

Interviewee: Willie Mae Seaton (with Hazel Mae White)
Interview date: July 2006
Interviewer: Sara Roahen

Southern Foodways Alliance
Project: Guardians of Tradition

[Begin Willie Mae Seaton]

00:00:00

Willie Mae Seaton: This friend of mine I've been knowing her for about 50 years and she is here by herself and she told me I could come and stay with her you know. I like going about and taking care of my business, so that's why I'm back over here.

00:00:20

Sara Roahen: Well this is a nice place.

00:00:21

WMS: Oh yeah, it's nice that she can be—. You know she's just nice, and I told her—I got clothes packed up there and my luggage over there. I told her I just hate to junk her house up. I don't like to do that but we try to keep it straight.

00:00:37

SR: It's nice in here.

00:00:38

WMS: She keeps a nice place. This your home?

00:00:44

SR: No, I'm from Wisconsin originally.

00:00:46

WMS: Where about?

00:00:46

SR: Wisconsin.

00:00:48

WMS: Oh yeah. How long you been here?

00:00:51

SR: Seven years.

00:00:52

WMS: Oh yeah. I've been here since 1940.

00:00:54

SR: Nineteen forty, huh?

00:00:56

WMS: Yeah, I raised my children here but Mississippi is my home—right this side of Jackson;
uh-hm.

00:01:06

SR: And so why did you move here?

00:01:08

WMS: Well my husband come here to work and he was in the shipyard and that's what brought us here. So we just got stuck here. **[Laughs]** And I was telling Miss White the other day, I said I don't know—I said I should have went back to my home to Jackson and—and 'cause I got a cousin that lives in the City and find me a nice little place up there and went back home 'cause I'm really getting you know—this place is—I don't know.

00:01:37

SR: You should have done that—when do you think you should have done that?

00:01:40

WMS: Oh I should have done that earlier.

00:01:42

SR: Oh really?

00:01:44

WMS: I could have them looking out for me a place now but I don't—I ain't—I ain't going—much longer to wait; you don't know how much longer your health—of course, I'm in pretty good health right now.

00:01:54

SR: Yeah, it seems like it.

00:01:56

WMS: But you don't know. So I tell you it's—it's rough. I just—and—and everybody asks me when they look at me say, 'oh my God, what happened to you?' I said, 'Baby, worries.'

00:02:10

SR: Who says that?

00:02:11

WMS: I look so different. My customers—when they meet me, 'oh momma what happened to you?' when they look at me. And I say, 'baby this pressure got me.' I'm under pressure—pressure will wear an iron out.

00:02:26

SR: Pressure will wear an iron out.

00:02:27

WMS: Yeah, pressure will wear the iron out, only I tell you never try to get under pressure 'cause it's not a good feel. That's what I'm under right now—a lot of pressure.

00:02:38

SR: I think you look good.

00:02:41

WMS: But I just love the James Beard Foundation people. All those people have been so nice. They sent for me the first time I went; they sent again last year. They wanted me to come up. They sent for me and my granddaughter, they—she go along with me, and my son, he went with us this last time ‘cause I told him they wanted some fried chicken. I said I’ll make the batter and y’all can fry the chicken while I’m on the—the—you know stage talking to the people. And she had said first she wanted me to—to you know interview the people and all but I just couldn’t do none of that. And when I got my reward—you seen those rewards—when I received my reward—was receiving it I just couldn’t hold it. I broke down. When I told them—oh I just couldn’t believe that they thought enough of me to give me such a high honor reward and high—and I couldn’t get over it. I just broke down and all them they just put their arms around me and they said I made the best speech of the night ‘cause it came from my heart and it did. I can’t never thank those people.

00:04:00

SR: You don’t have to, I don’t think.

00:04:02

WMS: I just—I just tell them—and John I just say, ‘oh Lord John; you’re just such a beautiful guy.’

00:04:10

SR: John Currence or John Besh?

00:04:11

WMS: Huh?

00:04:12

SR: Which John?

00:04:13

WMS: All of them—I just say all of them.

00:04:16

SR: Yeah; there's a lot of John(s) involved.

00:04:18

WMS: Yeah, it's all the ones you know that—I don't know. Do you know little Lolis Elie, the little writer in town at the *Picayune*? Well he come in my kitchen that morning and I'm busy and he say, 'you know you won that big award.' I had never heard tell of there going to be a Foundation Award. And I said what big award? And he—he started explaining it to me you know; he said, 'but I'll tell you what, you've got to go to New York to get it.' I said, 'oh baby; how I'm going to New York? I ain't got no money you know.' I say and then you know I'm kind

of crippled. I said I'd have to have somebody to go along with me and he said well wait and let me see what I can do for you. And sure enough he looked out for me and they sent on for me to come on up.

00:05:08

SR: He's a great—.

00:05:09

WMS: And they just—like it's just nobody like them when I go. They just treat me so superb. Oh it's just unbelievable baby these things are happening to me.

00:05:21

SR: Well I'm really glad that happened before the storm.

00:05:24

WMS: What did you say honey?

00:05:25

SR: I'm glad that happened—

00:05:26

WMS: Yeah, me too baby.

00:05:26

SR: —before the storm.

00:05:27

WMS: Yeah baby ‘cause this storm it’s done put a hold on us. It’ll be a long time I think before—and the people—they telling the people they want them to come back, they want them in here, but yet still they ain’t got no places for them to live. And they’re talking about tearing the projects and stuff down and I think that’s awful. What I think they should do but it’s not my thought—the people that needs places to stay because people got children and all of that and they’ve got to go school and all that and people are not able to go and relocate, you know what I mean? I think they should screen the people and then every month go through there and check out how things is happening, but I’m not the one to say.

00:06:17

SR: Unfortunately.

00:06:19

WMS: No, I’m not the one to say so. I just don’t know what our city going to come to because we’re going to need people and some of my plants is leaving out of here and we’re going to need the people back in here to get some money in our city to help rebuild our city because the government...I don’t know, baby you just don’t know.

00:06:41

SR: I know. How have you been—how have you been getting by there? Have you been cooking?

00:06:45

WMS: Oh I cook for she and I every day and she just loves that, yeah. There's food for us every day and we buy groceries you know. I'm not at the point where just—I got to lay on people's legs you know. I'm not at that point. See when I get at that point in my little place over there I worked hard and paid for that, so when I go back I don't have to pay no rent. I just pay my taxes and all of that—the home, my buildings—I mean my taxes and all—whatever I got to pay. I manage with that 'cause I get that little check you know 'cause I got Social Security.

