

Sharon Rollins

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Interviewer: Emily Hilliard

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Sharon Rollins grew up in Charleston, West Virginia and moved to Dallas, TX when she was thirty years old. Upon retirement in 2010, she moved to Helvetia, West Virginia and has since become involved in a number of community projects. She manages the Ramp Supper, serves as treasurer for the Helvetia Community Fair, and volunteers at the Hutte Restaurant.

This interview is part of a series of interviews conducted with foodways practitioners in Helvetia, West Virginia, as part of the Helvetia Foodways Oral History Project in partnership with the Southern Foodways Alliance. Learn more: <https://www.southernfoodways.org/oral-history/helvetia-west-virginia/>

Transcriber Note: EH: Emily Hilliard, SR: Sharon Rollins

Interjections denoted in []'s and blue.

00:00

EH: Okay. So could you just introduce yourself and tell me where you're from and how long you've lived in Helvetia?

SR: I am Sharon Rollins, I'm originally from Charleston, West Virginia, but when I was thirty I moved to Dallas, Texas and lived there for thirty years. And then when I retired I moved to Helvetia and that will be almost six years ago.

EH: And what brought you to Helvetia?

SR: When I came home in the summertime to visit my family, my sister-in-law Diane went to college with Betty Biggs who's from Helvetia. So on my vacation as soon as we got to Charleston the next day, we'd hit Helvetia/Pickens. And we'd spend all of our vacation here. So I took beautiful pictures and put them on my bulletin board at work and all I dreamed about was retiring and moving to Helvetia.

EH: And what was it aside from the beauty that drew you here?

SR: The peace and quiet. When you live in a big city it gets to you. All the dirt and the noise, especially... I always lived in an apartment complex and they were the worst. So all I wanted was quiet. And quiet is what I got.

EH: [laughs] What's your home like now?

SR: Hm?

EH: What's your home like now?

SR: Just peace. New life. I mean, I didn't... I felt like I really started living for the first time in my life when I retired and moved here.

EH: Wow. So, were you already kind of part of the community before you moved here? Did you know people?

SR: Just Betty. But then once I got here, I decided to jump in with both feet and started volunteering for everything. And Heidi Arnett who worked at the Post Office knew... heard that I was a hard worker so she had me... fill out an application for the Post Office so I became her assistant for a couple years at the post office.

EH: Okay.

SR: And then I started doing volunteer work at the Hutte. I would come down and do dishes just to volunteer.

EH: For free?

SR: For free.

EH: Wow. Do you cook there too?

SR: Oh not too much. I prep, but I don't do the cooking.

2:20

EH: What other roles do you have?

SR: I'm in the Farm Women—I'm the treasurer there. I'm the treasurer for the Fair Association, I work with the fair... What else do I do? Just anything that needs to be done.

EH: Mmhm. Could you tell me a little bit about what role food plays in the community?

SR: I think it plays a lot especially with the Hutte being here. You know, that's what draws people to this, you know, I think. You know, the beauty and the quiet and there's a few things to see but I really think it's the Hutte that draws people in.

EH: Yeah, yeah. I mean... it's definitely one of the best restaurants in the state.

SR: Mmhm. Especially Debbie's bread. Her homemade bread is the best.

EH: We were watching her—she just pulled it out of the oven when we were having dinner

SR: Uh-huh.

EH: And Dave [Interviewer's note: Dave Whipp, who retired to Helvetia and runs the town's website] kept teasing her—"can we get a slice of that?"

SR: And watching her brush all that butter—oh my goodness. You can just feel it soaking in there.

EH: I know. I was like—oh okay, so that's your secret!

SR: Plus, and I've eaten salads *all over*. And that Morgan Henalie salad to me and the house dressing is the best salad I've eaten. New York, Dallas, any place. That's one of the best salads I've ever eaten.

EH: Uh-huh. Yeah, um, I had that last night. It's really good. Um, and, uh, so basically people have those recipes in their head—Debby has it in her head.

