



Stark Aldridge

Pontotoc, MS

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Interviewer: Sarah I. Rodriguez

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Sarah Rodriguez: This is Sarah Rodriguez with the Southern Foodways Alliance. It is June 20th, 2023. I am here in Oxford, Mississippi. Do you mind introducing yourself for the recorder?

Stark Aldridge: Hi. I'm Stark Aldridge. I was borned and raised in Pontotoc County. Now, the reason I'm in the Farmers Market line—I was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia, and I finally got the right medication. And they encouraged me to get into somethin that would help push me forward. So I started out with 12 or 14 chickens. And it's been more of a therapy for me than anything. And I've now grown from 12 to 14 chickens to between 150 and 200.

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I also now have all kind of old-timey jams and jellies. And today I have my fudge brownies that will be soft and chewy. Now, some friends—I was getting more eggs than I could sell there at the house—friends recommended me coming to Oxford. The first time I set up, I had about 12 or 14 dozen eggs. And that's been approximately eight year ago. Today I have I believe 61 dozen eggs, a large variety of jams and jellies, along with the brownies.

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Sarah Rodriguez: Nice! What a process. What a progress you've made! Could you share your birthdate for the record?

Stark Aldridge: Borned August the 15th, 1950.

Sarah Rodriguez: And you grew up in Pontotoc?

Stark Aldridge: In Pontotoc County.

Sarah Rodriguez: Could you tell me a bit about your family?

Stark Aldridge: My great granddaddy was a truck farmer as well, and peddled. Probably started out with a team and a wagon. And then my people fared really well during the Depression era, because they knew how to truck patch farm, and to raise their own food. I've been working in gardens and fields basically all my life.

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When Mom went to work in the factory, I started out pickin cotton by hand. But when Mom went to work in the factory, that left me to take care of the garden, gather it, and have it ready to can when she got in.

Sarah Rodriguez: Did you have any siblings that you grew up with?

Stark Aldridge: I had an older sister that's deceased, and I have a younger sister.

Sarah Rodriguez: How did you start learning about gardening and tending the land?

Stark Aldridge: I started out with my mother. She *always* had a garden or a truck patch. And when I say truck patch, I'm not talkin about a row or two. I'm talkin about a fourth to a half acre. Granddaddy raised at that time field corn, which is just as good if you know how to cook it.

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He would go and gather a load, which would be several hundred ears of corn. Grandmother taught me how to cut off cream-style corn. She would help us until we got enough for her to start cooking it, or blanching it to freeze. Then I would go to doin all of the cutting, while two others

shucked and silked, and I could keep them two goin pretty good by myself. I was probably nine or ten years of age. So, I've been in the gardenin process all my life.

Sarah Rodriguez: Were your siblings also interested in gardening?

Stark Aldridge: My siblings were not interested. That's why I wound up learning how to cook. Grandmother taught me how to cook, and I remember the first dish, that was the country way of making spasgetti [spelled phonetically].

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And at that time, you stir fried your ground beef, you boiled your noodles, made your sauce, and put it all in one pot.

Sarah Rodriguez: So you know how to make that.

Stark Aldridge: I can cook pretty much anything I want to. I can do pies. I don't like to do cakes, but I can do them. Yesterday, I took my Dutch oven, which is a cast-iron pot, about four and a half to five inches deep, I put a stick of margarine in it, I cut up an onion, then some new potatoes, and then squash, put my lid on it, put it in the oven, and cooked it, with salt and pepper.

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Sarah Rodriguez: Nice!

Stark Aldridge: And the next time I do it, I think I'm either gonna put sausage, or some kind of Polish sausage in it.

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah.

Stark Aldridge: I don't have to have a recipe. I can go in the kitchen, and whatever I've got I can make a meal.

Sarah Rodriguez: Could you tell me a bit more about what it was like for you growing up in Pontotoc?