00:07:24

SR: That's good.

00:07:25

WMS: And that helps me out; that's what's carrying me through, so—.

00:07:30

SR: What have you been cooking?

00:07:31

WMS: Oh everything—*[Laughs]* stew, red beans, butter beans, string beans, smothered chops, smothered chicken, fried chicken, veal chops, cabbage. I just cook for she and I and she just loves that. I was just getting ready to drink me some coffee. Do you want a cup of coffee?

00:07:54

SR: If you don't mind.

00:07:56

WMS: Yeah, come on. You want to go in the kitchen? Come on. Miss White?

00:08:07

Hazel Mae White: Yeah, baby?

00:08:10

WMS: The young lady want a cup of coffee baby.

00:08:12

Miss White: Huh?

00:08:13

WMS: The young lady wants a cup of coffee. She's coming baby.

00:08:20

SR: Not if it's too much trouble.

00:08:22

WMS: It ain't no trouble at all.

00:08:25

Miss White: You can use the telephone right to the left, baby. What you want, to use the telephone?

00:08:28

WMS: No, I said she wants a cup of coffee.

00:08:31

Miss White: All right.

00:08:31

WMS: Uh-huh; you didn't understand what I said. Oh this is my coffee here huh?

00:08:39

Miss White: It sure is.

00:08:39

WMS: Okay baby.

00:08:45

SR: You know what I was wondering? I know that you're famous for your fried chicken but I always liked your gumbo.

00:08:51

WMS: Oh yeah, honey; she makes good gumbo.

00:08:55

SR: Yours is okra right?

00:08:56

WMS: What you say?

00:08:57

SR: You make okra gumbo?

00:08:58

WMS: Yes; we make okra and filé, both of them—make okra and filé.

00:09:04

SR: You mean together or in two—in different—?

00:09:07

WMS: In separate pots.

00:09:08

SR: Oh, I don't think I ever had the filé.

00:09:09

WMS: Huh?

00:09:10

SR: What did you put in the filé gumbo?

00:09:12

WMS: Oh the same thing but the okra.

00:09:16

SR: Oh.

00:09:18

Miss White: All this—you don't put the filé in there; you put the filé after you dish it up. You put—that's the way I do.

00:09:25

SR: Yeah; how do you do it? You put the filé in later?

00:09:28

WMS: Yes.

00:09:28

Miss White: Uh-huh, after I dish it up.

[sounds of coffee being served]

00:09:31

SR: Thank you; I appreciate it. Thank you.

00:09:37

Miss White: I put mine in the—I make it but I don't put—make filé—I don't put it in the pot. I take a spoonful and put it in the dish after the gumbo is done.

00:09:54

WMS: That's mine [*coffee*].

00:09:54

Miss White: That's yours? Oh I got mine sitting on the floor. I'm sorry.

00:10:00

WMS: That's all right.

00:10:02

SR: This looks like some good strong coffee.

00:10:04

WMS: Well taste it and see how you like it.

00:10:10

SR: Oh yeah.

00:10:12

WMS: Help yourself. Did you get you some cream?

00:10:13

SR: I did; uh-hm. It's real good. Did you learn how to cook in New Orleans or in Mississippi?

00:10:20

WMS: Oh no baby—Mississippi. I've been cooking all my life. I had four children I had to cook for. I had to work and I had to cook. And my daughter could cook good as me. She worked in the restaurant with me until she passed away.

00:10:36

SR: When was—

00:10:36

WMS: I lost my two youngest children.

00:10:41

SR: Should we go back?

00:10:40

WMS: Uh-uh; I'm going to sit right here. I'm going to pull my chair up so I can talk to you.

00:10:44

SR: Oh okay.

00:10:48

WMS: Yeah; you got—you got the sugar and stuff. We got to strain; we don't have no light in there. The light burned out.

00:10:56

Miss White: That boy going to put it in for me.

00:11:00

WMS: Popped it on this morning and it popped out.

00:11:01

SR: That's okay. I love this coffee; it's really strong.

00:11:06

Miss White: You do?

00:11:08

SR: Yeah. *[Laughs]* I like how strong it is. It's chicory, huh?

00:11:14

WMS: Uh-huh; I like chicory. I don't like pure coffee.

00:11:18

Miss White: I don't either.

00:11:18

SR: You don't like pure coffee?

00:11:19

WMS: Uh-huh.

00:11:19

Miss White: Me either.

00:11:22

SR: Is this—did you grow up—your name is Miss White?

00:11:26

Miss White: Uh-huh.

00:11:26

SR: You grew up in New Orleans?

00:11:27

Miss White: Well I come here when I was 19 years old. And I made it through now.

00:11:37

SR: And where did you come from? Oh did you also come from Mississippi?

00:11:40

Miss White: Uh-uh, I come from a little place called Morgan City.

00:11:43

SR: Oh Morgan City, yeah.

00:11:45

Miss White: Uh-huh, yeah—they done built that up out there now.

00:11:53

SR: Yeah, Morgan City—there's a lot of fishing around in that area huh?

00:11:58

Miss White: Uh-hm, a lot of seafood and all.

00:12:03

SR: You go into—I went into a supermarket there and there were about 15 different types of dried shrimp.

00:12:10

Miss White: Uh-huh, yes.

00:12:11

SR: That's not that common here in New Orleans.

00:12:14

Miss White: No, uh-uh, but that's seafood place out there. You go in any store you'll find that, largest store—. Some the stores closed up since Katrina. They closing up everywhere. I seen a store fixin' up to open up over the river...I mean, across the street.

00:12:35

WMS: Oh yeah?

00:12:38

Miss White: They getting the groceries in there.

00:12:39

WMS: What? Good, right across the street?

00:12:42

SR: Oh really, they're opening?

00:12:42

Miss White: They opening.

00:12:45

SR: Oh that's good. There's a lot of activity in this area I noticed.

00:12:48

WMS: What you noticed?

00:12:49

SR: A lot of activity.

00:12:50

Miss White: A lot of activity.

00:12:51

WMS: Oh—oh yeah, uh-huh.

00:12:54

Miss White: A lot of people coming back around here—‘cause I been here since November—I come back.

