SPINNING GOLD OUT OF CHAFF

SFA documents baking traditions.

BY ANNEMARIE ANDERSON

Julia Rendleman

STEAM CURLS AROUND JOYE B. MOORE. Her arms protected by industrial oven mitts, she carefully ladles cooked sweet potatoes from boiling water. When they cool, she peels the skin to reveal the deep orange flesh, the star of her sweet-potato pies. Moore is a narrator in the Southern Baking Project. In late 2018, SFA's oral history program began collecting interviews for what would become the Southern Baking Project. As SFA's oral historian, I was curious about the ways in which people—particularly women—throughout the South have used their baking skills to make a living. Baking businesses, often informal and home-based, have existed for generations, and they continue to flourish.

Baking played an important economic and communal role in the small Florida town where I was raised. Like many people, I grew up surrounded by school bake sales, pound cakes at wakes, and a neighborhood cake lady who sold Italian cream cakes out of her home kitchen.

When two pastry chefs walked into my oral history workshop a few years ago, I knew they would be excellent collaborators to carry on the project. Kelly Spivey and Sarah Adams were graduate students and self-taught bakers who had each worked in professional kitchens. Thanks to their deep knowledge of baking practices, they brought passion and nuanced perspective to their oral history work.

As a historical topic, baking often lies on the fringes. Maybe that's because it's been seen as women's work. Maybe it's because we see dessert as lagniappe. Yet baking is alchemical. Simple elements of flour, butter, sugar, salt, and eggs are turned into joy, sustenance, and economic freedom. Bakers spin gold out of chaff when they transform these ingredients into a flaky biscuit or

Joye B. Moore of Joyebells Sweet Potato Pies and her sister Cassandra Wheeler in Richmond, VA, April 2021

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an elegantly latticed fruit pie. For bakers in the past and the present, goods like pies and cookies are a sweetness that transforms everyday drudgery into sublime existence—and sometimes into an independent income. Generations of Southern bakers have used their expertise to claim a space for themselves in a society that hemmed them in because of their gender or the color of their skin (and, more often than not, a combination of the two). Narrators Joye B. Moore and Evva Hanes built businesses on generational recipes.

Joye B. Moore's sweet-potato pie recipe has

been made by six generations of women in her family. Moore inherited her recipe from her great-great grandmother, Nannie Mae Middleton. She remembers her backyard in Goldsboro, North Carolina, as a place filled with food. Middleton had chickens, pecan trees, and a huge garden. She even carried salt and pepper in her apron to sprinkle on fresh summer tomatoes.

Moore also remembers her grandmother's kitchen as a site of comfort and self-sufficiency for the women in her family. As a child, Moore watched her grandmother bake sweet-potato pies for family celebrations or community events.

When she was laid off from her nonprofit job in Richmond, Virginia, in 2019, Moore faced a difficult decision. She was fifty-six years old. Did she try to find a new job and start over, or did she draw on the strength she found in her great-great-grandmother's kitchen and take a chance baking for a living? Moore took her family's sweet-potato pie recipe and started to bake. She began selling her home-baked pies at farmers' markets and Richmond's Dairy Bar Diner under the name Joyebells. They were an instant hit. Moore's business grew. She rented commercial kitchen space. Just as multiple generations worked together in her grandmother's kitchen, her sister and her daughter now help keep up with demand.

"I know that I won't be...that older woman who's doing something she doesn't want to do just because she has to live," Moore said. "I see an alternate ending to that, and pies are that for me." Moore's freedom, energy, and autonomy emanate from her baking knowledge, like the five generations of women who came before her.

Evva Hanes, owner of Mrs. Hanes' Moravian Cookies, also built her business on generational skill. She was born Evva Foltz, the youngest of seven children, on her family's farm in 1932. She was raised in Clemmons, then a rural community just outside Winston-Salem, North Carolina, and her family had deep Moravian roots. She learned how to bake her sugar crisp cookies from her mother, Bertha Crouch Foltz, who would bake and sell the cookies to supplement farm income. Her mother's sugar crisp cookie recipe, a modified version of the traditional ginger flavor, jumpstarted Hanes' business in 1960.

The business has gradually grown throughout the years. Mrs. Hanes' Cookies grew to employ family members, and eventually, they needed even more help mixing dough and baking cookies. "We made all we could make and sold all we could make, and every year we'd make a few more, and we've been blessed beyond measure," Hanes said. Today, their bakery in Clemmons remains a source of employment for dozens of community members. Mrs. Hanes sells millions of cookies a year, each rolled out and cut by hand. Her bestseller is the quintessential Moravian cookie, wafer-thin and traditionally flavored with ginger and molasses. Spivey was impressed with the care and sheer labor that goes into baking all of those cookies. "We like to romanticize making everything by hand, but it was really hard," Spivey told me later, reflecting on the labor and infrastructure it takes to make the sugar crisp cookies.

LEFT: (Above) A package of Mrs. Hanes' Moravian Cookies, which are rolled and cut by hand (below) before baking. RIGHT: Evva Hanes outside her home in Clemmons, NC, April 2021.

Kate Medley

Bakers spin gold out of chaff when they transform ingredients like flour, butter, sugar, salt, and eggs into a flaky biscuit or an elegantly latticed fruit pie.

A few months after the interview, Evva Hanes sent me a handmade card, carefully decorated with dried violas. It still hangs in my office. In it, she thanked Spivey and me for the bound transcript, audio, and images that we sent her, and she updated us on her life and work since Spivey first interviewed her. Below her card hangs a printed photo of Joye B. Moore and her sister Cassandra Wheeler, smiling in front of a work table full of freshly baked pies. When Adams and Spivey first conceptualized their baking interviews in late 2019, none of us knew that we would be interviewing people on Zoom or masked and distanced in open spaces. We imagined this project to be a wide-reaching, meandering collection filled with voices of many bakers throughout the South. We would spend the summer traveling the region, learning about baking traditions and innovations. Instead, I worked with Adams and Spivey as they honed their interviewing plans, pivoting with every new roadblock they encountered. To conduct their work safely, they had to concede some of the face-to-face intimacy that is a hallmark of oral history—and one of my own favorite aspects of the work. I think of this persistence every time I turn to the wall in my office where both Hanes' card and Moore's photo hang.

We've learned together that narrators like Moore and Hanes teach us more than the importance of well-tested traditional recipes. They remind us that sometimes, the best thing to do in the face of a challenge is to hang on, develop our skills, and see our tasks through to the end. That's sweet work, indeed.

Annemarie Anderson is SFA's oral historian. By the time you read this, she'll be defending her thesis portfolio for an MFA in Documentary Expression from the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi.