Susan Puckett
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Location: Avondale Estates, Georgia
Interviewer: Annemarie Nichols Anderson
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Annemarie Nichols: Okay, we are recording. Today is Wednesday, March 21, 2018, and I am in Avondale Estates, the home of Mrs. Nancy Puckett, Miss Susan Puckett's mother. Let's get started. Could you introduce yourself for the recorder, please?

[0:00:21.0]

Susan Puckett: Susan Puckett.

[0:00:23.7]

Annemarie Nichols: All right. What was your date of birth and where were you born?

[0:00:26.4]

Susan Puckett: September the 9th, 1956, in Houston, Texas.

[0:00:31.1]

Annemarie Nichols: Okay. Can you talk a little bit about your early life? What are your parents' names? What were they like?

[0:00:35.7]

Susan Puckett: My mother's name is Nancy Puckett. My father's name was Jacob Charles Puckett. They met at Ole Miss. My father grew up, was born on a farm in Mendenhall, Mississippi, grew up in Hattiesburg, but was, you know, small-town country boy. And my mother was born in San Francisco and raised in Seattle and was a city girl, and wound up in Mississippi because her stepfather got a teaching job teaching music at

Ole Miss. And they met and fell in love in an art class at Ole Miss, and, hence, that's how I was created. [Laughter]

[0:01:40.5]

Annemarie Nichols: That's good. Where were you raised?

[0:01:43.0]

Susan Puckett: So I was born in Houston, but moved when I was just a baby. I primarily grew up in Jackson and Meridian, and my father was a steel salesman for most of my childhood growing up. So, you know, moved a little bit mostly between Meridian and Jackson. We lived in Hattiesburg for a while.

[0:02:21.4]

Annemarie Nichols: That's really good. And what were your early relationship with food like? Like what was your family's kind of relationship to food?

[0:02:27.8]

Susan Puckett: Well, my mother, being a Northerner, she really didn't get Southern food that much and was intimidated by my grandmother, who was just your typical—just your typical country woman, Southern cook, and also my grandparents' parents, who actually were living for much of my childhood and lived out in the country, so my father grew up, you know, with excellent fried chicken and biscuits and all that stuff. There are some pretty funny stories about her attempts to try to recreate that, and actually she did—she

could never get her fried chicken to rise to my grandmother's standards, but what she did is she started making like a—she would make like a sour cream gravy [Laughter] to cover up her mistakes, but it was really good. So, like, our typical Sunday dinner when we always ate together at 6:00 o'clock was typically her fried chicken with white cream gravy over rice. But she was also—this was back in the [19]60s and [19]70s, and especially in the [19]60s, she would try things, casseroles and stuff, and I was a super picky eater, and my father, actually, we shared our disdain for vegetables. [Laughter] So she kind of gave up a lot.

But my father was really the big influence on me as far as just a love of food and cooking, because he never cooked anything healthy [Laughter], but, like, he was—actually, he was renowned for his pizza, and the reason why was because when he—the first time he had ever been out of Mississippi was when he flew to New York en route to Korea, and he was in the Marines. Before they left for Korea, they went out for pizza pie [Laughter], which was the most exotic thing he had ever had, and he was just blown away by it. And, like, when he came back from Korea, I mean, this was like when he was, you know, twenty or whatever, probably I think before he went to Ole Miss, actually, he started playing around, like, with the dough. Initially, he made—it was like a biscuit dough [Laughter], because that was the only thing he knew. But he came up with this just cracker-thin crust and this really spicy tomato sauce, and we still laugh about he seasoned with a lot of what he called "or-ee-gan-oh" for "oregano" [Laughter] because he'd never heard of "or-ee-gan-oh" before.

So, growing up, I mean, my father's pizza parties were—I mean, that was when my parents entertained, when I had to spend the night company [?], friends over, and my

friends, it's like, "Is your father making pizza tonight?" So that was—I mean, that's my strongest food memory, actually.

And the other thing is he loved to make, like on Saturday, breakfast and candy. He loved to make—and I would help him a lot, like making fudge in a cast iron skillet and pralines—"prah-leens," we used to call them—that he made from scratch, and divinity. He loved to make candy, and for a while he really got into, like, breakfast breads, like he, like, making cinnamon rolls from scratch.

But I did not at all think of, you know—I mean, food was just something I—you know, I ate, but I didn't—I never imagined I would get that into it, especially because I really—I was really a picky eater, I mean, especially when it came to vegetables, because mostly most of the vegetables I grew up with—this was back in the [19]60s —were out of a can, and the steam-table broccoli just, you know, disgusted me. So it actually was not until I got out of college that I really started—you know, that I discovered vegetables, and now I love 'em.

[0:08:40.8]

Annemarie Nichols: That's great. Can we talk a little bit about, I guess, going from there, how you decided to go into Ole Miss and go into—why did you decide to go into journalism?

[0:08:52.3]

Susan Puckett: Yeah. Well, my grandmother in Oxford was a writer, and she actually had several novels published. She was very much ahead of her time and was a career

woman and worked in New York, so she was my role model in that regard. But between that and my father was just—he was just an incredible storyteller and, like, when, like, for bedroom stories—I mean, my mother read to us, but my father always told us told stories. One of the things that he used to do with my sister and I was, you know, he would start a nugget of a story and then we would add on to it.

So I just grew up, like, just loving stories, I mean, and both sides of my family just were very into storytelling. And we had some family reunions at my great-grandparents' house in the country in Mendenhall. They lived on a little farm. We would—all the cousins would, you know, sit out on the wooden porch, you know, covered with newspapers and eat watermelon out of the watermelon patch and tell stories, family stories. So that was just something I always enjoyed, and even when I was in elementary school, I just loved to write and kind of always—I mean, I wanted to be a writer like my grandmother. I mean, I wrote for the high school paper. So that was just kind of always something that I thought I would do.

As far as going to Ole Miss, I mean, I came out of the womb, you know. It's like it never entered my mind I would go anywhere else. Especially my father, just huge Ole Miss football fans and everything.

So anyway, after my second semester, I got into the journalism program, started working for the *Daily Mississippian*, and actually did my first—I wrote my very first food story there, when I was a student, but, I mean, it was a feature story, but I still remember it well. There was a little cafe called Isaiah's Busy Bee, that if you talk to anybody, especially my age or older, they'll know what you're talking about, but it was a shotgun shack that served just these incredible home-cooked meals, and it was run by this

elderly African American couple, who the woman had been the cook for the chancellor, and retired, and she and her husband, you know, started this little cafe where every day the menu was just written on a chalkboard and you ate whatever she ate. But I did a little feature story, and I think that one, it ran in the *Oxford Eagle*, and I thought that was such a big major thing. But I didn't—I mean, I still wasn't thinking that I would be a food journalist. I didn't even know that existed.

[0:13:21.4]

Annemarie Nichols: What was your grandmother's name that lived in Oxford?

[0:13:23.1]

Susan Puckett: Zoe, Z-o-e, Kreutz, K-r-e-u-t-z, and her husband's name was Arthur Kreutz, and he was a longtime music professor. He actually helped start the Tupelo Symphony and was the conductor. They actually composed some operas together at Ole Miss, and she was his librettist. So just the whole idea of writing is just something—and telling stories is just—has always been with me.

[0:14:11.7]

Annemarie Nichols: I bet. With a history like that, that's so cool. Can you tell me a little bit about your experience as a woman in the journalism department? Because I know at this time gender roles especially within journalism is kind of changing. Did you face any challenges because of that?

[0:14:32.0]

Susan Puckett: No. [Laughter] I mean, honestly, I was—it's not something I thought about at all. I mean, I always leaned to more the feature side, and I was actually—I think I was the entertainment editor or something, but I even remember then, I mean, the editors were—you know, I think the editor-in-chief was male, but the managing editor was a very strong woman. I mean, there were very, very strong women journalists who were still, you know, strong women journalists now, and we were—back then, the journalism school, it was in a—I mean, it was in a little building. I mean, it was very tiny, very tiny, and we were extremely close-knit. I mean, we did—we went to classes together, we worked at the paper together, we socialized together, and would pull all-nighters. We spent nights, you know, like whole—pulling all-nighters in the journalism school. It was men and women, and also there were some—some of them were older, but it was an eclectic group and it was great.

[0:16:31.6]

Annemarie Nichols: That's really good. So what positions specifically did you hold when you worked for the *Daily Mississippian*?

