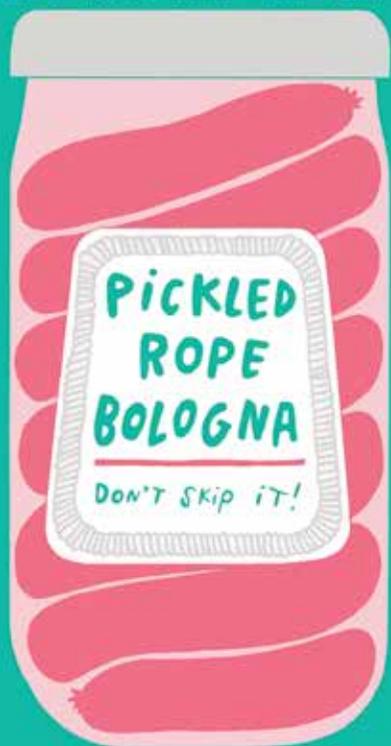


GRAVY

\$7



ISSUE #51

THE APPALACHIA ISSUE

A QUARTERLY FROM THE SOUTHERN FOODWAYS ALLIANCE



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COVER ART, Pickled Rope Bologna, by *Emily Wallace*.

PHOTO, THIS PAGE, Patrick County, Virginia, by *Kate Medley*.



EDITOR'S NOTE

HERE AT THE SFA we're devoting 2014 to the study of inclusion and exclusion at the Southern table. Inspired by the fiftieth anniversary of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, we are taking stock of the contemporary foodscape to ask who is welcomed, who is left out, and why. We'll ask questions about race, ethnicity, immigration, nutrition, food access, land tenure, and more.

In that spirit, I've chosen to kick off the *Gravy* year with an Appalachian issue. If you're not from the mountains, it can be easy to neglect this large and vital part of our region. To that end, stay tuned for more "UpSouth" oral histories, gathered by Sara Wood, coming later this spring.

A handful of stalwart SFA members, including Fred Sauceman of Tennessee and Ronni Lundy of Kentucky, have long been the experts we turn to when we examine the foodways of the Mountain South. For their important work over the years, we dedicate this issue to them. In this edition of *Gravy* I'm pleased to include established scholars alongside voices from an emerging generation. Several of these younger writers count pioneers like Sauceman and Lundy among their influences.

Lora Smith, a native of Eastern Kentucky, oversees communications for a rural-economic development foundation in North Carolina. On the weekends, she and her husband and their one-year-old daughter travel to Egypt, Kentucky, where they work on their own kind of rural development—transitioning a plot of land into a sustainable working farm. You'll also meet Courtney Balestier, who left her home state of West Virginia for the wilds of Brooklyn before she realized how deeply her Appalachian upbringing influenced her tastes and foodways. I'm grateful to Courtney, Lora, and each of the contributors to this issue for teaching me about their region, and I'm pleased to pass these stories on to you.

—Sara Camp Arnold

PHOTO, THIS PAGE, Mercier Orchards, Blue Ridge, Georgia,
by *Kate Medley*.



CONVERSATION

MY FAVORITE HILLBILLY INGREDIENTS

AN INTERVIEW WITH SEAN BROCK

Sean Brock earned his James Beard Award at the helm of McCrady's in Charleston, South Carolina, but learned to love cooking in the coalfields of Wise, Virginia.

What are some Appalachian ingredients that the rest of the South doesn't know about—or doesn't appreciate—but should? What makes them worth introducing to your pantry in Raleigh, or Memphis, or New Orleans?

PAW PAWS

I grew up eating these a lot when I was a child. My grandmother just loved them, and my momma despised them. You either love them or hate them. This is one of those ingredients that could really make a big difference in the Southern pantry right now. The flavor is very exotic—it reminds me of a cross between a papaya and a banana. We always went out and foraged them, but it seems like the trees are harder to find now. So many people have never tasted a paw paw. And that's just a shame. They are hands-down one of my favorite hillbilly ingredients. At McCrady's we like to make paw paw sherbet.

ELDERBERRIES

I used to have to pick these as a chore growing up in Wise County, Virginia. My family would turn them into wine, which I was allowed to drink. And my grandmother made an amazing jam out of them. Since the late-summer season was so short and picking them was so labor

intensive, we really only ate these on special occasions. I still have a jar of elderberry jam with my grandmother's handwriting on the lid. I like to take the unripe berries and turn them into capers. I scatter the flowers over wild game dishes.

POKEWEED

This weed grows wild all over the South, even in my current home base of Charleston. This may be my momma's favorite ingredient to eat. She makes these amazing fritters using the young shoots of the plant with the stem still attached. She breads them in cornmeal and fries them up in a black skillet. I love this ingredient so much that I licensed my business under the name Pokeweed Productions.

LEATHER BRITCHES

To make leather britches, you string pole beans—like a greasy bean or a turkey crow—with a needle and thread. Traditionally, you would hang the beans above a wood-burning stove to preserve them for the winter. I'd love to know more about the history of this technique. The drying of the beans develops so much umami, it's mind blowing. My family would cover these in water with a little lard and cook them forever. The potlikker that comes off these beans tastes like roast beef!

MIXED PICKLES

A salty and sour bowl of funky cabbage, corn, and beans was always on my family's table. My grandmother would place the blanched vegetables into a crock of salty water and let them ferment in the basement for months. She would can them and store them after they got the flavor she wanted in the crock. When it came time to eat, she would heat a little grease in a skillet and fry up the mixed pickles. It's like a kimchee. I still make it every year.

You're an avid seed saver, and you have worked with David Shields and Glenn Roberts to bring back Lowcountry rice varieties that were on the brink of disappearing. Is there an Appalachian species—some kind of bean or corn, for example—that you'd like to revive in a similar manner?

I'm totally obsessed with old Southern beans and peas. I definitely could be on an episode of *Hoarders* if they ever saw my collection. I have hundreds of varieties tucked away in an old, beat-up chest freezer. The greasy beans of my childhood are certainly my favorite, and it's nearly impossible to sit down in a Southern restaurant and find them on a plate. Its time we change that. Studying the varying flavors of each particular bean will keep me busy for the rest of my life.

How did growing up in Appalachia shape your values, tastes, or approaches as a chef?

I got to see the hard work and passion that goes into creating a soulful plate of food. I now understand that poor people food is the best food, and I know why: When you don't have a whole lot, the highlight of your day is when you sit down to share a meal with your family. And when you realize that, you put a lot more care and effort into providing a good time for your loved ones. When you are at the table with them, nothing else matters. The grandest cuisine is the food cooked by a loving grandmother. It's impossible to have a better experience, no matter how fancy or expensive a meal is.

If you were asked to cook one meal that encapsulated your hometown, what would it be?

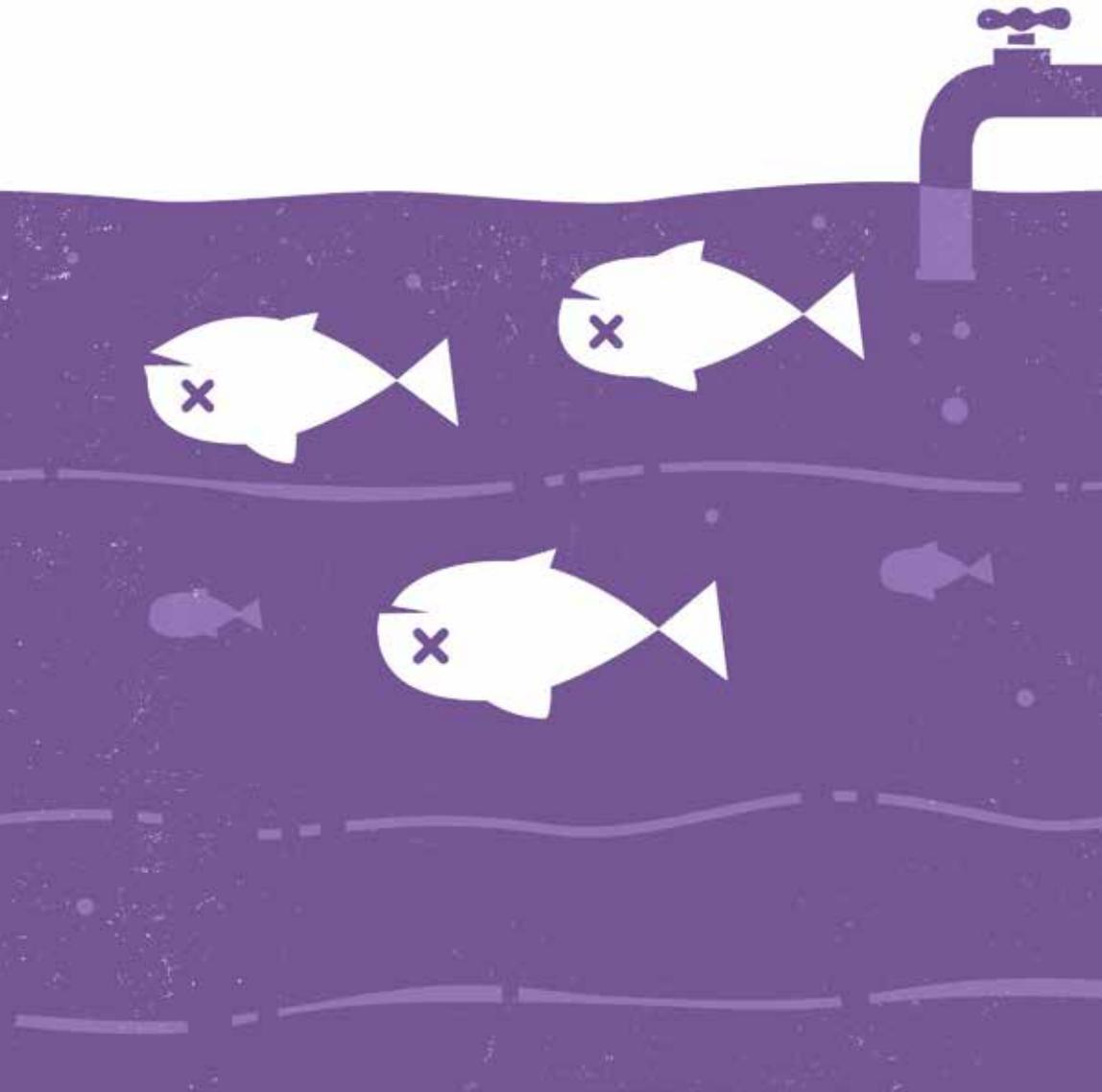
I would go to the market and pick three or four of the most gorgeous vegetables I could find and prepare them simply—some barely cooked, and some cooked to death. I'd make killed lettuce and poke fritters. I'd go down to the basement and pull some mixed pickles and some sour corn. I'd make a skillet of real cornbread and a big cathead biscuit. I would arrange a huge platter of sliced cucumbers, banana peppers, raw onions, and ripe tomatoes. I'd cook a pot of leather britches flavored with a chunk of Benton's jowl bacon, or a crockpot full of soup beans. There would be some ramps on the table for sure, just cooked down in a little butter. I'd end the meal with my grandmother's sorghum-apple stack cake and a nice glass of bourbon...or three. Sounds good, doesn't it? 🍷

PHOTO, PAGE 4, by Andrea Behrends, courtesy of Polished Pig Media.

COOKING IN CRISIS

AFTER A CHEMICAL SPILL, WEST VIRGINIA RESTAURANTS CARRY ON

by Courtney Balestier



ON JANUARY 9, 2014, Freedom Industries, an industrial chemical company, spilled up to 10,000 gallons of MCHM into West Virginia's Elk River. A tributary of the Kanawha River and a part of the Mississippi River watershed, the 172-mile Elk cuts through the Kanawha Valley and the state capital of Charleston. MCHM is a chemical used for cleaning coal, the mining of which is the state's principal industry. No one seems to have considered what would happen if the chemical entered the West Virginia water system.

In the days immediately after the spill, no professional or government official could explain what had happened or how the safety of the water supply might be restored. Three hundred thousand people in nine counties could no longer live normal lives. They couldn't boil potatoes, do a load of whites, or bathe their children. On order of the Kanawha-Charleston Health Department (KCHD), restaurants shut down so fast that Sandy Call, manager at Bridge Road Bistro in Charleston, had her staff scrape food off dishes that were now unable to be washed. At least they wouldn't return to filth, she told herself. The restaurant remained closed for four days.

The leak would devastate the local restaurant industry. The community knew it. And they stepped up with solutions. Local acts like the Diablo Blues Band performed at an "Aquapocalypse" fundraiser, and organizers waived ticket fees for struggling service workers. Proceeds went to the United Way Emergency Fund, established to benefit workers earning less than \$13.46 an hour (or \$28,000 a year). A state lawmaker-sponsored campaign called Turn Up the Tips encouraged generosity beyond the standard 15–20 percent at reopened restaurants.

