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“From the Recipe File of Luba Cohen”: A Study of Southern Jewish Foodways and Cultural Identity

by

Marcie Cohen Ferris

Luba Tooter traveled from Odessa to America in September 1912. Hers is a tale familiar to scores of other Jewish immigrants who made similar journeys from Europe between 1881 and 1924 in the wake of Russian and Polish pogroms. Less familiar but equally important is Luba’s life in Arkansas and the letters and recipes she left behind which reveal a compelling, significant network of women’s friendships. These friendships surface in recipes, letters, and cookbooks where they reveal how foodways shaped networks of community, family, and sisterhood.¹

With their parents Harry and Mollie Tooter, Luba and her brothers, Milton, Maurice, Edward, Joseph, Albert, and George, traveled in a horse-drawn wagon for over two months. Claiming that they were going to a family wedding, the Tooters packed just enough baggage to appear that they were leaving for vacation, rather than making a permanent exodus from Russia. After an arduous journey to Rotterdam that required an illegal crossing of the Austro-Hungarian border, the family boarded the *America*, and squeezed into small steerage compartments for their ten-day journey to New York. At the age of ninety-two, Luba’s youngest brother Joe still remembers a small cubicle on the ship where Jewish passengers gathered to observe Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.² Their cousin, Minnie Issacson, met the family after they were cleared through Ellis Island and took them to an apartment

she had rented in Brooklyn.³ Luba was fifteen years old when her family arrived in New York. Eight years later she married Samuel Joseph Cohen, a Russian Jew who had emigrated from Minsk in 1912. They soon moved from New York to Blytheville, Arkansas.⁴

When Luba died in 1985 at the age of eighty-eight, she left in her Arkansas home a wooden recipe box and the rolling pin with which she made noodle dough as her mother had done in Odessa. Stuffed into the box was a disorderly collection of recipes written on scraps of paper, note pads from her husband's construction company, stationery from the Statler Hotel in New York and the Peabody in Memphis, bits of wallpaper, backs of envelopes, recipes clipped from the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, and her personal cards with the inscription "from the recipe file of Luba Cohen" printed across the top.

When Luba arrived in Arkansas in 1920 as a young bride, she brought both recipes of her native Russian foods and those of American dishes she discovered during her seven years in New York City. She soon blended these recipes with southern recipes in Blytheville where she quickly developed friendships with her predominantly non-Jewish neighbors. Their cards for "Mrs. Thornton Scott's cocoon cookies," "Julia's jam cake," and "May Dixon's 'Cook While You Sleep' cookies" filled her recipe box, along with cut-out newspaper recipes for peach jam, pecan tarts, "Brer' Rabbit" molasses cookies, crabapple jelly, grasshopper pie, and "Mother's Best Hush Puppies" removed from the back of a corn meal package. Luba's recipes for food favorites from the 1950s such as tutti-fruitti rolls, "perfect tuna casserole," Chinese egg rolls, veal scallopini, and gelatin molds suggest how she acculturated by incorporating popular American dishes and entertaining styles.

Luba also had recipe cards from her Jewish friends who lived in Blytheville and nearby small towns in northeastern Arkansas and the "boot heel" of Missouri, where their husbands were merchants, doctors, engineers, and manufacturers. By 1947, these families had raised funds to build Temple Israel in Blytheville. Because her husband, Samuel Joseph Cohen, known as "Jimmy," had little interest in the temple and Jewish life, Luba remained on

the edge of the Jewish community. A constant exchange of recipes with her "temple friends" for dishes like "Fanny Weinstein's matzoh balls," "Lillian's strudel," "Lena's mandelbrodt," "Minnie's honey cake," unconsciously preserved her cultural identity in a place where there were few connections to distant family and Jewish memory.* After 1946, recipes from Huddy Horowitz and her mother, Lena, appear in Luba's box. Huddy married Luba and Jimmy's son, Jerry, in 1946 and moved with him to Blytheville. Reared in an active, traditional Jewish community in New London, Connecticut, Huddy embraced the small Jewish community at Temple Israel in Blytheville, where deep friendships developed through temple activities and the preparation of food for holiday meals and special events. Huddy explained that "The Temple was our connection to our close friendships, our place of worship and identity. It held us all together and the support was enormous."⁵

One well-used recipe in Luba's box was "Chicken Chop Suey or Chow Mein," the dish she prepared when entertaining her family. Why did she cook a dish so "un-Jewish," so foreign to her Russian roots? Chow mein was a dish she had discovered in New York. Living in Brooklyn from 1912 to 1920, she and many other eastern European Jews first encountered Chinese restaurants where they enjoyed this inexpensive food that did not mix milk and meat, as proscribed by kosher law. And pork, a forbidden food for Jews who kept kosher, was minced too small to recognize. Chinese cuisine featured garlic, celery, onion, overcooked vegetables, chicken dishes, eggs, sweet and sour dishes, and hot tea, tastes that an eastern European palate appreciated.⁶ While Chinese people called their noodle dumplings won tons, Jews looked into the same steaming bowls of chicken broth and saw kreplach.

On Luba's kitchen shelves was *Tried and True Recipes*, a guidebook to southern cooking published in 1922 by the Alabama Division of the United Daughters of the Confederacy. There was also the small, spiral-bound *Art of Chinese Cooking*, published in

* For a description of foods, see Appendix on pages 158-159. Certain spelling variations may occur.

1956. Luba's recipes, cookbooks, and Russian rolling pin reveal her experiences as a Russian child, a New York immigrant, and finally a southern housewife.

Luba Cohen's life suggests how southern Jewish foodways reveal a cultural history. We are what we eat, and the foods people enjoy as well as those they avoid reveal their cultural identity. Charged with the preparation of their family's meals, southern Jewish women shaped their cultural identity through food.⁷ Their history survives in non-traditional sources such as recipes, menus, letters, journals, and cookbooks. Consider the letter written by a friend to Luba Cohen on Peabody Hotel stationery: "Dear Luba, Received the chocolate nut cookie recipe from Rebecca today. Meant to bring this copy to you tonite. She said to pass the recipe on to you and Florence. I'm afraid I'll misplace same if I don't copy this tonight. I'm not too sleepy—here goes."⁸ While it is unclear whether the friend was Jewish, whether the recipe was for every day use or for a Jewish holiday, the letter reveals a powerful connection between four women, separated by distance, who communicated through foodways. Recipes must be read carefully to understand how women relate to family, friends, community, and their creation of cultural identity. This essay explores these recipes and how they reveal southern Jewish identity, foodways patterns, acculturation, women's networks, and the interaction between African American and southern Jewish women. The essay concludes with a brief case study of Natchez, Mississippi, and a 1998 survey of southern Jewish foodways.⁹

Don Yoder is the first folklorist who noted the connection between food and cultural identity. In 1972 Yoder introduced the term "folk cookery."¹⁰ This phrase, subsequently replaced by the term "foodways," embraced the study of food, its preparation and preservation, social and psychological functions of food, and its connections to other aspects of folk culture.¹¹ Yoder views regional and national cuisine as "a culinary hybrid, with an elaborate stratification of diverse historical layers."¹² Charles Camp later argues that food shapes culture because "ordinary people understand and employ the symbolic and cultural dimensions of food in their everyday affairs."¹³ Food, explains Camp, "is one of

the most, if not the single most, visible badges of identity."¹⁴ People turn to traditional foodways when their culture is at risk because food communicates human values that are both publicly and privately held.¹⁵ Theodore and Lin Humphrey define foodways as communication between people, the "way that people express themselves."¹⁶ And Susan Kalshik views foodways as performance, "in which statements of identity can be made—in preparing, eating, serving, forbidding, and talking about food."¹⁷

Examples of these theories abound in southern Jewish foodways. Sally Wolff King was born in Dumas, Arkansas, in 1954, and remembers a recipe for "Romanian Eggplant Salad" that she inherited from her Romanian grandmother. "The recipe reminds me of our roots in the old country and the power of tradition. Whenever I make this dish, I think about my parents, grandparents, and great grandparents."¹⁸ D. D. Rudner Eisenberg (b. 1947) was raised in Memphis, Tennessee, and recalls "rolling matzah balls with my Mom. This was my mother's mother's recipe. The kids would visit and roll matzah balls with my mother. Every trip to Memphis, my mother makes this soup for me and for my children."¹⁹ Gerry Barkovitz of Hayti, Missouri, (b. 1923) described her grandmother's house, where "Eastern Europe was absolutely palpable." Both of her grandmothers passed on their recipes, but "Neither of them ever measured anything. Grandma, how do you make this? Well, you shick arein a bissel dis and a bissel dos [Yiddish for 'put in a little of this and a little of that'], and you taste."²⁰ Gerry's daughter, Ellen Barkovitz O'Kelley (b. 1949) wrote "In our family, food is such an important thing that it is really the underpinnings of our traditions. Most of my memories of my grandmother are related to food."²¹ In Tyler, Texas, Maurine Genevov Muntz (b. 1927) remembers "black-eyed peas, turnip greens and cornbread, fried chicken, barley and beans cooked with short ribs on Friday nights [Shabbat]. Also, we had okra fried with tomatoes and fried or candied yams."²² Leslie Koock Silver (b. 1942) who grew up in Birmingham, Alabama, explains that foodway "traditions are my threads that came across the Atlantic Ocean to Ellis Island and are now settled in Vicksburg, Mississippi."²³

