

**MARY LOUISE NOSSER**  
**Church Volunteer, Annual Lebanese Dinner at St. George Orthodox Church**  
**Vicksburg, MS**

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Date: September 1, 2010  
Location: Nossler Residence – Vicksburg MS  
Interviewer: Amy Evans Streeter  
Length: 1 hour, 39 minutes  
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs  
Project: Delta Lebanese

**[Begin Nosser (Delta Lebanese) Interview]**

**00:00:02**

**Amy Evans Streeter:** This is Amy Evans Streeter for the Southern Foodways Alliance. It is Wednesday, September 1, 2010. I'm in Vicksburg, Mississippi, at the home of Mary Louise Nosser. And, Mrs. Nosser, if you would please state your name and your affiliation with the Vicksburg Lebanese Dinner, please?

**00:00:20**

**Mary Louise Nosser:** My name is Mary Louise Nosser, and I have been involved with the annual Lebanese Dinner since I returned to Vicksburg in, I think, approximately 1968. For a while I was co-chairman with my cousin, Gloria Abraham. We were co-chairmen of the sweets. We have an overall chairman and—and then different department heads, the cabbage, the *kibbe* [balls or patties of bulgur and ground meat that are baked or fried], the salad, and the—the setting up the dining room and so forth.

**00:00:51**

And for a many years, and I forget how long it was, I was co-chairman with my cousin, Gloria Abraham. When she got sick one year, we decided we needed to do a little cross-training so that we wouldn't be caught red-handed with only one person knowing the particulars. So I decided to drop out and let somebody else handle the management of the sweets department, and, actually, I just picked up boxes and did manual work. My cousin Gloria contacted the people about making certain kinds of pastry, and she was instrumental in picking it up and bringing it to the church and so forth.

**00:01:26**

But with the cross-training situation, I decided that I—I like selling in the dining room during the—during the dinner. And it's a hectic job and it—if I got paid by the mile, I could retire every year. But anyway, I help with all of the other activities. In fact, we—we beg everybody to come and help, and we welcome our friends in the community to come and learn. We don't—we're proud of our food, and we don't hide our recipes. We're really glad to share with other people.

00:01:59

And—and I help with the *kibbe* and the cabbage and the—and there's a lot of prep work with the cabbage [rolls]. You know, we work two or three days on just prepping for the cabbage [rolls] and then a couple of days just rolling all of those, because we do—we fed 3,420 people last year, and that's a lot of food to prepare, and—.

00:02:18

**AES:** Well if you—if you don't mind me interrupting you for a second, because I want to add some—some history here, because you said that you started working with the dinner when you moved back to Vicksburg back in the 1960s, but the dinner started around that same time, did it not?

00:02:33

**MLN:** Well, actually, this past year was our fiftieth anniversary. So I think it goes back to—let's see. I had it in print here somewhere. Oh, in the church book, if you want to cut that off for a second, the—the dinner started—I think it was like [19]58, something like '58 that the dinner started. Oh, I hate this. I thought I knew where everything was.

00:03:08

**AES:** So while you're looking for that I'll just—

00:03:13

**MLN:** Well this is 19—2010 and when we had the dinner this past February, it was our fiftieth anniversary. So anybody can figure it back up from there, I guess [*Laughs*].

00:03:26

**AES:** So, 1960, which is when you moved back to Vicksburg from being away for a time?

00:03:30

**MLN:** Yes, my mother passed away, and I needed to come back home. So and—and it's just something that everybody in the church helps with, and we're getting more and more internal help all the time.

00:03:41

For a long time, the men didn't help with the dinner, you know, but now they've—they'll get in there and chop garlic and roll cabbage and make *kibbe* and everything. It takes a strong person to make *kibbe*, and we need more men to help with that.

00:03:56

**AES:** Why do you say it takes a strong person?

00:03:57

**MLN:** Well, because you're doing this with your hands. And we're making batches that consist of eight pounds of meat—no, eight pounds of wheat and thirteen pounds of meat and that—

you're working in one big dishpan, and that takes a lot of strength to do that. And—and we have to make many of those batches. So it's really good to have the men helping with that.

**00:04:23**

**AES:** Do you know about what year it was that the men started helping?

**00:04:27**

**MLN:** Maybe twenty years ago, and they're big in the kitchen, cutting—doing all the vegetables for the—for the salad. And we have one man who does the snap beans all by himself, and he may have a—a small crew but he's—he's in charge of it. And we have three or four men who do help with the *kibbe* now, and I'm one of the *kibbe* makers, too. I don't know how much longer I'm going to last, but anyway [*Laughs*]—.

**00:04:52**

**AES:** Well and so the—the dinner is at St. George Orthodox Church. Can you—and we're—we're here to talk about the Lebanese community in the Mississippi Delta, and we're in Vicksburg and the Vicksburg community had—had a much larger Lebanese community ages ago as is true throughout most of the Delta. But you still maintain this dinner, so if—could you share a little bit of history of the church in Vicksburg and how the dinner came to be?

**00:05:16**

**MLN:** Well this—this little paragraph here in the—our one hundredth anniversary book, it says [*reading*]: *And—and now as the oldest Antiochian Orthodox Church in Mississippi and the oldest Antiochian in the South, St. George is celebrating its one hundredth anniversary in*

*Vicksburg, Mississippi.* And let me see if I can find what year that was. **[Laughs]** Not too well organized. Okay, 2006, we were here 100 years and one of the first churches in the South and the first in Mississippi.

**00:05:52**

**AES:** Now you were—you prepared this lovely lunch for me, which we just finished—traditional Lebanese lunch. And you were telling me while we were eating about how the chanting was separated within the church between the Greek and the Lebanese. Can you explain that?

**00:06:07**

**MLN:** Well, in the very beginning it was actually a Greek church and with an Orthodox church, when they say a Greek or a Romanian or Russian, that means that—that church was probably started by those kinds of immigrants. And initially, the church was a Greek church. And then when the Lebanese became more prevalent in the church, the men—the Arabic was chanted from one side of the church, and the Greek was done from the other side. And, of course, the—the—the choir plays a very important part in the service. I understand that the priest can't really hold a service unless the choir is there to handle their part of it.

**00:06:50**

We don't have chanters today like we had in the past. The young people came along and they—they wanted English. They didn't want the foreign languages, so they sort of fell by the wayside, which I think is important. I like to at least recognize Arabic when I hear it. I don't expect to become proficient in the language, but I enjoy knowing that it's Arabic. I can tell the

difference in the—in the writing. I can tell the Arabic from the Turkish and from the Jewish but it's—it's all in knowing. And that's what I was saying: I appreciate hearing the language.

**00:07:26**

And today we have a very small choir that backs the priest up, but we don't have any chanters anymore.

**00:07:35**

**AES:** Now if we could talk about your family, specifically, and your family background and when—you told me a little bit about when your mother came over from the old country when she was a teenager, can we talk about both your mother and father?

**00:07:45**

**MLN:** All right. Well you know, the First World War caught a lot of the immigrants who were going to—who would end up in this country, they were in Lebanon at the time. My mother's parents had already come to this country and they—and they left two of the children. One was my mother—with a grandmother until they could send after them. They were going to come to America and get settled and then send after the rest of the family.

**00:08:13**

Unfortunately, the World War [I] started and, although my grandfather sent money pretty constantly, it never arrived at the point it was supposed to be. And consequently, my grandmother and the—my mother's grandmother and the other child died, but my mother managed to survive. She said she looked like some of the pictures that we've seen, you know, from World War II with the little—dirty little child crying in the middle of the street. She said she looked just like that.

**00:08:47**

But she came to the United States when she was around seventeen and with other members of her family, not her immediate family, but that's how she came to America.

**00:08:56**

My daddy came when he was twenty-two years old. And he came to this country to—to make money to pay the debt on his family's property. His father had come to Mississippi—rather come to the United States many years before and—and—and, as they did in those days, they would buy a little bit of merchandise and then go out into the country and peddle it. Well my great—my grandfather was over in Louisiana and someone killed him and took his—his merchandise, you know. And we've never been able to—we know he was buried somewhere in Shreveport, but the name situation was kind of tricky in those days. They didn't know how to spell it nor pronounce it or anything else. So we have not been able to find out where he was buried exactly, except that it was in the Shreveport area.

**00:09:48**

When my daddy came to this country he was twenty-two years old, and it was August 27, 1920. And he said he arrived in Vicksburg at 8:30 in the evening with fifty-five cents in his pocket. He had been sent for by an uncle and a couple of cousins. You know, in those days you had—each country around the world had an allotment of numbers of people who could come to the United States, either to visit or to see if they wanted to stay. And so he—he got permission to come, and he did. He visited Vicksburg for several weeks, I believe he said, and then he went to—he was—had a cousin calling from Cleveland, Ohio, and told him there were a lot of good jobs up there—for him to come. And he in—in no time at all, he did have a job in a candy factory. And he stayed up there some little time, but he hurt himself in an accident. The candy—hot candy spilled on him and—and he was really burned very badly from his wrist all the way up



to his neck. And he—they really thought they were going to have to remove his arm. But he was in the hospital, and there was a male nurse with him, and he said that daddy—he told the doctor when the doctor came in the next morning and the arm was practically healed. And the doctor said, “What—what went on here? What’s going on?” And the male nurse says, “Doc, I don’t know. I couldn’t understand the language. But he cried and he prayed all night.” And he said, “You see the way his arm looks now?” So I think we could say that was a miracle.

**00:11:30**

But he said he spent forty-two days in the hospital in Cleveland, Ohio. And when he got better, his cousins, T. D. Farris and J. D. Farris from Vicksburg called him and said that they had—they wanted him to come to Vicksburg—that they had a job for him. And so I think he worked in cousin T. D.’s grocery store for about a year and a half. And then they bought him this little grocery store, 901 Washington Street, where he was for seventy-four years. And so after we—he was in the store for a year, he decided he needed a good strong wife to help him **[Laughs]**. And he met my mother at a wedding here in Vicksburg. It was an Abraham [family] wedding, I believe. And in those days, people didn't pick out their own partners; it was the older folks who says, you know, “I think Susie and Johnny would be pretty good together, see, so we’ll see about matching them up.” And that’s the way it was done. And so one of the ladies says, “I think Effie and Johnny would be a pretty good couple,” and they worked on that. So Mama and Daddy got married and had four wonderful children **[Laughs]**, managed to educate them all, built themselves an FHA house, and operated this store for seventy-four years. And mother passed away, I think it was like [19]67, and Daddy lived to be almost ninety-two. He made it until 1980, and we miss him every day, and his customers still tell us that they miss him, too. And people at the church still remember Daddy and how religious and how faithful he was.

