

Heirloom Gardens Oral History Project
Interview with Vivian Fields by Tessa Lowinske Desmond
Conducted on September 27, 2023 in Farmville, NC

[00:00:00] **Tessa Desmond:** Today is September 27th, 2023. I'm Tessa Lowinske Desmond with the Heirloom Gardens Oral History Project. I'm in Farmville, North Carolina. Thank you for sitting with us today. Can you introduce yourself for us and tell us some things that are important to you to share?

[00:00:20] **Vivian Fields:** I'm Vivian B. Fields from Fallville at 36, 3683 South George Street. And I am the daughter of Dr. Gray Barnes from Farmville. Um, she was my mother and my grandmother was Blanche Elizabeth Barnes. She also had 21 kids and my mother was the fifth kid of that 21. So, I can answer anything that y'all like for me to answer.

[00:00:48] **Tessa Desmond:** So you've lived in Farmville your whole life.

[00:00:50] **Vivian Fields:** All my life for 76 years.

[00:00:53] **Tessa Desmond:** And tell me about your family. Did you have brothers and sisters?

[00:00:57] **Vivian Fields:** I have, no, it was nine of us. Seven boys and two girls.

[00:01:03] **Tessa Desmond:** Did you live in town?

[00:01:04] **Vivian Fields:** I lived in Farmville all my life from Wallis Street to the main street of Main Street in Farmville.

[00:01:11] **Tessa Desmond:** And your grandparents?

[00:01:13] **Vivian Fields:** My grandparents was George and Blanche Bond.

[00:01:16] **Tessa Desmond:** And where did they live?

[00:01:17] **Vivian Fields:** Wilder Street, in Farmville, next to Main Street.

[00:01:22] **Tessa Desmond:** And what was Farmville like when you were growing up?

[00:01:26] **Vivian Fields:** It was It wasn't integrated at the time, so we grew up hard in Farmville. We couldn't hardly come across Main Street without being with the white. And they, we fought all the time. So when my kids came up, they didn't even know anything about all this kind of stuff, so I had to tell them, be cautious of how they, you know, where they go and everything and don't get in no trouble, because you will go to jail and we wasn't able to to take them out of jail because we it was nine my brother and sister nine, so my mother worked for Mr. Louise Thomas, Edgar Thomas.

And so when we get in trouble, we have to go to, like Lancer said, we have to go to him because he was white and get us out of trouble and stuff. So I try to teach my children not to bother anybody unless they bother them. So if they bother them, I want them to defend themselves. Not to be scared of nobody, but tell the truth and go ahead on about their business.

So,

[00:02:30] **Tessa Desmond:** When you were growing up, the line, the segregation line was Main Street?

[00:02:34] **Vivian Fields:** So, Main Street is the main street of all, from the police station back to the railroad track, was the Main Street.

[00:02:43] **Tessa Desmond:** And, what was it like on your side of Main Street? What was it like on the other side of Main Street?

[00:02:50] **Vivian Fields:** Well, coming across the railroad track, This, that's Main Street. From Wallace Street is the one that start. It was the most street, but I didn't know the street at the time. But now I know the different one. We were on the south side, and this is the north side. So, we

always had to come to the north side to get groceries and everything. And everything, so. We didn't have much money, so we all were raised up on garden food and stuff.

And so, like Liza and Willa were saying, whatever we didn't have, we had to go to the white man and ask for it. And if he didn't okay it, we didn't get what we were supposed to be getting. And so I thought that was very wrong, because we all were supposed to be equal.

[00:03:37] **Tessa Desmond:** You were talking, so garden food, what do you mean garden food?

[00:03:40] **Vivian Fields:** We had everything beside, uh milk and stuff. On my side, we had chicken, we had hogs, we had, uh, turkey, and the hogs had barbecued pork and all of that. Collards and cabbages, potatoes, white potatoes, squash, black eyed peas and stuff. That was coming from the garden, so we had plenty of that. We didn't have to buy anything.

Now you go to the grocery store, you have to spend fifty dollars for this one item. Fifty dollars, um, in 1959, about, because I'm 40, not, from 1947, I knew the difference of buying groceries, because I could take twenty five dollars and buy a hundred dollars food now, but now you're only going to get one, a couple items for forty seven dollars, fifty dollars.. So it's a lot different now than it was when, I mean, it was a lot different back then in 1950 than it is from 19, um, 2023.