[0:16:38.5]

Susan Puckett: I was just a general reporter and I think I was, like, the entertainment editor or something like that.

[0:16:50.4]

Annemarie Nichols: That's really good. So what years were you at Ole Miss?

[0:16:59.1]

Susan Puckett: [19]74 to [19]77. I actually graduated in summer school with the—I ended up graduating early because I didn't—I went to summer school and I graduated with exactly the minimum number of hours because I had declared my major and I didn't waste one credit. [Laughter] So I was actually, you know—I was actually twenty when I started at the *Clarion-Ledger*.

[0:17:32.5]

Annemarie Nichols: Oh, wow.

[0:17:34.4]

Susan Puckett: I started, like, you know, a week or two after I graduated.

[0:17:41.3]

Annemarie Nichols: Could you talk about getting that job and deciding to work for the *Clarion-Ledger*?

[0:17:45.6]

Susan Puckett: Yeah. I mean, that was, like, my dream job to get to work at the local paper, you know, my hometown paper, but fortunately—the other thing I will say is just the professors just bent over backward to help their students, and so—and, actually, Dean

Norton was my professor then, and Dr. Hoar was—I don't know if you ever remembered hearing about him, but he was—but, you know, I applied and they, you know, wrote me recommendations. Yeah, I was lucky enough to get the job.

[0:18:49.7]

Annemarie Nichols: And what—so you get the job at the *Clarion-Ledger*, and what are you doing when you worked there?

[0:18:55.6]

Susan Puckett: So, back then, they used to have—there were focus sections, like community sections, and to this day, I just think it's the perfect training ground for somebody that wants to go into journalism, so it was where the rookie reporters went, started, and you do a little bit of everything. So I did everything from feature stories to police stories and covering extremely boring Board of Aldermen and City Council meetings, and took our own pictures and everything. So, you know, back then, we had to do that for two years to figure out where we might end up when we got promoted to the big paper. I always knew that I wanted to, you know, do the human-interest stories, so, luckily, I did. When my two years was up, I went to work—I don't know if they still have Southern Style, but it was the feature section, which at that time was just—they were just starting. I mean, I was like the, you know, one of the first feature writers for that section.

[0:20:39.2]

Annemarie Nichols: That's really neat. That sounds like you got a lot of exposure doing that.

[0:20:41.6]

Susan Puckett: Oh, yeah, yeah. I was very lucky.

[0:20:46.4]

Annemarie Nichols: What sorts of pieces did you write in that feature section?

[0:20:50.5]

Susan Puckett: So I did a little bit of everything, but I found myself gravitating, just weirdly, toward food subjects, but it was—but I also really gravitated toward subjects that were about—that were related to fading Mississippi traditions, whatever they were, and it wasn't even really a conscious thing so much. I just was interested.

So, actually, my first feature stories for Southern Style, I mean, one in particular, was I found out that in this little tiny dying farm community, there were a couple of old farmers that had resurrected their grandfather's grist mill and they were resurrecting the custom of—they called it Grind Day, which was, like, on Saturdays they would—the farmers in the area would bring their dried corn to be ground into grits and cornmeal. So I thought that sounded so cool, and so I wanted to make it a food story, and I said, "Well, by any chance would you have any recipes for using the mill?"

And they said, "Oh, yeah, I'm sure we've got some."

And when I got there, they handed me a stack, a little stack of notecards that had these handwritten recipes for things like Bobby's Good Dish, and they had—as it turned out, it had been their wives' prayer meeting the night before, and they had circulated these cards and, you know, asked the wives to, you know, write down their recipes.

Anyway, that was an example of a food story, and I should say when I started for Southern Style, the only food section they had per se, it was basically one giant ad. It was one of those—they got it from some color services and it was just something Kraft or whatever, and it was like a double-truck thing and they plopped it down, and it was all recipes using Kraft products. That was the food section, and, actually, the two feature editors who started Southern Style and came up with it, Sharon Peters and Angela—now her name is Angela Hederman, they wanted to have, like, a localized food section, and they had not had one before then. And because I happened—it was my time to switch over. They talked to me about, you know—they said, "We want you to do general features, but we really—but we'd like for you to start a food section."

And I said, "Great." But I'm thinking to myself, "I don't know. I don't really know much about cooking. I really don't like vegetables." [Laughter] But it's like, "Okay." But I loved the idea. It's like, you know—because I'm what, twenty-two or twenty-three, and it's like having, you know—"Oh, I can make this into whatever I want it to be." And since I wasn't a cook, I did a lot of features and interviews with cooks and with chefs and stuff, and home cooks, and stories, you know, like the grist mill story, and it was in the course of doing those interview and those stories that I got bit with the bug of wanting to learn how to cook and just becoming more—you know, broadening my tastes

And that was also—this was like in the late [19]70s. It was also right around the time that running became popular, and I actually was smoking very heavily then. [Laughter] And it was to a very unhealthy level. So, during this time, I knew, you know, even at age twenty-two or twenty-three, I've got, you know—I've got to quit smoking, and tried a number of things, but I bought, you know, a pair of these thirty-five-dollar Nike running shoes, and it's like, "I've got to get my money's worth out of these shoes." But I started—so I started jogging and running, and actually a number of us at the paper started entering these 5K's and 10K's.

So I started changing my whole lifestyle and started eating healthier, and that was also—health food was coming into vogue, and around that time, somebody served me some steamed broccoli, and I thought—and it was just this huge revelation, you know, because it's like, "Oh, I didn't know broccoli could actually taste like that."

So anyway, which is to say all of these things coming together, it's like—I mean, talking to food people, any kind of food people, whether it was, you know, these farmers and their grist mill or talking to the ladies that opened the first health food store, and talking about, you know, these healthy things, everybody was just so into it and so enthusiastic, that I just wanted to learn everything I could about it, you know, just the whole gamut.

So I actually got the paper to—they paid for me to take some nutrition classes at Mississippi College, and Angela Hederman, one of the editors of Southern Style, she was really—she saw something more in these stories that I was writing, you know, these stories about the grist mill and the syrup mill and whatever, because I had done a bunch of 'em by then. Anyway, she proposed that I turn them into a cookbook, and that's how *A*

Cook's Tour of Mississippi came to be. So, I mean, it was like the greatest assignment ever, but they took me off of everything except they just wanted me to go drive around the state for, like, five months, with various photographers, and just collect as many of these stories as I could. They also had some other stories that some other people did. But anyway, so that was—so, you know, I kind of joke, although it's true, you know, I became a cookbook author before I even knew how to cook, but it was in the course of that, you know, tried to—I mean, I did some recipe testing. I didn't know what I was doing.

But after that experience, I just—you know, it was—the more you learn something, the more you see how much you don't know, and I just didn't want to go back to doing, you know, just to being a general feature writing or covering meetings or whatever, and I wanted to focus on food. I talked to Dean Norton, Dr. Norton, who's always just been a major influence in my career, and I told him what I was thinking about, and he recommended Iowa State, because Jim Autry, who was then the executive editor for *Better Homes and Gardens*, which is based in Des Moines, he went to Ole Miss and was the editor of the *Daily Mississippian* at one time, and they were friends. So anyway, he said, "If you go to Iowa State, because they have so many graduates that go on to work for *Better Homes and Gardens*, they'll know that you want to write about good." And he was totally right.

I got in, so that's when I went back, you know, just quit my job and I had never—I had to, like, take out a map and find Iowa on the map. [Laughter] And I couldn't pronounce it [Demonstrates]. It's very hard for a southerner with all those vowels. [Laughter]

But anyway, so I got my Bachelor of Science. Back then, it was still called Home Economics, with a nutrition emphasis. Took a lot of science classes, some of which I came close to failing. [Laughter] It was a very humbling experience, but I made it through, but I wasn't—at that time, I wasn't writing, and just missed writing. And just one night I came up with this wild idea that if I could do *A Cook's Tour of Mississippi*, why not *A Cook's Tour of Iowa*? So, actually, on the weekends I would drive around to go to festivals in these little towns and just—and wrote these stories. I got a professor in the journalism school at Iowa State—I was not studying—since I already had the journalism degree, I wasn't studying journalism, but I had a part-time job working in the journalism school, and I asked if there was a way that I could maybe do an independent study project, you know, just—and so I did, and got—I mean, basically I just—I would write a story and then I would turn it in to the professor and we'd chat about it, and got an A. [Laughter]

But then it sat in a drawer for many years. Actually, I got some interest from—I went to talk to the editor at Iowa State Press, and she was very intrigued with the idea, but, I mean, I was so young and naïve then, and I turned in a manuscript that just—you know, I just got a blistering rejection. [Laughter] And I was just crushed, but so much so that I almost thought of just throwing the whole thing away. And, luckily, I didn't because several years later and a couple of jobs later, the editor of University of Iowa Press had heard about it and tracked me down, and I ended up, you know, doing a lot of rewriting and retesting of recipes and then that book came out in—I think it was [19]85.

