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Interviewee: Ida Mae Alston

Interviewers: David Slutzky, Portia Morgan

Summer 2013

St. Helena, SC

DS: Good Afternoon, I'm David Slutzky with Portia Morgan. Today we are interviewing, Ida Alston. Ida Mae Alston is a resident of St. Helena among other things a gourmet cook and she's going to tell us about some wonderful Gullah cooking and some of her favorite dishes. So, Mrs. Alston, welcome.

IMA: Hi, it's a pleasure to be with you today.

DS: Yeah, thanks for being able to give up your time.

IMA: Yes.

DS: First of all what are you making for us today? We'll start right here

IMA: I just love cooking. It's one of my favorite things. It's one of my favorite thing I like to do besides going to church, so cooking is one of my favorite. And today, we are going to be making some okra and shrimp.

DS: Okay.

IMA: Some fresh okra out of the garden. Shrimp from the sea, which most southern Frogmore, Carolina people love when you talk about okra and shrimp mixed together. It's just a nice flavor, everybody love it. So right now I'm just cutting up my onions and I have some yellow peppers, and green peppers, which I'm going to put in it together and give it a nice flavor.

DS: K, do you need any help?

IMA: Yes, I have my pan oiled here. if you want to just drop a little of oil there and a little bit oil here. Just a little bit, so I can sauté my onions and my pepper.

DS: My pleasure.

IMA: And give it a good flavor for that shrimp.

DS: Okay.

IMA: We gonna do the shrimp in the small pan.

DS: Okay. So tell me when did you first discover your love of cooking? Who taught you how to cook?

IMA: Well, I first discover my love of cooking with my dad. My dad showed me how to make sweet potato pies and that start me off, you know, wanting to know how to cook. And he even showed me how to make the crust, so that start me off and I just went on from there with my

mom. Being from a family of twelve, you know, we had to have our role in cooking and cleaning. And so cooking was one of my favorites.

DS: Okay.

IMA: Right now I'm just going to put my onions in. Yeah, like that sauce.

DS: Oh I know, that sound is the best sound isn't it? One thing I've seen from Gullah cooking is everything is from scratch, you know, you don't cut corners, you make your own crust for a sweet potato pie you don't just buy a store bought one. How old were you when your dad taught you how to do pie?

IMA: I think I was about 8. I was very small when he showed me how to do it. I was very small. I put a bit of seasonal in there and some black pepper, just season it a little bit. You know, we don't want it to be too salty we just want it to be just right.

PM: So did you grow all of the vegetables that you would've used instead of going to the store?

IMA: Did I grow it?

PM: Right, did you grow them at home? Did you have a garden at home?

IMA: Yes, my father grow okra, and tomato, and peas, and beans, and squash, and cucumbers form the garden. Delicious.

DS: Living off the land pretty much. The Gullah way. So tell us, when did you first hear the term Gullah growing up?

IMA: Oh, I was much older when I heard the term Gullah. I think I was in school, high school somewhere.

DS: In what context was it used and defined?

IMA: At first, it was like a language, the Gullah language because of how we sound to other people. And I remember growing up in College they always asked me if I'm from Jamaica. And I would tell them, "No, I'm not. I'm just from Beaufort, South Carolina from a little island called St. Helena Island". So most of them didn't know where that was but that's what I would tell them.

DS: You're not the first person to say that to us form the people that we've talked to.

IMA: Right. Okay, this is my shrimp. I just add a little bit of flower, a little bit of season and I'm going to put it in the onions and red and yellow pepper and just let it brown for a few minutes.

DS: Get happy.

IMA: Huh?

DS: Let it get happy, that's right, let it get happy. Turn that pink color and it should be good. Let's turn my fire up just a little bit more.

PM: So cooks generally prefer either baking or cooking regular meals, what do you prefer, baking or...?

IMA: Just name it.

PM: Either way.

IMA: Either way. I can bake. I can cook, fry, steam, boil, whatever! Whatever it takes to make it I can do it.

DS: We can tell. This is one of your favorite dishes to cook I take it.

IMA: Well, mostly the olden ways they would do it- they would boil it with, you know, neck bone and different types of meat like, you know, they would do it that way. This is a quicker way to do it. Quick and easy on top of the stove.

DS: Tell me, why do you use flour as oppose to not using the flour under the shrimp?

IMA: This flour, when I blend it together its going to make it a little bit gravy, soupier. Not too much but the flour will give it that.

PM: How far back can you trace your family down in St. Helena. How many generations?

IMA: How many generations?

PM: Uh huh.