00:13:02

SR: It’s good to see. Did this street flood?

00:13:03

Miss White: Yeah, yeah; the street but not in the houses too much.

00:13:08

SR: Yeah, your house is raised, huh?

00:13:10

Miss White: Yeah, so we didn't have any—just I think up the second or third step going down, you know. There was roof damage mostly.

00:13:23

SR: Right, yeah we also had—but that's normal hurricane damage.

00:13:28

Miss White: Yes.

00:13:28

SR: That's not—

00:13:31

Miss White: Water damage—a lot of people had water in their house.

00:13:37

SR: Miss Willie Mae was telling me that she's been cooking here.

00:13:41

Miss White: Yes, she's been cooking.

00:13:43

SR: That's the right kind of houseguest to have.

00:13:46

Miss White: Sure is, she got a good spirit about cooking.

00:13:52

WMS: But we've been friends so long—. And what we—fool around and sit up here and look like every night—.

00:13:58

Miss White: Every night 'til 12 o'clock...

WMS: ...talking about old times—bringing back old times. I been knowing her and her husband—she lost her husband too—

00:14:09

Miss White: About 10 years ago. No, 11. I used to work at the school around the corner. I've been in this neighborhood about 42 years.

00:14:20

SR: And how did you meet?

00:14:23

Miss White: Well I met her through my husband. She had the restaurant and he used to go down there. That's been a long time.

00:14:31

WMS: Oh yeah.

00:14:33

SR: I was wondering when did you—did you always serve food there?

00:14:36

Miss White: Uh-huh.

00:14:38

SR: Or was it a bar first and a restaurant later?

00:14:39

WMS: Bar first and then I added the restaurant because when I come there a lady had a beauty shop in the front where I put my little dining room and she got sick, so I didn't lease it to nobody else 'cause I got—I had the lease. And so I was able to push the building. Yep, I stayed there for a good while and a lot of people tried to get that corner. But I went there and the place was so run down that's the first thing I went to doing – fixing it up and—.

SR: Well did—what year was that?

00:15:14

WMS: Huh?

00:15:15

SR: What year was that?

00:15:16

WMS: Oh I had an apartment.

00:15:18

SR: No, what year?

00:15:21

WMS: Oh that was—when I opened the restaurant?

00:15:23

SR: Yeah.

00:15:26

00:15:28

WMS: I opened my bar—I was a silk finisher at a cleaners; that’s the only job I had. Of course I drove cab about six years. And so the fellow told me about that place, you know. I had owned my little place and then he told me about that building and she was going back North. He said you come talk to the people and you might be able to get it; so that’s what I did. I went and talked to the people and they let me have it. So I—that’s where I was and I was so glad ‘cause the people—the white folks that had it, they had a grocery store there years ago and the old man and the old lady died and the old man was still running it, so he just had two children and he got tired of it ‘cause he had got old. So they—so he had died, so that left just the two children, and they got tired of fooling with it ‘cause they had their own stuff you know. So they wanted to sell the building so I was able to get it.

00:16:30

SR: But do you remember what year that was?

00:16:32

WMS: In ’60—’50—’57 I believe.

00:16:40

SR: Fifty-seven.

00:16:41

WMS: Fifty-seven.

00:16:41

SR: But when you—so first you just had the bar but did you serve food in the bar?

00:16:46

WMS: Oh I could have but I didn't have any place to 'cause they had the food up there, but when I—I was able to get the whole place I used to fix a little food for the customers—sandwiches and you know whatever; 'cause we used to send around there by Dooky's. You know where Dooky Chase is?

00:17:05

SR: Uh-huh.

00:17:05

WMS: We used to send around there and get food. Yeah, we had patronized her baby before I opened my place.

00:17:17

SR: She's having a hard time getting her place up too.

00:17:20

WMS: Huh?

00:17:20

SR: She's having a hard time getting her place up.

00:17:23

WMS: Oh yeah, uh-huh. She comes around there 'cause when they come around to work on the place the restaurant down there, they—they brang us food for me and set up tables about long as from here back to where Miss White is. And sometimes they have them white tablecloths. Baby I tell you, you know one of the guys told me—what about me that the people love so much? I said baby well I don't know. It's—it's a good feeling to know that they does love me you know. When the white guys ask me you know—baby they just shower me as much as they possibly can, and this is what makes my day. I just love it. Like I tell you, I can't thank them enough. And when I start telling them about it you know and knowing how good they treat me I just break down. I just can't hold it. They've been so good to me—and still is trying to get me back there 'cause they're supposed to come this weekend and work.

00:18:28

SR: You know one of the workers—I went there once for lunch and took them some water and stuff and one of the workers who had come from I think from Mississippi, I thanked him for coming to help the city you know. I thanked him for coming to help us—our city get back together and he told me that he's been down here working on your place a couple times and he said that every time somebody thanks him he feels guilty because he's having such a good time.

00:18:57

WMS: What he said?

00:18:58

SR: He said he feels guilty when people thank him because he feels like he needs to thank you because he's having such a good time helping rebuild your place.

00:19:09

WMS: Oh yeah, well he—well I—see I don't know them all personally but I just go there and I just can't never stop thanking them you know.

00:19:18

SR: Well yeah.

00:19:20

WMS: Yeah.

00:19:21

SR: When you were growing up who taught you how to cook?

00:19:23

WMS: Oh I just watched my parents you know. My grandmother partly helped to raise me because my daddy died when I was six years old. And so my mother came back home you know and I was the only child and I just went from there—just watching them and I did like a little child and tried to learn how to cook and do this and do that. So when I come here, the food was a

little different. It's Creole cooking that they said; well it didn't take me no time to learn how to do that—what kind of seasoning and all to put into it you know. So and everybody—everybody eat my food—black and white—and the little white guy sometimes would hold the platter up to my son and said, 'well you don't have to wash it.' Set it back on the chair—be so clean you know. **[Laughs]** Baby we just oh Lord, I have just a bunch of the precious(est) customers. Oh I have top of the line. Ask her—see that big old box over there?

00:20:33

SR: Yeah.

00:20:33

WMS: One of the judges brought me that big old box and him and his wife took me out for dinner for my birthday and they always give me a big cake for my birthday.

00:20:42

SR: Who did that?

00:20:44

WMS: One of the judges.

00:20:46

SR: Oh, one of the judges. Oh really?

