



Jo Ellen O'Hara

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Interviewer: Annemarie Nichols Anderson

Transcription: Shelley Chance

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Annemarie Nichols: Okay good afternoon. It is June 11, 2018. I am Annemarie Nichols recording Miss Jo Ellen O'Hara at her home in Birmingham. Would you go ahead and introduce yourself for the recorder?

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Jo Ellen O'Hara: Okay; I'm Jo Ellen O'Hara. And I'm with— I was with the *Birmingham News* for forty eight years. It's the only job I've ever had that I got paid for and I was the— I have a master's degree in journalism and have a bachelor's degree in home economics. It was because I didn't like home economics that I switched to journalism but little did we know, that this would be my career and that I loved it. I loved every minute of it.

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But I was born in Birmingham and I went to local schools. I graduated from John Carroll High School, which is a Catholic school here. I went to the University of Alabama. I got a degree in home economics from the University and then I got a master's degree in journalism from the University of Alabama and came to work at the *Birmingham News* as the federal court reporter. Go figure.

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But anyway, after a couple of years the editor who was one of these people you never say no to, he said Miss O'Hara I understand you have a degree in home economics. And I said yes, sir. He said well I think that we need a food editor and we want a food editor with some credentials. And my last food editor had the credentials and we think you do. And I said well I

think that's really nice [Laughter] but I— I really like what I'm doing. And he said well that's fine; you'll take over Monday as food editor.

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So that's how much pull I had in the early [19]60s.

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From there I went from— you know I've lived at home all my life. I— this was the home where my parents raised me and I was just— I was not a— a homey girl but I was— this has been my home forever. And I jumped into being the food editor and my mother was delighted because she was a fabulous cook, down home but fabulous. And she thought that was the grandest thing that ever happened to her.

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Well I had been a good friend of the daughter of the former food editor of the news and that's how she was the one that told my big boss, well you've got Jo Ellen; she's there. You know take her. So he did. And so for forty eight years that's what I did was I was the food editor. And I went from being a young twenties to an old almost— I was seventy years old when I retired, and it was just the most wonderful life. I got besides the normal joy you get out of a job that you really like, I got some nice trips like to Spain, to Italy, to Germany, and maybe other places but those are the ones that were out of the country that I thought were so special.

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And I met a lot of wonderful people. Food people are just plain nice. I've got to tell you that. They— they sometimes come off as very sophisticated but they're just good people. And I think the nature of the people that I worked with influenced the way I felt about my job. And I met some you know people I didn't like. Of course you meet all kinds of people in life that

you're not going to bond with as they say but I did have a wonderful life working for the *Birmingham News* and the— and taking advantage of some opportunities I received.

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I met cookbook author after cookbook author and [Laughter] I could— at this point in life I could say I knew her when she was twenty years old and now she's— well as an example, the food editor of the *New York Times* for years was a stay-at-home mom and she and a friend decided they'd write a book, so they did. And then it went on— she went to the *Washington Post* and then she and her friend— they didn't have a split, they just went different directions— and my friend was with the *New York Times* for years.

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I'm trying to think of other things that were fascinating about my life but you know the main things, for every grand, you know quotation marks *thrill* you got, there were other people that were just plain nice, down to earth, good people. And one that I recall very well was a woman who her mother— or mother-in-law or something— had been in the food business and but as a contestant and so this woman decided that she wanted to enter in the contestant business because she said she needed some money— that her child needed an eye surgery. And anyway it turned out she won \$5,000, which at that time was a huge amount of money, and the child had her eye surgery.

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Another person I met that was very interesting to me was a man who was originally from France, and he had come to the United States I think before World War II, which is a little bit before my time. And he came to the United States and he— he didn't exactly know what he was going to do and anyway, by the time he made his decision of what he wanted to do the war had

been declared. And so he joined the American Army so he could stay in the United States. And anyway there was a great you know USA booster and anyway after a few years, the war was over and he was living in the United States in New York where he became chef at one of the top restaurants in the city.

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But anyway he was deciding what he wanted to do and he met— he met a guy and they said you know we're going to be in France and my friend Pierre said well my mother was in France the last time I heard from her. And but it's been a long time. And the war had since been over but anyway, the friend said well why don't we just get a car one night and we'll see if we can find where you came from? So Pierre and the guy take off one night and they decide they'll go look for this little town. Well unbeknownst to him, his mother was still alive and she had followed the war because of her great interest in the United States and her connection to the United States even though she was a French citizen. And she told a friend of hers, she said I'm going to make a flag for the first American soldier that comes through my village.

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Well the first American who came through her village was her son. And that was a great moment for her. [Phone Rings] And you know anyway that's one of my heartwarming stories.

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I read recently; I looked him up because I wanted to be sure I knew his name correctly and his name was Pierre Franey--F-r-a-n-e-y. And anyway he stayed in New York and went on to be a great chef but he was also— you know he had the tie that was— it was such a charming way of getting to know someone and— and you know he was just— he was just a little boy from France when I first was acquainted with who he was. And anyway that's one of my fun stories.

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AN: That's really cool.

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JO: I also had made a lot of friends, you know just food editor pals and— and in fact I called one yesterday. She was 80 yesterday.

