

KATHY STARR
Atlanta, GA

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Interviewer: Angie Mosier, SFA Member
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[Begin Kathy Starr Interview]**00:00:00**

Angie Mosier: Today is Thursday, March 31, 2005. This is Angie Mosier interviewing Kathy Starr for the Southern Foodways Alliance Founders Oral History Project. And we're in Atlanta, Georgia. Kathy how did you come to be involved in the Southern Foodways Alliance?

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Kathy Starr: Well I've—my first initial contact to become involved in—in Southern Foodways was I—I got this call. It was from—if I remember correctly from—well, it would have been John T. and probably Ann Abadie back—back then. And they—the first discussion that we had was about where we would meet. And they gave me a little information; they explained to me about what they wanted to accomplish and said we'd get together at *Southern Living* or we'd get together in Birmingham, Alabama. And I—I certainly was excited about that—not that I knew everything about what would be involved in pulling together the SFA other than I knew that it—it had a lot to do with pulling together. Basically I guess what you could say, I thought at that time it would have been somewhat of an oral history on opportunities to go back and retrieve historical information about foodways and what have you.

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Well as excited I was to get to—to go to *Southern Living*, it was during the time that I was on the road with my husband. I was on the truck with him and I knew that I had a meeting coming up at *Southern Living* and—and I couldn't figure how I'd get back home to get my car and make it to Birmingham. And my husband drove his eighteen-wheel truck up to *Southern Living* and that was my first visit. And we all came together and it was really a—a beautiful

opportunity to meet you know most of the—not all of the founders were there during the first meeting. But we got together there and if I—if I recall I think John Egerton was there and—and a group of other guys and ladies. And we all got together and we began to pretty much put together what we—what our mission would be.

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And—and I'll just tell you I—I became thrilled about the process and mainly because everybody respected my desires and—and concerns that I had. And—and of course it was because of my mother that I was there. I—I just felt it was something I needed to do for her. And they—they—they appreciated that and they never stopped helping me to celebrate my mother from that day—really from that day to this day.

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AM: Wow.

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KS: They—they understood and—and always looked up to you know to me in—in that effort, so I've always had a—a deep love for SF—you know for Southern Foodways and for John T. and just everyone there because that's where I got my first opportunity to just openly express love for my mama.

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AM: Right; now were you involved with either of the Southern food organizations that predated the SFA either the Society for the Preservation and Revitalization of Southern Food or the American Southern Food Institute?

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KS: Never heard of them.

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AM: Okay; did you go to the organizational meeting in Birmingham? You've already answered that. But if so, do you recall anything else about it other than—what do you recall about that meeting?

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KS: Well the one thing that I recalled about the meeting you know you—you go through life—you know just being blessed with—with understanding the—the gifts and the art of cooking and you understand where you are with food and what have you but to be honest with you, it was just kind of like an eye-opening experience for me because you never really think that—. I never realized that anybody would have cared about preserving a history about food or I guess I looked at it as more—just a gift that you would have that hey, who cares if you know how to cook a salad that was made 200 years ago or that someone would want—would be interested enough to try to come together and put that information in a—in a place where it could be held you know for years from now.

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The thing that I worry about more than anything today and that is how cooking is—is—it's being lost to a certain degree. Nobody wants to do it the old way because everybody thinks they don't have time. So then I worry about what will happen in thirty years, you know; will all

of these gifts that my mom gave to me that—that's so precious to me and could be precious for everybody who wanted to know—if it would be lost, you know?

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What I've got to do is I'm trying to teach it to my grandbaby so somebody will know.

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AM: Yeah.

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KS: Every now and then I find myself having to think real hard about certain things that I know that go in recipes. You know I have to go back; it'll—you'll lose it. You know you'll—it'll come back to you but just think if it's not written and people like myself who have held that information for all of these years for as long as my mom held it—if I were to die or it was not written and it was lost. So the fact that someone was brilliant enough to see that it was important that these things get recorded and held for years. See, I see it that there will come a day that somebody will be amazed to know that these things were real. You know because it'll—it'll just come—I don't know what the best word for it would be, but it's almost like it'll be obsolete.

