually we do have a photograph from that original meeting that we had one of our photographers take so that we would have a record of the auspicious occasion and at some time over that week—those two days most of the group got there. Almost the whole group attended and if they didn't they called and wanted to talk over the phone and—and do that. It was an amazing meeting because we got everyone gathered in the room and started talking about what we wanted to do and how we wanted to do it and practically twenty-four hours later walked out with a mission statement, a basis of how we were going to work, how we were going to organize, what we were going to do, and where we wanted to go, which from that group is pretty amazing 'cause it was a pretty powerful group.

**00:36:07**

I think one of the things that drew me to it were the people that I knew that felt as strongly as I did we needed to get it done because time is marching and slipping away and we're losing a lot of people that we need to get recorded in terms of what's going on because with the changes that have gone on in the last ten years in this world and particularly in our country things are changing rapidly. And it's hard to go back and recreate once the folks who did it are gone. So that was very important to me in terms of what we did.

**00:36:44**

It was also very important to me that we have an ethnic mix in the group and a racial balance and that everybody be vested in what we were doing. And I think with all due respect,

John Egerton is the dean of that. He is the best at it and he obviously made it work to get all those people in there and to have them respond in that way.

**00:37:12**

**JY:** This is in the summer of ninety-seven?

**00:37:15**

**MJ:** I believe it was.

**00:37:16**

**JY:** Or ninety-eight?

**00:37:19**

**MJ:** Oh, gosh. One of those. We'll have to look it up.

**00:37:22**

**JY:** And when—when did the first symposium occur?

**00:37:24**

**MJ:** Actually there had been a symposium I believe shortly before that. There had been one symposium. And there was one of the books out that John T. had done. And Ole Miss was very willing to host the group there and give us some of the proceeds from that group or from that book so that we had some money—seed money to start with and go from there.

**00:37:53**

And there was some discussion even at that meeting about whether or not that was a place for the organization to be and I felt pretty strongly that if we didn't go there we were going to end up with a state battle about who wanted it where and where it went from there. And I was pretty much an advocate for let's put it over here. Number one, it's the Center for the Study of Southern Culture and there isn't one as well known anywhere else in the South and it's fairly close to centrally located in the South when you include Texas as part of the South and run it up in terms of the USDA, technical definition of the South. Actually Birmingham is the center of the South but there wasn't a school here that was really appropriate to affiliate with.

**00:38:43**

And when you have someone who wants you and is willing to give and work, then you really need to take a look at it. And I guess I sort of took it on as my role to talk to a couple of people who really wanted it in North Carolina about the wisdom of going where you're wanted and the people are offering it to you. So we ended up deciding that we would affiliate there.

**00:39:11**

**JY:** Great; and then what was your—what's been your role since that time in terms of—? I mean have you been part of the planning committees or the programming committees?

**00:39:20**

**MJ:** Absolutely. I went on the Board. I was elected to the Board for the first Board of Directors that was in place for the organization and was re-elected and I had a short term on one of those terms. I think it was the first one 'cause I think we—we staggered terms in order to get people started where the whole Board didn't roll at one time. So I was on the Board.

**00:39:46**

We worked on programming. We worked on introducing different speakers and sponsors to the group in an advisory position to John T. And I guess most recently what I've done is chaired a committee here in Birmingham, beginning a year ago—year and a half ago I guess—to do our field trip here for 2004 on Alabama in Black and White. And we were addressing the topic of food and race, how they influence each other, or how they interact, the history of—particularly with the Civil Rights history here in Birmingham and we hosted a very successful field trip here in early June of this year. So I was very involved in that in terms of organization and facilitating and contacting people and getting it done.

**00:40:49**

**JY:** What do you feel—I mean this is obviously an example of a program that's probably done what he wanted it to do, you know I hope. I mean do you feel like the field trip did what you—what you wanted it to do?

**00:41:01**

**MJ:** I do. I was actually amazed at the response we had to the field trip while people were here as well as while it was over because very much as I had thought would happen, we had a lot of people come who still had Birmingham pictured in the fifties and sixties in terms of focus with food, focus with race issues, focus with where we're going or not going and what's happening. So to be able to introduce people to Birmingham as it is today growing and changing was a very important thing for me.

**00:41:48**

People responded in a very interesting manner when I would say to them and I've invited the Chief of Police to join us at our dinner and welcome everyone to the City of Birmingham.

And it would take them a minute to think about it and then ask why the Chief of Police? And then we'd go back in history and talk about Bull Connor and then talk about the fact that our current Chief of Police is a black female, who is wonderful, very charming, and very much dedicated to bringing the city forward.

**00:42:27**

So I think that sort of set the focus for me in terms of what I wanted to do in letting other people learn about our city as it is, and I think what we did was give them a chance to learn in their own way about the city.

**00:42:44**

I knew we had done a number of things well when after the event we got notes and letters back and there was one couple who wrote a letter and told me that they had been talking about moving to Canada because they were so disillusioned with what was going on in the US and the racial problems and issues and the fact that people aren't working to make a change anymore, and they were seriously talking about moving this last summer and to be there by the holidays this year. And they said based on what they had seen in Birmingham and experienced that they decided that they needed to give it another shot and get more involved themselves. And that just said a whole lot to me.