[0:35:07.5]

Annemarie Nichols: That's really cool. What was the experience—so Iowa's a lot different place than Mississippi. [Laughter]

[0:35:12.8]

Susan Puckett: Oh, yeah.

[0:35:14.4]

Annemarie Nichols: How was it different from writing *A Cook's Tour of Mississippi* and doing that kind of fieldwork?

[0:35:20.9]

Susan Puckett: Well, I mean, doing *A Cook's Tour of Mississippi* was just—there was just this level of comfort. I mean, these were my people, and I just—you know, there's just a certain level of understanding that Southerners have with each other. Iowa, they're very nice and polite, but they're different, I mean, and it was very different culturally and they're not—how do I say—I mean, they're just—they're more reserved. I mean, they're not necessarily the type that are going to give you a big hug initially. I mean, so I had to—and I had to learn that, and just—and the stories were just so different. I mean, in Mississippi, it was—you know, it was largely black and white, whereas in Iowa, on the one hand, you know, it's, by and large, white, but a tremendous amount of ethnic diversity, which there was almost—I mean, in *A Cook's Tour of Mississippi*, there's almost no ethnicity per se represented, other than Southerners, whereas in Iowa I, you know, learned about the Dutch and the Amish and Norwegian, and what was interesting,

though, is these are two farm cultures and two agriculture-based cultures that were just so incredibly different, but wonderful in their own ways. I'm very grateful that I have that perspective.

[0:37:36.5]

Annemarie Nichols: Definitely. I want to circle back, too, to ask you about *A Cook's Tour of Mississippi*, because it was published in 1980, and a lot of the—and you mentioned, too, that you're really interested in human-interest pieces, and I think that really comes out through some of the stories that you decide to tell, because there are a lot of really interesting people, like the Canton Pie Man.

[0:37:58.8]

Susan Puckett: Yeah, the Canton Pie Man was one of my very favorite subjects.

[0:38:03.1]

Annemarie Nichols: I bet.

[0:38:03.1]

Susan Puckett: Yeah.

[0:38:04.2]

Annemarie Nichols: And Clemmie Presley, who's making this bread.

[0:38:06.9]

Susan Puckett: Yeah, Indian bread, yeah.

[0:38:09.7]

Annemarie Nichols: And Virginia Galloway and her daughter, who are women who are cane producers.

[0:38:15.5]

Susan Puckett: Right.

[0:38:15.5]

Annemarie Nichols: And you don't really hear of women cane producers.

[0:38:17.1]

Susan Puckett: Right, right, yeah.

[0:38:18.4]

Annemarie Nichols: So how would you choose the people in those books? Like, how did you come to find them, I guess?

[0:38:23.1]

Susan Puckett: A lot of it, you know, honestly, a lot of it was just by word of mouth and by talking to people. I did—you know, I wanted to cover the whole state as much as I

could, and, you know, I mean, Mississippi really is like one big small town, and I just mainly—it was just by talking to people and telling them the things I was interested in, you know. When people kind of heard what I was doing, you know, they understood some of the subjects. But like—and also, I mean, I have relatives and family in different parts, like I have family on the coast and in Hattiesburg and lived in Meridian, so I already—I had contacts there, but it was mostly just a lot of being on the phone and talking to people, which we don't—nowadays, the idea of just picking up the phone and calling people is such a novel concept. [Laughter] But I did a lot of yakking. [Laughter]

[0:39:45.3]

Annemarie Nichols: Could you talk a little bit about that fieldwork and about the interaction with those people that you include their stories?

[0:39:50.9]

Susan Puckett: Yeah. I mean, there was just—I mean, what I learned then and still very much holds true today for me and my interest, I mean, honestly, I've just never been that thrilled about doing, like, celebrity profiles, and, I mean, I love finding just everyday people who have a universal story to tell, you know, through their food, and often it's—to them, it's just an everyday thing that they don't think so much about, but most of the people I talked to were just—they were just so thrilled that I would find them interesting. [Laughter]

And, you know, I think that it taught me early on to—just the importance of being—of really being a good listener, which is something, you know, to this day I feel

extremely strongly about and I worry about a lot, that is being, you know, with iPhones and stuff, it's just kind of becoming a lost skill, and I think it's just—I'm very much at heart an old-school journalist, in that I still don't believe in going into situations with an agenda, and just letting people, you know, letting people talk and share and tell 'em, you know, generally what I'm interested in and seeing where it goes. You know, I'm a pretty chatty person. [Laughter] I think it's important to get people to relax, and I think Mississippians in general are very chatty. [Laughter] So, you know, I think I just tried to build that trust, you know, with the—at the get-go and just kind of see where things go, and if they don't go exactly where I think they should be headed, just to try to restrain myself and just let it go where it needs to go.

[0:42:52.0]

Annemarie Nichols: Definitely. And what about—so you had several different photographers. Can you talk a little bit about, like, working with the photographers and what kind of relationship you had? And also, like, just, I guess, the traveling itself.

[0:43:06.0]

Susan Puckett: Oh, yeah.

[0:43:06.2]

Annemarie Nichols: Do you want to share any of those stories? [Laughter]

[0:43:07.5]

Susan Puckett: Yeah. I mean, I had a great time traveling with the photographers, and most—when I was at the *Clarion-Ledger*, this was during the time that Ray Hederman had become executive editor in this family-run newspaper forever, who was, like, the renegade son who cleaned house and, you know, really transformed the paper into being, you know, a progressive paper, and so I came in with a bunch of, like, just, you know, just out of journalism school, but a lot from, like, Northwestern and Missouri, and they had never been to Mississippi before. Honestly, I was kind of in the minority of being—I was one of the few hometown kids, you know, that got hired, so, to them, Mississippi was just the most fascinating and exotic place, and some of the things that I—a lot of the things that I just took for granted that they thought were just so weird and cool really helped me. I mean, it helped me, you know, ask some different kinds of questions. But that was—it was very helpful to me to work with photographers that were from other—from outside the South, especially, and, you know, I think having that other perspective is very helpful.

[0:45:15.5]

Annemarie Nichols: How do you think their perspective—like, being from somewhere outside the region, how do you think that colored your work?

[0:45:24.0]

Susan Puckett: I don't know that it colored it that much. I mean, it's kind of hard to say, there's so many things, you know, that can lead me down one path or another. But I think there were some things that they were particularly interested in that I didn't think about

so much then. I mean, I think particularly, I mean, just coming out of school, I didn't think that much about things like civil rights and stuff till I became—honestly, till I became really good friends with a lot of my Northern colleagues, and did things that I probably would not have—probably wouldn't have done, like, with my high school friends or whatever, like going to—like, several years we did road trips to the Mississippi Blues Festival, and, you know, I mean, we would have—you know, I mean, it was—they definitely educated me on how Mississippi and the South, you know, were perceived by people outside the South. And believe me, I mean, it certainly was not like I wasn't aware of racism and these were things I was concerned about, but I didn't think about them—I didn't start thinking about them as deeply as I did until I started getting some other perspectives. So, you know, the interviews itself, I don't know how much that impacted, but it did—it definitely—I think I chose subjects. It broadened my range of the subjects that I chose to write about.

[0:47:36.7]

Annemarie Nichols: How did your audience kind of respond to this cookbook? Because it's different.

[0:47:46.1]

Susan Puckett: Yeah. Oh, yeah.

[0:47:46.9]

Annemarie Nichols: It's a lot different than anything else in the way that you portrayed Mississippi was like a really authentic—

[0:47:52.1]

Susan Puckett: Yeah. Well, thank you.

[0:47:51.7]

Annemarie Nichols: It's not moonlight and magnolia.

[0:47:54.4]

Susan Puckett: No, no, no, no. No, just—I mean, honestly, I don't remember anything but positives, but also bear in mind this is long before social media and email, but just tons of letters and stuff. But I will say, too, a lot of people don't know my—really my involvement on that, because, as you'll notice, you know, it's "Introduction by Willie Morris," but I totally get that, you know. Who knows who Susan Puckett was? But, you know, so I have a small credit on the inside cover. But, you know, because thank God for Willie Morris because it sold a lot of books. I mean, this was not something I got royalties for. It was just part of my job. But it did—I mean, that book ended up consequently, I mean, it got featured in *USA Today* and some—you know, actually some national press, you know, picked up on it, so it certainly—you know, it has definitely helped me, you know, all along.