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And see, what I know I've been taught by my mama is an art. And how you're able to pull those recipes together, how you're able to make every one of them unique, special, and good where you can take it and [George W.] Bush stops by for an evening meal, you can say you'll be proud of him eating from your table because you know you got something good to offer—is what's so important, not to even think about how people just take food and just dish it up and it just doesn't have any taste.

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AM: So for you that first meeting got you excited that people cared?

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KS: Yes, it did. Yes because I knew then that there would be a possibility that these things would be kept, you know the information won't get thrown away or just dismissed. You know it could be in a book but who can say that—that book will be available?

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AM: Right.

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KS: You see once they go out of print it—the information could get lost anyway, so the possibility of it being—just as my mama would say preserved—could be maintained.

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AM: So would you say that—that in the beginning that was sort of your vision for the Southern Foodways Alliance? Did you have any other sort of visions of what the organization could be?

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KS: The very first day I—I really didn't. You know I—I was—I was hopeful that it could be everything that it has turned out to be, but really knowing whether we could get there I didn't know. You see because we—we were lacking the one thing that—that makes—drives in it, the

one force that drives anything to success and that was money you know. **[Laughs]** We didn't have it. Now we had a few people there that had a few bucks but now whether they wanted to give it to the SFA that was another story.

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But the one thing that was the most important that I found that made it really get kicked off to its best effort is that we had two things going for us. We had John T. who was committed and believed in everything we—we expressed. He was a driving force. And then the people who came around the table as the founders and members were committed. I was committed, not just because I believed in what Southern Foodways could do but I was committed because I saw an opportunity to keep my mama alive in the foodways. And I wasn't given up that then; you know that was an opportunity for me. And I knew that if it could ever happen it would happen here.

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Where Southern Foodways has—where they've grown to and where they are now is just everything that I could have ever dreamed for them. There are some things that I hope for them even more in the future. I'd like to see them become more I guess what you could say institutionalized. For lack of a better word that's the only way I could say it. I'd like for it to—to become financially you know stable so that these things don't just die off. You see because it could be evermore important now, but when people like myself die on and John T moves on or those of us like—like you got John Egerton, you got Ann Abadie, all those people who have been committed and those of us who are members, we got—well, we're about a little over—about 1,000 strong now.

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AM: I don't know the number exactly.

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KS: I don't know the number either but I know it's more than 100, so that said, what happens ten years from now, twenty years from now you've got to be able to stay on top enough so that those of us who not only are the founders but who are members will continue to stay within a paradigm shift in the organization. We've—we've already come through one shift, but you know as the world progresses and moves on, it has to change with that to remain viable in my opinion.

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AM: Right.

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KS: Then I want to know that 100 years from now somebody will remember what my mom gave to foodways you know. And I'm sure I won't be around. I don't think I'm going to live that long, but you know I'd like to know that somebody will remember those who have contributed, because not just only my mother contributed, but you got people like Leah Chase, all of the other people out there who have contributed to foodways, just not myself and people like that. But you know those of us who have contributed to it, our voices need to continue to be heard, so that's important.

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AM: Absolutely. Did you attend the first symposium that was held in—?

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KS: Oh yes, Lord.

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AM: Okay; and what do you recall about that? Are there particular moments from that gathering or others that stand out in your mind?

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KS: I can remember every day I was there. Honestly I can; it was—it was one of the most fulfilling opportunities that I had ever had at a symposium okay. I remember, I got to say—you see the first thing I thought about was the symposium was held at Ole Miss Campus right and I never would have dreamed that I would have had an opportunity to stay in Ole Miss Hotel and feel really at home there. And I did; I had a ball, not to mention the camaraderie and the opportunity to exchange and share was just outstanding.

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And I'll tell you what; it was one of the greatest eye-opening experiences that I ever had because you just go on and you just think well, you go to the grocery store and you buy food to prepare it. You serve it to somebody who wants to eat it. Maybe you might get lucky. Someone famous may eat it. All kinds of things might come along somewhere in life. But I never realized how big—how big business is with the food out there.