Keeley Steele owns three Charleston restaurants with her husband, John, including Bluegrass Kitchen. Bluegrass was one of the first restaurants to reopen, on January 12. They had to use bottled water and bagged ice for most everything; tap water could only be used for suppressing fires. After the mass chaos of those first few days back, Steele believes her staff caught up on lost wages. "We were seeing 50 percent tips," she said. "I wasn't seeing anything under 20 percent the first couple of weeks we were open."

Aaron Diehl manages a home-cooking restaurant in Nitro, West Virginia, that his grandfather opened in 1960. For Diehl, the bottled water option wasn't a possibility. His scratch cooking—fried chicken

livers, green beans, mashed potatoes—is low-margin work with relatively high food costs. The local health department cleared Diehl’s Family Restaurant to open, using city water, a week after the spill. To meet the needs of his twenty-plus employees, who lost wages and tips during the six-day shutdown, Diehl pulled money from his own pocket. “It kicks you in your heart,” he said. “They’ve been here a long time, and they’re like family.”



Sandy Call of Bridge Road Bistro lives eleven miles away from Charleston in St. Albans, a town that relies on a separate water supply. For days, she ran an open house for employees, friends, and family members. They took showers, ate home-cooked meals, and did laundry. When she understood that the closure of her Charleston restaurant might stretch for a week or more, Call set about getting her staff back to work: She ordered disposable tableware and stocked restrooms with hand sanitizer and bottled water. The ad-hoc setup was, she said, like “catering on a farm.”

THREE WEEKS AFTER THE SPILL, restaurants cleared by KCHD are no longer required to use bottled water or bagged ice. But Steele and Call said they both smelled licorice, the chemical’s telltale aroma, even after they flushed their water lines as recommended by the governor’s office and the local utility. Call continues to spend \$350 every other day on office cooler-style water jugs. And Steele still buys a few hundred dollars’ worth of ice a week. She also employs two Drinkable Air units, which work like dehumidifiers to process moisture extracted from the air into drinking water. They’re not risking it.

Neither is Betty Lou’s Diner in South Charleston, known for pinto beans, cast-iron skillet cornbread, and hot dogs topped with homemade chili and slaw. People are skittish, said manager Stefani Angel. It seems everyone has heard about a place that claims to be using bottled water but isn’t. “About 99% of my customers I know by face and by order,” Angel said. “They know if I say something, I mean what I say.”

West Virginians can’t trust much else right now. “I feel like we’re guinea pigs,” Call said. “There’s no testing; they don’t know what’s going on. We actually have students coming in and doing theses on us. We’re like lab rats.” There’s also a sense of camaraderie at a time when the area is being scrutinized by outsiders. Steele said she’s had a few conversations with visiting media surprised at what a well-informed city they’ve landed in, which strikes her as something of a backhanded compliment.

It can seem frivolous, going out to eat in the midst of a disaster. But it’s more crucial than we might realize. Local restaurants offer a favorite dish, an impromptu town hall, an hour or two of amnesia against changed circumstances. Call says she sees the restaurant as a safety zone. “People know they can trust us. They can be served what they’d like at home. I’m looking out for my guests as I would my family, because that’s what they are.” ☞

Courtney Balestier is a native of Morgantown, West Virginia, whose work appears in Cornbread Nation 7: The Best of Southern Food Writing. PHOTO, PAGE 10 by Steve Helber, courtesy of Associated Press. John Steele of Bluegrass Kitchen fills a water jug for dishwashing on January 14, 2014.

GOOD STORY

THE INDULGENCE OF PICKLED BALONEY

IN APPALACHIA, A SIMPLE SNACK
EQUALED ATTAINMENT

by *Silas House*

DOT'S GROCERY, OWNED BY MY AUNT, was the community center of tiny Fariston, Kentucky: a therapist's office, sometimes a church, and—always—a storytelling school. Everyone gathered there to gossip and to seek the sage kitchen wisdom of Dot. She kept a Virginia Slim permanently perched in her fuchsia-lipsticked mouth and latched her steely blue-eyed gaze on her customers while they spilled their guts and sought her advice. A few times I witnessed prayer services there. The epicenter of a largely Holiness community was hard-pressed to escape that, after all. There were always the big tales, swirling around like the twisting smoke of the regulars' cigarettes (in my memory, all of them smoked, everyone).

Looking back, the stories are what matter the most. But when I was a child in the 1980s my favorite things were the cakes-and-candy rack, the old-timey Coke cooler with the silver sliding doors on top, and the huge jar of pickled baloney that sat on the counter next to the cash register. Beside it were a loose roll of paper towels, a box of wax paper, a sleeve or two of Premium saltines, and a large Old Hickory-brand knife.

Cutting pickled baloney was a rite of passage, usually reserved for children who were past the age of ten. That may sound young to wield a butcher knife, but we were country children who had attended hog killings, watched the dressing of squirrels, cleaned our own fish, and stood in chairs by the stove so we could learn to cook.



The pickled baloney, submerged in vinegar, was one corkscrew of delicious processed meat. I did not know then, and wouldn't have cared, that baloney is usually made up of the afterthoughts of pork or beef: organs, trimmings, and the like. All I knew was that it was scrumptious paired with an ice-cold Dr Pepper and a handful of saltines. Dot indulged me with treats when I came to the store, and I usually asked if, instead of getting a free banana Moon Pie or a Bit-O-Honey, I could opt for pickled baloney. "Why sure," Dot always answered, expelling two wisps of blue smoke with her words.

Besides the taste, which my Uncle Dave said was "so good you had to pat your foot to eat it," there was the added bonus of brandishing the knife and sawing off my own piece, proving I was not a little boy anymore. I was an eleven-year-old eater of pickled baloney.

Pickled baloney was a delicacy in the rural stores of Appalachia, showcased right on the counter, where no one could miss it. Most people headed straight for that jar when they were sitting for a spell at Dot's. Others eyed the jar with desire, knowing they couldn't afford to add it to their bill. Dot's thrived in that last period of the jottemdown store, a small community grocery where local folks could buy on credit. The name referred to the fact that such stores kept a spiral-bound notebook on the

counter to "jot down" purchases. Each customer had their own page and each month Dot totaled up what they owed. They came in on payday and paid off their debts. Dot seldom turned anyone down for more credit, even if they owed her for months on end. After all, she had opened the store as a single mother supporting her two daughters.

