

Heirloom Gardens Oral History Project
Interview with Shelby Johnson by Chris Keeve
Conducted on April 24th, 2023 in Berea, Kentucky

[00:00:00] **Chris Keeve:** This is Christian Keeve with the Heirloom Gardens Projects, interviewing, can I have your name?

[00:00:05] **Shelby Johnson:** Shelby Johnson.

[00:00:06] **Chris Keeve:** Thank you. Um, just to start off, can you just tell us a little bit about yourself?

[00:00:12] **Shelby Johnson:** Sure. I am a, an agrarian, a forager, self taught mushroom nerd, a farmer organizer. And, yeah, I am based in Asheville, in Western North Carolina. Yeah, I'm, what to say about myself? A burgeoning seed nerd. I'm excited to get to explore more the world of seed work. I would say in general, I'm, I like to identify as an agrarian. I think that that term really encompasses a lot of the, the life ways that I like to embody.

[00:00:47] **Chris Keeve:** Can I ask how you came to the term agrarian?

[00:00:50] **Shelby Johnson:** Agrarian, it's kind of going through a sort of a reclaiming, a revival process right now. You know, I think some of the, the returning generation farmers feel like the traditional definition of what makes a farmer a farmer isn't inclusive enough or broad enough to really, to put color to the different life ways that make up an agrarian lifestyle.

So, you know, when I say agrarian, I mean anyone who is engaging in land stewardship in an intentional kind of way, in, within a particular lineage, in an intergenerational way, or even in an exploratory way. So, you know, there are agrarians that are land stewards that don't grow food or there are agrarians that are storytellers. There are, yeah, you know, I, I feel like agrarian is more of a, is more of a match for all of the different types of folks that fall under that umbrella.

[00:01:55] **Chris Keeve:** Can I ask what kinds of places you called home?

[00:01:57] **Shelby Johnson:** What kinds of places I've called home. So I was born in Asheville. And I was raised between North Georgia and Asheville area.

None of my family is really from Asheville proper, but, you know how, you know, people talk. So, I haven't spent a ton of time outside of that radius between North Georgia and Asheville. I um, went out on my own after I finished college at Georgia State and I was very ready to leave the South. I was disillusioned and just ready to see something different.

So, I actually moved to Denver, Colorado, and I was there for four and a half years and, It wasn't for me, so, um, it definitely wasn't the right, culturally it wasn't a good fit. I started to realize some of the things that I took for granted about the South, particularly the Southeast and Appalachia.

Yeah, so those are the places I've called home. I've lived all over Georgia and I'm living in Western North Carolina now, so I really haven't strayed too far from that little, little radius.

[00:03:06] **Chris Keeve:** Can I ask about some of, some of your strongest food memories?

[00:03:11] **Shelby Johnson:** Strong food memories. Food is like, you know, it's a southern language. And so it's, it's hard to separate out food memories from almost any other kind of memory. Because it's, it's part of the way that we communicate with each other. And I think a lot of that is, it's primal, it's ancestral, but food for me is, is family. Food for me is kin.

It's hard to split those out. I do have one story that I like to share, um, my earliest food memory specifically of North Carolina. It starts beautiful and shimmery and it ends somewhere wormy. So, my Nana, I remember her loading me up in the car and we drove to one of her, I think it was one of her cousin's house and I remember we drove up to this garden and the first impression of the garden was there's just this wall of corn.

And I was small, I was tiny, but I even remember just thinking that it was the tallest thing I had ever seen. And the sound that mature, tall corn makes when it's in the field and the wind moves through it, it was, it really made an impression on me, especially in those like wide open years when like the sensory, the sensory feeling of being a new human in the world, can really make a deep impression on you.

So we stopped over at her cousin's house and we loaded up a car full of corn and I was very excited for the adventure. But, we went home to her house, which was in Flat Rock at the time, and we hauled all that corn on the porch, and it was our task for the day to shuck all of it and get, get it ready for cooking, and it started out, like I said, it was really fun, but then about hour two, hour three, I was like, I don't, I don't want to see corn again for the rest of my life with the, you know, like opening up and being shocked that there was worms or, you know, like whatever happening, but I think that that's one of my very earliest food memories specifically of corn.

[00:05:18] **Chris Keeve:** Can you talk a little bit more about the sound of living through a mature corn capture as well as kind of that, uh, tactile experience of like shucking?

