

Oral History Transcript
Ms. Mary Winston Mayes
30 April 2011

SANDRA DAVIDSON (SD): Hello. My name is Sandra Davidson. Today is Saturday April 30 and I'm talking to Ms. Mary Mayes. We're at 3715 Florinda Street in Houston, Texas. Good morning.

Mary Mayes (MM): Good morning.

SD: What is your full name?

MM: Mary Winston Mayes.

SD: Okay. And where and when were you born?

MM: I was born in Clayton, Mississippi. I'm now seventy-five years old.

SD: That's wonderful. Well, we're here today to talk a little bit about food. So tell us please about your favorite kitchen experience growing up. For instance, who was there? What was being prepared?

MM: Well, I was reared by my grandmother. Do I need to mention her name?

SD: Sure if you'd like to.

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MM: Okay. I was raised by my grandmother. Her name was Essie Guy and, of course, I was always around her. And I was in the kitchen with her most of the time.

SD: Did you have any brothers and sisters there with you?

MM: No.

SD: Okay.

MM: All of my brothers and sisters passed away.

SD: Oh, I'm sorry to hear that.

MM: Yeah.

SD: So what kinds of things would your grandmother make?

MM: Well, she would make—well, back in those days—she would always make homemade biscuits for breakfast. Most of everything that she made was homemade. What did she make? She would make homemade biscuits. She would make fried chicken, of course. She would make—one of my favorite desserts that she would make would be molasses bread which now is called gingerbread.

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MM: She would also make a dish, a dessert—it was called a butter roll which you don't see that anymore. I love it, but it's too much cholesterol in it now because it's made of sugar, butter, and ginger or even nutmeg with homemade pie crust.

SD: So how would you make that?

MM: You would make a pie crust. Then you would take the pie crust—you would roll it out. Then you would cut it in four squares, this way and then half that way. So you would have—the pie crust would be in, I guess you would say “fourths”. Yeah, because a half and then a fourth.

SD: So it was kind of a long rectangle?

MM: Right. And then you would cut it in four pieces. And you would put about, I would say, a cup, a half to a cup of sugar. Then you would put your butter on top of the sugar, your nutmeg or ginger, whichever one you like. And you would roll it into a roll, and then you would put it into the pan and pour about a cup or a cup and a half of milk all over it and put it into the oven and bake it until it was golden brown, which all of the sugar would melt. All of the butter would melt. Then you would have a nice sweet dessert.

SD: That sounds wonderful. About how long did it take to cook?

MM: Well, I can't really give you a time but she would cook it until the crust was brown, just like you would make a peach cobbler, or apple pie. And you would leave it in the oven until the crust browns. And then it would be done.

SD: That sounds good. Did she make that pretty often?

MM: Oh, yes. Yes, because it was a dessert that the family liked. She would make it and gingerbread. Well, it wasn't gingerbread then. It was more or less molasses bread.

SD: Was that more of a loaf, or was that more like cookies?

MM: No, she had one of the round, iron skillets. You've seen the iron skillets?

SD: Yes.

MM: Okay, she would make it in the iron skillet. And she would put it in there and bake it just like you would a layer cake.

SD: And when she was making these things, were you helping her make things?

MM: Well, I was rather small. But as I grew older, I could help to stir it while she put all the

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ingredients in it.

SD: What traditions did you carry on with your family related to that experience?

MM: Well, I only have two children. I have a son that has cerebral palsy and I have a daughter. And as my daughter grew, she was in her early teens and I started learning her how to cook.

SD: Does she enjoy cooking, too?

MM: Yes, she does. She didn't enjoy it at first but after she finished high school and went off to college, then she became interested in cooking. So now she's a very, very good cook. She makes dishes that I can't make.

SD: Does she like the old family recipes or does she make a lot of more modern-type dishes?

MM: She makes more of the modern recipes. She went to school in Louisiana and she learned how to cook a lot of dishes from a family that she met there. And the grandmother is a very good cook and she learned how to cook from her. So she cooks a lot of the Louisiana dishes. She cooks other dishes, too, but she likes to cook a lot of Louisiana dishes.

SD: Now, some of these things that you mentioned, like for instance the butter rolls, do you think that's more of a Mississippi recipe or a Southern recipe?

MM: I would say Southern recipe. Yes.

SD: Okay.

MM: Because whenever I tell people about it here, they've never heard of it before. They've heard more of a jelly roll cake. I'm sure you've seen those in the grocery store.