MANY PEOPLE I KNOW now scoff at the very idea of eating baloney, much less *pickled* baloney. They do not understand that the purchase of such a thing was an extravagance, an indulgence. This was a different time. A different world. I knew no one who went to the movies or shopped on a whim. These luxuries required a long period of saving. They had to be planned far in advance.

We were the progeny of people who had been very, very poor. And although I've painted the hamlet of Fariston as a romantic, bucolic place where people had the live-long day to gather around a woodstove in a little store to tell stories, the truth is much more complex than that. This was a place where poverty existed alongside great wealth.

A few yards from Dot's Grocery was a sprawling trailer park occupied by people who worked minimum-wage jobs in fast-food restaurants or at the Dollar General. Dogs meandered about the dirt yards, and children played on the porches while their fathers slept after working third shift or their mothers hung out lines of clothes that flapped in the wind.

Just past the trailer park loomed the mansion owned by a coal baron, built to resemble Southfork from TV's *Dallas*. Its opulence proclaimed, "We made it. You did not." The house was a few miles from the massive strip mine that destroyed that part of the county. The riches pulled from that mine by my people built the manor, but no matter: The baron had a three-car garage. And twelve-foot pillars flanked the front porch.

I am sure that the people in the South Fork mansion didn't serve pickled baloney hors d'oeuvres at their parties. But for people raised like my parents, pickled baloney was a symbol of attainment.

When she bought one of the gallon jars, my mother would return from the grocery with giddy excitement. As children, she and my father had never been allowed such indulgences. Both grew up in the sort of poverty people always associate with Appalachia. Still, they were quick



to tell you they had never been hungry. Country people were good at providing food for themselves, whether by growing it, bartering for it, or making it stretch. Snacks were rare and sniffed of affluence.

By the time I was a child my parents had worked so long and so hard they had firmly rooted us in the middle class. We did not have a house that looked like J.R. and Sue Ellen's, but we had recently left the trailer park and moved into a small five-room house with a grassy yard dotted by pink-blossomed dogwood trees. Buying pickled baloney, which might be considered the lowest of foods, meant something to my family and our community.

Every once in a while, I still get a terrific craving for pickled baloney. I eat it with a strange mixture of guilt, because I know what's in it, and delicious nostalgia for a place and time that is gone forever. Food is more than merely taste or nourishment. In Appalachia, food is memory and heritage.

Today, when I cut a hunk of meat off that corkscrew, when I draw in the sharp fragrance of vinegar as I peel off the casing and take a bite, I remember the customers in Dot's Grocery. Their joys and sorrows, always on full display. I recall afternoons spent with my father after he woke up, before he left to work the third shift. I remember my Aunt Dot, gone now, and the way she cared for the whole community, provided a place for them, jotted down their purchases, and sometimes wadded up a whole sheet of debt when she realized a family was doing all they could to support themselves. That way of life is gone now, and I miss it so badly, in all of its awfulness and beauty. 🍷

Silas House is the author of five novels, three plays, and one book of nonfiction, as well as the NEH Chair of Appalachian Studies at Berea College.

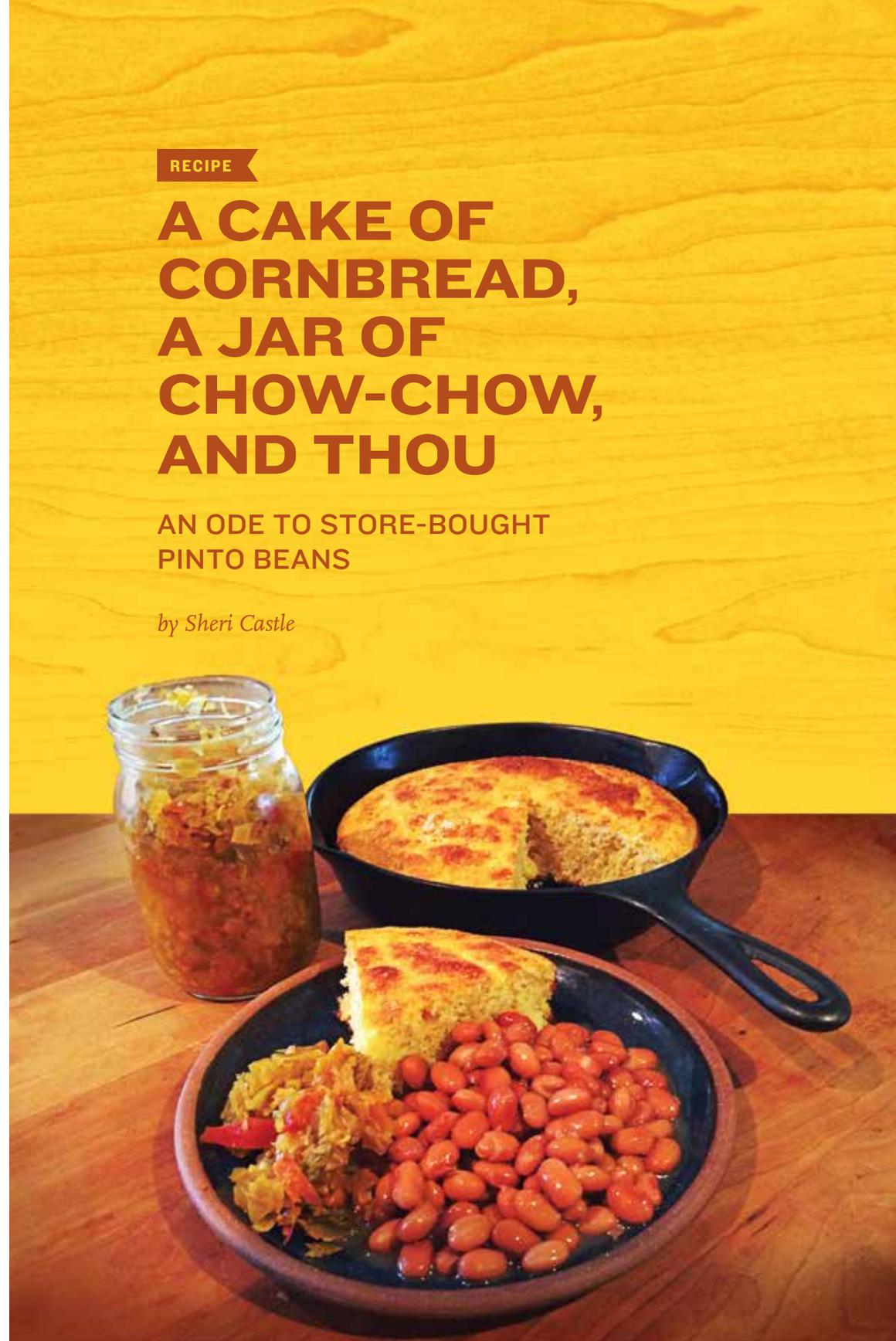
PHOTOS, PAGE 11, courtesy of Silas House. Top: Dot Kelsey, ca. mid-1970s. Bottom: Betty House (left) and Dot Kelsey at Dot's Grocery, ca. early 1980s.