IMA: Let see. I believe that it's about three or four generations back.

PM: Uh huh.

IMA: We recently had a family reunion on my father's side, which is Mack Nights and so we working on that area because we didn't know too much about them. And on my mother's side we just celebrated our 56th, 56th. So they've been going for awhile now.

PM: So what did you enjoy about growing up on St. Helena?

IMA: I enjoy the outdoors. Even nice and fresh breeze and being outside playing, you know, just having fun since I was a little girl. I enjoy the river, you know, seeing my dad going out fishing and my brother. They used to catch fish by the tub pool. I enjoy that. I usually enjoy the farm in the field. As a little girl, I can remember working for Sanders in the field picking tomatoes, you

know. I did one year at the packing house as they packed the tomatoes for the ship that we would go on. I enjoy that too.

PM: I wish this was the smell of shrimp because the smell is wonderful!

DS: I was just thinking that!

IMA: Smells wonderful?

PM: It does, It does.

IMA: I hope it tastes as good as it smells.

DS: Probably better.

PM: I'm sure, I'm sure.

IMA: Now, I'm going to do my okra.

PM: So you said you enjoy cooking and going to church, what role does religion on St. Helena?

IMA: uh, religion, as you can see on St. Helena, we have a lot of churches, so I believe religion played a big role in our family and in our neighborhood. I think it played a great role in teaching our children how to be a good role model and be respectful, learn how to take care of themselves and how to, you know, carry themselves through life.

DS: What're some traditions that were passed down to you by your parents and grandparents that you passed on as well to future generations?

IMA: Okay, tradition. I can remember this one tradition sticks with me. My mother- I'm just seasoning this okra. I'm sorry.

DS: Just getting some secrets, that's all.

IMA: Put some little season on it. Every Sunday morning, my mom would get up and prepare Sunday dinner. And it will be prepared and ready after we come from church. So when we come from church we have our dinner. It's not going to be cooked. It's already cooked. That's a tradition that I want to use that now.

DS: And what might be in that meal?

IMA: Hmmm?

DS: What might be in that dinner?

IMA: Might be some red rice, and fried chicken and macaroni and cheese and collard greens. There might be baked beans. It just depends on what we want for that Sunday dinner, some cabbage and meatloaf. All that good stuff.

DS: Between the smells in this kitchen and your description of a Sunday dinner, I don't want to leave St. Helena for awhile.

IMA: Okay, I don't want it to be too hot.

DS: Okay.

IMA: But then it's going to give a loud sound. Excuse me let me get, I like onions, so I gotta get another onion, okay?

DS: Oh, okay.

PM: That's okay.

IMA: I love a lot of onions in my food and, you know, some people don't like onions.

DS: Oh, we're fans.

IMA: Y'all like onions?

PM: Oh yeah.

DS: No, I said we are fans for sure.

IMA: Oh, okay. So I like onions. I have to have onions in my meal.

PM: So growing up, what kind of things did you do for fun?

IMA: For fun?

PM: For fun.

IMA: As a little girl, I was very sheltered. I didn't get out the house much but with my brother and sisters we would just play on the outside.

PM: Okay.

IMA: I can remember having, like my dad also raised pigs and we had this pet pig. I can remember, you know, we playing with it and riding it back, all of that good stuff with it, you know. So it was twelve of us. I had six brothers and five sisters. I'm the second oldest, so I had to take care of them, you know. So most of the time I'm in the house, you know, making the meal, ironing clothes, whatever. So I more was a little role model for my sister and brothers.

I had to take care of them I guess that's why I know how to cook 'cause that's one thing I had to do. I had to cook so...

DS: Did you teach them as well?

IMA: Yes, I sure enough did.

DS: There goes that sound again.

IMA: There goes that sound again, that crunchy, crunchy, crunchy sound.

DS: You mentioned the outdoors was one of your loves here, did you get involved in, you know, baseball, softball tournaments and what not, or whatever was popular here?

IMA: Really, with me I liked to run. I did a lot of running and I played a little basketball but I wasn't too good at it. I liked volleyball but you know.

DS: Think of the activities you would do outdoors growing up here and look at the kids down at St. Helena today, how is it different?

IMA: It's different because they don't get to play outside as much, you know, just a different generation now. You know, I remember we used to play outside, hop-scotch and jump rope and we had the little ball and the... what do you call it?

PM: Jacks.

IMA: Jacks, yeah, we had the little Jacks and ball. You know, you just different. Now, they have their cellphone and this is the only one, you know, a lot of them don't know how to communicate because they just use their cellphone and they text. They really don't know how to communicate because of that.

