

Heirloom Gardens Oral History Project
Interview with Mia Dené Edwards by Synai Ferrell
Conducted on June 29th, 2024 in Farmville, NC

[00:00:00] **Synai Ferrell:** This is Synai Ferrell with the Heirloom Gardens Oral History Project. The date is June 29, 2024 in Farmville, North Carolina. Could you please start by introducing yourself?

[00:00:11] **Mia Dené Edwards:** My name is Mia Dené Edwards, and I live here in Farmville, but I was raised in a little town in Greene County called Wastenburg.

[00:00:21] **Synai Ferrell:** And could you talk more about your upbringing there, specifically your connection to food and gardening?

[00:00:27] **Mia Dené Edwards:** Food is very important. That's, uh, family gatherings. That's what brought families together. And we always had a huge garden. Um, this is on my dad's, my paternal grand, uh, dad's side. And, um, the family would come together, help plant.

They would come together, harvest. And we would sit up on my grandmother's porch. That's when we lived back in the field. And we would shell peas, snap peas. Um, my favorite peas were the early peas. The sweet peas. And I think I ate more than I actually picked. So you could just go out in the garden and just pick and eat.

And I loved, um, raw turnips. I would never eat them cooked. Um, don't know why, but I eat them cooked now. Um, I love being in the garden with my grandmother and my mom. Um, so, that's how I, I, and being with family. Family is always important. And I've seen time, my grandmother, people in the community, it wasn't like, like we live now, they're like, maybe what, five or ten miles away from each other, but that was in the same community and, uh, would come together to garden or like even with the hog killings, um, the different communities come together and if this particular family is having a hog, everybody come and join and they help. And then after everything is done, everybody leave with something from the hog killing.

And then the next week it would go to another person's farm to do the same thing. So it has always been community for me. So, not just my aunts and my grandparents, but even other women in the community. Because some of the

women in the community, uh, would keep us while my, our parents weren't. So, the community was your family.

[00:02:31] **Synai Ferrell:** And can you, do you have a specific memory with your grandma or mom growing up? Oh my gosh. Especially like, um, the family gatherings, I would like to hear more.

[00:02:41] **Mia Dené Edwards:** Oh gosh. Every Friday was fish fry. Yeah. And so every Friday was fish fry. Every family member would go to the market and get their type of fish that they wanted.

And we would get to my grandmother's house and we would have a big fish fry. And, uh, the kids would either be outside playing. So we would be outside playing. And then, um, there was times that on my mom's side we would go to her, my favorite great aunt's dot. What we call a door dot. And we would go to her house, and we would eat.

It was always family, always family. And their girls would always let me wear makeup, their makeup, let me play in their makeup and fingernail polish. But it was always family. That, that's how I grew up, is with family. And so it is house to house. And food was always important. One thing that my grand, my, both my grandparents, whenever you go to their house.

You're going to have something to go home with. You're going to, I don't care who came by, they're going to feed you. And I've seen times that my grandmother, my dad's mom, would, somebody from the community would come in and say that they don't have any food. I've seen her go in her freezer. And just give away food.

I didn't quite understand that, because I was like, That's our food, so why are you giving our food away? But she taught me that we have an abundance, so let's share. And so, and that's pretty much how my mom raised us. Whenever we, we always had Sunday dinners. Sunday dinners were always And, um, And that's how I grew up.

Started at my grandmother's house. Everything was, was, was geared around my grandmother's house. And then after we had dispersed, um, when we weren't no longer living on the farm, my mom still always did Sunday dinners. And that was so important. And, one of the things that we had to do was, um, Um, and breakfast, that was so important.

Um, if my mom was working, we would walk to my grandmother's house, and she always had breakfast ready for us before we go to school. When we came home, there was food ready. Um, then at dinner time, still food. Something different, you know, but, It seemed like life was surrounded by food. We didn't get sick like we're sick now.

Um, cause we ate fresh food. And, I didn't know though, that the chicken that we ate was from my grandma's chicken coop. I thought they went to the store and got the chicken, till one day I came home to my grandmother's house, and she killed the chicken. And I'm like, we're not supposed to eat those. They make the eggs.