RECIPE

A CAKE OF CORNBREAD, A JAR OF CHOW-CHOW, AND THOU

AN ODE TO STORE-BOUGHT PINTO BEANS

by Sheri Castle



THIS IS A STORY ABOUT PINTO BEANS. But first it's a story about my mountain people and one of our curious traditions.

The Appalachian Mountain South is to the rest of the South what bourbon is to whiskey: It is distinguishable from the rest, yet part of the whole. That includes our food, which is rooted in our geography. Like the rest of the rural South, mountain people traditionally ate off the land. Unlike the rest of the rural South, my people live up and back in one of the oldest mountain ranges on the planet, where the landscape and climate are quite different. On a map, we're in the South. In practice, we claim our own place.

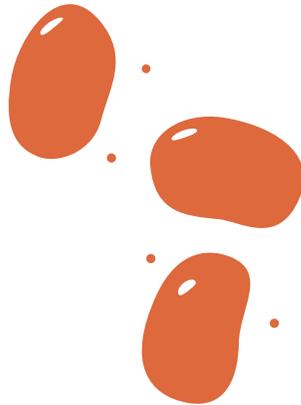
Mountain people were, and are, notably self-reliant, eating what they can forage, hunt, or raise for themselves. Farming in the Appalachian mountains is hard now and used to be nearly impossible. The land is combative. The growing season is fickle and fleeting. The ground can be as rocky as a dry creek bed.

Old timers quip that the easiest way to plant crops in the mountains is to load a shotgun with seed, stand on the porch, and blast it into the hillside. To survive the harsh and threatening winters, people preserve what they can't eat immediately. In short, they grow it fast, and make it last.

Which brings us to beans. Starting with the Native Americans, every generation that has cultivated mountain land has known that certain types of beans flourish there. The Appalachian mountains were once home to dozens of varieties of nutrient-packed beans, including many that seed savers now categorize as heirlooms. When dried, these beans are excellent keepers.

Pinto beans, better known as soup beans, have been essential to the mountain larder since the early twentieth century. Yet Appalachian people didn't grow their own. No matter how poor, they bought or traded for them.

This makes no sense. Why would people who produced nearly every speck of their own food buy dried pintos that had been grown up in Michigan? Not only buy them, but come to rely on them?



The handful of books and articles written about the foodways of the Southern Appalachians make little to no mention of this, so I started to ask around. I talked with people who know and love mountain food. They cogitated a long while, and finally threw up their hands, shook their heads, and replied, "That's a good question."

I finally sought the wisdom of Bill Best of Berea, Kentucky. A farmer and seed saver, Bill Best knows beans, especially mountain beans. Bill ventured that pinto beans were too inexpensive to warrant growing them. "Too cheap to bother," he said.

Too cheap to bother. This from a people who use the phrase "ain't worth a hill of beans" to describe things of very little value.

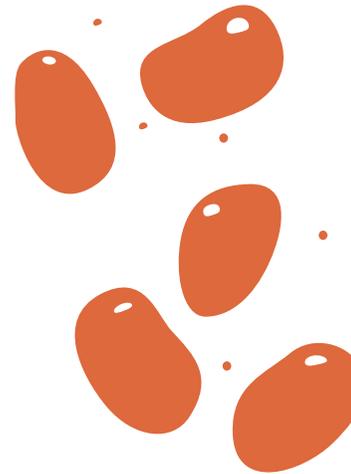
It probably happened like this: During the Depression, struggling mountain families realized that it cost less to buy dried pinto beans to eat than it cost to buy beans to grow. Mountain people couldn't afford to grow pintos—and they couldn't afford to do without them.

Dried pinto beans were about the cheapest protein available. A pot of beans remains astonishingly inexpensive. In 2014, a one-pound bag of dried pinto beans costs less than two dollars.

If mountain people once ate pintos because they had to, we now eat them because we want to. Those of us raised on soup beans never seem to lose our taste for them. A pot of beans is reassuringly familiar. We can rely on their tender creaminess; the traces of smoky pork, like the lingering scent of last night's campfire; and the promise of sopping.

I once heard the musician Doc Watson, who lived his whole life in Deep Gap, North Carolina, wax poetic about his love for soup beans and cornbread. He said that he could never get his fill. "If I ate twice what there was, it would've been half what I wanted."

Amen.



WATAUGA SOUP BEANS

Makes about 6 cups of cooked beans

1 pound dried pinto beans

Water

2 to 3 teaspoons salt, plus more to taste

Seasoning meat: a piece of side meat, 3 slices smoky bacon, or 2 tablespoons bacon grease

Aromatics: 2 crushed garlic cloves, 1 small halved onion, 1 to 2 fresh hot peppers, or a big pinch of cayenne pepper (optional)

POUR BEANS INTO A COLANDER and rinse under cool running water. Pick through and discard any shriveled or unappealing beans. Pour into a large bowl and cover with a couple of inches of cold water. Skim off any chaff. Let soak several hours or overnight.

By the next day, the beans will have absorbed much of the water and nearly doubled in size. Drain beans and rinse gently.

Transfer beans to a large, heavy pot. Cover with fresh water to a depth of 2 inches. Add seasoning meat and aromatics, if using. Bring to a boil over high heat, then reduce heat to a very gentle simmer. If you want the beans to be firm when done, leave the pot uncovered. If you want the beans to be creamy, partially cover the pot.

Check on beans once in a while to give them a little stir and to make sure they stay submerged in the cooking liquid. If the top has gone dry, add hot water to cover.