Stark Aldridge: [laughs] This'll be the funny part. We did not have indoor facilities or bathrooms until about '62 or '63. We drew water out of the well, put it in a large tub, early in the morning to let it warm up, and at the end of the day all of us took a bath, one at a time, on the back porch, in that one tub. There weren't houses thick as fleas on a dog's back then.

0:07:02

Yeah, I remember the old outhouses or privies, and all of that good stuff.

Sarah Rodriguez: You said your mom worked in a factory? What did your parents do?

Stark Aldridge: Dad was a truck driver. Mom worked in the shirt factory for a while, then in the golf factory sewing golf bags.

Sarah Rodriguez: This was in the Pontotoc area?

Stark Aldridge: Yeah. And before that, I went to the field with Mother with a cotton sack. First sack, to tell you how small I was, was a 20-pound flour sack, with a strap sewed on it. And I graduated to a nine-foot. So, I've worked in and around the fields off and on all my life. I pulled corn by hand after it dried.

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And you don't want to get in the field early with that, because if the dew is still on, it's hard; you got to wring it off. But once it dries, it'll snap.

Sarah Rodriguez: That makes sense. What was food like in your house growing up? You said you cooked some. What are some other dishes you remember from your childhood?

Stark Aldridge: Well, we had the standard old peas and butter beans and string beans. Tomato soup. We raised our own potatoes. I love fresh potato stewed, with a good bit of margarine in there, and when they get about done, put a little flour and water thickenin in it, and you can make a meal with that and a pan of cornbread and an onion. So, it was standard. We raised our own hog meat.

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I've helped butcher hogs, and I've helped cut up the lard. I've helped cook out the lard. Which is what we used to cook with. When I grew up, you didn't run to the grocery store every time you turned around. You grew it, or you didn't have it.

Sarah Rodriguez: That makes sense.

Stark Aldridge: And I can vaguely remember killin one beef, when I was really, really small. But they done it all. On the other meats, when I was a child, Granddaddy was a hunter, He killed squirrels, rabbits, possums, raccoon. And he fished. And he knew how to dress and prepare it, and Grandmother could cook it. I can say this, on my part—I have taught myself how to pressure-can chicken, fresh off of the yard.

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I can pressure-can deer meat. Also wild pork, or the wild hogs. And I can can fish, to make homemade salmon patties. And I taught myself how to do that. I just figured it out.

Sarah Rodriguez: Did you know what you wanted to be, when you were growing up?

Stark Aldridge: In school, my first thoughts was to be a cattle rancher. So I wanted to stay around the farm my live-long life. I've worked in factories. Factory life is harder on you, on your health, than the farm life.

0:11:00

Farm life's hard, but you're breathin fresh air, and you're not packin [sp] concrete [sp]. And that alone makes a difference. Now, it gets hot pickin cotton. It got hot haulin hay and puttin it in the barn loft. Got pretty rough in the corn patches. But it's still a better life. When you can go to the creek and catch a fresh mess of catfish and skin em and dress em out and fry em fresh, two to one better than anything you can buy.

Sarah Rodriguez: That's fair. That makes sense.

Stark Aldridge: Now. What's next?

Sarah Rodriguez: What is next is, could you talk to me a bit about going through school, what happened when you got out of school?

Stark Aldridge: I surrendered to preach, about a year after I got out of high school.

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Went to college one semester, and at the end of that semester I volunteered to be a summer missionary, and they placed me in Buffalo, New York. I've pastored about three or four churches

all told. Still teach Sunday school, fill in, in the pulpit, when I have an opportunity. In the earlier days, churches could not pay you enough to just live on the church field. You had to work, and that's where the factory life come in at.

Sarah Rodriguez: How long were you in Buffalo?

Stark Aldridge: Three months. The funny part about that—at home, the day before I left for Buffalo, we hauled hay to midnight.

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Hot is not the word for it. When I finally got to Buffalo, there was still ice around the lakes up there. A shock, for sure. Here, we were still with gravel roads, many of em very narrow. When I got to Buffalo, there was three and four lanes of traffic one way. A very, very shocking experience.