And I wouldn't eat chicken for a while because I thought they just came out of the grocery store. Not from my, she said, well that's what chicken you've been eating. And so, that was kind of traumatic for me. You know, it lasted about a week or so. Um, and so that's how I grew up. We were all the way around people in the community.

People in the community looked out for each other. People in the community disciplined your children. Not like now, because now families don't do that anymore. And, um, it was safe. It was safe. When we lived, um, In Greene County, right off of 91, there's a house back in the field. Um, I, it's the same time that I have, was on a, we had a swing on the porch and you just go out there at night, sit on the swing or sleep out there on the swing.

I remember growing up, I thought I had a picture of the house that we grew up in because some of the houses that we grew up in did not have bathrooms, didn't have running water. But we had a water pump, and then one house we had, had a well. And I slept, my crib was, was a, was a, it wasn't like the normal cribs.

It had screens all around, even the top part was a screen. So like a big screen, then door, bed. Um, I remember that. Um. We had this, uh, galvanized big tub that we bathed in. Um, nobody complained. Now, because there wasn't a bathroom, so you had the outhouse or you had a little pot, you know, whatever. And, um, I think that made me the person I am now, to be humble.

You know, because you never know. You might have to go back to those things.

[00:07:31] **Synai Ferrell:** Um, when you mentioned when you would go over to people's homes, um, every week and always leave the food, I wanted to know what food you always left with or what.

[00:07:40] **Mia Dené Edwards:** Usually you stay there long enough. There was nothing to break home because like I said, everybody, you know, whoever house we went to, they just had abundance of food for everybody that came.

Um, I don't recall leaving with any food. Um, 'cause once you ate, you were full. It's time to go to bed then. So. And this is a picture of the house that I grew up in. And I remember stories of my grandmother and great grandmother would talk about how they cooked on wood stoves. Um, I never experienced that.

I never seen that. But my mom has seen her mom cooked on wood stoves and, um, there wasn't electric stoves back then, during that time frame. Um, and so those, that's what I like. I love being around old people, uh, growing up. Because, like, you just glean on everything they said. And, when I got sick, uh, I had, um, chronic kidney disease.

And I had to stop eating canned stuff. I knew how to cook, but I did it the easy way with the canned stuff. But then I learned that fresh was always better. And, um, and then I brought back to my memory of growing up, We always had a garden. We didn't buy a can, go to the store and buy vegetables and stuff.

We had it in the garden. And that's what I like about the community garden. Because now you grow, you know what you're putting in your food. You know what you're growing.

[00:09:19] **Synai Ferrell:** When you guys had Sunday dinners, what dishes from the garden were prepared?

[00:09:24] **Mia Dené Edwards:** Chicken, ham, um, always collards, green beans, potato salad, uh, oh my gosh, it was like a feast of stuff.

Corn, um, yeah, sweet potatoes, like yams, um, cornbread, and my grandmother used I used to make, I loved her stove top cornbread. And she had this little cast iron frying pan. It was really small. I can't remember how she made it. But it always came out perfect. Every time. Um, those are some of my favorite.

Because I always stayed in the kitchen with my mom and my grandmother. Because I always wanted to know what they were doing. But my mom was always afraid that Because I was really short.

And she was afraid that I would burn myself. I remember my first meal that she allowed me to cook by myself. And it was, um, cabbage with ham chips, uh, jiffy muffins, uh, fried pork chops. And so that was my very first meal. I was 10

years old. That was my very first meal that she allowed me to cook by myself and I had to stand on the chair 'cause I couldn't really reach the stove.

Well,

[00:10:48] **Synai Ferrell:** and

I guess, could you walk me through more of that experience, like the steps you took to prepare that meal?

[00:10:55] **Mia Dené Edwards:** Uh, well with the cabbage, um, we just had to of course you cut it and take the core out, rent and cleaned it. And then I just chopped. And then what I did first was put the ham chips in the pot to let that cook a little.