Check beans for doneness after 45 minutes. When the beans are barely tender, stir in the salt and continue to simmer until done, 15 to 45 minutes more. Taste for seasonings. If they are not salty enough, remove the pot from the heat and add more salt, to taste. The beans will continue to absorb salt as they cool.

Most bean eaters spoon on something bright and pungent such as chow-chow, piccalilli, chili sauce, or home-canned tomatoes. Some bean eaters appreciate the crunch of chopped raw onion.

Transfer cooled beans to an airtight container. Store refrigerated for up to one week.

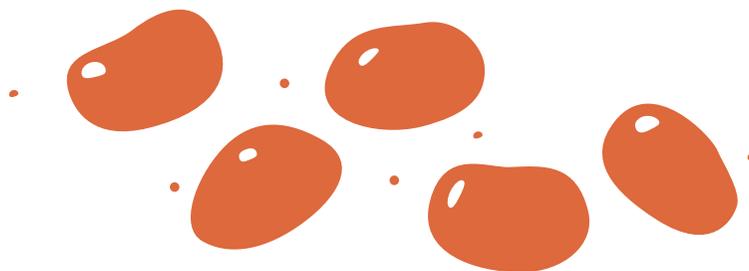
A FEW NOTES ON COOKING SOUP BEANS:

SORT. Most pintos these days are pretty clean, but because they are picked by machine, they harbor small pebbles and sticks. It pays to look through them carefully and rinse them thrice. As a boy, Bill Best lived in such fear of breaking a tooth on an errant rock in a bowl of soup beans that he always mashed each bite with his fork before eating it.

SEASON. Like so many things, beans need fat and salt. The fat can come from olive oil, but pintos prefer pork—a chunk of side meat, a couple of slices of smoky bacon, or a spoonful of bacon grease. People actually argue over when and how to salt dried beans, swearing that ill-timed seasoning makes the beans tough.

EAT. The moniker “soup beans” gives another clue to their charms. The beans and their seasoning make a delicious, satisfying potlikker. Cornbread is a requirement.

REHEAT. Pinto beans’ tolerance for reheating is part of their appeal. When reheated multiple times, they thicken and soften into something close to porridge. Cooked beans never look all that good in the first place, so declining appearance is not an inhibiting factor. 🍲



Sheri Castle, a native of Watauga County, North Carolina, is author of The New Southern Garden Cookbook. Her dad still believes her move to Chapel Hill thirty-five years ago is a phase she will outgrow.

PHOTO, PAGE 15, by Sheri Castle.

CANNING MEMORIES

by Frank X Walker

Indian summer
meant Saturday morning courtyards
and door screens opened and waiting
for urban signs of harvest.
No new moons or first frosts,
just the welcome staccato and horn
of an old flatbed truck, overalls
and mud-caked boots.

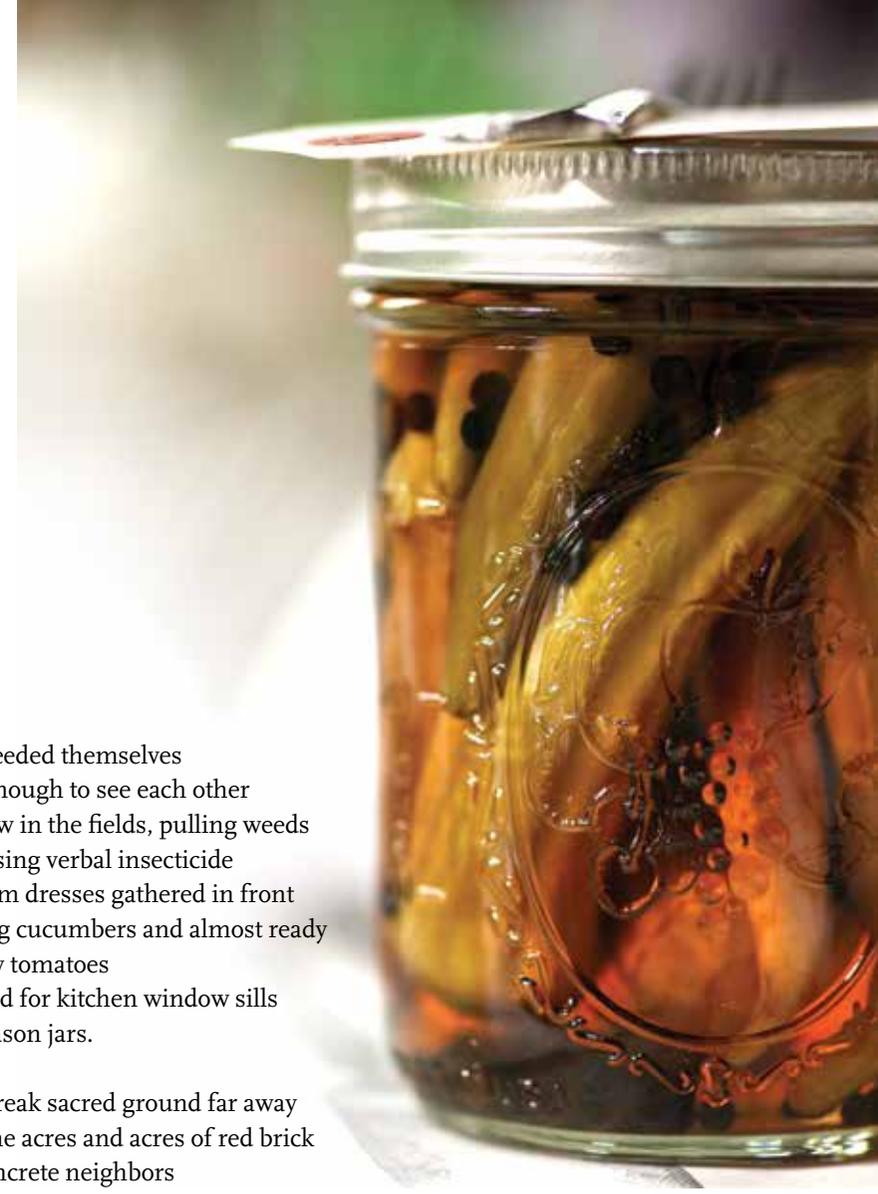
Grandmothers who still clicked
their tongues and called up the sound
of a tractor in the daybreak,
the aroma of fresh turned earth
and the secret location of the best
blackberry patch
like they were remembering
old lovers,
planted themselves
a half squint away from the palming
and weighing of potatoes
stringbeans, kale, turnips, sweetcorn
onions and cabbage.