[00:05:28] **Shelby Johnson:** Mm hmm. Yeah, I can. The sound specifically of corn is one of the most soothing things that I think. And I wonder if it's because I have that early memory.

I think it's because it was such a sensory experience for me, feeling so small. With the corn so big and you know, it's easy for children to feel overwhelmed or like kind of nervous about things, but it felt motherly almost like that sound was really, really comforting and I still, if I'm working in, you know, in my own plot on my own farm, if I get the chance, if the wind hits the corn just right, I always pause what I'm doing and listening and just, or, you know, stop and listen and think of that memory. It can really transport you through time.

The shucking was a different experience. Like I said, it starts fun. You know, it's like, uh, opening a present or something. And I do really think it was the first time that I, like, put two and two together, like, food comes from the earth and sometimes there's bugs in the food.

And I was, I was appalled. I was like, Nana, you're gonna, you're gonna have me eat this food? It's got bugs on it? And, you know, hearing the sound of her voice, like, just explain. You know, sometimes there's worms, you pick them off, you, you know, keep going, but I think that in itself is almost like an archetypal Appalachian experience, like sitting on the porch with your Nana, shucking corn or, you know, cracking beans or doing whatever.

Yeah, it's, it's really immersive. The sensory feeling of it is really immersive in that memory.

[00:07:10] **Chris Keeve:** Do you still, do you steward corn?

[00:07:12] **Shelby Johnson:** I do. I am trying to be a good corn steward. You know, I think there's more of an art to it than people let on. I, um, am very lucky where I steward land now. I am surrounded by elders.

Most of my neighbors, of which there aren't many, but the ones that I do have, I would say the average age is 75. And so me, stewarding the plot that I steward has given them an opportunity. It like also cracks open memory, like sensory memories for them too. So it's been like a, a place to share and, you know, for me to try and fail at growing things.

But, we had an okay corn season last year. One of my neighbors, who's an old man named Red, told me that my corn did not do well last year because I didn't thin it enough. So I'm working on it. But yeah, with help, I'll get there.

[00:08:14] **Chris Keeve:** How much of your work with food and seeds involves those sorts of interaction with, with, with elders?

[00:08:20] **Shelby Johnson:** A lot, a lot of my work. I, for my family, for my, like, not necessarily my immediate family. I am the young person who is recovering the stories and trying to get them documented and pull them out of my elders. So, almost everything that I do, I'm asking for the story, I'm asking for the, the background.

Especially as it relates to agrarianism, it's so, it was so vital to our success for so long and so much of it. I feel like we're grasping at things that are being lost and it makes me anxious. So I ask lots of questions. I maybe shouldn't admit this on recording, but I do, and I do record my elders a lot of the times when they're just talking freely.

I think young people are a little bit different because of the way we've grown up with technology. But elders specifically, a lot of the times if you, you know, put a camera in their face or put a microphone, they change. The way that they talk changes. The stories that they choose to tell changes.

So it might be slightly unethical, but I do, I do record them frequently while they're just talking and the stories just kind of come out like the things that, the memories and the things that are connected and triggered for them. They have really interesting things to say. So, I, I think a lot of my work is really rooted in, in those stories, especially my family and my immediate neighbors.

[00:09:53] **Chris Keeve:** What kinds of spaces or in what kinds of spaces have these stories been shared?

[00:09:59] **Shelby Johnson:** It's usually at the farm while I'm working, I, either, I either ask questions intentionally like while we're eating or sharing food, but there's something about seeing a young person working the land that like energizes them and they want to come over and see what I'm doing and, and ask if they can help or, you know, "back in 55, when Roy was working this field", like, you know, and the stories just kind of come up with, with random triggers.

So a lot of the times it is centered around my work at the plot for right now.

[00:10:34] **Chris Keeve:** Can you walk us through the plot?

[00:10:35] **Shelby Johnson:** I can. It is in a horse pasture. So I, my wife and I were very, very blessed, very lucky to be able to buy our first home in 2022. And it is in a little holler that is just, like I said, predominantly elders, mostly lots of relatives that haven't moved too far from that little valley.

So the land that we are on was bought by, was acquired by the Walker family in 1954 and Roy Walker, who was the father of that family, farmed all of the bottom land on the property. So, he transitioned, I'm not sure, a number of years ago, but the property, the land has been used for horses for the past 15 years or so.