00:20:50

WMS: The judges and the lawyers and the district attorney being in there—oh baby; they’ve been in my place—and the Mayor will come all the time. You can look up and see him coming through the door anytime.

00:21:01

SR: Did he come before he was the Mayor?

00:21:03

WMS: Yeah; he come several times before he was Mayor. But since he been Mayor he just comes. They know about me ‘cause I tell you, you know when you treat people nice and you—word get around you know it’s—helps to support you, you know.

00:21:19

Miss White: She always was nice.

00:21:22

SR: Well and the good food helps.

00:21:24

Miss White: Uh-huh.

00:21:25

SR: The good cooking is part of it.

00:21:29

WMS: Yeah, yeah.

00:21:31

SR: Well how is the Creole cooking different from Mississippi cooking?

00:21:34

WMS: Well they puts a lot of seasoning. You see in Mississippi, we—we raised garlic; we had garlic but I never put garlic in my food—just onion, bell pepper, celery and that you know. But it—just—and I added garlic. I love garlic, me. I put a little garlic in everything like my gravies and things, and it gives a good flavor. And then garlic is good for your health.

00:21:58

SR: I know it is.

00:22:00

WMS: Yeah.

00:22:00

SR: Well what did they do with the garlic if they didn't cook with it in Mississippi?

00:22:05

WMS: Oh well we just raised it.

00:22:10

Miss White: You cook it in your food baby; you chop it up and put it in your food.

00:22:13

SR: Right, but—but Miss Willie Mae was saying that they didn't do that in Mississippi even though they grew it. I'm wondering what they did with it.

00:22:22

WMS: Yeah, but I did it anyway. But I did it anyway. **[Laughs]** I just got my way.

00:22:30

Miss White: And garlic was another thing in the food to keep the pressure down too.

00:22:35

SR: Oh to keep your blood pressure down?

00:22:35

Miss White: Yeah, it's good for that.

00:22:38

WMS: That's right. Oh it's good for your pressure. That's right, garlic is good for you.

00:22:42

Miss White: And the flavor too.

00:22:45

WMS: Yeah, and flavor.

00:22:48

SR: What about red beans? Did you have red beans in Mississippi?

00:22:50

WMS: Oh not—no, not too many—black-eyed peas was mostly you know—and butter beans, but red beans, that's—that's a Louisiana dish.

00:23:04

Miss White: It sure is. 'Cause you can't get it in Texas—not no red beans. They used to could. They used to go over there— getting them around Beaumont and Houston. I used to send red beans to my people in Beaumont.

00:23:24

SR: Oh really?

00:23:24

Miss White: Uh-huh. In fact if I go over there I'd bring six—seven packs. Well they wasn't but 59-cents a pound then. [*Laughs*]

00:23:34

WMS: They don't have red beans like we have them.

00:23:36

Miss White: No, uh-uh. [*Emphasis Added*]

00:23:40

WMS: Honey and I just love me some red beans. This is a read bean city here.

00:23:45

Miss White: That's it.

00:23:46

WMS: That's it. If you don't have no red beans you just out.

00:23:52

Miss White: That's right.

00:23:52

SR: You're just out?

00:23:53

WMS: And I cooked red beans Monday—I cooked them every day, but I cook the big lima beans on Mondays and Wednesdays. And every occasion I cook black-eyed peas, but them red beans—if I don't have—oh I know better than not put no pot on the stove not unless I have red beans; uh-um.

00:24:13

SR: You have that every day?

00:24:14

WMS: Every day. [*Emphasis Added*] That's my big seller.

00:24:18

SR: In Morgan City did you grow up with red beans Miss White?

00:24:21

Miss White: Uh-huh. Yes, we grewed up with red beans.

00:24:29

SR: Hmm.

00:24:30

Miss White: Red beans, butter beans and I had—my mom used to like a little white bean and I liked the big ones. The small tiny, tiny—just like a pea—she liked them and I liked the big ones. It was two kinds. Camellia—they got two kinds—the small ones and the large ones.

00:24:54

SR: And was Camellia—was that brand always around?

00:24:57

Miss White: To me we'd have them.

00:25:02

SR: That's the best.

00:25:02

WMS: New Orleans—Camilla—if you ain't got Camellia beans—no red beans taste like the Camellia beans [*Emphasis Added*]. And I will not buy—if I didn't have—I will not buy nothing but Camellia.

00:25:16

Miss White: Camellia that's right.

00:25:19

WMS: And if you cook them baby and cook them right baby that's some good eating. Do you eat red beans?

00:25:25

SR: Uh-huh, and I called the Camellia people once to ask them how their beans were different and they told me they weren't different.

00:25:36

WMS: What they told you?

00:25:38

SR: They told me they weren't different from other red beans. *[Laughs]*

00:25:42

WMS: *[Laughs]*

00:25:44

SR: And I disagreed.

00:25:46

Miss White: I think they're—they're different.

00:25:48

WMS: I guess they just didn't want to tell you but honey they different.

00:25:52

SR: Yeah.

00:25:51

Miss White: Yeah, they different.

00:25:52

WMS: They different baby; they just didn't want to tell you, you know. They didn't want to block the other people business out you know but that's why they told you that, yeah.

00:26:02

SR: I think so.

00:26:01

WMS: That's why they told you that. They—they didn't want to be interviewed like that—like they're putting a product down and lifting theirs up. I know what they done that for. But that is all right because you done cooked both kinds haven't you?

00:26:18

SR: Uh-hm.

00:26:20

WMS: You know the difference don't you?

00:26:21

SR: Yeah.

00:26:21

WMS: Okay then.

00:26:22

Miss White: You know the difference.

00:26:23

SR: There's definitely a difference.

00:26:26

WMS: Can't tell you nothing. It's a lot of difference.

00:26:29

SR: I agree. What do you put in yours—what kind of meat?

00:26:33

WMS: All different kinds, but I liked the pickle tips with the little gristle bone. Oh I like that for my seasoning. Well I have pickle meat too and I can—sometimes I—if I got ham hock I throw in but you can't—you can't cook that and—and give it to the customers because you can never cook enough of that but honey they satisfied with a little piece of the meat you cook.

00:26:59

Miss White: Little pickle tips.

00:27:01

WMS: Pickle tips with the little gristle bone in it; that's right.

00:27:08

SR: I got to try that.

00:27:09

Miss White: That's the [inaudible] when you can get it.