SR: Mmhm. Yeah.

EH: Have you learned any of 'em?

SR: The applesauce and the sauerkraut. And it's fun making the sauerkraut because you make it in a giant bowl... and you mix it with your hands.

EH: Nice.

SR: It's easier—you know they always say on the Food Network that a cook's best tools are your hands.

EH: Yeah!

SR: And it's so fun getting... mixing all of that. It feels good to work with your hands.

EH: Yeah. So what's in the sauerkraut?

SR: That's a secret! [they laugh]

EH: [laughs] Alright. Sugar?

SR: Yeah, a lot of sugar.

EH: I remember...I think Clara [Lehman] told me about some secret ingredient.

SR: Secret ingredient I think is in the applesauce.

EH: Okay. Maybe that was what it was. Pineapple?

SR: No. It's something very weird.

EH: Clove?

SR: No.

EH: Okay. I'm not gonna guess it. I'm not gonna be able to guess it.

SR: [laughs]

EH: So what's your role at the Ramp Supper?

SR: Well I took over last year. They thought about just doing away with it. And one of our teenagers said, if you do away with this, what am I ever gonna bring my kids back to some day. So Cece [Interviewer's note: Cecilia Smith] and I from the Farm Women decided to back her, and we talked to the hall and then we decided we'd go year by year. So some of the people who have been doing it all their lives were just tired of it [Mmhm]. So I said I'd step in and do what I could. Course they come and help me but, you know, I do—you know, the hall orders the ramps but I make sure they all get cleaned and processed and ready and I do all the grocery shopping.

EH: Wow. So where do the ramps come from?

SR: Somewhere here in the hills of West Virginia! [Emily laughs] You know, I don't know where the guys dig. We have several guys that dig for us. And they know where their ramp patches are [Uh-huh]. Now we used to go ramp digging when I was a kid. My birthday dinner was always cooked by the creek while we were cooking ramps and it was done over an open campfire.

6:10

EH: When's your birthday?

SR: April fourth.

EH: I'm April twenty-sixth. Ramp season.

SR: Ramp season. So my family—my uncle and his family and my mom and my family, we'd spend our, we'd go find a ramp patch. And let me tell you—they are always straight up a hill.

EH: [laughs]

SR: I don't know how many hills that I have rolled down. So. Even though I just started here doing ramps, as a teenager, I knew ramps. My dad's from Richwood [oh yeah] and they had one of the first ramp suppers. So he is always... he would pick enough to clean, to put in the freezer so that he could get ramps all year long.

EH: Wow. And so when you would have that dinner, was it the classic beans, cornbread...

SR: Beans, cornbread, fried potatoes, ramps.

EH: Ham?

SR: I don't know whether we took so much ham, we might have fried some bacon.

EH: Yeah. Yeah.

SR: Yeah. To have the bacon grease to fry the ramps in and then just eat bacon.

EH: Yeah. Is your cornbread sweet?

SR: Yes.

EH: We were talking about this yesterday.

SR: I have to have sweet cornbread.

EH: How much sugar do you put in per pan?

7:19

SR: Oh maybe half a cup. Just enough to give it... you don't want it like a cake. But you want it to have a little sweetness to it [yeah]. I think the sweetness balances the savory from the ramps and the beans and the potatoes. A little sweet to go along with the savory I always liked.

EH: Yeah, 'cause everything else is pretty salty.

SR: Mhm. So you have to have something to balance.

EH: Yeah. Um, so could you, you walk me through the process of all the work you do to get ready?

SR: Okay, first of all you call and order the ramps. And then when they come in, you call everybody and say the ramps are *in*.

EH: [laughs]

SR: We're gonna start working Monday morning. So usually Betty, and myself, and Dan, we sort 'em in trays, you know, as to where you can grab 'em easy. And the first thing we do is hose 'em down. To get all the sticks and it, and it takes some of that skin off. And then we have people in the kitchen who cut off the roots. And then we have other people who you know, start chopping them up and boiling them to get 'em done. And then we put them in trays to cool. And then the next morning we put 'em in freezer bags and get 'em frozen.