So we have just a half acre that is under active cultivation and it's small but mighty. It's, it's really interesting because the plot itself started out as a subsistence garden, as a homestead. And, you know, my wife and I don't have children yet. And you can grow a lot of food on a half acre, even a quarter acre, you can grow a lot of food.

So, you know, I've been in production ag for about a decade. So, you know, within a couple of months, I, we have more food than we can eat. So I started doing free shares for my neighbors, especially like elders, they don't, there's a lot of elders that have folks that don't make sure that they have good food.

So it, it made complete sense for me to say, come get squash, come get tomatoes, come get beans, come sit next to the plot while I hoe and weed and, you know, we can just chat. And, so that kind of created like a, like a barter system that's like revolving around the plot now.

You know, I have one neighbor whose name is Paul and he is very excellent with engines and like small engine repair. So he like fixes up the four wheelers so we can haul compost to the plot and we give him, you know, produce. And the land that I'm actually growing on is another neighbor's who is like. Of course, you know, grow here. So it's like this whole system of trading that's kind of like popped up around this plot and it's been, it's been really sweet, really rewarding.

[00:13:04] **Chris Keeve:** What are you growing?

[00:13:05] **Shelby Johnson:** A little bit of everything, probably slightly too much for the scale that we're at. I have a hard time balancing, you know, it's, it's been kind of whatever the opposite of hitting the ground running is. Like I'm coming off of almost a decade of like really intensive, small scale, diversified, veg production.

So to kind of like shift gears a little bit out of my production brain into more of like a community growing brain has been interesting. So I am growing a little bit of everything. Definitely a focus on like southern heritage crops. I try to choose one new interesting or exciting thing each year.

Last year that was sorghum. And sorghum absolutely like captured my heart and my brain. It was a really beautiful and fascinating crop to grow, so yeah, I'd say that's at the top of my excitement list right now. Last year I grew a variety called Coral Sorghum, which is out of South Sudan. It was seed shared by Nate Kleiman with Experimental Farm Network. I had no experience growing sorghum. I had never grown it before. And from, you know, all of the different perspectives from like a production standpoint subsistence homesteading standpoint, even just like a purely aesthetic, like, beauty standpoint, it, this crop offered so much. It was really easy for me to manage. She was just happy to be there. And I've had fun.

You know, we, um, were able to process some really beautiful grain from the heads. Chris Smith and I experimented with processing some sorghum syrup, which I don't have, you know, like, small scale grower, like, I don't have an evaporator or anything like that, so I'm just, like, evaporating it on my, on my stove in my kitchen, but we got some really beautiful syrup, and I just, I'm really enamored by sorghum, I think it has a lot of potential.

Um, you are really intentional about family and ancestral seed stories. Do you grow those seeds also?

I do. You know, like I said, I'm trying to break some of the socialization that I went through in my like professional career in production ag, especially having gone through an orientation to agriculture through like a more affluent white lens.

Because a lot of the farms that can afford to bring in labor have greater access to resources to bring in that labor. So I haven't had the most, I haven't had a ton of time or experiences working alongside elders or black elders. So yeah, you know, there's some of that that gets muted in like small scale production ag where it's just like, oh, you just get the seeds from large non regionally based seed company that shall not be named and you plant them because that's how you, you know, generate a profit.

So I'm definitely trying to break that approach in my own endeavors. I've been keeping seed for a while, but yeah, trying to, trying to shift some of my, my understanding, trying to weave some of my beliefs between, you know, the strictly production and the, the cultural work, which I think have to happen in tandem.

[00:16:31] **Chris Keeve:** I ask if there are any varieties that you have been keeping or stewarding?

[00:16:36] **Shelby Johnson:** I would say definitely one that I've held onto for a while is a Calendula. There's something really neat about a calendula seed, the, the shape of it is just so funky, but the flowers are absolutely beautiful, really medicinally potent.

Even just like, the energetic imprint of a, of a really healthy, vibrant calendula plant is like a whole ecosystem in itself, like in peak summer. So I think it's really important to keep, to keep that flower kin alongside me and it's really easy to keep those seeds. So I always, I always have more calendula seed than I can use in a single year, so it's and everybody likes flowers, even if folks, you know, don't want to garden or farm or, you know, be in production act spaces, it's really nice to have a cute little flower on your porch. So, I've always, always, always kept that,

[00:17:28] **Chris Keeve:** Has Calendula also been a big part of your families or the region's seedway?