00:13:14

**AES:** And what—what years were your parents born, each of them?

00:13:17

**MLN:** Daddy was born in 1897, I believe. He was six years older than Mama. And so I think she was like 1903—something. That's close enough, I think. He was six years older than she.

00:13:32

**AES:** What year did they get married?

00:13:32

**MLN:** Nineteen twenty-five. My brother was born in [19]26. Yeah, Daddy opened the store in 1924, and they were married in '25. And he—he posted on his little ledger, May the—I think it was, “May 6th, I got married” [*Laughs*]. That's what he put in his stock book. And so my brother was born a year later, and then my second brother was two years later and then I came and then my sister, and that was the crop [*Laughs*].

00:14:05

**AES:** Well and you were talking earlier, too, about how—how much bigger the Lebanese community was then, and there were about 120 families early on, 140 families. And could you talk about living in this neighborhood then and—and, by the way, we're sitting in the house that your parents had built?

00:14:21

**MLN:** At—at one time we had about 140 Lebanese families in Vicksburg. For the most part, they were Orthodox. We had maybe four or five families who were Catholic, but, see, historically, Lebanon is half-Christian and half-Muslim. And the Christians are divided into Orthodox and Catholic. So the biggest part of the Orthodox people here in Vicksburg, I mean Lebanese people, were Orthodox, and of course today we—we've lost a great many people. We've lost the whole immigrant population, actually. All of those people are deceased now. And I forget the other part of your question. You said—oh, the house?

**00:15:08**

**AES:** And the—and the neighborhood and all the grocery stores in the neighborhood you were mentioning earlier?

**00:15:14**

**MLN:** Yeah, well when I was a little girl, there was a mom-and-pop grocery store on just about every block in Vicksburg, and a lot of them were Chinese, and a lot of them were Lebanese. And you just didn't have to go far to be able to get bread and milk, you know, because they were just everywhere.

**00:15:30**

The Jewish community was the first into Vicksburg in the late 1800s, and then we had an influx of the Orientals. And then we had the immigrants from Europe and the Middle East. And today we've lost a great deal of the Jewish population. They have a new synagogue here, but they don't even have enough people to warrant having a rabbi, except one who, you know, is a guest rabbi once or twice a month. We've lost all of the Orientals. I don't know if they've gone up into the Delta or what, but we've had our fair share of them here.

**00:16:11**

And—and so now it's mostly the Lebanese and the African Americans and the Anglo-Saxons, you know, but the population has changed up a great deal. And of course since [Hurricane] Katrina, we—we had a large influx of refugees coming up here, and a lot of them never went back home. And I don't know if this is relevant, but we had a big increase in crime and violence and drugs and gangs, but that's how the atmosphere has changed here in Vicksburg.

**00:16:43**

And of course the neighborhoods are changing up radically.

**00:16:49**

**AES:** Well tell me how the—the decrease in the Lebanese population affected St. George Orthodox Church and your church membership.

**00:16:56**

**MLN:** Well, of course, we've had a big change in our church. The young people, young people always think they want something else, you know, and—and our service was not that understandable, especially way back when they were doing foreign languages, you know. And—and of course, you know, when you marry out of the church and out of the Lebanese community, you lose people. They—they go with the other side, so to speak. And then, too, when kids go off to school, they don't come back home and so many—so many places have never had an Orthodox Church. You could find a Baptist Church on every corner in the United States, I think, but that's not the case with the Orthodox Church. So when they move off to these new places, they—they usually go to an Episcopal Church or something very similar—Presbyterian, maybe. But we lost a lot of people when they went off to college or when they married into other

churches, married non-Lebanese, and so our—our church, at the moment, I think, is probably at the lowest total number that we've had since the very beginning, I think. I think it's safe to say that.

**00:18:10**

**AES:** Do you have an idea about how many members you have now?

**00:18:13**

**MLN:** No, I really don't. It seems like on Sunday we have an average of about fifty people. Of course, it's probably fifty more that could come, if they'd just get up out of the bed. But we have a pretty steady crew of about fifty, and we've got maybe ten choir members, if they all show up. And it's—it's a wonderful church, but we have lost a lot of people.

**00:18:36**

My own son moved away. Of course, they consider themselves to be Orthodox, but they're not active in any of the—there's several Orthodox Churches in the Jackson area, and—but they are just—you know, really, church is a habit. It really is. You're either in the habit of going, or you're not, you know.

**00:18:55**

And it's so easy to get addicted to reading the newspaper and watching football all day Sunday, instead of getting yourself up and go help sing in the choir or something like that, so we've lost a lot of people.

**00:19:06**

**AES:** Tell me how the—the annual Lebanese Dinner started. Was it something to celebrate your heritage, or was it a fundraiser or a combination of both?

**00:19:16**

**MLN:** You know, I really don't know the main reason of why it got started. I think what they—I think what they wanted to do, really, was just to build a new church. I think—I—I couldn't swear to that. But our food has always been popular, and our people are famous for—for feeding their neighbors. You know, we love to feed people. And so I don't know how came up with the first idea or what the idea was. But in the meantime, we have built a new beautiful church, and, in fact, it was—what do you call it—dedicated just about the time—my mother's funeral was held from the funeral home because the new church was not ready, and that was like in 1968. And so I'm going to guess by saying that I think the—the need of a new church was the reason we started the dinner.

**00:20:13**

**AES:** So since the [new] church came a handful of years after the dinner was started, but now the dinner has lasted forty years past that, can you—how do you explain the success of that tradition?

**00:20:23**

**MLN:** Well, you know, we—I was thinking about the money part of it. We—we had an official mortgage burning when we got the church paid for, you know, and of course that was a—a big celebration. And what was the rest of your question?

**00:20:38**

**AES:** What—what you attribute the popularity and the lasting tradition of the dinner to.

**00:20:44**

**MLN:** Well, you know, the tickets to that dinner sell themselves. We don't have to peddle the tickets. People come to get the tickets. Our food, you'd have to know that it's very popular because we—we served 3,420 people this last dinner. And—and they know what they're going to get. They—they know the quality is going to be top, and it's a lot of smiles and greetings and best wishes and so forth and—and people like to come to the church so they can see everybody else in town.

**00:21:18**

My brother had a friend who had a little Taco Bell [fast food restaurant], I think, here one time up on Washington Street. And he said the Monday of the Lebanese dinner, he just didn't even open up because he knew everybody was going to be eating at the Orthodox Church [*Laughs*]. I think that's pretty much true. But it's such a popular thing. There's no way—we'd get run out of town, if we tried to cut it out.

**00:21:39**

In fact, when people say, “Oh, it's so good, we should have it twice a year,” well we'd faint and fall out at that because it's so much work. We truly work a whole month.

**00:21:50**

**AES:** Yeah? And so the dinner falls between—sometime between Christmas and Lent every year?

**00:21:53**

**MLN:** That's right. Of course, we have to let Christmas go by and we have to work it in sometime before Lent because, you know, it's supposed to be a quiet respectful time. And of course this time we only had a month. You know, we were working hard in January because we had it like the first week in February. But as Easter moves away from the first of the year, then we'll have more prep time.

**00:22:16**

But let me explain that to you. You know, I remember as kids we got teased about having a different Easter. Well the—the American churches have—they go by the calendar. It's just a set time, you know, and I think it fluctuates, doesn't it, from April to May or something like that. But in the Orthodox Church, the church fathers figure that you can't have Easter until the Jews have had the Passover because, you remember, Christ went to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, and that's when he was captured and—and tried and crucified. And so we have to let the Jews have the Passover before we can have Easter. And that's why we have a different Easter every year that moves up and down the calendar according to when—how the Jews calculate the Passover. And they do it by the stars and different kinds of way—I don't know, but it's official, and that's what we go by. We let the Jews have the Passover, and then we have Easter.

**00:23:22**

And we do get two Easters, but what's wrong with that? **[Laughs]** Everybody loves Easter eggs.

**00:23:27**

**AES:** So tell me about all this preparation that's involved in cooking the dinner and how that works and how—how you manage all the people who contribute and what you make, of course.



00:23:36

**MLN:** You know, in the beginning I think we had our first dinner at the Jewish Country Club. It was down on Washington Street next to the Hotel Vicksburg. Later, that beautiful, beautiful building served as the Police headquarters, and now I think it's—it's owned by a private individual and—who rents it out for different big banquets and things like that, and they have a caterer there and all. It's a beautiful building.

00:24:05

We started having it there because our—we had a very small church and everything. And then, finally, we realized that we could move it to the church. And, in the beginning, people were making things in their own homes. But the quality was so different, you see, and the—the final results—there was no quality control in size of anything and taste and all. And, you know, if—for heaven's sake, they were stuffing squash at first. Now, if that's not a monumental task. And then they decided they'd get—do something easier than that. They were making individual batches of *kibbe* in homes, and you can imagine how that varied in—in thickness and—and in the way it looked and the way it was cut and everything. And if I remember, Father Nick said that he didn't think he was ever going to convince the ladies that they really needed to make the *kibbe* at the church so it would all be alike. But Lebanese people are kind of slow to change sometimes, you know [*Laughs*].

00:25:01

**AES:** Can I ask you, just to interrupt a little bit, how everyone settled on a single *kibbe* recipe to make when they started cooking at the church?

00:25:09

**MLN:** Well it was—it was a—a hit-and-miss thing. In fact, it was only very recently that my cousin, Helen Abraham, started measuring out the spices so that it would be consistent, because when you've got 100 ladies sitting there mixing up *kibbe*, you know it's going to turn out different one from another. So Helen finally convinced them that—and they worked it out. They worked it out according to taste, you know, and she recorded what it was. So now she has a special time where she sits down and mixes up all these packets of salt and pepper and cinnamon. And all you have to do is you get your measurement of wheat. They've measured that out the day before. And you got the meat that came from the store in certain measurements and—and all you have to do—and we grind the onions. We spend the day before that—I, personally, help with cutting up and chopping 150 pounds of onions [*Laughs*] for the—for the preparation of the *kibbe*. And so then you've got your—your—your onions are ready and your spices are ready and you've got your meat, and we've soaked the wheat. That takes a lot of time. And—and you go from there.

00:26:22

And but we have learned. We have learned through the years how to kind of mechanize it a little.

