

SORORITY HOUSE COOK:
MARY ALICE LEWIS, RETIRED

"[W]hen my family was coming on, you know when I was raising my family, you didn't go to the store for anything. Most things you went to the store for was your flour, and your sugar. Your meat, your lard, your vegetables – we all raised that."

--Mary Alice Lewis

FULL INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTION:

Mary Alice Lewis, retired cook
TRI DELTA, KAPPA DELTA & DELTA DELTA GAMMA **SORORITIES**
@ University of Mississippi
July 13, 2004
Mary Alice's daughter's home
Interviewed by Mary Beth Lasseter

MBL = Mary Beth Lasseter
VC = Verlean Caruthers
MAL = Mary Alice Lewis

Mary Beth Lasster: Okay today is July 13. It is Tuesday afternoon, and I am sitting in Miss Verlean Caruther's kitchen. I called her about a week ago to ask if I could do an interview. Miss Verlean used to cook for the Tri-Delta houses on campus. As a great surprise today she had her mother join us, Miss Mary Alice Lewis. Miss Mary Alice used to cook on campus as well. So what we're going to do is just have a little conversation so I can find out a little bit about their experiences cooking on the Ole Miss campus, as part of the Southern Foodways Alliance oral history initiative. What I'll do is just ask each of you the questions so I'll identify you by name on this tape which is going to help me transcribe it later... Now I am talking to Miss Mary Alice Lewis who is Verlean Carothers mother. I understand that you worked on campus for many years. So tell me where you worked, please.

Mary Alice Lewis: I worked at the Tri-Delta. I think I started there in like 1966.

MBL: Okay.

MAL: At the Tri-Delta and I stayed there right – um – I think [inaudible] I know about ten or twelve years. And I left there from Miss Corsey and she left and then I left and I went where she was talking about she worked when the house got burnt. I worked there part time, too. For about a year. Then

I left there and went to Kappa Kappa Gamma and which I stayed there somewhere like about 21 years. [inaudible] I worked on the campus about thirty-something years.

MBL: Okay, and when did you retire?

MAL: In 19 – now what was that? 1995? So that's when I retired.

MBL: Now where are you from originally.

MAL: Well as old folks say, right here in this vicinity. Uh, well, really I guess I was quite young. But my mother says I was born somewhere – we call it Union Hill – what county do you call that?

VC: Lafayette County.

MAL: Which that's not truly from here. It's right up there...so then I've been here all my life.

MBL: And how did you start working on campus?

MAL: Okay. When I first started to working there...on my own working, I started working in homes. Like I was working for different people.

MBL: Private families?

MAL: Like a maid. That's where I started.

MBL: And were you cooking?

MAL: And then I...did the cooking too [laughter] you know, and I was doing that. I left – when I left there I went to Lafayette School and then worked out there. I worked there about a year at Lafayette School. So I also worked, helping cook and serve there. Then I was a regular dishwasher there. And then after I left there that's where I come in contact with Tri Delta.

MBL: Did you have a friend recommend that you go there, or did you know somebody who was working there?

MAL: Well I'll tell you how I got there. At the time when I was talking about when I was working at Lafayette we was on what you call a cedar (sp?) program. And those were government would pay, you know?

MBL: Okay.

MAL: And when that run out, they represent me. They, you know, before they let us go they helped us find us a job. And so that's where I got recommended to Tri-Delta.

MBL: Okay. So the government recommended that you try the Tri-Deltas.

MAL: Yes m'am.

MBL: Now, I skipped ahead of some of my most basic questions. When is your birthday? How old are you, may I ask? You're beautiful, you can't be...

MAL: Oh...my birthday is December 10, 1931. December 10.

MBL: 1931. Okay.

MAL: So I'm 73 years old.

MBL: Now tell me about your family.

MAL: Oh Lord. I've got a lot of family. I'm the mother of twelve.

MBL: Okay.

MAL: I'm the mother of twelve children.

MBL: And are most of them here?

MAL: All of them are right here under me, except the one's deceased. I got one deceased. All the rest of them lives around me.

MBL: How many girls and boys?

MAL: I got four girls and seven boys living.

MBL: And how many grandchildren?

MAL: Oh Lord! You got me there! [Laughter] I got somewhere like twenty-six or eight grandchildren and I have that many great grand-children.

MBL: And they're all around here?

MAL: And they all stay around here. I wouldn't take nothing for them, though. They all sweet.

MBL: I'm sure. So are you teaching them how to cook?

