Oral History Proposal - Mutual Aid in Western Virginia

Prepared for the Southern Foodways Alliance

Jessica Taylor, 2020

Overview:

In the New River and Roanoke Valleys, restaurant and food service workers have supported one another during the abrupt transition to a COVID-19 shutdown and ensuing economic turmoil. The narrators listed here have used social media, new organizing models, and networks between food producers and restaurants to feed their families and communities. This oral history project underscores the role of Southern food workers in developing relevant, creative strategies towards mutual aid.

This project focuses on how workers and small business owners who are themselves vulnerable meet the specific needs of their communities. We seek to understand how frameworks surrounding mutual aid (finding recipients, delivery food and financial support, coordinating labor) have changed as the state of Virginia has "closed" and "reopened" in phases. Changes in relationships between employers and service workers, customers, and suppliers provide context for community needs and will also be explored. Focusing on local challenges that resonate elsewhere in the region, from topography to the decline of tourism and higher education revenue, these interviews will complement SFA's COVID-19 project.

Collaborative breakdown:

We plan to conduct a total of ten interviews, two each with five narrators. Interviews will be conducted in June and August to establish change over time at the height of the tourist season and as Virginia enter Phase 2 of reopening. Jessica Taylor will be the primary interviewer and will be accompanied by graduate students and members of the University Library's Amplifying Unheard Voices team. These interviews will take place on Zoom, if the narrator is comfortable with the technology and the technology is available. If not, these interviews will take place in an outdoor setting with six feet of physical distance between interviewers and narrator.

Theme proposal:

With an evolving food scene and an established tourist industry, Appalachian Virginia sees constantly growing interest in its foodways. Appalachian labor history and understandings of mutual aid is also critical to understandings of labor and working people's history across the country, although Appalachian people's work in food is often overlooked. We envision a final product on SFA's website that is integrated into the COVID-19 project which highlights these unique components of western Virginia.

Timeline: Interviews will be conducted in June and August to establish change over time at the height of the tourist season and as Virginia enter Phase 2 of reopening. Interviews will be turned over to SFA at the end of this period.

Equipment & Budget:

Equipment will be provided by the Virginia Tech Department of History.

$300 per interview x 10 interviews = $3000

Interviewees:

Russell Chisholm: Russell Chisholm is a coffee roaster living in the town of Newport, Virginia, and is the founder of the Southwest Virginia Tip Jar. Over 400 service workers in the area have signed up to receive donations via online applications like Venmo and the Cashapp, which it has become a “tradition” to leave on Friday and Saturday nights, and at the end of the month, for a favorite restaurant worker or restaurant.

Rachel Doyle is a chef in Blacksburg, owner of HazelBea Catering, and member of Millstone Kitchen, a group cooking space in Montgomery County, Virginia. In addition to delivering meals to customers, she also works with her employees and local farmers, who would normally sell their produce at the farmer’s market, to plan, cook, and deliver meals to families in need.

Peggy Fleming is the owner of Gina’s Food with Flavor, a soul food restaurant in Salem, Virginia. Her dining space formerly supported local musicians and a robust wait staff, and since the restaurant has changed locations due to COVID she has found new ways to keep employees on staff and continue holding events.

Shaena Muldoon is the owner of the Palisades, a restaurant in the relatively isolated town of Eggleston, Virginia. In addition to delivering food over long distances during COVID, she also markets and delivers products like flowers, fresh eggs, coffee and tea, and even art and ceramics on behalf of other locals for whom the distance is a barrier.

Katherine Wilkin: Katherine Wilkin is a coordinator for an environmental advocacy group and runs the Roanoke Valley Tip Jar, which serves an additional 400 people in Roanoke and surrounding counties. She worked with Russell to develop the two tip jars in tandem, and her experience in other forms of organizing will provide valuable perspective.