

NANCY OCHSENSCHLAGER

Retired Associate Producer, New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival – New Orleans, LA

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Interview Date: July 13, 2006

Interviewer: Sara Roahen

Southern Foodways Alliance

Project: New Orleans Eats/Guardians of Tradition

00:00:00

Sara Roahen: This is Sara Roahen. It's July 13th 2006. I'm on Dumaine Street in New Orleans. Could you please state your name and your date of birth?

00:00:11

Nancy Ochsenschlager: Okay, Nancy Ochsenschlager—November 16th 1939.

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SR: And how you made and/or make your living?

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NO: I've been the associate producer of the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival and as—of the heritage fair, and as such have dealt with—for 30 years—with producing the food, the crafts, the site aspects and fair operation aspects of the Jazz & Heritage Festival.

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SR: And Nancy, you were telling me while my device was off—my mistake—that you came to New Orleans after a career in nursing—pretty brief career in nursing. You came to New Orleans with your second career, which was neckties; you were making neckties.

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NO: Uh-hm.

00:01:02

SR: And while you were in the French Market, you met Quint Davis, who is the—the founder of Jazz Fest?

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NO: Yes.

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SR: And the director?

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NO: With Allison Miner, yeah.

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SR: Uh-huh; and he—

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NO: Or George Wein, who was the executive producer that started the festival. He found Quint and Allison too—and started it, uh-hm.

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SR: Okay, and he took a liking to your neckties and also to your work ethic it sounds like.

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NO: Well I came in the office and—to find about doing an art fair part of the festival and staying—and I ended up staying around and volunteering on the festival that first year, working for the fair director answering all the phones. So the next year I came back and—to work with that fair director kind of officially, and of course I worked with Quint over the years. After two years with the fair director, he left, so then I came back with a bigger role with the—the original fair director, John Murphy, and was there for two years and then I had to take over as fair director and food director and all. I guess food, crafts, all of that—for a number of years until my assistant finally took over with the food, concentrating on the food operation, and she had a food background, so then we started getting a food manager and we eventually have a food director now.

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SR: And in the beginning—well in the beginning it was at Congo Square. Do you know how many years it was there?

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NO: It was there two years—it was there '70 and '71; in '72 it moved to the Fair Grounds.

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SR: Okay. And the food service was more limited than it is today, but certainly there were—there was quite a lot of stuff that I wasn't aware of. Could you just name some of the—?

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NO: Yeah, well we—our original food vendor was the New Orleans sausage maker, the Vaucressons, Sonny Vaucresson. So he—Sonny has passed now, but his family—his son is running it and they've been there since the beginning; so that was 37 years this past year. And that's quite a tradition. Brocato's ice cream has been there—Brocato himself wasn't in the first year, but then came—Angelo, and there's always—Buster Holmes was there in the early days with red beans. We've always had red beans; some are long-time vendors doing that. We've had, the catfish and the soft-shell were there since the early days of the Fair Grounds, so there are some very old vendors and then we gradually added new vendors doing foods of very traditional nature. In the beginning, we had a lot of different things and, as I say, we had ya-ka-mein in the beginning, and that went away, and it came back just recently, which is a street food from the parades. So now it's, you know—it's a whole elaborate process though of really having been—having over the years recruited almost 70 vendors to do very traditional Louisiana cuisine and—.

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SR: And that's the main criteria for a vendor is—regional—?

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NO: Yeah, we don't have hotdogs and hamburgers. We have homemade Louisiana sausage. We have crawfish in all forms, shrimp in all forms; you know, poor boys, but it's all you know—it's all very traditional. I mean we did—we have blended in an international fair of foods that are, you know, more common around here: the Vietnamese food now and the Middle Eastern food,

and we have a lot of, you know, African-Caribbean foods that have developed over the years at Congo Square [*Congo Square* here meaning a section of the festival at the Fair Grounds, not the site of the original festival].

00:04:30

SR: And you have—you mentioned earlier a sampling program. Does—is this something that happens every year with new vendors wanting to come in or—?

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NO: Yeah, with the openings that we have, you know, basically vendors are invited back if everything is going well and the product is good. It's very difficult changing the vendor because it's an elaborate process. You have to have a lot of experience in mass catering and—and usually, you know, we just change over when an item changes over because it's harder to find new traditional foods because we have such an elaborate representation of 120 different kinds of traditional Louisiana fare and—and international—.

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SR: Oh wow, spread across now more than 50 vendors, right?

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NO: Oh it's almost 70.

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SR: Huh.

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NO: There's around the grounds and then there's the booths—three different areas.

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SR: So—so if—when ya-ka-mein went away, it was likely because the vendor—the vendor—?

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NO: Well the vendor changed, and I think that was a vendor that we had in the early days that was actually—was someone we knew that worked in city government, and he did ya-ka-mein. Now it's—it's—the lady that does it on the streets of the second line, and she's the lady that's been feeding all the people at Tipitina's since the hurricane.