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But what bothers me more than that is that it seems that the people who are really in control of food and big business don't have a clue about what to do with it you know. They got all the money. But you know I look at—I look at some of the different businesses out there who make millions of dollars and the food is just not—it doesn't taste good and I don't understand

that. I can't figure it out when it's so easy to make it taste good. And wouldn't you think people like that would want to know from folk like us who know how to cook? All you got to do is ask.

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AM: So again, going to a gathering like the symposium gives you hope?

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KS: Yes.

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AM: Is that—?

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KS: That's—that's the only hope I will have right there. If—if that goes away well, unless my grandchildren can keep it alive and I don't know—I don't know where their voice could be heard in the matter. And how well I'll be able to you know keep it alive with them you know; children are so different from even when I was a kid coming up.

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My grandbaby tells me he wants to be a chef. But you know when he gets to be seventeen and starts looking at something other than a plate of macaroni and cheese I don't know how interested he'll stay you know. [*Laughs*]

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AM: Now Kathy could you tell us—could you tell us about your role in developing the Southern Foodways Alliance mission and vision in programming?

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KS: Well I—I recall that in—you know after we set down and we—and we decided—. Well you know we developed our bylaws, right and it's a lot of work went into that. We—we used a very democratic process. Everybody had an opportunity to have input. You know it wasn't a one-man show or just—it was—it was a beautiful gathering. Every time we planned a specific portion of the Foodways Alliance and how we pulled things together right down to deciding what the name would be, you know it was a concerted effort on the parts of every member there.

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And when we got ready to have our—plan our first symposium, you know it—they were very careful to make sure that everybody who wanted to contribute and share and—and make a suggestion you were heard you know. And I think the fact that everybody was able to be a part of it and was respected on—in that behalf is what started it out on what I guess my mama would say started on a good foot. And it just kept growing and it's never really lost its sight of that you know.

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AM: Now the Southern Foodways Alliance focuses upon food as culture. What does that mean to you both intellectually and personally?

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KS: I don't know if you have enough tape space for tell me you what I feel about that. *[Laughs]* But you know food—food it does have what I consider cultural. Let me tell you something; how deep that line is I'm not at all sure because I'm going to tell you. You know we have Mexican food. You got burritos and enchiladas and what have you. I don't know how to fix those things right. I consider myself a Southern food cook; that's my culture.

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They probably don't know how to fry pork chops you know. And then you got Chinese food, so you know foods are multicultural. But you know what it boils down to? When you look at Southern food I think we take the lead in all of it because I have seen if you allow me to say it, a Chinaman who didn't appreciate a good plate of rice and gravy and fried chicken. So you know how cultural it is, I think it gets to be broad, broad in that we appreciate whatever our palate desires.

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AM: Wow; do you have ideas—you've mentioned some of these already but do you have ideas for the future of the organization projects that you'd like to see happen or topics that you'd like to study?

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KS: You know yes. I have—and you know I'm—I've always considered myself a severe dreamer. You know now I know we got all these other fancy organizations out there. You got many; you see food and the business of food is—is a major institution. There are some organizations and businesses in food that are getting into the billion dollar arena who don't care one little bit about what I know about food.

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But I would hope that one day somebody will truly get real about what's good, what's wholesome, what's healthy, and what tastes good and understand how to pull all those things together at once. You see, you can't just say well I'm going to—I'm going to make a billion dollars selling organic foods and then you may say well, I'll make a billion dollars selling the best ketchup or the best mayonnaise, but is it really the best, you know? Maybe somebody needs to come over to Southern Foodways and check some of us out and see what is real and what is the best because as far as I'm concerned every bottle of ketchup is not the same bottle of ketchup.

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Ms. Starr could fix a bottle of ketchup, and it won't taste like those other folks' ketchup either, so what does taste good? The only thing I can say is that I know what is real and I know what comes out of Southern Foodways is real. I—a couple of months ago I was in Kentucky. I'm going to tell you who was on the elevator with me. This man walked up and he had a shirt on saying Whole Foods. And I looked at him and he had a little writing under it saying chicken salad.

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AM: Said chicken salad?