EH: Okay.

So when I took over since I'm retired, I said we're gonna work retired person's hours. So I know people have stuff to do at home. So we usually didn't start until like eleven o'clock in the morning. And we could get a good day's work by five. We worked four days to clean the first thirty bushel, we worked three days to clean the second thirty bushel. You know, people come and go as they want, you know, we don't ask anybody to kill their selves working. So we had good help coming in and out all day long.

EH: Mmhm. So sixty bushels?

SR: We ordered sixty bushels this year.

EH: Do kids get involved?

SR: If they want to, yeah. In fact on Thursdays, when we're cleaning ramps, on Thursdays the 4-H... that's when they meet. So we call the 4-H leader and have her—the school bus drops all the 4-H kids down here on Thursday afternoons after school. And we have them sit out chairs, sweep, mop, the girls help do all the... you know, clean all the dishes because they've been setting for a year. We taught them how to sort beans. That was one of the first jobs I had in my mom's kitchen was sortin' beans, so we taught the girls how to sort beans. And they have come down before and you know, helped clean ramps. So when we can we... I always say you have to use all your resources [Mmhm]. So just call all the 4-H kids and that way they get their community hours in and we get help [Yeah]. And they have been a big help.

EH: That's great. So, once the ramps are frozen, then what's the next...

SR: On Friday, before the ramp supper, all the men get together out here... see this firepit? [Mmhm] And they have a great big pot. They boil all the potatoes.

And then we have ordered ham from IGA, Tabbard ham, so we cut it, you know, in manageable pieces, get it ready.

You know, and of course the beans have already been sorted but we put them in pans and get 'em on to soak.

And we do the ham, and we take the ramps out that day to start defrosting. And then on, um, Saturday mornings we have to grind all the cabbage for the slaw.

We have to peel the cooled potatoes and slice them up.

And... we come down early and get the beans on to cooking. Cook those early so you can put 'em in pots to store, cause you need all your burners... going to fry the ramps. And then we start the potatoes—we have a big grill to do the potatoes on. And let's see, the beans are done, we do the ramps, we do the potatoes, we make the coleslaw.

EH: What's in the coleslaw?

11:33

SR: It's not a creamy coleslaw, it's oil and vinegar, guess salt, pepper, and celery seed. It's more of a clear dressing than the creamy dressing. And then we just start getting the roasters, you know getting the ham on and getting that good and warm, and the roasters on. And then...

EH: How many pounds of ham?

SR: Oh, uh, 240, sixty bushel of ramp, of forty-five pounds of beans, about a hundred pounds of cabbage. We've tried to way... scale down because the ramp suppers used to be...there'd be lines down the road.

12:15

So we've scaled back *some* because a couple years, people wouldn't come, because now like, Elkins has Ramps and Rails on the same day so our numbers have shrunk and we're trying to get the perfect balance of how much to cook.

EH: Right. How many skillets do you have?

SR: Oh I bet you ten, fifteen.

EH: So those are just going.

SR: Mmhm.

EH: Um... do you think that's why people don't come out as much because of other competing events?

SR: I don't know so much that or whether young people don't know ramps like some of the older people do like my dad's generation.

12:58

EH: Mm. So maybe there's some sort of a memory involved?

SR: Mmhm.

EH: Hm. That's interesting.

SR: And you know, like we're trying to get ready to make the cornbread, you can barely find real cornmeal in the store. The shelf where... I mean there's lots of flour but when you start looking for the shelf with the cornmeal it's... you know, cause people use Jiffy mix or you know, just something they can open a pouch, add an egg and milk, where we make our cornbread totally from scratch.

EH: Mmhm. Yeah, I've noticed that at a lot of stores you can only buy like a tiny box of cornmeal.

SR: Right. And you used to could buy ten, twenty pound bags.

EH: It doesn't take that much more to add the powder...

