

LOUIS & MARLENE OSTEEN
Louis's at Pawley's and The Fish Camp Bar–Pawley's Island, SC

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Date: October 10, 2004
Location: University of Mississippi – Oxford, MS
Interviewer: April Grayson, Friend of the SFA
Length: 22 minutes
Project: SFA Founders

[Begin Louis & Marlene Osteen Interview]

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April Grayson: Okay, this is April Grayson, interviewing Louis and Marlene Osteen, on October 10, 2004 in Oxford, Mississippi, at the Southern Foodways Alliance Symposium. And I was wondering if you could each quickly tell me your name, date of birth, and where you were born?

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Marlene Osteen: Marlene Osteen, May 6, 1948—Boston, Massachusetts.

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Louis Osteen: Louis Osteen—William Louis Osteen, September 17, 1941, and I was born in Anderson, South Carolina.

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AG: Okay. Can you tell me how you became involved with the Southern Foodways Alliance?

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LO: I can tell you. We got a letter from John—John Edgerton, saying you should come do this and we read the letter and—and it sounded like something we wanted to do, and we especially believed he would be involved in something worthy, so we said okay, we're there and we were there.

00:01:09

MO: Actually, it was a little more detailed than that. There were two former tries at starting a Southern Foodways Alliance. A woman whose name escapes me from Big Canoe outside of Atlanta and I had been involved with those two efforts that had—unfortunately had not succeeded and John had, as well, and he felt like there was a rightful place for Southern Foodways Alliance. And he took it under his wing to really find a way to make that happen. And there was a guy that was the newspaper editor in Memphis—.

00:01:51

LO: Ford—somebody Ford?

00:01:54

MO: Memphis—so you think—the Ford person was the lady from Big Canoe.

00:01:58

LO: No, Ford is the—.

00:02:00

MO: Okay, anyway—so—.

00:02:05

AG: Okay, so were those organizations American Southern Food Institute and Society for the Preservation and Revitalization for Southern Food?

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LO: Yes.

00:02:14

AG: Do you—having been involved with those, do you have any reflections on why those two organizations didn't really succeed and this one has?

00:02:23

MO: To me, the biggest single component was the link with the Center for Southern Culture and Ole Miss. It gave the organization a number of things. First of all, great credibility because of the esteem that people hold the Center in, number one. Secondly, it gave it a place, a locale, a location. Thirdly, because of John T. Edge and the Center's willingness to—for John T. to become the executive administrator it gave it a full-time administrator. And then last, it had allowed an expanded base for membership, a foundation. It's been incredibly important.

00:03:12

LO: It also gave a sense of discipline to a band of people who probably aren't known for discipline.

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AG: Well did either of you have a specific vision for SFA when it first came about and if so, how has that evolved?

00:03:32

MO: My initial vision was just that it would dispel the myths about Southern food and the South, in general, that a lot of the nation holds about it being a backwater place, the food culture not being a serious one, not being a refined one, etcetera; that was my initial hope for that

organization. I felt like, if they could do that, it would be a wonderful thing. But I think it's done that and done far more than that. It's—it's given Southern food a—a position that—in the culinary heritage, I mean I—I look at the kind of people who come to these meetings now and they're intellectuals and they're professionals and they're just food enthusiasts and people from all over America. And—and what it has brought together has—has been of immense—I mean the synergy—

00:04:36

LO: I think one of the things—I think it's also given—given the South sort of a little dose of self-confidence that it probably needs. Being Marlene is from Boston, so you know, she's from the other side sometimes, and I'm from South Carolina so—so while we have pretty much the same viewpoints, we have different backgrounds, so it's pretty interesting. And I think a lot of people have dismissed the South as—as a wasteland and you know, it's always been rural, it's always been poor—still poor. It's—it's still rural. But it's really significant. I think people are trying to—finally understanding that the South has given—I think the South has given this country its best regional food, certainly as good or maybe its best writers and as—all of its original music, which would be Blues and Jazz and—and Bluegrass, and it all came from the South. And—and so I think the South is pretty important, and it's more important than most people understand, and this is going to be one voice of that so the people can—can know about that.