00:27:13

WMS: I'm telling you.

00:27:14

Miss White: The pickle tips.

SR: Is it hard to get?

00:27:15

WMS: It's been—since the storm.

00:27:18

SR: Oh since the storm.

00:27:23

Miss White: We have to go out in Jefferson since the storm up on Tchoupitoulas.

00:27:24

SR: Yeah, that's by my house.

00:27:31

Miss White: It is?

00:27:35

SR: Yeah, well where did you used to go—to the Circle Food?

00:27:34

Miss White: Circle Food or across the street; they had good pickled meat over there.

00:27:38

00:27:43

SR: Well maybe they'll reopen. I wonder if Circle Food is reopening.

00:27:47

Miss White: I—that's what I wonder. We passed it Tuesday—was it Wednesday? We just passed it on the side and the door was open.

00:27:58

SR: That's a real loss.

00:28:01

Miss White: It's really a loss; yeah it's really a loss. New Orleans is really lost I'll tell you the truth. I wanted to come back home 'cause I didn't have no water in the house but they had leaks and the lady fixed it but I tell you the truth it's hard [*Emphasis Added*] when you come down with groceries. You got to go so far now.

00:28:28

SR: Uh-hm.

00:28:29

WMS: Yeah, and nothing hardly—they're so long opening up places around here. No—no pharmacist where you can get your drugs—your medicine you know; you have to go on out you

know. That's—it's terrible; it's just sad. And a lot of people and old people they don't have no transportation you know. I still drive but my—I ain't drove my car since the hurricane. My car is in my son's garage down there. But I told him he had to get it out of there you know.

00:29:01

Miss White: Walgreen's is opening up at St. Bernard and Broad. That's where I got my medicine but it takes you so long to get it.

00:29:12

WMS: You couldn't get it the same day? You had to put it in there and they called you back and told you the next day huh?

00:29:17

Miss White: Uh-huh, well that's right.

00:29:19

WMS: And me too.

00:29:21

Miss White: They told me it would be ready for evening and they hadn't had it ready. So you got to be patient and wait.

00:29:29

SR: Everything is just a lot harder now.

00:29:30

Miss White: It is—very hard.

00:29:35

WMS: It's hard.

00:29:36

Miss White: So you got to make the best of it as we can baby and that's all. That's all.

00:29:44

SR: Well maybe it's good to have roommates then.

00:29:47

WMS: Huh?

00:29:48

SR: Well maybe it's good to have roommate at this point.

00:29:50

Miss White: Well she been here with me since November.

00:29:53

WMS: And baby I'll tell you—she couldn't treat me no better than if I was in the family. And if I was her sister—I think she'd treat me better not—not being her sister than she would her sister. She's so good to me.

00:30:09

Miss White: Yeah, 'cause I couldn't get along with her. I moved—I left—they was in Morgan City and I left and come here. I had an aunt here and she told me to come on down here and that was in '44.

00:30:24

SR: That was in '44?

00:30:26

Miss White: Uh-huh.

00:30:28

WMS: Baby when I got back, you seen her—she walks with her stick sometimes.

00:30:34

Miss White: I got arthritis in my bones.

00:30:36

WMS: She hobbled on down there to see about her friend. She's a good friend and her husband too, and I knew her husband before I knowed her.

00:30:45

SR: She came down to see you at the restaurant?

00:30:46

Miss White: Yeah, when she was down there one day we passed there and the place was open. So I told my daughter—she said she's trying to clean out and, I said well I'm not going to stop today. And the next couple days I went down there and she was there.

00:31:07

WMS: They have really been superb to me; she can tell you that. And they come here in droves huh, Miss White?

00:31:13

Miss White: Uh-huh.

00:31:14

WMS: When I first come here. They come to see about me. They come to see about me.

00:31:19

Miss White: One thing—don't know where you're going.

00:31:23

WMS: They called all the way from New York and said—I tell you—I wants to know about Willie Mae and did she get saved? Tell me—just you know; oh Lord those people up there, they just treat me so nice. It’s just unbelievable.

00:31:38

Miss White: You want some more coffee honey?

00:31:41

SR: I’m good. I like that. What brand do you use?

00:31:44

Miss White: That was—I use Community Coffee. And if I don’t—when I can get it—then uh...

00:31:58

WMS: CDM?

00:31:59

Miss White: CDM—that’s a little stronger you know.

00:32:03

SR: I think it’s probably your technique though also.

00:32:06

Miss White: Yeah; that's an old coffee too in New Orleans. But Community Coffee, my grandma used to use that.

00:32:17

SR: She did in Morgan City?

00:32:19

Miss White: Yeah.

00:32:22

SR: Community has been around forever.

00:32:25

Miss White: And they used to get their coffee, but it would be green coffee; I don't know if you ever remember this but they had—she used to parch her coffee in a skillet and she'd let it cool, and she had a grinder and we used to grind that coffee.

00:32:44

SR: Huh, your grandmother?

00:32:46

Miss White: Uh-huh, coffee comes in little beans.

00:32:51

SR: So they would be raw, huh?

00:32:52

Miss White: Yeah and you had to take your skillet or something and put it on the stove and
pach it ‘til it gets kind of brown.

00:33:01

WMS: Yeah.

00:33:00

SR: What do you do to it—pot? What did you say? *[Laughs]*

00:33:05

Miss White: You put it in a—we used to use a skillet, ‘cause it was deep enough, and you put it
on the stove and you stir it—‘cause it used to be green—until it gets dark, and then let it cool.
And we used to grind—we had a hand grinder. I remember that and I’m 82—83 years old. And
we used to grind coffee.

00:33:29

SR: I bet that was good.

00:33:31

Miss White: Yeah, coffee grinder—I don't see them no more.

00:33:36

SR: A hand grinder, huh?

00:33:37

Miss White: Yeah.

00:33:38

SR: But what were you saying you pot—you pot the—?

00:33:40

Miss White: You pach it; we called it pach.

00:33:43

SR: What—I don't know that word. How do you spell that?

00:33:51

Miss White: P-a-c-h. Pach. You pach it like you—you take a spoon and put it on the stove.

00:33:56

SR: Maybe that's a French word.

00:33:59

Miss White: Maybe so, but you don't see that no more. Now there's the A&P, they had a coffee and you would buy it and they would grind it for you too, but they had an electric grinder and we had the hand grinder. And we would be fussing; we was small children—'who going to grind the coffee?'