And then I added the, the uh, cabbage and a little salt. And let that cook. And then with the pork chops, you just season it, floured it, put it in a pan. And by that time we wasn't, we were using Crisco. And um, when I was cooking it was Crisco and you just fried it. And with, of course, like, you just read the box with Jiffy Mix and put it in muffin pans.

And that was my first meal.

[00:11:38] **Synai Ferrell:** And what are ham chips?

[00:11:40] **Mia Dené Edwards:** It's ham, but they cut it up in, it, it's ham, but it's just cut up in pieces. Almost like little thin chips. Um, and you can still buy it in the grocery store. Piggly Wiggly has it.

[00:11:53] **Synai Ferrell:** And also earlier when you mentioned the fish fry, I was curious to know what type of fish they would cook.

[00:12:00] **Mia Dené Edwards:** Uh, croaker's, um, trout flounder. Whichever family like bought fish, that's what fish they bought. And, and it was a fish market in Snow Hill that everybody went to, and they would get their fish. We didn't do shrimp. I, we didn't even shrimp and crab legs, stuff like that. That was never part of our fish fry.

It was always fish, coleslaw, potatoes. It wasn't french fries. We didn't do french fries then. But it was boiled potatoes. And my mom would make the boiled potatoes with, um, tomato sauce. Because she doesn't like white food. And so she would use the tomato sauce to color the potatoes. And always hush puppies.

Homemade hush puppies. Not the store bought hush puppy mix, but it was cornmeal, put a little flour, sugar, eggs, and water. Mix it up and then she'd use a spoon the way you scoop it out so it'd come out like a little football. And you put it in the grease.

[00:13:05] **Synai Ferrell:** And do you have any meals that you prepare today that are from your childhood?

[00:13:08] **Mia Dené Edwards:** No more than like

pork chops. But I have expanded since

I've grown up, become an adult, and with my health issues I've changed quite a bit of stuff. Um, we still do the greens the same. Um, I don't eat a lot of fried foods. Unless you just got, now we do the, uh, air fryer. Um, just for health reasons. Um, and so it's just like, it's um, Food has evolved. Um, you still use a basic, your foundation, and then you just expound on that.

And so like now, I don't buy a jar of spaghetti sauce and stuff like that. I make my own sauce. Um, chicken alfredo, stuff like that. That's the type of stuff I like to cook. My mom more of the soul food cook. Um, I know how to cook that, but. I like experimenting. Certain vegetables I've never had before, um, like, uh, fennel.

And, um, so when I do that, I do it, I roast it with, uh, butternut squash, peppers, red onions, um, potatoes, um, and brussel sprouts. And what I do, I just do, sprinkle oil, Um, pepper, crushed peppers, and then I put it in the oven. And just roast it. Um, I steam vegetables like, um, I do steam cabbage now. Um, with peppers, with the red, yellow, the colored peppers, sweet peppers, and onions.

Um, uh, I do a lot of pasta. Um, but I still love, like my mom says, potato salad. I make. But she taught me how to do it. And she said, yours tastes better than mine. So I do the potato salads when we have, when we have dinner. And if I'm, I'll be in charge of the potato salad.

[00:15:29] **Synai Ferrell:** How do you like to make your potato salad?

[00:15:32] **Mia Dené Edwards:** Um, peel the potato, cut them, um, I try to cut my potatoes, yeah, about every piece about the same size. Boil them, but don't let it get where it's so mushy, mushy. And then I boil, if I do five potatoes, I'll do six eggs. So it's like five, what, what, what is that? Well, that's the ratio of how I, in, I put, um, Mustard, mayo, a little sugar.

Of course, well, I don't add salt because I put salt in the potato when I cook the potatoes. And I use, um, salad cubes. Um, in it. Like the, uh, Mount Olive, uh, sweet salad cubes. And that's what I put in mine. And, of course, the eggs. And you just stir it up and you got potatoes salad. Excitement for me about the garden is planting.

