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Interviewee: Northup, Temple
Interview Date: November 10, 2014

University of Houston
Oral History of Houston Project
Houston History

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Place: Active Learning Classroom, Cougar Place, University of Houston

Interviewer: Ismelda R. Correa

Transcriber: Ismelda R. Correa

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Abstract:

Dr. Temple Northup is co-director of the Gulf Coast Food Project, which is based at the University of Houston Center for Public History. The Gulf Coast Food project is focused on food research in the Gulf Coast region. Northup elaborates on one of the branches within the project, Houston Eats. Elements of the local food movement were discussed in depth. They include farmers markets, sustainability, and key players in Houston that have influenced the movement. He described the local movement, unintentionally, has an elitist connotation, which lead the project to shift its focus towards food access issues within the Loop. From his experience, Dr. Northup points out how the local food movement is vastly different within the U.S. and how it differs from where the movement originated, Berkeley, California.

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON
ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT

Dr. Temple Northup

Interview Date: **November 10, 2014**
Interviewer: **Ismelda R. Correa**
Place: **Active Learning Classroom, Cougar Place, University of Houston**
Transcriber: **Ismelda R. Correa**

IC: This is Ismelda R. Correa and I am interviewing Dr. Temple Northup, a professor at the Jack J. Valenti School of Communication at the University of Houston and co-director of the Gulf Coast Food Project. We are interviewing in the Active Learning Classroom in Cougar Place, a dorm on campus. Can you state your name?

TN: Temple Northup.

IC: Let's talk about your background. Are you a native Houstonian?

TN: No. I have grown up and lived all over the place. I was born in Paris, France, and left there at an early age. So when I was about one I moved to New York City with my parents, obviously. Then we moved to Lake Charles, Louisiana, when I was five.

[Momentary interruption by a student.]

I moved to Lake Charles, Louisiana when I was four or five. Stayed there until we were…eleven. Then we moved to Seattle. I was there through high school. When to college in North Carolina then moved to L.A. Lived in L.A. seven years, went back to upstate New York to get my masters. Then back to North Carolina for my Ph.D. and now I am here in Houston, so definitely not a native Houstonian.

IC: Your undergraduate was in anthropology but your graduate work was in communications. What drew you to that major?

TN: The undergraduate major was, I chose, primarily as a way to get credit for going out and studying abroad and just focusing and learning more about cultures and culture interactions. It was really interesting to me. I went to a little, tiny private high school in Seattle and we actually had an anthropology class in high school, which is a little unusual. I had taken an anthropology class before so I was familiar with the ideas of cultural anthropology and studying different people, groups, of different areas. That drew it to me with and as an added bonus it is a way to get to study abroad for extra credit, which made me interested in it.

IC: What about communications, though? How did you make that shift from anthropology to communications?

TN: A good thing about life is that what you major in does not actually matter. It is a little secret that they don't always tell you in college but at least it does not define you. I do not think I ever intended to be an anthropologist, per say, in life. I just thought it was an interested major. It is useful. It is one of those liberal arts degrees that is useful in broadening your perspective and get to think critically so that is what I used it as. But I often had the idea that once I graduated from college I would move to Los Angeles, where I worked in television; there isn't really a major, per se, that helps you do that. I mean, I am in the school of communications. We obviously have media production and various majors related to the television production but at the end of the day, those do not really help you get jobs. They don't really matter because you first job is just getting coffee and things like that. It doesn't matter how skilled you are at operating a camera. Then I moved to L.A., worked in television and that was my communication

professional background. Then I thought about what do I want to go back to graduate school for it was communication. It was never anthropology.

IC: You mentioned you have lived all over the United States and you've attended three universities, all in the East coast. What brought you to Houston?