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KS: Chicken salad that's right; Whole Foods chicken salad that's right. And I asked him, I said, "Is that chicken salad you got is it really good?" He said, "I think it's the best." I said, "Is it because you sell it? Do you really know what is the best?" I said, "I got a recipe for chicken

salad that's 245 years old. I think it's the best." He said, "Really," and kept walking. He didn't care about that recipe that was 245 years old because he was so convinced that his chicken salad was the best.

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Now I've gone and gotten chicken salad in the store and I know that ain't the best, okay. I'm just going to tell you right now. Some of the junk they sell in a bucket and a bottle I wouldn't even dish it out to my little pup Buddy at home. He'd turn his nose up at it. I hope you can print that because I'm for real. So you know I would—I would hope that somebody would understand at some point or some juncture in this that SFA, Southern Foodways Alliance has tapped into what's real and all of these billion dollar institutions will want to come over here and correct this garbage they're selling out here that can't nobody eat. You hear me; I don't care if I don't sell another biscuit, print that.

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AM: [*Laughs*] I love it.

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KS: [*Laughs*] All right. I'm for real.

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AM: So now I want to start asking you some questions about you personally and your history.

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KS: Okay; all right.

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AM: So if you don't mind could you state the date and the place of your birth?

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KS: I was born in Vicksburg, Mississippi—you said the place of my birth. That's where they say I was born [*Laughs*] at—well it was Mercy Hospital at that time, Mercy Catholic Hospital. And what else did you—?

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AM: The date.

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KS: Oh yeah the date was February 5, 1954.

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AM: All right; and could you now please tell us about the food of your childhood?

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KS: Oh my Lord.

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AM: Who prepared it and what were some typical meals and could you describe the ceremony of some of those meals and I know we truly might not have tape enough for this?

00:23:57**KS:** You got that right.**00:23:58****AM:** But we'd like to know a little bit about it.**00:24:01**

KS: Just to—to tell you in a short version, food was always extremely important in my house. My—my mother, as I told you many times before, started me out at five. I was not tall enough to stand up to the stove but she put me on top of a pot and that's where I began to learn. And traditionally my—what my mom taught me has not died in this family. I was sick this past Christmas, but my son and my daughter came together and prepared a Christmas dinner that was so perfect and like my mom's 'til I just had to cry because I didn't even realize that my son, Bill, who is always such a—well, he's a boy so I can't call him a diva, but I guess he's a Casanova or whatever you call him, got in the kitchen and he barbecued ribs, fried turkey, he and my husband and my daughter did the dressing and the cakes and pies and they were just like mama. So you know your children sometimes you don't think they're paying attention but they really are.

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So holidays were extremely important and we had a tradition when I was coming up. We celebrated Sundays like it was a holiday. My mom would always have a big dinner on Sunday. Every day I could sort of tell you what to—what a week would be like. She believed in cooking what she thought was healthy food. You always had—every day you had something boiled. That was what she thought was healthy. You had to have soup, you had to have greens, because she didn't want you running around wiping your nose and with colds and—. You know what? Come

to think of it I didn't have colds and all that stuff as a kid. The only thing I remember having that was really bad for me in my life work. I had tonsillitis a lot. And they had—petrified back in those days. And I ended up losing a lot of weight and became very ill as a result of it. But then they removed my tonsils and I—my mom fed me and I gained my weight back and did fine and about five years later my tonsils grew back and I got sick all over again.

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But after that just eating from my mom's table kept me healthy and I was—. Like these kids, these McDonald babies we got now, I didn't—I wasn't dealing with obesity as a kid. You know as an adult I'm dealing with it but that's because I was thirty-six years old before I realized I didn't have to eat everything on my plate because a kid you know you didn't waste anything. So I thought you had to eat everything. So I became voluptuous in the process as I got older. But you know food was important. My mom didn't throw away anything. You had dessert. Some days I—I can remember my mom didn't have money to buy what you would call fancy things but she could always make the perfect dinner with nothing, from what I call true scratch.