00:05:51

SR: Yeah, I saw her yesterday.

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NO: Yeah.

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SR: I'm interested—I'm—every time I go to Jazz Fest, I'm really interested in the Native American part.

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NO: Uh-hm, when we added the village in 2000 we—we added a food booth with that, and they did the fry bread and they did the Indian taco last year, and they demonstrate.

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SR: And so that was in—they were added in 2000?

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NO: Yeah, that's when we did the Native American village.

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SR: Yeah, I like that. What is the—so you were saying that some people are restaurateurs and cook their food before they—and bring it to the Fair Grounds; some people cook at the Fair Grounds—.

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NO: In the Fair Grounds kitchen.

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SR: In the Fair Grounds kitchen. You know, the day of a festival, what does that day look like as far as how the food area runs? When—when would you—

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NO: Well they load—

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SR: —go there?

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NO: —some of them have to start cooking at six you know—the barbeque fires and stuff like that. I mean, I've always traditionally gotten there, you know, 5:30—6:00 in the morning. And most of the vendors come in at 7:30 when our back gates open; they're cooking the week before in the kitchen now if they're that—they're loading their booths the week before, you know, with all the heavy equipment and supplies and stuff. But on a fair day they're pretty much starting out at 7:30 except for some early people.

00:07:16

SR: Uh-huh. And what—what are some of the biggest challenges of just getting through the day?

00:07:22

NO: Well it's sort of an elaborate operation now. You know Michelle Nugent has been the food director most recently and is doing an incredible job of—of organizing; there's—there's a whole staff that—you know the staff that monitors each food booth; so the monitors come onboard, you know—well really they're onboard by quarter of seven for people. They monitor the refrigerator

trucks where we store everything, and they climb in and out and the temperatures are monitored. A shuttle delivering food is run by her staff. There's just a lot of tremendous logistics: the fire marshals that monitor every booth that you work with, and then the Board of Health that we work closely with and really—a while back, the state actually made a law and said the Board of Health will regulate us, because we've always been very up to code with all the Board of Health stuff and we pride ourselves on that and we're really an example for all the festivals around, but they don't all necessarily get monitored as well as we do. *[Laughs]*

00:08:26

SR: Well I was wondering—

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NO: We appreciate it.

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SR: I imagine—you appreciate the—well that's good—from the Board of Health?

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NO: Uh-hm.

00:08:33

SR: I was imagining that—

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NO: Some of our staff used to work for the Board of Health, and they'd come over and work with us as monitors, so—.

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SR: Sounds like you get hooked in.

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NO: Yeah, they do—part of the family. [*Laughs*]

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SR: Yeah; I—I imagine that in the beginning it was a much looser operation. Is that true?

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NO: Well we've always followed Board of Health. The logistics have changed because it was a small—much more smaller operations in the old days, and I mean there were times then when we drove on the field and delivered food on the field, and then the festival grew and we couldn't approach it that way. We had to only approach it in the dirt, to deliver musicians and food, and I mean it used to be in the old days they drove on the field—right in the middle of the people.

[*Laughs*] So things have evolved because it's gotten bigger; it's spread out all over the field and in the parking lots. It's taken a lot of different logistics to make the operation work in the bigger environment.

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SR: I imagine it's just—I mean you—you all will learn as you go. Do you get—so 2004 was your last Jazz Fest?

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NO: Um, 2005 was—I retired at the end of the festival of 2005.

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SR: Oh 2005, right—right.

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NO: I consulted this year and I actually worked with them this year.

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SR: You were here?

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NO: Yeah; I was gone. I was at Guatemala at my house but I came back—and I helped—I consulted and helped them on some of the fair logistics and fair operations.

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SR: Well can you describe what we were talking about earlier, the look of the food area?

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NO: Well you know it—it started out with—Tag Richardson is the site director who has done this all these years—.

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[Interruption: I'm ready; I'm going to call.]

00:10:30

SR: Go on.

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NO: So they were simple booths, you know—wooden frame construction, and we had this old sign maker that did the traditional block signage that they put on frames, you know—stretch canvas and—and then it gradually evolved that the—Tag developed a whole system of framework that we're able to use with scaffolding, so then they constructed a whole special—and made special covers and special screens, so they were covered in—screens in the front, screens all around—very Board of Health savvy; booths that they evolved into and we still had all these Roy Land signs and Nan Parette who did all the art department stuff, gradually getting a whole different list to the festival, she copied all the old Roy Land stuff, and then she developed a whole new look with the facades of the French Quarter and the Louisiana buildings, and incorporated the food signs into those. So, you know, it's evolved you know over the years and we've had some graphics that have added, and shrimp and crawfish and stuff that are on poles, so it's you know—.

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SR: It's really a nice look.

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NO: Yeah, yeah.