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AN: Oh wow.

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JO: So I called her yesterday and but a lot of us became friends you know because we were thrown together at food editor conferences and you find the people you like and I'm sure you will find that in your life, too but—. Anyway we— we bonded and we all— you know like there's several friends I haven't seen in a long time but we still enjoy reminiscing and you know I said we can't relive but we can revisit sometimes. It's okay.

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And that's what we've done. And we've become friends and I can't tell you that we're best friends but we're the kind of friends you'll say they are a good friend of mine. And these truly are good friends that I've made over the years.

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Some local stories that you know probably aren't as exciting but they're still as important are people like— for every big story I did, I did tons of little stories and you're— after forty eight years you'll be quite aware of that. [Laughter] I hope your career takes as many interesting turns as mine did.

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But anyway, well I can't remember what I was going to tell you about but—

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AN: That's okay. I have a question about— I want to go— I have so many things I want to ask you.

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JO: Please do.

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AN: I want to ask you about this community in Birmingham of your girlhood. What was that like? How has that changed?

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JO: It was— well I think we looked at Birmingham as— it was a blue-collar town and Atlanta was sort of the white-collar town. And of course, Atlanta has become huge and wonderful and Birmingham is a little slower but we're also developing. We're just slow learners I guess you'd call it.

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But anyway I've noticed in the last two weeks that Frank Stitt who owns Highlands Bar & Grill was named the best chef in America. Well I remember when Frank came to Birmingham; he was from Cullman, which is the town just north of here and he came here and he had some nice credentials as far as his experience. But he decided he wanted to open a first-class restaurant. Well it took him 10 tries, but Frank is now the owner of the classification of best restaurant in America for 2018 and that was a wonderful moment.

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But when I was growing up there weren't that many wonderful restaurants. And like friends of mine laugh about it; we'd say where did we go to eat? Well we went to John's, which was a seafood place. We went to— there's a place that's still— well John's is still around, too but we went to another place called Nicky's and it's still around and it's still very popular. In fact, I went there with some friends late one afternoon and there were people that were either finishing lunch or getting ready for dinner. And it— there's no alcohol served there so the draw is the food— definitely.

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And Birmingham has become quite a culinary town now. And which is surprising because just people decided to plant here and make their lives here and we have benefited with wonderful restaurants and—. In fact, a friend— friends and I go out once a week on what we call our play dates and we— we'll decide where we want to go and last week I said where are we going to go? We've been everywhere. And we said well, we'll find a place. One week we went to Jasper which is north of Birmingham and went there and had lunch at a hippety hop place and that was kind of fun, and then we went to Selma because Selma has got so much history

especially from the Civil Rights Era and we went to Selma one Friday for our play date and we had lunch on the river. And we walked across the Edmund Pettus Bridge, which was our touch for history and we— we just have done a lot of, you know, fun things. Most of these are not work-related but they're related because I had friends who were also interested in what I was interested in and we have benefited from that.

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But in thinking about some of the people that I knew it was a fireman and he was— I guess he was a— not a recruit but he was an intern fireman and he later became fire chief in Fairfield which is a little town. It's a suburban part of Birmingham. And anyway he became the fire chief and it started off because firemen are known for being fabulous cooks and because they spend so much time stuck with the same people all the time and this man you know developed his skills and one of— I'm sure one of the reasons he became the fire chief was he was also the best cook anywhere.

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And that was just one of the things that went with the job. You had to be good and you had to be a good cook if you were at that fire station or at a fire station. And that's something you'll find I think any reporter who goes to a town if they'll call a fire station and say who is the best cook in your district and they'll say well, so and so and that's your key to opening up a lot of other windows of information.

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Um there— and there are a lot of just local people that are like you know I keep thinking of so many things because I did work a long time, but I remember so many people that they started off as you know just stay-at-home cooks, stay-at-home moms I guess you'd call them

now. And they developed them into great careers. You know they— as their children grew older and they didn't have the ties to home so binding then they evolved into some really fine cooks.

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And another—

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AN: Do you remember some of those women or some specific examples of that?

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JO: Well one family that I knew is the Bruno family and I went to high school with the Brunos, and Mr. Bruno's daughter was a year or two ahead of me in school and another daughter was a year behind me. Well Bruno's went from a little chain, a *little* chain, to a *massive* chain and when one of the brothers was killed in an airplane crash several years ago on a private plane— because Bruno's was doing their Christmas thing of visiting their stores and wishing a Merry Christmas— one of the brothers was killed, and I heard, and this is all what I heard, but that the Brunos got so much money out of it that they couldn't afford to pay the insurance— that you know came— they couldn't afford the taxes on the insurance. And so lots of them either sold out or they developed into other businesses such as one of the heirs to the Bruno family. I believe she opened a restaurant, which has developed into several restaurants now of not fancy ones but just what she knew.

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And then there—you know there's just lots of people that I know of that— oh like, there's a woman named Sharon Goldstein and she started out being just somebody who loved to

cook. And she always cooked for big Jewish holidays but that was about the extent of her cooking. And she became terribly involved with cooking as an aside and today she's you know quite successful when she wants to be. Her husband is a doctor so this was certainly something she selected for herself.