TN: Houston. What got me to Houston is a combination of things. As I mentioned, I lived in L.A. I lived there for seven years. I really like large cities. I don't like small cities. I do not like towns. I like things to do. I like culture. I like food. When I think about where I want to live, that narrows the choices largely. When I moved to upstate New York, I also discovered I hate cold weather. I never lived anywhere cold. So even though I lived in Seattle, Seattle never gets really cold. It is pretty mild. It certainly gets colder than Houston but it doesn't really snow. I discovered after living in L.A. that I have to have sun and I cannot have cold. That really limits your options. It is mostly southeastern United States and southwest too. This job opened up and it fit what I was looking for. It is definitely not cold and it is definitely a big city so that is how I ended up here.

IC: In 2008, the Gulf Coast Food Project came about. Where you here when it got started?

TN: No, I did not get here until 2011.

IC: Currently you are the co-director. How did that happen? Did you apply for the position or?

TN: No. When I got here, I went to a new faculty breakfast and I happened to sit at a table of someone who is no longer here but who worked in the dean's office in the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences. We were chatting and started talking about food and my own interest in food. She said, well, you should meet Monica Perales and Todd Romero, who have some sort

of food project. She did not know anything beyond that; that is how I got initially hooked up. I emailed. I don't know if it was both of them or just Todd, but I sent them an email introducing myself. We began meeting and just talked about our mutual interest and there was never a…you know, we call each other co-directors, that is true, but there isn't exactly a hierarchy or structure. We could give each other any title we wanted so it was sort of a natural thing that happened. Once the project began to grow and we began to have more formal classes. We have a website and things like that was when it became we should have more formal titles, I guess. There was never an election or what should our titles be. It just sort of happened.

IC: Can you tell me about the Houston Eats, which is a subprogram of the food project?

TN: The food project has many different arms but one of them is Houston Eats. Houston Eats is basically the documentary arm of the project; that is where all the documentary projects are being made under, sort of, that name. Again all the things we are calling it, they are arbitrary. It is not like there is a Houston Eats budget; there is no budget. We have called that the unifying name. The Houston Eats is documentary films. As short as three minutes and as long as twenty minutes that are looking at some food topic in the city of Houston. It could be anything from, people have done it on home brewing, OKRA the charity saloon, to food access issues, nutritional programs at schools, things like that. It can really be anything that involves food. So that's what the Houston Eats is all about. It is just trying to find interesting stories in the city of Houston related to food.

IC: Who creates these documentaries? Do you have a set of students or faculty?

TN: It is primarily students. Monica Perales and I, co-teach a documentary filmmaking class. It is offered every year; this being the third time we are doing it in the spring.

IC: Is that about how long you have been here?

TN: Yes, that is where the majority of the content comes from. We will divide teams into five students or something like that. They will have to come up with the topic and go out and do the project so most of films on there have come that way. There are some that students have done on their own; sort of as their independent projects. One person got the provost's research scholarship so she could spend some time working on a project like that. I have gotten a grant to continue one of the student's projects. Right now, we are sort of are filming and working it right now. Most of them come from students but there are some that come from that one class but some come from students or myself in addition to those but most of them area the class.

IC: In a way you are recording history except it is the food history of Houston.

TN: Yeah. As we have been navigating these courses, the very first time we taught it, we taught it as a cross-listed course where Monica Perales has an oral history graduate course. We had an undergraduate communication course. We have got five or six graduate students with twenty five or so undergraduates; that was the first time. The second time it was just an undergraduate course. The third time, now we are going to cross-list it again. The idea is to have sort of like, it is a history of food, but we are hoping to have even more context. Now we are just sort of figuring out what we can even expect of students and what the quality of work is and just trying to figure out the class. We have not been quite as strict, in terms of some of the things we

would like to have in the class; in terms of background, in terms of some better inner user and things like that. We are recording some sort of either moment of time or something like that.

IC: One of the topics is farm to table. How does the Gulf Coast Food Project define the local food movement?