Sarah Rodriguez: Around what year did you go up there?

Stark Aldridge: '71 or '72, somewhere around there. And I thoroughly enjoyed it.

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The first—they had a camp out from Buffalo in the mountains, and the first group of boys I had was five Black boys. And I still remember some of them's names. I believe—Elijah [sp], Douglas [sp], and Derrick [sp] was three of em. There were five, I think.

Sarah Rodriguez: What happened after your time in New York?

Stark Aldridge: I came back here and pastored and worked.

Sarah Rodriguez: Could you tell me a bit more about your transition into doing this type of work full-time?

Stark Aldridge: As I said first, I deal with clinical depression. And I had gotten down through one of the rounds to where I was so weak I couldn't even ride a lawnmower.

0:15:00

And they finally got the right medication, and I began by the Lord's help to push til I could get back up to goin. Now, the interesting thing about that—I was tryin to put up a double cookin of tomato relish, which I'm not doing now. I had got the tomatoes, the onions, and the bell peppers chopped, and I had it on cookin. And I just got so tired and so weak I couldn't finish it. And I called my cousin and her husband, and they come and put it in a jar for me. And I began to build from that.

Sarah Rodriguez: When did you start having symptoms of clinical depression? Your whole life, or—?

Stark Aldridge: I can look back and say that I've dealt with it all my life.

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Had to start taking medicine around 30 years of age. And I've had either two or three pretty rough rounds where the medicine quit workin. And—oh, I bought 50—well, it's 53 acres—

Sarah Rodriguez: Down in Pontotoc?

Stark Aldridge: —in Pontotoc County, and tried to get in the middle of it. Because, you do have to have time alone, to regroup and to get your thoughts together, and to be able to keep

goin. Like I say, I still work in the church—Sunday school director, Sunday school teacher, help in the kitchen and that, when they have meals. I’ve helped cook for youth camps.

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A couple of those camps, time you counted workers and all, was close to 100 people. It was enough—I know one time, we opened four—either four or five of those number three cans of string beans. And to tell you how the Lord can bless, I never cooked that much before in my life at one time. But by my Lord’s help, when I got through with them beans, those little kids ate em. And that’s sayin a lot for a kid to eat vegetables.

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah, for sure. You said you started with chickens, for the most part, here?

0:18:00

Stark Aldridge: Yeah. I started with just a handful of hens.

Sarah Rodriguez: Before that, were you still working with the church?

Stark Aldridge: I’ve always worked with the church, off and on, all my life.

Sarah Rodriguez: Okay. Were you still doing some factory work then, as well?

Stark Aldridge: Worked at the factories up until the nineties. And then I’ve done a little carpentry work. And I love remodeling [sp] because it was a challenge [sp], and I was blessed I got to where I could cut the crown molding, and with a guy talkin me through it, I could cut the rafters with all the angles on it. [0:18:49 wind noise].

0:19:00

Well, I'd just lay around in the house; that's all I could do. I was doin good to get up and fix me somethin to eat. I would have never believed that the chemicals in your body, when they malfunction, can leave you weaker than a kitten. But they can. And you deal with a lot of—I don't know what the right word is—people don't understand, and all they know to say is, “You just have to get back up [sp].” When you've got nothing but your clothes on, and that's a lot.

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[0:20:01 wind noise] And I think you can see from what is here this morning, I work. Two or three weeks back, in two days, I put up 106 jars of peach marmalade, by myself. And, about a week ago, I got six flats, of strawberries. Now I will admit, my legs are not as strong, and I use a stool in the kitchen. I pull that stool up to the sink. And I went through six cases of strawberries—cappin em, runnin em through the food processor, measuring em out—which is seven and a half cups of strawberries, for a double cookin.

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And I had 13 double cookins, in one day's time, by myself.

Sarah Rodriguez: Wow.

