

MEET JO ELLEN O'HARA

Even when she was Sue Scattergood,
she's always been herself

BY ANNEMARIE ANDERSON AND MELISSA HALL



JO ELLEN O'HARA WANTED TO study at Vanderbilt, but her high school principal in Birmingham decided it wasn't the right place for her and refused to send in the application. So she went to the University of Alabama instead.

O'Hara didn't want to major in home economics. Home ec was expected of a college woman in the 1950s. Not just in Alabama, not just in the South, but pretty much everywhere women had the audacity to matriculate. Then she found journalism and the university yearbook, *The Corolla*, where she excelled. Ms. O'Hara was elected the first female editor in a nonwar year of *The Corolla*. She was honored as the outstanding graduate of her class in journalism, even though she was not a journalism major.

She began her newspaper career at *The Birmingham News* in 1965 on the federal court beat. The job paid \$70 a week. O'Hara loved the job and was thrilled that she never had to work as a cosmetics saleswoman in a downtown department store—the post-college career path for many of her classmates.

Jo Ellen O'Hara was a writer. A good one. And her home economics major was her secret. Until it wasn't.

She recalls, "After a couple of years the editor, who was one of these people you never say no to, he said, 'Miss O'Hara, I understand you have a degree in home economics.' And I said, 'Yes, sir.' He said, 'Well, I think that we need a food editor, and we want a food editor with some credentials.' And I said, 'Well, I think that's really nice but I—I really like what I'm doing.' And he said, 'Well, that's fine; you'll take over Monday as food editor.' So that's how much pull I had in the early [19]60s."

Jo Ellen O'Hara's editors at *The Birmingham News* assigned her the pen name "Sue Scattergood." "You're going to get married in two years and you'll leave," they reasoned. They were wrong.

O'Hara became the food editor of *The Birmingham News* in 1965. Though she initially had no interest in covering food, she grew to love it. The pen name "Sue Scattergood" was chosen for her because her editors said, "Well, you're going to get married in two years and you'll leave and we'll be stuck with a no-name food editor."

O'Hara drew attention to gender equity during her tenure at *The Birmingham News*. In addition to her food coverage, she pitched and wrote a series of breaking news articles about the 1977 murder of Virginia Simpson, a Birmingham philanthropist and socialite.

In the 1980s, after more than fifteen years as food editor, she finally convinced the paper to let her write under her own name. O'Hara spent her entire career—forty-three years—at *The Birmingham News*. She retired in 2008. ♣

Annemarie Anderson

Read Jo Ellen O'Hara's oral history at southernfoodways.org. It is one of fourteen interviews that SFA oral historian Annemarie Anderson gathered as part of our Women Food Journalists project.