MAL: Well, you know. Some of them when they with me I try to show 'em

how to cook but not big thing 'cause you know these young folks they ain't got time to cook. [Laughter]

MBL: And what are some of the things you used to cook for your family when they were growing up?

MAL: Oh Lord. You know most time when we were growing up we was down with my family when I really had my little ones growing up. We was on the farm. And so we raised all our food. We raised peas, green beans, shuck peas, cabbage, turnip greens, [inaudible] ice potatoes, sweet potatoes. So they were brought up on stuff like that. They were brought up on soul food, not this fast food. [Laughter].

MBL: Soul food.

MAL: I mean, then, when my family was coming on, you know when I was raising my family, you didn't go to the store for anything. Most things you went to the store for was your flour, and your sugar. Your meat, your lard, your vegetables – we all raised that. We raised hogs, killed hogs, cut up so much of the meat off the hog – all lard to get that.

MBL: Now how do you think that compares with what people do today. Do you think it's better or worse?

MAL: I think it's worse. Cause, you know, they living on this fast food. And, to me, I said that's what's causing a lot of sickness.

MBL: Really?

MAL: You know, because we living on – we living in a world that's fast-going fast food, you know. You're planting all this stuff. You're putting all kind of solda- all kinda fancy stuff to keep the insects from eating it up. You keep – you putting it in the stove. I think it's better when we're cooking our own and raising our own food and get used to better cooking.

MBL: Now when you cook at home, do you try and use fresh vegetables and things like that, even today? Even though you're not on the farm?

MAL: Yeah, I have to say. The Lord blessed me there. I used to have like my, they husbands, they still try to work in the field. I got a daughter her friends, he plants stuff like that. So more or less, more or less, like this type of year, I'll have gotten my vegetables.

MBL: Good.

[Laughter]

VC: Yeah. [inaudible]. We wash it and put in the freezer. Bag it up.

MBL: So do y'all have freezer days – I don't know what you call it when you all get together and shell all your peas at once, or do y'all do it along and along.

VC: We just do it along and along. We'll call each other and say, "We got such-and-such a thing you wanna help? Come on over and we'll all do it together." Basically we all kinda do it together.

MBL: So y'all are still sticking with fresh foods, even though you have to cook frozen foods at work?

VC: Yes m'am.[inaudible] corn a little. Then we'll come back and cook it up. Bag it up.

MBL: Now, do y'all – so, are your children growing this here in town or out in the county?

VC: Out in the county.

MBL: So what are your grandchildren's favorite natural foods. Fresh foods?

MAL: You say my grandchildren? I'll be honest and tell you the truth. These young folks they don't like this stuff.

MBL: Do you think there's any way to get them to like it.

MAL: I've been trying, but I can't get somewhere. I've been trying to tell them that's the best for them. But you know, they like this...

[Granddaughter in kitchen says "We like soul food."]

MAL: But you know it's kinda hard to get some of these grandchildren. Now like her [referring to granddaughter in kitchen] she's just like her mama. She says she likes the soul food. But I've got some of 'em, they don't. "I don't like this. I don't like that." So they'd rather go get a hamburger or a pizza or a - what you call these sandwiches? Subway sandwiches like they eat these days. Grandchildren of mine, they all eat that.

MBL: Well tell me what one of your favorite things to cook is. If you can make them eat something that you make –

MAL: You know one thing I can fix at home that they more or less all of them come and eat – and that' soup. I make vegetable soup.

MBL: Now how do you make vegetable soup? It's different from neckbone soup?

MAL: [Laughter] Oh, yeah, it's a little different. There's all kinda work. Like I get my ground beef and I grind it up. Like I put me some corn, green beans, and butter beans, okra, potatoes – ice potatoes – we cook all of that up and you have a big bowl of soup. Now when I fix that, I [inaudible] the whole family. [Laughter]

MBL: Because everybody will eat it?

MAL: Everybody eats it.

MBL: Now, do you ever cook it for the Greek women that you worked with on campus?

MAL: Oh, Lord. Yes m'am.

MBL: So, were you able to bring in recipes from home when you worked there, or – like with your daughter – does the house mother set the menu?

MAL: She can.

MBL: So what was one of –

MAL: You know, sometimes, you know like she'll call me and ask us what did we think? Should she change, you know, add to the menu to make a different meal. And we have to help here do that. And then I guess that's one of the ways I got started making soup then because that's what I come up with and Lord knows I had a time making a soup for that many – they liked it too, when I worked with the Tri-Delts and the Kappa Deltas. Oh Lord, they loved it.

