



Elaine Corn

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Interviewer: Annemarie Nichols Anderson

Length: Two Hours and Thirty Four Minutes

Project: Women Food Journalists Project

[00:00:01.20]

Annemarie N.: Let's get started.

[00:00:01.20]

Elaine C.: Okay.

[00:00:03.12]

Annemarie N.: Good afternoon. This is Annemarie Nichols recording for the Southern Foodways Alliance. I am with Ms. Elaine Corn in Dallas, Texas, where she's visiting her friend, Ms. Dotty Griffith. Today's date is July 12, 2018. Let's get started. Could you talk a little bit—well, first, could you introduce yourself for the recorder?

[00:00:26.16]

Elaine C.: I am Elaine Corn. I live in Sacramento, California now, and I have been writing about food since I stopped being a copy editor and a news editor.

[00:00:42.22]

Annemarie N.: That's great. What's your birth date?

[00:00:43.22]

Elaine C.: March 26, 1951.

[00:00:47.03]

Annemarie N.: Awesome. Let's start a little bit and talk about your growing up years. Where did you grow up and what was it like?

[00:00:57.26]

Elaine C.: We are New York Jews. We're from Ellis Island immigrants. My dad was born in Manhattan. I was born in New Jersey, in a part of New Jersey where you could see the Statue of Liberty. It was very close to New York. My mom was born in New Jersey. And

trips to grandma's houses were either through the Lincoln Tunnel into Manhattan or not too far, where my grandparents lived in New Jersey.

[00:01:34.19]

Annemarie N.: That's great. So how did you get to Texas?

[00:01:38.20]

Elaine C.: The story goes something like this: in World War II, my dad worked for the Flying Tigers under General Chennault. He was based in China. And he worked in telecommunications, which is a word that you wouldn't even imagine existed in 1943 or [19]44 or wherever he went in there. When he came back and married my mom, they lived in New Jersey near Fort Monmouth and he taught electronics. We were TV people. I was born into a house with a television in 1951.

[00:02:23.20]

Annemarie N.: Wow.

[00:02:25.08]

Elaine C.: But then, his career began to take off. And mind you, he had no college degree. And we were sent to Winston-Salem, North Carolina, where he worked for Western Electric. And he was sent on many, many trips to White Sands Missile Range in Southern New Mexico, right outside El Paso, across the state line. But we stayed in Winston-Salem for a good five years. I think we moved there when I was five years old, and that was my first experience in the South. My high school, I mean, my elementary school cafeteria served a lot of Southern food, and I have to confess, I did not like the smell of collard greens cooked in ham hock. So my mother sent my lunch with me to school every day, and sometimes the kids wouldn't sit with me, 'cause I knew the minute a sandwich was wrapped in tin foil, it had sardines in it. [Laughter] And they would sit down at the end of table from me and I was the new kid a lot. But it was a real family town, took lots of dance lessons, and my mom cooked a lot of variety, even then. But my dad was the adventurous eater outside the house. There was a Chinese restaurant—having served in

China, it was his favorite cuisine—way down in Charlotte. There were no good Chinese restaurants, in his opinion, in Winston-Salem. And he would take my brother, me, and my mom about an hour and a half away to Moon Garden Restaurant in Charlotte, North Carolina and back in the same night, just to get good Chinese food. And he put a pair of chopsticks in my hands when I was four years old.

[00:04:33.19]

Annemarie N.: That's so neat. So what kind of things with your family, having a background in New York and then moving to the South, what sorts of things did your mom cook?

[00:04:49.02]

Elaine C.: Pot roast. [Laughter] Steak. Bologna sandwiches. There were canned peas, which I hated. That was the era. We had TV dinners, we had good breakfasts every morning. Eggs. French toast. But what saved our lives was when my grandparents from New Jersey came to save us. He always drove a Cadillac, and in the back of that Cadillac were two coolers full of real bagels, real corn rye bread, whitefish, sturgeon, good lox, pastrami, corned beef. Like he thought we were starving, that we had gone over the edge of the culinary earth. And he brought all that stuff to us. I'm trying to remember. My mother had a lot of variety. I always kinds of knew what we were going to have for dinner, later in subsequent years when we moved. But she was always very prepared. This was a time when we had an egg man and a dairy man deliver those items to the house, and she didn't—she got the chickens fresh. They'd been dressed and the feathers cut off, but she butchered her own chickens. And we had fresh eggs all the time. One of the things with the rye bread that I really hated was she made me teeth on the crusts because they were so hard and chewy. And you can't get rye bread with that kind of crust anywhere else, and I've hated it to this day. But I knew it's the hallmark of a good rye bread. So, we had a combination of, you know, barely Jewish cooking, not very . . . adventurous cooking in the house, but we went out to what then was considered odd food. Winston-Salem was not a very adventurous culinary town. We had lamb chops, spinach, mashed potatoes. She cooked almost every day.

[00:07:34.00]

Annemarie N.: That's really neat. How long did you guys stay in Winston-Salem?

[00:07:40.22]

Elaine C.: We left when I was ten and moved to North Andover, Massachusetts. The Raytheon building was in Andover.

[00:07:51.11]

Annemarie N.: Wow. So you've lived several places growing up.

[00:07:52.01]

Elaine C.: Yeah. So, this put us back north and put us within reach of a drive to New York to see my parents' parents, and for them to come see us a little more often. There was a bigger Jewish community there. Although, I must say, in Winston-Salem, I learned from a very good rabbi—with whom my parents were dear friends, we were their guests at Passover every year—I learned my Hebrew from that rabbi. I learned to read it, I learned to write it in cursive, and I never forgot it.

[00:08:35.01]

Annemarie N.: Wow.

[00:08:36.12]

Elaine C.: And I know that has nothing to do with food, but it was a big impact on my life that has lasted until this day. But when we went North, of course we had to try the Chinese food, and it was different. It had more black bean. It had a browner sauce. It had more ground pork. It had more choices, and I suppose that is due to the immigration into New York and then the migration of the New York Chinese through Boston and upwards, was changing their cooking and determined by the local ingredients there. So there was more seafood. But what interested me, it just seemed like a darker color, and the Chinese food in the South was more of a La Choy concept, and that's when bean sprouts began to be canned by La Choy, which actually came out of Duluth. It was a very odd thing to

happen to a main ingredient in Chinese cuisine. So, in Massachusetts, my parents made very dear friends. They had a lot of get-togethers. And from what I can remember, we started in with shish kebab. That area had a lot of Armenians, and my father took us to Armenian restaurants quite often. We had the flatbreads, we had the kebabs, we had the salads. I was introduced to hummus at that time, which was—gosh, it was unheard of. And we lived there, I will give you a timeframe: J.F.K. assassination and the Beatles. But we didn't stay there very long. He was still taking business trips to White Sands Missile Range, and by this time, he had become beyond what was just called an engineer, whatever that means, to technical writer, which gave him the duties of writing the manuals that would tell you how to put a rocket together. I mean, that is the most simplistic thing I could think of to say what he did. He had both sides of the brain working: the science and the writing. He was very good at both. And I was terrible at math, so that created some issues. So, at this time, my mother was into lamb chops, she . . . rather than cook at home, we took trips to the Atlantic Ocean, where we became absolutely addicted to steamed clams, steamahs, as they're called, and lobster. [Laughter] Lobster rowls. It was a really big, exciting trip for us to go to Ipswich and Essex to get the steamed clams. We didn't bring 'em home, but we ate 'em there. That is my greatest memory of living north of Boston.

[00:12:13.29]

Annemarie N.: That's great. What were your parents' names?

[00:12:18.20]

Elaine C.: Mom was Vivian, no middle name, Seagle Corn. And my dad was Monroe, no middle name, Corn. The name was not changed when my grandparents came over.

[00:12:33.08]

Annemarie N.: Wow. Where did they come from?

[00:12:36.04]

Elaine C.: They came from a town called Tomaszów, which is southwest of Warsaw. They came probably in 1920. The pogroms were really over. Tomaszów was a nice city, it wasn't a *shtetl*. My grandmother's brother was the mayor of Tomaszów. And there are Tomaszówers all over the New York area. They have their own cemeteries.

[00:13:10.21]

Annemarie N.: Oh, wow.

[00:13:12.16]

Elaine C.: And the conductor of the San Francisco orchestra is called Michael Tilson Thomas, he's a Tomaszówer all the way on the West Coast.

[00:13:23.23]

Annemarie N.: Wow.

[00:13:25.03]

Elaine C.: It was very interesting to learn how the family split from Poland-Russia. My grandfather's name on the ship manifest was Russian Hebrew. My grandmother's sister went to Palestine, which it was truly called then. There was no state of Israel. And they came to New York.

[00:13:52.11]

Annemarie N.: Wow. Do you know why they came?

[00:13:53.20]

Elaine C.: To get out of tsarist Russia.

[00:13:59.04]

Annemarie N.: Makes sense. And were these your father's parents or your mother's parents?

[00:14:03.14]

Elaine C.: My father's parents.

[00:14:05.16]

Annemarie N.: That's really interesting. Too, I want to ask, what were the differences between the Jewish community you lived in in Winston-Salem and that you partook in, and that difference between that community and the Jewish community of Andover, or the one that you lived in for a little while when you were really young in New Jersey. How was that different?

[00:14:31.03]

Elaine C.: I have no recollection of any Jewish activity. I was so young. I don't know what they did. We celebrated the holidays in the house, and we would go to the grandparents' for Passover. And of course, Hanukkah was presents every night. Usually practical things, like the second night of Hanukkah was always socks and underwear. And we always got a book during one of the nights, and the last night was a special present. So, I really don't remember that. When we got to Massachusetts, I mean, when we went to Winston-Salem, the first thing my mother did was call the synagogue or the temple. It was Reform. And she joined whatever women's group was there. She became what we call [Moves fingers in air quotes] active, and was involved in all sorts of activities. I went to Sunday School, I went to Hebrew School. We went to services on Friday night. I, at a very early age, realized I was just a fun Jew. I think I'm an atheist, pretty much. We . . . we had a very good time in Winston-Salem. There were a lot of activities for the kids. Then, when we went to Massachusetts, they did not have a Reform synagogue. It was conservative or Orthodox. We did not like that. I did not like that synagogue we went to. It was happened to be in Lawrence, which was the big city next to West Andover. It was an industrial town where the factories still stand where they made shoes and clothes and things you could hold in your hands. It's all decrepit now. But we were happy to move away from that, because when we finally got to El Paso, things began happening at Temple Mount Sinai, which was this magnificent structure designed and built by a protégé of Frank Lloyd Wright.