00:26:29

**AES:** Are there ever any arguments about the shape and size of the *kibbe*?

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**MLN:** Well, we measure that out. We—we have gotten—we have come a long way with the quality control. They put x-number of cups of meat per person and, you know, you're supposed

to put half in the bottom and half on the top. And then after they get it all, put it in with the *hoshwee* [*kibbe* stuffing made with ground beef or lamb, onions, pine nuts and spices] in the middle—the meat dressing in the middle. That's measured out, too, you just dump that in and spread it out. Then after you've got everything in the pan the way it belongs—then they shift that over to the Cutting Committee. See, so we've got that down to a fine science.

**00:27:07**

We used—that was a long drawn out thing, and everybody was scared. Everybody acted like they didn't know how to cut a pan of brownies or anything, you know. So I was at my aunt's in Meridian one time—Annie Abraham, she's a famous caterer from Mississippi—and she had this—this—it was like a pizza cutter, four or five of them joined together, and they called it a Baker's Helper. And when I saw that I said, "Oh, Aunt Annie, that's exactly what we need for cutting the *kibbe* at the dinner." I said, "Can I—can I buy that from you for the church?" She said, "No, indeed. I want to give it to the church myself." So I brought it back to Vicksburg, and that's one of the things that mechanized the cutting of the *kibbe*.

**00:27:47**

**AES:** Okay, so let me ask you this because the *kibbe* that you served me here today was like that. It was made in a pan, like brownies as you described, and it was cut on the bias in these triangular shapes.

**00:27:59**

**MLN:** Diamonds.

**00:27:59**

**AES:** Yes, ma'am, diamonds, exactly. My apologies. And so was that—prior to mechanizing the effort of cooking the *kibbe* for the dinner, was the *kibbe* made into the *kibbe* patties and—and this was just—?

**00:28:14**

**MLN:** I think it was baked *kibbe* because it's less work. I mean, in a manner of speaking. But if you're going to have those patties, that's frying stuff and you'll be there forever with the amount of *kibbe* that we had to do. And you know, today, people have gotten away from the frying business.

**00:28:30**

**AES:** So did people—do people—prior to you baking the *kibbe* in the pans at the church, did people make baked *kibbe* at home that way also?

**00:28:37**

**MLN:** Yes, yes, it was definitely baked *kibbe*. It was just easier to put together and to handle and to serve.

**00:28:44**

**AES:** Do you bless the *kibbe* also when you cook for the dinner?

**00:28:47**

**MLN:** Well, you know, we have a tradition with making *kibbe*. When you've got it all mixed up, you put the sign of the cross on the top of it, and then you go on with your work. But after

you mix the—the meat and the wheat and the onions and you've got in a beautiful mound there filling up that dishpan, you—you make the sign of the cross with your little finger and you go from there. I do. Everybody does it at home, too.

**00:29:15**

**AES:** Was there ever raw *kibbe* served at the dinner?

**00:29:19**

**MLN:** No, that—no, a lot of people are a little squeamish about that, and a lot of our own people don't like raw *kibbe*. But I love it. **[Laughs]** It's—I understand it's terrific with drinks. Now I don't drink, but I know it's good by itself.

**00:29:37**

**AES:** Do you make it here at home a lot?

**00:29:37**

**MLN:** Well, I'm by myself now, and I don't have to cook a lot, but it's wonderful. I'll tell you what happened one time. My boss was having a promotion party, and I asked him, "Could I bring some—something?" And he said, "Yes." He had it, you know, at—at a club. And I told him I wanted to make something and bring it. Well, I made some raw *kibbe*, and I put it on two different dinner plates and shaped it up like a little mound of cheese or something, you know, and put a little bread knife with each one. And I put them out on the table. Well the word got out that—that was raw *kibbe*, and I panicked because I know how some people are about raw meat, you know. And because it's—it's not raw. The onions and the spices really do cook it.

00:30:22

But anyway, when somebody came and asked me about it, I said, “It’s *kibbe ni ’yee, kibbe pate*.” Honey, those were the first two dishes to be empty on that table. They sopped it up.

[Laughs] They really enjoyed it. And nobody got sick, so, you see, it’s okay.

00:30:43

**AES:** So tell me what all—what else y'all make and serve for the dinner each year.

00:30:46

**MLN:** Well, our menu is always the same, only the pastries vary a little bit. We always have the *kibbe* and we have rolled cabbages, which are—people ask us, “How do they get better every year,” and I don’t know. I just tell people, “Honey, it’s God’s hands in it, because we keep doing everything the same way. And, if it’s getting better, it’s—it’s due strictly to him.” But the cabbages have gotten tremendously popular. And then the—the—the salad, which is a combination, plus the *tabouli* [bulgur salad with parsley, tomatoes, lemon juice and olive oil], it’s always great. And then the—the snap beans that you ate today, we—we cook gallons of that, too, you know.

00:31:23

And we have a bread. We have improved—we used to have just plain old everyday rolls, you know, and then we decided we needed something a little more ethnic. So we’ve started ordering this bread. I forget where it came from, someplace like Houston maybe or Dallas, and it’s more Greek than it is the Arabic bread. But it’s—it’s a better representation. And I don’t hope that we’ll ever be able to make enough of our own bread for the dinner. That would be a real undertaking with that many people to serve.

00:31:56

But actually, you know, you can cut each one of those in quarters and it—I mean nobody—people got plenty to eat. They're not going to store up on bread too much. You've got that wheat and you've got that rice, and it's just a lot to handle.

00:32:08

**AES:** So tell me about the—the snap beans. Is that something that would be a traditional Lebanese meal, or is it something that's an ingredient here that was kind of appropriated and spiced up with—with cinnamon and onions and the things that you added to it?

00:32:21

**MLN:** I think that's a definite Lebanese dish, especially with the cinnamon in it. I've got friends who hardly know what cinnamon tastes like, you know, and cinnamon is a major spice in the Middle East. I understand that cumin is, although my mother never used cumin and neither did my catering—Aunt Marie. But it's supposed to be a Middle East spice.

00:32:39

But cinnamon, we found out lately it's a very—it's very good for you, you know, and the Middle Eastern diet is good—the olive oil. I remember when I was a little girl, and I'd say something about Mama putting olive oil—my friends would say, “Eww,” you know. But now everybody is using the olive oil. And—and I had a friend [*Laughs*] up in the Delta who was complimenting my pretty skin. You know, she says, “I've got freckles and—and bruises and everything,” and she said, “and you don't have any of that.” And I laughed, and I said, “Well, maybe, honey, it's because while you were doing lard, we were doing olive oil.” [*Laughs*]

**00:33:19**

**AES:** Too smart. Well tell me, too, about—regarding the dinner, I wonder, you know, as—as the dinner started in the '60s with wanting to generate a new building fund for the church, and it was more of a Lebanese potluck, was it—when it started was it mostly the Lebanese community that attended the dinner or was it always the greater Vicksburg community?

**00:33:43**

**MLN:** It was—it was always a citywide thing. We've always opened to the public and—but more lately, interestingly enough, our people are awfully glad to—to participate in—in eating the food because people don't cook at home anymore like they used to. And I dare say, a lot of the younger girls don't know how to cook any of it, and the rest of them cook some of it.

**00:34:05**

But everybody is busy, and people don't cook that way. Lebanese food is pretty work-intensive. I remember when I was a little girl and my mother would make the *baklava* [a layered pastry with nuts and honey]. We call it *baklawa*. She and friend would work all day long making that dough, that paper kind of dough. I'd come in the house, and there would be sheets on the couches and the chairs and the bed, and they'd be stretching that dough all over the house, and they worked all day long and they got one pan. And then the next week, my mother would go help the lady make hers, and this was always just for Christmas. You know—you know, I mean it was such a time—time intensive thing. They only had time to do one pan. And so it was a luxury item. But good, whew.

**00:34:55**



**AES:** Now did you grow up eating traditional Lebanese—Lebanese foods on a daily basis or how was, you know, Southern—Southern food kind of—how did that enter your—your family kitchen?

**00:35:04**

**MLN:** I think I can safely say it was about half and half. Mother always helped Daddy in the store, and we had a maid here at home. With four children, you've to have some help at home. And Mama always fixed something for dinner that we could eat when we came in, but for the most part, it was snap beans and cornbread and boiled corn and—and she would boil shrimp every once in a while, and she'd make gumbo and fried shrimp and boiled shrimp. It was feast day, you know, and we would—we had things like pork chops and fried chicken and roast and— . She—she was a good cook and—and I think mostly—oh, you might come home and find a big bowl of lentil soup—big pot of lentil soup or spinach pies or whatever she had time to do.

**00:35:52**

**AES:** Now your—your father's store, what was it called?

**00:35:54**

**MLN:** J. M. Nossier and Sons, and he was on the corner of 901 Washington Street, and people kind of looked for the fishing poles out front. And when I worked for the Air Force, several times I bumped into people who would come to Vicksburg to go fishing at Eagle Lake. And they remembered my daddy's store by the fishing poles out front. And a lot of people—that was kind of the end of civilization at that time, you know. It was North Washington Street. After that, it was a lot of nothing mostly. And people would stop at the store to buy drinks and fifteen cents

worth of bologna, and dime's worth of crackers and that kind of stuff. I used to worry when I was a little girl as to how Daddy could raise a family on fifteen cents worth of bologna and a dime's worth of crackers [*Laughs*]. But he managed. He managed.

**00:36:39**

**AES:** Did he sell any Lebanese food items in the store at all?

**00:36:43**

**MLN:** Not, per se. He usually—like the tomatoes, anything you could use to make the Lebanese but there was nothing Lebanese, per se.

**00:36:52**

**AES:** Where did you get your ingredients like the bulgur wheat and the olive oil and things? You had them imported somehow?

**00:36:56**

**MLN:** Well, you know, we had to be kind of lucky and a lot of times the ladies—several of the ladies who made the church bread and who did a little cooking for a living, they would order like a 100-pound sack of wheat, and they would sell to whichever of the ladies needed some wheat and things like that. But wheat was mostly the stuff that we had the hardest time finding, you know. And—and we did have some ladies who—who sold food for a living and they were outstanding cooks.

**00:37:28**

**AES:** Did they sell just out of their homes? They sold traditional Lebanese food?

**00:37:31**

**MLN:** Yes. Yes, they did. They sold out of their homes and—and—and people from all over would buy from them the rolled cabbages, and of course those were the same ladies who—who might be commissioned to do the church bread that week, you know. And of course they made the—the little Arabic bread, like the little pita bread. They made that, too.