It's putting that seed in the ground. And then I would go out every day, see if there's anything coming up. You know, because I'm so excited. You know, you see these plants gotta come. And then when they start coming up, I get so excited. And then the time come to harvest, I didn't mind being out there. I'm not, I really wasn't an outdoor person unless I was in the garden or working with my grandmother with flowers.

That's the only time I really spent outside. But it was so It was fun for me. And my grandmother had, um, cucumbers and she would take all the grandkids and we would pick cucumbers and then we would go to this, I forgot what the name of the place is, in Snow Hill, and she would let us sell our cucumbers.

We thought we were rich. We got five dollars, but it was a whole lot of cucumbers. You had to pick a whole lot of cucumbers for five dollars. So, But you know, being young, you think, Oh gosh, I got a \$5 bill. I'm rich. And that, that time candy was like a penny. So you can get a whole lot of candy. Um, and so those are the memories I have.

And, but the excitement was getting the garden prepared. Cause you know, you can go out there and drop them seeds in the hole. My grandmother would have this, um, pick and she would dig in the hole and you just go behind her and put seeds in the hole and cover them up.

[00:17:57] **Synai Ferrell:** What were some of the most important?

[00:17:58] **Mia Dené Edwards:** For me? Early peas. That's what I love. I love the early peas.

Turnips. But like I said, I wouldn't eat them. And sweet potatoes. I have never been a big fan of sweet potatoes. But I liked to eat them raw. When I was younger. Or fried. My grandmother would fry them. Like cut them in like slices. And she would fry them. And I would eat them that way. But just like that. My mom loves baked potatoes.

Baked sweet potatoes. Um, I like sweet potato pie, but sweet potato is not one of my favorite. Honestly, I don't know where my grandparents got this. I'm quite

sure that they kept them from, save them from, but I've never seen the process. Only thing I know is when it was time to go out there, my grandmother had the seeds and she would give us a handful and we'll drop it in the holes.

[00:18:57] **Synai Ferrell:** And today with the Farmville Community Garden, could you explain what that means to you today?

[00:19:03] **Mia Dené Edwards:** For me, it just brings back a lot of memories. And I still get excited when we plant, put a plant out there in that garden. And then you start seeing the harvest come up on that garden and seeing the things. Cause I think when we planted the green beans and the lima beans, um, and we went out, I said, mama, they are coming up.

I mean, I get so excited just to see the plants coming up out of the ground. And then when it really started growing and producing, like my cucumbers, this is the first time I ever tried to do the English cucumbers or Japanese cucumbers. I just want to see how it's going to work. And we've had, I mean, I think it's given us a lot of harvest, but because of the heat, it's, it's not as pretty as I thought it was going to be, but that's because of the heat, but it's still producing.

And so I remember one year I wanted to try to do butternut squash. They were so successful it took over other people's garden because I didn't know you supposed to cut it back. And I had so many. And then I did, one year I did, um, eggplant. And I got one eggplant off the plant. So, two year, uh, the foll-, no not the following year, two years after that, I said, I'm going to put six plants, maybe one will yield.

Every last one of them yielded. And they kept yielding and yielding and yielding. I was like, when are they going to die? Because. People right here don't know, a lot of people, because I was trying to give them away, and they were like, what you supposed to do with eggplants? That's what we're asking. So, a lot of it had to throw away, but it kept yielding, and I was like, you know what, we're just going to pull these up because they keep growing.

And so we had a good harvest, and, and I love when you have a great harvest where you can share. And I always take a bunch of my, I did a, Every year I usually do jalapeno peppers. And I'll just take them to the church, or to where I work, and just share. Because I can't eat all that. And, um, and a lot of people say, are you going to sell?

No. This is our way of giving back to the community. You have an abundance, as my grandmother would say, you have an abundance to always share.

[00:21:18] **Synai Ferrell:** Could you give more context about the early peas?

[00:21:21] **Mia Dené Edwards:** the early peas?

[00:21:22] **Synai Ferrell:** Mm-Hmm.