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I mean you know we had a bread pudding or a rice pudding and sometimes we'd run out of rice and we wouldn't have the ends of the bread and she'd make an egg custard. And I mean it was just fit for a king you know. So we—we had something to eat all the time. And when it would get out of season and maybe it wasn't time for greens like the turnips and the mustard to come up, it would be summer, we'd pick wild greens and we'd have pork salad. That stuff is good for you; it kept me healthy.

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And I'll tell you if it wasn't for bad knees I think I'm doing pretty good at my age. And you know what? I think it keeps me young. It kept me young. You know I don't look my age.

Some of it is heredity I'm sure, but my mom lived to get to be a pretty good age and my dad was 93 when he died. And I figure well, I'll add both of them's age up and if I keep going like I'm going and keep my mom's food first and foremost in my life and in my family's life and make sure I eat in moderation well, it means I ought to be about 120 when I die, right. **[Laughs]**

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AM: That's great. So Kathy when did you first cultivate an interest in food and who or what was the catalyst? I think we know some of it but go ahead.

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KS: Every bit of everything about food was my mom. That was my catalyst.

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AM: And when did you become interested in it?

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KS: At five, whether I wanted to or not because she demanded it.

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AM: Yeah.

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KS: See if—if my mother was living today I only have one question that I would like to ask her. Whatever prompted her to putting me in that apprenticeship? I know that it was—I can only tell

you from what I know she said to me that she thought every young girl needed to know how to cook for—for their family. And they need to know how to cook because that was an opportunity for you to be able to provide even if you couldn't do anything else—you could cook. So I understand that, but what—what was her reason for sure? What started me out on top of that pot at five years old and putting me in an apprenticeship because see, I had to—I was taught those recipes like you were from the time you started out in kindergarten or first grade all the way through college. I mean I was twenty-six years old and my mom was still teaching me just like I was in school.

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You know you get grown after your eighteenth birthday. Well you didn't get grown in my mama's house. And I mean by the time I was twenty-four—twenty-five years old I was trying to convince her she had told me all that stuff. And she'd say shut up and listen. I want you to understand how to do this right. And I—I listened. And—and that was my catalyst, my mom because I mean for lack of a better word, some people may not understand this but I was almost forced into it. You know and—and I mean a nurturing way. You know I don't mean forced into it against my will. There were days now I wanted to go out and play and I'd burn up the cornbread to let her know I was angry and she'd just beat the hell out of me, you know for being what we called a little—you know being cantankerous or whatever.

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But still be that as it may I thank her, you know for understanding and seeing clearly something I didn't understand at that time. As a kid it—it—it helped me to be who I am and I wouldn't change that for the world.

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AM: Wow. How did you get your first job working with food?

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KS: Oh Lord. *[Laughs]* That's a question nobody ever asks. My first job with food—my first job with food would have been catering. It would have been catering. And I'll tell you what drove me to that—putting my children through college. I needed extra money and the education was something that was always stressed in my household by my mom. You had to go to school and I expected nothing less from my kids.

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And—and I stressed it so that it helped my kids to maintain well. They never missed the honor roll in school, never—not—I mean never from first grade to graduation. And they were Who's Who and on the Dean's List in college and they did well. But I—I saw catering to be my first job because I had a daughter who wouldn't take the scholarships that were offered to her. She wanted to go off to a private college and go to school and I barely could afford it. So I said well that's all right; I'm going to cater and sell it, if that's where she wants to go. So she went on to Tugaloo, and I had to cook to send her. *[Laughs]*

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AM: And that's how you got your first job?

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KS: Yes, indeed, that was my first job.

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AM: That's incredible. How have you seen Southern food evolve over the course of your lifetime?

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KS: Huh. Well I've seen it evolve in ways that I don't like. Okay; see it's—it's too many people out here who profess to say that they know what's good and—and in some ways it's almost shameful. I'm being real honest with you. It's shameful because what they stir up in a pot and put out on a table is just—they ought to be barred for life. **[Laughs]** It just don't make any sense. And then they serve it to the masses. And the most critical part about it is that there are people out there who really want a good plate of food and they—and the people are—they—they hate to cook so bad or it's such a bad situation in their lives in the way they live; they don't have to cook, so they're just out scrambling for any little possible good plate of food they can find.

