

JOHN LAUDUN
Lafayette, LA

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Interviewer: Sara Roahen
Length: 1 hour 17 minutes
Project: Southern Gumbo Trail

[Begin John Laudun-Gumbo Interview]

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Sara Roahen: This is Sara Roahen for the Southern Foodways Alliance. It's Thursday, September 13, 2007. I'm in Lafayette, Louisiana, with Mr. John Laudun. If I could get you to say your name—yourself—and your birth date, we'll get started.

00:00:16

John Laudun: My name is John Laudun, and I was born February 11, 1965 here in Lafayette, Louisiana, at the old Lafayette Sanitarium. It's about a stone's throw from here.

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SR: And have you lived here your whole life?

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JL: No, Let's see, I lived here until I was one year old, and my father and mother moved down to Franklin where I grew up—'til about seven—and then they moved from there to Baton Rouge, in part 'cause my dad in fact didn't want us growing up speaking English with a Cajun accent, or with a South Louisiana accent. Cajun and Creole were not yet cool, as the line goes, so he wanted us to—to grow up with city urban accents, so he moved us to Baton Rouge. And that's where I spent most of my years and in fact went to LSU for my undergraduate degree.

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SR: And did your father speak with an accent?

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JL: No. Well the family still has a legacy because the family came through New Orleans. ‘Cause my family—as I said earlier—has a longer history and arrived in New Orleans, you know 200 years ago in the wake of the slave rebellion. There are still sort of carry-overs that are kind of—well, typically we call them Ninth Ward or a Yat accent, but really probably reflect the kind of larger urban phenomena of an urban Irish accent. So my father actually has a slightly—slight New Orleans accent when he speaks. I don’t know what—exactly how he [and] the family held onto that accent, but he did. And in fact I remember when I lived in Upstate New York, and my father would call and leave messages, everybody thought he was from the Bronx. *John, this is your father; I’m just calling to see how you’re doing.* [**Mimics Father**] But it’s, you know, it’s an urban Irish accent ‘cause that’s just where the family lived. And that’s how the—the family name isn’t pronounced Lu-dan or Lo-dan [**with a French sound**]; it’s pronounced Lo-din.

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SR: Where did your father grow up? Was it in New Orleans or was he already out here—this way?

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JL: No, he grew up—he grew up out in St. Mary Parish. I mean, he was born on Weeks Island before they moved everybody off the island; grew up mostly in—on Irish Bend, which is the—the sort of backside of Franklin if you will.

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SR: And what was—what did he do for a living?

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JL: He is still a practicing architect. He was—it's kind of funny when you look, they have articles in the—in the paper about the hometown boy who did good by going to college. His graduation was actually marked in the paper. There's an article in the—the local Franklin paper. And it's, you know, it's a very rural economy built around the sugar mills. He went and got a degree in architecture, and that's where my parents met—was here at what was then SLU, was later USL and now is UL-Lafayette—at the School of Architecture. And [he] is a practicing architect with the State Fire Marshall's Office.

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SR: The—pardon me. Can you say that again?

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JL: He's a practicing—with the State Fire Marshall's Office, and his job is to—in fact his particular job is code—hood inspection, hood code. I know; don't ask me.

00:03:41

SR: He might deal with restaurants?

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JL: Yeah, he deals with restaurants. In fact restaurants are now more—interesting side-bit, completely off-topic in many ways, but still on the topic of food—restaurants actually have a higher propensity for catching fire these days because of the trend in healthful cooking, they maintain their grease at higher temperatures, which means heat—the grease is much closer to a splash point where it will catch fire, and when it catches fire it’s very hard to put out.

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SR: So maybe the frying traditions in this area—I don’t know, people might—their fried food might have been different 50 years ago or something, when the—when they weren’t frying as hot.

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JL: Well the frying traditions would have been different because people wouldn’t—increasingly is the case over the last 10 to 20 years, people are frying less at home, and they go to restaurants for fried foods. And interestingly, I mean really if you think about it and if you do careful reading, I mean of course people from Europe didn’t arrive here frying foods. That was an African phenomenon. Africans would fry in palm oil. So really it was an African introduction into American foodways, or an African American innovation or introduction. It got—it caught on wildly. I mean fried food is good food and really pretty healthy. I mean, if you do frying right there’s not much oil that goes in the food if any at all. And—and now people mostly still eat it, but they tend to eat it out. It’s kind of a mess. The same thing that people argue for why people increasingly go to crawfish—boiling houses for their crawfish or crabs or shrimp: it’s just easier

to go someplace else, especially for crawfish and crabs which can make so much mess and eat your crawfish and crabs there than do it at home. It's kind of a shame though. Crawfish boils and crab boils or frying things out in the backyard were a fine Louisiana tradition. And those crawfish pots and barbeque pits were as much a—a backyard fixture as boats. You know, all part of that investment and interest that people in South Louisiana have of remaining connected with their environment.

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SR: And people do still do that a little bit on a, just a relative scale. They're not doing it as much.

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JL: It's just too convenient to go to a restaurant. I mean I don't boil my crawfish at home; I go to a boiling house and get it. And I have my preferred boiling houses. And—and I think it's interesting: people tend to prefer boiling houses that prepare crawfish the way they grew up eating it. Of course you know I also teach folklore classes at the university, and so I see students who have never actually had crawfish—well crawfish at home. They've only ever had it at restaurants. So these things change, and you know part of me is an old—a member of the older generation, a middle—a middle generation now. I kind of admit that—as much as the folklorist, my job is to remain objective to change and to study it for what—what happens and how things change; part of me also is a little saddened to see people not knowing how to do these things at home. I mean it was—I can remember, you know as a boy going out and we'd find some wood that had flooded, and you'd put out those old pyramid traps—just these wire traps that had four

corners and a square net and you tied some piece of chicken wing or chicken liver or something up the middle of it. You'd set them down and you'd wait a little bit for the crawfish to, you know, smell or however crawfish detect these things; climb onto the trap. And you'd go along picking the traps up with, you know three, four—if you're lucky, you know a half dozen crawfish in a trap. Sometimes you didn't have any, or maybe you had one or two. And then you—you'd collect all the crawfish up, and you'd wash them off, you'd—and then bring them home or boil them or—. That was—that was a good time. That was the way you spent an entire day or a weekend, doing that. You know, kind of the way that people—you'd spend time with your family, and my father and—and friends, and so it's a part of me. [I'm] probably more passionate about those kinds of things that tie people closer together. But like I said, the other part of me, the scholar, says well, things change, and we'll see what happens and see if people don't want to change back, or what happens.

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SR: Well I did want to ask you about your job, but before we get off the crawfish topic, who—who would do the boiling in your house? Was it your mom or your dad?

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JL: [*Laughs*] Those are always dads. Those—that's you know, crawfish boils, like barbeques, are a moment in which men perform their—their culinary expertise very proudly. In fact, my dad was also the one who made gumbo with much [*Laughs*]*—with much pomp and circumstance.*

I'm cooking. Look out, I'm cooking here. I'm making the gumbo.

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SR: And what kind of gumbo would he make?