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But—

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AN: Is she still active?

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JO: Yes; she is.

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AN: Cool. And you were mentioning too I think it kind of goes along— your mom. Could you tell me her name and your parents and how that kind of taught you—?

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JO: Well my mother was— my mother's name was Adine O'Hara, Adine Loftus O'Hara and she was born in a little tiny, tiny, tiny, tiny town in Alabama and they didn't have any money at all. And her father died when she was three and my aunt was six weeks old. And so my— my grandmother, she married I think once again but not— only once. And she was just sort of a— a wonderful grandmother. You know everybody— well I was nine when she died, but she lived

with us and in this house and anyway, my mother was— you know people still say that's the finest woman I've ever known because my mother was just one of these— she— if she had anything she would share it with somebody else. And her nephew who is a very close cousin of mine said that she is one of the three finest women he'd ever known because she was so generous with her time.

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And I remember [Laughter] she— at her funeral one of the amusing parts— at the time you don't think of it as amusing but it was— and the minister said you know I remember that she was running around picking up people to get them out of the rain and I thought Adine O'Hara is the oldest one here. She's 80 years old and she was running around picking up people so they wouldn't get wet.

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And you know that was the kind of mother my mother was. She was a wonderful cook. I still have friends who say— and they called her Adiney. That was her nickname as we got older and as my cousin had children and they called her Adiney but you know they recall wonderful meals with my mother and my family and nothing fancy. I mean you know our big deal was roast beef. We had roast beef and we'd have usually one good, good, good side and several other sides but that was back when people cooked a lot. We weren't like three courses or three choices. It was— it was like five or six things that you had on the table. And Sunday lunch at our house was Sunday lunch. It was a big deal.

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And I don't know where you're from, but in the South, Sunday lunch was a big deal especially in my era, and I'm 80 years old. But it was a fun time and then when I took— when I

started doing this food thing which my mother just thought she had died and gone to heaven because I was her food editor daughter [Laughter], and of course they didn't realize that I would come home and say mama, how do you do this? And she always told me and I'd tell friends, I may not know how to do it but I know somebody who does. And so I lived that way for many years.

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And you know it was just a— it was a— it was a fun life and my life I— I'd like to say that I met people who had similar backgrounds and then when I'd meet someone who was a little different I'd say oh, you— you need to come see me in Birmingham and they'd say well, what I haven't lost anything in Birmingham. Well you never know and they'd become my great friends and they'd say Jo Ellen has got great food and she's got wonderful food at her house. Don't go to her— don't expect her to cook but her mother will fix you the finest meal you've ever had. And it was plain food. It was you know meatloaf. We had ham, we had meatloaf, we had—I don't ever remember having fried chicken and that— I think that's odd. But we never had a lot of that.

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And she did wonderful desserts. In fact, not long ago one of my good friends who has only been my friend since we were seven—

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AN: Oh wow.

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JO: —she said Jo Ellen do you remember the name of a recipe that your mama had and I— I thought and I thought and she called me in the middle of the night and she said it's trifle. Well that was a big deal in my mother's life because we weren't trifle people. We were cobblers and pies and layer cakes and stuff like that but anyway she said do you remember the recipe for trifle? And I said yes; I do. [Laughter] But you know it was a funny kind of thing that we remember those moments of our lives when it was so totally out of what we were used to and we thought well trifle that's a big deal. Well it's no big deal. It's you mix up a lot of stuff and it turns out pretty and people who aren't used to wonderful food thought it was just the finest thing in the world. And it is fine. But it's not as fine as some of her other things that she did I think.

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AN: Hmm that's great. Now you went to the University of Alabama. What made you decide to major in home economics?

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JO: Well you've got to remember this was like in the [19]50s when I finished high school, and in all truth I didn't know what else to do. I wanted to go to Vanderbilt and my principal at my school thought it was not a good school for me, so without talking to my mother or my good friend's mother or anybody else, he decided he would not send in our applications. So we didn't go and we were stuck, and so we ended up both going to the University of Alabama and as a last minute thing and but not without my friend's mother chewing out the principal for— he was a Catholic priest and she said Jo Ellen's mother was never Catholic and she honored her

commitment to send her child to a Catholic school and you have ruined everything. You've ruined it all. Well he didn't ruin it all; it turned out perfectly for me.

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But I went to the University and I didn't really like home economics but again, this was the late [19]50s or the mid to late [19]50s and there weren't that many opportunities for girls. And I thought Lord, if I don't pass this I'll end up selling cosmetics at the department stores downtown. You know that was— that was what I thought my next step was.

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But anyway as it turned out I wasn't happy with home economics and but I loved journalism, and I'd always kind of lean toward that and that was— and anyway, after I got into journalism then I got involved with the yearbook which was the *Corolla* which now I'm sure is gone but— or it's on its way out, so I hear, but it was the yearbook that was— oh we thought that was the finest thing in the world. And the yearbook and the newspaper the *Crimson White*, they were big deals.