[00:04:41] **Tessa Desmond:** The garden.

[00:04:42] **Vivian Fields:** The garden helps us a lot.

[00:04:44] **Tessa Desmond:** The Farmville community garden?

[00:04:46] **Vivian Fields:** Oh yes. And now if you want anything in the garden, you have a share. A long time ago you had to ask the people for this stuff. These people now don't even ask, they just go and take what they want. And I think that's wrong because if you're planting it, you're supposed to be able to ask them, could I have so and so and so, don't go and bother other folks stuff.

And I always brought my kids and my, now my grand bringing them up, my great grandchildren. And I tell them, don't take stuff that don't belong to them. If you want anything, ask for it. If you don't have it, come and ask me 'cause I'm gonna go survive my grandchildren.

[00:05:21] **Tessa Desmond:** I'm curious still about the gardens. When you were growing up, did your family have a garden? Um, were there families who shared things from their gardens?

[00:05:33] **Vivian Fields:** My grandmother had a garden in her backyard. And, uh, all my grandmother's children had to help during the summer and everything, help so we could have food for us the wintertime. We didn't have a freezer, so we had mason jars, and we had to go out there every day after school and help pick the beans and the collards and stuff and everything. Collards only came in the fall for us. You take three, four hours to cook those and clean them and everything. Now after September, you can go to the garden and get collards, and it only takes you a half an hour to cook them and everything. So I like the, I mean, fall collards, I mean, the summer garden better not do the fall, because I can cook them real quick and whatever.

And for the chicken, I've always been scared of chicken, so, but I like chicken pastry. I know how to make chicken pastry.

[00:06:26] **Tessa Desmond:** Yeah, tell me about chicken pastry.

[00:06:27] **Vivian Fields:** Okay, you, uh, I like chicken breast. Some people like whole chicken and everything, but I like the white meat of chicken. So I cut up my chicken in quarters and boil them for about an hour and then I put some margarine in the pot.

Then I put some base chicken mix,base in there. It's called chicken mix and I let that simmer for about five or ten minutes while the chicken cooking. Then I get the Annies', Annie's, uh, pastry, they call it the dumpling, but we call it pastry. And you, uh, while the chicken is boiling, you put

a layer of pastry and a layer of chicken, a layer of pastry, a layer of chicken, and you cook it maybe about a half an hour.

And then it should be done in about 15 to 20 minutes after you get all the chicken done been cooked for half an hour, after you put, add the pastry in there. And then you put some more base in there so it can thicken it up a little bit. And along with that, we have the collards and the sweet potatoes go along with it, and the cornbread.

[00:07:26] **Tessa Desmond:** Are you adding, um, spices, herbs, seasonings?

[00:07:29] **Vivian Fields:** No, we just use some chicken mix, it's called chicken mix in a container, maybe a three ounce, um, container. Some people just use margarine and black pepper and salt, but I use chicken mix in mine, and then I boil about 5 or 6 eggs, and then I let the eggs cool, and I cut them in round quarters, and then I put it in there so that the yolk would be kind of yellow like.

And so that's the way I eat mine.

[00:07:55] **Tessa Desmond:** And the collards that you're cooking with it.

[00:07:58] **Vivian Fields:** Okay, the collards I have, I get some country ham meat. I cook that about a half an hour more. Then I take the meat back out. I wash the collards about two or three hours, because they're gritty from the garden. And we'll, we cook those in, from uh, July to September, it takes them about two or three hours.

Some people don't like to cook them, I mean don't want to eat them like that because it takes too long, that's me. But I like to eat mine after September because it only takes me about a whole hour to cook the whole thing. And so I do it the same way I do, cook the ham first and take it out, and then put the collard greens in and let them cook about, from September to December, it only takes about 45 minutes to cook the whole thing.

And then you put them in the collard greens, spray them, spray them, and then you chop them up with a vegetable chopper.

[00:08:50] **Tessa Desmond:** What's different about September to December?

[00:08:53] **Vivian Fields:** Well, in the summertime, the collards out there with all that hot heat, and it makes them tough. So it takes longer to cook the collards in the summertime.

But in the wintertime, the frost done struck em. That's after September, Labor Day week. So it doesn't take that long. You can wash them, cook them, and everything, and be done eating in two hours. In the summertime, you got to wait three or four hours before you can eat anything. So I like the summer, over the fall, to cook the collards.