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JL: My dad—seafood gumbo is still the high-water mark in my life. He was an extraordinary seafood gumbo maker. My mom was—was a pretty good cook, but my dad’s gumbo was a pretty remarkable thing. I’ve made one gumbo that came close to his gumbos, and now it—I don’t really remember eating that much chicken gumbo at home. We ate mostly—mostly seafood gumbos. But we were from St. Mary’s Parish, so seafood is more of a tradition there. I can say this: you know most people think of sausage as being an integral part of a lot of gumbos, but in my household if a shadow of a sausage passed over the gumbo pot, that gumbo was spoiled in my dad’s imagination. And it’s something that happens in some of those coastal areas where—where sausage comes later. So there’s still a lot of people who think, *Sausage —what’s wrong with you? Why would you put sausage in a gumbo and spoil it?*

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SR: What do you think you did right when you made that one pot of gumbo that approached your father’s?

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JL: Oh what I did right was I bought fresh that morning, down in Dulac, a dozen boiled crabs by these local guys [*Laughs*]. I don’t even know what they do actually for a living, but they had—they were boiling crabs, and so I got some—some medium boiled crabs and brought them

back and put them into the gumbo. So they were—the crabs were already seasoned, and it was just terrific. It was absolutely beautiful gumbo.

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SR: And what kind of seafood would your dad put in there, crab?

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JL: Crab and shrimp—crab, shrimp, and oysters, that's it. Crab, shrimp, and oysters. Sometimes it's crab and oysters, but crab, shrimp, and oysters—that's it.

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SR: And it was a roux gumbo?

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JL: In my family, yes, gumbos always start with a roux. And unlike other parts of Louisiana, you do everything in one pot, so you start with your roux. You get your roux just right; you already have your seasoning vegetables prepared, and your roux is—is just the right color you want. You throw your seasoning vegetables in there; they absorb a lot of the heat. They—they stop the roux from cooking anymore. They then begin to cook down themselves, and you slowly add your water in and dissolve your gumbo and your vegetables and all that together, and then you can add your meat in. Of course we know seafood cooks very quickly, so it's very different from, say, what happens in—in St. Landry and Acadia Parishes, where you often brown your meat first and then add your water to that pot and—or you add your—you have your water

already boiling and you brown your meat separately, and you add your meat to your pot and you've already made your roux separately. In fact tradition in some parts of St. Landry and Acadia Parishes, they actually make a big batch of roux for the month, and they keep it in a bowl with waxed paper over it, and you would take a scoop out of that and add it to your pot. And then you slowly dissolve your roux in your water—very different from St. Mary's Parish, where you begin with your roux and add your water to it, and slowly add water dissolving the roux and the water together. And in St. Landry and Acadia parishes, often what you do is dissolve the roux into the water, not the water into the roux. It's a very different process. And that—that I think is the reason why, if you go to the grocery store and see the jarred rouxs, you'll notice they come from the northern part of Acadiana. Miss Eula Mae Savoie is from Eunice, I believe, and I don't know where Kary's Roux is from. Avoyelles Parish, I want to say. Or is it from Ville Platte? Anyway, somewhere—somewhere in that end.

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SR: So you didn't—so you didn't have that in your household growing up, the jarred roux?

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JL: I don't think they had jarred roux anywhere. I think jarred roux is, I want to say, the last 10 years, since the '90s—so maybe the last 20 years, but no. I don't—. I know for sure we didn't have it in our household, and I want to say that nobody I knew before I left for graduate school in 1987 was using jarred roux. It wasn't on the shelves.

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SR: I've been asking around about that a lot 'cause now it's so—there's so much, especially in Acadiana. There's different brands, different colors, and I wonder if it's just a convenience thing or—? I don't know if it was born of some—for some other reason.

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JL: Well you know it's—it's like I said, it's one of those cases where there was a tradition of having your roux pre-made, you know. Where I grew up in—in the southern part of Acadiana, I don't think that the—there's a wide tradition of pre-making your roux. You made your roux before you made your gumbo, and that was it—or whatever dish you were going to use that roux for. And so you know it's—you know Marcelle Bienvenu has gotten famous for saying you know, *First you make a roux*. But that's not really the case. You know, like a lot of famous chefs and some writers and even folklorists like myself—people often begin with the assumption that the gumbo they grew up with is *the gumbo*. And it's simply not the case; so it's simply not the case that first you make a roux. For, you know, people in St. Landry Parish and Acadia Parish, first you brown your meat. In fact really what is essential to gumbo is not the roux, but browning something. You must brown something unless you're making a gumbo des herbes. So if you—if you take gumbo des herbes, the green gumbos, out of the picture, the—the engine of gumbo is not roux but browning something. That—the engine really for much of South Louisiana cuisine—South Louisiana cuisine is essentially rice and gravy.

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SR: It's brown.

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JL: Yeah, but it's you know—so you—but brown is—browning is terribly—is a terribly interesting process. Two things happen: in vegetables like onions, browning caramelizes the sugars. So it takes the flavor of the onion and transforms it, so you have both the slight pepperiness and bite of the onion, but you also have a kind of rounded sugary flavor. What browning does with meat is something called the Maillard reaction—m-a-i-l-l-a-r-d—and what that does is, when meat comes into contact with high heat, a huge number of new compounds are produced. Now if the process goes too far, we call that burned. But up until the moment of burning you are producing dozens, if not hundreds, of new flavors and colors, which is what produces the browning in meat. And so what you're doing is you're—is you're adding flavor to a dish. You're adding flavor from the ingredients you already have. And so what browning does is it gives you both the chicken and the brown chicken, both the onion and the caramelized onion, so you're really getting double duty if not triple, quadruple, whatever duty out of your ingredients, which is part of what any, you know, peasant cuisine aspires to do, which is take a little bit of food and stretch it a long way. And in South Louisiana, not only do you take an old chicken or an old cow or an old whatever and stretch it a long way, but you—you stretch the ingredients in terms of their flavor, you know. How much—I mean it's almost like the mindset in Louisiana is, *How much flavor can I get out of this? I can get the chicken flavor, sure, but if I brown it I get something more.*

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SR: Do you have any theories—or I mean facts is fine too—but any ideas about why in this group of people, you know, which historically have not been real wealthy people—like you said,

like they're getting all the flavor out of—that they can out of not necessarily deluxe ingredients; why do you think these people were focused on flavor?

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JL: Well—

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SR: As opposed to—I mean I've been to, you know, other parts of the country, other parts of the world, where the peasant food is not necessarily so flavor-rich.

