

# THE FINE LEGACY OF Lucille's



In Houston, Chris Williams serves Black cuisine without limits.  
by KAYLA STEWART

Lucille's Yardbird, served with braised collard greens and honey-spiced gravy;  
OPPOSITE: Lucille Smith with a selection  
of her baked goods and small bites.





It's a sweltering day in September 2020, and Chris Williams is working in his restaurant kitchen in downtown Houston. He's braising collard greens, brining and slow-frying chicken, and roasting fish from the nearby Gulf. Importantly, he's also making sure his staff and guests are kept safe during COVID-19. He welcomes longtime and new customers to outdoor tables and offers curbside pickup and delivery options. He's also constantly thinking of how to communicate who he is through his food. When Williams cooks, he tells two stories: his own, and his great-grandmother's.

Chris Williams is the chef-owner of Lucille's, a fine-dining Southern restaurant. He opened the Houston eatery in 2012 with his older brother Ben. A son of Texas with an international résumé, Williams invokes his travels—and his rich Black Texan history—in every dish he serves. Privy to the expectations of what a leading Black chef is supposed to cook, Williams deviates from what he sees as stereotypical presumptions. He tops hot dogs with kimchi, makes a mustard-laden potato salad that speaks to the

Mennonites and Germans who've been in Texas for centuries, and seasons Cornish hen with the sweet and spicy berbere spice mix of Ethiopia.

Houston is one of the most international and ethnically diverse cities in the United States. Strip-mall restaurants here serve fragrant biryani, piping pho, and rich, decadent enchiladas, all an homage to the city's heavily immigrant population. There's tremendous culinary diversity, and yet Black Houston chefs, like many around the nation, are often

Archival photos courtesy of the Williams family; previous, above, and opposite: Jenn Duncan

THIS PAGE: Hot chicken sandwich at Lucille's; OPPOSITE: Chef Chris Williams hosts a dinner for the release of Jubilee by Toni Tipton-Martin, December 2019.



associated with one cuisine—soul food. Restaurants like Mikki’s Soulfood Café have long brought comfort and joy to Houstonians through their smothered fried chicken, ham hocks, and turkey necks. Careful to appreciate the importance of soul food, Williams knows that it’s not the only food Black chefs can cook.

“We’re so much more than what society tells us we are,” Williams says.

For generations, Black chefs have created their own narratives. At Dooky Chase in New Orleans, the late Leah Chase interpreted Creole cuisine to create a restaurant that placed Black cooking on a level of reverence that, at the time, was largely reserved for European cuisine. Her aptitude for French culinary techniques shone in dishes like shrimp Clemenceau and lobster Thermidor. Chase believed that Blackness—particularly in food—was excellence.

Williams’ contemporaries, including Mashama Bailey, Edouardo Jordan, and Kwame Onwuachi, continue this legacy of preparing Black food in new and extraordinary ways. Onwuachi invoked his Nigerian roots in his brussels suya at his former restaurant Kith and Kin in Washington, DC. Jordan pays homage to his family history through Momma Jordan’s braised oxtails alongside chanterelle mushrooms and roasted autumn vegetables at Junebaby in Seattle. At The Grey in Savannah, Bailey offers dishes like roasted beef shanks and biscuits with country ham, red eye gravy, and a poached egg. Like many modern Black chefs, they proudly bring their ethnic origins into their kitchens, but they refuse to remain bound to whitewashed ideas of what Black cooking should be.

In her 2019 book, *Jubilee: Recipes from Two Centuries of African American Cooking*, Toni Tipton-Martin traces the history of Black American cuisine. “Once these people are freed from the constraints

of stereotypes, then we’re all free, too, free to explore our own identities through their accomplishments, and to see what African American food identity really is,” Tipton-Martin says.

