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Interview with Professor Thomas Turgeon

Molly McNamara

Thomas Turgeon

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Accession Number: ELFS-MAM-A020701.A
Researcher's Name: Molly McNamara
Event: Interview with Professor Thomas Turgeon
Place: Turgeons' home at 20739 Newcastle Road , Gambier, OH 43022
Co-workers present: none

Note: Tape one side A did not record.

Synopsis of first part of interview:

His mother grew up in a family that had a cook, so she never cooked much growing up. Then she married his father. He was a French teacher and they went to Europe on sabbatical. She wanted to learn French cooking and had to learn French fast, and she took French cooking classes at the Cordon Bleu in Paris. Her father was a food wholesaler, so she had been around food a lot but not cooking. She learned how to cook in Paris. Then after World War II when many Americans were coming back from Europe, one of his father's publishers approached her. He thought that because of these returning Americans there would be a market for French cuisine. The publisher asked if she would translate a French cookbook. She wrote *T'Aunt Marie* and translated the Joy of Cooking into English (?).

The book had a good market, so she did much other translating and editing. Her career went on for about forty years. The kinds of recipes she wrote were largely based on what she had learned in France. Professor Turgeon recalled that he was the guinea pig for her experiments, as she learned what to do with these things. Some books were original, such as one she wrote with his brother, who is the president of a wine-tasting society. When asked how she went about creating her own recipes, he said, "improvisation happens all the time." She did a great deal of research for some of her books, for example, with *The New Larousse Gastronomique*. It was an encyclopedia of cooking written in the 1920s in French, a reference for French cooks and restaurants. She was in charge of doing an edition for the U.S. and England with a coeditor from England. It was a sort of standard reference, and she had to do a great deal of research, for example on how to prepare a roasted camel's hump, which is obviously something we don't often encounter here. In all, she wrote about forty or fifty cookbooks, including the ones she edited, and of these about ten or twelve of them were her own. She also helped put together Martha Stewart's book when Martha Stewart was just starting out. And various organizations would call her up. She did a cookbook for Playboy, for example. Something they published between editions.

Side B:

Thomas Turgeon: It was called the Playboy Gourmet, okay. So she had to go work with Hugh Hefner (sp?) to put a book together that was a cookbook. It had nothing to do with anything else about it. You know these kinds of things happened, so she had lots of adventures working with other people putting together, putting together various, various books for that. But then she did as I say about a dozen of these that were autobiographical. Including one she did with my brother which was an earlier book she

had done and she rewrote it twenty years later with my brother doing the wine chap...section. So it was those kinds of thing happening.

Margaret Turgeon: The Murder on the Menu.

TT: Murder on the Menu. She won...that's a good book. Yeah, she won the, the Edgar Award. An Edgar is a sort of Oscar that detective writers, people who write detective novels. Every year they give out an Edgar a sort of statuette of Edgar Allen Poe. You have...she won it one year because somebody wrote a book that she did the cooking for, called Murder on the Menu in which there were lots of recipes in the book. So she got a, she got an award as a writer of detective stories, which she never was. (I laugh). The Edgar was kind...(laugh) you're good to remember that. I had forgotten. But, you know, she had, she had lots of things like that. And so...and all of that grows out of this fundamental notion of, of you have an idea of where you're headed, you have idea of what you're working with, and you have ways of working in which you work.....(undecipherable) sort of like a jazz musician playing piano, you, you cook. And then you write it down and put it in a reproducible way, and that's what cookbook writing is about.

Molly McNamara: Um, I realized that I haven't even asked you this. What exactly is your mother's name?

TT: Charlotte Turgeon.

MM: Charlotte? S-H er C-H

TT: C-H-A-R-L-O-T-T-E.

MM: OK. Um and how is it possible to get a hold of her books now? Are they sold in

TT: Uh, well, she hasn't published any for, for... I mean she's 88 or 89. She hasn't published any for I guess the last one was about...when was the last book come out, I can't remember?

MT: (from other room) I can't remember either.

TT: Um probably fifteen years ago or something, so they tend to go out of print because people publish an awful lot of books.

MT: She's done cooking classes.