[00:16:52.19]

Annemarie N.: Wow.

[00:16:52.19]

Elaine C.: You can see it from Interstate 10. It looks like a huge Dutch cap. And the irony of this incredibly beautiful temple was a window behind the pulpit that looked over into a mountain called . . . Mount Cristo Rey, the king. We're looking at the cross on top of the mountain of Catholic Juarez. [Laughter] So, this was a gorgeous temple, and my parents became very active there. Still going to Sunday School, but I did not have a bat mitzvah, because we moved when I was twelve, and that whole year, I was the new kid again. But things began to change in the house, food-wise. The thing with the competition among the Jewish women at that time was where they bought their meat. There was a Lebanese butcher named Tony Haddad. Big Lebanese community in El Paso. This butcher attracted the best of the best who wanted to be waited on in a customized fashion, and you waited in line until Tony Haddad got you personally, and my mother would buy meat for the month and put it in our upright freezer. And I knew what we were going to have for dinner by what was defrosting on the kitchen counter when I went to school. But when we got liver, we always ate that first, because you couldn't freeze it. And we ate it the day she bought it. So, our meats began to become more varietal. For example, my birthday, my special birthday dinner was lamb chops from the arm cut, 'cause I liked the round bone, mashed potatoes, and spinach. That's my birthday lunch. And at that time, I realized I really didn't like cake, I like cheesecake. Cheesecake, my mother was a fabulous baker. The cheesecake was presented with the strawberries on top, tips up, with a lightly cornstarched strawberry glaze over the whole thing. And this has been my birthday cake for my whole life.

[00:19:45.11]

Annemarie N.: That sounds delicious.

[00:19:48.07]

Elaine C.: So she baked so much for these events at the temple, for her bridge club, that I really enjoyed being around her for the baking. And it wasn't just cookies. It was, like, complicated mousse and pies. She had a wonderful apple pie. She made all her crusts by hand. And I remember when she allowed me to experiment at the stove in Winston—sorry, in El Paso. Cream of mushroom soup from the can was my favorite thing, and so she set let me make it myself and let me add sherry to it at the end. [Laughter] As a finishing touch. It was kind of good. Those were my best memories from the food in El Paso until my dad, who had been there so many times, took me to Juarez. Took the whole family to Juarez.

[00:21:09.05]

Annemarie N.: Could you talk about that?

[00:21:09.05]

Elaine C.: Yes. I had never had Mexican food, but it turns out that the Mexican food in El Paso, as one mayor said, was the Mexican food capital of the world, indicating that the Mexican food in El Paso was better than the Mexican food in Mexico. So, when he took us to Juarez, at that time, what came to the table—absolutely free—was a small bowl of pico de gallo, which became very trendy decades later, and very freshly made tortillas, tostadas, we called them, from corn, fresh corn tortillas. I dipped that corn tortilla into that pico de gallo, and it was hottest thing I had ever put in my mouth, and I cried. And I never wanted to eat Mexican food again. But we did. And at the time, it was very safe in Juarez, and we went all the time. We went to very famous places like Martino's and La Florida and La Jacaranda, where the variety of dishes of Mexican food was so overwhelming. I had the best chile rellenos to this day. My high school cafeteria remains the place where I've had the best green enchiladas of my entire life. The cafeteria made green enchiladas and red enchiladas every day. The Southern influence was still a little bit present, because we had biscuits every single day. And sometimes, of course, my mother was still sending me to school with the lunch she made, and I would just set it aside, and with the allowance I had saved up, I got those enchiladas.

[00:23:14.20]

Annemarie N.: I don't blame you.

[00:23:17.03]

Elaine C.: They were so excellent.

[00:23:17.03]

Annemarie N.: That's great. What high school did you go to?

[00:23:22.23]

Elaine C.: When we first got there, I went to a school called Andress High School on the east side of town, but because all the Jewish people lived on the west side of El Paso, you've got to understand, the geography of El Paso is the most southern tip of the Rocky Mountains in North America. So, the city makes a u around the base of this mountain, and there's a scenic drive that goes over the top of the base, and you can see two countries and . . . three states, the state of Chihuahua, the state of New Mexico, and the state of Texas. So, when we moved to the west side, I went to Coronado High, and that's where I graduated.

[00:24:19.25]

Annemarie N.: That's great.

[00:24:20.25]

Elaine C.: And that was the place where the green enchiladas and the red enchiladas were my craving.

[00:24:26.01]

Annemarie N.: I don't blame you, that sounds so good. What was your first kind of, like, impression of moving to Texas?

[00:24:34.05]

Elaine C.: When I found out in Massachusetts that we were going to move to a place in the desert, do you know what movie had just come out? *Lawrence of Arabia*. I imagined myself being sucked into quicksand. I imagined camels. I imagined this desolate place. And I was very upset to be leaving my area. And because we were back in the North, and that's what I knew, we drove clear across the country, in a car. I drove my dad nuts because *Help!* had come out. Anytime the radio station picked up the Beatles, he went nuts because I begged him to play the Beatles. And we went through some forested area in New Mexico, which later would enter my life. And he made us look at it. It was so gorgeous. It was also in the Rocky Mountains, but a higher elevation. And we dropped down into the city of El Paso, and it was a sprawl. At the time, I guess it was a shabby border town. But you could cross over very easily. My first impression was, it's not sand. It's tumbleweed. And even though the climate has changed at this point, you know how your parents would tell you, "I walked two miles to school in the snow." I walked two miles back and forth to school in sandstorms.

[00:26:18.18]

Annemarie N.: Oh, wow.

[00:26:20.12]

Elaine C.: My mom would try to find us, but the headlights couldn't even see a foot in front of you, and I would walk home with the sand just blowing on me.

[00:26:30.06]

Annemarie N.: Wow. That's crazy. So, you graduated from Coronado High School, and then you went to the University of Texas at Austin?

[00:26:42.18]

Elaine C.: Yes.

[00:26:43.16]

Annemarie N.: So, why did you decide to go there, and why did you decide to study journalism?

[00:26:49.08]

Elaine C.: While I was still at that first high school in El Paso, I had already read the *Diary of Anne Frank*. And I don't know if you've read it, but for a young girl, it is one of the most beautifully written pieces of literature that has ever affected me. She addressed her diary as Dear Kitty, so I started a diary called Dear Kitty. And I started to keep a diary. And my mom knew I loved to write. So, by the time I was in the eighth grade, it was my mom who suggested, "Why don't you take a journalism class?" And I did. So I entered journalism in the eighth grade. By the time I got to Coronado, I was still taking journalism classes, and I became the editor of the weekly newspaper, which we put out at the high school. It was hot type. And instead of the one year, during the two years, I got a lot of experience writing and a lot of experience in the mechanics of putting the paper out. By this time, I could drive. The school did not have a hot type back shop with trucks of lead being moved around. That had to be done somewhere else. So, I would go there and read the proofs and then, magically, the newspaper would show up at the school and I would distribute it. So, I had a column. I assigned stories to the sports writers on our little staff. We had a yearbook, but I didn't consider that journalism. I just considered that, like, scrapbooking. I had a kind of snobby opinion of the yearbook people, because they were kind of the cool kids. But I was very determined to write about what was going on in the school. We had plays. We had just some artwork going on. And because my mom, take a class, that's what did it. Sometimes, your mom knows.

[00:29:21.09]

Annemarie N.: That's true. That is very true. That's great. And so, when you were at University of Texas, were you involved at the *Daily Texan*?

[00:29:32.16]

Elaine C.: Yes.

[00:29:33.26]

Annemarie N.: Could you talk a little bit about your experiences there during college?

[00:29:37.08]

Elaine C.: Yes. This is going to surprise you, but I was not a reporter at the *Daily Texan*. I started as a copy editor. I sort of went backwards. I was in the Siberia of where most aged newspeople go when they want them to stop writing and they send them to the copy desk to age out before they retired. But I liked graphics. I never took a course in graphics, but I liked laying out the paper, and I liked the topical variety of copy editing everybody's stories, from sports to—we covered city hall at this paper. And I was the telegraph, the teletype ripper. And as [Whispers] Dotty was pointed out, this was a very grave time in journalism, a very important time, because the Vietnam War was going on, but something else was about to happen. And on a Saturday night, June 17, or Sunday night on June 17, I ripped a story off the wire that said there had been a burglary at Democratic National Headquarters in a building called the Watergate. I think I saw the first AP story of that incident in, well, of course, in our school. And at the time, I was doing the layout and the story selection for our page two or three, whichever was available, 'cause there were ads. And I had the international assignment, plus national assignments, that this was not the local stories about the school and protests and things like that. This was stuff going on all around the world. And I got it in at the last minute, and from that point on, I watched this thing develop. It was a Woodward and Bernstein—no, it was an AP story, just that this thing happened in Washington. So, we began to follow that. I had an editor who was hired, an adult editor with a lot of journalism experience. And everything I did went through him. So we had double editing going on. And this was also the time of more mechanics of putting out the newspaper. Downstairs from our journalism building was what is called the back shop, even though it was underneath, which is all the printing. We had a fire melting lead.

[00:32:49.15]

Annemarie N.: Oh, wow.

[00:32:51.07]

Elaine C.: We had real printers who would cut the . . . the letters via a line of type machine, where these guys were just so fast. Anything could get in, even two o'clock in the morning you could get something in that paper. And the lead type was laid out as you laid it out, but it was upside-down and backwards. And I had to proof stories upside-down and backwards in lead type, and if a story was too long, what we called slugs, the lines of the type, the what do you call 'em—we called them slugs, they were too long—the word was T.D.L., Too Damn Long—and I would have to cut the story in lead. And sometimes you could end a sentence to fit the space by having the printer chip off the end of an s or the end of a t at the end of a word and put a period there and make a period out of what he chopped off, a little letter that could easily end a sentence. So, I was in charge of all of that, and then the paper would roll out, and we'd have a newspaper for the next day. The food part of this was, there was no television after, what, 11:30, they played the “Star Spangled Banner” and the TV went off the air. And I invited people to my apartment for omelets. And I cooked for them, so I thought they would like me. And this happened at least once a week. Sports writers came, the other copy editors came, some of the reporters came, because from midnight to two o'clock, there was just nothing to do in Austin. So, that's how I began really cooking and quasi-entertaining for people for their pleasure but also sort of selfishly so they would look forward to coming to my place to eat my food.

[00:35:14.24]

Annemarie N.: That's great. So, you moved from—after you graduated with a journalism degree, you got your first job at the *Dallas Morning News*, right?

[00:35:23.20]

Elaine C.: Yes.