[00:09:26] **Tessa Desmond:** And are, do you know, have you, have you had different collards?

[00:09:30] **Vivian Fields:** Yeah, I have Cabbage collards. I like cabbage collards better 'cause they're real light. The other collards, I call, fall collards because they're real dark and that's what takes so long. You can be going anywhere from uptown two hours and the collards be still cooking, but now if you leave, they be burned up by the time you get back.

So that's why I like after. Eat all my collards in the fall of the year, from September to December.

[00:09:58] **Tessa Desmond:** There's sweet potatoes and cornbread there too, you said.

[00:10:01] **Vivian Fields:** Yeah, cornbread, it's a cornmeal, you uh. Like, um, if you got a large family, you use a 9, uh, 13 baking pan, and you use about 2 cups of meal, 2 eggs, you can use either, if you don't have, or, or milk, you can use water and stir it up, put a little fried meat grease in it, or a little vegetable oil, and do the, And then put it, spread it in the pan and cook it for 45 minutes in the oven on 350.

And the sweet potatoes, you take an hour to cook them, bake them in the oven. You can either peel them or either let them stay on the peel until you get done. So, so you have a whole meal.

And then you're also going to have white potatoes, which they're called, you know, they're white potatoes or either russet potatoes, whatever you want to call them.

You can cook them in the pot with the collards while they're cooking. But you got to watch them because they'll cook all the pieces.

[00:10:59] **Tessa Desmond:** Who, uh, where did you learn?

[00:11:01] **Vivian Fields:** From my grandmother and my mother. 'cause I was on the, um, my mother had nine kids and I always wanted to learn how to cook, but I don't know how to bake anything.

I'm a cooker. I can cook anything that you want me to cook, reals, chicken, whatever. I cannot bake anything. So I, my grandmother learned me how to cook. Me and my other cousin and everything. I, we stayed with my grandmother until I was 15 years old. And then I went out on my own with my mother. My mother and I and her kids stayed with my grandma until I was 15. It was more than us, but it was time for my mother to spread out and get her own place. So that's when I started being on my own, learning how to cook and everything by myself. So I've been cooking ever since I was about 15 years old. So I'm 76 now.

[00:11:53] **Tessa Desmond:** I've heard barbecue pork.

[00:11:55] **Vivian Fields:** Okay, um. We call it fresh pork and some people call it barbecue pork.

[00:12:01] **Tessa Desmond:** Wait, what do you call it, what?

[00:12:02] **Vivian Fields:** Fresh pork.

[00:12:03] **Tessa Desmond:** Fresh pork.

[00:12:04] **Vivian Fields:** Mm hmm. But it's fresh, it's just fresh meat or shoulder, fresh shoulder, fresh ham, whatever you want. So I cook in a, uh, cooking bag. Valerie doesn't like to cook in a cooking bag, but I cook in a cooking bag because I time my stuff so I can go somewhere else. So I cook barbecue, it takes like around about three hours to cook in there in a cooking bag.

And so, I just chops it up, use crushed red pepper. I use hot sauce, which some people don't like hot sauce, but I use hot sauce in mine. Texas Pete. And then I just chop it up, and some people have coleslaw, barbecue, collards, and cabbage. Go along with it for dinner. So that's what used to be our Sunday dinner every other Sunday.

[00:12:49] **Tessa Desmond:** I'm wondering about your kids. What are some of the favorite things that you cook that they ask for?

[00:12:57] **Vivian Fields:** Spaghetti. They like, uh, pasta. So I use ground pork. I use, uh, Del Monte, uh, mushroom sauce. I use bell pepper and onion. And then I cook the spaghetti for 15 minutes. I pour the sauce on the hamburger. And then I put it back in the pot for about 5 or 10 minutes.

And let it simmer for a little while. And then we eat.

[00:13:27] **Tessa Desmond:** So we started, we started our conversation thinking about growing up in segregated Farmville, talking about gardens, um, on, you said the south side of Main Street. You were eating garden food. Um, when did things start to change?

[00:13:47] **Vivian Fields:** In 1963. Um, that's when I had my first kid in 1963.

And what, what was different? What started to change? How did, how, you know, I'm thinking about the time of, um, so you had your kids in sixty three.

I got married in sixty six. And we just went on there. We just had soldation and mixed white together.