[00:17:35] **Shelby Johnson:** Maybe. Part of what I'm going through right now is trying to uncover some of those, those stories, and a lot of it's been trial and error, or like, digging up those memories, because a lot of the elders in my family are in their upper 70s, 80s.

So they'll, and I think with my age, there's like a couple of skipped generations. So my grandparents, specifically my papaw, um, will tell stories of his grandparents and his parents, like there was a big push to get off of the farm, to get off of the land, to go to school, to get into industry, to move to the city.

So it's almost like, you know, like I hear some, like a generation or two older than me have like a lot sharper focus on some of those memories because they're not, there may be one generation removed from folks who are like very actively and intentionally stewarding crops in the land. I'm a couple of generations back, so, you know, talking with my elders and they'll have like vague memories, like, oh yeah, Granny White always kept a huge garden. She always had flowers. She always made medicine. And I'm like, but which?

So I'm like, did the flower look like this? Did it smell like that? So, you know, like, even like growing out different things and, and seeing if like the sense of the smell or the feel will trigger some of those memories. It kind of feels like a reconnaissance mission right now. So Calendula specifically, I'm, I'm not too sure. I would not be surprised, but, I'm, I'm working on it.

[00:19:14] **Chris Keeve:** When people would, would leave the farm or have pressure to leave the farm, where would they usually end up?

[00:19:20] **Shelby Johnson:** Typically in the Asheville area. So, you know, at, at least on my mom's side of the family. I'm not sure if I, if I mentioned this to you, I very recently found out I, on my mom's side, am the eighth generation to have been born in this, like, 30 mile radius of, you know, the Asheville metro area. So, my peoples have come from Flat Rock up towards Asheville, from an area called Mount Olivet, towards Asheville, and you know, like, the surrounding suburban areas, but, there's something about that, like, splintering of heir property that really kind of scatters people.

So, like, I've asked my papaw, like, we've driven up to where my, my great great grandfather, where his property was, and it was, you know, fifteen hundred acres that they stewarded, and, they didn't want their children to do that. So they started parceling the land, and, you know, as, my papaw's generation and his sisters moved closer to town, you know, and just like buying houses and doing the suburban thing.

It's kind of like sand through, through your, you know, hands that just kind of shifts away from the family.

[00:20:37] **Chris Keeve:** When people moved, did they bring those seeds with them or continue those practices?

[00:20:42] **Shelby Johnson:** I think to an extent. I do wonder how much of the story would be different. Like I heard earlier, like I don't want to lean too heavily into gender stereotypes, but for my lineage, my papaw specifically is the one boy of a family of sisters.

So I wonder how much of those practices, because my papaw's parents were land stewards and farmers, and I wonder how much of that was passed through his sisters. And not him. He went to industry, like he went for like a professional career and he, he wasn't maintaining the seeds and the stories in that way. So I, I wonder how much of that split between them, but I would imagine that his sisters did.

[00:21:28] **Chris Keeve:** With the 1500 acres, what were they growing?

[00:21:31] **Shelby Johnson:** I, I, I think a little bit of everything. I have. I have two stories of that property. The first is, whose story was this? One of my papaw's older sisters has a story, they, my papaw was the last of that generation of children and they lived in like a one room log cabin and his, one of his older sisters has a story of being young and like, maybe three or four and she too was left on the porch to play and hang out outside while you know, my great great grandparents were farming or working or doing whatever they were doing and, um, she had watched her dad. His name was Kimzie, which I think is a beautiful name. His name was Kimzie and she had watched him go out and hoe the rows every day and she was like I'm gonna help dad, I'm gonna be, you know, out on the farm and she went out and pulled up a whole row of beets, and that like really stuck with her and I guess that is one of the stories that's passed down. So I know that they had beets growing and my papaw talks about his grandparents. So not his grandparents or not his parents, but one generation further back, growing, he says, you know how grandparents like to like, big up stories, he's like, it was more tomatoes than you'd ever seen your entire life. And he would be set out to prune and sucker the tomatoes. And he said he hated it. And he was always sticky and like covered in the tomato stuff. So, I mean, I imagine that they grew a little bit of everything. I know that they had like a home garden, and then they had like the farm. So I at least know those two particular stories. I think they're kind of cute.