[00:35:25.12]

Annemarie N.: Could you talk a little bit about that?

[00:35:25.12]

Elaine C.: I got that job two weeks after I graduated. I graduated in mid-December of 1972, and by the first week of January of 1973, I was at work.

[00:35:40.03]

Annemarie N.: Wow.

[00:35:41.22]

Elaine C.: I was a copy editor. I was a telegraph-ripper. I was a headline writer. Just, actually, I wrote headlines at the *Daily Texan*, as well. I forgot that. And I was put on a desk called the universal desk, and the universal word made the same commitment to the copy that the copy desk I was on in college, where everything came through, city hall, fires, education, stories that my friends were writing. Sports. Politics. Road construction. What's going on at the zoo, everything came through this desk. And it was shaped like a u, and we all sat around the u and, in the middle of the u was a man who checked our work, and he was called the slot man because he was in the slot. Now, eventually there may have been a slot woman, but I wasn't there to experience it. I know there was at the *Dallas Morning News*, a slot woman later on. So, I got the stories. I edited according to AP style. I had all kinds of pencil marks and moving paragraphs around. I was editing copy that came over the wire from people like George Will who are already around at that time. William Safire. Who needs to edit William Safire? The *New York Times* had already done it. But what happened was that the telegraph type came in all capital letters, so I had to tell the linotype guy to make the first letter of a graph or a sentence a capital with certain markings from the AP stylebook. And then that copy went to the slot man. Then what he checked went to the news desk and they checked it. What this taught me was the first thing about writing to fit; as opposed to all the news that's fit to print, this is the headline that must fit. And our headline assignments were based on the layouts done by the news desk in back of me. So I would get an assignment over a story that it would be two lines of 36-point type. We did not have computers to help you figure out where that ending line was going to be and you would start the next line. We used something called the flit system, where you would count the numbers—each letter had a number equivalent, like an l was a half, and f was a half, an i was a half, and m was 2, and you

would just count it out until you got to the 36 for the 36-point type in each line. So, in summarizing a story in a headline, well, you could just go all over the place summarizing a story, but we had to summarize it in whatever the layout determined the size of the headline was going to be. The one column heads were the worst, because communist was a really long count. Had double m's, it had u's, had two half-count letters, and we couldn't use reds or anything like that. I mean, that was already *verboten*. So, that was a challenge: first, summing up what this reporter was trying to say, maybe fix the lead a little bit, and then think about what the reader would need to know to give them the head trip to read the story. So, that was the most challenging thing I did. When I ripped the wire, I was sort of a copy boy. I would send the copy to the various editors who specialize in international and local and national news, so that was a lot of fun, too, because I got to see everything. And at this time, I would consider myself a generalist. I like the variety, I like knowing about everything.

[00:40:44.25]

Annemarie N.: That's great. So how did you move from a more, an editing position into reporting?

[00:40:53.10]

Elaine C.: I changed newspapers. I went back to Austin. There was a copy-editing position at the *American Statesman*, and in Dallas, even though I had this great roommate and a pretty good life, I worked nights, I worked weekends, I had no life except the paper—which was a harbinger of the rest of my journalism career. Little did I know, I would be working Saturdays and Sundays and having Wednesdays and Thursdays off for many, many more years. But I wanted to get back to Austin because it was really a lot of fun and a lot of my friends were there. But the paper in Austin was not of the same caliber as the *Dallas Morning News*, but I felt like I had gotten better at what I did as a copy editor and was ready to move and use those skills in hopes that I would be greatly appreciated in Austin. So, I moved back there and remained a copy editor. I worked all hours of the day and night. I put out a morning paper, which meant I showed up at five o'clock in the morning. We put out the evening paper, which meant I stayed up late again at night. But

this time, Tom Snyder was on, so we had some TV. But still, people were coming over to my house to eat my omelets. And I had become very interested in cutting recipes out of the newspaper, because the *Dallas Morning News* had recipes, and I would snip them out. And I had a whole little file folder of recipes, and the Austin paper didn't have a single recipe in it. I spent several years as a copy editor, I got promoted to news editor of the edition that came out in the morning. It's called the bulldog edition. And I have some examples of some of the things I would do. Writing a headline is a very tricky way of working with language, 'cause not only do you have to make it fit, but you can make it fun. You could use puns. You can make it serious, as appropriate, as needed. But I was doing headlines like early in the morning. I'd arrive at five o'clock, and the first thing I did was rip the photographs off from the A.P. photographic wire service, all black and white, rip, rip, rip, take them over to my desk where I would lay out the entire A section, including the front page. Talk about a head trip. My brain was intent on determining where your eye went on that page first. Should I put a story over the masthead? Should I put it right under the masthead? Should it be all across the page, it was that important? Should I put a picture in the middle of the page, and two stories on either side of the picture? I felt like I had seven opportunities to tell the history of the day on one page, the front page. And you could jump into the inside of the A section to finish the story. And you always had to have, like, a guerilla story, a feature, and some hard news, local news, depending on what was going on in the day. So, just to give you an example of my headline-writing expertise, a story came over where this very aged man wanted to run the Iditarod, and his family absolutely did not want him to chance his life running the Iditarod at his advanced age. But he did it. He started in Nome, Alaska, where he was from, and because of his determination and his independence, here's the headline: "Nome Man Is An Island." Another one, Anita Bryant was a celebrity singer, and she represented the orange juice industry. But she was also a hater of homosexuals. And she was getting quite a bit of opposition and a lot of protests, and so my headline about her demise from the protests was called, "The Breakfast of Gay Rights Champions." And this was in the mid-[19]70s, so this stuff was already going on. Things were changing slowly. I loved being a news editor, except for the hour of the day, but you know, I was the healthiest I'd ever been. I'd get off at two o'clock and go run and swim. But getting up that early in the

morning—man, I did not want to hear an alarm clock go off ever, ever again. But this thing about the lack of recipes or any food coverage was starting to give me some ideas. Why did this newspaper, in the state capitol, where food was just worshipped—Mexican food, Texas food, chili, oysters, some fine dining, we had Greek food. Austin was a melting pot. It was very accepting of all kinds of cuisines. We had nothing to communicate that to our readers. And so, I decided to use my news editor skills, the packaging, the selection of the stories, to propose that the *Austin American Statesman* get a food section going. They were trying. Some examples of when the women's section, you had asked me about this, the transition from the women's section and the brides to a freestanding food section. You can see in some of these old lifestyle pages, they were trying. There were some little food stories in the lifestyle section, but not many, and some were policy stories. Some were dealing with dairy regulations, which, you know, hardly had a recipe connected to it, but it looked like there was starting to be some crossover. Before I could convince them that a food section was needed and could profit, I put out a couple of what we call tabs, half-page sections, and I started writing. And it was, this little thing was called Time Out, and I started writing food stories. And I was on the cover of this. And the whole thing was about food and entertainment, but it started, it was the very first time a food story appeared on the cover of anything in this newspaper. So, I brought a few of those with me to show you how the transition was very, very slow, but it looked like they were making some attempt to realize that food was going to attract readers. What do advertisers like? Reader eyeballs. Here's another tab that I did, all about the cooking school teachers in town. They were never covered, because no one covered food. So, this is from . . . November 1977. Still didn't have a food section. So, someone's in the kitchen with teacher. I went to three cooking schools in Austin and wrote about them. It was really my first writing foray, I did the whole thing. This was twenty pages, and I wrote every story in there. But I was a new writer. I was no longer a copy editor. And when you write a story with no copy editor, your story doesn't come out as good. I was really fledgling, and I don't think I was writing very well. I think I was covering things of interest, but my writing was loose and it wasn't structured very well. When I look at it now, I can see which paragraphs I would have moved and what sentences I would have made shorter or not even put in there at all. Where I could have cut it, where

it went too long. Things we realize now that economy of words is better for the reader, and also tells a better story in a quicker way. Finally, I got my nerve up, and I started a project to convince them that they needed to have a food section in Austin. What I have here are the notes from every food editor I called in Texas, including my roommate, Dotty Griffith. I called the *Star Telegram*. I talked to Joanne Vachule, who is now deceased, and I asked what her life was like as a food editor. [Reading notes] She said the quality of work would be better if she had an assistant, and she pulled in a UT intern. She said, some stories don't take quite as long; sometimes she spends a great deal of time answering the phone. This is something that food editors were plagued with that, except for sports, no other department in a newsroom got as many calls. "I'm in the middle of my pie, what did I do wrong?" "I don't know, but I'm on a deadline." So, it was a very challenging time. [Reading notes] "She was the food editor of the *Star Telegram* in Fort Worth. They were adding a second food section, it had become so well-received. She also worked out of her house a little bit." This was before computers. We had computers in the newsroom, but there were no emails or anything like that, of course. [Reading notes] "She had no test kitchen. She said she's a writer, not a cook. She planned a month in advance, sometimes used color transparencies. She told me the timeline when these transparencies had to be ready. Some food editors take food more seriously than readers do. And she said, you need a balance among nutrition, consumerism, and recipe approach, because readers are looking for new ideas and new preparation for old food. She doesn't hear from anybody when she does stories on athletes and their diets." [Laughter] Then, I called a woman at the *Times Herald*. Competition across the way. She submitted her resignation on the Tuesday I called her. [Reading notes] "The job was to be vacant in two weeks. Six months ago, she was yanked off full-time duty as a food editor to work three days a week back on the copy desk, where she would be doing the brides and the women's." So, this was a step backwards for her, and she was very indignant. [Reading notes] "It didn't work out. It created chaos. She was not writing anymore, and a new policy put the food section in too many hands and it was a battle every week." Okay, that was not very encouraging, but I brought a copy of an old food section from 1978 from the *Times Herald*. And it had things like you want to be a guest at your own party and nectarine strawberry torte is elegant, that probably came from a press release. Beat

the heat with some tantalizing recipes. Things you still sort of see now, but in a more sophisticated way. Then I called my friend Dotty Griffith from my *Daily Texan* days and with whom I roomed at the *Dallas Morning News*, and she had become the food editor after being a general reporter. [Reading notes] “And she had a secretary at that time to file section copies. She had recipes filed by category. She had to answer the phone, sort mail, route copy, arrange interviews. She hired, she fired. She was off the time clock. She was salaried, finally. She made an operating budget. She read wire copy, interviewed, wrote stories, assigned some stories, kept track of ad revenue, which I never had to do. She tested all recipes that printed, refused to use canned recipes. Didn't try to do it all herself because then she would have no time to write.” And this was a significant curse for many, many food editors. I called the *Houston Post*, which won numerous awards for nutrition writing, which at the time, everyone was very paranoid. The Senate Select Committee on Nutrition with George McGovern was in action at that time, and of course, they were wrong. Everything has changed. It was the biggest moneymaker in the entire paper.