**00:37:52**

**AES:** About when was this that women were selling food from their homes?

**00:37:55**

**MLN:** Oh, I'd say in the [19]40s and the '50s. We've got a couple of ladies now who sell Lebanese—who sell Lebanese food for a living. And one—my cousin Helen is a caterer, but she will make Lebanese for you, if you ask her to. But she doesn't just specialize in that, you know.

**00:38:19**

**AES:** Did you ever hear any stories or do you know any stories, personally, of—of the—the process of assimilation that the Lebanese community had here in Vicksburg in introducing, you know, the existing community here in—in Vicksburg to Lebanese food and if that was difficult in the beginning or how people developed a taste for that—that food here?

**00:38:39**

**MLN:** I couldn't say about that, personally, but, like I told you, we're all very friendly people, and I'm sure there's not a Lebanese lady in town that hasn't fed some of her neighbors. And when you walk into a Lebanese home, you're immediately offered some kind of refreshments. And it could be anything from the pastry that somebody might have made to maybe a piece of *kibbe* that was left from lunch or something. They're very hospitable people, and they offer you something to eat. And I know that a lot of lucky neighbors got to partake of this, that, and the other. And it just—I don't think we ever had trouble selling the tickets. And certainly not now. In fact, we've—we've considered just capping it off like 2,500 people, and if you don't have a ticket, good luck next year, you know. But I don't know that we'll ever do that. We enjoy it so much! And we enjoy seeing our friends come and everybody so happy and content and just souping it up, you know, so—.

**00:39:38**

**AES:** How do people get a ticket? From the church?

**00:39:38**

**MLN:** Well, we're all given some tickets to sell. And my cousin Helen takes care of that. She puts an x-number of tickets in your little envelope, and they welcome you to sell them. If you need some more, let us know. We'll bring them to you. And—and people—the people have gotten to where they kind of have a regular route of regular people. I'll—I'll see somebody going out the back door, and I'll say, "Are you coming to the dinner?" "Yeah, I just got my ticket from so-and-so," you know. So they've gotten in the habit of buying their ticket from a particular person.

**00:40:10**

I haven't worked up a clientele like that. I seem to use up all my tickets myself, you know **[Laughs]**. That Dinner costs me a fortune, actually, **[Laughs]** because I'm not going to invite my kinfolks to come from out of town and then expect them to pay ten dollars for dinner. So, you know, the dinner costs me plenty. I use up my own tickets. Of course, I've got some available if it'll save you a trip, you know, and of course you can get them at the church, too.

**00:40:34**

**AES:** How much were tickets when the dinner first started in 1960?

**00:40:36**

**MLN:** I can remember when the dinners were two dollars, and I was a widowed little mother, and I could hardly afford to buy a ticket. Of course that wasn't the only one I had to buy. I bought for my—for the maid keeping my baby. I bought one for my daddy. And I—you can't stay up there and work like a dog all day and not eat, so I had to have two tickets. And I'd always get me one for the next day. I'd call it withdrawal. **[Laughs]** I just—I hate myself when I don't buy that second—that third meal for Tuesday, you know.

**00:41:09**

But I always had to use my tickets for—for my little group.

**00:41:15**

**AES:** Tell me about the apron you're wearing.

**00:41:17**

**MLN:** Oh, yes. I do have this—it's just a red—it's a polka dot apron. It's basically red, and the polka dots are white, and it's a cobbler apron with the four big pockets across the front. The first year I came home, I served in the—I served in the dining room, and I saw the need for a handy place to keep the money—the change, you know, because I'm in a hurry and the people are in a hurry. And you've got to know where the ones are and the nickels and the dimes and everything else. So by the time the dinner came around for me the second year, I had made six of these cobbler aprons for the ladies who worked behind the pastry table and the two ladies who worked in the dining room. It's a real—you know, you keep all your ones in one pocket. There's four big pockets on this apron. And you separate your money, and that way you can make change a lot quicker.

**00:42:08**

And—and I did—made six of them. I've still got—I lost one. I lent one—we were having a party out at the Waterways Experiment Station where I work and I—I wanted my team to have—all be dressed alike so—and somebody didn't return one apron, so today I only have five. But I think I made them in 1968, and I keep them here at the house, and I wash them and iron them, and I get them ready for the next dinner. And I guess that's why they've lasted so long because they've had so little use.

**00:42:36**

**AES:** They're in great shape. It's remarkable. It's a beautiful little apron, so sweet. So tell me about the—the dinner that you made for me here today. Tell me about everything that you cooked—after you take a sip of your tea. Time out. It was such a lovely meal.

**00:42:55**

**MLN:** Well today we had the snap beans that we have at the dinner, and we had the *kibbe* that we have at the dinner. And we had a tomato salad instead of the combination salad with the wheat thrown in—a cross between combination and *tabouli*, you know. And I love this particular tomato salad when tomatoes are fresh and really in season and—very tasty. And the dressing is just mint and onions and salt and pepper and olive oil and lemon juice, and it will make you slap your mama.

**00:43:27**

**AES:** So there's a trick to putting it together, though. Tell us that.

**00:43:29**

**MLN:** Yes. Yes, you don't just chop it all up in a bowl. You—you—you chop up the mint and you grate the onions, and that's another secret about making the *kibbe*. You grate the onions; you don't just chop it up. And then after you've got this mint and this onion together, you put in the salt and pepper and you crush it with your fingers. You get those juices out of the mint and the onions. And then you put in your olive oil, and you mix it around a little bit, and then you put in the lemon juice and mix it again. And you let that marinade until it's time to put it on the chopped up—your cut up tomatoes, not chopped, but into, you know, big bites and just top that at the last minute and—and—and the gravy that's left off of it [*Laughs*] is so good on hot cornbread. So nothing goes to waste.

**00:44:21**

**AES:** And tell me about the other things you made. We had grape leaves and those olives. Tell me about the olives that you made.

**00:44:26**

**MLN:** Yes. Yes, I like to buy—my personal favorite on the olives is the black Greek olives, and I pour off the brine, and I'm very careful not to touch the olives at all because there's something on the skin that changes the taste of the olives and you can't get it out with loving or money. So you pour that brine off very carefully; you rinse the olives two or three times. If you have the chance, let them soak in freshwater maybe half the morning and then you pour that off. And you—then you add a little olive oil to it and maybe one bud of garlic or whatever seasoning you like. If you like rosemary or dill or—or whatever—and then you put the top back on there and you rotate that bottle every time you pass the kitchen table. You very slowly rotate it so that—that seasoning in there will get carried around by the olive oil and season those olives. And always be careful to use a spoon or something to get the olives out. And the ones I prepared today I did about three days ago, so the garlic would do its job. And—and they're very—always very popular.

**00:45:39**

**AES:** And now the stuffed grape leaves that you made were made with grape leaves from your yard. Tell me about that.

**00:45:44**

**MLN:** Well I don't know how many years ago my daddy planted the grapevine, but we've always enjoyed it. And I've got a real nice arbor out there that's six feet high, just right for me to reach up and get the tender new leaves. And—and I feel—I feel like I'm doing something with him when I go out there to pick grape leaves.



**00:46:07**

Of course, the—the vine is getting a little bit older and the—it produces less. And I seem to have a problem with bugs out there. I've got pine trees out there, and they're loaded with bugs and critters and things, and so I have—sometimes the diseases get on the leaves, and that disturbs me. But if you keep up with the fresh leaves, they're the tender ones and they're at—always at the end of the runner, you know, so—.

**00:46:29**

When I was a young girl I used to go get 150 [leaves] about every other morning. But and—and I've noticed that about mid-July they start getting smaller and tougher, so you have to get the leaves you want. And I've gotten into the habit of—of rolling my grape leaves and freezing them, and I—raw, everything raw—and I'll—I'll work with three cups of wheat—three cups of rice and whatever leaves I've got. And if I have leftover leaves, then I might make up more rice or if I've got some—some rice left over, it makes a wonderful side dish. So I'll just cook it up and have it as a side dish.

**00:47:10**

But I—I work. I strike while the iron is hot. I get out there every other morning or so and get the fresh new leaves. And I save them until I've got enough to work with, and I'll sit down and roll all that I've got and all the rice. And I put them in the freezer one batch at a time. And then when I'm ready, like today, I got out a dozen and cooked it for you and me.

**00:47:35**

**AES:** And the special pot you have that fits exactly a dozen?

**00:47:40**

**MLN:** [*Laughs*] Well, I bought that as a lark because, you know, I'm by myself now, and I decided all my pots and pans were way too big and that I might want to just heat up something a little—real quick. And I was going somewhere one day, and I said, "I think I'll fix just a few grape leaves." Well, it took a dozen, and that turned out to be plenty. And so I fixed a dozen for you and me today.

**00:47:59**

**AES:** And you put—you—you stuff the grape leaves pretty tightly in that pan, and then you covered it. Was that a layer of waxed paper on the top?

**00:48:06**

**MLN:** Well, actually, that's that new paper that they've got. What do you call it?

**00:48:09**

**AES:** Parchment?

**00:48:12**

**MLN:** Parchment, yeah. I can never think of that word. Although that pan is the Teflon that doesn't burn, I don't trust that. So I'll put two or three sheets in the bottom and—and I don't pack the grape leaves in real tight. That—that—they all need a lot of water to cook that rice. The rice is raw, see. So but it just so happened that it holds a dozen, and I fill it up. And I added a little extra water this time to be sure that the ones on the top were cooked. And of course I—I added a bunch of lemon juice. You have to remember to put that in there and—and you have to watch them so they won't scorch. And you also—I also put a piece of parchment on the top with

a little saucer or something to hold the tops one down long enough to where they'll cook—have enough water to cook, so—.

**00:48:59**

**AES:** And tell me about the size of your stuffed grape leaves. We talked about that for a minute, too.

**00:49:03**

**MLN:** Well my daughter-in-law asked me one time what determined the size of the grape—the finished product. And I laughed, and I said, “Well, the leaf, of course, because they’re all different sizes, you know.” *[Laughs]* And I don’t—there’s no point in making them uniform, but most of them are uniform, you know. They usually come out the same. The ones that you buy are uniform and so forth but that’s—I don’t know how they did that.

**00:49:29**

But I like the way mine turn out. Mostly, they’re a good three bites, anyway. And I did—the ones that I served you today, I had them in a container that says, “Some large, some small.” But I’ve got containers in there that are very uniform. Those are the ones that we’re going to use at the flea market coming up in October.