MBL: Was there, um, any special recipe that they loved in particular, besides your soup? Do you do cakes, do you do any baking?

MAL: Now, you know what? I never did do good – I could cook, now. But I never was a bake cooker. I was just a meat cooker and a vegetable cooker.

MBL: You do meat and vegetables. And cornbread? Cornbread or biscuits?

MAL: Sometimes you had some of each.

[Laughter]

MAL: Mostly cornbread.

MBL: Now do you like cooking, or did you do it because –

MAL: No, I love to cook. I just love to cook. Although I don't [inaudible].

MBL: How did you learn to cook?

MAL: Well, up under my parents.

MBL: Really?

MAL: I love when they was there in the kitchen cooking – I loved to stand around and watch them cook and do things and really when I was growing up I guess when I was 8 and 9 years old, I was cooking about everything I wanted to cook because my parents were teaching me. And they'd go in the kitchen to cook, I'd be there with them. They'd have me cooking, and you know, they had we had this old time stove – wood stove then – you know and I wouldn't talk or reach up in the stove or put stuff in the stove. My father had a box built all the way around the stove for me to stand up and cook. Now just how long – how long I've been cooking, when I was 8 and 9 years old –

MBL: Now did you learn any of your mother and father's recipes that specially stuck with you?

MAL: I guess that's where it all come from when I got to cook. Just from their recipes and watching them cook things. You know. Now that's something I ain't never had to do much of – is look at a recipe or something to fix what I want.

MBL: Really – you just know how to do it?

MAL: I just – I guess that's the way my parents brought me up, you know.

MBL: Do you think you remember the recipes, or are you more intuitive, and you kind of know how it works?

MAL: I just – to me, I say I just know how they work. And of course it had to be that you remembered some if it to do things. You had to remember some of it to know how to do it.

MBL: So you can always make it taste good, but it's probably never made the same way exactly twice?

MAL: [Laughter] You know when I started working and cooking out there at the Tri-Delta, uh well, that was very special for me to go through to learn how to cook for a group of people. You know, we was cooking for like about 100 or 150 peoples. You know, you know I had to kind of put my head together and find – figure out how much I needed to fix and what I needed to do.

MBL: Now, how is that different, do you think – cooking for home and cooking more institutional food. Is it just a difference in quantity, or a difference in style?

MAL: Well, it's kinda both ways. It's different in quantity – the stuff that I fix at home. Okay, I had to fix it there but it's still different because it's kinda hard for me because – at home, I know what I had going, and how much I had to fix for my family. But that, I had to learn.

MBL: I imagine cooking for more people is –

MAL: It is

MBL: Tricky.

MAL: It is. It's kinda hard.

MBL: Now, it is hard – excuse me, I'm losing my voice – is it hard to come back home then and make smaller meals. Do you find yourself cooking for large groups all the time?

MAL: No, no, no. You know your family cause you raise them and cook for them. No, it's not hard to come back and cook. You know, a little quantity.

MBL: So what was your favorite part about your job in campus?

MAL: My cooking job?

MBL: Yeah, when you cooked at the Tri-Delta house – did you enjoy cooking, or did you enjoy more working with the people you worked with or getting to know the girls?

MAL: I really enjoyed cooking, because I got to do what I was meant to do – was cooking. So I enjoyed cooking. But also, I enjoyed meeting the staff I was working with. I enjoyed being around the girls, you know, when they come in. Like you said, you find some real fine and friendly. They'll come in and talk and carry on with you. And then you find some, they probably won't even speak to you.

MBL: Why do you think that is?

MAL: I don't know. I said it's the way they come up with they parents. You know. Probably they family's wasn't friendly with everybody. You know. In other words, they folks act like we're colored. You got a picture of what I'm saying?

MBL: Yeah.

MAL: I don't mean no harm. What I'm saying about is, but that's just the way it is. And that's the way it is now. You pass some people – white people – they just as friendly. They say, "How you doing? Or How's your day?" and they'll be around and start a conversation. But you can run across some before they speak to you – you know what I'm saying?

VC: That's everybody.

MBL: Well do you think that, um – I'm trying to think how to phrase this – are there racial tensions within the house, if you don't mind my asking?

MAL: Well, really. That's what I said. Now, but I don't know. That's the way I feel about it – race.

MBL: Did you ever feel like the girls themselves were – I mean, did you think it was something they didn't think about, or do you think it was something that was very deliberate on their part. Do you know what I'm saying? Is it like an ignorance and a not-being-thoughtful, or was it more meanspirited?