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SR: Well I'll ask Michelle a lot about the—the current—you know, the current operations and stuff. Can you tell me, because this year people are especially—well especially the Southern Foodways Alliance, we had a dinner honoring our Guardians of the Tradition last summer and a lot of people who were there emailed us, called us, told us that you all are who they thought of when Katrina hit, you know 'cause they had been here—

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NO: Oh yeah, uh-hm.

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SR: —so recently, so can you tell us your Katrina story? Were you here or were you—?

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NO: I wasn't here because I was up working. I'm—I'm still consulting and working for the New York office of Festival Productions, so I was up there working on the Newport Jazz,

Newport Folk, and was still out east and I was just driving back to see friends in Michigan when this hit. So I was up in Michigan actually with friends. And I—I wasn't here; my nephew was in my house, got out by kayak but—.

00:12:44

SR: Really?

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NO: Yeah. So we immediately had a whole network. I mean Michelle started—I'm sure hearing from the food vendors and all—but the staff, the New York office, set up this whole blog so we could get in touch, and you know, know what was happening and with everyone. And you know, they helped people out a lot, like a lot of businesses did—we got in touch with everybody. And of course the festival was a big question right away, [*Laughs*] and you know everyone was praying that we were going to pull it together, and Quint finally did by a miracle. You know, we had a lot of support, a lot of sponsorship support, but you know all along Michelle was talking to the food vendors—she can tell you more about her experiences with that—but you know, trying to see how they had all done and I mean it's—because it's a big family. So you know, she was in touch with a lot of them and—and then when it came, you know, we were trying—we were hoping it would happen. They didn't know for sure 'til the middle of January, so they stuck with us and most of our food vendors came back. There were a few that were sitting it out because of a whole lot of circumstances, you know. They just couldn't do it, but we had an incredible food fair considering, and I think—.

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SR: I think so.

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NO: And the festival was so magical and wonderful and everybody supported us so much that I think everyone did well, you know. I mean it was a real bright moment in the world, so—at the time, because you know everything has been so tough here.

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SR: I would say.

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NO: It was—it was a reunion for everybody, and sure with the food vendors. It was a reunion with, you know, people and families; it was with band's; it was with the staffs; it was with the visitors. You know, New Orleans came home. Everyone had such an outpouring for us, and now it's continuing. I was just down the mall in Washington at the National Folklife Festival and they had New Orleans concerts at night and there was such a huge outpouring—yeah, for the Dixie Cups and the Hot Eight and—.

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SR: Oh good; I didn't hear about that.

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NO: Yeah; Monk and the Golden Eagles, yeah.

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SR: Is there—is—do you have any thoughts on what it means to be a Guardian of the Tradition in the food culture of New Orleans?

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NO: Well I think it's been—it's been a joy, you know, and certainly something that I—you know—have been really happy to be a part of it and really kind of bringing these traditions to the world because of all of our visitors to the festival, people are really—I mean the food fair to some people is as—if not more important than—the music. So it's—it's always—so it's tugged at my heartstrings to know how—how much we've brought, you know, to the world with this great international food fair. And I've been really proud of, you know, what Sally and then Michelle have done in making it such a big success. You know, I was—I was there at the beginning and I inherited it from fair directors and—but it took a big step when it had someone really focusing. I was focusing on everything, you know the crafts and everything. **[Laughs]** But it took a big step and—and it's just a real pride and it's spilled over to Essence. A lot of the vendors do Essence and—

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SR: And Michelle also.

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NO: And, you know, you see the comments now with Essence [in Houston]—the food wasn't nearly what it was in New Orleans. I mean, it's just such a part—you know, it's a part of us—the cuisine. So to have such an internationally known festival and have such an international food fair of such high quality...And the press is amazing, you know. The big writers—just, they can't believe what we do out there. So yeah, it's always been a big source of pride and—and so the food vendors have always been a big part of my heart. It was really tough saying good-bye to all of them. I mean not that I'm gone; I saw them all this year. *[Laughs]*

00:16:31

SR: Right.

00:16:31

NO: But—but I've been there, I've been with them for so long, you know—30 years, a lot of them—.

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SR: Is there one thing that you always have the first day of Jazz Fest to eat? Do you have any traditions?

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NO: Well I—yeah, I have a couple, you know. Merlene, when she came in with the Creole pie, which is not really at the beginning—it was the middle of the road—but she's been with us a while and she's from Lafayette, and that was such a big wonderful new part—the Creole meat

pie. So and I, you know, grew up with Mrs. Wheat too—the Nachitoches pies. You know she—there’s a very long history too and it’s down generations because she’s gone now and her daughter runs it. But we’ve seen all the generations with these food vendors. And of course the soft-shell has always been a big part too. So I—you know, it’s hard for me to eat a lot during the festival. *[Laughs]*

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SR: I’m sure.

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NO: But traditionally in recent years, the meat pie has been the first thing I get for breakfast.

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SR: Okay.

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NO: From Merlene.

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SR: Thank you.

00:17:37

NO: Yeah.

[End Nancy Ochsenschlager]