Stark Aldridge: And you have to—when you can get access to your fruit, you have to learn how to store it, to where you can have it year-round. I do peach, I do strawberry, and I do blueberry in the freezer. Your muscadine and your blackberry, and your scuppernong, I boil them after they're washed, until they burst and are tender. I run em through what is called a sieve, to get the pulp and the juice out of em, turn around and put the juice on the table, or back on the stove, bring it to a rollin boil, and then I can *it*.

0:22:14

And that way, I can put up jelly year-round. I am blessed in knowing how to do and to figure out things. I've had both knees, partial knee surgery done on it, and it didn't slow me down much. You sit down, you gonna go to the graveyard.

Sarah Rodriguez: And whenever you first started raising chickens, you said you sold the eggs mostly out of your house?

Stark Aldridge: Mmhmm.

Sarah Rodriguez: Who'd you sell them to?

Stark Aldridge: Friends, neighbors, whoever needed fresh eggs.

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Sarah Rodriguez: So your community, I guess, in the Pontotoc area?

Stark Aldridge: Yeah. And I now work the Pontotoc Farmers Market on Saturday morning, and the Oxford Market on Tuesday evenings. And to be 72, almost 73 years of age, that's quite a bit.

Sarah Rodriguez: For sure. And, were you canning whenever you started with the Oxford Community Market? How did you get specifically into canning? Was it something you were just interested in?

Stark Aldridge: That, and I needed something else to go with the eggs. And my brownies—now right now, we have too many pastry vendors here. I'm not makin my peanut butter chess squares, nor cinnamon roll cake right now, just the brownies.

0:24:04

But that helped bring attention to the table, where you could sell other stuff. Now [Stark grabs his list of jams and jellies.]—so I don't miss nothin—now, I'm puttin up muscadine jelly, scuppernong [0:24:26 wind noise], peach marmalade, apple jelly, apple *butter*, plum, strawberry jam, blackberry jelly, blackberry jam. And when I can, I put up fig preserves and pear preserves. Which is pretty good assortment.

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Sarah Rodriguez: For sure.

Stark Aldridge: Now, I still do it pretty much like my mother and grandmother would do it.

Sarah Rodriguez: That's where you learned it from?

Stark Aldridge: I've been around this, like I say, my whole life.

Sarah Rodriguez: How did you first learn about the Oxford Community Market?

Stark Aldridge: Wylie Stark told me [0:25:29 wind noise] guy that's got the peach orchard in Pontotoc County. He is a cousin of mine.

Sarah Rodriguez: Had you been to a farmers market before? Had you been to any other farmers markets before?

Stark Aldridge: Betsy [Chapman] was setting up on West Jackson under a tent, and I just showed up one day with an ice chest and a few dozen eggs, and it's grown from there over about seven or eight years.

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And, something that I consider a blessin—Betsy has it now where we can go to the liberry [phonetic spelling] onced a month, and demonstrate various cooked goods. Now, you're not gonna believe this, but you'll have to come. I believe my next time is in July. But I can put up jelly at the liberry, and a fry daddy. Don't question it, just come. The lord has given me the ability to do things that a lot of people can't.

Sarah Rodriguez: I'll have to see it then. [laughs]

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Stark Aldridge: I tried it one time at home, before I came, and I think I've done strawberry. Can't remember if I've done peach or not. But I know I've demonstrated French cooking eggs. I learned that off of a cooking show. You just cook your eggs real slow, keep em stirred, you put a lot of the old red-rind cheese in there, and about a stick of butter. Paula Dean don't have anything on me when it comes to butter.

Sarah Rodriguez: [laughs]

Stark Aldridge: I can't cook without it. And I can't remember how many, but it was either five or six dozen eggs that I cooked, at one time, in an electric skillet, and they musta liked it; they scraped the dish.

Sarah Rodriguez: Really.

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Stark Aldridge: But they stayed moist and didn't clump up in hard knots like some of em do. And we got somebody comin right now, I think wantin eggs, because here comes a whole bunch of egg cartons.