00:05:46

AG: Are there any projects or topics that you'd like to see SFA pursue in the future?

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LO: Well I think that you know—I think that to me the important part of this is to—is to record these things that are disappearing and Southern foodways are disappearing every day. And I think the history and some visual—you know, some audio—some visual stuff would be real good, and I think that would be important, as far as I’m concerned. That would be the direction I think would be most important.

00:06:21

AG: Okay.

00:06:21

MO: Can I say one thing?

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AG: Yes.

00:06:22

MO: I’d also like to see SFA publish a definitive cookbook with—with stories from the voices that are—that are passing or have passed.

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LO: Everybody always has cookbooks.

00:06:41

AG: [*Laughs*]

00:06:42

LO: Everybody says, “You should do a cookbook.”

00:06:46

AG: So you come from the chef’s perspective and the restaurateur’s perspective. Do you have any specific—*[Interruption—I’ll be done in just a little bit]*—and specific things that you’d like to share from that perspective, as opposed to the food writers or publicists or—or academics’ perspectives?

00:07:09

MO: In terms of involvement with SFA?

00:07:11

AG: Yes, yes, yes, in terms of—what is it like to come to an organization like this from your—your—?

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MO: Well I love getting the other people’s perspective. I mean that’s what’s enlightening for me is that there are people from, you know, all different trainings and backgrounds and—

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LO: It’s just all about communication. It’s good for us to get together and—and talk and—and see how—see how he makes his biscuits and how I make my biscuits, and so there are things to be gleaned here for me that translate directly to our business and probably more so to my kitchen part of the restaurant than Marlene’s dining room part of the restaurant and—and others too.

Although these things can help you in terms of publicity and promotion and—and public relations of things that you do in the restaurant. So we see it as important professionally, as well as being important socially.

00:08:12

AG: Did you attend the first symposium?

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MO: Yes.

00:08:17

AG: Do you—

00:08:18

LO: You mean the founding one in Birmingham?

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AG: Well the founding meeting—?

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MO: That's the first symposium that I attended.

00:08:26

LO: Okay, yeah.

00:08:26

MO: Yes, we did.

00:08:28

AG: Do you have any memories of those or things that you'd like to share? You—you were an original board member?

00:08:34

MO: Yes, I was a board member for the first, I guess, three or four years.

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AG: And I've heard that the Board had some fractious moments, and you were kind of a bedrock and could you share some—some—?

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MO: [*Laughs*]

00:08:47

LO: Bedrock—never heard you called that—lots of things but not a bedrock. [*Laughs*]

00:08:53

MO: Well I think that, as the organization of the Board got started, it—we—we were all—we're all from very different backgrounds and we were all in—in the process of having to define what the organization was going to become number one and—and to make that we were faithful to the vision that everybody had and—and to legitimize it. And a lot of people had a different way of coming about those—those concerns. I think one thing is certain that everybody took it—

everybody took it very seriously, and I feel like if we had some fractious moments and we—we had some lively conversations, certainly—that it was because of that because it was, you know, of a sincerity to—to make it a reality—to not fall back into the missteps of the two former organizations. And I guess maybe because I wasn't from the South, or maybe just because I'm the most outspoken, you know, I got to say—to look at the opposing point of views and say you know, “How can we come together on this?” But thinking you know—the—the Board today—the Board today has—is—is really a terrific Board today in—. They've done a great job. They've done an amazing job.

00:10:33

AG: What about the first symposium; do you have some memories from that event and—?

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MO: Well you know, the interesting thing about the earlier symposiums seemed to illicit more passion. The—the discussions were more passionate, which surprised me, because I remember when John Edgerton—I believe it was John Edgerton—first proposed that we do a symposium on race at a board meeting, and we all said, “Oh, that's a hot subject; we need to wait several years until we do that,” And so other things were done in advance of that, and we expected that when that symposium really occurred—this one today—that it would be pretty inflamed. And I don't know whether we've all just become too good of friends or what or—or you know maybe over five years we've just all come to see it the same way or—but that's the biggest change I see, actually, that there's more harmony. *[Laughs]*

00:11:38

LO: Well you can also take the other approach and—and say that there are less fireworks. And fireworks are okay. I mean, you know, they’ve got their place and that’s what this thing is—it’s sort of you know if—if we’re here to sort of be the—be the collective voice of Southern Foodways, then there’s needs to be a lot of discussion about lots of things, and everybody shouldn’t agree on everything, and everything shouldn’t be that homogenized.