[00:56:50.02]

Annemarie N.: Wow.

[00:56:50.02]

Elaine C.: The *Houston Post*, deceased, was deceased long before the *Houston Chronicle*, but it was a very good paper. [Reading notes] “This editor wrote cover stories, a couple of stories inside, which meant that she was writing three or four stories a week plus managing this section.” Can you write three or four stories a week? Plus do everything else? “The universal desk took over the food section, but it turned out awful because someone different did it each week.” So I'm learning all this about how the different food sections were functioning in the rest of the state. I called the *Houston Chronicle*, Ann Criswell was the food editor at that time and was for decades. She was so helpful and so excited that Austin might get a food section, 'cause we really didn't compete with each other. We were colleagues. [Reading notes] “It took one and a half years to finally get an assistant. She set up color photoshoots. The photographing took a day to organize. Cook

the food or have someone else cook the food, get it into the studio, back and forth in the car. The food color was a very technical thing; trial and error into plastic plates now require thinking whole printing processes. It took so long. Cooks at home have now regarded the food editor as a home ec major when so many of us were journalists.” Talk about indignation. “Oh, you must have been a home economics major.” No, we’re journalists. We assess the news. And I might add, I had two minors: I had a minor in sociology and a minor in English, and the sociology was a perfect piggyback for journalism, because of the observation of trends and what large groups of people doing all at the same time informs you about what is making news. [Reads notes] “Anyway, Ann Criswell wrote columns. She answered recipe questions, read mail, checked recipes if anything was wrong. She did the layout. They’re called dummies. Read proofs for errors in recipes. She did headline writing. She went through wire copy.” She was a very busy food editor, and she had a really big food section, because it was such a moneymaker. Food costs at that time was on everybody’s mind. There was a gas shortage. It was the Hamburger Helper, Tuna Helper—everybody had a helper except me, even hamburger. And there was a lot to be done to learn about nutrition at that time. So, taking that, I went to my publisher and I said, “We don’t have a food section. We don’t have a food editor. Some people have sections produced by four or five people, and we don’t even have a section at all. I propose that maybe one or two people from the copy desk edit the copy that is produced by me for the food section, and I sent the publisher about fifty story ideas. And the next thing I knew, there was a food section, but I was not the food editor. They just let a bunch of people do it until finally, at the end of 1978, they gave me the title. And I brought a few of my first attempts at food writing. Again, my writing was not wonderful, but my story ideas were good. So, one of them was the beginning—this is really interesting. May of 1979, I was writing about what would now be called Farm to Fork. “Produce stands, not easily bruised shoppers.” It was about, instead of going to the grocery store, going to these trucks and getting food fresh from their fields. That’s how far ahead we were looking at that time. It was overwritten. I got a nice compliment from the managing editor, but I look back, yeah, it could have been shorter. It always can be shorter. So, I was on my way, and I brought you a piece that makes it so important to have news judgement and news sense and to understand that,

where all the people are, something is going on that could be a story. I think I wrote the very first story about fajitas. I'm pretty sure this was it, May 1979. At Willie Nelson picnics, there was a guy called the Fajita King. His name was Sonny Falcon and there was always a line around his fajitas. It was the skirt steak, which is a throwaway piece of meat from where he was from in South Texas. It was very simply griddled on the barbecue, very simply put in a flour tortilla. You got to add your salsa, your sour cream, and your avocado, and that was it. No sizzling platters, no green bell peppers, no caramelized onions, nothing. That was a fajita. And this guy was also a butcher. When I look back at this, I think, "Yes, I think I know what his story is." So, after some time went by, I had a little bit of a separation from the *Austin American Statesman*. There was something going on, and the same thing that happened to the *Times Herald* person, where she quit, they decided that being a food editor was not a full-time job, and they put me back on the brides on Thursdays. And you know what I did?

[01:04:02.01]

Annemarie N.: Quit.

[01:04:02.09]

Elaine C.: I quit. And you know what I did next? I took myself halfway around the world to learn about food, because I was a newbie. When I was at the Austin paper, something big was going on, and it was called the Cuisinart. The revolution began when the Cuisinart entered all our countertops, but I was still not learned, as much as I read and as much as I delved into the history of cuisines. It seemed, at the time, I was almost more interested in how we got to where we are than where we are. So, I left the country for six months, got halfway around. I found families, I cooked with them in England and Holland and France and Switzerland, found some people in Italy. I spent a great deal of time in Greece, and I went across some of the islands. Corfu, I cooked with a family of some friends from Austin, and then I got to Rhodes, where he had more family, and the island of Rhodes proved to be one of my most unusual and adventurous experiences. I heard about a skipper in this very big port—this was, you know, the . . . what's one of the seven wonders of the world?

[01:05:47.04]

Annemarie N.: Colossus of Rhodes.

[01:05:48.16]

Elaine C.: Colossus of Rhodes. There they were. And there were very famous people's yachts in this port. Levi Strauss's yacht was there, Pink Floyd was there. I don't even want to tell you what happened with that, but I did have some . . . experience with David Gilmore from Pink Floyd. [Laughter] But word got out around the key that a British skipper, who had a seventy one-foot yacht that sailed around the coast of Turkey needed a cook. Well, I had a resume with me. Don't ask why I took it. And I was wearing a shirt that said, AP Washington Bureau. And I went for an interview. All his other cooks had been gypsies from Naples, they stole him blind, they didn't cook very well. And he said, "You're hired." And in four hours, I was on that ship sailing to Marmaris, Turkey.

[01:06:55.13]

Annemarie N.: Wow.

[01:06:55.13]

Elaine C.: At that time, a single woman in Turkey did not belong there. It was very, very dangerous. Turkey and Greece were really at each other's throats; they wouldn't even exchange each other's currencies. But this was a way to get to Turkey. So, my job was to cook for these Italian guests. There were four couples, eight people, and I bunked at the bottom of the front of the boat with the skipper and another assistant, who he was having an affair with. [Laughter] My job was to go off the ship—was a it ship or a boat? Is a yacht a ship or a boat? Anyway, I was to go to the souqs and gather up the food to cook for these Italians. Well, you know Italians are very, very picky about their food. While this British skipper was a big meat guy—you know, you imagine Henry VIII gnawing on this big turkey thing or eating only the oysters of a chicken, so it took thirty-six chickens to give him eighteen dark meat oysters. He had, in the kitchen, a countertop that lifted up, and inside were lamb roasts and beef roasts and veal roasts and just all kinds of meats.

And then I was supposed to surround these main courses with other things. Under my bunk, where I slept, was some interesting products: Turkish coffee from—that we brought from Greece back to the Turks—and Marlboro cigarettes. This was my currency. By the time we went around the coast and got up to a city called Bodrum, there was a very big souq there, and I remember the breads were yeast breads, but they were flat. The yogurt was droolier than the yogurt in Greece. I mean, when you see the term Greek yogurt, it's not from Greece, it's strained. That's all it is. And there were a lot of Muslim women sitting behind their piles of orange and beautiful spices and these perfect cone-shaped . . . displays in front of them. And one thing I learned to make in Greece was *dolmades*. And I knew we had lamb back at the ship, so I bought grape leaves, and they were sold flat with a string threaded through them. So I bought this, this length of grape leaves, and I paid her in cigarettes. A hand came out of her burka. She took the cigarettes and quickly withdrew them. If I had gotten caught, I'm tellin' you, the midnight express would have come for me. It was so dangerous to have done that. But that's how I bought the food for our guests. It was the first time I ever saw *frais du bois*, you know, the forest strawberries, the little ones. It was the first time I had ever seen orange . . . orange split peas, which I made a soup out of. It was a fascinating, fascinating experience. And I had no recipes with me. I completely winged it. And I realized I could cook. I really could. But I'd come through all these other countries and had gotten lots of learning. And then, this is a sidelight which was really terrific, the guests took a liking to me, and when we got to Kuşadası, their main goal was to go to the ancient city of Ephesus, built by King Herod, and they let me go with them. So, I got to see that.

[01:11:31.05]

Annemarie N.: That's so cool.

[01:11:31.17]

Elaine C.: And then we made our way back through Santorini, and when I got back to Rhodes, I needed to go to Israel. So, I went on a boat where—took my backpack, it's all I had was a backpack all this time—and I sat on the bow of the ship, which was a metal floor. A bunch of people had somehow created a campfire on the boat to cook food, and we

stayed there until we got to Haifa. And then, from Haifa, I went to the kibbutz bureau in Tel-Aviv to get placed. I had felt so hemmed in by Europe. I needed to get back to the desert, like El Paso. So, they sent me to the Negev, where I cooked at a kibbutz that was so big we fed six hundred people, six hundred meals three times a day.

[01:12:43.04]

Annemarie N.: Wow.

[01:12:43.04]

Elaine C.: Yeah. And I was new. All the ladies got to make the soup and everything was patties, the carrots, pat, pat, pat, pat, pat into these Eastern European patties. Most people were either American, Ashkenazi Jew, and the volunteers were a lot of French Canadians and people like me just wandering around. My first job was picking apricots, called *mish-mish*, and the guy below, typical Israeli, "Don't pick the green. Pick the yellow." We were just throwing anything down from the trees; it was 110 degrees. But I wanted to get in the kitchen, and finally they let me. And I learned patience, I learned prep. When they brought out a bussing tub full of green bell peppers, that's all I did all day was seed them, slice them, or chop them as needed for hours and hours. I did garlic the same way. Everyone did onions. And after every meal in this spotless, Swiss-designed kitchen, everything was stowed. Nothing was left out. And a high-pressure spray came out and sprayed the whole kitchen from top to bottom, all the way down to the floor until all the debris was left in a little basket in the middle of the floor. And out went the compost and you started the next meal.

[01:14:13.08]

Annemarie N.: Wow.

[01:14:13.22]

Elaine C.: So, that was where I learned that cooking is not just sitting at the stove and being a celebrity. There's so much behind it, and a lot of technique and a lot of dedication and patience.

[01:14:33.21]

Annemarie N.: Definitely.

[01:14:36.18]

Elaine C.: Then I came back and I started looking for a job. And I ended up at the *Louisville Courier-Journal*.

[01:14:42.14]

Annemarie N.: Could you talk a little bit about that? What year did you start there at the *Courier-Journal*?