TN: You know in some ways; I think when I started I thought that was going to be the focus. Is a sort of local food movement, in that sort of farm to table, locavore, whatever mentality. The focus is turning out to be a local food movement but not that local food movement. A criticism at times, of farmers markets even and definitely that sort of farm to table mentality, is that it is elitist and it is not intentionally trying to be elitist but it sort of it. In that you have to be able to drive to these farmers markets, they tend to cost more, are a little bit more than the grocery stores and so it is sort of a luxurious thing to be able to just go. As we were doing a project on the school nutrition program, one of the kid's mom talked about, well it is hard to eat well because there are no grocery stores around where we live. That has really taken us down this path of looking at food access. Part of it is grocery stores. We are not abandoning the local food movement, per se. One of the projects that I think we are doing next spring is on something called Hope Farms, which just got a grant from Wells Fargo. It is opening another building, a like farm, an urban farm in the Sunnyside neighborhood.

IC: That is interesting.

TN: They area also partnering with Go Healthy Houston. They have done healthy corner stores, which is bringing in fresh food but also things like granola bars to corner stores.

IC: Can you repeat that name, please?

TN: The Go Healthy Houston is who does the healthy corner stores and Hope Farms is going to be done by a non-profit group called Recipe for Success. It has a lot of elements of the local food movement. Go Healthy Houston also does farmers markets and these multipurpose community centers. They are doing it like once a month for, can't remember what they call them, but they are these centers where people can go for help paying bills, help doing various medical things, but they have a farmers' market there too. We are focusing more on that. It is a local food movement but it is a different one.

IC: Yes. It is a different type.

TN: In a lot of ways it is. We all like the idea of farm to table, and that is a choice we make, but for us It is almost a human rights issue-- well let's first get people to have access to produce and then we will worry about it being organic and local and whatever.

IC: You have mentioned there is a stigma that farmers market or the traditional local food movement is elitist. Do you think restaurants like Revival Market have influenced that thinking?

TN: I mean, I don't. They are all, like everyone, we have done a thing. With the farm to table film we had included Revival Market. I think his name is Ryan Pera or something. Those guys area all really awesome. Everybody, you know, in Houston is coming from a very positive place. In a lot of ways the people I have spoken about this. There is a guy named Benny, I forget his last name, who is the chef at Down House in the Heights. You k now they are realistic about the situation. They are not, don't think they hurt it. There are some people in the food movement who are like myopically focused on it just needs to be local, it just need to be organic from small farms with happy kale or whatever. I don't think that is really if you want to go to the case in

Houston. I think people are more open to idea so that might be their issue but they certainly understand. They might not have been exposed that much to food access or that is not their primary concern. They might just be coming at it from purely an environmental stand point. You know, that is what they want to work on is sort of looking at it from that perspective and try to influence that and hopefully their influence will influence whatever local grocery store that are in the Third Ward or whatever. You know where they are getting the food, hopefully it will have an influence on them. I don't think, those guys, like Monica Pope they are living up to that elitists. I just think it happens to be. If you want to go to Revival Market, it is not cheap. There are huge portions of the city that one if you can't get there if you don't have a car, you know. Two even if you could get there, it is unrealistic for them to spend that much money.

IC: From the people that stick to the definition of local food, I have done some research and none of it defines what local food is because it is so geographically based. In Houston is there any association to it? Any distance?

TN: There are certainly farmers markets that have restrictions. I am trying to remember what it was. In North Carolina, where I lived before here, it was seventy miles was the radius. I think it is bigger than that here. Part of it is you just can't grow as much stuff close to Houston, I don't think, compared to some other places that just have a more conducive climate. They are definitely a lot of farmers markets have that sort of restriction. I know like, we just met with the person from the City of Houston last week. They are making a push for local, but they are defining local as Texas, you know that is. El Paso is as close to Houston as Tampa, Florida, is or whatever. You know it is hard to define. Everyone will define local a little differently. I think, I am sure Urban Harvest has a geographic limit to how far away people can come. I think some of

the community farmers markets don't have that. Some of the city farmers markets that they run in these lower income, don't have that. Instead their focus is

IC: Food access.

TN: Let's get celery to those neighborhoods regardless, in essence, of where it is coming from. They try to work with local farms to get as much as they can but there is not that requirement, per se.

IC: You mentioned Urban Harvest. How do you think Urban Harvest has played into this local food movement?