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JL: Well for—for one thing, you have the heavy African influence in South Louisiana and an African population that's constantly getting refreshed. You know as Gwendolyn Midlo Hall points out in her *Colonial—Africans in Colonial Louisiana*. I mean it's a constant refreshing, so the African influence is particularly strong in South Louisiana. That gets even more emphasized by the fact that you have all those Creoles and—and free people of color and others coming up during the Haitian slave rebellion, and the population of New Orleans practically doubled overnight. And it goes from, I think like 10,000 to 20,000 over a decade, which is pretty phenomenal growth for a city, and so they're bringing with them a heavily Africanized cuisine as well. Truth be known, I think you know a lot of what we think of as being Cajun cuisine is really Cajuns adapting to these African—Franco-African or Afro-French innovations that were taking place here in Louisiana, and then holding onto them longer than others. But the Cajuns were also you know, part of the process, part of the innovation. You know, we know that the word *gumbo*

first appears in print around 1803, but what was happening beforehand? Did it—did it occur with the Creoles? Did—was it already happening with the Cajuns? It's not quite clear. Generally, you know, it takes 10 to 20 years for something to have an impact, so I suspect the Creoles came into an environment in which they probably maybe—maybe already had a dish called *gumbo*, and they were met with a dish that was called *gumbo*, and some sort of the merging of the dishes took place. But you have a convergence where you have three groups who already have a mastery of browning for flavor. You have the Europeans arriving with roasting, so in European tradition you—you do one of two things with meat in particular. You either roast it or you boil it. Roasting is—is labor intensive because you have to watch it, be there all the time, but it does produce an amazing flavor. The Africans arrived with, as I said, fried. That was one of their traditions and of getting flavor out that way. And then you also have the browning that the Native Americans did. I mean we have notes from—what's his name? Jean Pierre Bossu. What's his first—I don't remember his first name, but Bossu, who is traveling with the—oh which—I want to say it's maybe one of the tribes in Arkansas, but I—it could be the Choctaw. I don't quite remember now, but he talks about them carrying around with them in bags—leather pouches—browned ground corn. And when they're on the hunting path or on the warpath, this is what they use to eat, so they are—they are parching corn. They are browning a starch—not a long-standing tradition in other cookeries, really. Not clear to me—there might have been something going on in Southern France, but I don't know how much the Southern French traditions would have influenced Louisiana, but this notion of—of browning a starch to get a different flavor out of it is pretty amazing and is the basis for the brown rouxs of Louisiana.

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SR: Do you think the Native Americans are responsible for the brown rouxs?

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JL: No, I think what was responsible is you have three distinct cookeries or cuisines, culinary traditions, meeting up and having a kind of fundamental agreement on browning. And with that—that gave people permission to experiment in certain directions. And so you know I don't—I don't know if we can ever—unless we come across some document [*Laughs*] that points to somebody says, *Ah, this is the guy who thought it up*—. We have—we have a Maillard, if you will, in which browning is—is everywhere, or it's at least possible everywhere, and I think that's what happened. Out of that mixture of those three cookeries the same—you know that browning became a possibility for damn near everything; so part of that larger exchange of ideas.

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SR: Well you just brought a lot of things together for me that I've been hearing—you know hearing bits and pieces about so I—that's fascinating. I appreciate it. What about in your family, what is the ideal shade for a roux?

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JL: [*Laughs*] Well of course St. Mary Parish is not known for its strong rouxs. So I mean, so again you know you've got that notion of *first you make a roux*. So all right, well what color is the roux, and how much roux to the rest of the gumbo, you know? Are you going to use a lot of roux or a little bit of roux? Is it a thin gumbo or is it a thick gumbo? My family kind of shoots the middle. It—like a lot of St. Mary Parish and Iberia Parish rouxs, the—the gumbo will wind

up being more of a kind of gray-green color than a kind of distinct, you know, thick brown color like you encounter in Breaux Bridge and in parts of Lafayette where they've got a very dark roux. It's kind of a medium-brown roux. You know, slightly darker than peanut butter I would say, but not the kind of coffee-brown that some people in Lafayette aspire to. What's interesting is, I grew up with that tradition, but as I lived in Lafayette now for seven, eight years, I've come to really like and almost prefer the darker brown rouxs. But growing up it was, you know—medium-brown color. You know I almost wish now when I was doing my interview work I had a color wheel. **[Laughs]** So we could say, okay, either you—if you make the roux or you point out the color brown you want, so we could have like a Pantone chart to have better specificity to it. And you—you would use a couple tablespoons of flour and a couple tablespoons of oil to you know, a four-quart pot, and that would be about the right consistency of—of what a gumbo was supposed to be like.

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SR: I know what you mean about needing the color wheel because most people say sort of what you said: you get it to the shade of brown that you want, you know. But sort of pinpointing what exactly that shade is—is difficult to do if you're not doing it.

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JL: It's really hard with, you know when you're dealing—so my specialization is material culture, material folk culture, and with the case of foodways you have edible material folk culture, which means you have a femoral material folk culture, **[Laughs]** which means you know, unless somebody is willing to make you a gumbo while you're there, being able to deal

with it objectively is really hard. You know, so I really had to work when I was interviewing old—mostly older women, some older men, and a lot of other people about getting the process down, because like a lot of oral traditions you know, a lot is taken for granted. Well you know I used to—I remember I asked my grandmother one time—whose dish that I failed to document and I regret to this day to the point that I want to cry, was her crab stew. She made a crab stew that at least in memory is as close to heaven on earth as I'll ever get. But you know, I remember asking her one time when I was living in Syracuse—or maybe when I was living up in Indiana—about seasoning something, and she [*Laughs*]*—*you know she, like any good South Louisiana cook: *Well baby, to taste. Well how much salt— how much salt do you put in? Well baby, to taste; you know 'til you get it the way you want. But I'm like, I don't know what I want.*

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SR: What's—describe the crab stew. What would be different between a crab gumbo and a crab stew?

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JL: Well you—you would not in my—I don't think my grandma used the roux for crab stew. I think the brown came somewhere(s) else; I don't know. I didn't document it. You know I didn't document it.

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SR: Was it thicker than a gumbo?

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JL: No, it didn't have a heavy sauce. I mean there was gravy there as there is in any South Louisiana dish. **[Laughs]** I don't know where the gravy came from. I'll have to ask my father and—and aunt at some point what they remember about her crab stew. I just remember it being this amazing thing of little—of course, you know it's all so well prepared. The—the crab claws with already the shell taken off, so it's just the—the claw meat exposed ready for you to pick off your plate and clean with your teeth, sitting on a pile of rice that had some sort of wonderful gravy on it. Beyond—beyond that **[Laughs]** I just don't know how she made it, you know. I was a—a selfish young man sitting at the kitchen table and not turned around, not to see her at the kitchen stove, and that was foolish on my part.

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SR: Wow. Most of us—well we're lucky if we realize that we need to get those recipes before it's too late, really. So tell me a little bit about, you said—you mentioned interviewing people about gumbo. Tell me about that: what you were—why you were doing that.