SR: No. By the time you do your flour and your cornmeal and stuff, it's just the same as opening up a box of Jiffy mix and the taste to me is a hundred times better to make it totally from scratch.

EH: Yeah. Do you use bacon grease?

SR: Yes. Except when I use... sometimes Dare to be Square [Interviewer's note: Dare to be Square is a traveling square dancing workshop/event that was held in Helvetia for two years] comes here and for their mostly vegetarian, I just substitute oil. But the bacon grease does give it a little more flavor.

EH: I think so. Do you heat it... so you heat it up in the pan first and then put the batter in so it gets crispy?

SR: No, we put um, the bacon grease actually in the mix.

EH: Ah, okay. Got it. Because you're probably making it in big sheet pans, not like a skillet.

SR: Right.

14:34

EH: What about desserts?

SR: We ask all the ladies in town to make desserts.

EH: Are there favorites?

SR: Oh jeez, just what...you have to look.

EH: [laughs]

SR: I know the Hutte always makes good cakes because they have that... they make their cakes with a starter.

EH: Ooooh! So it's... like yeasted.

SR: Yeah, it's more like a sour... you know, like a sourdough starter?

EH: Yeah—that must be how they make the peach cobbler. [talking over each other]

SR: So I always try to look, try to look for... for the Hutte's cake.

EH: Okay. And what do they usually make... or how could I look for that? [laughs]

SR: I don't know! I'll have to look at it, I know they sent it over but I don't know where it is in the multitude. And we had one lady who made homemade peanut butter cookies, there's you know, a lot of nice looking desserts in there. Somebody made a pecan pie...

EH: Mmhm. Are there people who make the same thing every year?

SR: Not really, they just... make what, what they feel like they can make at the time.

EH: Um, and, uh, what about drinks?

SR: Lemonade, coffee, and water.

EH: Sounds good. Do you get people coming back, do you see people who come just for the ramp supper?

SR: Yes. In fact somebody—Betty... some gentleman and lady just drove up a little while ago while we were eating lunch and I think they come almost every year.

EH: Okay. Um, do you have family that comes?

SR: My sister-in-law's in there working. My brother can't because he's helping his son build a house. And Lucas works during the week so on the weekends, my brother and Lucas have built a whole house almost by themselves [wow]. And it is adorable. It's gonna be a cute house at the farm.

16:30

EH: Where's that?

SR: Right outside of Charleston. They have a... farm out there.

EH: Oh, okay. Cool. Um, oh, so since moving here have you adopted some of the Swiss recipes?

SR: Not really. When you cook by... for yourself, I just make a pot of something and eat off of it for a week. It's sad to say! [laughs] You know.

EH: Yeah. But, you know at...

SR: Well, I do make rustis.

EH: What's that?

SR: The potato cakes. Where you shred the potatoes [okay] and fry 'em in butter in a cast iron skillet.

EH: Is that what you guys are making today?

SR: No. Today's just fried potatoes [okay]. These actually will stick together more like a cake [ah]. You know, like a potato cake [mmhm]. Like hash browns or something. But the Swiss call 'em rustis.

EH: Yeah.

SR: But they're more like a hash brown.

EH: Okay. How did you learn that?

SR: Watching Debbie cook at the Hutte.

EH: Okay.

SR: I mean, if I had to I could cook [at the Hutte]. I know what she does, so. Except for the bread making [yeah]. And sometimes I do go down on Mondays and watch her make bread.

EH: So is Debbie really the carrier of the recipes?

SR: I think so. Melissa knows 'em pretty much, but it's Debbie who does the bread.

EH: And what about Henry [Henry Rice]?

SR: Henry knows them.

EH: But none of them are written down?

SR: Not to my knowledge. I don't think so. But Debbie's been cooking there for so... long time.

EH: Yeah, Clara said that's why things didn't change when Eleanor died. Because...