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So anyway I got involved with the *Corolla* and before I knew it I was going to be— I was asked to be editor of the *Corolla*, which again for a girl and I use that term lightly because we use women now but at the time, I was just so taken with the opportunity plus the fact that I was the first girl in a non-war year who had been elected editor of the *Corolla*. And so I— they said well, you'll have to go to graduate school to do that and so I mentioned it to my parents who were at best middle class— well you can— this house is a middle class kind of home and anyway they were at best middle class citizens. One reason was that I was the only child. And so anyway, let's see I get off the— anyway I got— had that opportunity to be editor of the *Corolla*.

So daddy said well if you can be editor of the *Corolla* I guess I can send you to graduate school, which was a big deal. [Laughter] And then that was followed by when I made my first C in some journalism course and daddy said well Jo Ellen, you know if you can't get a master's I don't see how I can justify paying your way through school, which taught me a lesson that you can do what you want to do.

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And I wanted to do this and I wanted to—I wanted to please my family also but I also really wanted to be editor of the *Corolla*. And that was a great moment for me. And I've loved everything about you know looking back and saying I was—I was editor of the *Corolla* back when it was a big deal. Well that's true of my newspaper. I was food editor of the *Birmingham News* back when it was a real newspaper and of course the *Birmingham News* is pretty much gone now. And anyway there's a lot of things I tell people—they've destroyed my history because so much of the past is passed now. But anyway it's been a fun life.

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AN: Definitely. I have a question about you being at—you being at University of Alabama during a time. What was the ratio of like female students in the journalism master's program and did you receive any pushback from any of your male—?

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JO: No.

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AN: Colleagues?

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JO: No.

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AN: That's good.

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JO: I really didn't and you know maybe one thing was I was not all that what you'd call cute and so I was you know— everybody would say I was a good friend. And that helped a lot though I wouldn't have admitted it then and I found it hard to believe until later in life but I was never— you know they'd say Jo Ellen go for it; go for it. And now you know I see women accomplishing all kinds of wonderful things that they wouldn't have accomplished forty years ago.

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So—

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AN: That's awesome. What were some— who were some professors who impacted you during your time there?

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JO: Well there was one who is now deceased. His name was Mr. Scaritt and he was a wonderful man. And he was— he was a real you know, who, what, where, why, when— basic journalism teacher and he had been a newspaper man and he had to quit teaching— he had to quit being a newspaper man because of his health. And so he— he was like over six-feet tall and weighed about 130.

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AN: Oh wow.

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JO: He had— he had digestive issues. But anyway, Mr. Scaritt was one of the ones who influenced me a lot and one of my fun things that I love to remember is when I graduated in home ec, I was named the outstanding graduate from the school— from the Department of Journalism and my mother was just heartbroken. She thought I hadn't told her that. Well I didn't know it either until I looked at the program and my good friend said Jo Ellen look at that; look at that. You're the outstanding graduate in journalism. And I wasn't even a journalism major; I was a home ec major, but anyway those were the fun things.

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You know life for me has been a lot of fun, and I know I make it sound very trivial but you know when you have a job that's more like fun than work it makes a tremendous amount of difference. It really does. And I hope you'll find that, too.

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AN: I think I have. I have a question, too; well let's transition and talk a little bit about you starting at the *Birmingham News*. You said you started as a federal court reporter. Could you talk a little bit about that?

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JO: Well I had a master's degree and I went to the *Birmingham News* at seventy dollars a week, and I was just grateful they took me for that. I was just grateful to have a job because I remember going to—I had been to Europe that summer before I started work and when I got home my mother said Jo Ellen, you have an appointment to interview at the *Birmingham News* on Tuesday after Labor Day, and I had gotten home the weekend of Labor Day.

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Well, I interviewed for the job and I thought I'll never get a job and I'll be, you know, selling cosmetics downtown. And I got home the next day and I had a message to call the editor of the *Birmingham News* who offered me the job. And that was the way I— oh and my transition from federal court, I loved doing what I did and I thought that was fun and I was you know— nobody ever knew I had a degree in home ec because I was a— I was a writer. And we didn't think much of home ec majors at the time.

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And—though I have a great deal of respect for home ec majors now, but anyway when they found out they said, we didn't know that. And I said well, nobody ever asked me. I didn't offer it either. But I did do that for three years until somebody found out that I had the degree in home economics and they said you're our girl. We want somebody with credentials. And so my

credentials got me the job I did not want but I have loved the memories of it and I've loved it when I did it and loved the people I met.

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AN: What changed your mind from being kind of weary about starting to actually loving the job?

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JO: Well it was such a transition that I can't really tell you, you know what it was but when I look back now I can't think of any unhappy moments I had. And it's just been— it was a wonderful time to you know kind of spread your wings and I remember there were things that— well like young people who would come into be food editors and that was a big deal to them, well when I went in that was not a big deal. And it was the change of you know the way people looked at women and individuals and— and of course we had such huge social change then, too.

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AN: Yeah; could you talk a little bit about that because that's— you started at 1960 right and that's right when the Civil Rights Movement in Birmingham is rushing up? What was that like?