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I just like to—if I—if you were to ask me what would you like to do today to change life as it is today for food, I'd like to just go into these restaurants and I won't name them, and just get everybody in there that calls themselves a chef and bring them all over the world and bring them to a big institute and teach those suckers how to cook. I would; that's what I'd like to do is just say now look. Just let me show you how to do this; it's so easy and stuff. It's no reason why I ought to be able to knock my dog out with a piece of—slice of cornbread. You know I mean what's so hard about that? And why should I sit down to a plate of corn that tastes like running water? I mean it's so easy to make it right.

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So I'd just like to—I wish I could—just like I had to be licensed to be a nurse, I wish you'd have to be licensed to cook you know just to bar you from messing up food in the kitchen. I'm coming off bad with the—. **[Laughs]** But I'm for real.

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AM: No; I got you.

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KS: I'm for real about that.

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AM: So it really—it's changed a lot for you?

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KS: Yes, it has, and I'm going to tell you. There are some places out here who really do it well. But I haven't found very many who could do Southern food well. Greasy food is soul food; but good food is Southern food cooked well.

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AM: That's great. Now a lot of the talk about Southern food is talking of continuity, of tradition, and in this age is this talk merely romantic or do you think it's accurate?

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KS: Say what—say that again?

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AM: It's a hard question.

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KS: Okay.

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AM: When people talk about Southern food a lot of it has to do with continuity and tradition. Do you think that when we sit around we talk about all this stuff do you think it is—it's accurate speaking or do you think that we're just romanticizing it? Or, do you think it really does exist?

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KS: I think it's some of all of it. You see, one thing I know that—that it's real, you know for those of us who know how many—how many people really know—it's definitely not the case everywhere. Now whether it's romanticized or it's a fable or whatever, I know this is real. But you see I don't think it's real when it comes to the people who are in control of making a difference in what is eaten. I don't think they're—you—they're more concerned about the money but I don't really know. I know people like me—serious. Any member that's a member of Southern Foodways would be serious especially its founders. But now where we make a difference at I don't really know when it—when it comes to a good plate of food.

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You see, out of all those people out there with all that money who pretend they want to make things taste good, not one have asked me how to do it. And I know it's right; you see what I'm saying? So nobody really cares. I hope I'm answering that question right.

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AM: Well I know and it's a hard question and I'm wondering if perhaps some of us who do romanticize Southern cooking, maybe the romanticizing of it will help us to realize that it's being lost and we can bring it back. I don't know.

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KS: Yeah, and—yeah and—and you may be right about that. That's why I say maybe a little bit—see, because every—every—all of us everywhere somewhere all of—everything that involves food has its place. I mean I have my place. I'm contributing; I am contributing and I'm not just saying everybody—now you know it's some good things out there though. Everything I say doesn't taste bad. Some people have been able to create some good tastes of things out there and I wonder how they looked up and did it when everything else doesn't come off so good.

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But you know that's what money will do for you. It—it will get you past all of those things that a person like myself will complain about.

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AM: But now I think you as far as continuity you really have been able to keep your food traditions alive through writing out these recipes and teaching these recipes. I just—I guess what we're saying together is that there's not that many people actually doing it.

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KS: Right.

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AM: And that's why Southern Foodways is important, too.

00:40:03

KS: That's right. I mean you know I—I've just gone into stores and bought—just to try it, bought food that is supposed to be like a can of seasoned greens. Pinto beans that were supposed to have been cooked and all you had to do was take it and warm it. And—and they—they were coming pretty close, but you could tell that it was packed with cornstarch because you could taste it. You see you don't have to put anything in a—in a bean. Beans come with its own ability to thicken on its own. All you got to do is cook it, so why would you put some damned cornstarch in it you know to thicken it up? That's silly. *[Laughs]*

00:40:55

AM: Bean comes with its own ability.

00:40:56

KS: Yeah, that's right to thicken it. You don't need no cornstarch for that you know. Just cook the beans.