Williams builds his restaurant’s identity through the environments that have influenced him, from his travels abroad to his cosmopolitan hometown. “Houston’s known for its diversity. It’s a little bit of everything, which made it right for us to come in and do what we do,” he says. “There were no rules here. You can have the freedom to do whatever you want to do, as long as it’s good.”

Freedom when you’re Black, however, often comes with constraints. The expectation for Black chefs in the United States is to serve inexpensive food without requiring more openness from guests—or demanding innovation from themselves. “Historically, Black cooks are associated with servitude. People don’t really appreciate the creativeness that goes into that ingenuity,” Williams says. As he sees it, “American culinary truths are African American.” From those hands, much was borrowed, too often without proper attribution.

Williams comes from a long line of Black cooks and chefs. His great-grandmother, Lucille Elizabeth Bishop Smith, namesake of his restaurant, is his biggest inspiration. Nearly a century ago, she broke the mold of what Black cooking—and Black personhood—could be.

LUCILLE SMITH WAS BORN IN THE late 1800s in deeply segregated Crockett, Texas. Early on, her great-grandson says, Smith showed a bold disregard for boundaries of gender and race. She attended several state colleges, including the historically Black university Prairie View A&M College, and became the first in her family to receive a college degree.

She married Ulysses Samuel Smith, with whom she had three children: two sons, and a daughter, who was Williams’ grandmother.

Smith and her husband made a home in Fort Worth. She worked as a seamstress and began cooking for private clients around the country, Williams says. In the early 1900s, just 6 percent of married women in the United States worked outside the home, usually because their husband was unemployed. Smith wasn’t a traditional woman. She worked in the Fort Worth Public School District in a vocational education program that trained Black youth for domestic service jobs. Cooking was her passion. At home, Smith experimented in the kitchen—toying with French

cuisine, for which she had a penchant, and building her private client base.

One of those clients hired Smith to run the dining program at Camp Waldemar, a tony summer camp for white girls near Kerrville, Texas. Smith found solace in the job, as she was able to cook for large groups and continue perfecting her techniques and recipes. She was known to prepare individual souffles for 160 campers at a single meal. With help from Ulysses, a pitmaster who’d become known as “the Barbecue King of the Southwest,” Smith managed the institution for forty years, hiring a network of extended family and friends.

“It was a family tradition for everybody who was in the family and who were friends of the family and my grandparents,”

Lucille Smith serves hot rolls to the champion boxer Joe Louis, a customer and friend.



Williams says. “They were best friends—my mom and dad’s moms—so everybody had to go work with Lucille over at Camp Waldemar.”

In the off-season, when camp was closed, Smith wanted to pursue her own business interests. At that time, however, most married women weren’t allowed to manage their own finances without a sign-off from their husband. Williams believes his great-grandmother was one of the first women in Texas to file “feme sole” (which translates as “a woman alone”) for business purposes.

“That’s how fearless and courageous she was,” Williams says. Despite the “divorce” on paper, the two chefs remained together. Smith took her talents to her former university, Prairie View A&M, and created a Commercial Foods and Technology Department which included an apprentice training program, the first of its kind at the college level.

In 1941, Smith wrote her first cookbook, which was published as a boxed set of recipe cards called Lucille’s Treasure Chest of Fine Foods. That collection, which recently sold at a rare-book auction for more than \$1,500, includes a range of meals and sides, such as hushpuppies, spoon bread, potato fudge, and hominy casserole.

“She demonstrated proficiency in creating recipes that prioritized variety, and were easy and enjoyable, [and] that put an emphasis on seasonality,” Tipton-Martin says. “She captured all of those aspects of cooking that were quantified in home economics for the home consumer.”

In the mid-1940s, Smith invented an All-Purpose Hot Roll Mix for a fundraiser at St. Andrews United Methodist

Church of Fort Worth. Rolls made from her mix were served to passengers on American Airlines flights and at the tables of Martin Luther King Jr., Joe Louis, and President Lyndon B. Johnson. It became one of the first marketed hot roll mixes in the nation and, according to Williams, was likely an uncredited inspiration for Pillsbury hot roll mix.