[0:49:16.7]

Annemarie Nichols: Definitely. What was your relationship—you kind of talked about it a little bit, but what kind of relationship did you have with Angela Hederman? How did she kind of impact you as a young journalist just getting started out?

[0:49:28.1]

Susan Puckett: Well, I owe everything to Angela Hederman. I mean, mainly she just believed in what—I mean, she saw something in me that I definitely did not see in myself, but she was an example of somebody who was from—I mean, I think she grew up, actually, in Virginia, but went—I can't remember if she went to Missouri or Northwestern, but she was actually one of the—and she's a photographer also, but she was one of my colleagues who was from outside the region, who saw—I mean, sometimes it takes that outsider to see something special, you know, something that—I mean, little things that I took for granted, you know, my whole life, and I just thought these were fun little fluffy feature stories, and she saw something deeper there that, you know, I didn't see. But she was my—I mean, she was one of my editors, so, I mean, she had a—her enthusiasm for these stories just made me want to do more, and just, you know, seeing the impact and—I mean, just even seeing how a story like that, you know, makes an impression on somebody like Angela and who had just this vision for what it could be, and she's really just one of the most brilliant people I've ever met in terms of just her coming up just with the aesthetic and how to present it. I mean, to this day I think, you know, choosing that size and format and, I mean, I have to give her all the credit for figuring out how to package this and tell it in a way that, you know, it just

makes me feel so good that I still hear from people who say, "Oh, my mother has that book," or whatever. [Laughter]

[0:52:00.8]

Annemarie Nichols: That's great. Can you talk a little bit about, too—so after you got done at Iowa State, where did you go afterwards?

[0:52:10.6]

Susan Puckett: So I kind of bounced around a bit for a while. I did a brief stint at the *Cincinnati Enquirer* and then I came back to Jackson for a while, and then I got a job at the Cleveland *Plain Dealer*, which was a great experience, and was there for about three and a half years. Then I went to—I was one of—I was a food writer, one of, like, three food writers there, and then I got offered a food editor's job at the *Fort Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel*. Now it's the *South Florida Sun-Sentinel*. But I did that for—I was there for almost three years. That was also a great experience.

Then, you know, I got the offer in 1990 to apply for the food editor's job in Atlanta, which was one of my dream cities, but I wasn't—you know, I mean, I was very happy in Fort Lauderdale, but always kind of saw that as a temporary place, and the idea of coming back to—I wasn't sure if I wanted to come back to the South, but if I did, I wanted to come back to a big, progressive city, and Atlanta was kind of—I mean, that was kind of my dream city of where to wind up.

[0:53:52.0]

Annemarie Nichols: Can you talk a little bit about the experiences of, like, starting out as a food editor maybe in Fort Lauderdale and how is it different between Fort Lauderdale and then coming to Atlanta? Because those are two really different places.

[0:54:04.1]

Susan Puckett: Oh, yeah, yeah. I mean, it was—I mean, it was very hard when I—after I graduated from Iowa and starting, you know, I kind of had some rocky starts, you know, but, you know, in each city I went to, I mean, just the cultures were just so different and the food and approach to food was so different, and I mean, honestly, Cincinnati just—it just was not a good fit. [Laughter] And I was there just—I was there briefly, but then Cleveland—going to Cleveland was just a great opportunity because I made some wonderful creative friends who are still very good friends to this day, who we worked on the Sunday magazine together, you know, with the photographer and designer, you know, and we were covering stories that were just in Cleveland, you know, which, you know, I got introduced to pierogis and just all these foods that I just—you know, a lot of Jewish culture, you know, that was pretty unknown to me, but they were also—they were—everywhere I've gone, you know, people are just never-ending interested in my Mississippi background, and so, you know, we cooked together a lot, and, actually, I really, you know, really honed my cooking skills, like, in Cleveland and then in Fort Lauderdale, mostly with friends there.

But just getting to tell these very different stories, you know, like going from, you know, interviewing the ladies that make pierogies in Cleveland, to, like, you know, going out at midnight on a shark fishing boat [Laughter] and pulling in a shark in, you know,

basically a ski boat. [Laughter] That was a different experience. I mean, I did—yeah, Fort Lauderdale, I had some funny experiences. I did a—one of my favorite Fort Lauderdale stories was I got there around the time right before summer, and when summer hit, I realized just a huge thing for South Florida cooks is mangoes, because everybody had these mango trees in their yard, and their yards would just be covered with mangoes.

So I had a friend, someone who's still a friend today, who was writing a food column for me, and she had actually just moved to South Florida also, and so we came up with this great idea that we would have a mango recipe contest, and we got, like, three or four hundred entries, so it was like, "Oh, this is great!" So we whittled it down to like thirty recipes and we spent, like, for three days just up to our elbows in mangoes and testing all these things, and it came out great. We got these great recipes, but we both—we broke out in hives, I mean, because we had, like, rashes down our arms, our face, and there is a chemical in—you know, you learn something new every day, but there's a chemical in mango skin that's related to poison ivy [Laughter] that we didn't know. We know now. [Laughter] I mean, it was like a literally—because we had juice, like, running down. So every place I go is a new education. [Laughter]

[0:58:38.5]

Annemarie Nichols: I'll bet. That sounds fun. Do you have any other, like, stories that stand out from either Cleveland or Fort Lauderdale that you did reporting on while you were there that you want to share?

[0:58:51.0]

Susan Puckett: I'm trying to think. I'm trying to—something will probably—something will probably come to me, but those were—you know, I think Cleveland was just—it was kind of a—it was a very [19]80s time, and that was where I really got—particularly with these friends, did a lot of entertaining and just doing things like—you know, cooking things like squid ink pasta and, like, I remember, like, we had a Black and White party, where everybody had to bring a dish that was either black or white, and everybody had to wear black and white, so it was kind of a time of — like, experimenting with different— and I also— one of my closest friends, Iris Balen, was a—she was a personal chef or a private chef who started doing—who did a trip to France, and I ended up going with her and a group, in a group to Paris and Southwest France, where we got to go visit truffle farms. This was, like, long before the artisanal movement, but I learned about—I mean, the artisanal movement was always there, but, you know, going behind the scenes of artisanal bakeries and went to a foie gras farm and had a, you know, dinner, you know, an all-goose dinner, you know, with foie gras farmers and, you know, visiting Armagnac. So I got—so, Cleveland was my time to get—I got a lot of culinary education there.

[1:01:39.3]

Annemarie Nichols: Sounds like it. Sounds really interesting. Can we talk a little bit about moving to the *AJC*, and I guess to start off, asking you kind of what the food scene was like and how you kind of found your place within that.

[1:01:58.5]

Susan Puckett: Yeah. It was—the transition was a lot harder than I expected, mainly because the responsibility was different. I mean, I had been a food editor in Fort Lauderdale, but I was really a one-person—you know, I was really a writer, editor, and whereas in Atlanta, it was more of a management position, which was an adjustment, and with a staff and learning how to manage a staff, and I was much more deskbound, and that was a real adjustment, just—I mean, I kind of had to—just finding ways to get out in the community, and it was just more of a big-city job of, like, really doing—you know, getting out in the dining scene.

But, I mean, once I got over that hump, I mean, it was great. It was just a different—it was just a different experience and getting—and at that time, New Southern cuisine was just—I mean, that was just starting to take off, and so that was an interesting time.

[1:03:46.9]

Annemarie Nichols: Definitely. How did you kind of cover that, or how did you—because you're in a management position, you're kind of like getting people—like, "Here's our vision," I guess.

[1:03:55.0]

Susan Puckett: Yeah.

[1:03:55.7]

Annemarie Nichols: Could you talk a little bit about how you decided to cover that?

[1:03:59.0]

Susan Puckett: Well, luckily, I just had—really had some great people that worked—that wrote for the food section, and at that time—and we had dining critics that, you know—luckily, I got to tag along on a lot of those things. But, you know, we always tried to have a balance of covering the, you know, the dining scene as well as the home cooks, and there was always, you know—we always pushed ourselves to include diversity and get out of just the fine dining, particularly when John Kessler came to work, came to work for me. He was—he had such a strong attachment to Buford Highway and had—he was such a world traveler, and I loved that he—you know, he was just so comfortable in embracing every nationality, and this is always close around the time of the Olympics, and in the early [19]90s, there was just—Ron Martin was the editor then, and there was just a huge push by the paper and the city to really brand Atlanta as this international city, and so we did—I mean, we just did a lot of really—a lot of really diverse stories.