TT: But she's been running cooking classes. She doesn't do that much anymore, but she did run them for fifteen years or so out of her kitchen. She's also a classmate and old friend of Julia Child. They keep a lot...do a lot together. You know, social...on a social basis. They went to college together, so and, and uh so, you know, that's part of that.

And she's taken tours of people to France on cooking tours and that kind of stuff. She's, she's a pretty remarkably busy lady.

MM: I guess so.

TT: So she does lots of stuff like that. But now most of them are in people's collections rather than...every so often somebody will say, hey I found a copy of your book, will you autograph it, will you do something to it, that kind of thing because they've found it in a bookstore somewhere, a second-hand bookstore. So it's a...the cookbook business is an ephemeral business, with a few exceptions. The Larousse is still around although it's been reissued with a new editor in a sense.

MM: I'm sorry what was that again?

TT: The Larousse, the big encyclopedia I was telling you about is around although as I say it's been reissued.

MM: Um, you said that you cook as well? (page turning)

TT: Yes, I...as a hobby

MT: You should talk about Michel at some point.

TT: I should talk about Michel. Um, one of the more fun adventures of my last sabbatical was that there was a chef we've gotten to know from France whose name was Michel Lecont who was coming over as a guest of my mother. She'd gotten to know him...young, younger man absolutely brilliant, brilliant cook, just a brilliant cook who was coming over to do some charity dinners in America in the winter when his restaurant in Europe is closed down. And he needed somebody to, he didn't speak any English, and he needed somebody to help him translate and we were working in kitchens and various restaurants in Massachusetts, places like that. So I spent three weeks charging around cooking with this guy. Absolute breakneck speed. I was simply exhausted at the end of it cooking dinners for a hundred fifty people like that with, with local, local people in these restaurants and local friends of people in these restaurants coming in, who are professional cooks, coming in to do, to do, to help him out. But of course they didn't speak any French and he didn't speak any English, so I was sort of the tennis net across which this game was played. And that was...that was a wonderful time. I had a very good time learning about a *ton* of stuff, just absolute ton of stuff, and had a wonderful, wonderful learning kind of boot camp by working with this guy because I was cooking while I was trying to, trying to figure out what everybody was trying to say to each other. And uh, so that was a very fabulous learning, learning time, learning time for me. So that's what she was talking about. Anyway we cooked a lot of stuff. And learned a lot of how cooking works by watching this guy go, and I've also visited his kitchen in France three or four times, and so...I've watched him cook and watched him do things there which is a wild study, so good. It was fun. Anyway, that's one thing that I do. Yes... I cook a, I cook a lot as a, as a kind of hobby.

MM: What do you enjoy about cooking?

TT: Well, I guess I'm good at that improvisational business. I enjoy the idea that I've got some stuff and I've now learned how to do some things at least, I mean what some techniques are. And, and the kind of fun of applying the techniques to whatever's lying on the table and coming up with something is, is a very, you know, gratifying and inventive thing to do when it works. And as you do it more often, it works more often. (Laugh). So it's, so it's, so you have lots of disasters along the way but that's part of it. And so it's, it's kind of the fun of improvising.

MM: Um, do you often use your mother's recipes?

TT: I don't use recipes all that much.

MM: You don't use recipes?

TT: I mean, you use recipes in the sense of you can get ideas from recipes. You use recipes in the sense you can get senses of proportion. When I was working with Michel, I noticed that his cookbook consisted of absolutely nothing but lists of ingredients in proportion by weight. He knew what to do with them, but he'd have to remember what proportions were which were. You know, numerical things that he would work out on a scale. In Europe you don't use cups and teaspoons and stuff. It's all done by weight. So, he would work everything out by weight, and he would have all those mathematical, you know relationships between ingredients worked out, you know, just to remind him what they were. But once he had those numbers down, that's all he needed. And um, so you, you, you know, you look up proportions and look up relationships and you look up, you look up things, ideas of what things you might do. But, after a while what happens is the recipes become repetitive in terms of how to do it because, because there are basic ways to, to put things together. And once you, once you learn those techniques and sensations that allow you to tell how you're doing, by practice and experience, it's, it's all empirical. Um, then, then you, then you're free to do that. So, so for the most part, except for, except for, you know, proportions or reading somebody else's stuff to say oh there's an idea I hadn't thought of putting that in the bath. Let me try that and see what I come up with. So, so, ideas and proportions are the two things, you know, you get from recipes and, and, but, but most of the time we, we either do stuff we've done a number of times just because there's a particular call for it, particularly Peggy of course...