[00:14:17] **Tessa Desmond:** And so, were you still, up until 63, were you still eating garden food?

[00:14:22] **Vivian Fields:** We had garden food. That's the only thing, actually, we ate was garden food. We very seldom to the store and bought anything unless it was milk and bread.

[00:14:31] **Tessa Desmond:** And then when did you stop eating garden food?

[00:14:35] **Vivian Fields:** We never stopped. I'm still eating it. I just don't have a garden. I just am not able to tend to a garden. So, I get some from different people and everything.

[00:14:47] **Tessa Desmond:** And so, um People share their garden food every year.

[00:14:52] **Vivian Fields:** They're still sharing it now.

[00:14:55] **Tessa Desmond:** In the interview with Mr. Willoughby, we were talking about how good it feels to share food.

[00:15:01] **Vivian Fields:** Well, uh, we buy vegetables from, from Mr. Shaggerford. He lives at two, uh, on 258, lives on, uh, Lizzie. So that's where we get our collards year round from, when they got them. Instead of going uptown, he'd get the same collards, but it's much cheaper to get them from him. And you get more, you know. You can get a box at a time from him, you know. And you just go home and wash them and cook them, whatever. He even sell the meat. Now, they used to not sell the meat, the Shaggerford's, but they have the meat. You don't have to come all the way uptown if you don't want that. And they also have potatoes. They have watermelon. They have squash. I don't know, I don't know if they have onions or not.

But they have everything when he, Mr. Shaggerford and his wife. They supply, you know, everything that you need for the, um, Like cabbage collards from squash, sweet potato.

[00:16:01] **Tessa Desmond:** You're lucky that you can do that in your community.

[00:16:05] **Vivian Fields:** You don't have to go far, you can walk.

[00:16:09] **Tessa Desmond:** Um, talk to me about the community kitchen.

[00:16:14] **Vivian Fields:** Okay, um, I worked in a soup kitchen for eight years for St. Matthew's Free Will Baptist Church. And then my hips started getting bad, so I just told them that I couldn't do a whole lot of walking down my steps. But I would help them cook. What they want, just let me know a day ahead of time, or whatever month.

So we've taken, Valerie and I now, since my kitchen's not doing it, my kitchen's not doing it, Valerie signed up for, signed me up for help her on the 5th of Wednesday in each month. So we don't have about 5, 5 or 4, 5th months. So I think next month is my time to start off November 1. So we all, we cook whatever we want.

Sometime we'll ask some of the people that go there what they like, so it can be a big crowd come so we know how much to fix. So we try to have enough for 50 people at one time.

Sometimes they have stuff at the soup kitchen that we go up there and get. And sometimes they don't have enough, so we have to come out of our pocket.

We don't ask for the money back. If we don't have enough money, we'll get it from Kathy and go along with it, but most of the time we get it from Kathy and we'll find out what we're going to have because the meat is very expensive now. But other than that, everything else is up to the garden. Canned food, breads, cooked cakes, pies, everything besides the plates and stuff.

I think the church had to buy the plates and stuff and everything. And since this pandemic been going on, they would let them come in and get the plates and carry back out and everything. But I haven't been twice since that been going on.

[00:18:06] **Tessa Desmond:** What do you like about cooking at the community kitchen?

[00:18:09] **Vivian Fields:** I like cooking at this kitchen, but they don't have my stuff that I use at home.

So I fix most of mine at the house. And then Valerie pick me up bout half an hour. So in case it ain't ready, we can put it in they oven. But I like to cook in my own kitchen. Because they don't

have, sometimes they don't have the seasoning and we haven't told them what we use and everything. So if we would tell them, I guess they would get what we need.

But I have all my stuff home and I know what I use so, I just buy the big ones from Big Quality and just keep it at home anyway. But my daughter in Connecticut, she know how to cook. So she dos a lot of baking and everything. But when she comes down, if I'm about to do it, she'll help me with it. She knows how to cook because she works in a restaurant in the city.

But now she works in a bank. So if stuff that I don't know how to do, and I forgot or whatever, I would call her and tell me what, what to put in it. So, if anybody is wanting to know how, like Valerie said, she used apple, uh, cider vinegar. So apple, uh, cider vinegar is, uh, brown, but my daughter used white vinegar.