00:41:03

AM: So with these things in our mind, these traditional foods, could you—excuse me—could you describe for us what you think is your quintessential Southern meal?

00:41:18

KS: Woo-wee; my—I tell you. If—if I were to want to—I’ll say I’m going to prepare dinner for the most important person in the universe, Jesus is at my table—okay, I’m cooking Christmas Day all right. You want to know what it would be?

00:41:48

AM: Oh very much so.

00:41:49

KS: Oh yeah, this is what I’d fix him. I’d go and buy some three, five down spareribs and I’d barbecue them from scratch up.

00:41:57

AM: Now go back and tell me what kind of spareribs.

00:42:00

KS: Three and five down.

00:42:02

AM: Tell me what that means.

00:42:04

KS: That means that the rib is the perfect five, okay. It's going to have the rib tip already built into it. So that means that I can get the—the thinnest part of the bone where the meat is tender and nice.

00:42:19

AM: So when I go to the butcher do I ask for that?

00:42:21

KS: Oh yes, you got to have three and five down. And don't let them fool you with no Danish spareribs because that ain't real either. But anyway—

00:42:29

AM: Okay, so we start with that.

00:42:30

KS: Right; and I—I'd provide—I would do—you see, when—when my mom was a kid they didn't throw anything away there either. So my—my great-grandmother had to find ways to use foods that were left over. So they would fry chicken right; so in the process all the—after they'd cooked two—three turkeys she'd have to try to use that meat. She couldn't throw it away. So what she'd do is she'd take that turkey and cook it like you do fried chicken to change the taste of it.

00:43:11

So what my grandmother taught me to do is to do what is called a French fried turkey. So that's what I serve usually for turkey because I've been told it's the best thing that has ever been

put on a table in terms of cooking a whole turkey. I mean French fry that whole turkey. I'm not talking about just fried turkey that they put—

00:43:34

AM: Deep fry.

00:43:35

KS: —nothing. I'm talking about another kind of fried turkey. All right; and I'd have dressing, potato salad, and I'd get me some real nice plump berries and I'd make my cranberry sauce from scratch and I'd have—got to have something green, right. And we'd have some collard greens and some cornbread and then I'd cook two or three pecan pies. This is a traditional Christmas dinner and two or three sweet potato pies. And of course we got to have my mom's caramel cake. And she wouldn't have Christmas if it wasn't a coconut cake there.

00:44:12

And then I'd make some jelly from scratch and we'd have a jelly cake. This is every Christmas. And needless to say my kids will never let me get by doing at least thirty or forty pounds of chitlins. Now I'm not sure if Jesus would eat those but I'd fix them anyway. **[Laughs]**

00:44:31

AM: Tell me about that.

00:44:32

KS: Okay, about the chitlins, well that's kind of a tradition in our house.

00:44:38

AM: And you still do it every year?

00:44:39

KS: Every year—every year. This year I didn't have to do it; my kids did it.

00:44:44

AM: Your kids did it.

00:44:45

KS: Beautifully.

00:44:46

AM: Because that's a difficult process.

00:44:47

KS: Oh, yes, honey they cooked for two and a half days and I said, “Lord, this will be one Christmas dinner I have to try to pretend I enjoyed it.” It was the best I could have ever wanted to eat. The taste was like my mama’s and mine so I was real proud of that. And my mom had a tradition of always having green peas so I definitely have those. I haven't broken that tradition even though we have so much most of the time, the peas will be the last thing that gets eaten. And then we’re going to have the homemade yeast rolls because we’re always going to do that. And then I have—have maybe some other little trimmings because we always do ambrosia. And

we have fruitcake. Now you—you got to start out eating early to get all this stuff in but that’s—that’s a traditional Christmas dinner for us.

00:45:42

AM: And when—what time of day on Christmas do you eat that?

00:45:45

KS: We usually eat—

00:45:45

AM: Or do you do it at—

00:45:46

KS: —around one or two o'clock. We—we’ve changed a little bit though now. The—my kids complained and they say, “Mama, it’s no way you can ever eat all this stuff on Christmas day.” So now what we start doing is we will have certain portions of our meal Christmas Eve at one of my children’s houses and then the balance of the Christmas dinner we have it at my house. And then that helps you to get around to more of the food. We decide what we’re going to have on Christmas Eve and then we have you know whatever our traditional dinner was on Christmas Day.