SD: Yes.

MM: So when you say “jelly roll” they would think more of a jelly roll cake than a jelly roll—something resembling a pie, you know.

SD: So when you talk about a “jelly roll” are you saying something more along the lines of a pie?

MM: You know, maybe I made a mistake in saying “jelly roll”. It was a butter roll.

SD: Oh, okay.

MM: A butter roll.

SD: Do you have any particular pies in your family that were maybe real notable or real popular?

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MM: In my family—I like sweet potato pies. That's one of my favorite pies, is a sweet potato pie.

SD: Do you have any memories of making any of those when you were younger with your grandmother?

MM: Yes, that's where I learned how to make the sweet potato pie was from my grandmother because my mother, she passed when I was three and a half so I wasn't able to learn anything from my mother. So all my cooking experience when I was young, I had to get it from my grandmother because there was no older sisters. Well, there were aunts, but I didn't get any cooking experience from my aunts. I got it all from my grandmother.

SD: It sounds like she was the matriarch of the family.

MM: She was.

SD: So in terms of holidays, what were the holidays like regarding cooking?

MM: Oh, wow! The holidays was awesome. My grandmother would make cakes, pies, chicken and dressing, potato salad. All of the good stuff.

SD: And when would she start preparing all that?

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MM: In the olden days, I think they would start cooking cakes and pies maybe a week before Christmas. So by Christmastime, you'd have all your desserts and everything—of course the main dishes like the chickens and the meats, they would prepare those on the day of, or maybe the day before. Back then you didn't have too many refrigerators and the modern things that you have now. So they had to cook according to how they could preserve it for the holiday.

SD: Well, that's a good point that we don't often think of. How did she keep things cool?

MM: Well, we had—back then we didn't have a lot of refrigerators. We had an icebox where you would keep everything. You would use a block of ice. Have you ever seen the old iceboxes?

SD: I have.

MM: Okay. Then you can somewhat imagine how we would keep the food, you know, you'd put the ice on one side. Then on the other side you would have your food. And if it was in the wintertime, it was real cold. And they would have rooms where you could put the cakes and the pies. And it would just be preserved from the natural cold, you know.

SD: Do you have any other particular memories that you can think of regarding food in your family.

MM: No. No more than the—just the old tradition of what they used, you know like in the wintertime

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they would can a lot. In order to preserve their food they would do a lot of canning.

SD: And what kind of things would they can?

MM: They would can meats. They would can a lot of different vegetables in order to have it at a later date because as far as—we have freezers and refrigerators that have freezers. And we can put our food in the freezer or in the top part of the refrigerator to preserve it. Back then, they didn't have that. So in order to do a lot of preparing their food and preserving their food, they had to can it in order to keep it.

SD: Is that something you learned how to do as well?

MM: I didn't learn how to do too much of canning but I was there with my grandmother when she was doing it, you know. When you're a young person, back then you didn't learn how to—at least I didn't. I can't speak for others. I didn't learn how to do a lot of it. And as I grew older, I wish I had because what your parents and your grandparents did, it would be a help to you and you could pass it on to your children. And a lot of that I didn't do. And now, I'm sorry. I wish I had.

SD: Yes. When your grandmother was cooking and making things for holiday meals, or when she was canning or preparing the vegetables, did any of the other neighborhood ladies come over and help? Was it a community-type thing, or was she mostly by herself doing these things?

MM: No, she had friends that would come over and help. They would get together and maybe make some food. They would get together and do quilting and all of the stuff that was done back then. It

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was done with a neighbor or neighbors.

SD: One last question. Do you feel that you learned any lessons or wisdom that weren't necessarily related to food or cooking? Values like the importance of being organized or planning events?

MM: Oh, yeah. I learned how to do a lot of things that did not pertain to food. All of my learning mostly growing up was with my grandmother. In some cases, you can learn more from your grandmother than you can your mother. Your mother is there, which mine wasn't. So all of my learning and all of my upbringing was done by my grandmother.

SD: What kinds of lessons do you think you learned from her?

MM: Oh, I learned how to sew a little. I learned how to cook. I just learned how to be a young lady at that time. So it was so many things—wisdom, knowledge, and all of that stuff I learned from my grandmother.

SD: Is there anything else that you'd like to add?

MM: No, I think that's about all.

SD: Okay. Well, thank you very much.

MM: You're welcome. Thank you.