And one thing, living in this part of town, being close to the DeKalb Farmers Market, I mean, the DeKalb Farmers Market was really, you know—I mean, it was a game changer, I think, for anybody coming here to cook food or write about food, I mean, just having this international market, this unique international market, that where you could just see—it's like this, you know, United Nations of shoppers, and to this day, it's still one of my favorite places to take people who come to Atlanta, you know. This is, you know, this is as much a part of Atlanta as Mary Mac's or fried chicken or barbecue or whatever. I mean, Atlanta was the—I mean, that was my biggest—I mean, from the get-go, is just—there's such an incred—more diversity here than anyplace I had ever

lived, but, you know, like when you get—especially when you get a little bit out in the suburbs and the exurbs, then it's—you know, I could be back in Mississippi. So, you know, it's kind of—I mean, it could be very overwhelming.

[1:07:48.9]

Annemarie Nichols: Definitely. I want to talk about the Olympics too. How did you shape coverage in the food section during that time? And can you talk a little bit about that time?

[1:07:57.7]

Susan Puckett: Yeah, that was really fun. What we did, like, leading up to it and to run during the Olympics, like, knowing that there were going to be visitors coming from all over the world, we did a series on—it was like cooking lessons that we did with—I mean, like Edna Lewis did a little cooking class on making biscuits, and Nathalie Dupree did a little cooking class on making cornbread, so we ran that as a series. I mean, during that time, I mean, we went really Southern then, you know, because that was something that people were interested in learning about, knowing about, and, you know, it's easy when you get—when you're working for a big, modern big-city newspaper, you know, it's great that we have all this diversity, but we don't want to forget where we came from either, and I kind of saw it as our responsibility and opportunity to, you know—let's show visitors from all over the world, you know, the real South.

[1:09:36.6]

Annemarie Nichols: That's really cool. And, too, you mentioned the diversity, and during that time especially, like, immigration, especially around Chamblee−Doraville, Buford Highway is really kind of like blossoming.

[1:09:50.8]

Susan Puckett: Oh, yeah.

[1:09:51.6]

Annemarie Nichols: Can you talk about, too, like, how you decided, or, like, what conscious way you guys decided to cover those new kinds of foodways that immigrants brought with them, especially some that might be not as familiar to people who might live in suburbs or exurbs or Atlanta in general?

[1:10:12.9]

Susan Puckett: Yeah. Well, I mean, certainly in our dining, I mean, we always—just in determining what restaurants we would cover, we always included that in the mix, and we have, like, besides our main dining review, we also had a Cheap Eats feature, and those, you know, almost every other one was, you know, was something from, you know, out on Buford Highway, but from another culture. Doing recipe stories could be much more of a challenge, but we did—we definitely tried to do that and sought those stories out where we could, but I remember—I think it was—I'm pretty sure it was John Kessler who did—like, we did a whole section that was—it was a big fat guide, and I know—I

guess now you're not supposed to say "ethnic" restaurant. [Laughter] But international. But back then, we did call it the ethnic food guide.

We had it broken down by nationalities, and it wasn't just—it wasn't—it was actually a shopping guide to all the ethnic markets from every—you know, from every nationality, and it was really a fun project. I think it may have been a group project, where everybody sought out these markets where you could get these ingredients, and then came up with recipes, and John Kessler came up with a lot of 'em, of things, things to do with these unusual ingredients that we have access to here.

And so we—and just other little things, you know, sometimes just in small ways, like we had—within the food section, we had an "Ingredients Spotlight," and just within the mix, we would just try to consciously include some international [Laughter] ingredients and give a little background. I mean, you know, a lot—I tried to—in just in managing the food section, I mean, just really tried to cover the diversity, just like the city itself and not just—not just hit people over the head with it, but just make it part of our weekly coverage in every single feature. I mean, we had, like, you know, we had a Southern cooks type—we called it "In the Kitchen With…" And so—and for that, I mean, everybody was in our meetings, you know, always had the directive to, like, whatever feature we're doing, look—you know, look for the broad swath of voices, and so in that—those were features on home cooks, and when we—and very often there was some—I mean, being the melting pot city that we are, I mean, often they did come from somewhere else, and we got those stories and how, you know, how did they assimilate or whatever, and there would just be some of these natural cross—you know, crossing cultures and other times you would go interview somebody.

I mean, I can't remember if it was me [Laughter], but somebody going, and the subject was—I think it was me, but the subject was this Chinese woman, and it was some—I know what it was. What we did with that feature is we invited people to nominate somebody to be the featured cook, and so a father—or—so this Chinese guy nominated his mother, and it's like this is great, and got there and he was there and his mother did not speak one word of English, and so, you know, just—and he translated everything. But, you know, we got a recipe and you kind of had to—you know, it challenges your writing, you know. You just have to—sometimes you have to adjust to your approach accordingly.

[1:15:09.5]

Annemarie Nichols: That sounds really interesting. Too, so, at the *Journal-Constitution*, the food section is kind of split up into dining and, like, a more recipe section, right?

[1:16:13.5]

Susan Puckett: Yeah.

[1:16:14.4]

Annemarie Nichols: How did you strike a balance between that? What do you think that says about the food—the food scene of Atlanta and I guess the food pages in general?

[1:16:21.2]

Susan Puckett: Well, I—I mean, back then, yeah, we had a dining—I mean, we had dining reviews that ran in the entertainment section on Friday, and we—I mean, these were in the fat old days when we had just, you know, huge food section with tons of ads and everything. And most of the dining stuff would go in that Friday section, but we also did two annual dining guides that were very intense and—but what we tried to do is just always look for stories that—things that related to—that could relate to a home cook, that would, you know, that would spin off into a food story, but always tried to kind of keep the food section more focused on cooking and recipes and—but just give the depth and perspective with—and often they would be about, you know—sometimes they were profiles on chefs or people in the food business.

But one thing that was kind of unique about my—I wouldn't say unique, but in my role as food editor, I mean, I was responsible for our coverage throughout the entire paper, so we did—I mean, we did breaking food news, you know, that—I mean, we were—all the writers that worked under me were—I mean, we were all encouraged to try to get on 1A, so those could be very different stories. So it was a really challenging job in all the right ways, you know, to look at every single aspect of food, from food safety and food culture to just, you know—to health, to cooking technique.

[1:19:08.1]

Annemarie Nichols: I bet.

[1:19:08.1]

Susan Puckett: And just in part of my job was figuring out where is the best place in the paper for this to go, and I did—I worked a lot with other editors to try to, you know, make cases for getting a story. Sometimes food stories would run in the lifestyle section and, I mean, that's the great thing about food, is it connects to everything and every aspect of life, and I was very fortunate for almost nineteen years to be in this place, to, like, you know, to look for those connections.

[1:19:47.6]

Annemarie Nichols: Definitely. What were some of the favorite either columns or pieces that you guys ran in the food pages of your audience in Atlanta?

[1:19:58.9]

Susan Puckett: By far, by far, the thing that I'm most—that I'm the proudest of is we did—started doing a feature—it was actually started with John T. Edge. We started a series called "Saving Southern Food," where for about almost four years, had the privilege to work with John T. on doing some quarterly magazine-length, in-depth stories for the food section on covering, I mean, particular aspects of Southern food. One was on meat and threes, one was on barbecue, and those came out quarterly, but I wanted to find some way—how do you keep the momentum in between these magazine-type features, and what would—you know, what's something that could connect and how could we get readers involved. And so just kind of—somewhat on a whim, just to see what the reaction would be, I invited readers to submit their favorite heirloom family recipe, and even if it was, you know, written on the back of an envelope or just a memory, no matter how

sketchy, and then what I did was—and this is kind of where the intersection of home books and chefs really worked well, is I assembled a chefs' panel, who would help me review these recipes, and I picked chefs that all had some Southern background, and they would pick some of the stories and recipes that would—that might inspire them to do something of their own, and so how it would work is I would run the—something that would be close to the original recipe, and if it warranted it, it might be a spinoff on that by a chef, and the chefs really got into it, and we just got deluged with just these stories that were—that just kind of blew my mind.