DS: That's sad how the advances in communication takes away their ability to communicate face-to-face.

IMA: Right, right.

DS: Yeah, you know, we see that as well. I see how much, you know, the prior generation were finding ways to be creative, make their own fun pretty much. You know, make up their own games and, you know, they'd never run out of things to do. You know, we're taking these interviews back to Cleveland where we teach Cleveland and Washington D.C. where are teachers are from, who wanna share the interviews we did on the island here just to give our students a better understanding of, not only Gullah culture but really American history and where so many of us and them have come from. And what are some messages you'd like to leave them with about growing and their futures?

IMA: Growing up Where? Here?

DS: Uh huh, well, growing up here and just in general a message you can give to youth anywhere, you know, you're a positive role model. You have taught enough people how to act and what to expect out of life, how do you motivate kids further on?

IMA: My message is to learn all that you can. Going to school and- because when I was going to school- right now they have a lot more to offer, you know, then when I went to school. So I'd say to them, to learn all that they can and most young teenagers, they try to find themselves and they must realize that they are somebody and just be good role model to your friends.

DS: Hope that gets across a lot more then it does sometimes. I notice your okra is getting that nice little translucent color and- gosh, it smells good. I don't want to leave.

IMA: You don't wanna leave?

DS: No, I don't wanna leave.

IMA: I think okra is a acquired taste and it depends on how you cook it sometimes, it be slimy.

DS: And how do you prefer to cook it to your perfect texture?

IMA: It depends on how many waters in the okra 'cause it to be slime. If it's nice and dry, then it'll be dry. Like you had it, it'll be dry, so...

DS: How do you prefer it?

IMA: I prefer it either way. I like the slime, I like the dryness. As you know, some of the restaurants you see that it's fried in a batter, so I just like okra.

DS: Okay.

PM: So okra is like a vegetable like tatoos, green beans?

IMA: It's a vegetable.

PM: Okay.

DS: How common is it to use okra in other Gullah dishes? Is that as common as rice?

IMA: It is not that common because at this time of the year they would dry okras and tomatoes.

PM: And that's how you make a jumbo?

IMA: Yeah, you can make a jumbo out of that. I didn't dry any this year. I was supposed to help my mother but she did it all. She was in the mood to do it. Let me show the job that she did.

DS: Woah, that looks nice.

IMA: Just pop that open, ready to cook.

DS: Nice.

IMA: Nice, you see that okra in there?

DS and PM: Mhm.

IMA: Tomatoes.

DS: And you would add to your shrimp for...

IMA: shrimp or meat or whatever yo want to add to it.

DS: Okay, that's nice.

PM: Can you serve it over rice?

IMA: You can serve it over rice. You can eat it like a soup.

PM: Okay.

IMA: You know, just how you want to eat it.

DS: Oh, here we go.

IMA: Right now we're going to combine the two.

DS: Here we go. Now both sides are getting happier.

IMA: Exactly. Smells good?

PM: It does. Oh, smells wonderful

DS: Oh, incredible. I think some restaurants could use your help. You could be their advisor.

IMA: Huh?

DS: I said some restaurants could sue your help here on how to cook.

IMA: Yeah.

DS: Put you on their counseling board. I see you have a cookbook sea island seasons, I wonder, do you contribute to that?

IMA: Any of my recipes, you mean?

DS: Yes.

IMA: No, not in that one.

DS: But have you contributed recipes for the local cookbooks?

IMA: Yes, my church did one several times and I had my sweet potato pie in there and I had some other spaghetti salad.

DS: Tell us about that.

IMA: The spaghetti salad?

DS: Uh huh.

IMA: Spaghetti salad is spaghetti, tomatoes, cucumbers, banana peppers and zesty italian dressing. You cut all of that up and you mix it together and that's you're salad.

PM: You ever had it before?

DS: Oh yeah, I had it. We call it pasta salad up there and you said spaghetti salad and threw me off.

PM: Well, there are some different things in it then normal then what we would put in, I think.

DS: I make my kitchen sink pasta salad sometimes at home, so you can kind of imagine what I put in it, but the same base.

IMA: We're just going to let it simmer for awhile.

DS: Okay.

IMA: As it is being blessed right now.

PM: That's always good. Blessing doesn't hurt.

DS: How long do you simmer that for, usually?

IMA: Oh, about ten minutes or so, not long.

PM: So you want the flavors to mesh together, to come together.

IMA: Yes. And it's Ida's sweet potato pie.

DS: We got it. Well, the first edition of cooking-