[00:21:22] **Mia Dené Edwards:** they're like the sweet peas. And what you do, you break one in and it has a string that string down the, the, the, the, um, side of the peas, and then you pop it open.

And then there'll usually be like three or four, maybe five little peas inside that pod. And like I said, I would eat more than I actually picked. Um, but it was fun because, like I said, we'd be on my grandmother's porch and we would shell peas. That was fun to me. I don't think my other cousins cared too much for that.

I don't think they care too much for it now, but it was like, for me, that was fun. I loved, and when we had a garden, um, we would shell peas. That was , or shuck corn. So for me, that was fun. Um, because I'm working with food and I know that once we peep, it's going to be a good meal come out of that. And we would sit at the table and we, we didn't have a TV.

You don't have a TV in your kitchen. I mean, in your , where you ate at and you enjoyed each other. When you lay out that food on the table, um, and you put them in the bowls and on the table and that was a time of, kind of, seeing how your day went. See what, what, how, how things were for you. But it was fun.

It was so much fun. And, but my mom, especially on Sunday morning, all of the children had to recite a Bible verse before you ate. And so, that was fun for me. And we always had joined hands and we had blessed the food. And that's how I grew up. That you always bless the food before you ate. Thank God for the harvest that he gave and what he provided for you.

And um, and that's something that we still do now. And, I um, And with my grandkids, we try to share those same things when we sit down to eat. No phones, you just sit down and you have those conversations. Sometimes with my grandson, I say, you can't talk, go on and eat your food. You know, because he wanted to do more talking than eating, so.

And it's important that you sit at the table together. That was one thing that we always did growing up. You always. No one got up from the table until after everybody is done. If you're finished, you sit there until everybody is done. And

then, whoever's supposed to be cleaning up the kitchen, you start cleaning up the kitchen.

[00:24:02] **Synai Ferrell:** Do you have a favorite meal from your childhood?

[00:24:07] **Mia Dené Edwards:** Yes. Every Saturday, we would have fried chicken and toss salad. And so, All of my, I have five siblings. But during that time there was only maybe four. Four of us was born then. And everybody wanted a leg. There's only two legs on a chicken. And so, you better holler out real quick.

We want, I want, I got the leg. And, uh, so then finally Mama, my mom, would go to the grocery store and that's all she would buy. It's chicken legs so that everybody get a chicken leg. And it was always fried chicken and toss salad. It's just lettuce with tomatoes and cucumbers and toss

it together

[00:24:51] **Synai Ferrell:** Did you get the vegetables from your toss salad from the garden?

[00:24:54] **Mia Dené Edwards:** Not the lettuce, but tomatoes and cucumbers we did.

Um, if it was in season during that time, being that we did it every Saturday. So a lot of times in the wintertime, you have to go to the grocery store to get it.

[00:25:07] **Synai Ferrell:** And I guess I'm thinking about how you brought up church and faith. Were there a lot of connections between food and going to church and events at church with food?

[00:25:18] **Mia Dené Edwards:** Oh, yes, yes. We had what they call quarter meetings. Quarterly meetings, and every family would bring a bunch of food. My grandmother would cook a complete meal. And it's sort of like a potluck, but it's like, All the families bought food. But, uh, my grandmother, because we were real picky about who we ate from, so my grandmother would make sure that we had food from her.

Um, and, but the community would come together and they had a spread. I remember when it was, before they had a Bowielding, they had these, um, it really wasn't a table because they had like chicken wire down the middle, and,

uh, connected to wood. It was a table, but it was, it was chicken wire in it, and you just laid, everybody just put their food out and people just came and ate.

So it was, like I said, community. You know, and um, That was one of the best times. And at the church that we went to, They had cherry trees in the, On the church grounds. And so we would get cherries from the trees. So, We had a good life. And I remember where we lived, You would go down where they had the hog, what we called hog pens.

And there would be wild berries, Like blackberries, the best berries. Um, I remember going to, um, it was somewhere near Maury, that's in Greene County, and they had the peaches. You go to the peach farm and you get peaches. You go to the mountains, you get, uh, apples. Um, there was another farm where you got the blueberries.