MM: Right.

TT: ...because she's got lots of repeating to do. And um...or we look for variations on those themes and just go with it. So, I don't think...I don't really use many recipes in normal...very often, which is odd with all these cookbooks lying around. (Both laugh). We've got shelves and shelves of cookbooks, but we...they stay on the shelves most of the time.

MM: Do you own a lot of your mother's cookbooks?

TT: Yeah, I own quite a few of them. Not a lot of them, but quite a few. There's one, two, three, four, I don't know how many are there. (He gets up and walks over to the shelf to pick out some of the books and throws them down on the counter as he talks). These are both sort of autobiographical ones. This is one she did for somebody else. Just working with the chefs at Williamsburg to write a book. This was one the publisher had her do, which is how to be a cook when you're cooking for fifty people or more. Umm, this is one that grew out of our summerhouse in Maine, where we do a lot of cooking together. And, and so on. Here, here's one she had by the Saturday Evening Post to do because the editor had a...was excited about cabbages, would you write me a book about cabbages....

MM: Oh.

TT: So she...you know that kind of thing is what, is what happens, and that's, that's how the pile gets bigger. (Laugh).

MM: Would I possibly be able to borrow one or two of these?

TT: Oh sure. Umm, I'm trying to think of...which, which sort of thing do you need? I'll tell you wh...(he walks over into the living room area and pulls out a large book)...this as I say is the, is the biggie. This is the one that's on the New York Times. It was really crazy. They didn't...they thought they'd sell, you know, a few copies to a few pros and wouldn't that be nice. And it turned out to be a kind of fashionable present in 1968 or whenever it came out and everybody had to buy it. And so it became...it got on the New York Times bestseller list, which is really unusual. Umm, but uh, there's that one. Anyway, I don't know what kind of thing would suit your purposes best.

MM: Umm, I'd actually be interested in one of the autobiographical ones.

TT: Autobiographical ones? OK, well here's, here's an autobiographical one.

MM: And by autobiographical do you mean that they're the ones she wrote herself? Or is there...

TT: No I mean that they're the ones she wrote herself based on um things that, that...(Margaret come in and says something undecipherable)...uh...let's see if I can do this...Oh yeah, they, well, yeah... this is the one that was rewritten with my brother doing a part.

MM: Um. Does your brother um write books as well?

TT: He's written a couple. Umm-hmm. He was a restaurant critic for a newspaper in...for the Washington Star for some time. When there was such a thing. Yeah this will probably tell you the most.

MM: OK.

TT: That is the one that was rewritten from this one. This was written in the fifties and that was written in the seventies. Umm, but that also contains my brother's thing, so it could give you some of that.

MM: Could I borrow this one as well?

TT: Sure, sure, sure.

MM: Thank you so much. Um, I guess my other question was, do you have a favorite recipe that you'd like to share with us?

TT: Uh, no. As I say it's a process. Oh... it's a, it's a process rather than a particular product. So my favorite thing is to get up to my neck in the process and see if...what comes out the other end that does that.

MM: (interrupting) Well, what is your favorite kind of thing to make?

TT: It, basically, it's French cooking, basically after that...

MM: French cooking.

TT: You know, again that's what I was brought up with, that's what I like to do, and that's what I'm most excited about, and that's what seems to be, you know, to me the most... the things I'm most curious about. But, that's an area and a set of techniques and a set of materials to work from, which is pretty wide and pretty sophisticated and pretty interesting and pretty, you know, has all kinds of variations. So that's why I'm interested in it because it's such a rich field and because it's...they have such, you know, such a rich time thinking about it and (undecipherable). That that's why, that's why doing that kind of thing.... but really it's that, it's playing that game that's fun, rather than... It's like asking, you know a tennis player what shot do you like best. I don't know. Whatever works at the moment. But it's the game, the game that, that's intriguing.

MT: This is a good example of the, the duck with olives.