For folklorists, these foodways stories are expressions of cultural history and identity, communication, and performance. Foodways clearly show how the southern Jewish community chose to address its diverse cultural roots. Evocative tastes and smells link southern Jews to past experiences, to far away places, and to people distantly remembered.²⁴ Living in small communities where there were so few Jews, in many cases only a single family, Jewish southerners from the early nineteenth century to the present developed networks with one another that sustained them both socially and spiritually. This networking is common among southern Jews who use the term, “Jewish Geography,” to refer to conversations that focus on regional name-swapping and the familiar question, “do you know . . . ?” Leanne Lipnick Silverblatt (b. 1949) of Indianola, Mississippi, describes a gathering of Jewish friends and family at the Delta Jewish Supper Club, begun in the 1970s, which continues this tradition of Jewish socializing:

We meet sporadically in different towns all over the Delta. Of course, the biggest “Jew Meet” is the Delta Jewish Open Golf Tournament. [An annual benefit in Greenville, MS for the Henry S. Jacobs Camp in Utica, MS.] My parents belonged to the YJPL (the Young Jewish People’s League, [c. 1940s]). They met every month or so to eat – Jewish couples from all over the Delta belonged. Our family enjoyed all Jewish holidays with extended family and friends in Greenwood, Grenada, and Ruleville, Mississippi.²⁵

Jewish women’s emphasis on food preparation and shared recipes remembered from mothers and grandmothers who had died or lived far from the South remains vital to maintaining Jewish identity. Foodways sustain networks between Jewish southerners, and, to understand their community today and the evolution of its foodways, one must understand its roots in the colonial South.

From the mid-eighteenth century to the early decades of the twentieth century, Jews in the South encountered Anglo-Ameri-

cans and African Americans with their respective roots in the British Isles and Africa. They lived together in the most isolated, predominantly Protestant region in the country.²⁶ Southern Jews discovered a creolization of foodways, as black southerners combined African okra and yams with the cornbread and pies of the white South. How to respect Jewish dietary laws in the earliest years of settlement in a region that consumed bacon, ham, pork shoulder, lard, head meat, chitterlings, pig feet, salt pork, fat back, side meat, white meat, pot likker, pig ears, and "even the squeal" at every meal was a challenge.²⁷ Joe Gray Taylor noted, "So long as he had pork, the Southerner ate it everyday and at nearly every meal."²⁸

During the colonial period Jewish immigrants to the South who tried to keep kosher had to either learn to slaughter their animals in the ritual manner or go hungry.²⁹ Joan Nathan notes a letter sent to Mordecai Sheftall of Georgia from his Christian friend, John Wreat, in 1788, that counsels "Don't forget to bring your sharp knife with you. And then you shall not fast here unless 'tis your own fault, as I am putting up some sheep to fatten."³⁰ By the eighteenth century, Sephardic Jews sought religious tolerance as well as economic opportunity in the newly developing markets of the coastal South. Many settled in Savannah, Georgia, and Charleston, South Carolina, where they were joined by a smaller number of Ashkenazic Jews.³¹ Their Sephardic cuisine was shaped by Mediterranean traditional foods such as almonds, olive oil, dates, chickpeas, fava beans, grapes, and pomegranates.³² Stewed fish and fish fried in olive oil, beef and bean stews, almond puddings, and egg custards are among the Sephardic foods that were eaten in colonial America.³³

Although their foodways differed from those of other southerners, Jewish immigrants and their descendants in the South found much that was familiar to their own tastes. They appreciated the nineteenth-century southern table where "big eating" included fried and boiled meats, overcooked vegetables, pickled vegetables and fruits, sweets and hot breads.³⁴ Both Jewish immigrants and native southerners viewed food as a way to celebrate

daily life and to share with others. Jews also embraced the southern notion of hospitality. According to John Egerton, “serving large quantities of good things to eat to large numbers of hungry people, of sharing food and drink with family and friends and strangers, proved to be a durable tradition in the South, outliving war and depression and hunger.”³⁵ Such hospitality was a concept with which Jewish people strongly identified.

Between 1820 and 1880 a second wave of Jewish immigration to America occurred and Ashkenazic Jews from central and western Europe, including the Germanic states, France, Hungary, and Poland came south.³⁶ Single Jewish men sought economic opportunity and political rights, and women came for similar reasons and to “make a good match.” Jews who had been peddlers and traders in their countries of origin sought similar work in the South. To keep kosher while on the road, a peddler carried food supplies for his journey. Cherokee Indians referred to Jewish peddlers as “egg eaters” because they kept hard-boiled eggs in their pockets and ate them with either dried beef sausages or pickled herring that they roasted in newspaper over an open fire.³⁷ As they prospered and expanded their operations, peddlers purchased wagons and eventually settled in towns and cities. German Jews built stores throughout the South and became integral members of their communities. Merchants wrote home to family in Germany requesting suitable brides. These Jewish women brought their foodways with them as a welcome taste of home for their husbands. Chicken and vegetable soups, roasted goose, duck, and chicken, stewed and baked fish dishes, sweet and sour tongue, kugels, cakes, breads, and tortes were basic foodstuffs in the German and Alsace-Lorraine Jewish kitchen.³⁸

These Jews gathered for religious services in temporary locations like a merchant’s store or a Masonic Hall. Once enough Jewish families settled in a town, a familiar pattern of Jewish community development followed. They created a chevra kadisha and a chevra nashim. Benevolent societies were organized to administer Jewish community philanthropy, and permanent places of worship were constructed.

Gradually these Jews shaped an identity that focused on ethical principles more than Jewish ritual and ceremonial practices. It was important to fit into the larger society and in many homes, Jewish dietary laws were dropped because of the community's small numbers and the difficulty of obtaining kosher foods.³⁹

The foodways of twentieth century descendants of central European immigrants reveal the evolution of their cultural identity.⁴⁰ Kathryn Loeb Wiener (b. 1929), a native of Montgomery, Alabama, described "Matzah charlotte at Passover and matzah balls. The rest was strictly assimilated southern."⁴¹ Bettye Lamensdorf Kline (b. 1939) of Vicksburg, Mississippi, remembers "Almost no Jewish food was prepared in my home. I only remember matzah balls at my grandmother's. I did not eat Jewish food until I was married."⁴² Also from Vicksburg, Minette Switzer Cooper (b. 1937) recalls "only matzahs; we were not into 'Jewish.' Holiday food for us was usually fried chicken, rice and gravy, string beans, salad, and ice cream. We [now] celebrate Passover here at the house. I make up my own charoses [sic]* – pecans, apples, apricots, sweet wine, and honey."⁴³ Cathy Samuel Wolf (b. 1944) grew up in New Orleans where her family "had no Jewish traditions or experiences . . . Sometimes we ate Aunt Maud's matzah balls, swimming in butter, on Wednesday nights when our family ate at my Grandmother Samuel's, who lived with Aunt Maud."⁴⁴ Suzanne Schwarz Rosenzweig (b. 1925) was raised in Wheeling, West Virginia, where her "southern grandmother observed the Sabbath by not eating bacon."⁴⁵ Amelie Banov Burgunder of Baltimore, Maryland, (b. 1927) explained that

Our family was fairly traditional about holidays. Meals with relatives and lots of cooking. Strudel, kuchen, and lots of foods made with only cream and butter. The tradition was more German, than southern. No root vegetables – too peasanty [sic]. I, of course, love them. Passover foods included matzah dumplings with lemon sauce, prunes and chestnuts, and flourless sponge

*See "haroses" in the Appendix.

cakes. One of my aunts made schnecken (sticky buns) so great that she sold them locally.⁴⁶

Southern Jews effectively adapted their religious practices, while holding on to the tenets of their faith. They could think and believe Jewish thoughts while they dressed and acted like southerners. English was substituted for Hebrew, choirs and organs were introduced into the service, mixed seating was allowed, the rabbi preached much like the Protestant clergy, the yarmulke and tallit disappeared, and a quiet, dignified decorum was encouraged during worship.⁴⁷ Even the architecture of the new synagogues was modeled after churches, de-emphasizing the Jew's Old World roots in a country increasingly resentful of outsiders.⁴⁸ Southern Protestants strongly related to the piety and Old Testament traditions of Jews in their communities.

Central European Jews had barely transformed themselves into Americans when they were followed by a massive immigration of Jews from Russia, Romania, Galicia, Silesia, Czechoslovakia, and Russian-held Poland.⁴⁹ As a direct result of the flood of immigrants to America in the late nineteenth century, both German Jews and the newly arrived eastern European Jews faced a growing anti-Semitism. Jews who were already settled saw themselves as vulnerable, and believed it was in the best interest of all Jews to quickly assimilate the newly-arrived immigrants and direct attention from their "foreign-ness." Tensions quickly developed between these new immigrants and the already established Jews due in part to significant differences in worship styles. Eastern European Jews created separate sub-communities in small towns where German Jews already lived.⁵⁰ In larger cities, eastern European Jews built their own synagogues and followed Orthodox religious practices.

Unlike the German Jews before them, many eastern European Jews clung tightly to kashrut and the traditional foodways they had known in their countries of origin, such as bagels, borscht, chicken soup, stuffed cabbage, cholent, tsimmes, herring, kreplach, and tongue. Rosa Poliakoff, who was born in Union, South Carolina, in 1914, describes her family's commitment to

keeping kosher in the South and how the Jewish community helped to make it possible:

There was this place in Atlanta called S. J. Gold and they shipped kosher meat all over the South. When I went to college in Atlanta, my mother wrote to 'em and told them I was coming. She didn't want me to eat any chometz on Passover. . . . They were so busy shipping Passover orders all over the southeast, they stayed up all night the night before Passover to be sure everybody got their [orders]. They would drive out to Agnes Scott College to get me every night to eat supper at their house, so I could keep Pesachdicke.⁵¹

Oscar Fendler (b. 1909), whose mother and father came to Manila, Arkansas, from Cracow, Poland, via New York in 1908, remembers:

Dad would take me for high holidays to the synagogues in Little Rock, Memphis, or St. Louis. They could not keep kosher in a town such as Manila, but they did their best. We never had pork in our home during all the time Dad and Mother lived. We never had any catfish in our home. That food was not considered proper. We had lots of crappie, perch, buffalo, and carp. Some of the best tasting crappie was fried in animal fat. It was a delicacy for breakfast and was served with hot biscuits. At times, when we had been to Memphis, Dad would buy herring at a delicatessen.⁵²

Like the Fendlers, eastern European and other Jewish families made frequent trips to cities with larger Jewish populations to purchase both kosher and kosher-style ['Jewish,' but not kosher] foods. Most American delicatessens were run by non-Jewish Germans and Alsatians until the late nineteenth century, when Jews came into the businesses.⁵³ At the delicatessen, defined as the American "Jewish eating experience," one could grocery shop for kosher foods, fresh meats, salads, fish, bread, pickles, knishes, and other "Jewish" products, or sit at the counter or tables to en-

joy a gargantuan corn beef sandwich or piece of cheesecake.⁵⁴ Although centered in New York where there were over five thousand delis by the mid-1930s, these institutions quickly spread across the United States.⁵⁵ For many years Irving and Judy Feldman, owners of the Old Tyme Delicatessen, which opened in Jackson, Mississippi, in the early 1960s, were the only source of kosher meat in Mississippi. They sent frequent shipments to Jewish customers throughout the region. In Hot Springs, Arkansas, the Forshberg family has operated Mollie's Restaurant since 1955, serving delicatessen fare to the small number of Jews in town, the Jewish tourists that once came to enjoy the area's curative waters, and now a non-Jewish clientele that has learned to love kreplach and corned beef. Atlanta, Georgia, had many delicatessens, including those owned by members of the Sephardic community such as Nace Amato's The Roxy and Victor Papouchado's Victor's, both located on Peachtree Street in the 1920s. An Atlanta newspaper reporter described Victor's: "There is no place in New York or Washington that surpasses Victor's Delicatessen in beauty of appointments or great variety of good things to eat."⁵⁶

Examples of southern Jewish delicatessen memories abound. Bess Seligman, who grew up in Shaw, a small town in the Mississippi Delta, remembers getting supplies for Passover: "I was the delivery boy. I went to Memphis and took everybody's order and brought back the meats and the perishable foods. The matzah, the flour, the potato starch, and all that, we would ship by bus or by train, because we couldn't put it all in a car. Don't you remember the wonderful smoked goose legs that we got from Cincinnati!"⁵⁷ Eli Evans (b. 1936) explains that in Durham, North Carolina, the shochet also performed as the cantor and mohel. "He ran a small deli with a few tables, where he served corn beef sandwiches, brisket, etc."⁵⁸ Joan Levy (b. 1942) of Savannah recalls that "Gottlieb's Deli and Gottlieb's Bakery were very popular from the 1930s."⁵⁹ Roberta Schandler Grossman's (b. 1943) father "had the Pickle Barrell in Asheville, North Carolina, until his death. Before him, grandpa had kosher meats and groceries."⁶⁰ Helene Markstein Tucker (b. 1943) and other Birmingham natives enjoyed

"Brody's Delicatessen in Mountain Brook, Alabama, a family-run grocery store that was the only place to buy food on Sunday."⁶¹

In downtown Savannah, Jane Guthman Kahn (b. 1933) wrote "my husband's aunts ran Hirsch's Delicatessen during the 1930s and early 1940s. It always smelled of pickles. My husband would attend afternoon Hebrew School, then walk over there for a free over-sized corned beef sandwich."⁶² Mary Lynn Allmont (b. 1943) of Memphis described Halpern's Delicatessen, which advertised "Say it with food." She remembers "going there with my mother and grandmother, buying bread, smoked whitefish and herring."⁶³ In Columbia, South Carolina, the "Five Points Delicatessen was a regular stop after Sunday school classes" for Jack Bass (b. 1934) and his family.⁶⁴

Another reliable source for Jewish foods was the northern relative who frequently traveled to the South beginning in the 1940s and 1950s laden with Jewish supplies. Vicki Reikes Fox (b. 1952) of Hattiesburg, Mississippi, recalls how her "grandparents visited yearly from New York and they always brought bags full of lox, bagels, whitefish, rye bread, and farmer's cheese from the city. When they arrived, no matter what time, we always sat down to enjoy a meal of this New York deli food."⁶⁵

Following the eastern European immigration, a second wave of Sephardic Jews came to the South early in the twentieth century. Jews from Turkey and the Isle of Rhodes settled in Montgomery, Alabama, and Atlanta, Georgia, where they found jobs as fruit peddlers, butchers, storekeepers, grocers, tailors, haters, and shoemakers. Like eastern European Jews before them, they settled where synagogues were established and by the 1920s built their own places of worship, Congregation Or VeShalom in Atlanta and Congregation Etz Ahayem in Montgomery. Social functions, organizational affiliations, cultural events, the Ladino language and Mediterranean foodways characterize these Sephardim. Miriam Cohen, a long-time member of the Montgomery Sephardic community, reflected on her food traditions from the 1920s to the 1990s: "You know, when I cook pink rice, my son says, 'This is Jewish soul food!' It is, you know."⁶⁶ Regina Piha Capilouto (b. 1920), who was born in Montgomery, and whose

parents and grandparents came from the Isle of Rhodes, remembers childhood dishes of “baked noodles, spinach, and cheese, stuffed grape leaves, rice with tomato sauce, rojalde, and boyos. For Passover dishes: fried chicken, turnip greens, fish with Creole sauce, sweet potatoes with brown sugar and butter, and baklava.”⁶⁷ Congregation Or VeShalom’s sisterhood is famous for its annual Sephardic food bazaar, which inspired the sisterhood to publish a cookbook, *The Sephardic Cooks*, now in its fourth edition.⁶⁸ While the cookbook is filled with traditional Sephardic recipes for dishes like arroz con pollo, albondigas, dolmas de calvasa, and pastelles, the congregation’s southern sense of place intermingled with Ashkenazic tastes, as seen in recipes for fried chicken, black-eyed peas, macaroni and cheese, pecan balls, matzo balls, brisket, kugel, and mandel bread.

In *Jewish Cooking in America*, Joan Nathan explains that Jews always carry the foodways of their home countries with them and adapt these traditions to those of the local culture.⁶⁹ Southern Jews brought with them foodways from their countries of origin: from Germany, kuchsens, strudels, breads, roasted goose, matzo balls, and gefilte fish; from the Mediterranean, feta, olive oil, fish, rice dishes, and filo dough pastries; from eastern Europe, chopped liver, kishke, stuffed cabbage, roasted chicken, kreplach, and herring; from Alsace and Lorraine, tortes, kuchsens, pastries, breads, onions and garlic, cheeses, baked and stewed fish dishes.⁷⁰ Recipes were copied into journals, written on cards, and brought by memory to the South. Jewish women continued to cook the foods remembered from their Old World homes and modified the ingredients, methods, and occasions for eating these foods as a result of southern influences. The informal communication network between Jewish women allowed the recipes to pass within and between families and friends, changing as each person made the particular dish their own. For second and third generation southern Jews, the foods of everyday meals in the Old World became special foods for holidays.⁷¹ Chopped liver, gefilte fish, salami, and rye bread are known as “Jewish” foods because they are so closely tied to the Old World that the foods became a symbol of the group itself.⁷²

As their southern Jewish identities evolved from the eighteenth century throughout the early twentieth century, some women kept their southern and Jewish dishes separate, while others chose to blend the cuisines by adding pecans, fresh tomatoes, okra, butter beans, and sweet potatoes to their holiday menus, and substituting regional specialties such as fried chicken, gumbo, and beef ribs for the traditional roasted chicken at Friday evening Sabbath suppers. In present day southern kitchens, Jewish women effectively blend and distinguish southern and Jewish foods in ways that celebrate the distinctive foodways of both the region and their Jewish culture. Miriam Graeber Cohn (b. 1925) describes her "food guides": "My mother came from Austria; my husband's grandmother came from France; an aunt from Cajun Country; and my mother-in-law from Port Gibson, Mississippi. Some recipes came from our beloved servants, relatives and friends."⁷³ Bert Fischel (b. 1940), grew up in Vicksburg, Mississippi, where his grandmother, Mama Stella, "lived with us, as was the custom for most families at the time. It was Mama Stella's kitchen, not my mother's, because Mama Stella had a passion for the kitchen, where she spent hours each day directing Mamie, our cook."⁷⁴ Mama Stella's Alsatian roots were reflected in her rich cakes and meringues, her love for strong cheese, sauerkraut, white asparagus, and her predilection for ham. In Lexington, Mississippi, Phyllis Berkower Stern (b. 1924) blends southern and Jewish foodways in her Rosh Hashanah dinner as she prepares her mother-in-law's "Big Momma's" kreplach, brisket, butter beans from her garden, squash casserole, rice and gravy, and turnip greens.⁷⁵ Paula Ross Hoffman (b. 1939) of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, explains how her husband, Harvey, and daughter, Julie, make the gefilte fish for Passover using sea trout and "goo," an abbreviation of gasper goo: "Pike and whitefish aren't available around here. We call matzo brei 'lost matzo' after the New Orleans term for French toast, 'lost bread,' or 'pain perdu'; Eating hamantaschen and wearing the costume I had worn for Mardi Gras are my memories of Purim."⁷⁶ Ann Zerlin Streiffer (b. 1954) of New Orleans makes jambalaya by substituting kosher chicken and kosher sausage for the customary ham and shrimp.⁷⁷

