

Interviewee: Caraway, Nellie M.

Interview Date: April 30, 2011

Oral History Transcript
Ms. Nellie M. Green Caraway
30 April 2011

Sandra Davidson (SD): Hello, my name is Sandra Davidson. Today is Saturday, April 30 and I'm talking to Ms. Nellie Caraway. We are at 3715 Florinda Street in Houston, Texas. Okay, if you would please, tell me your full name.

Nellie Caraway (NC): Nellie M. Caraway.

SD: If you don't mind me asking, what was your maiden name?

NC: Green.

SD: Is that spelled with an "e" at the end or without?

NC: No, "G-R-E-E-N."

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

NC: I was born in Beaumont, Texas.

SD: And when were you born?

NC: January 6.

SD: Do you live here in Houston?

NC: Yes.

SD: Been here a long time?

NC: Long time.

SD: Well, we're here to talk a little bit about food. If you would please, tell us a little bit about your favorite kitchen experience growing up.

NC: That's kind of hard to tell. I don't remember--favorite? What do you mean, "favorite"?

SD: Well, did you spend a lot of time in the kitchen helping relatives when you were young?

NC: Not really.

SD: Okay. Was that mostly something that the grownups did?

NC: More or less. We did do a little bit when I grew up to be a teenager or something but I never spent

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too much—except doing dishes and whatever.

SD: Who taught you how to cook?

NC: I guess I learned by watching here and there and having a taste for certain things.

SD: Did your family make a big deal about holidays? Did they do a lot of cooking in the holidays?

NC: Like a normal family would. It's a day for turkey or whatever, when you have Christmas or Thanksgiving. Other than that, it's just a holiday and you ate whatever the holiday called for.

SD: Did they make cornbread dressing?

NC: Yeah, that's why I was saying, Turkey Day was Thanksgiving or Christmas. You had all the trimmings.

SD: Was there any kind of dish that your family, your mother or grandmother—was there any special dish they were known for?

NC: I can't say. I think they just liked them all. They did everything that was normally done. My grandmother used to work for people, so whatever they had, whatever the ritual was at that time, that's what we ate.

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SD: Was cooking a big part of life for your mother and grandmother as far as community goes?

NC: Well, it had to be. She had five children.

SD: Your mother or your grandmother?

NC: My mother did.

SD: Okay.



NC: My grandmother only had one child.

SD: I see.

NC: So it had to be something of a ritual. You had to cook every day for five children.

SD: Did other ladies from the community or neighbor ladies get together with your family on holidays or things to do cooking?

NC: Not necessarily so. We weren't selfish, but we did our own family thing.

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SD: Okay. Is there any particular food that stands out maybe over anything else in your mind, you know especially—especially any kind of pie? Was there a favorite pie in your family?

NC: Not necessarily so, except if you would call banana pudding a “pie” but it was a pudding. And that was very special.

SD: Why was that special?

NC: ‘Cause the taste.

SD: [Laughs] Now who was the expert at that one? Was it your grandmother or mother?

NC: It just came down through the family. Everybody knew banana puddings and that's what we liked.

SD: Have you passed on any of those recipes to your children?

NC: I wouldn't say just “directly passed them on.” I only had sons. And if they thought about cooking it, they either watched me, or they would get a recipe or they would call me and ask me. So that's the only thing I can say about that.

SD: Did they do a lot of cooking?

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NC: My boys do, yes. They're the ones that usually do the cooking in their family because their wives cooked but not like Mother did. So they had the idea, they cooked.

SD: Did you have a certain favorite thing that you liked to cook especially?

NC: Not necessarily so. I had three boys and a husband who loved to eat. So whatever dinner was and I made it, we all ate it.

SD: Okay, do you feel that you learned any lessons or wisdom that weren't necessarily related to food and cooking? You know, maybe something that your grandmother or mother taught you while you were in the kitchen with them?

NC: That I learned from them?

SD: Like maybe things like being organized, planning or patience?

NC: Of course. You learn what you be around. And they were the type of people who prepared for whatever. And they got it situated and they did it within a length of time. They got it finished and we ate at the particular time.

SD: Did you all always eat together?

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NC: More or less. Yeah.

SD: Is there any other memory that you can think of around food you would like to share?

NC: Not really. Can't think of anything right now.

SD: Well, thank you for talking with me.

Toni Tipton-Martin (TTM): I have a couple of questions if that's okay.

SD: Yes, Toni, please ask.

TTM: You talked a little bit about your sons and cooking with them. We're noticing there are fewer women in the kitchen and a lot more men and so that says to me that something transferred between you and your passion and cooking into them. And so the stereotype has always been that women just passed it automatically and maybe there's some truth to that because your boys are also cooking. So when she asked you a little bit about what you might have learned from your mother or the women you were around cooking, can you see things that you did in what your boys do as cooks?

NC: Preparation is all I can think of.

TTM: What do you mean by that when you say "preparation"?

NC: I notice how my grandparents and mother would prepare to get things done. They would do it within an amount of time that they prepared for it. The same thing with my sons and me. If they were going to get something done, they would prepare. They would lay it out, think about it, talk about it, then they'd do it.