They seeded themselves
close enough to see each other
bent low in the fields, pulling weeds
dispensing verbal insecticide
gingham dresses gathered in front
cradling cucumbers and almost ready
Big Boy tomatoes
destined for kitchen window sills
and mason jars.

They break sacred ground far away
from the acres and acres of red brick
and concrete neighbors
to be close enough to the earth
to know that,
“if all city folk plant is family and friends
alls they gonna get is funerals.” 🍷

Frank X Walker is founder of the Affrilachian Poets and director of the African American and Africana Studies program at the University of Kentucky.

PHOTO by Brandall Atkinson.



"BEAUTY IS

Strip and Auger Mining have become the current issue for those high-minded heroes who crave and court the attention of the moneyed and the great. Politicians, bored with themselves, use this simple issue to create noise by which to make popular but meaningless speeches. Mining is not a political issue at its heart. Nor, is it basically a social issue. It is economical. It has to do with dollars and employment.

Today, it is popular to decry the rape of the natural resources, to bemoan polluted streams and air. That makes good stump talk! The ugly fact is that strip mining has become the "whipping-boy" for those reformers who find it easy to point out the faults on the other end of the state, and over-look the ugly mess in their own yard and fishing hole. Strip mining is absolutely necessary to the present economy of Southeastern Kentucky if we are to hold our own as people who believe that work is better than welfare.

It is time that everyone looks at the simple fact that no one understands the situation in Southeastern Kentucky better than those who grew up in the shadows of our beautiful mountains. We have sought ways to survive by taking pick and shovel, carbide light and buggy, and crawling on bended knee, we entered narrow caverns to feed our children and clothe them against the nasty, blowing winds of winter. We think it unbelievable that total strangers raised in marble-walled mansions should now attempt to steal from our hands these tools of survival. More unthinkable still is the fact that those who take from our hands the tools of survival will curse and cry because their taxes are rising and welfare is on the increase. We, more than they, hate the notion of being unemployed; we, more than they, understand the dangers of welfarism; we, more than they, know the waning inner self-respect and loss of dignity. Why not? We have been stripped of the tools of our trade and left unable to perform the tasks of manhood.

The alternative which comes to surface from the confluence of these two polluted streams is starvation. If welfare is out, and work is impossible, then, starvation is inevitable. These high-minded bird watchers can stand in the splendor of our beautiful mountains while we stand in the soup-line in some strange city. Such is unthinkable to those of us who have discovered that the beauty of our hills is as much in their bellies as on their lofty peaks . . . BEAUTY IS SOMETIMES A BISCUIT!

A BISCUIT"

The real issue is local - one of hungry babies, crying mothers, and of workless, payless fathers who wait for a welfare check, food stamps or by chance, a handout. Exploited by those who would shackle our families to poverty under guise of concern for beauty, they would move us like pawns on a chessboard for political gain or favor while we wait in the shadows of beauty, hungry and alone until the opportune moment when our situation and need will pay rich political dividends.

It is popular and proper for our state and federal leadership to talk of the strides of progress in recent years. However, to downgrade or destroy the mining industry in Southeastern Kentucky will reverse the trend to such a degree that thousands will be jobless and homeless. Our young people already run to cities in search of work! Where shall we all run? Is it not proper, indeed, to ask who will be left to pay the taxes to support us all?

It has become commonplace to argue that the Federal government is too far removed to adequately discern the State's problems or accurately meet the state's needs. How much more is it impossible for either the state or Federal governments to correctly assess the needs of Eastern Kentucky. It is the belief of the indigenous populace of our area that they who have lived here and survived here know better than any the nature of their needs. They feel it unjust for outside authorities to superimpose far-reaching solutions upon problems obviously misunderstood. Judged by the standards of other peoples in other places, we here are unique and even peculiar. Our greatest desire is to be self-sufficient, self-respecting citizens whose children have respect for their parents. To close the one remaining door to self-determination will still the current of progress and reduce our economy to a stagnant cesspool of welfarism.

Picture, if you will; the many thousands of men engaged in Strip, Auger, and deep mining. Most of them have families with children in school. Fathers work hard and pay their bills. Now, take away their jobs, sterilize their pride, call back their self-respect, erase the smile from the faces of their children. Such would be the unthinkable result should mining be stopped! Where now is beauty when a black shroud of fate reduces their homes to shanties and shacks, their children to orphans, or, worse, wards of the state? To which good do we aspire?

BEAUTY IS A BISCUIT

FOOD AND POWER IN THE COALFIELDS

by Lora Smith

IN FEBRUARY OF 1970, a full-page paid advertisement appeared in newspapers across Eastern Kentucky. “Beauty is a Biscuit,” declared the headline. A visceral and angry litany followed, aimed against politicians and “high minded birdwatchers” who showed concern over the environmental damage caused by strip-mining.

The rhetoric was terrifying. If the mining industry were to fail, dependence, starvation, and mass exodus would follow in the Eastern Kentucky mountains. At its crescendo, the manifesto argued that real beauty lay in mining coal from the bellies of the mountains—and specifically, in the food that mining put in the bellies of local people.

The names of two companies—Oxygen Inc. and the Delaware Powder Co.—claimed the largest text block on the bottom of the page. Based in Pineville, Kentucky, Oxygen and Delaware Powder were local employers that manufactured explosives for strip-mining operations. (In strip-mining, part of a mountain is blown up to expose a subterranean coal seam.)

The campaign responded to a contentious moment in Kentucky’s history, when the coal industry confronted local resistance. Much of the tension arose from the so-called broad form deeds that coal companies used, assuming ownership of the minerals below a property’s surface. According to the language of these deeds, individual landownership covered only the “surface and air” of a piece of land—not the valuable minerals underneath. Once strip-mined, the landowner’s entire property was destroyed.

DEE DAVIS, president of the Center for Rural Strategies in Whitesburg, Kentucky, was a teenager in Hazard at the time. He remembers seeing the ad in his local paper. “It was an unsettling time—people were angry,” Davis says. “Large-scale strip mines were coming, and it was a big public fight. The people that were powerless were often the landowners.”

While federal regulation of strip-mining had taken hold in the 1960s and would continue through the 1970s, Davis says the anger wasn’t aimed at the federal government. “They were really talking about people in Louisville and Lexington. The coal operators were creating a cultural battle, trying to make people here feel disrespected by some imaginary city elite that wanted to keep the mountains beautiful and didn’t care if that meant someone starved to death.”

