



◀ OCTOBER 12, 2019
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Nashville, TN



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22ND SOUTHERN FOODWAYS SYMPOSIUM
Work Songs,
Po-Boys, Soup
Bean Theater
Oxford, MS

DECEMBER 9, 2019 ▶
SFA CELEBRATES JENNI HARRIS
Five Generations of
White Oak Pastures
Atlanta History Center, Atlanta, GA



OCTOBER 8-10, 2020
23RD SOUTHERN FOODWAYS SYMPOSIUM
The Future of the South
Oxford, MS

For more information, visit
southernfoodways.org



MARCH 28, 2020
SFA Spring Symposium
The Future of the Restaurant

HAVEN • BIRMINGHAM, AL

STAKING THE BIG TENT

The SFA at twenty

BY JOHN T. EDGE





THIS PAGE: Mississippi farmer and catfish processor Ed Scott fried catfish at the 1999 Symposium.
PREVIOUS PAGE: North Carolina pitmaster Ed Mitchell (left, in overalls) cooked at the 2002 Symposium.

THE SFA, WHICH MARKED ITS twentieth anniversary as an organization this summer, has changed.

What began when fifty founders lent their names to an idea, coalesced at our annual fall symposium, and gained purpose with our documentary and storytelling initiatives, has evolved and adapted and morphed and expanded to do more than our founders conceived. Much of that change has been purposeful: A healthy organization rejects stasis, especially an organization that aims to document, study, and explore this vibrant region.

When people outside the organization talk about the SFA, they often use the term preserve. SFA once used that term, too. Our initial mission was to “celebrate, preserve, promote, and nurture the traditional and developing diverse food culture of the American South.” Our aim then was to preserve the stories of people whose narratives had long been overlooked, misconstrued, or maligned.

About ten years back, we took a harder look at what we do and what we intend. SFA recognized that, at our best, we tell

new stories about this dynamic place and its varied people. Instead of codifying what’s old, we curate what’s new. We document our region’s ongoing evolution. In the telling, we aim to change the South, for the better. With that in mind, we rejected the term preserve and the finality it implied.

We aimed to explain ourselves better. Yes, we preserve stories, but we don’t do that work to halt change or progress. The SFA doesn’t believe that the South was made at some point in the past. And we don’t believe that, without intercession, the South might be unmade at some point in the future. Culture is not a product. It’s a process, just as the South is a process.

Because we take that stance, our current work, focused on the contemporary South, is often messy and sometimes cantankerous. When you work in the present, nothing comes off as settled, almost all is debatable, just about everything is in motion.

When we focused our energy on looking back, SFA work was tidier. Even when we looked back on contentious moments, like the Civil Rights Movement era, temporal distance between then and now made our work a tool of affirmation. *That was then*, we said of the Civil Rights Movement era and the Jim Crow era before. *Wrongs have made right*, we suggested. *Those problems are no longer our problems*, we implied.

This April, while enjoying a breakfast of grits and eggs with a friend and SFA donor in suburban New Orleans, I recognized that our current choice to set SFA work in the contemporary South

does not always sit well with our membership. *What you publish in Gravy now seems more aggressive*, he said, in a kind tone that told me he was truly searching for an answer. *It feels more threatening*, I heard. Those are not the words I would have chosen, but I didn’t argue.

Our perspective has indeed changed, I told him. That’s because the SFA has more recently focused its attentions on the challenges the South confronts today. That’s harder, I said. It can be threatening to some, and emboldening to others. We never aim to drive members away. We will always aim to tell honest and unflinching stories of this place we call home.

SFA’s shift in coverage, from past to present, unsettled him. Taking into

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account the rapid cultural shifts and entrenched political tensions of today, when the whole of the nation feels unsettled, I can’t imagine another way to be.

Back in June, I joined another donor for breakfast, this time in Atlanta. Over pan-fried eggs and sausage and peaches, he talked about what he saw and felt when he attended his first SFA symposium, more than a decade ago. That event had reminded him of the interracial softball team he played on back in the 1970s. He didn’t reference *The Bad News Bears*, but he implied that sort of spirit.

Sponsored by a soul food restaurant and bar, the team included Joogie, the

owner, who wore a pistol on his hip while running the juke (but not while running the bases.) *SFA events used to feel like that*, he told me, in a generous tone that reminded me of that New Orleans conversation. In the telling, he implied that the SFA of today doesn’t feel that same way.

I’ve been puzzling this through, trying to make sense of why he feels that way. My friend had responded, I think, to what SFA intended when we began our work back in July of 1999. Our audiences have never met our own standards for inclusion, I told him. Our reach has never matched our intent to represent our region. Nostalgia for beginnings can often cloud realities.

In truth, our events are more integrated than they have ever been. And thanks to media products including our *Gravy* podcast, our audience is younger and more diverse, too. This is a start. An earnest intent. But we can do more and will do more to stake a big tent under which all may gather.

It is the responsibility of our staff to manage realities and perceptions, and to leverage all toward a better South. My challenge today is to help run an organization that makes room for both of these friends, and these different challenges to SFA work, while acknowledging that the SFA has changed and will continue to change and will always work to be the sort of organization through which many people of many backgrounds with many different perspectives may find common purpose and make community.

I love this work. Today, our work matters more than ever. Our work shows more potential than ever. And so we return to that work, fixed on helping the South realize its potential. Onward Cornbread Nation. 🍷

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