**00:49:49**

**AES:** The flea market?

**00:49:49**

**MLN:** Uh-huh. Vicksburg has a flea market up around the Old Courthouse Museum, and that's my favorite place in Vicksburg. And they are not subsidized by any government project or anything—or department. And so they're going to have a booth this year that will have different things, some of their souvenirs from upstairs. And they are promoting a cookbook, and they're going to have some things out of that cookbook. And I'm donating some Lebanese food for the profit of the old courthouse. I'm going to take *kibbe* and grape leaves and spinach pies.

**00:50:25**

**AES:** Speaking of cookbooks, let's make sure to talk about the Women of St. George Cookbook here[, *T'ai Bien*]. When was that published?

**00:50:31**

**MLN:** This is—it's the—the book that we've put out several times. I was looking in here. It's been published five times, and they had the dates. Here it is. See, our first printing, second, down to the sixth, and we kept increasing the amount of books that we've made since—1988 was the first printing. And—and we've put—redone it five—five—six times.

**00:50:59**

**AES:** So this—this also would have been a fundraising tool for the church?

**00:51:03**

**MLN:** Yes, it is. I think it's up to ten dollars now, and the title is *T'ai Bien*. And it's hard to pronounce if you've—if you've never heard the word, and I don't know if the spelling is anywhere close to being correct. But when I went to Lebanon one time, I learned just a few

phrases and *t'ai bien* means delicious. And when I came back, I was driving everybody crazy saying, "Oh, *t'ai bien*," you know, and "*ikteer, ikteer*" means very, very. And so we just—they—when Helen was putting this book together, she decided to—to call it *T'ai Bien* because it means delicious.

00:51:43

**AES:** And tell me about some of the recipes that are in there. You mentioned earlier that it's organized kind of in a funny way.

00:51:50

**MLN:** Well we—we cook with lentils and with yogurt, and of course we have the meat dishes like anybody else does. And we have a bevy of sweets. We have wonderful sweets and the phyllo dough, which I don't think anybody makes anymore [*Laughs*]. Of course, we've got a lot of vegetable dishes, because you know in Lebanon they don't eat that much meat. *Kibbe* is a treat; they don't have *kibbe* every Sunday. You—you just don't eat meat that often.

00:52:20

And, of course, the reason that the Lebanese came to this country liking lamb is because Lebanon is a very mountainous country and cows take grazing area, so they—and there's no place in Lebanon for cows to graze. Lebanon is 100 miles long by fifty miles wide, and it's got two major chains of mountains coming through there. Therefore, they—they have no room for cattle grazing, so they have sheep and goats. And that's why our food started out in—I don't know—everybody loves lamb, I think—of course, you know for a while we were getting what was it—the Australian lamb that was so strong, and people thought they didn't like it. But lamb is really delicious.

00:53:03

**AES:** Tell me about the section [in the cookbook] that's "Church Food." Is that recipes from the dinner?

00:53:07

**MLN:** Well, no, ma'am, I think that's just the bread, yes. It's called the *Kurban* [the holy bread used in church services]. The Lebanon—the Lebanese language has two—two more letters in the alphabet than English, and they're guttural sounds. And this—it's like [**Gestures**]; it's guttural [**Laughs**]. That's all I can tell you. One is a G-H and one is a K-H and it's—let's see. Well, I don't know if I can think of a word. Oh, like, you know, hummus has a counterpart that's made with eggplant. It's called *baba ghanoush*. You hear that *ghanoush*? That's one of the letters that they don't have in English. So this is just the holy bread for church and—and this is a—a wheat that we make for a memorial service. And it—you boil the wheat, and you season it. I've never made it, but you put walnuts in there and those beautiful covered—candy-covered almonds and it's just when you're commemorating someone who has passed away.

00:54:21

**AES:** What's the significance of that, the—the symbolism?

00:54:24

**MLN:** Well it's just—just the—like people do it on the anniversary of their death or something like that and you get a little cup of it as you go out of the church, just like you get a piece of holy bread for communion.

**00:54:37**

**AES:** Tell me about the holy bread that—that was not homemade by church members for a long time and then just fairly recently people started—women started making the communion bread again.

**00:54:49**

**MLN:** Well, you know, when—when the first—the church first started and your family volunteered to have the communion bread for that particular Sunday, and you also had the privilege of honoring your dead and so forth. Well most of those immigrant ladies could do—could make the bread, see. And then finally, as they started getting occupied with jobs outside the homes, like their husband's business and so forth, we had four or five ladies who could really make outstanding church bread. And some of them would do it. You know, you could hire them to do it.

**00:55:24**

All the ladies could make wonderful bread, but they just weren't open to the public, you know. But there were some—three or four—that you could hire to make the bread for church service. And I don't remember my mother making it too many times because she did help my father in the store six days a week. And—and then we—we went through this phase of not having anybody to make it; nobody had time to do it. It really is an all-day job. You know, you're sitting there waiting for bread to rise again. And they used to punch it down twice and then shape it up again and—and then bake it. It really was an all-day job.

**00:56:02**

Even making the little pita bread is an all-day job, especially when you've got to make five big loaves. And I would just make a little two-pound of sack of flour for my home use, but, you know, when you're using ten pounds of flour that's an all-day job.

**00:56:16**

So finally, we decided to go with a couple of bakeries. Well nobody was happy with that. It just wasn't satisfactory. I sang in the choir and I didn't dare eat a piece of church bread until we were through singing because I couldn't get it down. And so then we came up with the idea, some of us were kind of aching to get the good old bread back, and we started talking about buying a commercial mixer. Well we talked about it. It was several thousand dollars, you know. And so we said, "In the meantime, why don't we just make a batch and see what happens."

**00:56:52**

The ladies enjoyed it so much, we decided against the commercial mixer. We enjoyed doing it ourselves. And the thing is so many people are turning out now to help with it, you don't get to do but one ten-pound package of flour. And I found that disappointing. I wanted to make a couple. I wanted to work up some proficiency. And I wanted to do it more than once. But we had so many people there wanting to help. So it's going very well. It's going very well.

**00:57:18**

**AES:** Tell me about the stamp that goes on the top of the bread.

**00:57:22**

**MLN:** Oh, can you give me a minute to find that?

**00:57:25**



**AES:** Sure can. Sure can. We can pause. *[Recording is paused for approximately two minutes, while Mrs. Nossner looks for mention of the stamp in one of her books.]* All right, we're back and you have a—I'm sorry, a cookbook that was sent to you by Ralph Nader that was written by his mother, Rose—is that Rose Nader?

**00:57:38**

**MLN:** Uh-huh, and there's a note in here that he wrote. And therefore, it could have been his secretary or something. I don't know. It doesn't matter. But I had written him several letters while he was campaigning, and maybe he just got used to seeing my name or something *[Laughs]*. So this book showed up one day, and I have used it several times.

**00:58:00**

**AES:** The book is called *It Happened in the Kitchen; Recipes for Food and Thought*, and the inscription from Ralph Nader says, "Enjoy and relate to the young."

**00:58:10**

**MLN:** Uh-huh. And he says, "To Mary Louise." *[Laughs]* And he made the mistake of putting my name on there twice. "A belated response to your good letter; I'm sure you will enjoy the book from beginning to end." And the recipes are great. I have made her cheese several times. And I—.

**00:58:28**

**AES:** Is that the cheese recipe you were describing to me about hanging the—? Tell me that. Tell—if you would real quick, tell me about the handkerchief and—.

00:58:34

**MLN:** Okay. Well, if you want to make yourself some homemade *labneh*, we call it. Because the word in Arabic is *laban* where the Jews call it yogurt. And of course they put it on the market first, so it's yogurt to the world, but to us it's *laban*. And if you would like to make yourself some cheese that's equivalent to the spreadable Philadelphia [brand] creamed cheese, then you buy a big carton of plain yogurt. You can—it works up all the way up to the highest power or down to no fat, you know. It works both ways. And you take a couple of spoons out and—and eat that, of course; don't throw it away. And—and put it back in the refrigerator a couple—three or four days and let it get a little bit of tartness to it. And then you pour the water off, if there's any water accumulated, and then you mix it up good so it'll have the same thickness all the way through. Then you get a deep little bowl and—that would accommodate all of the yogurt that's left in there, put your daddy's linen handkerchief in the bottom, and you pull the four ends out and lay them out carefully. And then you pour that yogurt down in that little container, and then you pull up the four edges, and you pin them together with something big like a diaper pin. And then you hang it on the spigot on the—in the kitchen over the sink and eighteen hours you let it drip, and anything before that it's still too soupy and twenty-four hours, it's too dry. So, eighteen hours is just right to get something like the Philadelphia Creamed Cheese.

01:00:16

And you take the pin loose, and then you dump it into whatever kind of serving dish you want and cover it and put it in the refrigerator. It comes out like a little apple, just rolls out. And, if you'd like, you could put some olive in on there to keep it moist a little bit. And keep it covered so it won't dry out, and you've got your homemade Philadelphia Cream Cheese, no fat if that's what you wanted.

**01:00:39**

**AES:** All right. And so you retrieved this cookbook. We were talking about the stamp that goes in the communion bread.

**01:00:45**

**MLN:** Oh, yeah, that would be in this one.

**01:00:48**

**AES:** And this is the Syrian—the Syrian Cook—.

**01:00:51**

**MLN:** Helen Corey has put out a lot of Lebanese cookbooks and her—her cousin, Father Nicholas Saikley, was our Minister here for many years, and—here it is. Look, I opened right to it. Now this is the stamp. It’s a wooden stamp that goes—that you—you put on top of the church bread for communion. And you see this [the letters depicted in a grid pattern in the center of the bread: IC, XC, NI, KA] means Jesus Christ, King of the Jews. And—and these twelve [triangles] over here—three times three—that’s nine [they are the Angelic Hosts and the Saints of the Orthodox Church]. There’s—all these different things in here mean something during communion. And the priest, when he’s blessing the bread, he will cut certain parts of this out of bread. See, you press it down real hard before you bake it, and then it stays in there.

**01:01:37**

And he pinches out certain parts to put in the communion—communion vial and—and you get a little bit of that when you get your wine. We have a common cup in the Orthodox Church. And so that's what this little thing represents.

**01:01:58**

**AES:** A picture of a baked loaf—loaf here to the left [in the book]. So, is the stamp that you use for the loaves, is that original to the church? Is that some old artifact that the church has?

