

TONI TIPTON-MARTIN
Austin, TX

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Date: Unknown
Location: Unknown
Interviewer: Virginia Wood
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs
Length: 16 minutes
Project: SFA Founders

[Begin Toni Tipton-Martin Interview]**00:00:03**

Virginia Wood: Okay. We are collecting information for the Southern Foodways Founders Oral History Project. This is Virginia Wood interviewing Toni Tipton-Martin. How did you come to be involved with SFA?

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Toni Tipton-Martin: Like many of the founders, I received a letter from John Egerton inviting me to participate in a meeting that he was organizing along with the University of Mississippi at the Southern Progress headquarters at *Southern Living* in Birmingham. And the ambition was large but based on his reputation and his passion for diversity for the Southern food message, it was important to me.

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VW: Okay; were you involved with either of the Southern food organizations that pre-dated SFA, the Society for the Preservation and Revitalization of Southern Food or the American Southern Food Institute?

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TTM: No, I was not. I knew there were some other ones, but I didn't know what they were called.

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VW: Did you go to the organizational meeting in Birmingham in the summer of 1999 and if so, what do you recall about it—impressions?

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TTM: I remember that there was a lot of enthusiasm. Everyone was excited about the possibility but they were all largely living in the South, working in the South, and had—had some association with those previous organizations. So along with that enthusiasm there were some concerns about the viability of trying to start another organization. And there were some very serious questions being raised around the table along with the exhilaration about the possibility—.

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VW: What was your vision for SFA when it began?

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TTM: I, as a journalist, noticed the disparate representation of African American cooks in the theater of Southern food. And so the idea of bringing a second—or the other side of the story appealed to me. I thought this was a collection of people with a similar interest so that it would not be the same old lip service through diversity and all of those things that was in society. But this was different; they were passionate and they had thriving careers elsewhere. And so they were going to make it happen. If—if anyone was going to make it happen SFA would. So I saw my own passion—the ability for my own passion to be fulfilled through SFA because I was out on an island pretty much by myself, and I needed to align with a group or with others who were headed the same direction.

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VW: Well that was really great that that gave you that opportunity.

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TTM: I hoped so; I hoped so.

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VW: Has your vision evolved or changed and how after six years?

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TTM: Naturally, I would say my vision has grown. It's easy to look back and see mistakes and missed opportunities and think we should have done this better or we could have done that better. And in the early days we were all struggling to figure out what is the best way to approach this topic or this group of people and not offend others, because it was a very delicate balance getting people together in a room where they feel comfortable sharing sometimes emotional and painful memories without tramping on them. So—so I could say that I felt—I had felt over along the way that we may have had some missteps, but overall I think we've accomplished the goals that we set out at the four or five year mark.

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I consider it ready to go to the next level and maybe face some of those challenges and things that looked like we were trying to do them before, dig a little bit deeper now that the group has confidence and feels secure in the environment, and we may be able to dig a little deeper. But because I was so socially involved in [*Phone Rings*]—.

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VW: Did you attend that first symposium in 1998? And what do you recall about it? Are there particular moments that stand out in your mind?

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TTM: Unfortunately I did not attend the first meeting, so my first experience was the second meeting. And by then the idea for an organization had—was already—.

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VW: Tell us about your role in developing the SFA's mission and vision and programming. I'm sure you must have had a lot of input in that.

00:06:00

TTM: I did but it wasn't all by my choice. **[Laughs]** I arrived in Birmingham as a passionate observer and that was the role that I intended to play. And so I sat in on the workshops, the mission and vision workshop and over the course of the morning we would build the goals and aims for the organization from an overarching umbrella of really the ambitions had been mapped either from the previous organizations, from—from a variety of sources, I assume. But we started under this umbrella of terms and objectives, and we just built those into a working mission and goal—set of goals.

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From that—by the end of the weekend, I found myself on the list of thirteen possible steering committee members, people who I think were going to be responsible for—in charge of

taking this mission statement and determining its viability and whether we could work it into an organization.