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah, we can pause it for a second. [audio pauses and then resumes]

Stark Aldridge: And people do return their egg cartons, and that helps keep down the expense. Because your profit margin in this type work is pretty lean. I know I sell my eggs at \$6 a dozen, but the feed hasn't been down very much at all. And there was for a while I really wasn't makin anything above the feed. That's not countin your labor, your lights, or your water.

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And you gotta be pretty crafty to build a chicken pen that a raccoon can't tear into. Because they *will* do it. They cleaned me out a time or two, before I learned.

Sarah Rodriguez: How many chickens did you start with, and how many do you have now?

Stark Aldridge: I started out with a dozen, maybe 14. And I still don't have as many as usual; I lost a bunch this time. But I should have close to 200.

Sarah Rodriguez: Right now?

Stark Aldridge: Uh-huh. I normally have three or four.

Sarah Rodriguez: In terms of collecting the eggs and everything, do you mostly do that on your own? Do you have any help?

Stark Aldridge: The only time I have help doin the eggs is on Tuesday when I'm over here.

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Now, I've already gathered a few. They're setting in a basket in the sink. Some friends [0:30:08 wind noise] and gather the rest of em [0:30:14 wind noise]. Now, in the last two years, that couple has come and helped with the jelly process [0:30:29]. She and I will do jelly, and we have done 120 half-pints in a day's time.

Sarah Rodriguez: Wow. Who are these friends? How did you know them?

Stark Aldridge: From church.

Sarah Rodriguez: Nice.

Stark Aldridge: And they want something to do, from time to time. And that's the wrong thing to say around me. I can give you *plenty* to do [0:31:00 wind noise].

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I've just recently bought a new cook stove. I used the one that I replaced around 14 years. And if you can stop and think—I have by myself put up 70-something jars in a day's time—you use a stove. And you're better off with a gas cook stove that has two large eyes on the front, one to do the jelly in, the other to water-bath em. Something else that I find that's interesting—two of the pots that I cook my muscadine, blackberries, and that type stuff off in, is going to be about 18 or 20 inches deep.

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Really a commercial-style pot. Got a real thick bottom in it. My cousin and her husband found some stirrin devices that looks more like boat paddles. Because a regular cookin spoon won't go

to the bottom. And I have two stirrin devices that's goin be probably 30 inches long. That way you can stir it without burning your hand, on it. And I've had both big pots on at one time. When I learned to pressure-can chicken, some friends from Water Valley, that at that time was comin to the market, came on a Saturday evening.

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We butchered 130-something birds in one evenin, and I shared them with those people. I put mine in a cooler with salt and ice. And the next mornin, I got up and [0:33:33 wind noise] in a pressure cooker pot. [0:33:41 wind noise]. Now, I don't mind sharing about the pressure canning. [coughs] You have to make sure the chicken is clean. There can be no pin feathers or anything left on it.

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You leave the skin and the bone it, and then—[coughs] you pack it in big-mouth jars, no water, teaspoon of canning salt, put the flat and the ring on it. I think you can put eight big-mouth quarts in a canner at a time. It's either seven or eight. After it starts jigglin the right way, you do it for sixty minutes. It will be the best flavored chicken you've ever eaten in your life. Makes *wonderful* Chicken Rotel. It's good for chicken salad.

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You can use it in chicken and dressin. Anything you can use a chicken for. It's already cooked.

Sarah Rodriguez: Nice. And where do you usually get your produce from, to make the jams and the jellies?

Stark Aldridge: Three Eagles Produce Company in Pontotoc.

Sarah Rodriguez: And you've been getting it from them the whole time?

Stark Aldridge: Most of it. Yeah. To start with, I could find muscadines in different places, but I can't anymore, so I've been buyin em. I get the peach and the strawberry and the plum and cherry from them. And now blueberry. There won't be figs this year, I don't think, because of that bad freeze in the winter. Might have some the following year. Not sure.