[01:14:47.24]

Elaine C.: I went there in 1981. I had applied for a job at the *New York Times*; all they wanted was a copy editor. I applied for a job at the *Washington Post*. I got trials at both. All they wanted was for me to be a copy editor, and I was now so into this food realm and I'd learned so much that I couldn't take those jobs. Then the *Courier-Journal* needed a food editor, and they heard about me through somebody at the *Chicago Tribune* who I had met. And he recommended that they call me. And it was so wonderful to say, "I'd love to send you my clips, but they're at the *New York Times*." So finally, I sent them my clips, and I got an interview at the *Louisville Courier-Journal*. And the form that you had to fill out was not just your name and address and your resume, but they asked you a lot of questions that you had to answer with kind of good essay answers. And I was so passionate and in love with what I was doing, I think when I told them, "There's a food angle to every story you could think of," and how I would go about this, I was hired instantly. And I moved to Louisville, Kentucky. My parents must have thought I got there on a Conestoga wagon. It was the farthest-most place I had ever been. But unlike Austin, which geographically, of course, is farther South than Louisville, the real Southern connection happened in Louisville. In the summer, it's a Southern city. In the winter, it's a winter city, because Cincinnati is a hundred miles away. They had a Super Bowl there, they called it Refferfront Stadium. I once froze meat on a windowsill in Louisville. But

the *Courier-Journal* was probably the best paper I ever worked for. It was a writer's paper, and they made a writer out of me.

[01:17:14.20]

Annemarie N.: Could you talk about the experiences that made that happen?

[01:17:17.28]

Elaine C.: I had great editors. I finally had good editors. No one edited my copy in Austin; I just threw in what I wrote and put it in my own food section. I was a one-girl team. These editors, when they did your performance evaluation, where now they're just sort of check boxes like, "Elaine is a team player." Nah. I had an editor who had to put five blank sheets of paper into her IBM Selectric and write about me in her own words as an essay. Now, you gotta respect that. On the other hand, this was not a freestanding food section. The Austin paper became so big, it was thirty two pages long. It was actually a section and a smaller section within a section with all the grocery store ads. The Louisville paper still did not get away on Wednesday from a section called *Accent* on Wednesday where the cover was food but the rest of the inside of the features section was the TV Guide, and . . . other unrelated topics to food. I started to change what I thought a good story was. I started doing profiles about people. I had a real chance for variety, they liked my story ideas. The thing about the difference between having a journalist put out a food section and a home economist put out a food section is, my process is to kind of stand against the wall and fold my arms and say, "What the heck? This has got to be a story. There are questions here." You can't go out and teach curiosity. That is the benchmark of a good journalist. Asking the questions, a good interview, getting their confidence, saving the worst question for last so they don't walk out on you. There's a strategy to it. So, I enjoyed writing profiles. I did the chefs. There was a big cholesterol fear craze going on. A lot of the nutrition stories that were prevalent then, all turned out to be wrong. But we covered them because they made news. I had my doubts about a lot of it, but you write what people say. You call a cardiologist, you call seven cardiologists, and try to understand why, if you eat cholesterol, you're going to get plaque in your heart, and if you eat fat, you're going to get fat, and if you don't eat fat, you're going to lose fat. Now

we know this is not the case, but we went along with it. The South came into perspective at Derby. This was sort of the . . . the series premiere of the Southern food era of the year in Louisville, Kentucky. The Derby stories were nonstop for weeks. "This is the week that glorifies Kentucky food." Every year, everybody forgets how to make a mint julep. You run the mint julep. You run the mint julep by the pitcher. You run a very idiosyncratic Louisville dish called Benedictine spread that was made with cream cheese, grated cucumber, grated onion, a pinch of cayenne pepper, two drops of green food coloring, and mayonnaise. There was an egg casserole that was very famous, and for crunch on top, it was crushed potato chips. When I first got there, I hate to say it, I thought Louisville was kind of a culinary backwater. My line was, "These people, given the opportunity, would fry the salad." And one of their most favorite books was a community club cookbook where the chapter on salad used the word 'salad' as code for Jell-O. And I have the Farmington cookbook with me, actually. I marked the whole thing up. How could I have been such a snob coming from Texas, to this place where they're still using canned food? They're having lunches, the grocery stores closed at five o'clock at night because the maids had done the shopping and the man of the house wanted his dinner on the table at six o'clock sharp. I started attacking some of these lifestyle problems because now we had two-income households. Most women, they just couldn't do it. They couldn't work all day and maintain this . . . this odd anachronistic life of getting to a grocery store before five o'clock. So, it began to change when I started introducing new ways of looking at food through freshness. I wrote an entire piece on cilantro, they'd never heard of it. One of my recipes called for lemon zest. The woman who would become the mother of the mayor of Louisville called me up to say, "Zest isn't a Louisville word. We call it lemon peel." And I tried to explain to her the difference, and I got calls all day long, especially—"I just made this cake. Can I freeze it?" The can-I-freeze-it question came up so many times to myself and my friends, I said, "You know, you could freeze your husband. He may lose quality, but if you defrosted him, it would still be your husband." The calls took up a lot of my time. This was the job that took up my life. And I'll tell you why. Not only did I write two or three stories for the cover of the *Accent* story—[Shows newspaper] this is a significant piece here—but, the main food was going on in a Sunday magazine, and I did this all by myself.

[01:24:54.11]

Annemarie N.: Oh, wow.

[01:24:54.24]

Elaine C.: This came out quarterly. I tested every single recipe. We had an extravagant test kitchen. We had two stoves, two refrigerators, complementary countertops on each side to make like a mirror, and it was adjacent to an enormous photo studio. We used 8x10 camera format. In between the test kitchen and the photography studio were props, dishes, Russel Wright plates, antiques that we could use for props in these photos, and I was in charge of the photos. Here, I interviewed the governor of Kentucky for her Derby menu, Martha Layne Collins. I oversaw all these photographs; that was really one of the most difficult parts of my jobs, because photographers just have other ways of doing things and they were not adept at food photography because they were news photographers. And these Sunday magazines came out every Sunday. I brought you the four quarterlies that had a theme for holidays. So, this was the most time-consuming part of my week. I either created or tested every single one of these recipes.

[01:26:38.21]

Annemarie N.: Wow. That is a lot of work.

[01:26:40.04]

Elaine C.: Thousands. Thousands of recipes. So, I worked day and night, once again. I shopped for all the props. I had a standing account at one of the most prestigious cookware stores in town, where I could borrow beautiful plates and flatware or Le Creuset casserole dishes. And just runnin' around town was part of the job. And cooking food like you're seeing here, on breads, I made every one of those breads.

[01:27:23.21]

Annemarie N.: Wow. It's gorgeous.

[01:27:26.10]

Elaine C.: Every one of them. And the recipes, of course, there were about ten breads, ten recipes, all tested, yeasted. I had a chart of what was what, which bread was what. Here is the entrées for Christmas dinner, which I got complaints because the meat was rare. [Laughter] Still trying to pull them out of the very hide-bound traditions of this area. Now, I can respect hide-bound traditions. They're fun, they give you a sense of place, they give you an identity. And Derby was the kickoff of that. And I really enjoyed it. I also enjoyed getting tickets to the Derby. Eventually, I figured out that something was wrong in the home. People couldn't cook. They couldn't make the food we were trying to move them into with fresher ingredients and more scratch cooking. So, I wrote this piece for the cover of the *Courier-Journal's* lifestyle section called, "Getting Down to Basics." And this was the first time I realized that just a little bit of information about these various techniques: broiling, making a sauce, sautéing, boiling, baking, could help readers; not just entertain them, but do something with their lives if they paid attention. Because I had paid attention to some of the shortcomings and rather unhealthy diets in this area. Another one of things that I did in Louisville was to go to actual people's homes. And Andy Warhol, at the time, had a magazine called *Interview*, and we copied his graphics. We called it's "Cook's Interview," and I went to people's homes. They made their dishes, gave me their recipes, which I then tested, and so you get an entire span of the cooking abilities that I had no idea were going on in Louisville. This man, look what he's making. Paris-brest, little swans of cream puffs filled with pastry cream. He was a phenomenal cook. And when readers got the idea that their neighbors were cooking food like this, it made such an impact that our . . . our readership began to really notice a difference in how their neighbors, people they knew, people they'd heard of, were cooking in their homes or how they were entertaining. And it wasn't just egg casserole with potato chips on top of it. This was the real deal. Now, not that everybody would make Senegalese soup or pork and phyllo dough, or even—I did a guy who made incredible *sauerbraten*, but it . . . it was a big time of change in Louisville. And the restaurants were reflecting that, too. So, when I interviewed the chefs, some of their dishes could be transferred to the home cook. Many could not. But it was interesting to write about them, because it introduced people to new ways of looking at the food of this

really fecund area. It was a lot of farms in this area. And I wasn't there long enough to experience what we now call the local stupor, but things were changing. And finally, when I left, I wrote a—they asked me to write a farewell piece, and it was called, "Stocking New Larders." Let me find this. Here, "Derby Desserts." [Looking through newspaper clippings] Here's another Derby story, asparagus is really big in Kentucky. I don't know if you knew that. This is a horse farm that also grows asparagus. And they gave me their wonderful recipes for asparagus, and they like the big fat ones, which we now know are the best ones, not the skinnies. I food styled that. Borscht. Set up the whole thing. This took days.

[01:33:18.25]

Annemarie N.: I believe it. How did you learn how to style food? Because that's, like, very tedious and challenging work.

[01:33:27.13]

Elaine C.: It is. I winged it. I had a vision in my head, what I wanted things to look like, and I made it happen. After several fights with the photographers, of course. But I had it in my head what I wanted. I knew what the dish looked like. I knew what I would surround it with; the ingredients that went in the dish or, if it was an historical story on, say, New Orleans food, I'd find the saxophone or something to prop it up. I'm looking for this story, just want to pause for a minute. Sorry, you can edit this out . . . [Looking through newspaper clippings]

[01:34:24.07]

Annemarie N.: You're fine, don't worry about it.

[01:34:45.09]

Elaine C.: Here it is. My farewell piece, which was very unusual for somebody to do that—usually, they just quit, get another job, and leave—but they wanted me to sort of sum up my years in Louisville. I knew I was going to Northern California, where I could have a lemon tree in my front yard, and Napa and Sonoma weren't that far away, so why

wouldn't I take a job at the *Sacramento Bee*? But I began to go through a timeline of when I noticed the character of the food of Louisville begin to change, and it started with a certain restaurant. Also, something very significant happened in Louisville while I was there. Two men, who were in PR for restaurants across the country and based in Louisville, realized—kind of through the zeitgeist—that America had a food angst going on that we didn't have regional cuisine like France had Burgundy and Brittany and Leon. There was a lot of handwringing about, "What is American food? What could it be? Is it Pilgrim food, is it Southern food, is it meat and potatoes, what is it?" So, they formed a symposium, and this symposium was attended by the likes of Craig Claiborne, Paul Prudhomme, Bill Rice from the *Chicago Tribune*, Gael Greene from New York, Larry Forgione. And their panel discussion was so compelling, they really couldn't answer the question yet—maybe you have many cuisines. It was at this point where it came up that perhaps New Orleans was the first regional, truly regional cuisine in America. I was the hometown reporter for this first symposium, and my coverage of it not only informed my local readers but the story and the information in it made its way around the country through these two men who put on the symposium. They did one more symposium, and the next thing you know, it became the International Association of Culinary Professionals.