00:46:26

And then of course now what we always do is we prepare the turkey two ways. I have the French fried turkey and then I have baked turkey, you know based on what you like.

00:46:39

AM: Well now you—when you started out you said that if you were going to prepare the best Southern meal for the most important person, Jesus, but then you changed that around and it sounds like you cook that very same meal—

00:46:55

KS: For my family.

00:46:56

AM: —for your family.

00:46:56

KS: Exactly.

00:46:57

AM: Which I think is really wonderful.

00:46:58

KS: That's right. Well I—I just can say to you I wouldn't—I'd give Jesus the same most important meal that I would give my family.

00:47:07

AM: And I think that he would appreciate that because he said if you do it to the least of these, you've done it to me.

00:47:14

KS: Yeah, that's right—to me, that's right, so that's what it would be. That's what Christmas is for as long as I can remember as a kid, all through my children's lives and right today—that's how it is. And you know the one thing that I had kind of hoped is that—I've had people ask me all the time about our traditions and about what we cook Christmas. I would like for somebody to just not tell me they're coming, just pop in my house on a Christmas Day. That's right, and just see if they have to and they would be amazed.

00:47:53

I have—we have so much food that—that I literally have to take my ironing board and anything else I get and cover it with tablecloths just to put the food out. And my kids complain; they say, “Mama it's just no way. Why do we keep doing this?” I said, “When I'm dead and gone you keep doing it. It's tradition.” Mama did it and you know after I've told them that they never asked me again. But I always remember that—that was the answer I gave them. “Mama did it; you do it. Don't stop this tradition.” And they know that's important to me. That's why when they thought I was too—I'm kind of—I was feeling good but I—since I had the opportunity to play sick I took advantage of it. *[Laughs]*

00:48:41

But honey I was scared there for a minute. But honey they cooked that food. I mean they did a beautiful job. And we still had Christmas dinner. So if you come to my house you know I—I invite you. Don't—don't let me invite you; just pop in our house on a Christmas because you know what? People talk this stuff but you say well, I wonder do they really do that. I bet you ten dollars—I bet you one dollar to my \$100 you won't find one left out pie or cake that I told you. It'll be there. I can feed everybody in the neighborhood.

00:49:18**AM:** Incredible.**00:49:18**

KS: And I never could figure it out but at my house, my mom had a thing, and I never, you know, quite understood other than she must—it must have been some type of a divine intervention but she would—she was the only house on our street where a light burned all night. She would burn that light. And I believe people would tell folks—but you know how long years ago people used to travel the road walking. You know things are different now. But they’d always make their way to my mama’s door. And she’d have something to feed them.

00:49:55

You know she didn't care how poor we got she had something to feed you. You could always come there and she could give you a meal. You know you'd come sometimes and you'd come to the house just for a visit and the first thing—"You want something to eat? You hungry?" She just could not deal with thinking that you know you were hungry or you needed something to eat—people she didn't even know. The first thing she'd do, I'm going—almost before she'd say hello is—"You want something to eat?" And I think she must have known that—that was for her to do you know and they'd make their way right to her door. She'd feed them and they'd go on and you may not ever seen them again. But that's what I remember in my childhood.

00:50:38

AM: Well Kathy that—that was my last question for you. And I want to thank you—

00:50:44

KS: Okay.

00:50:44

AM: —for taking time.

00:50:46

KS: And thank you for even thinking enough to ask.

00:50:49

AM: Well they wouldn't think of not having your—your interview here.

00:50:56

KS: All right.

00:50:56

AM: So we'll sign out now. This is Kathy Starr and Angie Mosier in Atlanta on March 31, 2005.

00:51:04

KS: Okay, and where I got wretched you'll cut some of that stuff I hope.

00:51:07

AM: No, it's all staying in. [*Laughs*]

00:51:09

KS: [*Laughs*]

00:51:10

[End Kathy Starr Interview]