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JO: And one of my— one of my good friends and she was ten years younger than I was and I remember one time we were sitting around the news room and you know just as we called it BSing and so this young black boy and we called them boys, we— when today I would call him

a middle-aged black man but at the time he was a young black boy and he was a copycat— a copy boy, which we called everybody boy— white, black, whatever.

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And anyway he was saying something and sort of joining in the conversation. Well that made this white bigot really mad. And he started to fight at him. And I thought that's the worst thing I have ever seen in my life. And I must admit that I grew up pretty what's the word— I was pretty liberal even in my early days.

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But I thought that is wrong. And I think some of it had to do with the way that my parents felt, you know you treated everybody the same unless they prove themselves right or wrong to you. And anyway, I never spoke to that man again. I didn't go his funeral either. But and I saw the guy who had been the young black boy who had the nerve to try and join into the conversation and anyway he— I said Ralph do you remember the day? And he said oh, I remember that day. He said that was when I became a man. [Laughter] But we had a lot of fun and he— another funny thing, oh I guess he was maybe a young fledgling reporter and one of the girls in the office needed a ride home. And Ralph looked up and he said Mary Pat, if I had a cap and a Cadillac I'd offer you a ride home, which I thought was quite incisive of him at the time to realize that his color had nothing to do with anything except he was black and black people didn't drive white people home unless they had on a cap and a Cadillac— and drove a Cadillac.

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But journalism— I keep veering off the point, but journalism has— it's gotten less pal-sy than it was before, and I think a lot of that's the competition. But I mean, we had friends who you know they were just people we liked, we didn't care if they made like me seventy dollars a

week with a master's degree or two hundred and fifty dollars a week with no background. But if we liked them that— that's all that made a difference. And I had another friend who I think he worked for the news and then he went to the— I believe he went to Huntsville and then he went— anyway he used to say I've written more letters of resignation than copy. And anyway he ended up with AP in New York. And but he was from Mississippi— good guy and good friend.

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And I guess I've seen the transition of people you know going to work for next to nothing just because they loved what they did to people really making some money. And I heard a young guy— or young, he's not young; he's sixty-something but he said the other day, he said well I went to work for the news for two hundred fifty dollars a week. And I said that was just huge amounts of money in my day. I mean I thought two hundred fifty dollars was huge. And you know it depends on the time and the era and the economics.

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AN: Could you talk a little bit too about— you were mentioning the friends and how the newsroom was kind of pal-sy? What was the— I guess the atmosphere of the *Birmingham News* when you first started?

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JO: Oh it was wonderful. We— I remember spending the night. I was— I was single of course and I had some friends that were married and they— anyway we— we had gone to a Christmas party or something and I'm sure there's a lot of alcohol involved in this decision, but anyway they said well just come on and spend the night with us. So we go to their house and they said Jo

Ellen you're the cook around here— I was the food editor at that time— and they said you're the cook. You just fix us some— I think I did biscuits and I had never made biscuits in my life but it's— you're sort of born with it. You learn you know that that's what you're supposed to do. So I— I made biscuits.

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And they were wonderful; thank you God.

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But anyway that was one of the things I did. And then another time on a non-food related thing, it was I guess not toward the end of my career but say in the last fifteen years there was a huge murder in Birmingham. And the woman who was murdered lived on the top of Red Mountain, which overlooks the city. And anyway, I went to the city editor and I said so and so has died. And he said oh, we'll get it. I got somebody checking on it.

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And being stupid me I went back to him an hour later and I said you know, I understand that her maid is being interviewed by the police. He said we'll take care of it, Jo Ellen. Don't worry about it. He said we don't handle society obits until the funeral home calls in. Well that made me furious because I did have a background where I knew what a story was. And so anyway, I fussed around and fussed around about that and— and he had done some other things. I hadn't liked him anyway. But anyway, the next morning the *Post Herald*, which was a smaller paper but it was— we called it our competitor and it was and they had a six-column hit about this woman being murdered in her fine home overlooking the city. And I was called into the editor's office and there stands the publisher, the editor, the managing editor, and the city editor who was

not my friend, and they said Jo Ellen, we decided we need to do a story about who this woman was. And we think you're the one to do it.

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And I thought well, [Laughter] I'll do my best. And I did my best. I mean I went out and I called like I was Brenda Starr— and Brenda Starr was a woman of the early days in the comics— But anyway I went out and I— I called her banker, I called her lawyer, I called her good friends, and everybody was so open and so willing to share. And anyway, the city editor who was not my friend, I'm sure he cussed all the way to not getting a job. But anyway he— he was not happy that I had found the story and gotten the story and really brought the story into the prominence it really deserved because they said, well she was only a socialite. I said if she had been a man, she would have been Chairman of First National Bank. And they couldn't disagree with that.

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AN: Yeah; that's really, really interesting.

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JO: And that was my— that was one of my great moments I thought.

00:45:43

AN: Definitely. What was the response to that piece?

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JO: I don't know. I know I was very proud of it. And you know the thing about— a lot of that you didn't sit around and rest on your laurels because you had another story the next day.