Leanne Lipnick Silverblatt (b. 1949) of Indianola, Mississippi, explained that “Southern foods were always a part of our holiday meals. We often had fried or barbequed chicken on Jewish holidays. Pecan pie, lemon meringue pie, and peach cobbler were favorite desserts for holiday meals.”⁷⁸ Judith Weil Shanks (b. 1941) of Montgomery, Alabama, also remembers holiday foods, including “Pickled shrimp, smoked turkey, ham, always biscuits, fried chicken, ‘chopped’ chicken liver, like a mousse. The Jewish country club (mainly German Reform) had [an] Easter egg hunt, Fourth of July with pork barbeque.”⁷⁹ Bobbie Scharlack Malone (b. 1944), who was raised in San Antonio, Texas, says, “We tend to eat southern *or* Jewish, but not at the same meal. That’s how we ate growing up, too—fried chicken and biscuits at one meal; challah and baked chicken at another.”⁸⁰ Suzanne Ginsberg Kantziper (b. 1936) grew up in Savannah, Georgia, where “My parents’ home was kosher, so we had traditional foods for the holidays. We also ate okra and tomatoes, grits and fried chicken, black-eyed peas, zipper peas, squash, collard greens, turnips, but that was for everyday fare.”⁸¹ Shirley Ettinger Orlansky (b. 1931), raised in Alexandria, Louisiana, has made “cornbread oyster dressing with smaltz [sic]” for the past eighteen family Thanksgivings.⁸² Some southern Jewish families serve Old World recipes, such as German lebkuchen, at Thanksgiving and Christmas holiday celebrations. Peggy Kronsberg Pearlstein (b. 1942) remembers how “Friday night dinners were always dairy. My father hated chicken; growing up on Tilghman’s Island on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, it was hard to obtain kosher meat and the family ate chicken, and more chicken. My paternal grandmother made sweet potato pies for each of her sons’ families for Friday night dinner. Sunday brunch was grits, kippers, fried tomatoes, and fried corn.”⁸³

Shulameth Reich Elster (b. 1939) of Norfolk, Virginia, recalls, “Southern fried chicken—cold for Shabbat summer [dinners] and always watermelon for dessert.”⁸⁴ Jack Bass (b. 1934) grew up in North, South Carolina, and remembers fried salt herring served

*See “schmaltz” in the Appendix.

with grits for breakfast, and on holidays, sweet potatoes substituted for the carrots in tsimmes.⁸⁵ Carolyn Lipson-Walker (b. 1951) describes Mississippi recipes for gefilte fish that use non-kosher catfish and a Texas Jewish family that barbeques matzo balls on the grill.⁸⁶ Marion Wiener Weiss (b. 1936) of Shreveport, Louisiana, remembers: "Pecans in haroses, smothered chicken and/or beef tongue. For Shabbat, southern food. Always home-made soup first. Sunday brunch: smothered chicken livers and biscuits. Sometimes during Passover, we had matzah pancakes for breakfast with mayhaw jelly or matzah fritters with apples and raisins and lemon sauce."⁸⁷

From the 1930s to the early 1950s, many eastern European and German Jewish families in the South vacationed at inns and small resorts in the mountains of North Carolina and at coastal beaches that catered to Jews and to their taste for traditional Jewish foods. Esther Rosenbaum Buchsbaum (b. 1936) remembers a Jewish resort, the Lake Osceola Inn, in Hendersonville, North Carolina, where "I first tasted potato knishes to die for."⁸⁸ Also in Hendersonville, the Jack Bass family stayed at the "Horowitz Kosher Inn—southern Catskills with lots of eating and rocking chair activity."⁸⁹ Eli Evans' family met at the Cavalier Hotel at Virginia Beach, Virginia, and the Maison Sur Mer Condominium in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina: "the nick-name for Maison Sur Mer was 'the Kibbutz.'"⁹⁰ Joan Levy (b. 1942) describes a beach club at Tybee, a resort on the Atlantic Coast, where the Reform Jews of Savannah vacationed.⁹¹

Reva Schneider Hart (b. 1924) of Winona, Mississippi, writes about the Henry S. Jacobs Camp in Utica, Mississippi: "It's not a resort, but close to it!"⁹² Although a center for Jewish youth in the summers, the Henry S. Jacobs Camp has provided year-round adult education for Jewish families from Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Alabama since June 1970. Fried chicken and biscuits is a Friday night Shabbat tradition at the camp.

While Jewish camps like Henry S. Jacobs, delicatessens, summer resorts, and northern urban families were sources

for Jewish food outside the home, most Jewish foods were prepared in the home by mothers, aunts, grandmothers, and the cooks they supervised. Although most southern Jewish women used recipes passed to them from mothers and grandmothers, they were equally dependent on nationally popular sources such as the *Settlement Cook Book* and “Aunt Babette’s”

Cook Book, Foreign and Domestic Receipts for the Household. In 1901, Lizzie Black Kander, founder of the Milwaukee Jewish Mission, published the *Settlement Cook Book* as a fundraiser to benefit the organization. Based on the mission’s cooking school curriculum, the cookbook offered basic information on household and kitchen management and one hundred non-kosher American and German Jewish recipes.⁹³ One of the most successful cookbooks ever published, forty editions have sold over 1.5 million copies.⁹⁴

The *Settlement Cook Book* remains a classic in southern Jewish women’s kitchens. Its mix of American classics like waffles and brownies with decidedly non-kosher delicacies like shrimp a la Creole, fried oysters, and creamed crabmeat particularly appealed to southern Jewish women. Anne Bower suggests that women authors like Lizzie Kander asserted themselves as upper middle-class, assimilated Americans, “comfortable acknowledging the German aspect of their German Jewish background, but worried that their Jewishness . . . could undo their secure lives,” because of growing anti-Semitism at the beginning of the twentieth century.⁹⁵ The large number of non-kosher recipes reflected the Americanizing mission of the *Settlement Cook Book*. Kander saw no place for kosher dietary laws in the modern Jewish home, and her recipes and cooking classes emphasized American tastes, although she did include several recipes for traditional German dishes such as kugels, kuchens, tortes, and “filled fish” or gefilte fish. She taught her readers to eat and entertain like middle-class Americans with non-kosher meat and potatoes, salads, seafood, and German-style desserts fed to Jewish and non-Jewish guests alike. “In the Cohn family,” writes Miriam Graeber Cohn of Vicksburg, Mississippi, “the only cookbook I saw was the *Settlement Cook Book*.”⁹⁶

Another favorite in American Jewish kitchens, *"Aunt Babette's" Cook Book, Foreign and Domestic Receipts for the Household*, was published in 1889 by the Bloch Publishing and Printing Company in Cincinnati, "the oldest Jewish printing company in the United States."⁹⁷ *"Aunt Babette's"* was passed down through generations of American Jewish women, southerners included, who turned to this quietly Jewish cookbook more for its charlotte russe and escalloped oysters, than for its matzo balls. Janice Rothschild Blumberg's (b. 1924) 1891 edition was originally owned by her great-grandmother, Sophia Weil Browne, who lived in Columbus and Atlanta, Georgia, and was married to Rabbi Edward Benjamin Morris Brown, who officiated at Atlanta's Hebrew Benevolent Congregation between 1877 and 1881. Mrs. Browne appreciated the cookbook's many German recipes, as well as its lenient view of kashrut.⁹⁸ "Aunt Babette," the pseudonym of Mrs. Bertha F. Kramer, wrote "nothing is trefa [sic]* that is healthy and clean."⁹⁹ A section of Passover recipes was titled "Easter Dishes, Cakes, Puddings, Wines, Etc., How to Set the Table for the Service of the Sedar [sic] on the Eve of Pesach or Passover." Menus and instructions for "Kaffee klatch," "Pink Teas" [a novelty party at which everything was pink], "Thanksgiving Dinner," "Plain Sunday Dinner," "Lunch Parties," and "Portable Luncheons" gave southern Jewish women the tools they needed to shape an acceptable Jewish identity in their predominantly Christian community. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett explains that "Treyf cookbooks like that of 'Aunt Babette's' reveal how Jewish identity was constructed in the kitchen and at the table through the conspicuous rejection of the dietary laws and enthusiastic acceptance of culinary eclecticism."¹⁰⁰