TT: (sigh) Oh yeah.

MT: That you were traveling in France, you had it there. Tell that little story.

MM: Well last spring I was in France with my brother and my mother. And we went to a restaurant in Paris, which has been there for a hundred years. And one of the things they do in Paris and this restaurant famous for is a kind of duck with olives. So, the dish runs out...so we ordered it and, and it's interesting because it comes very, you know, very...it sometimes comes with...you can't find the duck. It comes with, in just like this heap of

olives and just (undecipherable). And is actually delicious and is actually surprising and we had a wonderful evening at this place. And so we all sat around and said let's figure out how to make it. So we did, and, and it's not the same exactly, but it's a variation of it and it's nice and it's a good dish. And we've done it a couple times for friends and so on. That kind of pursuit. Can we come up with our notion of it. Can we go in that direction, can we find out... but you have to find a place where you can buy olives in, you know (he gestures a huge portion). You can't go and buy little things of cocktail olives or you'll go broke buying all those little bottles. So you have to find a place where you can buy lots of olives in bulk and do that kind of stuff. Well okay, it's that sort of, of puzzle, solving that puzzle that is...that's fun. And uh, and that is intriguing and turns out to be not difficult. That doesn't mean it's not good. It's good eating but it's very simple cooking. And it's just an idea putting those things together in this way. You have these ingredients, you have this process, let's see how you put them together. What can I say? We figured out what we thought the ingredients were and we figured out what the process would be we think and, and we might not be right, but we came up with something that was, that was also fun. (undecipherable) So that's what happened.

MM: Do you have the...what you came up with written down anywhere?

TT: Yeah, I do as a matter of fact. I have to go get it off my computer, but I can do that. When, when you're talking with Peggy, I'd be happy to do so.

MM: Sure, that would be great. Cuz we're, we're actually going to be trying to collect different recipes. Everybody in the group is going to.

TT: OK.

MM: And then, we're gonna publish a recipe with each of the things, but then they're also gonna collect them for later issues of the Mt. Vernon News.

TT: Sure, fine.

MM: That would be great.

TT: That's fine.

MM: Umm, I think those are all the questions...oh, actually no I had one more question: you mentioned a lot about French cooking, but I was wondering if you had taken any classes or done any...had any experience in other cooking....

TT: (interrupting) Well, Peggy and I both taught cooking for seventeen years.

MM: Oh really?

TT: We taught it in Columbus at a cooking school run by a friend who's name is Betty Rossbottom (sp?) who writes for Bon Appetit magazine and does things like that. She ran

this cooking school in Columbus for a long time before she moved to Massachusetts, by odd coincidence moved to my hometown where my mother lives, and my mother and Betty have done stuff together...

MM: Mm-hmm.

TT: ...since they moved there...on occasion. And Betty ran this school in Lazarus, in the department store in Columbus and she'd have us down there three or four times a year to do cooking demonstrations and various kinds of things based on whatever we were doing at the time, and again we'd make up recipes for that.

MM: Mm-hmm.

TT: The cooking schools we've been to have again all been, other than as teachers, have been in France. We've been to the La Varenne School and Peggy spent a week there and I visited various demonstrations at La Varenne school in Paris and now that's moved down to a chateau in Burgundy. And we've been to the Ritz-Escoffier School, and as a child I was taken to my mother to the Cordon Bleu, where she went to school. So, and I remember watching them cook there for...on a number of occasions. I didn't go as a student, obviously. I was thirteen, but I, but I certainly was glad to go, you know, watch them do their stuff because it's very entertaining with these guys when they're good, they're just wonderful to watch. So um, that was, then that's the kind of stuff we've done to get started and learn some stuff. And we did the same thing everybody else did: we watched Julia on television. It was brilliant. We watched, you know, Jacques Pépin on television and he's a fabulous technician (undecipherable). And we're trying to pick up stuff all the time because again that's part of the fun. That's part of the process.

MM: OK. Well those are all the questions I had. Did you have anything you wanted to add?

TT: OK, no, no. If that suits you, I'll get you, I'll get you that recipe.

MM: OK.

End of tape.

Other notes: The cooking school that he and Peggy taught at in Columbus was called La Belle Poume.