[00:23:19] **Chris Keeve:** Great. Have you heard stories of the home garden?

[00:23:21] **Shelby Johnson:** Yes. Um, not a ton. And it, it, it makes me sad because, you know, I'll ask like, what, what were you growing? What were you eating?

And they're like, everything. You know, we had pigs, we had grains, we had corn, you know, and it just, it almost, it's what's really fascinating to me is there's this like resurgence in, we want all the details because it's something that we can't touch. It's a life way that we're trying to breathe life into through memory. And for them, that was just, that's just how it was, you know, like, of course we grew everything. We needed to, we had to. So a lot of the, like, the very fine details were not necessarily obscured, but, they're like, that's just, that's just how it was, you know.

[00:24:10] **Chris Keeve:** I'm wondering, in a sensory, in a sensory way, what kinds of spaces or experiences do you really kind of like feel connected to food and seeds? Anywhere?

[00:24:22] **Shelby Johnson:** I'd say in three ways. One we already touched on, which is physically being on the land. And that can happen either like in a cultivated area, like on my farm plot, but also walking in the woods.

I feel very connected to this like, primal feels like it's reaching a little bit far back, but almost primal sort of sense of connection to like place. When I'm cooking and in my dreams is when I have the most active sort of feeling of connection to the food, the seeds, my ancestors, my people. Yeah, I would see those three spaces and specifically being in the woods is when I feel the most human of my human form. And I'm really happy that I have, I have access to very vibrant and dense woods where I can disconnect and connect. And, um, yeah, really experience that humanness.

I am a mushroom nerd. I love all things mushroom. I'm into wild plants. I really like to, you know, I, I did more wild crafting a few years back, but other than the mushrooms now, I'm more just like soaking in the essence of the forest. I think that there is, yeah, like I said something really human about going to a wild space and finding food or finding medicine. So yeah, I think I think the most enjoyable for me is is mushroom foraging just a little bit.

It's spring now. So it's morel season and there's always I mean, there's just there's magic and mushrooms and I do fully think that they are their own entity. And, I've had some really, like, intense experiences foraging. I had one recently, actually. I have, not seen a morel in two or three years, independently on my own, and I spent a good chunk of time in the woods.

So I went out alone a couple of weeks ago and I brought my walking stick and, you know, there's a different kind of tempo between hiking and foraging and forest bathing, like they're all different kind of speeds. So I was moving really slow and I moved out maybe three miles or so, just like almost at a crawl, just like really looking in the leaf litter. Morels specifically are just so elusive.

And so I had, had a whole morning. I saw a box turtle, which was the highlight of my morning. I saw some ramps. the lady slippers are up. The chicory, the wild comfrey. You know, I was seeing lots of kin and I was having a good time, but I had decided to, to circle back. But on the way back I decided to stop and I sat at a tree and just closed my eyes and was thinking of the

essence of the Morel, of like, who, who they are, what their presence brings, what their being brings, it just kind of like simmering in the feeling of the Morel people.

And this, it was so exciting. I like literally went to like brace to stand up from the tree and there was a Morel like sitting right next to me at the tree. And it was just like, one of those just like, shimmery kind of weird feelings where like, you know, I don't know, it was very exciting to just like be in the essence of the Morel and they were secretly there with me the whole time, as they usually are.

[00:27:58] **Chris Keeve:** Can I ask how, about how you came into that relationship?

[00:28:02] **Shelby Johnson:** Hmm. I almost don't know, like the, the essence of the mushroom people, they're very sneaky and they're very pervasive and I feel like they kind of creep up on people, and they kind of just like spread their little hyphy, their mycelial networks in, in our beings and our like energetic essences in a way that kind of like draws you towards them.

I'm probably describing symbiosis or something like that. So I'm. I'm not really sure. I just was interested in them and started reading about them. And, you know, especially having grown up between Georgia and North Carolina, there's mushrooms everywhere. And I've always thought that they were beautiful.

I think it was somewhere around 2016 or 2017 that I really started trying to be more intentional about learning who they are and their life ways.

[00:28:57] **Chris Keeve:** So let's talk about Asheville. Do you have any memories of both family or community food centered events.