**01:02:07**

**MLN:** Yes. Is it what?

**01:02:11**

**AES:** Is it—is the actual stamp like an old artifact of the church that's original to the church?

**01:02:15**

**MLN:** No, you can buy new ones. You can buy new ones. There's a little—you want—you want to turn that off and let's read that? You might want—it's a little detail. It says, "The Priest removes the center portion from the first loaf and places it on the paten." That's part of the communion silverware. "From the second loaf he removes the large triangle piece in honor of the Blessed Virgin and places it on the paten. From the third loaf he removes the nine smaller triangular pieces in commemoration of the Angelic Host and the Saints of the Orthodox Church." And so on. See, it's all very symbolic.

**01:02:53**

Have you ever been to an Orthodox wedding? I had a young lady tell me that she thought that was the most religious and the most romantic thing she had ever seen. And she was married in a different church, and she said on the way home, “I told my husband that our wedding was nothing compared to what we had seen at the Orthodox Church.” It’s all very symbolic. And you—the bride and groom are there in front of the priest, you know. And you take—you take three turns around the little altar there. That’s symbolic of your first walk through life. And you get three little sips of wine. That’s symbolic of your first meal together. And they have the crowns. Have ever seen that in the movies? Well they’ve got crowns of different kinds. It could be just a little roses—little—little ring of flowers, you know, but the groom has one, and there’s a ribbon hanging down the back. It looks kind of funny on a man, **[Laughs]** but it still is very romantic. And the groom has one and the bride has one. And the Priest will reach up, and he’ll say, “The servant of God, Harold, is betrothed to the hand-maiden of God, Mary Louise, in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.” And he makes—goes back to the groom and makes the sign of the cross. He does that three times. Everything is done three times in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

**01:04:13**

And then when it’s the bride’s time, he takes her crown, and he says, “The hand-maiden of God, Mary Louise, is betrothed to the servant of God, Harold, in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.” And he does that three times. And my husband’s grandfather told him, he said, “Boy, they tied you in so many knots, you’ll never get loose.” **[Laughs]** And I said, “Well, you know, that’s the object of getting married is—is to be married.” So it really is a very romantic and very religious thing.

**01:04:43**

**AES:** Now what—are there any special and—and symbolic and traditional foods that are associated with the—the reception after a wedding that—in a Lebanese culture?

**01:04:52**

**MLN:** Not that I know of—just whatever the family can afford and how big they want to do it, but not that I know of. But it is a very romantic wedding. And in the Orthodox Church, the—you know, we've started asking all of our friends to stand up with us and everything but actually, the—the best man is supposed to be Godfather to your children. And the maid of honor is supposed to be Godmother, but only if they're Orthodox, see. So it's a lot of tradition.

**01:05:22**

**AES:** So tell me—tell me about that and how, you know, the—the Lebanese Dinner is symbolic of that tradition of—of your culture and your church and the Orthodox tradition and—and what the future of that might hold.

**01:05:35**

**MLN:** I really don't know that our dinner has any relationship to any of the church service or anything in the Old Country or anything. I think it's just something that we did out of necessity to raise some money, and it just got to be bigger than we could handle. And it's kind of like catching something by the tail. You're scared to let go of it, [*Laughs*] you know, so I don't think it has any connection otherwise, except that we're very proud of our food, and it's very popular. And we believe you're certainly getting your money's worth.

**01:06:06**

**AES:** So what do you think the future of the dinner is if—if you know the declining membership in the church and—and your friends and colleagues getting on age and what might hold ten, twenty years from now?

**01:06:16**

**MLN:** Well, I think by popular demand we're just going to have keep this up somehow or other. And we've seen an interest in the younger people, even the kids> There are things that the kids can do and they're—they're there to help. And they—and they have been a big amount of help and they'll be more of a help as they get older. And the teenage girls are helping and—and the young mothers, well, you know, a lot of the young mothers are working outside the home today. But we try to schedule things on Saturday so people can come and help. And we have good turnouts. We really do.

**01:06:55**

**AES:** Now the—the dinner is obviously open to the—the greater community of Vicksburg. Is there anybody from the greater community of Vicksburg who also volunteers to help or is it just church members?

**01:07:05**

**MLN:** Well nobody volunteers to help. We handle that ourselves. But we do welcome people to come and learn, because, like I told you, we don't keep our recipes a secret. And we have people who come and spend a few hours. You can see the whole operation in a few hours, you know, and—and they marvel at—at how much work we do.

01:07:24

**AES:** And so is it—is it—tell me about how the dinner works. Is it a sit-down dinner, or is it like a buffet or people buy plates or how that works.

01:07:33

**MLN:** Well if you can fight your way into the church, [*Laughs*] you come down this long dark hall. And if you're going to get takeouts, well, that's the first stop on the left, but it's well marked. But if you're going to eat in the dining room, you continue straight ahead, and you'll pass the pastries on the right, but you usually get those on your way out, because if you want just a little something to eat, I take care of that in the dining room. But they go on straight ahead, and you've got a ticket. You either bought it at the door or from one of your friends or something. And you take your left, and you follow the line by the big table. And you give them three tickets; they'll hand you three plates ready to go, and you go find a place to sit and visit with everybody you know in the area. And maybe you sit long enough to have a cup of coffee or something, or you flag me down and buy a couple of pieces of pastry. And then you make your way back out to that same hall and—and we usually sell out of pastry and that table—we just—we've just got all we can handle there.

01:08:30

And those girls work like Trojans. They really do.

01:08:33

**AES:** And I want to ask you about the pastries because you also had—you had a lovely tray of pastries that is—is usually a tray that you would sell at the dinner, correct?



01:08:41

**MLN:** Uh-huh, yeah. We sell—we make those up. We call them prepackaged for a person that just wants to try a little bit of a lot of stuff, and they don't know what to call it, and they don't know what it is but they want it, so we've got five pieces on there. And it's a true value because each piece—the last time, they're up to \$1.00 a piece. We started out at much lower prices years ago, you know.

01:09:04

But anyway, it's a good seller because it's ready to go, and everybody is in a hurry. So but we sell—we have big silver trays lined out like this, you know [*points to the cover of The Art of Syrian Cookery*] these big pretty trays just packed up as high as they'll hold of—. I don't even know the total number of different kinds of pastries that we have. Some of them are homemade. Some of the ladies still want to make things at home and bring it in and—and we started out with being reimbursed, if you wanted to be reimbursed. And today I don't know if people are being reimbursed or if they want to be. It's just not in my purview anymore.

01:09:40

But we have a lot of variety. We—we try to keep it Lebanese as close as we can, but if you want to bring in your favorite little cookie, we're not going to tell you no. But we're trying to keep it genuine.

01:09:52

**AES:** Tell me about some of the cookies that were on that tray today.

01:09:56

**MLN:** Well we have the—what the world calls *baklava* and of course in Arabic we call it *baklawa*. And that's the phyllo dough with the roll of ground pecans in the middle and soaked with rendered butter. And that rendered butter makes a big difference. That's what makes it taste so good. I've made it before by just melting a stick of butter, but you really need to cook that butter to—to get that different taste to it.

**01:10:24**

And then we have some cookies that we call it *ma'mool*. That's the number two favorite. The *baklava* is the number one favorite. All the men love *baklava*. But the number two favorite is the *ma'mool*, which can either be a flour cookie-base or the Cream of Wheat. I don't think we have anybody making the Cream of Wheat anymore. I think all those ladies have died. But they're filled with either ground pecans or dates, cooked dates. I used to buy those for my daddy because he wasn't big on nuts. Then the third favorite is one called *sambousek*. That's a half-moon shape and it's a little filled cookie with a dough base and the—the ground pecans on the inside.

**01:11:15**

And let's see; we had a—we over in the package we were eating today, we've got a cocoon or, let's see, what do you call it—butter finger. We used to call them butter fingers or cocoon, just butter and nuts and dipped in powdered sugar. And I think that about covers everything on that plate.

**01:11:36**

**AES:** Well tell me about—you said that some—some of the older ladies would make that one cookie with Cream of Wheat. Do you mean that boxed breakfast cereal that you buy on the grocery store shelf or do you mean some other—?

**01:11:51**

**MLN:** Yeah, Cream of Wheat, that was the cookie base. Instead of using flour, they'd use Cream of Wheat. And I'm—they may have had to put a little flour in there to give it a little holding power, but that's the way my godmother used to make it. I remember, she was—I think she was the only one that made it with the Cream of Wheat, and I really liked it. It was kind of grainy, but it was good. And hers were so tender and good.

**01:12:14**

**AES:** Do you—do you know how the appropriation of that ingredient came about in any way?

**01:12:18**

**MLN:** No, I really don't. I'm sure the recipes are in the books. And our priest's wife, Father Nick's wife, I used to call—I called him Father Nick and I called her Mama Grace. She would make the *ghry-bee* over there, the little round cookie with the pistachio—what is it—pistachio—some kind of—no almond—almond. You put an almond on top. She made really good ones that would melt in your mouth. And it was just flour and sugar and—and melted butter. And it just was—nobody made them like she did.

**01:12:53**

**AES:** Well now that reminds me, too, I'm going to ask you about that spice that I'm not going to try and pronounce because I've forgotten already but that—that special mixture of spice that you were talking about earlier.

01:13:01

**MLN:** Well it's—it's just now starting to come out on TV. I heard—who is the boy?

01:13:10

**AES:** Tyler Florence?

01:13:11

**MLN:** Tyler Florence, that's right. I heard he was talking about it one day. And I knew what he was talking about, but he had the wrong pronunciation. He said, "Za-tar." But I said, "No, darling, you've got it wrong. If I had your phone number, I'd call and tell you how to pronounce it." It's actually *zaartar*. It's spelled z-a-a-r-t-a-r. And in Arabic you—you pronounce both of those As, *zaartar*. And like in—you've heard of Baalbek. It's got real very famous Roman ruins. Well, in Arabic it's pronounced Ba-albeck—you pronounce both of those As, you see. Not Bal-bek but Ba-albeck. And I think that's so pretty.

01:13:53

But anyway, it—I think it's in this book, if you'll give me a minute, I'll tell you what that *zaartar* is made up of. [*Zaatar is a blend of savory herbs (usually thyme, oregano and marjoram) sesame seeds and salt.*]

01:14:04

**AES:** Okay.

01:14:06

**MLN:** I saw it in here, and I was really surprised to find it. This is Mrs. Ralph Nader's cookbook, Ralph's mother, and she's got some wonderful recipes in here.