From the early 1900s to the 1950s, American Jewish women were encouraged to blend food, interior design, religious practice, and daily values to create the model Jewish home, "a bond in sanctity" between Jewish religion and family life.¹⁰¹ Jenna Weissmann Joselit describes this phase of American Jewish domestic culture as a time concerned with the spiritual and

*See "Treyfadicke" in the Glossary.

emotional properties of the home that differed from an earlier era where domestic reformers like Lizzie Kander focused on hygiene, contagious disease, and Americanization.¹⁰² This new form of Jewish identity, known as “domestic Judaism,” became a way for Jews to “recapture and revivify a sense of connection.”¹⁰³ Temple sisterhoods reinforced this ideology with congregational cookbooks that equated food preparation with making a Jewish home. To raise funds, virtually every synagogue in the country published a cookbook that mixed its members’ regional specialties and their family’s heirloom Jewish recipes. Some popular southern examples include Savannah, Georgia’s Congregation Mickve Israel’s *Shalom Y’all Cookbook*; Atlanta, Georgia’s Congregation Or VeShalom’s *The Sephardic Cooks*; New Orleans, Louisiana’s Gates of Prayer’s *Everyday and Challah Day Cooking*; Dallas, Texas’ Temple Emanu-El’s *Five Thousand Years in the Kitchen*; Baton Rouge, Louisiana’s Liberal Synagogue’s *Matzo Ball Gumbo*; and cookbooks published by southern chapters of Hadassah, B’nai B’rith Women, and the National Council of Jewish Women.

The influence of African American cooks and domestics is central to the lives of southern Jewish families. Like their white Protestant neighbors, Jews were intimately associated with black nannies, cooks, housekeepers, drivers, gardeners, and workers who cared for them from cradle to grave. Eli Evans recalls how he “was raised Southern-style – by the maid.”¹⁰⁴ Having “black help” was common, and Jews who did not hire black domestics were in the minority. In a recent survey of southern Jewish foodways, more than half of the 117 respondents mentioned black female domestic workers who either did all the cooking or provided part-time assistance in their childhood homes. The generational differences between Jewish women who hired black cooks and those who did their own cooking suggests that acculturation and class influenced the increased hiring of black domestics. In many southern Jewish house-holds, grandmothers who lived with their grown children oversaw the kitchen and black cooks, while their daughters and daughters-in-laws

*Betty Green, a professional caterer at Temple Israel, Little Rock, Arkansas,
learned to "cook Jewish" in the homes of her Jewish employers.*

(By permission of Bill Aron, © Bill Aron Photography)

participated in Jewish organizational activities outside the home.

Today many African Americans still work for Jewish families. Members of southern synagogues have lifelong relationships with black southerners who open their buildings and who turn out the lights after services. In Natchez, Mississippi, Eula Mae Demby, a long-time employee of Temple B'nai Israel, visits the synagogue almost every day and has given as many tours of the building as its Jewish members. Jewish southerners frequently mention relationships with black men and women who cooked for them, served family meals, catered parties, and cleaned their houses. Jane Guthman Kahn (b. 1933), who grew up in Savannah,

recalled a black woman who cooked for her aunt for more than forty years: "Her recipes are the ones I remember most fondly."¹⁰⁵

Cultural traditions and foodways passed back and forth between black women cooks and their Jewish employers. Black women brought sweet potato pies and biscuits to their Jewish "families," and went home at the end of the day with chopped liver and corned beef. Dale Grundfest Ronnel (b. 1939) grew up in the Mississippi Delta and recalls Georgella Green, a black cook who worked for her grandmother from age seventeen to retirement. Mrs. Green learned to cook from Ronnel's grandmother and "cooked Jewish-style even in her own home."¹⁰⁶ Anne Grundfest Gerache (b. 1933) of Vicksburg, Mississippi, recalled that "Black women were good cooks who grew up preparing traditional southern food. They could improvise and adapt, and Jewish food was just one more facet of their experience."¹⁰⁷ This ability was seen in many southern households where black women learned how to "cook Jewish" on Friday nights and on Jewish holidays. Eli Evans explains that once black women had learned to cook for a Jewish family, they were assured of constant and secure employment in the Jewish community.¹⁰⁸ Nan Dattel Borod (b. 1943) of Rosedale, Mississippi, experienced this in her own family: "We had a cook, Geneva Jones, who worked for our family for forty years and cooked every meal. My maternal grandmother, who lived with us, taught her how to cook."¹⁰⁹

Kathryn Loeb Wiener (b. 1929) remembered that her German grandparents took their black housekeeper with them on a visit to Germany in 1903: "Eula went to Germany to visit my great-grandparents, and she learned German and the cooking at their home."¹¹⁰ This story suggests how important it was for the older generation to maintain their German foodways and language, so much so that they brought Eula to learn from German cooks, the most direct and knowledgeable source. Ethel Hargraves, Eli Evans' family's black cook, sometimes found a southern inspiration for her "Jewish" recipes. Evans described the "Atlanta Brisket" made by Hargraves and explained her secret recipe was to marinate the brisket in Coca Cola overnight.¹¹¹ Dorothy Goldner Levy (b. 1912) of Birmingham, Alabama, recalls that "our maid picked

the feathers off the fresh killed chickens, grated the fresh horse-radish, scraped the scales off the fresh fish, fried the 'gribbenes'."¹¹² Saul Krawcheck was born in 1926 in Charleston and spoke of the interbraided Jewish and Low Country cuisines that were shaped by his family's black cook:

Our home was kosher, presided over by a colored woman named Agnes Jenkins, who came from the country and only had one job in her life and that was being my mother's cook . . . One day you'd get a typical southern dinner of fried chicken and rice and okra gumbo—and the next day, the appetizer would be pickled smoked salmon and then a bowl of lentil soup and then potato latkes or potato kugel or tsimmes.¹¹³

In some homes the Jewish wife oversaw a division of labor in which she prepared the Jewish foods for special occasions, and the black cook took charge of southern food that was eaten every day, while in others black cooks prepared all the food. Miriam Graeber Cohn of Vicksburg, Mississippi, recalls that "Our maid cooked the regular food—fried chicken and all southern foods, but mother liked to have the holiday meal just perfect. They did prepare our meals, but nothing Jewish, which Mother did."¹¹⁴ In New Orleans, Judith Page (b. 1951) described the black housekeeper who worked for her grandparents. When Page's grandparents died, the housekeeper came to work for Judith's family: "The housekeeper knew how to cook all Jewish foods, even though she cooked soul food and Creole at home."¹¹⁵ Esther Rosenbaum Buchsbaum (b. 1936) of Atlanta, Georgia, explained, "My mother's parents worked in their grocery store. They always had a black maid who made corn bread, cooked with collards, turnip greens, and other vegetables from the store, but kosher, not with meat as usual southern-style dictates."¹¹⁶ Jill Reikes Bauman (b. 1954) and Vicki Reikes Fox (b. 1952) grew up in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, and have strong memories of Willie Mae Boucher. Vicki recalls, "She was a wonderful southern cook and she became a real Jewish cook. She called herself 'the only black Jew!'" Jill remembered that "she cooked mostly 'southern,' but also

cooked 'Jewish,' according to Mom's recipes and directions."¹¹⁷ In Blytheville, Arkansas, Richie Lee King was the black housekeeper who worked for the Cohen family from 1955 to the early 1980s. Huddy Horowitz Cohen (b. 1926) prepared the Jewish dishes and Richie handled southern specialties like fried chicken for Shabbat, cornbread, vegetable stew, and sweet potato pie. Richie helped at the annual Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur dinners at the Cohen home, greeting the visiting student rabbi with a big hug and a 'Good Yontuf, Rabbi.'" Southern black and Jewish worlds mixed and merged, shaped by shared personal relationships, sense of place, and family connections.

Black southerners also worked for Jews in food-related businesses such as Robert Zalkin's (b. 1925) grandfather's kosher butcher shop in Charleston, South Carolina. Sam Coaxum, a black man who worked at the butcher shop, learned Yiddish so he could speak with eastern European Jewish women that traded there. Zalkin would join Coaxum on his delivery rounds, often stopping at the black man's home, where the Jewish child intimately absorbed southern black life.¹¹⁸

The Jewish community of Natchez, Mississippi, exemplifies small town southern Jewish life and the ways in which ethnic foodways and southern traditions intertwine in the South. Elaine Ullman Lehmann's German great-grandfather, Samuel Ullman, was a founding member of Natchez's Temple B'nai Israel which was dedicated in 1872. Temple records describe how Ullman's fellow congregant, Isaac Lowenburg, went home to Germany in the summer of 1870 and came back with a Torah given by the Jewish community at Hechingen. In 1994 Elaine Lehmann helped plan the Natchez Jewish Homecoming, a seminar sponsored by the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience that celebrated the history of Temple B'nai Israel.¹¹⁹ The weekend attracted hundreds of people with ties to the Natchez Jewish community as well as scholars, rabbinic leaders, and the president of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. The food for the event symbolized Natchez's culinary expertise, the community's noted hospitality, and above all, the heritage of the Jewish community of Natchez.