[00:29:08] **Shelby Johnson:** If we're going community or family centered food events, we're talking about church. Because that is like the rural or peri rural community place. And there's almost not ever church without food.

So when I was younger, and this is, this is some Asheville, but I really have deep memories in Atlanta about church and food. I used to go to church with my grandmother, my grandma Elliot, and I remember it was always hot and stifling and loud.

And after that, we would always go straight to the basement. And everyone would hang out and eat. And there was always chicken and biscuits and greens and corn and, it was like a whole, it was a whole Sunday spread every Sunday, and there were certain people that cooked certain things, and certain people that always brought the same things. I do have strong memories of, my grandma cooked lots of greens, my, this is my grandma on my dad's side, Grandma Elliot, she always, always, always had a pot of greens going, and one of the best parts was getting the potlicker and there was, so my dad is the baby of nine so there's lots of kids and cousins and grandkids and great grandkids and there's only so much potlicker to go around.

But, you know, I remember grandma always telling us that it was medicine. And the other medicine that she gave us wasn't good. Whether it was, you know, castor oil or whatever she

was, she was doling out, the potlicker was good. So I remember collards. And um, she would cook, no, she would cook mustard greens too. Never, never kale, but mustards, collard greens, yeah, for sure.

I have, I have really strong memories of the, the smell of the greens cooking on the stove. I didn't, when I was little, I didn't like the greens too much. They kinda, they were like a little sensorily strange, but the potlicker could get down with it.

[00:31:24] **Chris Keeve:** Um, can I ask, did you do anything with the potlicker or you just drink it straight?

[00:31:28] **Shelby Johnson:** No, you just drink it. She would put it in um, jars and we would, I mean, I really think she would hand out one big jar and then leave the children to, to scrap over who got what bits of it, but yeah, and just drink it straight up.

[00:31:43] **Chris Keeve:** So in, in the kitchen when you're still on the green, what else is kind of going on?

[00:31:48] **Shelby Johnson:** Well, for one thing, both of my grandmothers smoked cigarettes and this was back in the day. So I can see either my Nana or my grandmother at the stove with a cigarette and apron on. The greens are going, it's always loud. It's always so loud in the kitchen on, on, on either sides of my family. On my dad's side of the family, like I said, he's the baby in nine and I have predominantly aunties on his side of the family. And there was always at least three, four aunties in the kitchen.

In my grandmother's house in Atlanta, the kitchen was small. It was a really small place. And she had, carport off to one side and she would always have that side door open when it was warm or when she was in there cooking, it was hot, and so I can like see and smell like the smell of outside coming in, smell of the greens or the chicken or the you know, always meat, potatoes something like that going on mixed with the, the loud talking going on. There was a very small table that would be hosting games of spades or, you know, whatever, mail and stuff grandma had on the table, but it was a loud, busy kitchen.

[00:33:05] **Chris Keeve:** And you mentioned in that church that different people had different specialties. Do you know what people's were?

[00:33:11] **Shelby Johnson:** Well, that could get controversial. You can't name drop because, you know, if there's two competing potato salads, one of them is gonna be the clear winner, so there's always, like, a signature potato salad. Like I said, I feel like my grandma usually brought greens. There's always someone that's really good at biscuits. There has to be biscuits.

Chicken, usually, I think fried chicken was a Sunday thing, which, this might be a controversial statement, I wasn't a huge fan of fried chicken growing up. So, I'm not, I can't say who had the best of those, but it felt like it was, like, usually consistent things. I don't, I don't remember a lot of, no one was pulling up to the church lunch meeting with like some surprise dish that no one knew what it was. I think the most heated competition was over the potato salad though.

[00:34:01] **Chris Keeve:** And how did they prepare the green?

[00:34:03] **Shelby Johnson:** That could also get controversial. Some folks like, you know, there's got to be meat whether that's like ham hock or I think for a lot of the times it was like whatever like fatty scrap cuts were left over from the week and just it cooks and cooks and cooks for days on the stove. Some people, I've heard rumor that some people put sugar in their greens, which is different to me, we did not do sugar in our greens. The only thing that I remember specifically my grandma and my aunties doing, was putting the pepper sauce on greens. It's like a yellow pepper in like a clear kind of vinegary hot sauce. And so grandma's greens were always kind of spicy, but yeah.