[01:37:40.08]

Annemarie N.: Wow.

[01:37:40.08]

Elaine C.: It became the IACP. So . . . witnessing the beginning of that conversation, which is still going on today, but in many other ways—like ownership of a cuisine or, you can't make my grits because you live in Idaho, they're only mine—a lot has happened since then. But because I was there when it happened, it put me in a very strategic position to follow it for the rest of my career, to see what happened. So finally, when I left, "The appreciation of regional cuisine consisting of fresh, local products was brought home by a small band of food professionals from all over the country who attended the first symposium on American cuisine in March of 1982. Famous and soon-to-be famous

foodies argued vigorously about what American food is, was, and would be. Panelists include Paul Prudhomme, Pierre Franey, the acerbic critic Gael Greene of New York Magazine. And the next thing you know, there were conferences in New Orleans, Boston, San Francisco, Philadelphia, and it spawned numerous imitators bringing food folk together to discuss, eat, and learn.” The astonishing twist to all of this was the reversal of who influences whom, and it used to be that home cooking made an impact of what was served in restaurants, but while I was there, it became the reverse. So, the restaurant crusade for fresh food began infiltrating the modest home cook's kitchen. And I kind of like to take some credit for that, even coming out of a Midwestern place like Louisville.

[01:39:57.10]

Annemarie N.: Could you talk a little bit, too, you mentioned that there was a specific restaurant in Louisville that kind of started this whole Louisville regional food scene? What restaurant was that?

[01:40:10.06]

Elaine C.: The Bristol Bar & Grille. It's still open after all these years.

[01:40:18.12]

Annemarie N.: Cool. What made it special?

[01:40:22.02]

Elaine C.: It was forward. It was comforting to Louisville who were not that adventurous, but they were trying new ideas. They traveled to New York, they went to Chicago, they saw what was going on and would introduce it slowly, gradually, maybe as a side dish into their menu. It was a casual restaurant. The other big-time restaurant there was called Casa Grisanti, but it was fine dining Italian, so it was a one-cuisine deal. But the Bristol could expand anywhere it wanted. So, I would say that was the restaurant. And now, Louisville is quite a food destination. It's on the same street that the Bristol is on to this day, Bardstown Road. It's called Restaurant Row now. And Louisville has really, really achieved a great deal of respect in how it functions as a food city.

[01:41:39.10]

Annemarie N.: That's great. I have a question, too, I guess more generally about the *Courier-Journal* and the newspaper industry of Louisville as a whole. What was the kind of environment that you worked in? 'Cause you said that you enjoyed it but you also worked a ton here. What was your relationship with your colleagues like and what was the overall environment?

[01:42:03.19]

Elaine C.: The environment was excellence. I never worked for a newspaper that wasn't owned by a family, and the *Courier-Journal* was owned by the Bingham family. They were a very ethical family. We learned that the appearance of a conflict of interest is a conflict of interest. I mean, the joke was, "Wait a minute, I breathe the same air as my subject that I'm interviewing. Is that a conflict of interest?" [Laughter] The ethics of that paper were very, very strong. It was a stepping stone to the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, *L.A. Times*. It required so much thought that all you wanted to do was please your editors. And some copy editing was mean and personal and humiliating. That didn't happen there. They just wanted it to be good. And they helped me, they made suggestions, until finally my writing progressed to the point where they were very happy with it. I was pretty happy with it. I was a pain in the neck. I was a highly managed person because I'm neurotic, because I wanted things to be perfect, too. And that took a lot out of me. I worked a lot; I worked weekends. At one point, a computer was developed I could take home and relax and write a story. We had a good budget. They sent me to Canada, they sent me to Atlanta. And one of the things that they had no problem paying for was getting me educated by sending me places to interview people who could teach me things. One year, at Derby—no, it wasn't the Derby, I'm sorry—it was, this horse stuff gets me all mixed up. It was the selling of the yearling Arabians. The people who had these Arabians were so rich and the guests came from Saudi Arabia, the cast of *Dallas* was there, it was a great, big deal. And they needed a caterer. So, they called Wolfgang Puck.

[01:44:58.16]

Annemarie N.: Oh, wow.

[01:44:58.16]

Elaine C.: And I thought, "Well, I better cover this." So, I drove to Lexington. I met Wolfgang at the airport where his knives were coming off the security belt like so many Stradivarius violins. So protected. And in his team were Dean Fearing of the Mansion at Turtle Creek, a chef named Mark Peel who was pretty good at the time, he had Maxwell's—no, he was in LA at the time. He eventually had Maxwell's Plum in New York. And several other well-known chefs. So, to make so much food for this enormous group of people with enormous amounts of money who were buying these very expensive horses, he needed a commissary kitchen to produce all this food, and then take it over. So I went to the commissary kitchen and I had my dog with me. He let my dog in. That did it. I was in love with him. I interviewed him and asked questions, and finally, he said, "Why don't you chiffonade the basil?" And luckily I knew what that meant. And I began to work with him and the other chefs, and I learned so much in those two days that finally, after helping prep and skewering marinated pieces of chicken onto the bamboo skewers, and mixing enormous bowls of meats and observing him making his famous pizza dough and decorating the pizzas in the pizza oven, and at the end of the two days, it was time to take everything to the party. And he said to me, "You don't want to go to that stupid party. You cook with us." So he gave me a Spago hat, a Spago apron, a little chef coat, and he put me on the grill station. My eyes burned. I smelled like charcoal and wood for four days. And it was one of the greatest experiences of my life.

[01:47:28.10]

Annemarie N.: That is so cool.

[01:47:28.18]

Elaine C.: And he called me later in Sacramento to cook with him again.

[01:47:32.28]

Annemarie N.: That's so cool.

[01:47:34.07]

Elaine C.: So, I think to be a good food editor, even though the question hasn't been asked, I'm going to answer it anyway. If you don't pay attention, if you don't keep learning, if you are not around people who know more than you do, if you cannot accept that there is more than one way to get a chicken boiled, you're not going to be a very interesting writer or communicator. And your readers are just going to think you're boring, and they won't learn anything, because you haven't.

[01:48:17.04]

Annemarie N.: That's really great. So, you went from Louisville to Sacramento. What was that learning curve like? Because you're going from one regional cuisine an entirely different, like, pretty—also, there's a big scene in California.

[01:48:39.17]

Annemarie N.: Northern California was the place where all the jealous people thought I was going. It came about because I found out that the food editor of the *Sacramento Bee* was retiring. I found out from a friend at *Bon Appetit*, "Get on this. Gannet is buying your paper. Get out of there." And that's when the two papers in Louisville combined. We had two food editors, and there was only going to be one, and I knew it was going to be me because the managing editor who would take over both papers and who hired me would not ever let the other person handle it. Even so, I could not work for Gannet. There was no way. So, I applied to the *Sacramento Bee*. I went out there and . . . [Laughter] Actually, two things happened. I applied to the *Orlando Sentinel*. [Phone rings] Let me turn that off. Oh. I applied to the *Orlando Sentinel* and I didn't really care for their— [phone rings]—approach to their food coverage. In the same weekend, I went to the *Sacramento Bee* for my interview, and you know what happened? On January 30, 1986, the Challenger blew up.

[01:50:21.27]

Annemarie N.: Oh, wow.

[01:50:23.16]

Elaine C.: Who had time to interview a food editor? [Laughter] So I was kind of shunted aside, nobody wanted to deal with me. But finally, after all that settled down, I got my interview and I was offered the job. And I took it, and there I went. At the time, the *Sacramento Bee* had a Sunday magazine, so I was still up to writing the two or three columns for the front page for a freestanding food section, which also, at this time, was thirty, thirty-two pages thick because the time was still when the grocery stores had double page and four-page ads. Took up a lot of space. I had one assistant who had a column with reader questions, and every now and then, she'd write a story, but she was from the old school. And things were happening very quickly in Northern California with Chez Panisse and Jeremiah Tower. And it was a learning curve in that food was a little more precious. It was very important in people's lives. People were pickier about their produce, even before the Farm to Fork thing was going on. The organic commission began at the time I was there. There were policies being made. I was in the seat of the second largest government in the United States. All kinds of food policy was going on. And again, the variety of topic, to me, was very, very important. Some weeks, it was a recipe cover. Some weeks, it was a profile of a chef. And another way I learned a lot about cooking was, there was a program at the Mondavi Winery called The Great Chefs. And they brought in people like my pastry idol, Gaston Lenôte from France. Watching his hands, watching him cook, reading his books, I interviewed him with an interpreter and it turned out to be just a real story with soul. He was so interesting. I saw Jacques Pépin there, Joyce Goldstein, Martha Stewart, a lot of very famous chefs. And again, if you paid attention and you got to have an interview with them later, you learned so much. The wine element was very strong then. I changed the name of the food section to Food & Wine. I was invited to the Napa Valley Wine Auction at the time when sauvignon blanc was being introduced over chardonnay with oak in it. I drank all the wine, I ate all the food. I met a lot of people. I met a lot of sources. The Sonoma Wine Auction also took place. I ended up in, gosh, LA, San Francisco, many times a month for dinners, press conferences. I was at Stars a lot, a lot of press conferences and wine launches took place

at Stars. It was a time of rapid change, a time of investigation of food, G.M.O.s, the fallacies or non-fallacies of organic versus conventional—I've always thought that growing organically was the conventional way until the pesticides were invented, so that became unconventional, but nobody listened to me about that. I still got a lot of calls from readers about being in the middle of their pie, what should I do? It bogged down the whole process. We had a test kitchen at the *Sacramento Bee* until—I designed one, there wasn't one—and again, that was adjacent to the photo studio. Working at the *Bee* was a little less gratifying than at the *Courier-Journal*. This newspaper seemed to care more about what it looked like than what it said, and that bothered me. But what I learned at the *Courier-Journal*, I carried over to the *Sacramento Bee*. I could write first-person stories, which were a lot of fun. I could write crazy stories. I interviewed Chef Tell, where is my Chef Tell story? It's in another folder . . . The *Sacramento Bee* had a great copy desk, too. In addition to the great editors who managed me and wrote those freeform evaluations, they let me say things like, in a mushroom story, "didn't know a shitake from Shinola." They let me get away with things like that. This story on Chef Tell when he came to town, I don't even know if you remember who Erhardt Tell was, he's passed away—he was a really famous television chef, and he was very, very funny. He didn't have the proper cutting board at the state fair where his presentation was supposed to be, so he never knew it, but a handyman went into a restroom and cut down a wooden bathroom stall door and made it his chopping block. He never knew it.