And she used her pepper and put it in the jar and let hers turn brown. And like Valerie said, she had the red and the green pepper. And she takes the stem out and she pushed the vinegar in the bottle. Well, my daughter pushed it in there too, but she used the white vinegar. And so hers can turn brown. She wants hers to turn.

Val would be already turning. She's just getting her seasoning already halfway in. And it don't take as long as Val to do her, but if you're not in a hurry, you can use the white vinegar. And it be stay the whole time. And the longer it stay in the vinegar, the softer the vinegar get and the better it taste.

And if you want to use, uh, just the crushed pepper with the seasoning, or you don't want to use the, you can buy the pepper already with the seasoning. And you won't have to use the, uh, one in the bottle. And then you also use Texas Pete hot sauce, but everybody cannot eat the hot sauce and stuff, so we just don't put it all on there.

You know, we just season it a little bit, so the pork won't hurt you. You got to season the barbecue with the vinegar while it's, you know, warm. And so that's the difference. Any kind of pork, like in the oven or whatever, you pour the vinegar over it and let it be steaming into the meat. And wasn't going to bother you at all.

But if you just come pouring it, you know it's going to bother your stomach.

[00:20:50] **Tessa Desmond:** How do you think the Farmville Community Garden has impacted Farmville?

[00:20:55] **Vivian Fields:** Oh, it impacts a whole lot of people in Farmville. Because some of them don't have money, and some of them don't know who to ask. So they just go out there and volunteer and get what they want, and then we just Well, it's the truth.

I mean, you know. And then they'll tell a couple of their friends, and so it's not good for them to go out there. Cause some of them just destroy their stuff and leave it out there. Cause I had seen some stuff when I went with Valerie and them when they had their garden back here. Some of this stuff had been cropped out and then people didn't know they had dropped it.

Some people could have been eating that stuff while they were messing it up. They didn't know how to, you know. But it's that, you know, they all got to do is ask for it. They don't need to, you know, go out and bother folks stuff. So it helped a lot, and it's nice, it's pretty out there. I was, about it all day, it's, they have really done a good job out there, the grass and everything.

I need to find them to cut my yard.

[00:21:47] **Tessa Desmond:** And what kinds of things would you like to see Farmville do, or people in Farmville do, to continue to build out that community and make sure that everyone is provided for?

[00:22:00] **Vivian Fields:** Well, I feel like if they are really interested in it, they can go out and do volunteer work and help the Boy Scout.

Let them know. I don't know that the man was sitting over there. Mr. Bob, he, I mean, I don't know how old he is, but he always can use help. And so they can just come along and ask, you know, find a day or find somebody that works, you know, and ask about volunteering help. Like that. Give them a hand. I mean, you know, you see the boy scout out there, they young. They don't know so much until he teach them. So that some of these people that walking around, they know. So they can, you know, this Mac can work an hour, the other Mac can work an hour. And that will help everybody. And they can get a chance to get some of the vegetables themselves and take it home to their family.

All that they don't get from the soup kitchen, you know. So I think, you know, that would help. Cause everybody doesn't have money, everybody's not alike, so.

[00:22:54] **Tessa Desmond:** If there was one recipe that you hope your family carries on that you make, what's the recipe that's important to you that they continue to make?

[00:23:04] **Vivian Fields:** The greens and the collards.

My family, my family grew up with it, but if anybody else want to know, they can help them.

[00:23:13] **Tessa Desmond:** The greens and the collards?

[00:23:15] **Vivian Fields:** I call greens the same as collards. Some people just don't say collards, they say green. So it could be a turnip green, a mustard green, like that.

[00:23:25] **Tessa Desmond:** But the greens you prefer to use are the collards?

[00:23:28] **Vivian Fields:** Yeah, because I don't like the salad that much.

[00:23:33] **Tessa Desmond:** And why do you think it's important that they continue to cook the green collards?

[00:23:37] **Vivian Fields:** It will, uh, help the family. It doesn't take a lot when you got a lot of greens. You can grow greens, um, collards and stuff, spread a long way, like black eyed peas, or string beans, or something like that. You can feed a good little bit off the whole box of collards. You can feed 50 people off the box of collards. So, that's why I said collards would be best for them to use.

[00:24:03] **Tessa Desmond:** Is there anything else you want to share?

[00:24:06] **Vivian Fields:** No, that's it.

[00:24:08] **Tessa Desmond:** Thank you.