[00:34:48] **Chris Keeve:** So there's the porch, and there's the church basement, and there's the carport at the kitchen. So I'm also wondering if there are any other sorts of spaces that really resonate with you?

[00:34:59] **Shelby Johnson:** I think those might be, those are the really prominent ones. There's a lot of time spent on porches, a lot of time spent in the kitchen. Certainly a lot of time spent with the church folks. Yeah, I, I think that those are the, the three prominent spaces that feel the most poignant in my memories.

[00:35:18] **Chris Keeve:** Um, and you mentioned earlier, the kind of this bartering system that came up around your, around your farm. Do you have any, any memories of those similar sorts of relation at Asheville?

[00:35:30] **Shelby Johnson:** Yeah, I think that that is it's a part of like country life ways, you know, the elders always really talk about like, you know, being neighborly and doing for others, but it's fun to get to experience it myself and be kind of like a, not necessarily a focal point, but like in the mix with folks, like to have, to have a worthwhile offering to like inject into the system.

You know, like being little, I remember like, you know, like driving with my Nana to get corn. I'm sure that there was some, like, trade that precipitated that, you know, happening. But like I said, I feel like a lot of that was not super explicit. It's just the way that Appalachians and country folks and agrarians are.

Like, you know, we can romanticize the life way, but there's a lot of hard parts about it. And if your car breaks down and you can't get it to a shop or you can't afford to get it to a shop, it's really nice if one of your neighbors knows how to work on cars. Or, it's really nice if your neighbor has an implement that you might only need to use one time a year.

Or, yeah, you know, you can put all your tobacco in the same barn you know what I mean? Like, I think that kind of stuff is, is just kind of part of the life way. It's fun to see it be kind of revitalized. I think there's been some splintering of our communities, and I, it's certainly not intentional, like people want to share, they want to be engaged with each other in ways that is, that are reciprocal. But just some of the pieces have kind of like fallen out of the picture. And I think food probably plays into that. I think when most of our families were growing food, there was more of a need for trading and resource sharing and, and bartering. And that culture lives on in the

South. Like, the idea, the essence of it lives on, but without that, like, food production piece being common, like, commonplace for everybody, a lot of the infrastructure around that barter system is just kind of like, ehh, you know.

It's really interesting. I hadn't, I hadn't gotten to that kernel of thought myself, but yeah, like, popping up the farm in this small neighborhood is now, like, you know, Red will come and mow for us and we give him produce or, you know, like there's just, there's just different ways that it's kind of, it's been useful. It makes it very easeful to be in relationship with folks when there is, there's exchange.

[00:38:12] **Chris Keeve:** And one more question, actually, you mentioned that the potlicker was presented to you as medicine, so I was wondering, like, what other kinds of medicine?

[00:38:20] **Shelby Johnson:** So, interestingly, my grandma Elliot was a city girl. She was not super connected to land stewardship. She was not a gardener. She, you know, kept roses and flowers and things like that. But for her, medicine was food. It was the food that she cooked. It was the way that she cooked it. So she wasn't tending plant medicines in the same way. But for her, you know, the way that you stayed healthy was eating your greens, the way that you didn't get cold and sick is eating the greens and drinking the pot liquor and eating at home and eating together also was, was part of the medicine of it.

So I think some of that is downstream ancestral memory. And that is part of, it feels like some of the healing work, you know, taking it one step further. Like, yes, the food is medicine, but also the way that we steward the food is part of the medicine too. So, I, I do know that my grandma, Elliot, did not really use pharmaceuticals.

She, I mean, even to the extent that when she passed away, she had cancer and she refused, she did not want treatment, whether that's, you know, distrust of the medical system or whatever for her, it really came from, from food. So that was, that was the basis of it.

And I think eating the way that her parents taught her to eat was the way that she taught my dad and his sisters and his brothers to eat and that still maintains. My dad still says the same things that she said. That food is medicine and that we have to, you know, remember the way that she cooked and why she did it and um, not eating out of the house and stuff like that.

So my dad is, he is like the keeper of the recipes and the cooking and, yeah, I think he, he's the one that keeps all of grandma's, like her physical recipes and stuff, but like the way that you cook cornbread, the way that you make it, the way that you cook the greens.