00:12:06

AG: Okay—.

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LO: I might also add that Marlene commented to me that she was sorry to leave the Board because she felt like it was the most meaningful thing she had done in—in a long time.

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MO: Well yeah. Yeah, I was always very proud of being associated with it and still am, obviously.

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AG: Just a couple more questions and then—

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LO: It’s all right.

00:12:27

AG: The—the idea of food as culture is important to the SFA, and so I was wondering if you have reflections on that both from sort of an intellectual point of view or a personal—just a personal point of view?

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LO: Again, I'm not intellectual, and I don't know what is meant by food as culture. What does that mean—food as culture—food is food?

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MO: I think it—

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LO: It represents culture, maybe. It represents people, but I don't think—I don't know how food can be culture.

00:12:58

MO: I think it's culture. I think—I think it's so—in the South it's truly culture. I mean the South—what you ate, where you ate, when you ate all—all was a reflection of your cultural background of whether you were raised on the farm or raised in the city, whether you were raised—your family were sharecroppers or cotton pickers or they were, you know, plantation owners or industrialists or textiles—it's all—all of these people from all these different cultures within the great Southern culture all had different food habits, different food on the tables—.

00:13:43

LO: What you said, though, is you said food—that what you ate is a reflection of your culture, well I agree with that.

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MO: Well it—

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LO: I just don't think food is culture. I think food is—

00:13:52

MO: Well I think it's part of the culture; I do.

00:13:53

LO: Food is food; it's part of the culture, but it's you know—I don't think culture and food are the same. I don't see how they can be—how food can be a culture; it's not a culture. A culture is people. Isn't culture—is that right?

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MO: No.

00:14:09

AG: I'm asking your opinion. [*Laughs*]

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LO: Well I mean, you know, it's a culture like I don't know—like spaghetti is an Italian—it's not culture; it's an Italian food. It reflects, you know, somebody—some part of Italy, depending on what kind of noodle you eat and—and but I don't think a food is culture—my opinion.

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AG: Could you be separated from the idea of certain types of food—could you separate that from your experience as a Southerner, I guess, is how the question—?

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LO: Can I separate, you mean, like grits you know—

00:14:42

AG: Quintessential Southern foods—can you separate those from what you—how you identify yourself or your culture—your community around you as Southern? If not—I do think maybe it is culture. [*Laughs*]

00:15:01

LO: You all are trapping me now. [*Laughs*]

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MO: Well I mean I—

00:15:06

LO: All right; I don't think food is culture. I think food is food, and I think food reflects culture.

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MO: We don't—we do disagree on this, so we're not going to settle this.

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AG: That's okay.

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LO: And if you want to come around this time next year we can talk more about it because I'm going to research it and figure it out—figure out.

00:15:27

AG: Okay. What about your restaurant? Could you tell me the name of your restaurant, the menu, the kind of approach that you take?

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LO: My restaurant—our restaurant is called Louis's at Pauley's Island and the Fish Camp Bar and it sort of represents two restaurants—one is Louis's and that is—of the two, it is the least—is the least casual, but they're both casual. And the Fish Camp Bar is the most casual, and it's a bar and it's an outdoor seating area and—and has different menus. The food is pretty much the same both places, and it's pretty much all Southern or tends to be all Southern and—and we tend to use a lot of fish and shellfish because we are in that area and we're on the—on the [Atlantic] Coast, and so those things are prevalent in the market, and they're prevalent in people's appetites or—even people from Ohio. They come down and say, "What's the best place to eat seafood?" So you know we have it for—so that's kind of how that is. Now my wife will tell you the more meaningful parts of our restaurant.