00:46:03

AN: Yeah definitely. I have a question too about first coming— becoming the food editor. I know you had a—like a pen name, you were—

00:46:13

JO: Sue Scattergood. [Laughter] That was the name that the--well they said when I took the— they said well, you're going to get married in two years and you'll leave and we'll be stuck with a no-name food editor. Well, after about fifteen or twenty years they decided yeah, maybe she'll stay around a while. And so [Laughter] I got to use my real name of Jo Ellen O'Hara. And so that was like a brand new name because I— but I said the nice thing about being Sue Scattergood was that no one ever called you on Sunday morning and said Sue, my— my cake didn't rise or you know, you didn't have any of those kinds of problems. And by the time I got the— you know got the job with my own name I was pretty much people were out of the habit of calling. It wasn't like— I mean I used to have calls all the time from people who felt like you were their good friend. And that was another good thing about being a food editor is you were— you were considered a good friend of the cook, the lady who cooked at home.

00:47:28

And I still see friends who say Jo Ellen, I never cooked but I read everything you wrote. And that was just sort of the way it was.

00:47:39

AN: Could you talk about some of the things that you might have changed or kept the same when you started in the Food Section?

00:47:48

JO: Well when I started I was only twenty five, I think. And so I didn't really change anything much, but we always had like recipe of the week and you got five dollars if you got recipe of the week. And that was a big deal. And then you know we expanded and we would do features on people and then when Birmingham became more of a restaurant town we started doing recipes—stories on chefs and that was a very exciting time.

00:48:26

AN: Could you talk a little bit about that?

00:48:28

JO: Well, Frank Stitt is the one who, you know like it or not, and I'm very fond of Frank Stitt, but he came here and he had worked—I think his father was a doctor in Cullman north of Birmingham and he had worked with some pretty big name people in the food world. And he decided that he would—he was the food and beverage manager at the Sheraton downtown when he first started. And then he wanted to start his own business.

00:49:05

And I can remember being at a friend's home one night, and Frank was cooking and it was the most wonderful meal I'd ever had. And it was scallops. I remember that. But Frank was

just a fabulous cook. He just— he had a knack. He had a way about him. And anyway we all realized that this guy was something special and there are some people in town today who were second and third to follow Frank and they're still a little bitter because they didn't— they weren't first. And it has nothing to do with anything other than Frank was the first to really do special things with food in Birmingham.

00:49:50

And you know now I see Frank and I've known him well, since he was in his twenties and I guess I was maybe in my early thirties and he's just--he's a delightful man. And he has done great things for the city through his food and his knowledge of food and he's done great things as a citizen of the city too, proving that you know cooks can be a lot of things and they aren't necessarily held back by— oh he's a chef. Well, chef today and chef thirty years ago, they have totally different meanings in cities this size. The chef today is very well thought of— I think. I think the world of chefs and the people involved with food but I think that's obvious that they're very nice people and very caring people.

00:50:54

AN: Definitely. He is— he is a really special guy. Could you talk a little bit about your responsibilities as the food editor?

00:51:03

JO: Well I— I did the day-to-day things like I had to do a feature front every week, and then I did asides and then if there was some big food event coming up I covered that. And then I did a lot of recipes because when it started off, it was mainly a recipe kind of deal.

00:51:29

AN: How did you choose the recipes?

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JO: Timeliness, seasonal, the way you— you know, like if you were at home planning what you were going to serve for dinner, you'd say well what's good at the market here and what's a good price? And you know, I think it was that kind of thing.

00:51:53

AN: Yeah.

00:51:54

JO: It was no great you know, ha-ha!

00:51:57

AN: And you had— you had that hard news background. How did you bring that— how did that hard news background help— help you when you went to features, food section?

00:52:08

JO: I think you asked questions that you normally wouldn't ask you know like, well why did you get into this or who was the person that influenced you to get into this? And you know

things like that you know somebody might overlook the idea that it was important to ask those questions.

00:52:30

AN: How do you think that the community of Birmingham responded to— to your food section?

00:52:36

JO: Oh I think it was— I think it was a great response. In fact, I ran into a friend of mine who is about my age recently and he said, Jo Ellen I just cry every day. I— I open the paper and I don't see your name there. And his wife said, and you think I'm kidding, but I'm not because he really— he had read the food section. And that was not— at some point in our lives that was not a manly thing to do, but he was secure enough that he thought that was manly.

00:53:11

AN: That's great. So did that change at any point in time, this kind of like—?

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JO: I think—

00:53:18

AN: During your career?

00:53:18

JO: I think— I know you're going to edit this down and that's fine because I have a lot of quiet moments, but—

00:53:30

AN: No; this is fine.

00:53:32

JO: I think at some point it became okay for men to like food and for men to cook. And one of my friends who— he became the first wine writer in the United States and he did it as an aside; he worked for an insurance company, but he loved wine and so he decided that he would write a wine column for the *Birmingham News*. And he was our first wine writer and ultimately the first wine writer in the country so we think.

00:54:08

AN: Wow; what's his name?