MAL: Okay, now how would I put that? I would say it was ignorance. I would say, uh, that they were raised like it. I would say it's how you're brought up.

MBL: That's just about right.

MAL: That's what I would say. And I mean, I ain't just kicking on them. Cause we got them in our own color. We got our own colored folks that way. Know what I'm saying?

MBL: Yeah.

MAL: Seems like they think they bored with you, or something.

[At this point in the interview, MAL's daughter gets up from the table and starts walking around. She appears uncomfortable with the direction of the conversation.]

MBL: Can you tell me a little bit about the people you work with in your kitchen? How many worked on your kitchen staff? Same number as your daughter?

MAL: I worked with Fairy Bell –

MBL: You worked with Fairy Bell? We're going to interview Fairy Bell?

MAL: [Laughter] Oh really?

MBL: We are.

MAL: I worked with her. And, uh, one of these ladies, she's deceased now. And Olive [inaudible]

MBL: Olive Voyle, is that her name?

MAL: Vaughn.

MBL: Voyle?

VC: Vaughn. V-A-U-G-H-N.

MBL: Oh, okay.

MAL: Olive Voyle. I worked with her.

MBL: Is she still around?

MAL: And Gladys Mitchell. Yes, she's still up by Clear Creek. Yes m'am, she's still living. [Inaudible – something about Gladys Mitchell being up by a church in Clear Creek.] I'm getting myself all confused, I know it.

VC: Spring Hill.

MAL: Spring Hill. Spring Hill. She stay back up in there. And, uh, [inaudible name] and [inaudible name] – all them's deceased. A lot of them that I worked with – they's deceased.

VC: Lula Mae.

MAL: Yeah, I worked with her, too.

MBL: Lula Mae Hussee. H-U? How do you spell that, you know?

VC: [Laughter] H-U-T...[conversation between VC and her daughter, who is sitting in the living room debates spelling]. H-U-D-S-O-N.

MBL: Did you cook with these people for a long period of time or was there a lot of turnover in the kitchen? I mean did you develop...

MAL: Okay, well, uh. Halle – she's deceased. Fairy Bell, uh and Gladys Mitchell. I was friends with them.

MBL: Now how did you...

MAL: And Olive Vaughn.

MBL: Now how did you get your children involved? Did you ask them to come work, or did they ask you because they wanted to do what you do?

MAL: The way they come about that, you know, they needed some help in the evening times. That was, you know, wash dishes and help to get things straight and there wasn't enough of us to do it. Keep that going...and so they were asking did we know anybody that would like to come in in the evenings after they get out of school to work? So that's how I got them started.

MBL: Okay. [to VC] Did y'all just do it for spending money, or weekend money?

VC: Both. [Laughter] Definitely – having your own money to get the things you wanted.

MBL: I know that feeling. [pause] So, let me think...could you describe a typical day to me? I know I asked your daughter, but what was a typical day like for you where you were working?

MAL: Are you talking about being off days?

MBL: Yeah, well – what do you do – what did you do – when you're off? You're off all the time now [laughter]

MAL: Well, you know my off days – I still have a day's work at home.

MBL: Okay.

MAL: [Laughter] Trying to cook, clean up, wash, dry – I still had a day's work.

MBL: What was work now at the Greek houses? What times did you get in? Were you – did you start –

MAL: Oh – 'bout 6:30 to 6:30. 6:30 mostly till 7 o'clock.

MBL: And all the time that you worked there, did you also go in the summers to get unemployment because they didn't have the checks to cover...has that always been the case at the Greek houses?

VC: Yes m'am.

MBL: It has. So it's never been something where they have something for the employees.

MAL: They always prepared for us to have something to go on for the summer as long as we stayed employed.

MBL: Right, as long as you were coming back. Okay. Did you ever have a second job when you worked at the house, or it kept you busy enough –

MAL: It kinda kept me busy enough there. Now I've already said all when I left there.

MBL: So you didn't help out with catering or anything on the side.

MAL: Well, now – I did, uh, uh – She called Miss Morgan. I worked some for her and, uh, uh, my son he always – my oldest son, he always helped in weddings in things like that. And I helped...I'd go and help them out, you know. Weddings and things...

MBL: Now you said you started working on campus in 1966, but you were in Oxford in 1962 when Meredith integrated the university, right. Do you remember that?

MAL: I do remember that. [MAL shakes head and hand no].

MBL: Would you, I mean, would you tell me a little bit about that or would you rather –

MAL: Well, I'd rather not talk about – I don't know too much – you know, I was here but I don't – I wasn't in that too much.