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MO: [*Laughs*] I think we—

00:16:45

LO: The culture parts. [*Laughs*]

00:16:46

MO: We do tend to sell—sell and serve a lot of the quintessential Lowcountry dishes because that's where we are in the Lowcountry so it's something—grits or she-crab soup, Creoles, you know; the fried chicken on Sunday is a big part of the tradition at our restaurant. It's a big Sunday dinner of fried chicken, squash casserole, green beans, and rice and gravy and it's—it's become quite the cultural event on Pauley's Island for Sunday. Everybody is there after church—the Preachers and everything; so it's—it's—it's very local, it's very regional.

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AG: So you have a mixture of local and tourists?

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MO: Oh, obviously we have a lot of visitors because we're on, you know, the ocean so the summer volume is twice what the winter volume is but there's—there's a pretty decent sized year-round population. People come up from Charleston sometimes for lunch.

00:17:49

AG: Okay, one more question—and this may go back to how you—what you serve in the restaurant but if you—if someone approached you and asked you to serve them what you feel is the quintessential Southern meal, what would you have on the table?

00:18:06

LO: I don't know, but probably I would have something on the table that would be something that we serve in the restaurant—but maybe not. I mean it would—I think there is no quintessential Southern meal because there is you know—the—the South is a part of—of the country, and the country is a part of the world. Well then there are lots of regions that make up the South, so it's going to be—it would be a different—it would be a different in Mobile than it would be on Pauley's Island, although we're both on the water and—and have similar climates and that sort of thing—it would just be different. In—in Mobile for instance you might—you know they like to put on there grillades and grits. See we had them today for lunch and they were good; and—and—but it wouldn't be that in Pauley's Island, so there is no quintessential Southern—Southern meal. I think this is just—it's—it's too—the South is too broad and complicated for that—I think.

00:19:18

MO: I would agree with Louis; I think there is a quintessential Lowcountry meal that we could put on the table but I would agree—just years ago we used to be involved with something called the Salute to Southern Chefs and—and the goal in the whole—the whole perspective of that was that chefs from different states came and served their quintessential food, and if you came there and had those 11 different dishes, I mean they're vastly different, but they were all very Southern.

00:19:54

LO: Yeah, the original thought was we were going—it was Marlene’s idea—we were going to have a chef from every state of the Confederacy.

00:20:03

MO: The original Confederacy.

00:20:05

LO: Well—well that didn’t work.

00:20:07

MO: No, we did.

00:20:08

LO: Well you had Bob Kinkaid; he’s from Massachusetts.

00:20:11

MO: Well he was—he had a restaurant in DC.

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LO: DC well that’s not—that wasn’t in the—that wasn’t part of it and then you got mad—you got mad at one state [*Laughs*] that was in the Confederacy, and you quit inviting them [*Laughs*], so—so—. But anyway, it was good.

00:20:26

MO: It was close to the truth. [*Laughs*]

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LO: It was fun. It was an important cultural event. [*Laughs*]

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AG: That's a great experience.

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MO: [*Laughs*]

00:20:37

LO: Not the state. She got mad at—at two guys—two separate chefs that came from there.

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AG: Okay, one last thing—I said that before but there's a radio show that SFA is putting together *Cornbread Nation*.

00:20:52

LO: I was on it last night.

00:20:52

AG: You were?

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LO: Yeah but you've got—

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AG: Okay, great.

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LO: —to have six months in the can before you can start broadcasting.

00:21:00

AG: So did you do your little—I'm Louis Osteen and I love Lowcountry boil and blah-blah-blah?

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LO: No.

00:21:08

AG: Okay, could you do that for me each of you—just say your name—I'm April Grayson, and I love butter beans and you're listening to *Cornbread Nation*. And, of course, you can change that however you want?

00:21:21

LO: Okay.

00:21:22

MO: Say it.

00:21:22

LO: You go first.

00:21:24

MO: I'm Marlene Osteen, and I love crab cakes, and you're listening to *Cornbread Nation*.

00:21:34

AG: All right.

00:21:35

LO: I'm Louis Osteen, and I love grits and you're listening to *Cornbread Nation*. I should have said cornbread. Let me do that. I'm Louis Osteen and I love cornbread; you're listening to the *Cornbread Nation*.

00:21:47

AG: [*Laughs*] Great.

[End Louis & Marlene Osteen Interview]