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JL: Well I was working on a—before the storms of 2005 I was working on a book about gumbo. It was a kind of—you know we had—we had done the conventional histories of Louisiana, and they left a lot of people out—African Americans, Acadians, others. And we've done some social histories, ethnic histories, so we've—we've gone back and looked at the Cajuns. You know my colleague, Carl Brasseaux, is an exceptional historian of the Cajuns. And we've done—getting better at Creole histories and African American history now with someone

like Gwendolyn Midlo Hall's work. But it struck me that the problem with the conventional histories is that it left—it left people out. The problem with the social or ethno-history was they left out the mixing of people, you know, and we know that in South Louisiana, through just orientation and attitude as well as through circumstances, people were mixing things up a lot. You know when I worked with my friend Todd Mouton and we did the Varise Conner CD, you know there's a lot of tracks on that CD but a number of them are blues, and polkas, and mazurkas as Varise Conner says, so these are—and these are not songs that are strictly Cajun. So we know that people were exchanging ideas; we know that something like gumbo can only happen out of an exchange of ideas, and so I thought if I were to look at—use gumbo as a kind of limbs on the Louisiana history, it would give me a different—get another version of history and another dimension of history. It would be a history in which the contact between peoples would be far-grounded. Now like I said earlier, in the wake of the storms and—and how African Americans were portrayed and how people were so ready to ignore the folks that were hit by Rita, who were mostly poor Cajuns, it—it just became clear to me that we weren't ready for that kind of story. And so maybe at some point I'll revive that project, but right now it's on the shelf. But the idea behind it was to look at—at how those ideas get exchanged, and I had sat down with my colleague Barry Ancelet, and we had based on our own personal experiences as well as the field work we had done, kind of sketched out this theory that there were lines, boundaries, regional differences between gumbos. And there are regional variations between gumbos but they aren't really bounded; they're more like horizons or vectors. So I can tell you after doing a fair number of interviews that there is no line that you can draw on a map where if you cross it, garlic—either an ingredient or a non-ingredient you know—. But I can tell you that as you move further west from the Bayou Teche, garlic becomes less and less likely to be an ingredient in the

gumbo. Bayou Teche, populated by—settled by a large number of Italians, and some of the—some of the Ibero and Isleño peoples—so probably the case that garlic is a function of those people settling in that area. Previously we have said things like, *Well the Cajuns of this area did this and the Cajuns of that area do that*. But if we—if we throw garlic—if we throw gumbo into the mix and we notice that garlic drops out, then we're—we're driven to examine the fact that in fact the Cajuns in one area have been impacted by other settlers. Now we—we talk about this, but I felt like what gumbo did was foreground that. And like my friend Carl Brasseaux has—has done a terrific job of isolating the fact that probably the preference for smoked meats in Northern Acadiana is a function of the settlers who came from Fort Toulouse over in Alabama and were resettled originally at Point Coupee, but like the Cajuns who—who as well, you know they would—the administration, French or Spanish, would plop them down in one space and they'd say, *We don't really want to be here*, and they would move someplace else. And as a colonial administrator you got a chance to—you didn't have much of a choice. You just said, *Okay, you want to be there? Fine, you be there*. So they settled in St. Landry Parish and probably brought with them certain smoking traditions because they were a heavily Indianized group, and you know we're pretty sure that things like barbeque are native to the Americas. And the same way that peppers are native to America. One of the interesting things that came out of the research was how much—how widespread the Colombian exchange was. So everybody thinks about West African food as being peppery and Indian—parts of Indian food being peppery, but what they don't think about is that when they use those chili peppers in Indian food, those weren't native to India; they were native to the New World, and it was the Portuguese who brought them to India. So there's this incredible exchange going on of plants and of ideas about food. And you know part of it happens here in South Louisiana, so we have the garlic dimension. Of course

historically seafood would have been more preferred to the—to the South, but what I found was, you know, interviewing older people was, yes it was —seafood was not common in the prairies, which—but that wasn't to say that seafood gumbos were unknown in the prairies. They said we were very special, so you would have seafood gumbo for Christmas or New Year's in the prairie, which would be—would be a big deal. What I simply found was just how varied things were, you know in terms of what people would use or wanted to put in there. You know the general trends about—were really focused around process: when you did what and what you added in there.

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SR: Can you tell me a little bit about what you learned about filé in gumbo?

00:33:46

JL: You know filé was less of a concern when I was doing the work. It varied widely, you know, and—and really what became clear in a lot of the work was how idiosyncratic and personal traditions can get. It was fascinating to me as a folklorist—frustrating 'cause you're trying to write a book that has sweeping, you know, synthesis and generalizations—but really people are very—get very particular. And so some people just don't like filé and just don't want to add it, you know. But the general trends were, in Northern Acadiana people tend to sprinkle it on only at the table, and more in the southern areas along the Bayou Teche people tend to add it just before serving; so they'll add a tablespoon to the pot and that was about it. Really filé didn't play that large of a role. I was—I was really more fascinated by the processes and occasions of what—what was served when. And I was also fascinated by the—the recipes I would get, 'cause

you know I would show up and there would often be an older woman I was talking about it with, and she would—I mean one of my jobs as a folklorist was to play stupid, you know. Even though I know how to make my family's version of gumbo, I'd just be dumb. I was often fascinated at what they assumed I would already know. I remember I got a recipe one time for gumbo which was, you know, one chicken cut up, pound sausage cut up, and I think it might have had onion in there. But I mean there—there was no directions for how to cook or when to cook what or *[Laughs]*—.

00:35:30

SR: What kind of sausage?

00:35:31

JL: —what to do. It was just like, well sure, you—you know those things, don't you? So it was very interesting. And then my own family, my grandmother put filé in. She was representative of that South Bayou Teche tradition of putting filé in right before serving, so she would add filé to the gumbo before she served it, which would probably give some people in Lafayette the screaming heebie-jeebies. It's you know—don't want—they want to control their filé at the table.

00:36:05

SR: Was this your paternal grandmother?

00:36:06

JL: Yes, it's my father's mother.

00:36:09

SR: And just for the record, I'm—can you tell me what filé does to a gumbo?

00:36:15

JL: Some people believe it thickens it a little bit, and I'm sure that happens to some degree, just 'cause you're adding more fiber that can absorb moisture. A lot of it has to do with the flavor.

You know, it definitely makes it greener, so you'll see that—that gray-green tinge I was talking about along the lower Bayou Teche, I think, is a function of the filé being put in there. Mostly the flavor I think—a little bit of thickening, you know. Again, it's interesting: filé is one of the trinity for Creoles of Cane River, and there is this common notion in South Louisiana—it's just like gumbo—of the trinity. But what people mean by the trinity is very different, you know.

[Laughs] John Folse is very fond of saying *the trinity*, and by that he means, I think—does he mean onions, garlic, and bell pepper? I forget what Folse calls *the trinity*, you know. In parts of the Bayou Teche the trinity is bell pepper, onions, and celery. In the Cane River and Isle Brevelle the trinity is red pepper, filé, and maybe okra. I forget what they call their trinity. I don't—off the top of my head I can't remember. So there's the notion of the trinity, which is kind of interesting. There is of course the Trinity with the capital *T*, but this—this notion of the smaller case *t*-trinity, which is a food, and the idea of course is that this is true for all dishes in a—in a cookery, in a cuisine, which of course it isn't. I mean, but the idea is there—is that this trinity is something we put in all our dishes. So it's kind of like the larger trinity in that it's supposed to be true all the time, but in fact if you actually talk to people about the dishes they make, the trinity may be true

of their gumbo, which is often what people take to be the kind of primary dish, and that's partly a function of what scholars and food writers have done you know. We have taken an early focus on gumbo, and so therefore people really focus on their gumbo. But if you talk to them about how they make their—their crab stew or their shrimp stew, or you know their pork steak stew, the trinity may not necessarily be a part of it.

00:38:40

SR: And so do you think that—well what you said is interesting about what scholars and food writers have done with gumbo. Do you think that in, you know, the average household in this part of Louisiana—and even in New Orleans—gumbo is put on a pedestal like academics and food writers might do, or is that something that we've purely imposed? Like, is it this really central dish in most households, do you think?