Choosing the menu for the weekend meals was complicated by the age-old questions of Jewish ritual observance versus the celebration of southern traditions. How could you have an event in Natchez without serving the city's famed "ham biscuits," tiny buttery biscuits filled with thin slices of salty ham? But how could you serve ham biscuits with Rabbi Alexander Schindler, the leader of the American Reform movement, at the front of the buffet line? The compromise was to serve plain biscuits at one end of the table and ham biscuits at the other. The temple sisterhood made hundreds of petit fours and Eula Mae Demby, the temple's black housekeeper, oversaw the silver tray logistics. At lunch, seminar participants had a choice of non-kosher catfish or, for the more observant participants, fried chicken, while all were entertained by the New Orleans Klezmer All-Star Band.

The Natchez Jewish Homecoming was rich with stories about family history and Jewish acculturation in the South. Although Elaine Lehmann and her Vicksburg-born mother Mildred Ullman Ehrman (b. 1896) employed cooks for their households, Lehmann remembered the cooking skills of earlier generations. Elaine's grandmother, Sara Gross Ehrman, and Sara's sister, Mamie Gross Loeb, were born in Canton, Mississippi, in the mid-nineteenth century. Their families came from Alsace and both were excellent cooks. Elaine's family saved Mamie's personal cookbook journals which are filled with recipes from family, friends, and African American cooks.¹²⁰ Like Luba Cohen, Mamie Loeb stuffed her cookbooks with loose recipes written on scraps of paper and stationery from the Mississippi State Senate and the Hotel Monteleone in New Orleans. Handwritten names—Cousin Carrie, Bertha Loeb, Tilly, Alma, Hatty, Mrs. Marx, Pauline, Neva, Mrs. Jeffers, Lizzie—and places—New Orleans, Louisiana, Portsmouth, Virginia, Uniontown, Alabama, Canton, Mississippi—reveal Mamie's foodways. Part of a letter from Elaine's mother, Mildred Ehrman, describes a recipe for "Delmonico Pudding." Penciled on the back, she wrote "How are Bud and Lillian? Hope they are both improving. Mamma feels fairly well, nothing to brag on. I didn't know a thing about Memphis when you wrote, but received a letter from their Sisterhood President."¹²¹ The

cookbook journals reflect the dual southern and Alsatian Jewish identities of Mamie and Sara Gross, who collected recipes for forty cakes, three kinds of barbeque, four versions of biscuits, bourbon balls, five types of cheese straws, matzo griddle cakes, matzo ball soup, matzo meal cake, matzo charlotte, mint juleps, non-kosher deviled crabs—*nine versions*—Oysters Rockefeller, Shrimp Creole, shrimp mousse, cream curry shrimp, ham soufflé, and five types of lebkuchen, including “Mama’s.”¹²² Mamie and Sara’s lives clearly revolved around family meals, Jewish holidays, and frequent entertaining.

The preparation of traditional Jewish foods, as well as blended southern and Jewish fare, is still one of the most important ways that southern Jewish women create Jewish homes. This pattern is evident in responses to a questionnaire on southern Jewish foodways conducted in the fall of 1998, which provided extensive information on the history of family foodways, contemporary traditions, recipes, holiday menus, and meal memories. Responses came from 111 women and 6 men from fourteen different states. Sixty-seven of the respondents had eastern European roots, twenty-six had German and Alsatian roots, two had Sephardic roots, and twenty-two had both eastern and western European roots. Most of the respondents were born between 1918 and 1949.¹²³

When asked to list Jewish foods they remembered from their childhoods, those with eastern European roots listed the largest numbers of food items: 103; those with German/Alsatian roots listed 30; those with mixed eastern and western European roots listed 39 foods. From the eastern European list, the most frequently mentioned in order of popularity were: gefilte fish, chopped liver, matzo ball soup, potato latkes, noodle kugel, kreplach, stuffed cabbage, borscht, brisket, strudel, and tsimmes. More than 50 percent of the participants wrote that black cooks assisted in the preparation of Jewish foods in their childhood homes.

The respondents continue to prepare ‘Jewish’ foods in their kitchens today. Examples include Ann Grundfest Gerache’s “Mamaw’s Slip and Slide Cake” [a Passover meringue torte filled

*Jeannette Cohen Capouya, (Montgomery, AL), a participant in the survey,
is shown with her home-baked Sephardic pastries.*

(By permission of Bill Aron, © Bill Aron Photography)

with strawberries, ice cream, and whipped cream], Suzanne Schwarz Rosenzweig's mandelbrodt with pecans, Joan Levy's Alsatian lemon stew fish and pflauman kuchen, Amelie Banov Burgunder's brod torte, Riki Saltzman's Hungarian coffeecake, Dale Grundfest Ronnel's "Birdie Tenenbaum's Shaum Torte," Elaine Ullman Lehmann's lebkuchen, Huddy Horowitz Cohen's apple noodle kugel, Regina Piha Capilouto's boyos, and Deborah Lamensdorf Jacob's Passover Brownies. These recipes recall foodways traditions from Germany, Alsace-Lorraine, eastern Europe, Turkey, and the Isle of Rhodes, as well as the influence of American-style dishes and ingredients.

The survey confirms that preparing, eating, and remembering traditional Jewish foods remains one of the most compelling ways that women create Jewish homes and maintain Jewish family identity within the American South. Barbara Antis Levingston's (b. 1948) meal memory from Cleveland, Mississippi, illustrates the intricate web of family relationships tied to food and cultural identity:

Rosh Hashanah is the only holiday I host. We used to have my husband's parents and relatives, the Jerry Sklars and Ron Sklars [from] Memphis, Uncle Ben Sklar [from] Ruleville, Mississippi, Aunt Sylvia Sklar, Jerry and Ron's mother, and Ben's wife, who died ten years ago. For years, she had all of the family to her home in Ruleville for the holidays—Rosh Hashanah, Chanukah, and Passover. She was the matriarch of the Levingston family. After her death, Jerry and his wife, Louise, took over Chanukah; Ron and Linda took over Passover; my mother-in-law, Vivian Levingston, took over Rosh Hashanah. I started doing it 6 years ago.¹²⁴

This memory evokes the essence of Jewish life in a small southern town, of the Jewish home filled with memory, ritual, extended family, congregational friendships, holiday celebrations, traditional foods, and hospitality.

In southern Jewish homes from the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, women were responsible for maintaining traditional foodways, and as a result, controlled one arena of the family's acculturation to the South. Husbands and children might express their wishes about ritual practice and food tastes, but it was women who decided whether or not their kitchens were kosher as they prepared holiday food and incorporated traditional foodways into the family's weekly menus. Women defined this world for themselves and for their families. Their experiences suggest the importance of studying southern Jewish women and the influence of foodways in shaping cultural identity, community, and sisterhood. It is equally important to study the relationships between southern Jewish and

black women, and the dynamic of race and class that surrounds housework and the preparation of food.

Luba Tooter Cohen's journey from Odessa to New York to Blytheville is evoked by the foods she prepared. As she and other southern Jewish women shared their recipes and cookbooks, they created complex networks that extended across the South. Their foodways allow us to chart a map of the southern Jewish experience and its rich history of acculturation. Sephardic, central European, and eastern European Jews each brought their foodways to the South, and each generation hence has adapted these traditions to reflect their steadily evolving southern Jewish identity. Their country of origin, their date of immigration, the communities where they settled, and their attitudes toward assimilation are all reflected in what they eat. While food has nurtured southern Jews, it has also linked them to Jewish heritage, to southern places, and to their northern brethren as well. Carolyn Lipson-Walker, a folklorist who grew up in Alabama in the 1950s and 1960s, captures this dynamic in the emotions she felt when she received a gift of warm sugared pecans in honor of her son's bar mitzvah in September 1998:

The Sunday afternoon before the bar mitzvah an older woman from Vincennes delivered the pecans to use for the Oneg Shabbat and hospitality room. The smell of those pecans brought back so many emotions. I remember I was alone in the house and I put them on the counter and wept—not because I was sad, but I was so grateful for the gift that called up so many childhood memories . . . The pecans brought back memories of sitting on my grandmother's back porch in Marks [Mississippi] and shelling pecans from their trees.¹²⁵

The gift between two Jewish women of southern food for a Jewish rite of passage recalled memories of Carolyn's grandmother in Marks, Mississippi. Southern networks, recipes, memories and identity all bond through food. Together they communicate the southern Jewish experience, who they are today, their pasts, and the people they hope to become.