So, there was always somewhere to go, especially if you wanted fresh fruit. Then my dad was a truck driver, and so He would bring up oranges and tangerines, grapefruit from Florida. So we never got sick. I remember one year, the house that we stayed in was, the hallway of this house was more like a room. And we had boxes and boxes of citrus fruits.

We never got sick. We never got sick like that. Kids are getting sick now. And we will walk down the, this is one of my favorite things. There was a, we will walk down the road and one of the, one side of the road they had this pipe coming out of the ground and it was water coming from a stream. The coldest, clearest, fresh water.

And then they had like the honeysuckles on the side of the road. And you would pick the honeysuckles and you would be sucking on it as you were walking up and down. But you don't do it now. Cause they didn't put down poison and stuff like they do now. Um, those are some of my memories. That, uh, one of the things that I enjoy doing.

So, I didn't go in the woods. That was my brothers and them, but I would do what was on the edge of the woods. Then we had Well, I think it was my pet, the cow, Lucky. Lucky, he was black and white. She, uh, her mom died at birth, and so we had to get up early in the morning to feed him every morning. And so, well, after he got bigger, and we had a big pasture in front of the yard, and he would go down, time, every time when we get off the bus, he'll meet us at the end of the path and walk us back to the house. And then my dad sold him. And then I stopped eating beef because I was afraid I was eating Lucky. Now that, maybe about a year, I stopped eating beef because I was scared I was eating

Lucky. So, um, So our livestock was more like Pets than what you ate from except for like when they had the hog killing we didn't pet them. Arnold our hog that would get on the porch.

You know, they said go on back. He'll go on back We didn't eat him, he just died. He was real fat. He was really fat and it was nothing to see him on the porch. Like you did that, like the dogs would sit on the porch , the hog would sit on the porch. He'll let you rub him, pet him. And I had a pony, his name was Donnie. And he died, he was sick.

Yeah.

[00:29:45] **Synai Ferrell:** You mentioned how growing up you barely got sick. I was wondering if you guys used any herbs or natural medicines?

[00:29:54] **Mia Dené Edwards:** I don't think we used natural, it was just the food. Um, The food that you ate. Now my grandmother, my dad's mom, tried to get me to drink this stuff that she would make. And it was olive oil, onions. I don't know what else she put in it. But, It did not look right to me. But my grandfather would make his own cough medicine out of rum.

I think it was rum and honey. And it helps keep his throat clear. And I'm learning now, like, uh, another home remedy that I do now, um, cause, uh, is vinegar and water. That is good for your throat. It clears up all that bacteria. And if you have phlegm, it clears up the phlegm. It helps with, um,

hoarseness. When you get, your voice is real raspy. Um, when I, um, this, um, African lady. Well, she was from Ghana, and she told me about the lemon water helps you from being bloated and how healthy that was for you. So I practice those things now.

[00:31:12] **Synai Ferrell:** Those were all the questions we had, but I wanted to know if there's anything else you would like to add that we didn't touch on.

[00:31:18] **Mia Dené Edwards:** I think I touched on about everything that I could remember growing up. Just being around the older people and listening to their stories for me. To know what my history, you know, where I came from. Why do I think the way I do? And when I hear my mom talking about her mom, I say, Uh oh, so this is like generational.

I, I, you know, that, so that's where I get that from. Where, you know, just trying to figure out where Who you are, you need to know where you came from. You

need to know what the culture that, you know, what did they do back in those days. And so that that history don't get lost. It's important that, because I feel like a lot of our history is being lost with technology.

Not saying that technology is bad, but it, especially with young people, it stops conversation. Um, because they'd rather be texting each other instead of having a conversation. They'd be in the same room and

will

not talk, but you can text. And I'm like, where's the conversation? That's why it's so important when we sit down at the table

to eat or to fellowship, phones are gone, just talk. Just, just a simple conversation is important. And when you get feedback, then you know that they're being heard and you're being heard.