TTM: Which is interesting because that's not a process that you see out loud unless you are doing it, right? You don't realize that the person might be thinking through those steps. So observers of our people over the years might not have understood that that kind of preparation, organized thinking, was going on because it looks so effortless. But you're saying that you're able to see that there was an organization to the preparation?

NC: Of course.

TTM: How do you think you manage that? Does that mean you know that if you're going to start dinner, you want to serve it at x amount of time, you need to do these things in advance? What do you mean by saying, "They got it ready for the certain time"?

NC: "Advance preparation" is the magic word.

TTM: Can you tell me what—since you guys were talking about banana pudding when I came in, is there an organization of the kitchen or the recipes that went along with getting that ready to fit that time

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frame that you were describing?

NC: Well, banana pudding--

TTM: Or something else.

NC: No, I'll take banana pudding. You'd have to have the cookies. You gotta' have the cream. You gotta' have everything situated. You always lay out your equipment and you lay out the foods. You lay out what you have to do and you have to have it there before you start. Once you start and you don't have something, you'd have to go back. So preparation in advance is the only thing I can say to that.

TTM: That's an excellent, excellent answer. That's not something that's been revealed before. We see people running to the neighbor's and saying, "Can I borrow a cup of sugar?" That didn't happen, you're saying.

NC: No, no.

TTM: And you can see that translated into the next generation. Have they grown that process? Crystal's daughter does something—a version of what she does but it's different.

NC: I would think they've grown because they always grocery shop and do whatever. And in their minds they already know--

TTM: In their minds--

NC: What's going to happen. What today is going to bring. What tomorrow is going to be. So they prepare for it.

SD: That actually makes me think—even something like banana pudding, has that changed from when you were little and seeing your family make it, to now? I mean now you go out to H.E.B. You buy the Nilla wafers, you buy the whipped cream, you buy the instant pudding. Has that changed from when you were a young child?

NC: Well, that that you just mentioned is on the box.

SD: Right.

NC: What I taught was from scratch.

SD: Did they make the cookies for instance?

NC: Well, not cookies. On the cookie box, that's on the box that other people do. They did the custard from scratch. It's not from the vanilla pudding box--

SD: Right.

NC: You understand.

TTM: Good question. Do you see the difference in the taste between the scratch?

NC: Of course.

TTM: Was it worth--

NC: Of course.

TTM: The time they save on making it in the box? Or do they make it from the box? Do they make their own custard or do they make the instant pudding?

NC: They were watching and knowing how it tastes. They go from scratch. Now if they wanted to hurry, they would go from the box. But it's not as tasty as from scratch.

TTM: Did you use cream or milk?

NC: You used canned milk.

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TTM: Canned milk. So evaporated? That PET, [or] Carnation milk?

NC: Something. Carnation or PET.

TTM: Was there a secret that you added to it that nobody knew about? Did you put in a splash of vanilla or something that made yours special?

NC: If it was, I can't tell you.

ALL: [Laugh]



TTM: Not even for the purposes of this?

NC: No. That's just a normal thing.

TTM: Just a normal thing.

NC: Taste.

TTM: Is that your specialty?

NC: To your taste. To your taste is a specialty.

TTM: That's an important thing to communicate. That it's to your taste. You start with a baseline recipe and then you adjust certain things to make a taste that makes that recipe belong to you?

NC: More or less.

TTM: And then your family also develops a taste for "your way."

NC: Yeah.

TTM: Which goes back to why the wives can't reproduce that.

NC: That's right. If they needed more sugar, they needed more vanilla, they needed more whatever, they'd put it in so it would be to their taste.

TTM: How do you develop that taste if you're young, and you're just starting out and you're a little intimidated in the kitchen? When you were a young bride? Had you had experience growing up that gave you that taste all along? Do you think that's what you communicated to your children?

NC: I think so, because right now since this surgery, I don't have that taste. But if somebody else has the taste it just comes out. And see, it's in your mind what you taste. Since I've had this surgery. It's in your mind.

TTM: What do you mean by that? Like a memory?

NC: Yes. You can have a taste that it's sweeter. Normally, your mind would tell you, "I don't like it sweet." Somebody else's mind will tell you "I like it sweeter than that."

TTM: Is that what it means to cook "with soul" do you think?

NC: I don't know. I don't know if that would go with that or not.

TTM: I'm trying to find a place for that in my thinking of this whole thing, what that really does mean.

NC: I don't know. I really wish I knew what "soul" means. It just tastes good. It tastes like you like it.

TTM: But not this category of foods that are narrow and defined by poverty. That's a matter of how it tasted across all kinds of categories of food. Like the sweetness of the banana pudding, you're cooking that with a part of your heart and your mind and your soul when you're tasting it and making it sweeter.

NC: Well, I wouldn't know how to associate that with soul.

TTM: Spirit. It's in your mind. You did a great job.

SD: Well, did you have anything else you'd like to say?

NC: No, not really.

SD: All right, well thank you for your time.

NC: Okay.