Appendix

Description of Foods

- albondigas* – meat balls
arroz con pollo – chicken with rice
bagel – boiled and baked roll with a hole
baklava – filo pastry layered with honey and nuts
blintz – thin pancakes filled with cheese or potato
borscht – beet soup
boyos – spinach and cheese pie
brisket – cut of beef from the front quarters of the steer
brod torte – cake made with bread crumbs and grated nuts, instead of flour
buffalo – a southern, freshwater fish
challah – braided egg bread
charlotte russe – sponge cake filled with whipped cream, garnished with fresh fruit
chitterling – pig intestines
cholent – Sabbath luncheon stew, made with beans, onions, garlic, and meat
chopped liver – pate of chopped chicken livers, chicken fat, and eggs
collards – southern greens
crappie – a southern, freshwater fish
dolmas de calvosa – stuffed yellow squash
fat back – pig fat
gasper goo – a southern, freshwater fish
gefilte fish – poached, minced fish ball (usually whitefish, pike or carp) with filler of bread crumbs or matzo meal
gribenes – “cracklings” or fried bits of chicken fat
hamantaschen – triangular-shaped butter cookie dough with prune or poppy seed filling, associated with holiday of Purim
haroses – traditional Passover dish made from fruits and nuts
jambalaya – Creole tomato-based stew made with ham and shrimp
kippers – salted or smoked herring
kreplach – noodle dough with meat filling
kuchen – coffee cake

kugel – noodle or potato baked dish; noodle kugels often enriched with sour cream, cottage cheese, apples, jam, raisins, and cinnamon

latkes – fried, grated potato pancakes

lebkuchen – iced gingerbread

lox – smoked and salted salmon

mandelbrot – twice baked almond cookies

matzo – unleavened bread eaten during Passover

matzo ball – a dumpling made of matzo meal, usually served in chicken broth or soup

matzo brie – matzo soaked in milk and egg batter and fried in butter

matzo charlotte – baked dessert of matzos, egg whites, sugar; can include apples, raisins

mayhaw – southern berry

pastelles – meat pies

pink rice – rice simmered in tomato sauce, Sephardic-style

pflaumen kuchen – plum coffee cake

pot likker – liquid from vegetables cooked with bacon or salt pork

rojaldes – filo turnovers

schmaltz – rendered chicken fat

schnecken – sweet rolls or sticky buns

shaum torte – meringue cake made with egg whites and sugar

tsimmes – baked dish of carrots, prunes, apricots, root vegetables; can include short ribs

NOTES

¹ Recipe collections like these, plus community cookbooks and women's compiled cookbooks, are the subject of study in *Recipes for Readings: Community Cookbooks, Stories, Histories*, edited by Anne L. Bower (Amherst, 1997). This collection of essays by scholars from a variety of disciplines examines how community cookbooks and recipes, described as "nonliterary print documents," reveal the stories of women and their networks of friendship. Because the authors were unknown women, positioned in the private, domestic sphere, these fragmentary historical sources have been trivialized and considered unworthy of serious study by traditional scholars. Recently, feminist scholars in English literature, history, and women's studies have noted the value of non-traditional texts as examples of

women's self-expression, social interaction, and evidence of how they shape the communities around them. The author would like to thank Bill Ferris, Leah Hagedorn, John Vlach, and Joan Nathan for their time and thoughtful advice regarding earlier drafts of this article. Additionally, the author is grateful to the staff of the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience for their assistance with the Southern Jewish Foodways Survey.

² Luba Tooter Cohen interview, conducted by Joseph Tudor, Washington, DC, April 9, 1978, 17. Luba Tooter Cohen was born in Odessa, Russia in 1897 and was the author's grandmother.

³ Joseph Tudor interview, conducted by Marcie C. Ferris, Washington, DC, September 11, 1998, 11.

⁴ Jerry Cohen telephone interview, conducted by Marcie C. Ferris, March 17, 1999.

⁵ Huddy Cohen, New London, CT/Blytheville, AR, Southern Jewish Food Survey (SJFS), November 1998.

⁶ Gaye Tuchman and Harry Gene Levine, "New York Jews and Chinese Food: The Social Construction of an Ethnic Pattern," *The Taste of Place in America: A Reader on Regional and Ethnic Foods*, eds., Barbara G. Shortridge and James R. Shortridge (Lanham, MD, 1998) 171-172.

⁷ In a recent article on Savannah, Georgia's Jewish women from 1830 to 1900, historian Mark Greenberg writes about the ways wives and mothers, who fostered Jewish identity through their control over the kitchen where they maintained a kosher kitchen, created the ritual foods that accompanied Jewish holidays and observed the Sabbath and Jewish festivals. Miriam Moses Cohen's nineteenth century recipe book contained recipes for Passover "soup dumplings" and "koogles." In the 1860s and 1870s, Lavinia Florence Minis baked "Haman's ears" for her family's Purim celebrations and sent Passover matzos to her son, Jacob, when he was away attending a university. Mark I. Greenberg, "Savannah's Jewish Women and the Shaping of Ethnic and Gender Identity, 1830-1900," *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, 4, (Winter 1998) 760.

⁸ Unsigned letter to Luba Tooter Cohen, n.d., possession of author.

⁹ For the purposes of this study, the South is defined as a cultural area, rather than a geographical region based on the eleven states of the former Confederacy (Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia). Because southern foodways patterns bleed into neighboring regions and are equally shaped by those regions and the movement of people, the boundaries for a foodways study are not sharply defined. I have used the definition from the *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* (eds., Charles Reagan Wilson and William Ferris, Chapel Hill, NC, 1989, xv): "The South is found wherever southern culture is found. . .," and thus includes states such as Missouri, Maryland, and Delaware.

¹⁰ Don Yoder, "Folk Cookery," *Folklore and Folklife*, ed., Richard Dorson (Chicago, 1972) 325.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 325.

¹² *Ibid.*, 334.

¹³ Charles Camp, *American Foodways: What, When, Why, and How We Eat in America*, American Folklore Series (Little Rock, 1989) 23, 29.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Theodore C. Humphrey, Sue Samuelson, Lin T. Humphrey, "Introduction: Food and Festivity in American Life," *"We Gather Together: Food and Festivity in American Life"* (Ann Arbor, 1988) 5.

¹⁷ Susan Kalḥik, "Ethnic Foodways in America: Symbol and the Performance of Identity," *Ethnic and Regional Foodways in the United States: The Performance of Group Identity*, eds., Linda Keller Brown and Kay Mussell (Knoxville, 1984) 54.

¹⁸ Sally Wolff King, Dumas, AR/Atlanta, GA, Southern Jewish Foodways Survey (SJFS), November 1998.

¹⁹ D. D. Rudner Eisenberg, Memphis, TN/Washington, DC, SJFS, November 1998.

²⁰ Gerry Barkovitz, St. Louis, MO/Hayti, MO, SJFS, November 1998.

²¹ Ellen Barkovitz O'Kelley, Hayti, MO/Overland Park, KS, SJFS, November 1998.

²² Maurine Muntz, Tyler, TX, SJFS, November 1998.

²³ Leslie Kooock Silver, Birmingham, AL/Vicksburg, MS, SJFS, November 1998.

²⁴ Kalḥik, "Ethnic Foodways in America," 49.

²⁵ Leanne Silverblatt, Indianola, MS, SJFS, November 1998. The Delta Jewish Open Golf Tournament celebrated its twelfth year in October 1999.

²⁶ James R. Curtis, "Ethnic Geography," *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, eds., Wilson and Ferris, 541.

²⁷ John Egerton, *Southern Food* (New York, 1987) 21.

²⁸ Joe Gray Taylor, "Foodways," *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, eds., Wilson and Ferris, 614.

²⁹ Joan Nathan, *Jewish Cooking in America* (New York, 1994) 10.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, 42. Organized in 1735, Savannah's Congregation Mickve Israel was officially chartered by Governor Edward Telfair in 1790. (Congregation Mickve Israel, *Shalom Y'all Cookbook*, eds., Arlene Belzer, Becky Civjan, Elaine Erlich, Diane Kuhr, Joan Levy, Margie Levy, and Sue Ruby, (Savannah, 1995) intro. In 1697, Charleston, South Carolina had only four Jewish settlers. By 1775, its congregation had grown to more than fifty families. Construction for a permanent place of worship began in 1792, and Beth Elohim was dedicated in 1794. In both Charleston and Savannah the first Jewish settlers were merchants who were connected to an extensive network of trade up and down the east coast and across the Atlantic. (Eli Faber, *A Time for Planting: The First Migration, 1654-1820, The Jewish People in America*, 1, [Baltimore, 1992] 41-42.)

³² Nathan, *Jewish Cooking in America*, 10-11.

³³ *Ibid.*, 11.

³⁴ Taylor, "Foodways," *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, 614.

³⁵ Egerton, *Southern Food*, 38.

³⁶ Hasia Diner, "German Immigrant Period," *Jewish Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia*, eds., Paula E. Hyman and Deborah Dash Moore (New York, 1997) 502.

³⁷ Bobbie Malone, "A History of Jews in the South," Mississippi Humanities Council and Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience Lecture, Meridian, MS, 1993, and Nathan, *Jewish Cooking in America*, 12.

³⁸ Nathan, *Jewish Cooking in America*, 13.

³⁹ Isaac Mayer Wise, the organizing leader of the Reform movement in America, encouraged his brethren to reconsider the relevance of ritual. This heated discussion

culminated at

the July 11, 1883, "Treyfa Banquet," a graduation dinner for the first class of American rabbis in Cincinnati and their two hundred guests, who were served non-kosher little neck clams, soft-shell crabs, shrimp salad, and frogs' legs with cream. Several shocked guests left the room, insulted by the absence of respect for the Jewish dietary laws. This episode, plus the long history of dissension regarding ritual within the movement, led to a permanent split within American Jewry. At the 1885 Pittsburgh conference a platform was defined that emphasized the Classical Reform principles that distinguished the movement from other Jewish groups. That a food-centered issue should cause such turmoil suggests the powerful connection between food, cultural identity, and the basis of Jewish religious practice. (Nathan, *Jewish Cooking in America*, 15, and Gerald Sorin, *A Time for Building: The Third Migration, 1880-1920*, 3, [Baltimore, 1992] 172.)

⁴⁰ Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Kitchen Judaism," *Getting Comfortable in New York: The American Jewish Home, 1889-1950*, eds., Susan L. Braunstein and Jenna Weissman Joselit (New York, 1990) 80.