But the other—but the neatest thing about it is I had said, you know, if, by any chance, if you have a family photo of the person who created it, to send those, and the designers had such a great time, you know, just—I mean, these photos were just mesmerizing because—and you just—I wish to this day we could do a gallery just of the photos, because, I mean, there's one I still remember, of, you know, this country lady holding a chicken and she's barefoot in this dirt yard, and it was like during the Depression, and then another one in this Victorian gown that's in front of this white-columned mansion, and then, you know—and even within that, you know, it was all about Southern food, but just naturally people—I mean, I got some really good diversity there, you know, people who would—they'd say, "Well, actually, my mother came over," you know, from Cuba or whatever, but it turned out, I mean, that just added this layer of richness to it, and it just—I mean, I still—I kept—those are the one, if there's anything that I've kept and saved, I've actually cut those out [Laughter] because they're—it, you know—as long as I've lived in the South, it just kind of gave a different perspective.

[1:24:54.4]

Annemarie Nichols: I bet. Sounds like really, like, intimate stories.

[1:25:00.0]

Susan Puckett: They were, yeah, and there were—like, I remember one story about—I remember a woman called me one time and she was just—she wanted to make sure she understood what the rules were. She said, "Well, I've got this recipe that I really want to share, but I just want to make sure this is what you're looking for." And so, you know, she asked me some questions and she started to tell me, she said, "Well, I really want to share my aunt's divinity recipe," and she starts talking about it, and then in the middle, the phone just goes silent, and I thought maybe we had gotten disconnected, and I said, "Are you—hello? Are you still there?"

And then I could hear her. She was sobbing, and she's like, "Oh, I'm so sorry. I'm so embarrassed." But, like, her aunt had died, you know, not too long before that, and—but, I mean, that just kind of spoke to the power—and then another—one of my favorite ones was this woman shared her mother's—it was a lemon cheese cake, not cheesecake, but cheese cake, and lemon cheese on it. I don't know if you've ever heard of that, but basically it's like a custard, I mean, and it's a layer cake, and it—almost like a lemon curd or something, and I had never heard of that, but it was the kind of thing that people who had—around here, "Oh, yeah, I've heard about that."

But anyway—and one of the chef participants, Sonya Jones of Sweet Auburn Bakery, who's done some SFA stuff, knew about it, like, from, you know, her mother and grandmother, and was very enthused about helping recreate, and she actually—she made

this cake and some cupcakes that, like, the mother was, like, in an assisted living home and we went with—we surprised her with her daughter, and Sonya brought a cake and the cupcakes, and so all of her—it was like a party in the assisted living place, and all of her friends in assisted living came, and it was great.

But there was a huge—there was like half of a cake left over, and it's like, you know, what am I going to do with this? So the photographer, Louie Favorite, was there and he said, "You know, I'm having some company over. I'll take a big hunk of that." So he did.

You know, a week or so later, he said—he sent me an email and he said, "I just have to tell you this story." He said, "I took that lemon cheese cake and I served it, and we had these friends of ours over, and everybody was raving about it, but we had some that were left over, and so our friend said, 'Would you mind if I take some of that? Because I'm going to see my mother tomorrow.'" And she was in—she had Alzheimer's and was in a nursing home, and she had not been—I mean, she had been completely out of it for a while. And she said, "But I know that this was something that she loved."

So she took it to her, and then Louie actually sent me her—she wrote him this long email and said that she had taken her mother the cake and that her mother took one bite of it and she just stopped and tears were streaming down. I still get choked up. [Laughter] And she said it was the most lucid conversation they had had in months. And it's like it's really magical that way, and that is by far the thing I miss the most about my job, was that project.

[1:29:51.6]

Annemarie Nichols: I bet. That sounds like a really, really special way to connect a very large city.

[1:29:57.7]

Susan Puckett: Oh, yeah, yeah, it was, yeah.

[1:30:02.1]

Annemarie Nichols: That's crazy. Do you have anything else you want to share about your time with *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*? Oh, I have one more question. You talked about John Kessler a little bit. I know he's done a little bit of writing, and I've read some of the stuff he's done. Can you talk a little about some of the people who are important as you worked at the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* and some of the people that you are really proud of that you got to be a part, an instrumental part in kind of like shepherding their careers?

[1:30:32.0]

Susan Puckett: Oh, yeah. Well, definitely, definitely John, but also—god, there have been so many, but Regan Walker, Kristin Eddy, they—I mean, both got Beard nominations, and I think even some awards. I'm very proud to say I gave—Virginia Willis wrote her first food story for the AJC, and ended up working with her on a number of stories. I'm proud of Bob Townsend, who is over twenty years ago—I think it's been twenty, twenty years, but we—but I asked him if he'd like to take a shot at beer writing, and he's, you know, built a national reputation, you know, for his beer writing. And,

gosh, I'm trying to think. There've been—there've just been so many. I've been very, very lucky in that regard. I'm sure I'll think of more. [Laughter]

[1:32:08.7]

Annemarie Nichols: You can just add them at any time.

[1:32:11.0]

Susan Puckett: Yeah.

[1:32:11.5]

Annemarie Nichols: And is there anything else you want to share about, like, maybe some challenges or some, like, really thing—some challenges or some triumphs or things that you feel like you did to impact the food section while you were there?

[1:32:32.0]

Susan Puckett: God, those are always the hardest, [Laughter], the hardest, the hardest questions. You know, I mean, mainly I hope if—I just hope that I was able to be a vehicle for a lot of different voices and perspectives. You know, I guess, you know, going back to some of the other people that I worked with, I mean, in some cases it was people who—like Jim Auchmutey, who is an incredible writer, but had never done a food story before, and now, you know, he's—we've actually written a couple of books, cookbooks together. He's coming out with a History of Barbecue book, and he's actually one of the founding members of SFA. I mean, I learned so much, you know, from other—you

know, whether it was subjects or just a lot of—just the, you know, the diverse perspectives of people that I worked with, and, you know, I would just like to think that all of those perspectives—I mean, I'm very proud of—you know, we won a lot of awards and recognition and seeing them, you know, go on to sometimes bigger and better things, just—I mean, hopefully their work, you know, speaks for itself, and I hope I created—I helped to create an environment where creativity and ideas could thrive.

I mean, one thing, just kind of going back to the earliest lessons of just being a listener, besides listening to subjects, I also really tried to listen to all the writers that, you know, I had the honor of being able to supervise, and if somebody ever came to me with an idea for a story, even if I didn't see it right away, I don't think I ever shot down an idea. I mean, we would talk it out and sometimes just in the course of talking, you know, it might completely change or move on to something else, but I think that's the biggest thing that I've tried to do, is just let—especially if I could see somebody's excited about something and they want to explore something and they want to share something, just see where it—at least get the ball rolling and see where it goes, and inevitably, it goes somewhere.

[1:36:26.6]

Annemarie Nichols: That's great. I think a really important part that I've realized about your career specifically is you're kind of a teacher. That's a big part of what you do now, or maybe not so much as a teacher, as a guide in your job. Can you talk a little bit about your decision to leave the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* and what you did after that?

[1:36:53.1]

Susan Puckett: Yeah, sure. I honestly—I really was—even on the—even my worst days at the *AJC*, you know, I was just very grateful to be there and just—I really thought I would be there, you know, till the day I dropped. [Laughter] And I will never forget the day that in 2008, when the executive editor hauled us in to the big conference room to tell us that—I mean, this is when it was—it almost felt like overnight, the newspaper business kind of imploded. [Laughter] And I still clearly remember her saying that if there—she said that at that time there weren't going to be layoffs, but that there were going to need to be buyouts, and they wanted to see how many buyouts they could get before they had to lay people off, and they said—I still remember she started out saying, "And if there's anybody who came here with a very—something that they're very passionate about—." And I thought she was going to finish the sentence by saying, "You're safe," you know. [Laughter] "No worries." But that's not what she said. She said, "If there's something that just this focus thing that you're really passionate about, do know that in the new world, there's a very good chance you will not be doing this thing that you're so passionate about, and know that if you are able to continue doing it, you may be doing—you will likely be doing four or five other things as well."