00:39:14

JL: I don't know. You know, I mean it's interesting. There are certainly dishes that get made more often, you know: stews, rice and gravies. Like I said, those are really the—the stuff of everyday cuisine. Once upon a time people might have made more gumbo more often. I—a lot of people I know these days, you know, make plenty of gumbos. Right now in fact, the weather is cooling off and all I can think of is, okay this is it; this is my chance to have gumbo before it heats up again, you know, for the rest of September. So I'll make a gumbo probably tomorrow night. And—and gumbo has become a kind of important dish. You know when I was talking to people they didn't necessarily prioritize gumbo amongst the dishes they made, but in their—you know, thinking back on their childhoods in the earlier part of the 20th century, I didn't get the

sense that it was a particularly special dish. I think thanks to scholars and—and travel writers and foodways writers—you know scholars sort of led the way by focusing on gumbo or crawfish or whatever, and that gets picked up on by writers, and that gets picked up on by marketers and advertisers, and so it becomes a part of a packaging and people can't help but be influenced by that packaging, you know. If that's what's being sold, you know—if you drive along I-49, St. Landry Parish has a big billboard that says *St. Landry Parish—It's Gumbo for Your Soul*, you know.

00:40:49

SR: And do you look at that as a positive or a negative, that packaging?

00:40:55

JL: I look at it as simply a function of our modern lives. We—you know I consider it a dangerous—and then I worry that we—if we package ourselves too much for the consumption by others we'll wind up only consuming ourselves in that same way. I mean gumbo is important to me, as I think it was important to my father in that it connected me with others, so that when I get out my pot—it could be an old cast iron pot, it could be a Le Creuset pot, you know. It's really nice having that porcelain finish; it cleans up really easily. When I get out that pot to make a gumbo and I smell the flour—I'm going to make that roux and that slightly smoky smell and I feel the heat on my forearms, I can't help but think of my mother who—well my father made terrific gumbos; my mother was the everyday cook. And I can't help but think of my grandmother, and in that moment I'm connected to them, you know. And even now when my wife comes home—and my wife is from Kentucky—but if she walks in the house and I've been

making gumbo she's like, *Oh...* You know, so it's part of how I make home and now my wife, you know, thinks of home as being this place with this smoky smell. I was just in the Alsace with a—visiting my friend of mine, and I made her a jambalaya, and you know she was off doing something. She came upstairs, and I'm sure it was the first time her kitchen—you know here it is in Northeastern France and it had that much smoke in it [*Laughs*], or that smoky smell in it. It sort of hangs. I mean it's—it's that—it's a smoky smell. It's a product of oil at a very high point—high temperature, which means it's a smoky smell that sticks around in the—in the air for a while. But it's part of how I imagine home, so it's a highly resonate process for me. But if I only ever eat gumbo in restaurants, that resonance—part of that resonance is lost. So it is in fact to my mind—this is me speaking as a native of Louisiana, not necessarily as a folklorist—it's a thinner dish. It's—it's a poor experience for not having, you know, not having the memory of being in the kitchen with my mother or grandmother as they stirred that roux very carefully in that pot, making that smell, and cut up those vegetables—those onions and celery and bell pepper—ready to get them to go into the pot to keep—to get that roux when it's just right. You know all that smell is part of my memory, so that when I make a gumbo it's part of it, and I worry that if we're all buying pre-packaged gumbos, you know we're missing out. We're missing out on—on being connected with each other, and you know that's part of what happens in modernity. People are less connected to each other; just simply part of what we call modernity, but I don't have to like it.

00:44:07

SR: Well can you talk a little bit about—you did this a little before I started recording—sort of the tension between your job to keep objective as a folklorist in a place that’s a very—it’s a very subjective place for you. You were raised here with your culture.

00:44:27

JL: It is really hard. I think it helps that my family isn’t— isn’t really Cajun per se in terms of family lines. So it helps me not quite be caught up in all of this. My family really has like a sort of Creole—it’s hard. You know my training—I left Louisiana for 15-years? For a while, and I left for all of the usual reasons that young people leave. There’s just not that much in terms of economic opportunities. I left in the middle of the oil crash. There’s still plenty of racism and elitism in South Louisiana. The planter class is strong in South Louisiana; let’s just admit it. I mean there—there are small towns you can go to that you swear that they didn’t know the Civil War happened. I won’t name them. So I left for a lot of good reasons, but I also came back for a lot of good reasons. Louisiana—and Lafayette is the only city in Louisiana I was interested in coming back to—no dings to New Orleans but New Orleans was, to my mind was—you know, pre-storm was just too big and too crazy. The northern parts of the state don’t really interest me; they don’t resonate for me. They’re—they’re a part of the larger American South. I grew up in Baton Rouge and didn’t particularly like the city, but Lafayette, you know I had family here and it’s a place—this is really true, I’ve discovered since being here: it’s a place where the folk cultures are still really strong. And one dimension of those folk cultures is incredible emphasis on family. So raising a daughter here is really an amazing experience. I mean, after my daughter was born it took us twice as long to go grocery shopping because every little old lady especially—but it could be even teenage girls and sometimes teenage boys—would stop and

want to see *chère bébé*, you know. And now I do it too. I'll stop—when I was on—when I was traveling I would stop women—women and men—in the middle of airports and want to see their baby. That's just part of being in South Louisiana, is this incredible—I mean you know it's amazing to watch a toddler ramble through, let's say the mall or someplace, and have teenage boys step out of the way. You—you could take—if you go to Houston or Baton Rouge, the same thing doesn't happen. They'll pile over the little kid, but in South Louisiana there's an incredible emphasis on family, and that's been really an amazing thing to return to and something I really not only enjoy but I want to encourage. And it's something that I don't think modernity encourages very well. And so you know, there was a recent statistic released that—that demonstrated that Louisiana has one of the highest native populations. People don't leave the place; they like being home. And so part of what I try and do as a folklorist who is a teacher is encourage my students to appreciate the people and things they have because a lot of what we get—they get in university educations is, oh, you know really this elite global mediated literary culture and ways of doing things are just infinitely better than whatever it is that you had on the home—at home. But the fact of the matter is that people are perfectly good speakers of English by the time they get to first grade, and they're perfectly reasonable and full-fledged competent human beings by the time they get to six—to first grade. I think we need to start respecting that, and I really worry that we aren't communicating to kids that you can—you can know this stuff that we teach you in the college classroom and also know and love the stuff that you had at home.