[01:57:11.22]

Annemarie N.: Oh, wow.

[01:57:13.15]

Elaine C.: But it's in the story. Also, I was still on my quest to get people to cook better because, at this point, I had realized: cooking was a survival skill, and if you didn't know how to cook, you kind of deserved it. You deserved your bad health. If you couldn't cook just a little bit, you were at a great disadvantage. So, my years at the *Sacramento Bee* were fulfilling. Again, long, long hours because of the photography and the testing, but eventually, the Sunday magazines ceased to exist. That really didn't lighten my load. The

section became smaller, the grocery ads went away, but the stories became a little bit more complicated, because food was becoming more complicated as far as policy—here I was, blocks from the California Department of Food & Agriculture. It's a very political town. And I began covering issues and weaving them through the topical variety of the entire section, week by week.

[01:58:47.27]

Annemarie N.: Awesome. I have two questions. One kind of is about your recipe development—so, you keep kind of stressing this idea that you should educate yourself, and you educated yourself in lots of different ways and you really learned how to cook. How did you take your knowledge of how to cook and put that into recipe development? Because that's kind of another really technical skill. How did you learn how to do that?

[01:59:23.19]

Elaine C.: Well, like so many of us, we read cookbooks, we read magazines, we saw recipes we thought might work. We changed them, we changed the directions. I did not have a house style, and I had a certain way of writing recipes that continues to this day unless a book publisher changes it back to their house style. It was very important for me to get everybody set up before they started cooking. You could get ideas from a lot of different places, and I should have brought some of my notes to show you my scribbles, where I would have a recipe in front of me—no, no, no, no, no. I'm gonna do it this way. There's all kinds of shorthand for sugar and tablespoon and what I'd learned about technique, which was very important, I might add to replace the technique in an existing recipe that I saw. Some recipes I kind of invented, like that rare meat that we looked at that was stuffed and rolled. But that's not new. I didn't invent it. But I sort of made my own. I learned a lot from interviewing other people. I learned how to make a country ham soaked in Coca-Cola. And I brought that recipe to California, and now some people in California think they invented it. I learned how to plug country ham with mixtures of kale and garlic, sort of like larding through it, so I could take a technique and use it in other ways. I did not reinvent the recipe for brownies; there's a hundred brownie recipes out there. It's how you write the process. I went to some conferences, and people always

imagine, "Well, if you just change the salt, or if you just change three items, then you haven't plagiarized the recipe." That is not true. A recipe is a formula; a formula is not protected by Title XVII of the U.S. Code. A formula is an idea, and you cannot protect an idea, but the expression of the idea—which would be the directions—that's where you get in trouble. So, if you watch yourself and observe your own self, the physical movement of moving through the kitchen kind of tells you when things are going to be ready, when you have time when something's simmering to do something else, and I just paid really close attention to the human body as it approached the recipe. Like, I could dictate a recipe to a friend, and believe me, I have done that many, many times. I could tell, are the onions golden brown yet? About ten minutes have gone by, and we've been talking about your boyfriend. I think the onions are ready. What do you think? Okay, now add some wine. I know your question is, how did I do it? And I have a very hard time explaining that, because there are a lot of recipes out there that are inspirations. There are a lot of recipes out there that are popular, that people want to see again and again. And you can't really change them that much except to express the idea in your own words. And if you test the recipe, that's when those words occur to you.

[02:03:37.18]

Annemarie N.: That's really interesting. It seems like your process is very intuitive, but also, it involves a lot of your copyediting skills. Or, your very technical skills. That's really interesting. Too, so while you're doing this work—this journalism work, this food editing work—you're also writing cookbooks? Can you talk about how you decided to get into cookbook writing? 'Cause I know you have at least two books that are about the basics of cooking.

[02:04:08.06]

Elaine C.: Yes, yes. I've written six. [Whispers] Not like Dotty. The *Bee* and I had a separation. I had a baby two months shy of forty years old, and when I came back, my trainee had become my boss. It didn't work. I lasted four months. I was old, I had this little baby, so I quit. Again. And luckily, a local publisher asked me to write a cookbook called, *Gooey Desserts*. And because I was so habituated to working really, really hard and

investigating—over-investigating—that the idea of recipes based on how they feel in your mouth and go down your throat was thoroughly interesting to me. But then I got into, well, what is an invert sugar? What is Karo syrup? What is honey? I talked to the sugar people, I interviewed the dairy people. The best ways to get this stuff whipped up. But I did enormous amounts of research—for gooeyness, which I would assess in my head when I saw the recipe—from a lot of community club cookbooks, 'cause if they're gonna be anywhere, they're gonna be there. Aside from mousse and the lava cakes that were very popular then. And I got a lot of these recipes together and, you know, just had to narrow them down. Some of them weren't gooey enough. Well, there that went. So, that was a really interesting project. A whole book on mouthfeel and just really great-tasting, sugary, fun, enjoyable sin.

[02:06:31.28]

Annemarie N.: That does sound really fun.

[02:06:35.06]

Elaine C.: And the introduction to that book is very comprehensive, because that's what I was used to. And then, I went back to this notion of cooking as a survival skill. And I already had an agent. And while I was at the *Bee*, I won several awards. Three of them happened in one year.

[02:07:03.24]

Annemarie N.: Wow.

[02:07:03.24]

Elaine C.: And it was for a ten-part series on learning how to cook. And the *Bee* made a book out of it, a little spiral bound book with all ten parts of the series that went through techniques. It had workshop recipes; you could practice. The thing sold out, but they didn't reprint it, so that became my basis for a great, big proposal which I sent to my agent. There was a bidding war over it. And I finally went with a new publisher in Berkeley, because I knew I could drive to see them. And it was a really interesting

process because that's when I changed my recipe style for good. Until other books gave me a house style that I hated. I objected to: "Pour the batter into the buttered and floured baking dish." What? You want my batter to sit here with baking powder already exhausting itself while I butter and flour a baking dish? No, I should have already done that right away in step number one. As well as getting out a serving platter so you don't have that frenzy at the end. Again, this is the physicality of cooking. I mean, it's not a sport, but it has movement. And it has certain timelines where details can be set aside while you do other things. So, once again, I did not revolutionize the recipe for meatloaf or brownie, although I have a pretty good meatloaf—I left out the veal because it was out of favor. The award for the newspaper articles was for best food section, best general reporting—like they thought learning how to cook was a revelation—and best column, I had written a column about something else. So, it was three in one year, plus three others for other columns. So, this became a book called, "Now You're Cooking." And it was one of the first books for beginners that didn't treat beginners like children. And one of the things I learned, back at the *Austin American Statesman* when I was laying out the front page, the head trip of the eye: the eye can only go so far across the page. And I've always maintained it's twenty-two picas in newspaper talk, which is about two and a half columns of newsprint wide. After that, the eye gives out. I wanted larger type, and I wanted all the ancillary information, like in a gourmet recipe that would go on and on on and on, be sure not to do this, be sure to do this, and then you are able to continue and do that all in this big, long, unparagraphed piece of battleship-gray writing, to pull that out and put it down the sides so the recipe seemed, to the eye, to be short. So, then the instructions were divided up in such a way as, "Do this first." And you might have two or three things to do first. A goal is accomplished, like buttering the pan, getting the serving platter out. Setting the oven, which is pretty basic. Step two, you start to move around with the food, and you've gone through three steps without a goal. Do this third, maybe one or two things left to do, you put it in the oven or stir it or whatever, and then there's a wrapping it up, if you want to garnish or something like that, and that's it. That's the whole deal. Meanwhile, if something's simmering—like, do this second, well, what are you going to do for thirty minutes? In italics, it says, "Clean up." So you're ready. Because that is the practical thing to do, so you don't make a mess out of your kitchen. I

think that's why the book won the Beard Award and the Julia Child Award. It's the way it was written, not what it's written about.

[02:12:15.16]

Annemarie N.: That's awesome. Sounds like a really—it's really thoughtful, but it's also really practical at the same time.

[02:12:28.03]

Elaine C.: I have drawings of how I wanted the graphics. I sat at a coffee shop and set this whole thing up, with the what's baking powder and what's the difference between baking powder and baking soda. It's all down the side. But here's this little recipe for biscuits, it looks approachable to a beginner. I didn't put in phyllo dough. The subtitle was, "Everything You Need to Know About", what is my underline? "Everything You Need to Know to Start Cooking Today," indicating, there's a lot of things you don't need to know to start cooking today. So, that was my goal. That was my mission. And I still cook out of my own book. [Laughter]

[02:13:32.18]

Annemarie N.: Sounds like mission accomplished.

[02:13:36.09]

Elaine C.: Yeah.

[02:13:36.09]

Annemarie N.: That's awesome. Well, let me see. So, we talked about recipe development and you talked about kind of your testing and all that good stuff. I guess I have more broad, big questions. I asked this to Ms. Griffith yesterday, but what do you think is your biggest personal achievement, whether that is, like, an inward growth or an outward thing, that you have accomplished in journalism?

[02:14:08.13]

Elaine C.: I think I've helped people. I just think I have a philosophy that, if you're not informing people in a relevant way, you're just wastin' their time and your time. And the same is true in the style of journalism for public radio, which is a very difficult form of communication. I did some of my best work in public radio. But as far as an achievement, I think I became a better writer, better communicator. I don't think my notion of what a good story is—I taught food writing when I stopped working for the *Bee* and I needed some jobs. I held up an apple and I asked the whole class, "What comes to mind about this apple, if you were to write about an apple?" And the whole board was full of, like, Adam and Eve and apples dipped in honey and the apple industry and apple pie. That there are so many ways to approach a story, and I was privileged to have done that. I told them, "If you're a curious person, you can write a person about that doorknob. You could write a story about an exit sign." Who invented the doorknob? What was the doorknob before it was a doorknob? What about the door in the cave? Was it a latch? Why'd you need a latch? Were people comin' to your house? The mechanics of the doorknob—when did it become a piece of art with glass and the clicking and the lock. If you just ask the questions, you can get a great story. That makes a Smithsonian story, the evolution of the doorknob. The exit sign is all over the world. I don't even know who invented it. I'd like to know. How come it doesn't turn out when the power goes out? What's that all about? It's just having this incessant need to know things, and as far as that achievement question, I think—rather than have that an achievement, it was a privilege that I got to do it. And I'm still doing it, hopefully.