Like many Black culinary innovators of her generation—such as the chef whose recipe inspired Bisquick in the early twentieth century, and whose name has been lost to history—Smith and other prominent Black chefs were rarely credited or compensated for their creations. Blackness became an asset when a white person or brand capitalized on it. That is a painful legacy and remnant of America’s centuries-old inability to properly recognize and compensate Black Americans for their talent. This injustice, more than any other, influences Williams.

“Her spirit was ingrained in us because we’re all entrepreneurs and we’re following her footsteps.”

Generations of the family took up the cooking baton. Williams’ father, Connie B. Williams, a criminal defense attorney, was also the cook of the household. When Chris was younger, Connie would recreate their favorite restaurant dishes at home. Chris also cooked with his father’s mother, whom he called “Mama Joe.” Snapping peas and tearing collard greens, he waited for his favorite dish—Chinese cabbage, bathed in lard. “I’ve

ABOVE: Ulysses and Lucille Smith  
OPPOSITE: Lucille Smith demonstrates her Hot Roll Mix at a Fort Worth grocery store, one of many that carried her product.



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“American culinary truths  
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The dining room at  
Lucille's, February 2020

been chasing that flavor my entire life, but I can never reproduce it. There's just not enough pig fat in the world," Williams says, laughing.

Williams was six when his great-grandmother passed, but her legacy remained ingrained in the family, and her great-grandson has moved it forward.

"His work embodies all of the dimensions of her legacy of using food as a mechanism for social change," Tip-ton-Martin says of Williams' career. "She was an entrepreneur, and she expressed her intentional desire to empower others. She gave back to her community; she gave back to the broader community. She inspired people to pursue careers within food, but not those that had been

narrowly defined to restaurant cooking or soul cooking. She was a nutritionist, she was a restaurateur, she has the same entrepreneurial stretch as a manufacturer. What she does is embody culinary freedom by encouraging us to be whatever it is that we want to be. And [Williams] is the beneficiary of seeing that up close."

Williams' professional cooking journey began at Le Cordon Bleu in Austin, followed by jobs in Lithuania, Southern France, Canada, Germany, London, and Washington, D.C.

But something was missing. "I did not want to live this peripatetic lifestyle," said Williams. "I didn't know what I was doing, because I had no recipes. I had no

culinary perspective; I was just this gun for hire." With a new baby on the way, he moved back home to Houston with his then-wife.

In 2012, Williams and brother Ben opened Lucille's in the center of Houston's Museum District. In 2019, Ben opened The Highway Distillery, Houston's first Black-owned distillery, which makes hemp vodka. Though he left his role as co-owner of Lucille's in 2014, his grandmother's legacy still influences his work as a Black business owner.

Ben says, "She's the reason why I believe I can do whatever I want." Ben's business extends his family's longstanding legacy of entrepreneurship and innovation.

So does Chris' restaurant. Serving his great-grandmother's famous chili biscuits, he oscillates between the food he grew to love during his travels and the Southern cooking traditions that defined his childhood. He tops his great-grandmother's subtly sweet biscuits with American cheese and a dollop of hearty chili. They've never left the menu.

His roasted Cornish hen is an ode to his love of Ethiopian food. He rubs the birds with lemon juice, roasted garlic, olive oil, and berbere, a spice blend with sweet notes that packs a citrusy heat. The next day, he pan-sears the hens before finishing them in the oven. He serves each one on a bed of Carolina Gold rice grits cooked with Gruyère cheese. He pairs the meal with brown-butter sweet peas, inspired by his father's mustard-battered fried chicken with mashed potatoes and peas. His pork and beans stuns guests; rather than a saccharine bowl of beans that often accompanies barbecue, Williams presents a bone-in pork chop that sits atop a three-bean ragout, creamed collard green kimchi, and a tomato-onion-herb salad inspired by his father.