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It's all gotta come up from the ground, on new growth, and they don't bear the first year—

Sarah Rodriguez: I see.

Stark Aldridge: —normally.

Sarah Rodriguez: Right, right. Could you describe I guess what has it been like to connect with folks at the Oxford Community Market and the Pontotoc Market? Any stories or who you've talked to, who you've gotten to know?

Stark Aldridge: I try as much as possible to [0:36:38 wind noise] kind of crazy things about myself. I can tell you one story that happened to me on the farm, in the chicken house, several year ago, before I had my knees fixed.

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I have since then learned [0:37:04 wind noise] eight-foot long self-feeders to where I don't have to put feed out every day. I, at that time, was still usin the canisters that would hold about 50 pounds. Well, I had a leak in the chicken house right there *at* the feeder. I was standin perfectly

still, far as my feet, and I went to lift up the sack of feed to pour it in the feeder. My feet flew out from under me—it was so slick—and on the ground I went. Well, I got to laughing at myself.

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When I started tryin to get up, it was so slick, I like to never have gotten my knees under me where I could crawl to a post to pull myself up. And I still laugh about that til this day. If they'd have had a video camera there, I coulda gotten rich off of my own self.

Sarah Rodriguez: I'm sure. [laughs]

Stark Aldridge: It had to have been hilarious.

Sarah Rodriguez: [laughs] That's great. Could you describe some of the challenges that you've experienced working with the Market or doing this type of work?

Stark Aldridge: Things that don't make any sense to me, in a way—in a way, I've accepted it—but you have to label your product with labels that read, “Made in a food cottage operation that is not subject to Mississippi food safety regulations.”

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I've had to learn to have labels made, for all of my product. And somethin to me that's really foolish—you have to have a \$10 license to sell at a farmers market. If you sell to a restaurant, you have to have a \$50 license. Why in the world can you not do it all on one? That's your government making things complicated and really trying to push out the small man to where it's all in one big deal for one person in charge of it.

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But I got news for em—I done figured out how to do all that. And until I croak, I will continue to do it.

Sarah Rodriguez: What do you think are some of the successes that you've had, doing this work, and working with the Farmers Market?

Stark Aldridge: Well, I can share that according to people's comments, they claim my eggs are better than anyone else's. And there's not but one way that can happen—the Lord had to bless. Because to me, an egg's an egg, unless you're baking, and it *does* make a difference there. They need to be fresh, to get the best lift, in your cake.

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Other successes—it's unreal how much jelly I really sell. And that speaks for itself without me braggin on my own stuff. For sales, strawberry is the best mover. Then the peach. And I sell a good many fig preserves. Last year was a bountiful supply of figs. My friends came over, and she and I, I think two different times, picked seven gallons of figs in one mornin. That's not the end of the story. You got to wash em, you got to stem em, you got to measure em, put your sugar and lemon on em, let them set in the fridge overnight.

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The next day, they will have to cook on low at *least* three and a half hours—and I have cooked em over four hours—til they start candying. You cannot rush it. If you rush it, you'll scorch em and ruin em.

Sarah Rodriguez: Has that happened to you before? No?

Stark Aldridge: I just know from my childhood that you have to do it slow.

Sarah Rodriguez: I see.

Stark Aldridge: And if you will look, you can see, they'll move, but it's cooked down pretty good. At *least* three and a half hours. And you start checkin your syrup after that, and watching it to—you can tell when it begins to thicken and start candyin.

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Now those things, I think Betsy served some recently at the liberry [ph] over goat cheese, and they said it was really good. I can open that thing and just start takin a fork and pullin em out and eatin em. Cause they're sort of candied.

Sarah Rodriguez: That makes sense. You say that you get help from people from church, some of your family members. Could you talk a bit more about the help that you have for this type of work?

Stark Aldridge: That's all. Up til—well, my cousin Janice [sp] and her husband only helped me til I could get enough strength built up. And then for years, I done it all by myself. And that's with havin three or four chickens, keepin the eggs gathered.