**01:14:14**

**AES:** You were telling me that *zaartar*—I'm not going to say it right, so I apologize.

**01:14:19**

**MLN:** *Zaartar*.

**01:14:19**

**AES:** *Zaartar*, but you were telling me that it goes great on biscuits.

**01:14:24**

**MLN:** Yes, it's wonderful just as a covering for bread, like cinnamon—you know, cinnamon rolls and stuff. And I bought—one day I bought the little—the little twist sticks that you bake, Pillsbury something or other, and you twist the little sticks, and they're fun to eat. Well I—I lay them out flat, and then I rub all of them with olive oil and then I sprinkle the *zaartar* over it and then I twist them. And so you've got one side that looks plain and the other side the *zaartar* is showing. And then I cut them up in like six-inch intervals just so they'll be easier to eat, and they're always very, very popular at the Church.

**01:15:03**

And if you wanted to just take a Ballard [brand] biscuit, if they make Ballard(s) anymore or the small Pillsbury and just rub a little olive oil on the top and sprinkle some *zaartar* on there it—. If you like it, you'll love it.

**01:15:15**

**AES:** And now some of these things like that—your jar of *zaartar* has—you have it in an old peanut butter jar, but the label is written in both English and Arabic. Where are you getting that—that spice and other things like it?

**01:15:29**

**MLN:** Well I actually bought—I bought that from a Lebanese grocery store in Jackson, Mississippi. I think it's called the Mediterranean Grocery Store [Mediterranean Grocery & Café in Ridgeland, MS, just north of Jackson]. And he's opened a little restaurant to go with it. And I buy most of all of my wheat and everything from over there. And this was a very large package. I just would have been happy for a little one-ounce jar, you know, but that was the only size he had. And so I've shared it with two or three different friends, you know, and I've got plenty—you know, plenty to use when it's cool enough to turn the oven back on. I'm not doing it anytime soon.

**01:16:03**

**AES:** Has there ever been a—a formal Lebanese—not formal but a Lebanese restaurant here in Vicksburg?

**01:16:10**

**MLN:** We've had several restaurants here, but they weren't genuinely Lebanese. They were things like Armenian. I mean Jordanian or African or whatever, you know. It wasn't really

Lebanese. And they did all right at first, just long enough for everybody to try it out, but then they realized it wasn't really what they're used to here in Vicksburg.

**01:16:28**

We should have a restaurant here because our food is so popular, but it just goes back to nobody wanting to spend their whole life in a restaurant, you know, and—or to manage it or—. I noticed something in the show that I was telling you about, the Anthony [Bourdain] show ["No Reservations"] on the Travel Channel. Two different places had very successful restaurants, but they had their food brought in by these little housewives who cooked it at home and brought in a certain batch of something. And the business couldn't have been any better, but they're having it done on a small basis in a private home. And I think that's the success.

**01:17:03**

If we could do that in Vicksburg, we'd have a phenomenon on our hands, but we can't get any commitments [*Laughs*]. I—I tell you what, I thought I had—you know, I'm embarrassed. I thought I had a lot of stuff located as to where we could find things and what they were made of and all that. I found them somewhere, but I just didn't do a good job of finding it.

**01:17:27**

**AES:** You're fine.

**01:17:29**

**MLN:** If you want to cut that off.

**01:17:30**

**AES:** Well we have a lot of stuff to talk about here, so I don't want to lose any of our conversation but you don't—I mean I don't want you to work too hard to find something if it's not going to rise to the top.

**01:17:40**

**MLN:** Well it had to be somewhere that would be evaluating what the different spices were. And maybe I was wrong about it being in this book.

**01:17:47**

**AES:** Well there is a spice page in here, which is what reminded me—in the Women of St. George thing.

**01:17:54**

**MLN:** Well, if you see it.

**01:17:56**

**AES:** But that spice is not listed, but there is a page of spices here: “Handy Spice and Herb Guide” [in the *T'ai Bien* cookbook].

**01:18:02**

**MLN:** Well, I'm going to see if I can find it in this one. Oh, okay, let's see. I don't see *zaartar*. I'm going to get new glasses soon. I'm tired of closing my right eye to be able to see anything. No, it's not there. And I started to go back and look that up so that I could tell you what *zaartar* was made of.



01:18:38

**AES:** Now, may I ask you a question about your name, and that is did you happen to marry a Nosser, or did you keep your family name?

01:18:43

**MLN:** I kept my maiden name. I decided a long time ago that I—that—well when—when my husband died, I stayed with the name Scott. But after I got a divorce from the second husband, I decided that anybody who wasn't man enough to appreciate me, I was not going to carry his name around the rest of my life. So I paid that judge to let me have my name back. And—and when my husband, third husband proposed to me, I said, "Now you're going to laugh at this," I said, "but that's one of the reasons why I thought I never wanted to get married again, because I don't want to change my name anymore. I have never been anybody but Mary Louise Nosser, and that's who people recognize me by." And he said, "Oh, honey, that wouldn't matter. You'd still be my wife." And I said, "Oh, thank you." **[Laughs]** So I didn't change my name. But I can tell you, some of those little farmers out there in that Mississippi Delta thought that was mighty terrible that I didn't change my name.

01:19:44

But you know, when you're eighteen years old and you get married, you don't have any legal papers to change or to worry about. But when you're somebody's grandmother, it would take you two years to make all the legal changes in everything you've got. And he died in eleven months. So I would not have accomplished the job before I had to go back and redo everything again. So you know, it didn't—didn't take away one ounce from our marriage, and I'm still where I belong, Mary Louise Nosser. Isn't that crazy **[Laughs]**?

01:20:13

All right. Well I'm—I'm sorry. *[Regarding not being able to find a mention of what's in zaahar.]*

01:20:18

**AES:** That's all right. Don't worry about it. Do your children cook traditional Lebanese foods?

01:20:21

**MLN:** Well, my son is very—he's—he's gotten real proficient with the grape—I mean the cabbages lately, and he's really proud of how they turn out. He loves to cook, and I'm glad of that. And he's good with lamb. He always fixes lamb on the grill. They make *kibbe* and the Lebanese dirty rice, which is lentils and rice cooked together. And he makes shish-kabob which—which we call *laham mishwee*, and he usually makes that out of lamb, you know, cubes of meat with onions and stuff. And well I—I can't—he makes good *tabouli*, and he says his—his *hummus* is really good. And he loves to eat, that's for sure *[Laughs]*.

01:21:13

**AES:** Well and tell me, for the record, we didn't get these details earlier, but both of your parents' names and where in Lebanon each of them was from?

01:21:22

**MLN:** My father was from Chikhane, and when I was over there in—let's see, Rainey [my son] was born and he was sixteen when we went to the Old Country so it was the late '60s or the early '70s. I took him to the American University to see what the chances of his going to college there.

And when I told the administrator that my father was from Bekhaaz, he kind of smiled. And I said, “What—what is funny?” He said, “That is a very ancient pronunciation.” And I says, “Well my daddy is 75 years old. I guess that’s ancient enough,” **[Laughs]** you know. So—so my daddy was from Bekhaaz. And my mama was from—no, I get it—wait a minute. Give me a minute— from Chikhane —my father was from Chikhane, and my mama was just over the mountain in— in—I’m having some senior moments here **[Laughs]**. Maybe I need a drink of iced tea.

**01:22:27**

**AES:** Okay. Okay, have—have a sip.

**01:22:35**

**MLN:** Okay, Mama was from Bekhaaz, and Daddy was from Chikhane. You got that Chikhane, that guttural thing I was telling you about. And so Daddy says he remembers here. He was six years older than she. But she said she didn't remember him in the Old Country.

**01:22:53**

**AES:** What was her maiden name?

**01:22:53**

**MLN:** Mitchell. Mitchell, or that’s what it was translated to in this country. You know, they changed up a lot of—a lot of names at Ellis Island because they couldn’t understand what the people were saying, and they didn't really have a translation. It was—I think it was something like M’khail in the Old Country, and nobody could spell that so they changed it to Mitchell.

01:23:18

**AES:** Now her name was Rebecca, the—the equivalent of Rebecca in Arabic, and then she was known as Effie here?

01:23:22

**MLN:** Uh-huh; Raffka is the way it's spelled—pronounced, Raffka. And Daddy's—Daddy's name is John, which is Honna and his middle name was Mike or Meka'il and then Nosser. But Daddy told me that in the Old Country our name was—they changed it at Ellis Island because he had an uncle here, who—and one of his names was Nosser and they—that's the way they changed it at Ellis Island but his name in the Old Country was Shakour. Shakour.

01:24:00

**AES:** How would you spell that?

01:24:01

**MLN:** S-h-a-k-o-u-r—Shakour It's close enough, but I like Nosser.

01:24:12

**AES:** Well and speaking of Ellis Island, there's this paper here in front of us on the table that your church collected funds for the restoration of the Statue of Liberty.

01:24:17

**MLN:** Uh-hmm, we sure did. That's something that I'm really proud of. Here's the original news clipping out of the Vicksburg paper. It was 1985. They were doing the restoration of the

Statue of Liberty. And we had a food sale, and here's the cashier's check copy. We sent \$843.96 to the restoration of the Statue of Liberty, and we did it with a food sale.

**01:24:48**

We sold *kibbe* and *baklawa*, and I think cabbage rolls. And I think—

**01:24:56**

**AES:** And you're quoted in this article.

**01:24:57**

**MLN:** What, hon?

**01:24:59**

**AES:** You're quoted in this article.

**01:25:00**

**MLN:** Well, I was kind of the honcho on this thing. It was my idea. And of course I had a lovely committee at the church. I just asked them—when I mentioned it—when I mentioned it, oh, they fainted and fell out, you know. And they thought we was having another Lebanese dinner. But I said, “No, this is much smaller, and I just want volunteers. We're just going to make a little bit, and we're going to send it to the Statue of Liberty because this country has been good to the Lebanese, and it's payback time.”

**01:25:27**

So I had about maybe a dozen people who honcho(ed). We had the cabbage and the *baklawa* and the *kibbe*, and it was not painful. And I did hand-worked signs and put them in the

different office buildings—you know, in front windows and hung them on posts and things.

**[Laughs]** And I—I don't think there was any other place in Vicksburg. I seem to remember some little something that somebody else had, but it was nothing sizable. But I—for the most part, we were the only people that sent anything to the restoration.

**01:25:57**

And this—this is a copy of the certificate they sent us, and it's in the priest's office in—in the church.

**01:26:09**

**AES:** Well and tell me about—is this [photograph] your father and your siblings?

**01:26:11**

**MLN:** Yeah, it looks like an immigrant family, doesn't it? Of course we were not actual immigrants. You know we were all born here in this country. But this was 1935. This is my daddy and my oldest brother and my second brother and my baby sister, and this is me, and I'm assuming Mama was—this is her shadow and she was taking the picture. And this was—Daddy's store was right over here, and he had this little rental house right next door where a black woman lived.