MBL: Okay. You weren't involved with the university. Did you stay involved with the university after you retired? Do you ever go back to campus for things?

MAL: Not too much. Uh, you know, like my daughter we go out there when they have the children and things out on the campus then we go out there and, uh, like graduation. We go to that. Sometimes I have been to the games. But that's something I ain't never been interested in, I don't know why.

MBL: Not a sports fan?

MAL: Na...but I have went with friends.

MBL: Did y'all do anything special when you retired.

MAL: No m'am.

MBL: I was about to say – I didn't know if there was a retirement party or uh

MAL: No. Well, when I worked out there, like I said, we didn't get no retirement. It wasn't like that. We didn't have no kind of benefits. When I was working on the campus, it wasn't no kind of benefits. No kind.

MBL: Why did you decide to do that as opposed – I know that when the school recommended that you go to the campus – but why did you decide to work at the Greek houses as opposed to maybe the hospital in town or another school?

MAL: Well, I was gonna say – I guess I was just young and know I needed to work and had a family to take care of and when that job came up I accept that. But I have asked myself a lot of times why did I stay there and work that long with no benefits? I have no idea why did I do that.

MBL: Yeah. Did – did you find that the time off you had – was that helpful with your family, like having summers off with your kids when they weren't in school.

MAL: Yeah, it was fun. Seeing them. Like she [VC] said, we did things together. You know, the whole family would get together and do things.

MBL Did you ever see any kids – I'm jumping all over the place with my questions, I know – did you ever see any kids that were homesick? Did kids ever come in and ask you to maybe cook –

MAL: Oh Lord, have mercy. Yes, I told – I told – I guess I got a great big family because just about all my children, friends, and things there – all they children were there. I was surrounded with children. [inaudible] They all called me...

MBL: What did they call you?

MAL: Mother Dear.

MBL: Mother Dill?

MAL: Mother Dear.

MBL: Oh, Mother Dear. Oh, I'm sorry. I'm just having a hard time.

MAL: And they liked each other. They come in...they think I got something on they gonna come in and ask me, "Is you got so-and-so? Can I have some?"

MBL: So do you keep a plate of cookies for all those folks at your house?

MAL: I'm not able to do that now. I guess I used to like to cook, you know they call them teacakes and things like. I used to like to do that. But, you know, I done got up in age to do that now.

MBL: But you live by yourself still, right?

MAL: No...my mother...I got my mother she's in the house with me and I got my grandson.

MBL: Now how old is your mother?

MAL: 86.

MBL: Okay. And she's living with you. Now what did she do? Did she work as well when you were a child?

MAL: No.

MBL: She stayed home with you?

MAL: [nods head yes]

MBL: Now how many siblings do you have? You were one of how many kids?

MAL: There's three of us. Three girls.

MBL: So you came from a small family, but you had a big family.

MAL: Yes m'am. I'm the oldest of all, I got two more sisters running around.

MBL: So what makes you like big families so much?

MAL: Well, I guess that was God's plan for me to have big families. But you know, when I was growing up and I was at home and coming on up, I always [inaudible] told the Lord I wanted four children. I wanted four children. I want two girls and two boys.

MBL: Well, you got 'em.

MAL: [Laughter] I got more. Well, I always had wanted that, two boys and two girls that's what I wanted. But God blessed me to have more.

MBL: Well good.

MAL: And I'm proud of it.

MBL: I'm sure you are. I can tell. I'm looking around this house and I see all the family pictures on the walls. Well, do you have any particular memory

or tradition you want to share with me today that I haven't asked you about? Is there something that you want to say?

MAL: Well, you know, in my growing up, in my young days and growing old – all the peoples that I worked around I enjoyed. That was the biggest [inaudible] to me. You know, to learn how to communicate with them and do things. I enjoyed that.

MBL: Okay. But you don't regret the time –

MAL: Not at all. Not at all. And you know like one lady I worked for, before I had this stroke, I was going [inaudible] I was part time, about two days a week.

MBL: When did you have your stroke?

MAL: 2001. And so that lady where I was working, my baby girl she's working for her now. But they always call me and they want me to come up there with the children – want me to come up there and play with them. [Laughter]

MBL: I'm sure you're a favorite. Well thank you very much for talking with me today. Y'all have been wonderful.

VC: You know we're happy to help.

MBL: I'm so interested in everything that y'all have done. Y'all have led interesting lives.

MAL: Interesting for us, too – you know.

MBL: Good. Well, thank you very much. And this will conclude our interview today.