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In the *hot* weather, I like to gather em if I can, at least two or three times a day, to keep the eggs out of the heat. But up until the last couple or so years, I've done it by myself.

Sarah Rodriguez: Wow. And the people who have helped more recently, is it mostly people from church?

Stark Aldridge: Mmhmm. It's just that one couple. On that, you can't bring just anybody in the kitchen. Not everybody is clean. Not everybody is neat. And you've got to be neat when you're doin jelly, or you'll have that blessed sticky stuff all over the floor, all over everything. And I can't deal with that.

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I've learned, if you will put a damp either cloth or paper towels in the floor—you are gonna drop some once in a while, and I keep somethin to where I can take my foot, real quickly, and wipe it up. Because by the time you do 60 or 70 jars, you don't feel like turnin around and moppin the floor, doin a scrubdown on the counters and everything. So, yeah, there's tricks to it that you learn as you go. I finally spilt one jar of jelly not too long back. I just don't do it. One, it's too much of a mess. And once you've went to all that trouble of preparin the fruit and cookin it off, no, you don't wanna waste it.

0:46:07

Sarah Rodriguez: For sure. Could you talk a bit about the changes—cause you've been involved in the Market, you said, about eight years. Could you talk about the changes that you've seen with the Market?

Stark Aldridge: One change that they laughed at me about—I finally convinced Betsy to start a winter market. And I told her, I said, “These hens does not have a switch on em that you can cut em off and stop em from layin when it gets bad cold.” Now, I have set up out here with a poncho on that I made out of a big blanket, to try to keep a little warm.

0:47:01

[0:47:01 wind noise] winter market [0:47:11 wind noise] bigger than it was. There was only three or four vendors to start with. No one else considered it—well, they said I was crazy. Probably am. *But*, I was movin my eggs. And this Market has grown, and it's continually growin. And I am amazed at how the Pontotoc Market is going. The director there, one of the main ones, is Julia. And we've had as many as 40 vendors there this year—

Sarah Rodriguez: Wow.

Stark Aldridge: —at one time.

Sarah Rodriguez: Wow.

Stark Aldridge: That's *a lot*.

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Sarah Rodriguez: What do you think is the role of the Oxford Community Market like in the larger community from what you've seen?

Stark Aldridge: If you want fresh, and I mean fresh food, you'll have to go to the farmers market. This may get me in trouble—I'm a firm believer that all of our cancer that people are experiencing now, is coming out of processed foods and tin cans. I will share this [0:48:46 wind noise] and I don't mind sharin it, because I *can* prove it. You kill a chicken at home, pluck it, put it in the ice and salt water and refrigerate it, if you do not cook that chicken by the next evenin, it will be ruined.

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I say that, to say this: they claim they're not putting a preservative in our meat, these meat [0:49:27 wind noise]. If you lived on a farm, you would know that's not true. You can imagine a fresh chicken killed on the farm, in salt and ice water, in the refrigerator, will only keep about 24 hours, 30 at the most. That's in salt water and ice water in the refrigerator. How long does that chicken sit in an *open* meat cooler?

0:50:02

It's got to have something on the line of embalming fluid. And that's where our cancer and our diseases is comin from. And like I say, you can go kill you a yard bird and try it, and I'll guarantee it.

Sarah Rodriguez: What do you think that—especially you mentioned some of the outreach that you do at the library with the Market—what has it been like to share some of your knowledge and practices with other people? How have they received it?

Stark Aldridge: It's been well received. It's like this—when us old people, I'd say those from sixty years and up, die out, a lot of the things that is known now will be lost, because people no longer even try to cook at home.

0:51:11

I am blessed and I still say I can go in the kitchen and whatever I've got in the kitchen I can make a meal out of it. Far as we know, my grandmother never had a cookbook. And I cook pretty much on that same line. Whatever I got, I make a meal out of it. And that's a dying art, you know. I mean, how many people can cook now, say fifty and under, without a cookbook? It's a dying art. It's somethin the Lord give us older people, that really was survival.