⁴¹ Kathryn Loeb Wiener, Montgomery, AL/Jackson, MS, SJFS, November 1998.

⁴² Bettye Lamensdorf Klein, Vicksburg, MS, SJFS, November 1998.

⁴³ Minette Switzer Cooper, Vicksburg, MS/Norfolk, VA, SJFS, November 1998.

⁴⁴ Cathy Samuel Wolf, New Orleans, LA/Washington, DC, SJFS, November 1998.

⁴⁵ Suzanne Schwarz Rosenzweig, Wheeling, WV/Hot Springs, AR, SJFS, November 1998.

⁴⁶ Amelie Banov Burgunder, Baltimore, MD/Bethesda, MD, SJFS, November 1998.

⁴⁷ Louis E. Schmier, "Jewish Religious Life," *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, eds., Wilson and Ferris, 1290.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Sorin, *A Time for Building*, 1, 2, 12.

⁵⁰ Lee Shai Weissbach, "East European Immigrants and the Image of Jews in the Small-Town South," *American Jewish History*, 85, (September 1997) 242.

⁵¹ Rosa From Poliakoff interview, May 1, 1995, Jewish Heritage Collection, College of Charleston, Charleston, SC (hereinafter cited as Jewish Heritage Collection).

⁵² Oscar Fendler, Blytheville, AR, SJFS, November 1998.

⁵³ Nathan, *Jewish Cooking in America*, 185.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Jenna Weissman Joselit, *The Wonders of America: Reinventing Jewish Culture, 1880-1950* (New York, 1994) 203.

⁵⁶ Sol Beton, ed., *Sephardim and A History of Congregation Or VeShalom* (Atlanta, 1981) 229-230.

⁵⁷ Bess Seligman interview, conducted by Marcie C. Ferris, Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience, Jackson, MS, 1993.

⁵⁸ Eli N. Evans, Durham, NC/New York, NY, SJFS, November 1998.

⁵⁹ Joan Levy, Savannah, GA, SJFS, November 1998.

⁶⁰ Roberta Schandler Grossman, Asheville, NC/Johnson City, TN, SJFS, November 1998.

⁶¹ Helene Markstein Tucker, Birmingham, AL/Chevy Chase, MD, SJFS, November 1998.

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- ⁶² Jane Guthman Kahn, Savannah, GA, SJFS, November 1998.
- ⁶³ Mary Lynn Alltmont, Memphis, TN/La Place, LA, SJFS, November 1998.
- ⁶⁴ Jack Bass, North, SC/Atlanta, GA, SJFS, November 1998.
- ⁶⁵ Vicki Reikes Fox, Hattiesburg, MS/Los Angeles, CA, SJFS, November 1998.
- ⁶⁶ Miriam Cohen interview, conducted by Marcie C. Ferris, Montgomery, AL, Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience, Jackson, MS, November 1994.
- ⁶⁷ Regina Piha Capilouto, Rhodes, Greece/Montgomery, AL, SJFS, November 1998.
- ⁶⁸ Congregation Or VeShalom Sisterhood, *The Sephardic Cooks*, eds., Emily Amato, Blanchette Ichay, Marcy Franco (Atlanta, GA, 1992), and Beton, *Sephardim*, 210.
- ⁶⁹ Nathan, *Jewish Cooking in America*, 3.
- ⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.
- ⁷¹ *Ibid.*
- ⁷² *Ibid.*
- ⁷³ Miriam Graeber Cohn, Port Gibson, MS/Shreveport, LA, SJFS, November 1998.
- ⁷⁴ Bert Fischel, Vicksburg, MS/Dallas, TX, SJFS, June 1999.
- ⁷⁵ Phyllis Berkower Stern, Tottenville, NY/Lexington, MS, SJFS, November 1998.
- ⁷⁶ Paula Ross Hoffman, Baton Rouge, LA, SJFS, November 1998.
- ⁷⁷ Ann Zerlin Streiffer, New Orleans, LA, SJFS, November 1998.
- ⁷⁸ Leanne Lipnick Silverblatt, SJFS.
- ⁷⁹ Judith Weil Shanks, Montgomery, AL/Washington, DC, SJFS, November 1998.
- ⁸⁰ Bobbie Scharlack Malone, San Antonio, TX/Madison, WI, SJFS, November 1998.
- ⁸¹ Suzanne Ginsberg Kantziper, Savannah, GA, SJFS, November 1998.
- ⁸² Shirley Ettinger Orlansky, Alexandria, LA/Greenville, MS, SJFS, November 1998.
- ⁸³ Peggy Kronsberg Pearlstein, Charleston, SC/Silver Spring, MD, SJFS, November 1998.
- ⁸⁴ Shulameth Reich Elster, Norfolk, VA, SJFS, November 1998.
- ⁸⁵ Jack Bass, SJFS.
- ⁸⁶ Carolyn Lipson-Walker, "Shalom Y'all': The Folklore and Culture of Southern Jews," diss. Indiana University, 1986, 286-287.
- ⁸⁷ Marion Wiener Weiss, Shreveport, LA, SJFS, November 1998.
- ⁸⁸ Esther Rosenbaum Buchsbaum, Atlanta, GA/Tybee Island, GA, SJFS, November 1998.
- ⁸⁹ Jack Bass, SJFS.
- ⁹⁰ Eli Evans, SJFS.
- ⁹¹ Joan Levy, SJFS.
- ⁹² Reva Hart, Winona, MS, SJFS, November 1998.
- ⁹³ Joan Nathan, "Food," *Jewish Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia*, eds., Paula E. Hyman and Deborah Dash Moore (New York, 1997) 460.
- ⁹⁴ Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Kitchen Judaism," 96.
- ⁹⁵ Anne L. Bower, "Bound Together: Recipes, Lives, Stories, and Readings," *Recipes for Reading: Community Cookbooks, Stories, Histories*, ed., Anne L. Bower (Amherst, 1997) 3.
- ⁹⁶ Miriam Graeber Cohn, SJFS.
- ⁹⁷ Mrs. Bertha F. Kramer, "Aunt Babette's" *Cookbook, Foreign and Domestic Receipts for the Household* (Cincinnati, 1891) back page.
- ⁹⁸ Janice Rothschild Blumberg interview, conducted by Marcie C. Ferris, Washington, DC, November 2, 1998, 17.

⁹⁹ Kramer, 452.

¹⁰⁰ Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Kitchen Judaism," 80.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹⁰² Joselit, "A Set Table": Jewish Domestic Culture in the New World, 1880–1950," 45.

¹⁰³ Jenna Weissman Joselit, *The Wonders of America: Reinventing Jewish Culture, 1880–1950*

(New York, 1994) 171.

¹⁰⁴ Eli N. Evans, *The Provincials: A Personal History of Jews in the South* (New York, 1973) 255.

¹⁰⁵ Jane Guthman Kahn, SJFS.

¹⁰⁶ Dale Grundfest Ronnel, Cary, MS/Little Rock, AR, SJFS, November 1998.

¹⁰⁷ Anne Grundfest Gerache, Cary, MS/Vicksburg, MS, SJFS, November 1998.

¹⁰⁸ Evans, *The Provincials*, 256.

¹⁰⁹ Nan Dattel Borod, Rosedale, MS/Boston, Massachusetts, SJFS, November 1998.

¹¹⁰ Kathryn Loeb Wiener, SJFS.

¹¹¹ Eli N. Evans, SJFS.

¹¹² Dorothy Goldner Levy, Birmingham, AL, SJFS, November 1998.

¹¹³ Saul Krawcheck interview, July 6, 1995, Jewish Heritage Collection.

¹¹⁴ Miriam Graeber Cohn, SJFS.

¹¹⁵ Judith Page, New Orleans, LA/Jackson, MS, SJFS, November 1998.

¹¹⁶ Esther Rosenbaum Buchsbaum, SJFS.

¹¹⁷ Vicki Reikes Fox, SJFS, and Jill Reikes Bauman, Hattiesburg, MS/Little Rock, AR, SJFS, November 1998.

¹¹⁸ Robert Zalkin interview, July 14, 1995, Jewish Heritage Collection.

¹¹⁹ The Natchez Jewish Homecoming, sponsored by the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience and Temple B'nai Israel, Natchez, MS, May 1994.

¹²⁰ Camp, *American Foodways*, 99. Charles Camp describes the importance and poignancy of compiled cookbooks like these, "A cook's records are the records of how regularly social worlds—special occasions, friends, family—and the world of food—recipes, instructions, mementoes—converge, and how much the records of one world stand for the other." He speaks of the "wholeness" of these collections, the overlap of holiday recipes and souvenirs, recipes from people and the local newspaper, and the juxtaposition of private and public worlds.

¹²¹ Mrs. Max Ullman, letter, n.d., Natchez, MS, property of Elaine Ullman Lehmann.

¹²² Cookbook journals, v. 1, 2, property of Elaine Ullman Lehmann.

¹²³ The survey was primarily sent to female Jewish southerners, but several male Jewish southerners also responded, or were given copies of the survey by a family member or friend.

¹²⁴ Barbara Antis Levingston, Cleveland, MS, SJFS, November 1998.

¹²⁵ Carolyn Lipson-Walker, Tuscaloosa, AL/Bloomington, IN, SJFS, November 1998.