00:34:21

SR: Because you wanted to or you didn't want to?

00:34:24

Miss White: We wanted to.

00:34:26

SR: Where would you get the green coffee—at the supermarket?

00:34:29

Miss White: Now they used to have it at A&P. I don't know if they still have it there or not. And you'd buy it and they would grind it for you.

00:34:42

SR: Hmm.

00:34:42

Miss White: I guess that done played out now. Uh-huh.

00:34:51

WMS: That go way back there.

00:34:52

SR: Yeah.

00:34:53

Miss White: And the Sav-A-Center—.

00:34:55

WMS: What kind of food did y'all have in your city where you was raised up?

00:35:00

SR: Bland food.

00:35:05

WMS: Huh?

00:35:05

SR: Bland.

00:35:06

WMS: Bland food.

00:35:06

Miss White: Bland food.

00:35:09

SR: Yeah, it was mostly German heritage in my area. So there's a lot of sausage, but not very spicy sausage. And things like sauerkraut, you know, pickled cabbage and potatoes—it was very meat and potatoes—not a lot of gravies. But you know I—I love New Orleans because of its food.

00:35:40

WMS: Oh yeah, and that's what carries our city. They say we have the best food in the nation—that New Orleans has the best food of the nation. This is called the Creole City, and they say Creole cooking—it means all of that good seasoning that you put into it.

00:35:58

SR: And what makes me feel good now is hearing stories like you're telling where you know you're—you're having a hard time. You lost your house, you lost your business, your family is not here, but you still are cooking this food of your home, you know that can make you feel a little bit at home.

00:36:19

WMS: Oh yeah, I feel at home here. She can tell you that; I feels at home here. She makes me feel that way. If she didn't make me feel that way I'd have done picked up and gone. But honey I just feel—I tells her every day. I say and I'm going to miss you baby but we'll—see I live right around the corner and she can walk right around it. I told her you still don't have to cook; if she gets her one good solid meal, come on around there and get her some lunch every day. And my son will bring her lunch around here. And she'll tell you how they brought—she done been around there when they brought all that food for me and the workers, and people come from far and near to eat that food. They didn't tell them nothing; they was welcome to it 'cause they just have so much and so much and different stuff they cook.

00:37:11

SR: I ate there once.

00:37:14

WMS: Huh?

00:37:13

SR: I ate there once and it was delicious.

00:37:18

Miss White: It's delicious. That food—and they have some good gumbo around there too.

00:37:22

WMS: Right, yeah they had some good gumbo.

00:37:24

Miss White: I'm not much on gumbo in the summertime but I like gumbo and soup in the wintertime.

00:37:31

SR: What about—do y'all eat ya-ka-mein [pronounced 'yakimi']?

00:37:36

Miss White: If we can get it. But I don't know who has ya-ka-mein anymore.

00:37:42

WMS: I don't know either.

00:37:43

Miss White: They used to get it off Orleans Street.

00:37:46

WMS: See they used—the people used to—the guys used to like the ya-ka-mein when they be out drinking mostly.

00:37:53

Miss White: Yeah.

00:37:53

WMS: So we used to could go different places here to eat ya-ka-mein, but she and I was talking about that one day, about the ya-ka-mein.

00:38:02

Miss White: I think the Two Sisters—remember when they was—? I haven't seen ya-ka-mein in years.

00:38:09

WMS: And you know way up there on 7th Street at that restaurant they used to specialize in it.

00:38:16

Miss White: Seventh Street and what?

00:38:16

WMS: I forget—off of Danneel Street.

00:38:23

Miss White: Seven and Dryades, huh?

00:38:21

WMS: Huh?

00:38:23

Miss White: Seven and Dryades, huh?

00:38:24

WMS: Might have been—somewhere up in there, that restaurant over there, and they used to specialize in that ya-ka-mein. We used to sit there and them guys used to go in there and be drinking and done got their heads kinda—

00:38:35

Miss White: Is it up there where the cab stand?

00:38:37

WMS: Yeah, yeah.

00:38:39

SR: Was it called Bean Brothers?

00:38:40

WMS: Huh?

00:38:41

SR: Was it called Bean Brothers?

00:38:44

WMS: Oh I don't know about Bean Brothers.

00:38:47

SR: Okay, I heard about a place in that area that had ya-ka-mein.

00:38:50

WMS: Oh you did?

00:38:50

SR: Uh-hm.

00:38:52

WMS: Well that might be the same place. I—I don't know the name of the place.

00:38:58

Miss White: It was a drugstore in there wasn't it—in there that little restaurant?

00:39:03

WMS: I think it was in that block.

00:39:06

Miss White: Was the Dorgenois on that?

00:39:08

WMS: Yeah—up in there; you know where I’m talking about—‘cause one of the brothers used to work at a drugstore up there.

00:39:19

Miss White: One of The Dorgenois

00:39:21

WMS: Yeah, okay.

00:39:21

Miss White: I remember; I used to live up that way.

00:39:23

WMS: I used to just send and get it all the time.

00:39:25

Miss White: Yeah, but I haven’t had that in years.

00:39:28

WMS: No ya-ka-mein me neither, but I used to like it too 'cause I used to—.

00:39:33

Miss White: Yeah.

00:39:34

WMS: It was real good for you.

00:39:35

SR: But you don't make it huh?

00:39:37

WMS: Oh no, I never made ya-ka-mein. I ain't going to lie to you.

00:39:40

Miss White: There's a lot of work in that.

00:39:43

WMS: I ain't going to lie to you. I never made ya-ka-mein in my life 'cause I didn't sell enough of it—. It wouldn't be no problem—.

00:39:53

SR: Right, but it's just not your thing?

00:39:54

WMS: No, I—

00:39:57

SR: I think they might have it at that place right up here on Broad called Manchu.

00:40:02

Miss White: They might be.

00:40:04

WMS: They might be.

00:40:07

Miss White: I ain't had any of that in years. The last time I had some—Arthur brought some, oh and that been about seven years ago. He got it from this market on St. Claude Street. What's the name of that market—that fish market?

00:40:20

WMS: I can't think of that name. I never could think of that fish market name.

00:40:26

Miss White: On St. Claude. That's the last time I had some.

00:40:29

WMS: Uh-hm.

00:40:31

Miss White: And that been about seven or eight years—.