00:54:09

JO: His name was Nelson Cole and he's been dead for a number of years now but he wrote under the name of Mason **Koro** because again you didn't splash your--he worked with the press--with the public and the press and he didn't want to you know be the guy with two jobs. So he changed it to Mason **Koro** which I've forgotten what— we thought of some silly reason why he should be Mason **Koro** but he was Nelson Cole. And he was a fine writer. And he had been a

journalism major I think in college and then he got involved with other things and of course journalism has never paid fabulous amounts of money, which is fine and good. It just didn't happen. And I don't think anybody ever went into this career for the money factor. It was the interest factor and the fun factor and the opportunities factor.

00:55:13

AN: You talked a little bit about like some of your everyday responsibilities but you were mentioning things like going on trips and doing some other things like that. Are there any stories or even columns that you wrote that really stand out as one of the— some of the most fun or significant things you did while you were the editor?

00:55:35

JO: I think you know— and again, you know this is an old woman talking about old memories but one of the most fun things I had to do and I did it while my mother was still alive talking about Mother's Day, every day was Mother's Day at my house and about the best cook in town. You didn't have to walk around the block to find her; she lived in your house. And— and it was a— it was like a homage to my mother. And it was long before she died, so I'm glad I did that.

00:56:14

AN: Uh-hm; what kinds of things did you say in that piece?

00:56:17

JO: Just the things that we cherished you know like simple things, like peach cobbler. I'm sure you remember— you know peach cobbler. And her roast beef which my cousin's children still talk about you know oh, Adiney's peach cobbler that was the world's best or her— not her peach cobbler, her roast beef. It was the best. And she— you know she had a lot of trendy little recipes that women liked at the time. She was— she was probably the tail-end of the at-home cook because friends of mine who were like my era, they had— they later lost great interest in you know cooking as such and they were busy in the things that I'm sure were very helpful at the time. And they still are; like Cuisinarts, they came about after I went to work. The microwave came to work— came into being after I went to work. And there were a lot of things that you know we just didn't think about at the time but they're a part of our everyday life now.

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AN: Did you ever integrate those into your recipe choices?

00:57:51

JO: Well yeah; yeah because they became so important.

00:57:57

AN: Uh-huh; definitely. So you mentioned that you were friends with Margaret Dillon who was the first— ?

00:58:05

JO: Uh-huh.

00:58:05

AN: Could you talk a little bit about her and her column?

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JO: Well hers was— I think she wrote— I don't remember because Mrs. Dillon would be oh, a hundred-something by now. And she was the mother of my good friend growing up and Mrs. Dillon was probably in her forties when she had her first child and her only child.

00:58:33

But she was much more the— as we all were and it's a lot of people were at that time— you made it yourself, you— you didn't have shortcuts because there were no shortcuts. A lot of the frozen foods, there were no frozen foods, and I'm sure that's hard for you to imagine at this time but you know that's the way it was. We didn't have frozen foods. We didn't have mixes. Mixes were sort of a new thing and she operated on a totally— probably a much more intelligent vein than I did because I had lots of things that helped me or that helped people be better cooks.

00:59:27

And she— I'd say Mrs. Dillon as an example of a notable cook, she did things on her own and she did things that she thought of and she was probably more creative and probably had the opportunity be more creative than I did because you had to come up with some great ideas. And I remember going to her house for dinner when we were children because her daughter and I were good friends since--well in grammar school for sure, and you know Mrs. Dillon would have these wonderful meals and of course I was the child that had good manners. She always

said please and thank you and I enjoyed my lunch or my dinner. But I remember thinking oh, it's got to be good. Mrs. Dillon is cooking it. And it was.

01:00:37

And then I knew another food editor who was in Atlanta and I went to her house one night when we were judging some contest and she invited us all over for dinner. And she lived off her freezer, which is something I had never even done. And she was not that young. She was a good bit older than I was, I think. And she just— you know that was just her way of life. She lived off frozen foods and what people gave her. And we didn't do that; we just didn't do that here.

01:01:17

AN: It's really interesting— the difference. You had mentioned, too earlier about the relationships that you had with all these different food editors and getting to meet them. Could you talk about the Association of Food Journalists and maybe your involvement in that and how you met those women or men?

01:01:34

JO: Well you know when it first started out you— we were very— we were very unorganized and you kind of met people like you know you'd go to things and you'd talk to people who were about your age. And then as you got to know more people you would spread out and know others. And I remember there was one woman who talked about— she was very creative and I think she was from Canada. But she talked about how— that she learned to cook a roast on the

grill of her car or something like that. And you know she did crazy things but they worked because she was very creative. And she'd figure out a way to make things work.

01:02:34

And I'm trying to think of some other you know fun people that--and they're not coming to me right now but I do remember the woman who cooked a roast on her grill in her car. And she'd tell you the idea of how long it would take you and you know don't get stuck in a traffic jam and all that kind of stuff. But those were all fun things. Those are— you know again I've been retired ten years so I'm going to tell you a lot of things that are fun and schmaltzy in the same way. [Laughter]

01:03:24

AN: That's pretty fun. Did you ever get like ideas from those women?

01:03:29

JO: Oh sure.

01:03:30

AN: Yeah.

01:03:30

JO: Sure. And I can't tell you one right this minute, but oh sure you'd get ideas and you'd go home and you'd adapt it to your part of the country. And I can't remember any specific things right now but we did do that a lot. And the sharing was a very important part of that.