**00:43:34**

And I had any number of people comment on that and talk about the group of people that was gathered in the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church experience and the—the Civil Rights Institute experience and what that meant to them, as well as a Lazy Susan Supper with the Gospel Choir and—and some of the historical folks honored at that event. And I think it made a big difference. I think people who came did not understand that we're trying to move forward and make changes. And we talk about it pretty openly here in this city. Sure, there's still problems, but I

think it's a lot better than a lot of other areas. So yeah, I do think it accomplished a lot of things we wanted to accomplish and it's—it was a team effort. There were a group of about fourteen people that worked on it and they were very much dedicated. They sought us out to become involved in it. So that says a lot about this city I think.

**00:44:43**

**JY:** And do you have a similar feeling about the Alliance as a whole, I mean has it—you know has it done what you—what you hoped it would do?

**00:44:51**

**MJ:** I think it has. I think we still have a lot to do.

**00:44:55**

**JY:** Were people talking about what those things are?

**00:44:56**

**MJ:** Sure; I think from in terms of what we've done, I think getting started with the oral history projects and the video projects in terms of what's been done to get down some of our heroes like Martha Hawkins, down in Montgomery, get her on tape and have her talk about where she came from and how she got there and why. I think that's a very important thing. I think the forum to open up a discussion of feelings and history and where we've been and where we're going between black and white has been good. It's not always been easy; sometimes it's been very hard and sometimes we've been involved in discussions that started out probably not being very

honest on either side and ended up being brutally honest and frank to the point of taking your breath away. Let's sit down and regroup and think about this.

**00:45:55**

But I think that's good. That's something that I need to be challenged I know and I think other people do too because you get in your comfort zone and you don't. And I guess because I relate life and history and what's going on in the world of food, I look at that as a way to interpret where things are. This organization has given me a way to do that and to get involved. And it's been very interesting to me to hear from a number of people in the City of Birmingham who were unable to attend, who would have liked to have attended. Every time I see them they say to me now, well, do you have another one of those events coming up? Now if you do we want to get involved and we want to be there. So I think that's important.

**00:46:44**

I think really in the future what I see is we need to get more done of what we've been doing, but then I think as we move ahead we need to get involved with some of the other ethnic groups in the South that are here and are growing. Hispanics come to mind. Top of mind to me, because they're growing the fastest in terms of percentage of population in the South; they're having a great deal of influence now on the foods we eat in terms of eating out and the restaurant business, and particularly in the independent restaurants, not only the small Hispanic restaurants, but even in the Frank Stitt type restaurant because that's who is starting to be in the kitchen a lot now.

**00:47:27**

So we're seeing those changes and that has influenced the type of foodstuffs and food items that are available to the consumers here in this market particularly and in others also. And it influences what you can do with the foods. So I think we need to keep going. I for one would

like to see us—and I’m hoping that *Southern Progress* will eventually come up with some funding to do an oral history of the women who were honored in the Birmingham event for feeding the marchers. That’s something we don’t have down and we need to know about. And we had funding come in as a result of this for the Greek restaurateurs in Birmingham; that’s another minority. You go to Texas there’s a huge German influence. And I think we need to explore all those, so I think there’s loads to do and it’s something that’s very interesting to me.

**00:48:28**

**JY:** Great; that pretty much covers it. Just a couple more questions that are I guess sort of offshoots of this conversation we’ve been having.

**00:48:45**

**MJ:** Oh.

**00:48:54**

**JY:** Well I guess this one—describe—describe a meal that you would characterize as essentially Southern or totemic(ally) Southern.

**00:49:06**

**MJ:** I guess if I were going to describe a meal that to me that would be Southern it would have to depend on place and where we were doing it. If I were going to Frank Stitt’s Restaurant I think it might be a pork-tenderloin with a bourbon molasses glaze or sauce on it. There might be fresh peas from the garden. There would most certainly be a green salad. There might be grits or sweet

potatoes in some form or another. Now they might not be fixed in the way they were years ago but they would be foods that would be indigenous to this area.

**00:49:57**

And in terms of dessert, gosh what would I say? I think Frank's best dessert if I were eating out in terms of something that's really Southern are his fruit crisps and his fruit tarts and they're all very seasonal. It would be peach cobbler in the summer, apple crisp in the fall, and depending on the seasonality and what was available that would be—and that would be a Southern meal to me there.

**00:50:28**

If I were cooking for you here at the house I might do beef, pork, or chicken either one because from my heritage of the South that's where it is. And I might even do shrimp and grits which is not something we had growing up in Arkansas. We had the grits but certainly not shrimp unless it was fried at that time. But I might do the Low Country or Cajun Creole version of that. In terms of other vegetables, in the summer particularly there would be fresh tomatoes, fresh corn, relishes, melon of some sort either as a dessert or as a salad, biscuits, cornbread. And then for special occasion desserts, again I go back to the standard pound cake and I'd probably put cranberry ice with it, which is just a personal favorite and a special touch that I like with it.

**00:51:35**

**JY:** Sounds great. I'm really hungry now.

**00:51:38**

**MJ:** Now you are. Or brunch. Brunch is another real Southern thing that we do a lot here. I have a lot of friends that come over and we'll make biscuits and the only requirement for you to come

on the weekend is you have to bring something to put on biscuits. So if we have eight or ten people here during the holidays it'll be everything from all kinds of jams and jellies to sausage gravies, honey and molasses, and it's really pretty fun.

**00:52:06**

**JY:** You can put barbecue on biscuit right?

**00:52:09**

**MJ:** Oh, heck yeah.

**00:52:10**

**[End Martha Johnston Interview]**