00:40:34

WMS: You like ya-ka-mein? It's good.

00:40:39

SR: I do but I—I didn't know—I learned after I started eating it that people eat it when they are drinking or when they're hung over. I just like it.

00:40:52

WMS: You just like it?

00:40:52

SR: [*Laughs*]

00:40:53

WMS: Uh-hm; yeah and that's—that's really when—when they start to drinking they say that's when it's good for your stomach—.

00:40:59

Miss White: I have a cousin. She could make it—she could make it—she used plenty of seasoning and she was making a gravy and she would use about two or three kinds of meat and that was—she made—she used soy sauce in it.

00:41:27

SR: Soy sauce yeah.

00:41:28

Miss White: Soy sauce, uh-huh; she ain't made that in a while. But I haven't been out there.

00:41:39

SR: Oh where does she live?

00:41:40

Miss White: Morgan City. Yeah.

00:41:47

WMS: I tell you, garlic plays a big role here in this city—garlic.

00:41:51

Miss White: Yeah, you get all kinds of seasoning in that.

00:41:53

WMS: Oh garlic is good. Garlic is good for everything. It's seasoning good, it's good for your health, and this is a garlic place baby. You ain't got no garlic you know and onions—

00:42:03

Miss White: Garlic brings the flavor.

00:42:04

WMS: And garlic I tell you it plays a big role here.

00:42:07

Miss White: That's what they make your hot sausage with.

00:42:10

WMS: Yeah garlic.

00:42:11

Miss White: Garlic and onion.

00:42:12

SR: Yeah, hot sausage. What about—do you put celery and bell pepper in your beans?

00:42:19

Miss White: Uh-huh.

00:42:19

WMS: Oh yeah.

00:42:21

Miss White: We put all the seasoning in there.

00:42:22

WMS: I puts all that seasoning in it—garlic, onion, bell pepper, and celery—put all that in the beans. Yeah, and I have never since I opened my restaurant had one customer to bring a plate back and said there was something wrong with it.

00:42:44

Miss White: That was lucky.

00:42:47

SR: I can't imagine.

00:42:48

WMS: Never.

00:42:48

Miss White: Yeah, 'cause they know her.

00:42:49

WMS: Never. It takes time—time is consuming when you—you're cooking. And I don't try to rush my food. I get up at 5 o'clock every morning—5:30 I'm down there in my restaurant and putting my beans on. I make my coffee, I get my paper and I sit down and drink my coffee and finish my paper while my beans is cooking. I know exactly—

00:43:15

Miss White: It takes time to cook some beans.

00:43:16

WMS: Yeah; and I know exactly what time to get up and start cooking my meat. See I—I time myself and I know exactly—got my clock up there on my wall and I know exactly.

00:43:30

SR: What do you do after—what is the next thing after you put the beans on?

00:43:34

WMS: I told you; I—I—

00:43:36

Miss White: Read the paper.

00:43:36

WMS: Get my paper and get my coffee 'cause I'm not a breakfast eater too much. Now my son what helps me in there. I cook grits; he—he—sometimes he don't eat them either, and then I fix him some sausage you know and so he'll sit down and eat him a little something before we start to work.

00:44:00

SR: What's your son's name who works there?

00:44:01

WMS: One time I had about five of us working there, but I cut down. I do not like no big, big restaurant, and my restaurant I can seat—seat 28.

00:44:16

SR: Twenty-eight?

00:44:18

WMS: Uh-huh; I can seat 28. I have eight tables. And the white lady—do you know them, they got a place up there on the river in the 300-block down on Canal Street by the river going up?

00:44:34

SR: It's on Canal Street?

00:44:35

WMS: Huh?

00:44:36

SR: It's on Canal Street?

00:44:38

WMS: All going on—

00:44:39

SR: Is it Palace Café?

00:44:39

WMS: I have their phone number and the address too. I got to call that lady 'cause I've been trying to call her and her and her husband came through. It's the second time they come to me and they heard about my place you know, so she told me whenever I get all of my stuff out of there and get it back in tact they going to come and get me and they going to help me to get me some merchandise—get me some stuff you know.

00:45:05

SR: Do they have a restaurant?

00:45:07

WMS: Uh-hm.

00:45:06

SR: Oh I don't know.

00:45:08

WMS: They have a restaurant. I got to go to see them too. I wanted to go the other day, but by me not driving and it's just so hard. My son—this one here, he drives cab and he just be busy you know and that other one needs to come on down from Houston 'cause I don't think he going be able to stay up there. I don't think he's going to like it. Houston is all right; it's nice, you know, for you to get out but I don't know. Like I was telling Miss White this morning, I mean I thought about relocating and going back to Jackson and getting me a place up there but my little place is so nice and the people treat me so nice. I have my clients there—customers that they just worrying me to come back and all of that. So I been here all my life. My children was raised here.

00:46:01

SR: What—how did you come up with that name Scotch House, the Scotch House?

00:46:06

WMS: Well when I first went into business I had applied for my license. I had got my liquor license but my beer license hadn't come and like they—like the—the—federal people and all, the tax people, they'd come around and check to see you know what—nosy you know. And they came around and I didn't have my beer license and they looked in my box and they saw my beer and they told me to take it out of there. I couldn't sell it 'til I got my license you know. I had a couple of guys around the bar there drinking beer you know, and they stopped me from selling it 'til my license come. I had applied for one now and had paid for it but they just hadn't sent them yet. So they said that ain't no big thing; they took the license for your beer. You got your liquor license up there; we're going to buy all the scotch on the bar, and they started drinking the scotch. They run an ad in the paper—we got a paper here called the *Louisiana Weekly*; it's still on the market. And they run an ad in there and they named my place that—*Willie Mae's Scotch House*—my customers.

00:47:18

SR: Your customers ran an ad?

00:47:20

WMS: My customers ran an ad. They paid for it.

00:47:24

SR: That's fun.

00:47:24

WMS: Yeah, yeah. Had no problem baby. The policemen have to come meet me. I've been on that corner since '57. I never been held up; I never had to call the police for an incident happening in my place—no fight or nothing, and they just think it's remarkable. And a lot of times baby I didn't have nobody in there but me and I'd stay in there 'til 3:30 or 4 o'clock in the morning. And then my last customer would say you got to get on out of here now; you know what I mean? Sometimes I'd be in there an hour by myself and whatnot—nobody never bothered me.