And at that moment, you know, I thought, "I can't stay," because I had pretty much spent my whole career going from being a generalist to a specialist, and I think, if anything, I was like—I was going deeper and narrower in terms of, like, what I was passionate about and interested in, and the idea of potentially going back to covering City Council meetings and whatever was terrifying to me. And I—my husband and I, he was also—we were both in the same boat, and he was actually—he is more of a generalist,

and we had thought that if, you know, if one of us had to take a buyout, it would probably be him, and we switched. He ended up staying and I—I mean, once—I mean, I just—I mean, I cried for, like, days. [Laughter]

But then once I decided, I was one of the first ones to say, "I'm taking it," and then, you know, it was not too long after that, that through—I got reconnected to Angela Hederman and she was the one that put me on the path to going back to Mississippi to do *Eat Drink Delta*, and that's pretty much how I ended up here. [Laughter]

[1:41:08.6]

Annemarie Nichols: Can you talk a little bit about that experience? What was it like being a seasoned journalist with lots of different kinds of experiences, what was it like researching and doing fieldwork for that book, as opposed to your first book?

[1:41:25.8]

Susan Puckett: Oh, yeah. It was totally different because I had, you know, a very different perspective by then, because I was—you know, when I did—I mean, I didn't have—the only thing that was guiding me before was, you know, I was just looking for interesting stories. [Laughter] And just as it turned out, I mean, there was a good bit of diversity in that first little book because that—they just happened to be interesting stories, but I wasn't looking for any balance or whatever. But with this, I had specifically over the years become very interested specifically in the Delta, in the Mississippi Delta. My interest in that start—I mean, it actually did start at Ole Miss because my boyfriend at the time was from Greenwood, and I used to go home with him to Greenwood, and I was

from Jackson, and it was, you know, just a completely, completely different world. [Laughter] And I had this impression of Lusco's, you know, eating in the curtained booth and the Pompano, just remembering that it was just the weirdest but coolest dining experience that I could remember. It had just left this impression. But at the time, I just thought that was weird, but I didn't bother to—I wasn't interested enough by then [Laughter] to, you know, dig into the backstory.

But over the years, I had just read about other things that were going on in the Delta, you know, with—I mean, actually one of my good friends got to go interview Morgan Freeman when he was the opening Ground Zero in Clarksdale, and it's like, wow, that's going on there, and the B.B. King Museum, I mean, different friends of mine at the paper, because we were, like, the Southern, you know, the—that got to go out in the field did—I mean, somebody, one of my friends went—it may have been Kessler. I can't remember. But went and did the story on Viking and Greenwood and this renaissance of Greenwood. So I was—so that had aroused my curiosity, but by this time, I had gotten—I mean, just through the years, much, much more interested in, you know, civil rights history and, you know, especially being involved in SFA and getting to know, you know, John T. and the work there, and also just several of my close friends, you know, like Jim Auchmutey, he's, like, a civil rights expert, these were just stories that I was always very curious about, but being, you know—when you're an editor, you don't get to travel and do these stories, and so, you know, Angela gave me the idea to go back to—"Why don't you go back to Mississippi," and I started thinking about, well, what if I just narrowed it down to the Delta, and I knew, you know, there'd been a lot of books about, you know, exploring the Delta through the music, and I thought about, what about

the food, and I called John T. to bounce the idea off of him, and he thought it was a great idea. I said, "Well, I just want to know." I said, "I know there's tamales." And tamales was something I had grown up with, too, and I said, "But is there more to it than that?"

And he's like, "Oh, yeah." And he immediately sent me, you know, some links to get started, and when I was just thinking of the idea, I ran across that famous quote that—to anybody in the Delta, it's such a cliché, but it was just a light bulb moment, that the Mississippi Delta begins in the lobby of the Peabody Hotel in Memphis and ends on Catfish Row in Vicksburg," you know, which was—and then I just really looked into the meaning of that as, you know, that here are these two, you know, distinctive end points, you know, of—that tell the story of the haves and have-nots, and I—of course, I knew the bar at the—the famous bar at the Peabody Hotel was still there, and I wondered, you know, what's—could there be anything on Catfish Row? And I found out that there is a very popular soul food restaurant on Catfish Row, run by a successful African American businessman in Vicksburg, who had actually grown up on the banks of, you know, Catfish Row, and it's like, well, there are my two end points, and so—you know, the Blues Highway connects 'em, so that gave me—it was a time—I didn't have any—I didn't have a road map. I mean, I didn't have any connections to anything. I didn't know what I was going to do, and I think just visually I could see—I had a plan. It's like I'm going to use these as my end points. I mean, I didn't literally—because I was doing this long distance. [Laughter] And so—but it gave me a goal and I just decided to pursue that, and it's like I'm just going to see where this story takes me, and while I try to figure out what I'm going to do, because I had no idea what I was going to do then.

And then, you know, in the course of doing this research, you know, I have to say Will Norton comes to my rescue again. [Laughter] And he was—as it happened, he was just—he had been in Nebraska. He had been the dean of the journalism school in Nebraska, and I got an invitation—when I was in the midst of, like, doing my research, I think I had just started, and I saw that they were having a reception for him at Ole Miss when I was already planning to be around Greenwood. I thought, "Maybe I'll slip over there."

So I went to this reception and it was like—and, you know, told him what I was up to. And Ed Meek was there. And anyway, so we kind of kept in touch, and then he offered me this incredible opportunity after the book was done, to come do the co-teaching with Bill Rose, who's amazing, when he was going his Delta project, and ended up getting to work with about ten of these super sharp honor students, and Dr. Norton proposed—you know, he said, "Every year we do a—you know, it's something themed about the Delta. Why don't we—we'll make this the food issue?"

And so after the book was out, and it was actually at the time that I was promoting it, and so I got—I was kind of commuting back and forth from Oxford here, but staying a lot of the time in Oxford, and spent spring break with these students. We all went to Clarksdale and we stayed at Ground Zero, and they went out and did their own stories, and, again, you know, this was—you know, I mean, we came—I worked with Bill Rose to come up with some story ideas from him, but then gave them pretty much free rein to do—you know, see what they found. So anyway, so that was a nice little gig, and then that magazine ended up it was the number one student magazine in the country by SBJ, which was definitely a proud moment to be a part of that.

So it's funny how these things just kind of—they just kind of—stuff just started falling into place, and I think that the more focused you are in what—if there's something you're curious about and just—if you just, you know, follow that curiosity and just being open to things and open to people that you meet along the way, you know, I mean, I've been fortunate to, you know, continue to get some—get writing assignments, but also now doing these collaborations with people who have similar goals and interests that I have, I mean, all telling different parts of the Southern story, food story.

[1:53:09.2]

Annemarie Nichols: Definitely. Can you talk a little bit about that? Because you've worked with several chefs, like most recently Eddie Hernandez and Steven Satterfield. What is it like to manage and kind of guide a person who is really knowledgeable about cooking, but I've heard tell that chefs are not the easiest people to work with [Laughter] when it comes to, like, getting precise measurements and talk about more precise details?

[1:53:37.3]

Susan Puckett: Yeah.

[1:53:37.3]

Annemarie Nichols: Could you talk a little bit about that?

[1:53:38.6]

Susan Puckett: Yeah. I mean, every chef is different and they all, you know, have their—you know, all have their strengths and weaknesses, but, again, you know, it gets back to that listening thing, and, you know, what I've—I mean, I've loved doing these collaborations. I've been fortunate that I've been able to, like, work with chefs that, besides being just incredibly talented in the kitchen, they really have something genuine and, I think, important to say that goes well beyond them and their egos or whatever. But, you know, getting—but the whole thing, the measurements and stuff, I mean, that is just a challenge. [Laughter] And I've just yet to crack that.

But I will say, you know, just like—especially working with Eddie Hernandez, who, to his huge credit, I mean, he insisted on—he wanted to break these recipes down himself in the kitchen, and he forced himself to, like, get—to, you know, use some measuring cups, and we would—I mean, like I say, everybody works differently. In the case with Eddie, he will be the first to tell you, you know, when we first started talking about—I mean, I actually approached him and Mike Klank about—when I first realized that this was a thing, something I could possibly do, and by that time I had started working with Daron Joffe, better known as Farmer D on the *Citizen Farmers* book. I had fallen into that and really enjoyed doing that. I may have had a conversation with Steven by then, but I'm not even—I think I actually may have started talking to Mike and Eddy first, but the reason why—and the reason why I chose them, I have John T. to thank for that, because back when he was doing *Saving Southern Food*, he was—he did a feature story about the relationship of Eddie and Mike and how they—sharing their cultures to create Taqueria del Sol, and that was what planted the idea that "I think—I bet there's a book there." But when I first approached them and talked to Eddie, Eddie said, "Well,

you know, yeah, I'd love to do a book, but as long as you do the writing." And so—and it was mostly an oral history situation, just like this, but there's a lot of work on—I mean, you know, he put a lot of work into just our conversations, but especially with the food. I mean, and a lot of our figuring out the story, I mean, I can't remember a time ever that I met with him to interview him that I was not greeted with several plates of food, and in the explaining of what he had made, I would learn things, and he—but, you know, I mean, like with Eddie, he really wanted to learn how to write recipes, and he actually wrote—he wrote out the measurements and the procedures, and, you know, I filled in a lot of gaps and, like, things that—we had a lot of conversations, texts back and forth, and thank god for iPhones and photos, because sometimes I would take pictures and, you know—the phone would ring. "No, no, you're doing that wrong." [Laughter] He actually came to my condo several times. As luck would have it, there is a taqueria—Decatur Taqueria is almost right next door to where I live.