**01:26:41**

And so that's the way we all looked in 1935. And **[Laughs]**—and this is the way we looked when we moved to this house in 1939, five years later, see—four years later.

**01:26:58**

**AES:** Quite a bit more polished.

01:27:01

**MLN:** Yeah. Well, more Americanized it looked like. I'll tell you, this was Depression time, honey. Everybody looked like who—who drug it in, you know. But this is out here on the front—out on the corner of the front porch. That's where we were standing. And this—and we took our next picture in 1981 standing by that same corner of the porch. The heights had kind of evened up [*Laughs*].

01:27:25

**AES:** My goodness.

01:27:26

**MLN:** And then the last picture that we took together before my oldest brother passed away—this was in December of [20]07, and this was down at Anchuca, very nice antebellum home and restaurant [in Vicksburg]. And we posed for this picture.

01:27:45

**AES:** And we have a stack more of things here. I don't—do we want to talk about all of them or just some highlights?

01:27:50

**MLN:** Oh, this was—I was calling a friend to see who was the oldest Lebanese person in Vicksburg. And I talked to Frances Abraham Thomas, and she said it was her—her grandfather. His name was George Abraham. And he came in the late 1800s. And there was another man, K

Jabot or Jaboa who also came at that time. And this George Abraham went back to the old country and got two of his sons after World War I was over, and he brought them back to—to Vicksburg and they settled.

**01:28:25**

**AES:** You were talking about your grandfather earlier. Do you have an idea of what year it was about that he came over?

**01:28:31**

**MLN:** No, I really don't know what year Mama came because she came a few years after her parents did. See, she was left in the old country with a grandmother who perished, and I just have more documentation on when Daddy came. But they—they didn't know each other. They didn't come together. They weren't married at the time in other words.

**01:28:51**

**AES:** But you mentioned your grandfather who came and peddled in Mississippi and the one who died.

**01:28:57**

**MLN:** It was my Daddy's daddy. He—he came over here to make money for the family. You know, things were always poor in Lebanon. And he was killed over there in Louisiana. Now my—my mother's daddy settled in Meridian, Mississippi, and he had a grocery store and he farmed—he farmed a whole city block of stuff right there by the house. And I don't know what all kinds of businesses he was in, but I know every once in a while he'd raise some goats because



he needed goat's milk for his stomach. And he would sell it to other people who also needed goat's milk, you know. And—and they—he was on that same little corner by the railroad track.

**01:29:38**

Just to show you how times have changed, when I was five or six years old my mother would put me on the train and tell the conductor to let me off at my grandpa's store in Meridian. You couldn't do a child that way today, honey. You'd never see that child again. But I would—they'd put me on the train, and the conductor would put me off at my grandpa's store [*Laughs*].

**01:30:00**

**AES:** My goodness. So maybe both of your grandfathers would have—would have arrived here in the late 1800s, then, sometime, at least.

**01:30:06**

**MLN:** Yeah, I think so.

**01:30:09**

**AES:** So this is a photograph of your father and his grocery store on the—?

**01:30:14**

**MLN:** Yeah. Yeah and here's a picture of my brother when he was finally closing up after seventy-four years.

**01:30:21**

**AES:** Hmm. And your father—is this a bunch of candy he has on the counter? Can you tell?

**01:30:32**

**MLN:** Yeah. Well, it does look like candy, doesn't it. Could well be. He had groceries and hardware and a little fruit and a meat market.

**01:30:43**

**AES:** It says—the caption under the photograph it says, “Mr. Johnny’ has been serving the public in a grocery store for fifty years this past weekend. He went to work for his cousin T. D. Farris on October 9, 1921, and opened his own store in May of 1924. As the grocer says, ‘I’m still serving the people with a smile.’”

**01:31:00**

**MLN:** And this is my brother. After seventy-four years, they threw in the towel. That was the last mom-and-pop store in Vicksburg.

**01:31:16**

**AES:** My goodness. All right. Wow, and then you have this large folder here. What are we—what images do you have?

**01:31:25**

**MLN:** These are also of the Lebanese dinner itself. I thought you might want to see those. And they belong to Miss Sue Thomas, Miss Rosalie Thomas, and I promised them on my life that I'd be responsible [*Laughs*] for getting them back over there.

01:31:38

**AES:** Okay, so these are mostly all newspaper articles, which we can take some time to look at.

01:31:47

**MLN:** And some shots—some photographs.

01:31:51

**AES:** And some—here's a copy of a newspaper article that published some of the recipes, I see.

01:31:55

**MLN:** Yeah, we always—every year, we—it's practically the same recipes over and over. It looks like everybody would have them by now, but we're still having people call and ask—wanting the recipes.

01:32:07

**AES:** And here are a couple of black and white photographs of women it looks like mixing *kibbe*. I can tell now, you say it takes someone strong. **[Laughs]**

01:32:12

**MLN:** Yeah, uh-huh. You see, you're working with thirteen pounds of one thing and eight pounds of another. That takes a lot of shoulder grease. And they—they have nice article and they'll pair it up, mother and daughter, sometimes all—one family, they'll let one family. They try to have something new and interesting every year when it comes to—to advertising the dinner.

01:32:40

**AES:** And here's a photograph from 1980 that looks like maybe a reporter—.

01:32:45

**MLN:** No, that's Johnny Thomas and Mabel Abraham. Now this is the mother and daughter thing, and you see it's a whole page. And here's another mother and daughter, and they have— have the recipes on the—. You know, we're only down—we're only down to a half page now. They used to give us a whole page, [*Laughs*] but now we get a half page. We're—we're so widely known. So this is a mother and daughter and same thing here and same thing here.

01:33:13

**AES:** Wow.

01:33:15

**MLN:** And the recipes all over the place.

01:33:19

**AES:** I see Lebanese green beans listed right there: one onion, diced; garlic; Oleo or butter; parboiled green beans; cinnamon; salt and pepper to taste.

01:33:31

**MLN:** You know this dish here, the lentils and rice, you can eat it—have it dry like a porridge or you can put a couple of cups of chicken broth in there and a can of chick peas, and you've got a wonderful soup [*Laughs*].

**01:33:49**

**AES:** Well I—I think I'm going to—I would love to take some photographs of these. So maybe we could wrap up our recording and just, you know, ask you if you have anything else to share that maybe we didn't talk about or a final thought for the record here?

**01:34:01**

**MLN:** Well I think we did very well with covering the dinner and parts of the church and our uniqueness in—in Vicksburg. And if you ever get the chance to go to an Orthodox wedding, do it because it's—it's something to see. It's just full of ritual and—and biblical stuff. We—we hope to live a while longer here in Vicksburg. We've lost a lot of people, but we are starting to have a few new babies and so forth. So we're going to hang—hang on a while longer [*Laughs*].

**01:34:34**

**AES:** Well I do have one—a two-part question that I'd like to end on, if you don't mind, and that is to ask you what's your favorite Lebanese dish and then your favorite Southern dish?

**01:34:44**

**MLN:** Oh, fried chicken is my favorite Southern dish. I used to be famous for my fried chicken. You see this right here? Where is this? [*Rummages through a kitchen drawer.*] I want to show you the first thing I bought when I married. Here it is. This is the first thing my husband and I

spent money on was this fork. I love a fork that will pick up something. You know, a lot of these forks are so blunt they won't pick up anything. But we went to the hardware store and bought a good fork for me to do my fried chicken. And when [Harold Max] Chrestman, my third husband, called some of their old Air Force buddies to tell him that he was dating Scott's wife, the guy said, "Oh, I remember her fried chicken." **[Laughs]** I didn't even remember him, but he remembered my fried chicken. So I love fried chicken. I really—and I haven't fried any in a long time.

**01:35:37**

You know, but I think *kibbe* is my favorite Lebanese dish, and I like it any way it turns out—raw, fried, baked, anything.

**01:35:46**

**AES:** Do you have a secret to your fried chicken that you'd share, something that makes it special? And your *kibbe*, too, for that matter?

**01:35:52**

**MLN:** Well, no, I don't have a special recipe for the *kibbe*, you know. I'm kind of at a loss now, not being able to taste or smell. I'm going on other people's charity. But on my fried chicken, I clean it good, and I would blot it dry. But then I'd sprinkle a little water on it really so it would hold the flour. And I'd put—I would just do the salt and pepper at random and—and put flour on it until it—you know, it all stuck. I think the real secret was I used a cast iron skillet, and I always used fresh Crisco that had never been used for anything else. And if it was still clean and nice when we got through, I might strain it and use it for the next batch of chicken but never for anything else. But I think the secret really was the fresh Crisco.

**01:36:49**

And of course you have to have it medium-hot. And I'd turn it twice. And I would drain it on paper, and I don't stack it on each other. I drain them separately. You know, I'd stack them next to each other. But I hate to see somebody take something out of the oil and put it on top of something that's already drained. So I drain them separately so they don't get greasy, but I think that's it.

**01:37:13**

**AES:** How did you learn to cook?

**01:37:16**

**MLN:** Well I was the oldest daughter in the family, and when my mama came home on Saturday night, my place was in the kitchen with her. And many, many times I had to cut up and clean two fryers for Sunday dinner. Mama might be sitting there cleaning out the squash to stuff them, but I usually was in charge of the chicken.

**01:37:38**

And we've got a family joke going. My—my younger sister still does not know how to cut up a chicken because Mary Louise had to do it all the time, see. So, but yeah, I did. I—I—I learned right here. Mama did the work herself, but she wanted you there to hand her everything she needed. But you still learn a lot just by watching.

**01:37:58**

**AES:** And you learned to—to cook in this kitchen where we're sitting right now, yes?

**01:38:02**

**MLN:** Uh-hmm, yeah, uh-hmm. And when I was thirteen years old we didn't have a maid anymore. You know, they started moving to Detroit and all that you know, and so I—I learned how to iron and to mop this white floor and—and—and help with the cooking.

**01:38:19**

**AES:** Well it's been a privilege to sit in this kitchen with you here today and eat with you and listen to these stories. So thank you so, so much for your time.

**01:38:25**

**MLN:** It was my pleasure. Honey, you come back any time. We'll do it again [*Laughs*].

**01:38:30**

**AES:** Yes, we will.

**01:38:31**

**[End Nossier (Delta Lebanese) Interview]**