00:48:27

So I spend a lot of time in—in my Louisiana folklore class getting people to simply go home and talk to their parents and grandparents. And it's always amazing to me. So one of the—

in fact one of the activities I have them do is collect a recipe, and it never fails that I'll have somebody come back to me either in tears or almost in tears, and they'll say something to the effect of, *I never realized how cool my grandmother was*. And because you can't just go collect her recipes, you've already discovered this. You could just—it could be your sole focus just to say *I'll go around the State collecting gumbo recipes*, but you don't get just the recipe; you get stories. You know, in fact in some ways you get better stories than if you were to go up to somebody and say, *Tell me a story*, or *Tell me your story*, because they—if you ask somebody, *How did you learn how to make gumbo?*, well they go back to thinking about their mother or grandmother or whatever house they grew up in, and suddenly they're there. And out of that they can tell you all kinds of things, and you know it's always amazing to my students. But I mean my job is to try and inculcate both that subjective appreciation and the objective evaluation and appreciation of the thing, and so it's really hard. But even as an objective observer I'm trying to, you know, remind people of the native intelligence and beauty of this place—that people here are smart. I mean these—these boat makers I'm working at, they're not like they're buying pre-made hulls; they're making these hulls out of sheets of aluminum, and they're making the drive mechanisms out of raw steel, and they came up with the idea 20 years ago. I can, you know—I know the guy who came up with the first idea of—with the hydraulic boat. He was a local guy. And the local guy made it for the first time, and—and a bunch of other guys saw it and have adapted it to their regions and are making it themselves. You know, and it's—it's interesting 'cause they're all doing just fine and there was no intellectual property involved, except they all thought it was shared. And that's very different. If there had been patents involved, then chances are the—the crawfish boat would not look like what it is about today.

00:50:50

SR: And there aren't patents involved, or there weren't in the beginning?

00:50:53

JL: There are none that I know of. They don't think that way. They don't think—they don't think that modern way of *Oh, it's mine; I have to hold onto it. It's all mine--mine--mine—mine.* They think, *Well I'll make a boat and if somebody else wants to copy it that's fine. But people will buy my boat 'cause they like the way I make it.*

00:51:10

SR: That's kind of like, I'm talking to a lot of boudin makers and that—a sort of similar attitude. I'm always asking about competition between boudin makers because they're so—they're everywhere, you know, and there is that sort of philosophy with most people of, *Well, people will come to me because they like it [my product].*

00:51:34

JL: I mean they're also not interested in dominating the landscape, you know—*I have to be the only person doing this.* It's just not interesting to people in—in I would say in a lot of rural cultures it's the same way. They're interested in having their place in the world and in sharing their ideas 'cause they recognize fully—and this is the great lie behind patents—is that the ideas came only from that person. We all know—we know this: years of study in cognitive science and other places, we recognize that—that these ideas don't come out of nowhere. Other people have been contributing to them; it's just somebody happened to write it down and get it in. Shortly it's

going to be first to file, so whoever got it into the patent office first is the person that gets the lock on it. Well that's just bullshit, you know. And I talked to these guys and they said, *Well yeah, you know I got that idea from so and so, and so and so did this. So I thought I would try that too and it worked out pretty well.* I mean they—to them the idea of patents would be loathed. Yeah, they would lock other people out, but in the process they themselves would get locked out, which is of course the—the central problem with modernity. We're all behind locked doors. And so we're not sharing, and we're—we're you know— other people are poor but so are we.

00:52:52

SR: What about—I want to go back to your students for a second. I imagine that you have some students who aren't from Louisiana. Is that true?

00:52:59

JL: Yeah, well I mean it depends on the course. In the Louisiana Folklore class it tends to be mostly students from Louisiana, but some are new and they're—they're taking the course less to understand themselves and more to understand this new place. And so it's—it's a little hard for them because in almost all my courses I have them go out and do some field work, and as you know field work is not easy; you have to actually talk to somebody. **[Laughs]** And at the university they're not trained to go—go out and just talk to somebody. And so it—those students who are new to the area, it's a little bit panicky. I'm like, *Well just go talk to a neighbor, you know, or talk to one of your friends. If they're from here they know something that you could learn.* But yeah, yeah. It's mostly—and my favorite moments in that course is when I have older

people in that class, you know. When I have—a couple years ago I was very lucky. I had this older woman in this class who grew up in Breaux Bridge, and she could remember houses before bathrooms, you know. She had an outhouse. She wasn't that old; I mean plumbing came—it was—a lot of people didn't get plumbing until after World War II.

00:54:13

SR: How old was she?

00:54:11

JL: Oh I don't want to say.

00:54:15

SR: Oh okay. No I'm just [*Laughs*]*—I'm just—it's curious—it's cool that she was getting—*

00:54:21

JL: I think she was probably in her mid-60s, you know.

00:54:23

SR: She was getting the degree?

00:54:26

JL: I don't even know if she was getting a degree or if she was taking the class for fun, but I love it when I have the older people 'cause then—you know I—it's one thing to be like, *Oh*

people once upon a time did blah-blah-blah, and you know this is important for that reason— and then they'll stand up and say, *Yeah, we did—that's exactly what we did, and I still do it today, and I love it.* And you know this woman is a grandmother, a full-fledged grandmother. She probably had grandchildren close to the age to some of the students in the class. And you know she could talk from her heart about what it meant when her grandchildren came to her and asked her about these things, and so she could say that far from being an imposition on their grandparents or parents, this would be something that her grandparents or parents wanted them to do—is come talk to them.

00:55:13

SR: Can you tell me a little bit about what you learned about gumbo des herbes, if anything? I guess maybe we could start out by—I'll just start out by asking you, do you—in your mind is that dish—how is it connected to meat and sausage gumbos and seafood gumbos?

00:55:37

JL: Well gumbo des herbes is called a gumbo, and it's obviously a green gumbo, often served with eggs as a way of getting protein in it. In the stricter Catholic calendar where you had meatless days, gumbo des herbes was an important back-up dish. Gumbo des herbes—excuse me—sometimes had okra in it and sometimes didn't; often it was simply greens. I've actually collected—getting back to the notion of the importance of browning—some recipes for gumbo des herbes which involved browning, either of the okra or of the greens themselves, to get a little bit—as cooks would say—a little flavor of them. Otherwise, you know I don't—it was not something as I had gotten into my research that I was overly focused on. It—and for the most

part, it has passed out of practice. Not a lot of people these days who aren't older people make gumbo des herbes. It seems to be more amongst older people, especially older Creoles and African Americans.

00:56:56

SR: Was it part of your food culture growing up at all?

00:57:00

JL: Uh-um, no, the gumbos we had were all chicken and okra, seafood gumbo—there was no gumbo des herbes, but you know that again could be a function of predilection. You know we didn't have many shrimp stews, which sometimes were made with eggs as well. So if you go to Gallagher's on Thursday, I think—today—you can get shrimp stew with boiled eggs—sliced boiled eggs in it. We just had crab stew, but that was just, you know, what my grandmother and grandfather and—preferred to make, so it's just one of those pieces of family—family preferences. We didn't get a lot of—of sort of like pork steak served over rice and gravy, you know. It would be a separate pork chop or a pork roast, typically with the gravy from the roast and ladled onto the rice. But you know I suspect that's 'cause my father—my father loves pork roast, and my grandmother who—who you know, my father was the light of my grandmother's life, yeah. If you want a cat, you can have her. **[Laughs]** Yeah, he liked pork roast, and so that's what my grandmother made. Yeah, she made a hell of a pork roast too, I got to tell you.

00:58:27

SR: I haven't—I'm not really familiar with the egg in the gumbo des herbes or in the shrimp stew. Is that like a hardboiled egg that's whole or cut up or—?

00:58:36

JL: Uh-hm, in gumbo des herbes I've heard many people said—they would get—the egg would be hard-boiled, and you would crack and peel it yourself. When I have eaten gumbo des herbes with egg in someone's home, the egg was already peeled, and what happens is—and this is to the shrimp stew—interestingly, the egg yolk dissolves out of the egg white often, and it becomes a thickener for the soup or stew. So it—it's a kind of additional potential thickening agent to the dish.