The 1923 Mission-style home that

Lucille's now occupies is modern and airy inside. Guests dine as portraits of legendary Black chefs and visionaries, including, of course, Lucille, look down on them. A massive window overlooks the oak and elm trees of the Museum District. As they dine, guests of all races can consider a side of Blackness not often highlighted during this turbulent moment in history: one of freedom, of joy, and of personal identity.

Remnants of his time boiling potatoes in Canada can be found in his tuna classic salad with fingerling potatoes. His grilled octopus pulls from his cooking experience in southern France. The green coconut curry is a holdover from Chris and Ben's previous venture, a Caribbean restaurant that shuttered in the early 2000s. His stewed okra and tomatoes is a proud ode to his Black heritage.

"I am very proud about the Blackness of my family history, but I also want to be very welcoming to everybody," he says.

Williams' departure from the status quo has drawn accolades and critiques. One white food writer was particularly brazen in his criticism, suggesting Williams stay in his lane and cook "what his grandmother cooked."

"About a year in, he tells me that everyone's rooting for me," Williams remembers. Williams thanked him, and then the writer gave him a cookbook by an African American chef. "He said, 'We think you need to get back to what your grandmother was doing.' And I said, 'You mean my great-grandmother?' He says, 'Yeah!' And I said, 'So what was she doing?'"

The writer, a respected Southern food journalist, stumbled over his words and continued offering unsolicited input. He pointed Williams to a chef he should emulate—a chef who predominantly cooks soul food. Williams shut him down.

"I am doing what my great-grandmother

Lucille Smith with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.



Previous: Jenn Duncan

did, because she was being true to her own creativity. She wasn't limited to what your expectation was."

Some Black customers have come in with their own assumptions of what Black food should be, too; they weren't initially receptive to the nuances of Williams' menu and the fine-dining price tag that came with the plate.

"I would get comments like, 'This restaurant should be for everybody.' And I'm like, 'What do you mean? It is for everybody.'"

Another Black customer, especially pleased with a sous vide halibut over carrot butter with a raw fennel salad and salsa verde, told Chris that she'd shared how great this "soul food" was with her friends. Williams asked her what made the dish soul food.

"She didn't have the answer, but I knew the answer: Did your Black-ass hands make it? Then it's soul food."

Williams links this constant dance between expectations to the origins of Black cooking in the United States. The role of Black chefs began in the kitchen of white slaveholders. Despite their creativity, Black cooks were relegated to servitude, and to one narrow pathway for what kind of food they could cook for other people.

"I knew that the expectation was that Black chef plus Black restaurant equals soul food. I knew that as limiting as it is, it was also an opportunity to break the narrative that people have created for me," Williams says.

His narrative-breaking mission resonates beyond Houston. In 2018, he served as the cultural-culinary ambassador for a tour of the Balkans organized by the U.S. embassies in Slovakia and Slovenia.

More important, however, is how Black Houstonians have grown to respect and treasure Lucille's, both for its history and as a demonstration of modern Black

excellence. Williams says that Black diners are driving business to Lucille's, both through weekly patronage and sending friends and family along for celebrations and major events.

"You can see the pride they have in taking ownership that this is a Black-owned business. This is yours. This is your voice."

In spite of his successes, Williams' work has sometimes been overlooked. Mainstream food media tends to focus on Houston's Tex-Mex, Southeast Asian, and white American restaurants and their chefs, to the exclusion of Lucille's. This reality isn't specific to Houston—the disregard for Black chefs has been a ubiquitous habit in American dining, sparking an outcry over how restaurants and chefs are covered as well as calls for change of who gets to decide what constitutes culinary excellence.

This underappreciation is slowly dissolving. The forty-two-year-old chef's restaurant reached the ears of the 2020 presidential campaign. When then-candidate Joe Biden came to Houston to meet George Floyd's family amid ongoing racial justice protests, he chose Lucille's as the meeting place.