TN: I mean they are definitely huge players in the scene. They are really fantastic. A group that is really working at doing it all sort of fronts. They are obviously, they don't run the town in terms of farmers markets, but they certainly have the largest ones. I think they are growing probably considerably. They are in the history of farmers markets in Houston. It certainly seems like they have gotten larger over time and certainly more numerous, that is because of Urban Harvest. They are the ones who have certainly been spear heading it but they are also very active in terms of the schools. They have a huge school program. One of the projects we did was on a teacher at Gregory Lincoln, I think is the school that she is at, but it is Urban Harvest who is in there helping her. I went to one of the ways where they were prepping the garden and it is one of the Urban Harvest people that are overseeing the program; they have after school programs. They are not just focused on farmers markets as being…they are definitely huge and important in trying to get people to buy from farmers markets, grow their own food, just sort of recognize you can pay attention to what you are attention

IC: You mentioned pay attention to what you are eating. Would you say that the local food movement guides people towards eating healthier?

TN: Yeah. I mean, generally speaking. If you are big into the local food, you are going to be paying more attention to what you are eating. You will be going to farmers markets a lot, by definition you are getting a lot of fruits or vegetables or whatever that are growing in season. It definitely encourages you to eat better. In general if you are going to farmers markets, the produce will be grown in a sustainable way. Probably with fewer pesticides. It may not be organic, certified; it is really expensive to get certified and so most local farmers cannot afford the certification. They tend to have a certain perspective. If you are eating meat, the meat needs to be antibiotic or hormone free. Probably lived a happier life. It definitely encourages you to think a lot more about what you are eating and putting into your body, which is a good thing.

IC: A social movement is defined as a loosely organized but sustained campaign in support of a social goal, typically either the implementation or the prevention of a change in society's structure or values according to *Encyclopedia Britannica*. With that being said, would you consider the local food movement a social movement?

TN: Yeah. I mean, I think they are trying to change, in a lot of ways, how the food system, how and where we get our food. You know, in general, I think the local food movement is focused on environment as much as anything else. If you look at the large agriculture businesses, they are using a lot of pesticides and they are not treating the soil in the best way that is necessarily sustainable. Most local farms are not doing that. They are being better. I think the local food movement is trying to change the structure and how we eat, in terms, of how we are growing and producing our food. I think if you focus too individual on the local food movement, people will

disagree. I tend to think they can't eat purely local and is not necessarily the best way to do it. There are certain areas that can just grow things better. There is a reason we get our coffee from Colombia. They just have great weather. It is not always from an environmental perspective, if you use more energy to grow something. It might be more energy efficient to grow something else and then bring it to you than to grow everything around you. I think in terms, it is definitely sort of changing. The goal is definitely to change how food is being eaten. They are seeing that slowly happening. Obviously there is a lot more organic food, in general, at grocery stores. The problem of course is when large companies start taking control of things. It might not be any more sustainable. They just won't use quite as many pesticides. It is definitely; we can see the change. How much organic and there is a lot more hormone-free chicken and beef. Things like that than there ever used to be. I think those are the changes we will continue to see, slowly, better treatment of animals. Overall, we will continue to have sustainable practices. It is because of this local movement influencing things.

IC: You mentioned the farmers, and the farmers are as important as the consumers. Through the Gulf Coast Food Project, have you or any of your students, interacted with any of these local farmers?

TN: Not much; there is one project, the farm to table one that has the goat farmers on there. To my knowledge, I am trying to think, there is one student who went off to an artist commute or farmers out there, but it is not really farmers. We haven't really interacted much with those. We have been much more focused on Houston; there is a lot to tell about Houston but also for students and for us it is easier to drive ten minutes than an hour. We are at the very beginnings stages of working on some project at the Gulf. Trying to get some stories that are related to some

of the fishing, shrimping, and those sort of industries. We have been working with some people down there, just sort of talking about stories ideas and things like that. We are going to expand next is south and to tell those stores, eventually. It would be great to talk to more farmers. It is just a matter of time. You know if we are only doing some a few projects a year and the end of the day you have to choose.