00:59:18

SR: So you would boil the egg and then put it in and then the yolk would dissolve, do you think, or do you like crack the egg into there?

00:59:24

JL: No, you would—you would boil your egg either in the gumbo or separately, and you slice your egg up and put it in the dish.

00:59:32

SR: Oh right, and then peel it.

00:59:34

JL: Some people, you know, slice—if they're going to boil it separately or boil it in the thing and slice it, they'll do it right at the serving time, but other people take and put the egg in the dish and the egg yolk falls out; it dissolves and becomes part of that thickening of—of the stew or the gumbo.

00:59:51

SR: And in this area, is gumbo des herbes at all a restaurant dish?

00:59:57

JL: No, no, I suspect for a couple of reasons—probably has some taints of being sort of poor people's food for some people, so they wouldn't go to a restaurant to eat it. Often, you know a number of people—I mean restaurants—tend to serve meals that are meat-oriented, and so if you were an observing Catholic you wouldn't go to a restaurant on a meatless day. You know, a lot of restaurants now have—I mean the tradition in South Louisiana is to offer lots of seafood on Fridays, which is the one—it used to be Wednesday and Friday, and once upon a time was Wednesday, Friday and—and often sometimes Saturday or Sunday would be—but usually Wednesday and Friday would be the meatless days of the week. It's mostly just a Friday now that are—are meatless, and so a lot of restaurants will serve something called catfish Acadiana, which is a fried catfish with crawfish etouffée on top, which I think Chef Pat Mould may have invented—I'm not sure—as a way of having the kind of restaurant food that would also be possible for a—an observing Catholic, or a Catholic observing meatless Friday to eat. Otherwise I think people just stayed home. You know it's—it's one of those trends. Really a lot of the restaurants, the chain restaurants in Lafayette, now have really come here in the last 10 years, but

once upon a time—I remember when I first got here, if you wanted to take somebody out to eat on a Sunday night you were doomed because a lot of—like Gallagher’s is a lunch house, which means it’s open from 10:30 until around 1:30 or 2 o’clock Monday through Friday. Otherwise it’s closed. Creole Lunch House, Laura’s Two, and I think Cajun Cuisine or Country Cuisine is now open on weekends, but a lot of these restaurants are only open for lunch.

01:02:06

SR: Uh-hm, I noticed that.

01:02:06

JL: When you were out working you would want to eat out, but when—by the time—when you go home at night, that’s where you ate. You ate at home. You ate with your family. You didn’t go to a restaurant to eat. Weekends, you know Saturdays you might eat out. Sunday is family time, so you know you might be able to find a Piccadilly open on Sunday at lunchtime, but come suppertime you should be home. There was no moral, you know, *you should be home*, but it was just—that was kind of an assumption. And so there were very few restaurants, and to this day if you want to eat out on a Sunday night in Lafayette chances are you’re eating at a chain restaurant. You’re eating at the Bone Fish Grill or Chili’s or someplace like that, ‘cause most of the local restaurants, if they aren’t—if they’re a local cuisine—they aren’t like an Indian restaurant or a Café Habana City—they’re closed, because people are going to eat at home.

01:02:56

SR: I've noticed that also in the smaller towns in Acadiana, finding a place to eat at night sometimes is impossible.

01:03:04

JL: Because you should be eating at home. The assumption is you go home. I mean it's, you know—it's like once upon a time—it wasn't that far for that, for South Louisiana. I mean supper was not a huge meal. Supper was the—often they had the same thing for breakfast. It would be an egg and bacon and grits or something like that, or often it would not be grits in South Louisiana—it would be cornmeal mush. My aunt, you know, who grew up in Glencoe, talked about they would have—the big meal was dinner and supper was a small meal served [at] 8 o'clock at night, and it was—it was the same thing often people had for breakfast. And so I think part of that carries forward in South Louisiana, in there being restaurants that don't open for supper. The assumption is you're going home and having a small meal.

01:03:55

SR: And that's part of the—the family, the way that this culture is very family-oriented, I think. Before we run out of time I want to ask you—we're also, you know, doing a documenting project about boudin, and I'm wondering I guess if this comes up in your studies and your classes, and also if you've ever explored the origins of boudin. I'm having a hard time putting a finger on that—of Cajun boudin.

01:04:24

JL: Well I mean I don't know the origins of Cajun boudin, except there is an equivalent in French cuisine which is—has organ meat. Or often it would just be congealed blood, leftover parts, and the modern boudin—boudin that is lightly flavored—I would say has emerged in the last 10, 20 years, maybe 30 years. We're actually using ground pork, but I mean when I was a kid I remember growing up—boudin still had the ground organ meat. I mean it was a strong flavor; it was like eating, you know, steak and kidney pie, or you're eating liver. It was that—it was all of the other stuff, and you mixed it up with some rice and seasoning and that made it palatable, and it was in a casing and it was easy to eat. But otherwise I don't—I don't encounter boudin that much except when I go buy some [*Laughs*] and eat it and enjoy the hell out of myself, you know, on the go somewhere. I mean for—for South Louisiana it's our fast food. You stop off, you grab yourself a link or two of boudin, you go stand out in the parking lot, you eat it right there out of the casing—doing the whole, you know, pulling it out with your teeth. When you get too much of the casing leftover you cut that off with your teeth and spit it on the ground. When you get done you wipe your hands, you go in—get back in your car and you keep on driving.

01:05:58

SR: You know the routine.

01:05:58

JL: [*Laughs*] It's good like that.

01:06:02

SR: Can you tell me what a couple of your favorite boudin stops would be around here?

01:06:08

JL: Oh, you know I have to watch myself 'cause very honestly I will insist that the Best Stop is the best boudin, and their boudin is good. I like Ray's up in Opelousas, and to be honest, the other places I buy boudin—there's like a little place down in Morse that has pretty good boudin, and it might be my favorite one, but I couldn't tell you its name. A lot of my favorite places to eat I don't know their names; I only know where they are. That's just the way it is, you know. Like C'est Bon down in Estherwood—I love to eat there, but nine times out of ten if you ask me what the name of the place is I won't remember. But I'll know—I can tell you where it's located.

01:07:01

SR: What about gumbo? If you have—you probably don't go out that gumbo—for gumbo that much yourself. But let's say you had people coming into town, you didn't have time to make gumbo for them. Where would you go?

01:07:16

JL: We just wouldn't have gumbo that night. **[Laughs]** Honestly I don't—I don't take people out for gumbo. I—now I'll take them out for crawfish bisque, and Don's Seafood Hut on Johnson Street has pretty good seafood bisque and crawfish bisque. But if I want to get fried catfish I go to Bubba Frey's out in Mowata. That's just—that's fried catfish that's so good it's

actually good—better the next day, cold out of the fridge. If you haven't had a chance to eat at Bubba Frey's, treat yourself.

01:07:48

SR: I did last weekend for the first time.

01:07:50

JL: Oh man, did you—did you have the stuffed potatoes?

01:07:53

SR: Yes, and the deep-fried bread.