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So within a short time I emerged again on the list of potential leadership. It came as a surprise to me being an outsider that had helped birth the organization in a family sense among the group, and I definitely felt that, and I reminded them of that at every opportunity. So I think it was that difference if I had to say where I contributed, it was the fact that I was an outsider to some extent, and so I was not the best—I didn't have anything—territory that I was trying to protect and I could be more objective. I wasn't necessarily interested in all the politics that had gone on before, so that when we came together to do that business we could really focus on the business. And I think that put us on the fact that to accomplish some really ambitious goals that both the organizations had not been able to reach—figure out.

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VW: Well I remember hearing John Egerton say on more than one occasion about you—saying he felt like that your leadership was one of the main reasons that SFA got out of its infancy and he really gave you the credit and your organizational and management and—and leadership—gave you the credit for that.

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TTM: That was quite a compliment for me, and it was one of my actually searching some of the more experienced members of the organization—because I was concerned about that. I had a great concern about being a youngster and a Yankee—all of that. And I did not want to be seen as the extension of him. But if it turned out, we had so much in common in our passion for

Southern food that it was a natural alliance, and I was able to perhaps accomplish what he would have accomplished which is what everyone expected. So my—but I didn't have to rely upon his friendship and personal relationship that he would have naturally used. I just kept the focus on the work we could do.

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VW: Okay. The SFA focuses upon food as culture. What does that mean to you both intellectually and personally?

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TTM: Over the course of my work, I have encountered people—African Americans in particular, who say, “I don’t cook like that anymore.” There’s a sense of detachment and a loss for Southern food. But at the same time there’s a deeply rooted yearning for the relationship and the association that go along with the food. And so there’s a tremendous loss not only in our ability to cook the food, but in those experiences they’re associated with.

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Those who have maintained the foods in their family, even at the time of holiday basis or a periodic basis, always talk about it in terms of memories, food memories. I don’t think that they’re separate-able. One can hardly talk about a Southern meal without it being associated with some kind of place. And similarly I think we associate food to a certain—we associate the occasion. So I think it says definitely **[inaudible]** and compatible **[inaudible]** in my mind.

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VW: You have ideas for the future of the organization; are there projects still that you'd like to see or topics that you want to see covered?

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TTM: I think we've done a good job being balanced in terms of food topics and socially cultural topics, and as I said I hope that we would do the organization and its founders a disservice if we don't push through the memories and take it to the next level. So we've chosen some fairly obvious topics. I'd like to see us do what we did in Austin, Texas which is reach beyond that, perhaps reaching even into places where we aren't certain what the Southern experience is. We've got to do some new perhaps obscure quote unquote scholars to bring that outter voice because that is who we are; we're a diverse group and we should treat them to more diverse experiences.

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We have taken ourselves out on a limb with the iconic Southern food topics, but I'd like to see us introduce more diversity to go with it **[inaudible]** in the next five years.

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VW: Okay. What is the date and place of your birth? You've been talking about being a Yankee, so where—where and when were you born?

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TTM: I was born in 1959 in Los Angeles, California, and I lived most of my life there. So I have some baseline Southern experiences in terms of food, but as I said in my work, my family made skid marks when they headed south. And my Southern affiliation was not a topic of—

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VW: Cherished and maintained?

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TTM: Absolutely not. The foods that we ate were Southern by default but they were part of a large repertoire of food and being from Southern California that is a wide assortment of everything from—so we were not. I don't—I didn't have a traditional Southern upbringing.

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VW: Where in the South was your family—did your family originate, do you know?

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TTM: That's difficult to ascertain, but somewhere in the East Texas; Shreveport, Louisiana; and Greenville—were able to—it's not a lot of—I don't have very many family members left, and so most of the information I'm collecting and I'm getting from [inaudible] unfortunately.

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VW: Okay; tell us about the—well you did some of this already—tell us about the food of your childhood, who prepared it, what were typical meals, and describe the ceremony of those meals.

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TTM: Well the ceremony of the meals ebbed and flowed. My grandmother probably provided the most vivid, and her twin sister. They probably provide the most vivid imagery I have of the mealtime and the sense of Southern hospitality. But my grandmother passed away when I was—.

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[End Toni Tipton-Martin]