IC: Just from your experience, would you say economically, the local food movement is helping farmers or any local producers?

TN: Yeah. I mean. It is my opinion. I don't really know. It seems there are a lot of farmers markets now. You know you are never going to get small farmers to go out and start farming if there isn't somewhere for them to sell their food and produce; having farmers markets and having people that actually want go to those farmers markets is critical. You can get people to do it, but if no one is going to go buy it…

IC: True.

TN: You know, they are all going to go out of business. In that sense, the people, the farmers markets are important. The restaurants, there are a lot of restaurants like Revival Market that are pulling from local farms and those are all important in sustaining those farmer. It is definitely a link.

IC: Do you think eating locally, or just being more aware of where our food comes from, will become more prevalent in Houston? Houston as a society versus just individuals.

TN: I mean, yeah. It is going to happen, I think. People will slowly and it will start. Not even the upper class but, you know, people that have the disposable income to care about that. It will

slowly change and probably filter into other neighborhoods and other areas. Even though, I will say, it is absolutely somewhat elitist, the local food movement. In general, like movements of any sort, tend to start at the elitist because they are the ones who sort of have the time and the ability to think about those sort of things. I do think we will slowly get this changing; there are people. One of our projects was healthy eating in the Third Ward; there are some places. There is a place called Conscious Café; it is on Scott. There is a place on Martin Luther King called Sunshine Market. These are just two examples of places that either, Conscious is either vegan; Sunshine might be vegetarian. It is certainly healthy if not vegetarian. I can't remember. You can see the influence of, you know, the broader food movement on places like that, which are now beginning to give alternative food options in neighborhoods that are primarily fried foods or whatever so that is where you can see the influence. Those people are trying to get people to start thinking healthy and hopefully. I think Conscious Café that women started at Sunshine. You can sort of see it's spreading out slowly.

IC: About the local food movement, how do you think it will develop in Houston? For example?

TN: I mean, how I see it. I imagine that, you know, over the next twenty years we will see more farmers markets. I am surprise in some ways; we don't have any yet. It is sort of the most recent trend for new developments, like suburbs developments, to have farms. It is like a thing that it is happening. I have seen it in Georgia so I think things like that are going to start popping up. It is going to be like the idea of growing food locally is going to start infiltrating into communities. It is not just having a farmers markets. It is that you are actually part of a community garden even though you may not actually be gardening it yourself. I think things like

that are going to start happening or you will see a lot more. Community gardens are popping up. They already are. The UH one is right there but if you drive down Alabama there is one. If you drive down Elgin, there is one. I think we are going to see, not only more farmers markets but more local farms. I think the more of these you see the more you starting thinking where your food is coming from. I think that is another part sort of that influence of the local food movement are these little farms. You are not going to have a plot like that one, the UH one. It is not going to serve a huge community but it can actually create a fair amount of food. It can just be a very visual reminder that you can grow food; that food actually comes from somewhere. There is book, I don't remember what it is called, *Food Matters*, anyways. Part of the argument is the industrialization of our food has disconnected us from the foods and supply. Things like, very clearly, animals, we just think of that is what a chicken is. You can see chickens at the zoo or you can see chickens elsewhere, but you are very disconnected of the killing and the process. It is also true of vegetables. We see the perfect little lettuce. We don't really think about where that comes from. We will also see more community gardens. The slow filtration of that idea of where is my food coming from, what am I putting in my body.

IC: Houston is a very, very big city and its surrounded by a lot of suburbs. Do you think the movement is going to go from the city to the suburbs or did the movement start from the suburbs to the city?