01:07:57

JL: Oh, I didn't have the deep-fried bread there, but the stuffed potatoes and the fried catfish is just out of this world.

01:08:01

SR: I'll try the fried catfish next time. I had some fried quail.

01:08:05

JL: Hmm.

01:08:07

SR: Day-old—butchered the—or yeah, killed the day before.

01:08:14

JL: Yeah, for gumbo—I would eat gumbo in somebody’s house. I’ve had gumbo, you know at—you know, boy I had some good gumbo at the Mermentau Mardi Gras. The church every year after Mardi Gras is run on a Saturday—on the Sunday before Mardi Gras day the church sponsors a gumbo, and the Mardi Gras comes and finishes its run there, and the guys who make the gumbo there make an outstanding gumbo.

01:08:40

SR: Where is that?

01:08:40

JL: It’s in Estherwood; it’s the church in Estherwood. It’s the Mermentau Mardi Gras. They run from Estherwood—no they run from, sorry, Mermentau to Estherwood—C’est Bon is in Mermentau, not Estherwood—down through Morse; then they run into the Mermentau Cove and then back up to Mermentau.

01:08:58

SR: Gumbo in the—in the old tradition I guess.

01:08:59

JL: Well, they're not—they're collecting money for the church, but then the church then has its gumbo, which is where it raises its money—more money as well. And the—God, the gumbo they serve there for some paltry amount of money. I mean \$2.00, \$3.00, you get this huge bowl of gumbo, and it's just outstanding. If I could buy that stuff in quarts I would. I may—I may have to do that next year. It's just really good.

01:09:28

SR: Is it seafood or is it a prairie—?

01:09:33

JL: No, chicken and sausage—chicken and sausage, but it's a really—I don't know if it's 'cause they're so close to the Coast or what, but it's a really thick and flavorful broth. I can't tell you that I go to a restaurant to eat gumbo, and I've had—I have eaten as part of my mission lots of gumbos, all around this part of the state, but in terms of a restaurant I would go back to to have their gumbo—probably no. I mean maybe Miss Merlene Herbert's at the Creole Lunch House, but she doesn't make gumbo very regularly. She makes it every now and then.

01:10:17

SR: Is that in Lafayette?

01:10:18

JL: It's near Lafayette, over on what—traditionally it's called the north side, the traditionally black part of town. The Creole Lunch House, Miss Merlene Herbert—outstanding woman, and one—someone worth you interviewing.

01:10:30

SR: I'm writing that down.

01:10:32

JL: You can tell her I sent you and she'll—she'll know.

01:10:36

SR: One final question for you: what—can you tell me what it is about your work that you enjoy the most?

01:10:44

JL: The people. The people. I mean, I often explain folklore studies is a discipline in which my job is to go out and make friends with people I normally wouldn't make friends with. So this—this gumbo project; I've gotten to be friends with these guys—some of them are a little tough characters. Kurt Venable is kind of a gruff character. I think—I think even Kurt would sort of say—admit that. You know, but he—these guys are really smart and they're really funny, you know. I show up at the Olinger's shop and they're like, *Oh John, you're here; it must be time for coffee*. They put down their tools and they go off in the corner of the shop and we have coffee.

01:11:31

SR: These are the boat makers?

01:11:32

JL: These are the boat makers. The Olinger's run a general purpose machine shop. They—most of their work is actually repairing and maintaining agricultural equipment. They only make a few boats a year these days. But Kurt specializes in it. Mike Richard up in Eunice specializes in making boats. You know it's just really incredible people. I love that work. I mean I wish, I mean—in the ideal world I would be paid to do nothing but go do field work and write about the incredible people, but so far nobody has agreed to pay me to do that, so I—I work at the University where I do get to do research. I have this incredibly flexible schedule, but you know my job is also to teach and guide—guide graduate students through their dissertation studies and sit on committees and do all kinds of other things, but really in the ideal world I would—I would do nothing but this. As a friend of mine, another folklorist, Ray Cashman, says, *We're the boots-on-the-ground guys*. You know we really just like going out and talking to people and—and documenting these amazing minds. You know most people drive past the machine shop and they see a dirty dark place full of greasy sweaty men and think—they don't think there could be anything beautiful and intelligent happening there. So it's kind of fun for me to say, *You know what? These guys are incredibly smart and they produce the most amazing things*. And if you think about a crawfish boat, that is an amazing thing. I mean, who the hell would come up with the idea to build a boat that looks like that?

01:13:17

SR: Well I wasn't recording when you described the boat. I know I said I had one final question, but could you describe what a crawfish boat is for—looks like, for the record?

01:13:27

JL: A crawfish boat looks for all the world like a regular bateau. So in South Louisiana a bateau or boat—typical boat—has a scow bow; it has a flat bow that gently slopes towards the bottom. These boats are a little wider than most boats: they're five-foot wide at the bottom and six-foot wide at the top. And they're about, on average about 14-feet long. They're made by hand out of aluminum sheet metal, and down the back sits about a three-foot in diameter steel wheel. That steel wheel has what they call cleats on it—what we might say are—look like paddles on it. Those cleats or paddles—that steel wheel is sitting on a steel arm that hangs off the back of the boat, and it drops to the bottom of a crawfish pond where it pushes the boat along in a fairly slow speed, so that one man can operate a boat. And what he does is he sits in the boat and he—he starts off with an empty trap that he baits, and as he comes onto his first trap he pulls that trap up and puts the—the empty trap, baited trap, he has down and empties that trap into a sorting table that's sitting in front of him. He pushes his crawfish into the sacks. Their sacks are hanging off the sorting table. He reaches into a bucket sitting next to him, re-baits that trap, and repeats the process. Now the whole thing, the whole time he's steering with his feet. The steering takes place by a hydraulic valve which operates a ram or a piston that steers the arm of the boat. He can—now and the—the wheel itself is being driven by hydraulic motor, so the wheel is raised and lowered, turned side-to-side and driven forward or backward all by hydraulics. The hydraulics are all being driven by hydraulic pump, which is being driven by usually about a 13-horsepower engine. Typically they're made by Honda or Kohler. Those are the two engines

that—that these farmers prefer. But it’s an amazing bit of machinery, and so these guys buy the valves, they buy the engine, and they buy the motors and pistons. But everything else is handmade in the shop. And you know this is a boat that has that steel wheel in the back, but sitting either inside the hull or on the hull on the sides of the hull are a pair of wheels, so that when a farmer is done with a field and he wants to move to the next field, which might be across the road or down the road, he can drive his boat up onto land and drive down the road.

01:16:05

SR: So you might be behind one of these on the highway?

01:16:07

JL: Yes, you could. You could come up on one on the highway or—or pass one on the highway. There would be a guy sitting on the boat driving down the road.

01:16:14

SR: That’s an image I wish I could capture.

01:16:19

JL: Well you can look for it in the book, but I mean it’s an amazing machine.

01:16:22

SR: And that—I should just say for the record that that’s your—the current project you’re working on is a book about—

01:16:26

JL: *Things that Go on Land and Water*, which you need on a day like today.

01:16:30

SR: I know. It's pouring out. Well thank you for giving me, and us, your time. This is really enlightening.

01:16:39

JL: You're welcome.

01:16:41

[End John Laudun-Gumbo Interview]