For example, here's one, I, I told my dad, I was like, Hey, I got this like instant pot thing, it's crazy. You can cut the greens, put it in there and they're done in 15 minutes. And he's like, why would you do? I'm like, it's so much faster. And he's like, it doesn't matter if it's faster though. Like it's something about the way that they cook slow and they like break down and the process. Like, I don't know if grandma would have wanted you to be doing that. And I'm like, she had nine kids. Maybe she would have liked some extra time. And he was like, no, like the process is part

of the medicine. So yeah, even little stuff like that, I think is it's, it's a memory and it takes. Um, some back and forth to, to dig it out, but.

[00:41:08] **Chris Keeve:** So your father keeps the recipes. Have, have they been passed down to you?

[00:41:12] **Shelby Johnson:** Not yet. not yet. I am able to look at them and maybe take pictures of them. But no, my dad is very open. Like he'll, he'll teach you and show you. But I think there was a lot of pain for my dad in my grandma's transition, so he is, he holds really tight to a lot of her, her things, and I think the recipes specifically are, were part of who she was, so I, I don't imagine that he'll, I don't imagine that he'll be ready to part with those for a while.

[00:41:45] **Chris Keeve:** Are there any recipes that you maybe look forward stewarding?

[00:41:51] **Shelby Johnson:** You know, this is, this is a, an, yes. And there's a funny story there about families and blended families. I remember going to my grandma's house, my grandma Elliot, and she made a neck bone soup and it was, oh, it was so good. Like the, even as like a young person, like you can tell the complexity of a really good soup and it comes from like the bones and the simmering and it was not even a complex soup, like I think it was really just like whatever, the neck bone, the scrap pieces of the chicken, the broth and onions, like I don't really think it wasn't like maybe there was some other like whatever she had tossed into it, but it was not a complex soup and I was obsessed with that soup.

I loved it and I think for her, it was, like I said, just kind of like an end of week grab what's, you know, ready to be cooked and turn it into a soup. And, um, I went to my Nana's house in Asheville and she asked me what I wanted to eat. And I was like, can you make me a neck bone soup? And my Nana tried. She could not make it. It was just not, it was like, she put noodles in it. And it was just like, brah. And she was a great cook in her own right and in her own, you know, expression of her lineage, but she could not replicate a neck bone soup. And so maybe, maybe I'm going to dig through and see. But like something like that, I don't even know if she would have it written down.

You know, I think that that was just like part of being a mom and a grandma to a very large household and knowing how to make something good from what's left, then I'll probably have to, I'll probably have to experiment. But I would like to dig around and see if that one's written down somewhere.

[00:43:37] **Chris Keeve:** What was it about that soup?

[00:43:38] **Shelby Johnson:** I'm like wondering, like, I'm like, was, I don't think I was even like sick. You know sometimes when you're sick or feeling kinda low, like, something maybe marginal will just really hit. I don't think that that was it. I think it was like, really the like I'm like, was it something about like rote, like simmering it with, I think it might've been the bones or something.

Like it was so deep tasting, like it didn't have like a shallow, and it wasn't like overly salted. It just had like a nourishing kind of feel to it that like when people like joke, like, Oh, you can tell this was made with love. Like, no, it actually like imbued me with nourishment in a way that I still really remember.

And I don't know if it's also, like, we don't really, like, if you go to the store and get chicken, you're not, not a lot of people are breaking down a whole chicken and using all of its parts anymore. Like, people make a chicken soup, like, they'll use, like, thighs or something, but, like, really roasting it with the bones and the marrow and the fat and all of that is something that I think we've kind of, like, shied away from in a lot of senses, but, yeah, I think that there's probably something about that.

[00:44:50] **Chris Keeve:** Is there's anything for the past hour, that is sitting in your head, things that have come to mind.

[00:44:56] **Shelby Johnson:** I'm really enjoying, like, sitting in the memory of both of my grandmothers. You know, we've talked about my parents and my papaw and my mom and my dad. But it's been really, really, really beautiful to kind of remember them and honor them and sit, specifically, my nana and my grandma Elliot. It's been really beautiful. I can feel their love in it. It makes me really happy. They've both transitioned. I miss them a lot, but I feel them very strong. Thank you.

[00:45:32] **Chris Keeve:** Do you have any final thoughts?

[00:45:34] **Shelby Johnson:** It's been beautiful.