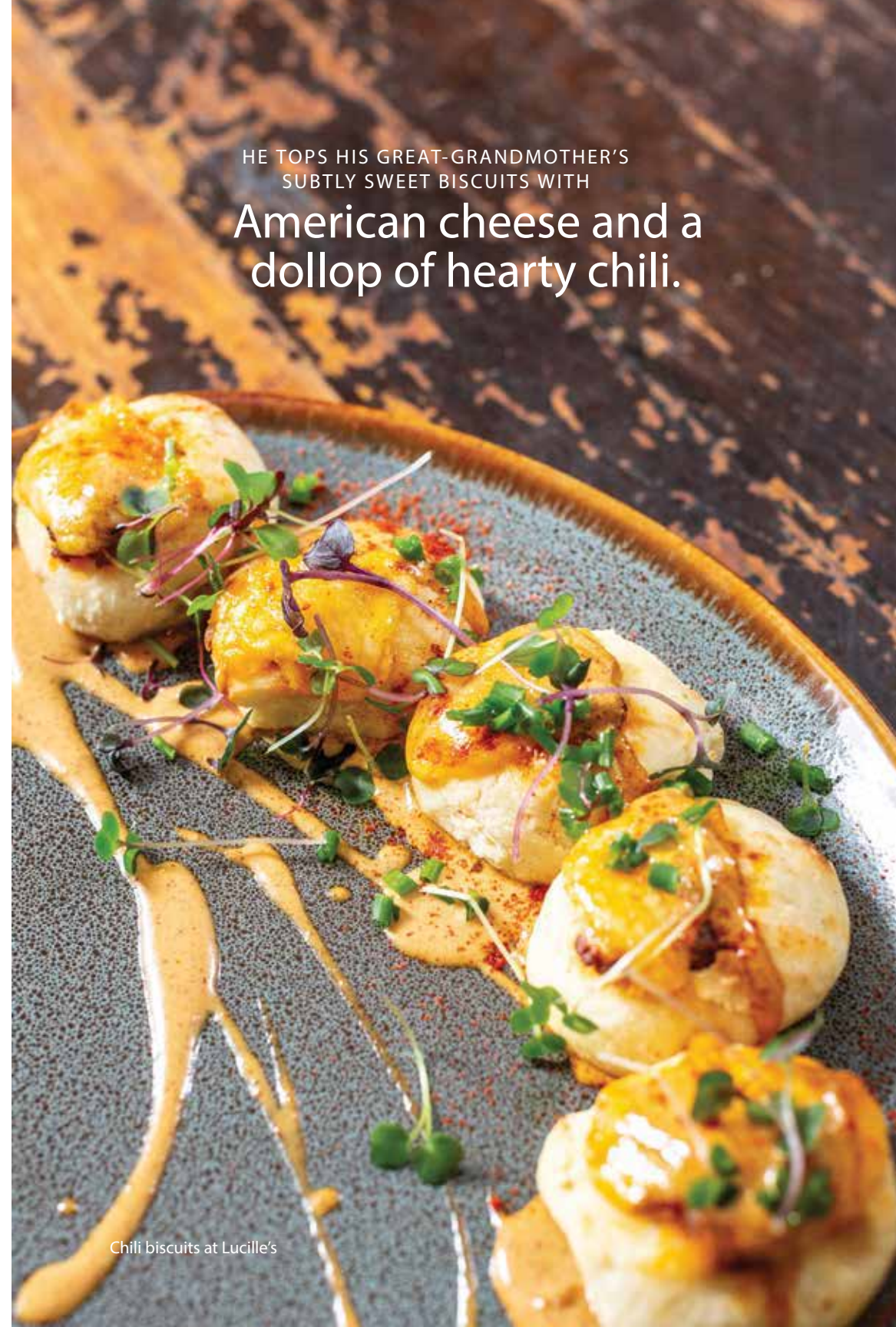
Williams was struck by the opportunity to offer a space to the Floyd family and to meet Biden. Members of the Floyd family, Williams says, were grateful to have their voices heard by the candidate, and to converse with him in a place like Lucille's. Watching them enter his restaurant was a sobering moment for Williams.