[02:17:14.04]

Annemarie N.: That's awesome. You mentioned public radio. Could you talk a little bit about who you worked for, and what you did when you were in public radio?

[02:17:24.01]

Elaine C.: I worked for Capital Public Radio, which is the NPR affiliate in Sacramento. And again, sort of like what I went through to propose a food section for the *Austin American Statesman*, I met the news editor at some ceremony in Sacramento. And Sacramento was just lighting up with restaurants. And he had been thinking about covering food, and I

said, "Well, let me send you my resume, and maybe some kind of a proposal." I wanted to be the Click and Clack of food on public radio. It didn't turn out that way, but it turned out better. And I had an interview with him at a restaurant, a Turkish restaurant. She had—well, if you knew me better, you would know I always ask for a dessert menu before the real menu. And I knew she made an incredible cheesecake that was . . . a little more yellow than your basic New York cheesecake. And we talked about how to convert a print person into a sound person. And I have hyper hearing. My son always accuses me of eavesdropping. "Mom, are you listening to those people?" I mean, some of my stories have—I was at Lutèce in New York to write a story for the *Chronicle* about the demise of French food, and I overheard two guys, maybe from Wall Street, saying, "I have all the money in the world and I'm still not happy." And I put it in the story and he read it. "Mom, were you eavesdropping again?" So, hearing is very important. Your inner ear is very important in writing because of the cadence and the syncopation. And living in Texas actually helped that, because people in Texas have a certain way of talking: ba-dump-bump. Almost like Borscht Belt, you leave the big, big word for the end. You lead up to it, and ya hit 'em. Anyway, he said, "How can you put a story about food on radio?" "Well," I said, "Joe, I would come to this restaurant, and let's say I'm gonna do a story about this cheesecake. Well, she's going to tell me about the cheesecake, first of all. She's Turkish, why is she making a cheesecake? Is this a Turkish cheesecake? She's going to show me how to make it. The beaters turn on. The KitchenAid's going. Here's some sound. The eggs are cracking. She's unwrapping the cream cheese. Sound is your punctuation in radio. And Joe, why do you think this cheesecake is yellower than most cheesecakes you see?" "I don't know." "It has more yolks in it. I would ask her about that: her technique. And the next thing you know, we'd put the recipe out there, send it out there for the listeners." In fact, the web helped radio instead of causing the demise of newspapers, because radio stories are so ephemeral. They're on; they're off. "Oh, I wish I could go back and hear that." Now, you can go read the script. At that time, that was not possible. And he was pretty impressed by that. So my first story was about scrambled eggs with a really good chef in town. I went to his house, had the microphone on according to my instructions. "Hi, how are you," at the door. "Let's go into the kitchen." Talks about his organic eggs from a certain farm near Sacramento. He cracks them, he

scrambles them, lotta sound. He's talking about how he prefers to make scrambled eggs, and finally, it ends. I said to him, "Now, some people might think these aren't quite done, 'cause they're so soft." And the chef had some comment, "Well, they need to learn to eat them this way." We took a bite, the mm-mm-mm part. And, you know, some kitchen clanging. And it was just terrific. But the technology of producing a radio story is a huge learning curve, because you're working with a program. You've got your whole tape up there. You're pulling things you want from it, putting it on different tracks. That egg cracking is gonna go down here because I know it's gonna be a segue to another part of the story. And finally, I was doing five- and six-minute stories, which you never hear anymore. I mean, it's the equivalent of an essay in *The Atlantic*, that kind of time. It was a very, very gratifying, low-paying opportunity. And what I learned was, I became an even better writer writing script for radio, because you had to write to fit for time. You had to start nicking out every word that didn't belong there. And as a freelancer, if you're going to reproduce the story or repurpose it for another entity like a magazine, it's better to do the radio script first. And then you can blah, blah, blah, blah, blah in the magazine. But it is a fascinating, fascinating medium. It's also a very intimate medium, 'cause you're usually alone when you're listening to it. But the mechanics of putting the story together, I really liked that. I really liked moving the listener along, 'cause if you lose them, it's over. They'll just stop listening. They might continue reading a story, but if you lose their ear, it's over. So, sometimes you might start a story with the sound. One time, I did a story about the new trend to aging wine in caves, which was the original process. And there are some natural caves in Napa Valley and in and around Sacramento. But now, people are building caves, and they have to dynamite the earth to get the cave to form. I started the story out with the dynamite: boom. And then went into the whole piece, and it turned out very well. So, after ten years, I kinda miss it.

[02:24:27.26]

Annemarie N.: When did you start working at Capital Public Radio?

[02:24:31.05]

Elaine C.: 2005?

[02:24:35.17]

Annemarie N.: Okay. So you only retired two years ago from that?

[02:24:40.00]

Elaine C.: Um-hm.

[02:24:42.25]

Annemarie N.: That's good. I don't blame you. Working in sound is fun.

[02:24:48.17]

Elaine C.: Things were changing, and the stories were getting shorter and shorter. And they wanted to hire somebody who would do more policy, but it turns out, I was working on policy stories myself for the *Sacramento Bee* and Capitol Public Radio at the same time. It regards food fraud—I'm still on this—like no lemon in the lemon juice, no honey in the honey, no pomegranate in the pomegranate juice, but the big thing was olive oil. Which is a big, big commodity. Well, it's not a big commodity in terms of numbers, it's a popular, scary commodity, because there's so much bad olive oil out there. UC Davis had done a blind tasting of the same olive oils purchased in LA, San Francisco, and Sacramento, wrapped them in brown paper, took them to a lab in the Olive Center at UC Davis, at a building the Mondavis built, and produced a list of olive oils that passed three significant tests that laypeople can understand—although there were ten other chemical analyses that would just go over our heads. And the olive oils that made it were very surprising, and the olive oils that didn't make it were very surprising, but they named names. And I broke that story and NPR ran it.

[02:26:30.28]

Annemarie N.: Oh, wow.

[02:26:30.29]

Elaine C.: And then I kept goin' on it in the op-ed pages of the *Sacramento Bee*, and my stories were used in testimony at the capitol, because it became apparent that labelling needed to be changed to produce the truth, because there were all kinds of lies: that it was extra-virgin when it wasn't, so you can get the big bucks for what you perceive the label to indicate to you, that it's a high-quality product, when it's hazelnut oil with green food coloring. And why do we buy olive oil? For your health. Because it tastes good. Because it's a quality product. And these rings of bad guys in Greece were ruining it for the ethical people. So, California has standards for a plum. You know, if a plum doesn't meet a certain criterion, it's a second. It just doesn't make it to market. So, the labelling has changed. You have to put the lot number, the harvest date, the use-by date. If it was estate-grown. The blend. Various olives in the oil. There's a website called *The Olive Oil Times*. It reads like a police blotter. They're always rounding up these bad guys and, if it says "Product of Italy," it doesn't mean it was made in Italy. It means that oil is flowing in from all these other countries and bottled in Italy, and it's not Italian at all. I learned all this. Journalism is so great because you can walk out the door and learn something every single day.

[02:28:21.07]

Annemarie N.: That's the truth. It must have been so gratifying, you know?

[02:28:25.18]

Elaine C.: But that was real news. That wasn't recipes. That was an issue. And that was a consumer story. And, you know, almost the opposite effect happened. People were so afraid to buy it, they were gonna get ripped off. [Laughter] It might have had a negative effect at first, but this was information people needed to know about.

[02:28:51.25]

Annemarie N.: Definitely. That's really interesting. I have one last question for you: what do you hope to see for the future of food writing?

[02:29:01.20]

Elaine C.: Hm. Think about that. I don't really have a crystal ball about the future of food writing itself. The crystal ball is really more about cookbooks and the internet and the buying of cookbooks or just looking up a recipe on the internet. There are some very serious internet sites that are reliable. Nothing beats a book, but the future of food writing should continue to inform people about what's going on in the fields, what's going on with poisons in . . . in the corn crops, pesticides being linked to diseases. It should back off on false claims of health and Internet scams that say, "If you eat this, you won't get Alzheimer's." That's got to stop, and I hope that's in the future, that these things will be vetted and checked more frequently and with the proper authority. I think this is a really bad trend we're in right now where anybody can write anything, and make you have to go to Snopes to see what's really true and how Snopes knows, I have no idea. There's a naiveté about food in all venues of it. There's always room for a recipe. There's always room for nutrition, but you know what's going to change? Right now, it's brain food. If you eat brain food, maybe you won't get Alzheimer's. That's crazy. Or you won't get cancer. What kind of a predictability is that? It has no authority whatsoever. And you can see, from that food pyramid that came out, it didn't work. It pleased the pasta industry because the eleven servings of carbohydrates, but you couldn't live eating like that, and I believe it is part of the obesity epidemic right now. It started then. I mean, when I saw it on a box of frosted flakes, I knew it was BS. So, the future of food writing will be on the Internet, it will be on blogs of various authority—or Internet sites of great authority to vague authority—and it will always be recipes. I also see a lot of people interested in the history of food. And even though that's going backwards for a forward trend, but it's fascinating to know how we got here.

[02:32:57.17]

Annemarie N.: That's really true.

[02:33:00.04]

Elaine C.: So, I guess I would like to see as much truth as possible in the future of food writing, and better writing, and editors who check copy.

[02:33:14.05]

Annemarie N.: That's great. I asked you a lot of questions and you have told me a lot more than I knew previously, and it's a fantastic interview. You have a lot of great experiences. Is there anything that we haven't talked about that you've wanted to talk about?

[02:33:31.29]

Elaine C.: Um . . . I kinda miss it. I'm kind of waning, you know? I don't wanna get into that, but . . . it was a great decision. Dotty's my idol. But I'm really glad I was a copy editor first, a news editor second, and a food editor third, and that I went backwards.

[02:34:09.16]

Annemarie N.: Saved the best for last.

[02:34:13.06]

Elaine C.: Because you learn the mechanics first, and some people never learn the mechanics. They have no idea.

[02:34:25.03]

Annemarie N.: Interesting. Well, thank you so much.

[02:34:29.22]

Elaine C.: It's wonderful talking to you.

[02:34:31.16]

Annemarie N.: It's wonderful talking to you.

[*End of interview*]