SR: Mmhm. It was Debby. And Melissa works there a lot, I'm sure Melissa knows all the recipes too [Mmmhm]. [Um...] But a few of them might be in that little cookbook that they sell there? Some of the older ones. I know they use those. The rosette recipe that we used at Fasnacht is in that Helvetia cookbook [Transcriber's note: The cookbook is *Oppis Guet's vo Helvetia*, compiled from community recipes by Eleanor Mailloux in 1969 and still in print. It is an essential cookbook for most home cooks in Helvetia].

EH: Yeah, I've made some things out of there. I think I made the apple fritters out of there. [Mmhm]. That were good. Are there other community celebrations that involve food?

SR: Here?

EH: Yeah.

SR: No. We used to have a chicken supper but that went by the wayside. So that's how come Cece and I decided to back Morgan to try to keep the ramp suppers going. [Okay] So we'll do it for as long as we can.

EH: Um, was it successful last year?

SR: Yes. That's how come we're having one this year! [laughs]

EH: [laughs]

SR: Because the Hall [Helvetia Community Hall] and the Farm Women both made some good money.

EH: And what do the Farm Women fund? What sort of projects?

SR: We do the ramp supper, every once in a while Dare to Be Square comes here because we have such a good dance hall, we do that. So far that's all we do, but... if we need to do a fundraiser, we could put something together.

19:38

EH: Mmhm. What about the Agricultural Fair? So you're the treasurer for that?

SR: Yeah, I was just elected treasurer for that. The fair.

EH: Congrats.

SR: Thanks! [laughs]

EH: [laughs]

SR: I decided to take it because everyone else has so many jobs too and really, you know I'm busy—this one's in April so I won't be busy with that until September so that's a good pace. I have from April from September to rest.

EH: [laughs] So what does that entail, the Agricultural Fair?

SR: You just encourage people to bring crafts, your canned goods, any type of flowers that you've grown. Uh, you bring your produce, you know cucumbers, peppers, corn, potatoes, eggs. You just want people, especially young people to come and see what food's all about. Because our country is such a processed food eating bunch of people and I'm sure that's why we're all sick. We need to get more back to fresh produce, what the land produces, and eat real food instead of junk.

EH: Mmhm. Um, do you make anything for that?

SR: Uh, I've made banana bread and stuff like that to bring down. I bring crafts—I do a lot of counted cross stitch and crocheting. I'm more on the craft end than the agriculture end.

EH: Cool. Um, so what are some of the favorite canned goods?

SR: Oh, if you do your green beans right... and Betty's son Norm did one time green beans where in the jar—you know you saw some of 'em straight down perfect, some of 'em across. And the jar was—you didn't even want to open it up to eat it. It was just *beautiful*. And the canned grapes that people do, and then the grapes, you know, float and then you have the pretty colors. The berries. I mean it's all pretty to see the pretty red tomatoes, the green beans. Some people can vegetable soup, that's pretty, the yellow corn [yeah]. It's just nice to know, oh! I have produced all this food and I'm gonna put it in my pantry.

EH: Yeah! That's really nice. A good feeling.

SR: I know my mom and I when I was a teenager, you know, we'd go to a farmers' market and buy produce and we'd fill the garage shelves full of canned goods.

EH: Wow. What did you guys make?

SR: We did green beans, we did banana peppers, we did corn. Just carrots, anything. Peas if we could get enough peas.

EH: For the green beans are they pickled like dilly beans or...?

SR: No we just did regular green beans.

EH: Oh, I really like pickled stuff too.

SR: Yeah, we've done different... but not as much as just gettin' the green beans. We did pickles. You know we made dill pickles and stuff.

EH: Do people bring their wines to that too?

SR: Y-Yes.

EH: So there's kind of... a lot of wine makers in this...

SR: In this area, yeah.

EH: Why do you think that is?

SR: Cause they have access to their grape arbors.

23:05

And to me I think it's like a craft or a hobby.

EH: Yeah. Um, well, is there anything else you want to add about...

SR: Not that I can think of right now.

EH: Okay. Well thank you very much!

SR: You're welcome!

EH: Especially taking time out of the...

23:27

END OF TAPE