0:52:04

One thing that I have done in years past [0:52:10 wind noise]I can fry biscuit dough. You mix it up a little thicker than pancake batter, and drop it in an electric skillet, or some kind of skillet, with grease in there, and fry it real slow. I done that for a while, and put a little of my jelly on it, for em to get a taste of *it* to sell the jelly. Something that I look back on, and I am amazed at, the first time I done that in Pontotoc, I [0:52:55 wind noise] and bread and jelly...

0:53:00

[0:53:01 wind noise] I can set up a table over there and either get my little portable gas stove, or my electric skillet, and go to work. Here, I have stir-fried cabbage to help other vendors sell their cabbage. I've done eggs here, and I can't remember what all, but besides the fried bread. And I'd like to share this as a recipe—don't know where I started or anything—but you take either yellow or zucchini—if you've got a mandolin that you can slice it thin on, slice your squash or zucchini thin.

0:54:06

Put it in a gallon Ziploc bag. Put just a little cornmeal in there with salt and pepper, and shake it up, and let it sit til the moisture starts comin out, where the cornmeal will stick to your vegetable. You deep-fry that til it's golden brown. And I dearly *love it*. And to be on the—[0:54:37] brown, you do cook it, but it'll be likened to a potato chip. I don't cook mine that long. I like it a *little* soft. I fixed me a big plate of it the other day.

Sarah Rodriguez: Thank you for sharing.

Stark Aldridge: I mean, that's just somethin you can think of and do.

Sarah Rodriguez: For sure.

0:55:00

Stark Aldridge: The other one that I've done that—well, yesterday, I took my Dutch oven, a whole stick of margarine. I cut up a large onion, and I didn't cut it up fine. You can do it whichever way you want. I put the onion in on top of the margarine. I washed and cut up the new potatoes, fairly all about half-inch to inch chunks. Then, that's your longest cooking items. Then you cut up your squash in pretty big chunks on top. You put salt and pepper on it, put your lid on it. And if you got other things to do, you can put it in the oven on about 250, and go off and leave it and do your other work.

0:56:01

And the next time I do it, I *am* gonna put some kinda sausage, or Polish sausage. I'm gonna put some kind of meat in there. And I've never had a recipe for that. It's just something that we've eat all of my life. And those fresh potatoes is good in there like that.

Sarah Rodriguez: Nice!

Stark Aldridge: And you can also take small, fresh potatoes, say about the size of a quarter, wash them good, put a good bit of butter in the pot, add a little water. Needs to be a pot with a thick bottom. Boil your potatoes til they get to where you can stick a fork or knife in em, with salt and pepper. And then take some water and flour and make you a little thickenin, and put in there, and boil it til it thickens, make you a pan of cornbread, and you got a meal.

0:57:11

Sarah Rodriguez: That's great.

Stark Aldridge: A lot of what I cook is in my head right now. It's not recorded. It's just like the older generation has done down through the years.

Sarah Rodriguez: And like you learned from your parents and your grandparents?

Stark Aldridge: And I've watched some cooking shows, and picked up like that French cookin the eggs and all. And I love em cooked like that because they're not dry. Interesting.

Sarah Rodriguez: Well, I want to be respectful of your time. Is there any final thoughts, any final stories you want to share?

0:58:02

Stark Aldridge: I enjoy this, and I've already said it—as long as the Lord gives me the strength to do it, I shall continue, And I didn't realize this part in the beginning, but many people have shared that it was a blessing to be able to get fresh jams and jellies and fresh produce. Something that's not got all the preservatives and cancer-causin stuff in it. On my jellies, it would be sugar, Sure-Jell, and sometimes lemon. And the Sure-Jell is the closest thing to a chemical you're going to find in mine. And I've enjoyed the interview.

0:59:02

Sarah Rodriguez: Great. Thank you so much!

Stark Aldridge: Maybe it'll encourage somebody.

[End]