"The Floyd family comes in, and that's what made it real. George Floyd is a movement. He's a father, son, brother, uncle. And his family came, and they're hurting. They don't want this publicity."

Lucille's was closed to the public that day. Over lunch, Biden listened to members of the Floyd family express

HE TOPS HIS GREAT-GRANDMOTHER'S  
SUBTLY SWEET BISCUITS WITH

American cheese and a  
dollop of hearty chili.



Chili biscuits at Lucille's

Jenn Duncan

Chris Williams (left) and family members with Dr. Jill Biden and President-Elect (then candidate) Joe Biden, June 2020.

grief and frustration, and he tried to offer comfort, Williams recalls.

Biden also spoke to Williams and his staff. Offering Williams a Challenge Coin—usually reserved for war heroes or people who’ve shown extreme acts of valor—Biden told him, “I believe in what you’re doing, keep doing it, this is for you,” Williams said of the meeting. Hosting Floyd’s family and meeting Biden was one of the highlights of Williams’ career, he says. It reminded him of the ongoing legacy of Black restaurants serving as community spaces.

“I’ve never aimed to be or considered my space to be a place for activism, but it’s just in our DNA to act, and to be active

in addressing the challenges our communities face.” Reflecting on the role of Dooky Chase during the Civil Rights movement, the Black Lives Matter movement, and COVID-19 have spurred an increased sense of responsibility at Lucille’s, and Williams is eager to make Lucille’s an essential institution for progress in the Houston community.

For Williams, creating his own path and helping others on the way is simply the way of the family. His great-grandmother built a career on generosity, innovation, and service—but not servitude. For so many in Houston, the restaurant that carries her name does just that.

“If someone tells me that the food reminds them of some great experience back in the day from their mom’s cooking, or some time when the sun shone brighter and the air was great, I know that I’m doing the right thing.” 🐦

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Paul Morse



# FIELDWORK, MINUS THE FIELD

Dispatches from an oral historian’s couch

BY ANNEMARIE ANDERSON

IN THE FIRST TWO MONTHS OF 2020, I drove back and forth from Oxford to Birmingham, Alabama. I traipsed in and out of restaurants with Michelle Little, a Birmingham-based oral historian who was collaborating with me on our multicounty Career Servers project. Maskless, we drove around in each other’s cars, ate lunch together at restaurants, and scouted interviews. As I traversed I-22, I listened as NPR’s Beijing correspondent Emily Feng reported on a virus devastating a nation halfway across the world. Birmingham felt beyond such sorrow. 2020 was shaping up to be the most productive year for oral history since I joined SFA as oral historian in 2018.

On the morning of March 4, I sat in the dining room of Milo’s Hamburgers in Jasper, Alabama. I was there to interview Ms. Brenda O’Neill, a longtime employee and manager at Milo’s. She talked about the joy of leading a team of

employees, teaching and conducting administrative work that allows the restaurant to operate smoothly. Ms. Brenda loved her customers, she told me, and she loved guiding and helping her employees to develop their skills.

After the interview, I sat in an alumni chair across from Ms. Brenda and plied her with questions about what it takes to manage a team effectively. I could tell that she was good at her work, and it was largely because she cared about the people around her. I wanted to soak up some of her knowledge.

I, too, manage people. It’s a big part of my responsibilities at SFA. I make sure oral history projects are finished, processed, and publicly accessible in a timely manner. When a collaborator has a problem or a need, I’m the one responsible for resolving it. When I got in my car to head back to Oxford, I didn’t know that Ms. Brenda’s interview would be the