TN: I mean, I think it starts probably in the city and it has moved to the suburbs but I know it is there. I used to live in Pearland; there is a farmers market twice a month in Pearland. There's one, I think, every week in the Woodlands. I imagine there is one in Sugar Land, in Katy in places like that. I think. I don't think we have a whole lot of things moving from out to in; in

terms of influence. Things are generally more progressive inside the city and sort of moving out. I imagine that is potentially the next move. Farmers markets but I imagine more restaurants will start opening up in the suburbs, with that sort of farm to table mentality, which I think it is mostly chains that are opened in the suburb. You know with the idea of getting your food at the farmers market. If you are a locavore, sort of speak, then you would rather eat at a local restaurant versus a national restaurant. It is sort of the extension of the same mentality. I wouldn't be surprise, if sort of an offshoot spreading into the suburbs it is more local restaurants. In Pearland, there are barely any but the ones that are local are so popular. I tend to see things as happening in the city and spreading out but it is also spreading across the city. Third Ward is a different suburb compared to the Heights. They are worlds apart.

IC: You lived in L.A. How is L.A., another big, hot city different from Houston, in terms of the local food movement?

TN: Right. California in general is, you know, at least a decade ahead of where everyone else is with food stuff; not everyone but a lot – as a state, certainly. Part of it comes from people like Alice Waters who lives in Berkeley, who is a big, early, adopter of farmers markets. Big sort of early U.S. proponent of eating locally. She had a big influence in that area, which then influenced everyone else. They are definitely ahead of where we are. Part of it is you grow everything in California. If you look at the percent of food that comes from anywhere, a huge percent of the food comes from California. If you go to a farmers market in California, it can be local and you will have like a whole grocery store worth of stuff because everything grows there. We use to go; there was a little farmers market that was a permanent farmers market that is where we used to get all our fruits and vegetables. It was all they had. All from California.

Again, that is like saying Texas is local but it is all California stuff in there, for the most part. It was all really good it would be seasonal but California is pretty temperament so it is sort of a year round season for a lot of stuff. That was conducive, if you think; farms that produce everything. It makes it a lot easier.

IC: Yes.

TN: Unlike Houston, where you have these extremes summer and you are not going to be growing a lot of stuff. It makes it more challenging to have farmers markets. They are definitely ahead, in that regard. Restaurants there were doing it before restaurants out here thought about doing it. They are definitely ahead of the curve, in that regard.

IC: You mentioned Alice Waters. Is she the equivalent of a Monica Pope here in Houston but for farmers markets instead of restaurants?

TN: Alice Waters started a restaurant called Chez Pannisse in Berkeley. Depending on who you talked to, in terms of how big of an impact. It was the first one to say she has a daily menu, basically, on what is around. No one in the U.S. was doing that at the time. The people she has influenced, so many, there weren't farmers market prior to, you know, the seventies. It was all started in Berkeley with this food movement and that was the epicenter of farmers market spreading out slowly across the rest of the country. In a sense, she is like Monica Pope, except, you know, exponentially more. Like Monica is super important, super fabulous, super awesome and giving in Houston but in terms of influence. Lot of people attribute farmers markets as really coming from her [Alice Waters], or at least the people she is associated with definitely the modern food movement in the U.S. as coming from her. She has influenced like Wolf King

Puck, there are so many big chefs who have come through her kitchen and have worked with her. In terms of ideas, she is very similar to Monica Pope except she was on it forty years ago. She is a lot older than Monica Pope. In a community that was already sort of anti-government, anti-…sort of a revolutionary time. Things aligned for her in terms of having this big influence.

IC: California is a very ecofriendly, very green forward type of state. Do you think that Houston, or Texas, had that same thought, the local food movement would get rid of that elitist connotation it sometimes may have?

TN: I mean it is hard to compare Texas and California. There are people in general, in California, who are more concern with the environment than in Texas, or they were sooner. It just takes time for people to care. If you look at electronic vehicle charging stations, as a metric for environmental concern. If you go out to L.A. or California in general, they are all over the place. If you come here, it is like, I hope you have a well thought out map because you are just not going to run into them all over the place. They are growing, there are a lot more than there used to be. It is just part of it being we are the energy capital; there is a lot of resistant on more environmentally, friendly perspective type of things here, which is changing because of necessity.

IC: I think that is it. Thank you for your time. I appreciate it.

TN: Yeah, no problem.

End of interview.