But anyway, you know, in working with him and in working with Steven and sometimes I needed to—I spent a certain amount of time just watching them, watching them cook, to figure out how to articulate things, and, you know, with Steven it was very different because Steven's a—he's actually very good writer in his own right, and it was a lot of—you know, I mean, we literally sat side by side at the computer together and just—in sending stuff, sending stuff back and forth, and it was kind of more, you know, like—almost like an editor's role, and just trying to figure out how to shape this thing, especially when you're working with somebody that's got so much knowledge. But they're both just incredible—and with Daron Joffe, too, yeah, they've been—in a way, these projects have just—I mean, it uses every skill that I needed when I was at the paper,

and I've really enjoyed just participating in the photo shoots, and you learn a lot in the photo shoots, too, and just how those things come together, and in both of those cases—and it's not always the case, both Steven and Eddie, they cooked almost everything in both of those books themselves. They were on, you know, very active—actively on the set, and it's just telling a big, big, big story, but just, you know, where it's just kind of multidimensional.

[2:01:00.9]

Annemarie Nichols: I bet. A lot of work that goes into those kinds of things.

[2:01:03.7]

Susan Puckett: Oh, yeah, yeah, and just a lot of it is just figuring out—I mean, the hardest part is figuring out which stories and which recipes to leave out.

[2:01:16.7]

Annemarie Nichols: Yeah, that's a hard decision to make too. [Laughter]

[2:01:19.2]

Susan Puckett: Oh, yeah. Yeah, and it helps having good editors for that, and in both cases, you know, we've lucked out there, and especially with Eddie, our editor at Houghton Mifflin, Rux Martin, was really drawn—I mean, the actual original manuscript had maybe—it was about 50/50 kind of southern influenced, but a lot from his Mexican heritage, and she really—she said, you know, "The Mexican heritage is fascinating. We

want some of that." But I'm most interested in how he came to be this original chef that he is today, and so, you know, that was really a matter of just kind of shaping it and directing it a little differently, but we were very happy with that, with that guidance.

[2:02:34.1]

Annemarie Nichols: Yeah, definitely. Is there anything else you want to add about working as a collaborator, maybe the challenges or the rewards of that?

[2:02:45.1]

Susan Puckett: I think just—I mean, being able to tell somebody else's story is just—I mean, I mean, it's an honor for somebody to trust you that much, and there is, like, you know, there's a lot of trust there. The chemistry has to be right. I mean, I think the skill that it—you know, has really helped me sharpen is, again, you know, just besides how do you get these stories out of people, it's also respecting how people want to tell those stories and what their comfort level is, because, you know, with some—some people, some stories would come more easily than others, and sometimes you would have to—I mean, I found—you know, especially with somebody like Eddie Hernandez, who he's such a warm and open person, but, you know, I did respect our individual filter. You know, we filter things differently, and learned, you know, cultural differences to respect, and some of the—you know, the less obvious things, you know, like just in terms of some of the stories that, like, for whatever reason, he wasn't ready to share at that moment, I mean, like one thing that kind of drove me crazy, but I kind of think it's funny now, but I would—it was very common, like, I would, like—we would meet at Taqueria.

He would always have some food there. Very often I would have a list of questions like you've got, and, you know, it would be twenty questions and I would, you know, take reams of notes, I'd have the recorder going for several hours, and then I'd realize, you know, he only answered like two of these questions. [Laughter] And I had all this other stuff that I didn't ask. It was good stuff, but I still need answers to this other stuff, and sometimes it would be like, well, does he not want to share that? Or whatever.

And sometimes he would invite me and my husband over for breakfast, like before the lunch crowd came at Taqueria in Decatur, which was right next door. Mike Klank would be there. And it was just, you know, a hangout kind of lunch, and he was always—it's like, you know, we're not working, we're just hanging out, and then inevitably, he would start telling these great stories, like "But I don't have my pad! I don't have my recorder!" And he would just—he would be answering those eighteen questions, but I have nothing to—and so then I would have to, like, frantically go back and try to record it, and then go back. So when people say, "Why did it take you seven years to write this book?" [Laughter] So I guess the big lesson, it takes a long time to do these books sometimes, you know, but that—but I feel like, you know, that's when a lot of the best stuff, I think, comes out, is when—there again, it's like if you—it's good to have a plan and good to have a road map, but just being open to seeing where—if things—if stories lead you to other places, just let them. You know, I think if—I mean, I've gone back and looked at the original script, you know, which was the proposal, and I'm actually kind of proud at how, you know, the skeleton, you know, is there, but we did take a lot of detours and I feel good about that. But, you know, when you're a collaborator, I mean, you do have to—you know, I mean, I'm just the, you know, the

vehicle or whatever to get—you know, to tell this story that they want to tell, and just trying—I mean, there is a fine line between guiding things and not—you know, I mean, sometimes I would have things just, you know, in my head, like we really need to go in this direction or really need to get this, and sometimes, you know, Eddie would very, very—you know, there were just certain things that he was resistant on wanting to do, and in some cases, I mean, he was always very cooperative and he would give me these things sometimes kind of grudgingly, but interestingly, you know, the recipes that ended up getting cut by the editor, you know, were largely those ones that I was pushing for. I mean, he—there was a good reason why he was—I mean, I think he knew in many cases better than I did what recipes needed to be there, and so, you know, I mean, that's part of it, is, like, just striking that balance between being a support and being a guide and pulling the right things out, but just learning when to step back and let—and again, just really listen to what they're bringing.

I mean, in working with Steven, you know, we always knew that—I mean, Steven is a very naturally focused person, and from the get-go, he had a great focused idea for a book. I mean, he wanted to do a produce book from the get-go, and this idea of, you know, his interest, growing interest, which continued to grow during the process of the book, is just, you know, looking at a vegetable, you know, from literally from root to leaf and then telling these Southern stories around that, but, you know, during the course of that, other stories—you know, just going deeper into that, we ended up having a lot of discussions about food waste and about—and just kind of the moral issues with that, and that was something that just became more and more clear, that that was something that he felt very strongly and passionately about, and that just came to be more of a bigger thing

than the book, and it was very gratifying. I mean, this was really before people were really talking about—that much about food waste, and it just—the timing couldn't have been better, because once the book came out and those aspects were there, you know, he—it—from a collaborator's perspective, some of my proudest moments in that have been when, you know, writers have turned to Steven as a thought leader on food waste, and he certainly told that story, but, you know, if I could play a role in, you know, helping to pull those stories out, you know, yeah, that's a good feeling.

[2:12:19.2]

Annemarie Nichols: That's cool. That's really nice. Is there anything else you want to add about your career or anything you want to say about anything? I'm done with all of my questions.

[2:12:30.1]

Susan Puckett: Okay. Well, you've done an excellent job, a thorough job of asking, asking a lot of great questions, and I just—it's thrilling to me to see that food continues, you know, continues to resonate and that—I mean, because when I started, I mean, I mean, people—we just didn't really call ourselves food writers. I mean, it really wasn't—it really wasn't a career back then. And just to see how now it's just—it's everywhere, and there's just some amazing stories. I mean, there's just some incredible food journalists out there that I'm just in awe of, and I hope that continues, and also—but I do hope that just that people who want to write about food just don't forget—don't forget to listen and to try to take yourself out of the story and open yourself up to stories that are

out of your comfort zone, and if stories take a different path, you know, I mean, let 'em and report it.

[2:14:28.4]

Annemarie Nichols: That's great. Thank you very much for spending so much of your time today.

[2:14:33.1]

Susan Puckett: Well, thanks for your interest. [Laughter]

[End of Interview]