01:03:59

AN: Definitely. I have another question too more related to Alabama. What was the relationship of the *Birmingham News* in Birmingham and to other cities in Alabama?

01:04:09

JO: Oh we thought we were the best. We just thought you know at— at the time Birmingham was and still is the largest city and the cities that have grown now such as Huntsville, we just thought they were little towns. And we thought we were *the* town in the state.

01:04:38

And I remember going on little trips you know outside like to Cullman or Selma and you know trying the specialty at such and such a place that you'd heard about. And there was— I wish had somebody here who had a better memory than I do about things, but there was some things that you know like— well Big Bob Gibson in Decatur; have you ever heard of it?

01:05:17

AN: Yes ma'am.

01:05:17

JO: Well it's a place that has white barbecue sauce. And we— I remember one time I was doing a story with a photographer and we had both gone up to work on this story and she kind of drove me crazy if the truth were known but she said well, could we stop and have lunch at Big Bob

Gibson's? Well it was the finest meal I ever had in my life, you know in my world at that time and for what it was because it was white barbecue sauce. And I thought that is really fabulous.

01:05:55

And I'm trying to think of other places that were interesting. Not right off the bat—

01:06:14

AN: I have another question, too so relating to like kind of the evolution of restaurants in Birmingham. When did you all start adding like— did you add reviews to your food section or was that— ?

01:06:28

JO: We did; we did. We started that in the [19]80s I believe, but it was when Birmingham started getting a lot of restaurants. And we had one guy [Laughter] who we called him advertorial because he never met a meal he didn't like. And then you know we thought, well we've got to do something about this. We've got to be more honest about you know how good is this place or whatever?

01:06:55

And anyway [Laughter] he died, so then we could be really honest about what we thought about restaurants and how they rated and you know in comparison to other places in the town or in the state or whatever. And there's a place that I go that they have here now, but there was a place in Mobile called Wintzell's. It was a great seafood place. Well I was out with some friends no long ago and we went to Wintzell's in Fultondale and they have spread a lot around the state [Phone Rings] since that time.

01:07:39

AN: Definitely. I think they have one in Montgomery too.

01:07:42

JO: Do they?

01:07:43

AN: I think so.

01:07:43

JO: Well it's a good place.

01:07:47

AN: So did you do some of that writing yourself or did— was there a food critic who— ?

01:07:51

JO: No; I did some of it. But mainly we had— we tried to have people that were not attached to the news editorially, you know, so that we could say, you know, this is a completely independent opinion. And we tried to be very honorable about that. The one thing I can say about the news is it was when I knew it with the exception of our editorial guy who never met a meal he didn't like and he was a good guy; he just— that's the way he had been trained.

01:08:31

And that's the way everybody knew what he did and it was kind of a joke about reading this guy's column. But anyway we tried to be very honest about things that we did and our restaurant critics, one was a lawyer— two were lawyers, one was a PR guy, and one was a woman who just simply liked writing about food.

01:09:08

And they all came from different parts of the town and different experiences and in some cases different ages. And that made it really very fun for us because you know you'd say hey I like this. You know let's see what so and so thinks. And then you'd say hey they liked it, so then we'd all go.

01:09:34

AN: How did you choose those folks to write columns?

01:09:38

JO: People that were interested. It was mainly interest. It was not— it was not pull. It was interest and people that were interested really cared.

01:09:58

AN: Uh-hm. That's good. This one is kind of connected to— and it's connected to like your— the idea of your relationship with the city of Birmingham as a— as the food writer. How did that change over time because you had a really long career? Did you—

01:10:24

JO: It really didn't. It really didn't change.

01:10:28

AN: That's good.

01:10:29

JO: Because I started off with people depending on Sue Scattergood. She was a lot older than I was [Laughter] and maybe almost as old as Mrs. Dillon would have been. I'm not sure; Mrs. Dillon could have been younger than Sue Scattergood, the person— the— the idyllic food editor.

01:10:48

But anyway it never changed because you had the belief that people trusted you and I never had trouble with people questioning what I said. And that is because I came from a long line of those who had been trusted. [Laughter]

01:11:10

AN: And how did your experience in home economics help you do this job?

01:11:16

JO: I think the fact that I know the basics. I think you've got to like to write. I think that's the most important thing but I think more than anything is you've got to like to write. And having a knowledge of food principles is quite helpful.

01:11:42

AN: I bet. Well, I think that's all I have for— to ask you.

01:11:46

JO: Well if you think of anything else please call me.

01:11:48

AN: Okay.

01:11:48

JO: I'll be happy to talk to you any time.

01:11:50

AN: Is there anything else you want to add that we haven't talked about?

01:11:53

JO: No except that this will be ten years this fall when I will have been retired and I told somebody the other day, I said I can't think of one bad thing. And I'm sure I had all sorts of terrible thoughts but at this point in life I can't think of one bad thing. I think I had the world's best job.

01:12:12

AN: That's good; it sounds like it. Thank you so very much.

01:12:16

JO: Well Annemarie it was nice having you here.

01:12:18

AN: Thanks.

01:12:18

[End Jo Ellen O'Hara Interview]