00:48:06

SR: Did your husband work there?

00:48:08

WMS: No, no, no; uh-uh. He ain't never worked there. He—he worked contracting work. But my husband and I separated and then I opened the place after. I could have never had the place with my husband 'cause he was a jealous-hearted man. Oh, he was jealous and I couldn't have never done that. But I went on and I ain't stumbling. I ain't never had to ask nobody for nothing. I used to do a lot of those movie star clothes—them pretty evening gowns with the beads and all that when I worked the cleaner. The cleaner is still there at Airline Highway and Sue's Berry Road [unsure of this spelling].

00:48:52

SR: Airline and which?

00:48:53

WMS: Sue's Berry Road.

00:48:53

SR: Oh I don't know that.

00:48:56

WMS: Yeah, it's a cleaners. It's—it's the Sue Berry Laundry and Cleaners [unsure of this spelling]. I worked at one further down and then after they sold out with the business I went to that and then I said, 'well Lord.' I went to school and—'cause I seen the girl. I said I believe I'll go to school and get me some beautician license. And I went to school for that and I got my license and I done that for a while, like I said. Baby I been working hard all my life. I had to do that to raise my children you know. So nothing—I—I raised them pretty good.

00:49:34

SR: I'd say.

00:49:35

WMS: And the important part—I love cleanliness. We just kept our place clean. We had white tile—it was white this—well you've been in there.

00:49:47

SR: It's all white.

00:49:48

WMS: My sons—oh he takes that bleach and that stuff and cleans and puts him a little bit of wax, not that much, just enough to put a shine on it. And he'll wipe all day long 'cause he got a wife that's a fanatic. When I tell you a fanatic, you can't leave a spoon out no place. I tell you what—I tell you—I get mad sometimes with her 'cause [*Laughs*]—

00:50:16

SR: Because she's so crazy clean?

00:50:16

WMS: Yeah, but she—she immaculate—I just have to give here that. Everybody that knows her knows that about her and she—she got him wiping all day long. And he will never leave out of that place without he seeing all of my pots is washed and dried up and put into place before he leaves. I never have to go in my kitchen and find a fork or spoon or knife dirty in the sink or nothing when I come down. And you know what used to could get my daughter, if somebody—if they would wash them dishes and things and leave them in the drain. She wants you—when the counter dries off to get that towel and dry them up and put them in place. She just couldn't stand to leave no dishes in the drain.

00:51:06

SR: So your daughter worked with you?

00:51:08

WMS: She worked with me before she passed on. That's who was running the place. We had about—there was five of us in there 'cause like I said I used to cook and they used to have all kinds of sandwiches and I had to cook that out.

00:51:21

SR: What was your daughter's name?

00:51:23

WMS: Lillie—let me show you my daughter's picture.

00:51:27

SR: Yeah, I'd love to see it. And what is your son's name who works there?

00:51:33

WMS: Charles.

00:51:35

SR: Charles, right.

00:51:36

WMS: Charles, Sr. and Eddie and Louis—he's named after his dad.

00:51:42

SR: Is Eddie the one who drives the cab?

00:51:43

WMS: Eddie was in business—he was in the—he was in the seafood business. He had the place—and he still has that building on—on Broad—Broad and Paris Avenue, right on the corner, the white stucco building there on that corner. That’s his place; that’s his building now but he—.

00:52:09

SR: Wait, so you had three sons and one daughter?

00:52:12

WMS: Three sons and one daughter—that’s my daughter.

00:52:17

SR: Oh sorry. Oh, she’s beautiful.

00:52:20

WMS: Oh she was brilliant. Oh they loved her. She was so friendly and warm; oh she just would put her arms around the guys and told them—.

00:52:31

SR: How long was this before she passed away—this picture?

00:52:34

WMS: Oh that was—she never aged. She just didn't age. Like some people age; she had this kind of oily skin and they say if you got oily skin you don't wrinkle fast, you know.

00:52:48

SR: Yeah beautiful. How old was she when she passed away?

00:52:51

WMS: Forty—forty—some.

00:52:54

SR: Oh that's too soon.

00:52:56

WMS: And my baby son here—here I don't have his picture here but I have—a lot of my pictures got washed away too 'cause I couldn't get them out of there. We had to get out of there and they were screaming and hollering for me to come on out of there. And we had to get out of there baby. That Sunday—we had to hurry up and make it out of there.

00:53:15

SR: And where did you go—Houston?

00:53:17

WMS: Houston—we went to—me and my oldest son—course I was with them—me and my oldest son and his wife and Carrie and her husband, they was in a different part, and we went to Mississippi and we couldn't find no hotel up there so we kept searching around and searching around and this guy told us that Carrie and them had found a hotel. So we just kept circling around and circling around until a guy told us they—where this hotel was—just right out of—of—now please—oh shit—not Texas, Mississippi I'm trying to say, right on this side of Jackson, just right on this—another little town in Mississippi. And we was lucky enough to get a place there. Oh baby and that was the nicest little place—right around that corner. And I loved those pancakes. We used to be there where you could get them pancakes. So I left on and went onto Houston by my other son and then after that they left and come there too. But we tried to get back around here three or four times but the water was still up there and the police turned us around on the highway. Couldn't get to it. And there it is baby; I just got to pick up the pieces and keep walking—'cause God was able to save our life.

00:54:49

SR: Well that's true.

00:54:50

WMS: That's the main thing.

00:54:51

SR: Had you ever evacuated for a hurricane before?

00:54:54

WMS: No. And I had a five-room house. I had a living room, dining room, two bedrooms, two baths and a den. And it's all furnished; I had me some nice stuff and I'll never be able to buy no more. And I ain't going to try but I got to go back and furnish it.

00:55:13

SR: How much water went in there?

00:55:15

WMS: Oh my God—enough to run you funny. When you went in there your pretty tables and things—just like she said you know just falling apart. That saltwater will ruin them. They let it stayed in there too long.

00:55:29

SR: That's the problem.

00:55:31

WMS: They let that water stay in there too long. That saltwater—I asked them what kind of water is that saltwater? I know it eats up stuff.

00:55:42

Miss White: Yeah.

00:55:42

SR: There was a lot of stuff in that water.

00:55:45

WMS: I can witness that—it eats up. It eat up wood. I guess it eat up pine too.

01:02:37

[End William Mae Seaton]