The length of the ad was part of its brilliance. The cramped page of varied-sized text demanded intense engagement. “If you gave it the time to read the whole thing, go through the author’s whole logical process, you were going to be changed by it,” Davis says.

We, the undersigned, acknowledge a vested interest in the future of Southeastern Kentucky and we believe that we speak for thousands who will refuse to bow the knee to the expedient, and will continue to battle with all comers who would relegate us to a life of poverty. We invite the comments of any and all.

Calvin C. Hays and T. R. Hays
OXYGEN INC.
DELAWARE
POWDER CO.

People who had the time to read the paper were the primary target audience. “It was intended for the Appalachian middle class,” says Davis. “People who lived in town—shop owners, professionals, business people with political influence.” These were the people whose pocketbooks would be hit if coal workers lost wages or moved away.

A BISCUIT SITS AT THE CENTER of both a real and imagined class struggle. Biscuits have long been signifiers of class in the mountains. The “beaten biscuit crusade,” a movement by teachers at the Hindman Settlement School in Knott County, Kentucky, tried to convince mountain women to replace cornbread with the more expensive and labor-intensive beaten biscuit. This history begs the question of why the advertisement’s authors didn’t choose cornbread, the traditional bread of the people, over the biscuit.

The potential absence of the biscuit is what matters. The text read, “The real issue is local- one of hungry babies, crying mothers, and of workless, payless fathers who wait for a welfare check, food stamps or by chance, a handout...” The campaign encouraged local middle class and working poor to unite against much wealthier “outsiders” supposedly trying to starve them out.

The absence of food in some Appalachian coalfield communities, and the causes of that absence, are as worthy of research as the roots of shucky beans and sour corn. Government commodity foods, processed foods distributed by relief agencies, and changes to national food policies deserve future study.

Likewise, environmental issues, including the loss of access to topsoil and potable water from mountaintop removal, have profoundly affected foodways. Without clean water, we can’t drink or cook safely. Without our topsoil for growing food, we can’t eat.

The struggle over land use in Appalachia is not as simple as the Beauty is a Biscuit campaign suggested. It is not a choice between a biscuit for hard-working local people or a beautiful landscape for the big-city bird watchers.

Nor is the issue exclusively local. Coal- and gas-rich communities in Eastern Kentucky provide families across the country the energy to fry chicken, braise greens, and bake pies. Many of the headwaters

originating in the Appalachians feed the greater waterways of the Southeast, including the Mississippi River. Our plates are all connected back to the soil and water of the mountains. Ignoring the connection means depriving ourselves of the richness of an interconnected Southern ecosystem.

TODAY ONLY 7,000 MEN AND WOMEN WORK mining jobs in Kentucky. While external factors—diminishing coal resources, competition from natural gas—drive most of the decline in production, industry PR is still creating villains out of regulators and imagined elites. The industry-driven “Friends of Coal” campaign has been successful, positioning locals against strangers who are presumably not “friends” with coal and coal miners.

Food remains a talking point. It’s no longer a symbol of hunger—instead, food is positioned as an economic opportunity by farmers, chefs, advocates, and consumers. Grow Appalachia provides grants and technical support for planting gardens. Mike Lewis, an Eastern Kentucky farmer, connects returning veterans to agricultural careers through the Growing Warriors program. Members of Community Farm Alliance and other non-profits advocate for policies that build a local food economy. Farmers’ markets are springing up in small mountain towns, creating new jobs and making healthy food accessible.

We now have the chance to re-imagine a mountain table where no one goes hungry, a table set for a new sustainable era in which soil and water are our greatest natural resources. A table piled high with locally grown food. A table where our biscuits get buttered on both sides.

That would be a beautiful biscuit. A biscuit worth fighting for. 🍪

Lora Smith studied folklore at UNC-Chapel Hill and oversees communications for the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation.

NEWSPAPER ADVERTISEMENT, PAGES 24-25, 27, “Beauty is a Biscuit,” portions reprinted from the Middlesboro Daily News, February 19, 1970.

ICON

THE PEPPERONI ROLLS OF PRINCETON

IMOGENE TERRY BAKES LOCAL TRADITION INTO SCHOOL LUNCHES

by Martha J. Miller

STUFFED WITH STICKS OR SLICES of cured meat and cheese, baked, then mopped with melted butter, the yeast-risen pepperoni roll is a West Virginia icon. By most accounts, Country Club Bakery in Fairmont baked the first commercial rolls sometime between 1920 and 1940. Initially a favorite lunch of coal miners, pepperoni rolls are now sold in bakeries and grocery stores and eaten at college football tailgate parties. They're even baked and served in lunchrooms at schools like Mercer Elementary School in Princeton, West Virginia.

Once each month, on what Princeton locals call Pepperoni Roll Day, Imogene Terry slides a pan of pepperoni rolls into the oven. As the school's head cook, she's been perfecting her recipe and technique for over thirty years.

When the tubes of stuffed dough hit the oven, it happens quickly: Moist heat enlivens yeast. Meat and cheese burble. The aroma filters up the school's stairwells, rolls down the hallways like a baptismal wave, and seeps under the closed doors of classrooms. As lunchtime nears, students scurry down to the cafeteria, take their places in line, and hanker for Terry's pepperoni rolls.



I only learned Terry's name recently. But I must have shuffled past her, sporting my boyish haircut and carrying my lunch tray, back when I was a Mercer student in the late 1980s. Like Terry, I was born in Princeton. But I didn't get to stay long. My family moved out of state after my third-grade year. Since then, I've consumed my share of pepperoni rolls. But I've never tasted one that bested Terry's.



It all started in 1983 when Terry, a mother of three school-aged sons, walked into the county's Board of Education offices to apply to be a teacher's aide and walked out a cook. Over her thirty-year career, Terry has come to enjoy the creativity and the relative autonomy of the position. "Our supervisors trust us to do our job well and right," she says. Plus the children give great feedback. "A lot of them are eager to come back to school, even when they're off, because they miss the food," Terry says. "To hear them say 'I love to eat at school' is great. I just love feeding children."

Terry learned to cook by reading a Betty Crocker cookbook that her mother gave her as a wedding present. "Even before I started working out of the home, I was like little Susie homemaker," she says. Although her sons are now grown and no longer live at home, Terry still cooks stewed apples and biscuits and gravy for her husband of forty-two years, Paul, whom she met in church when she was a teenager.

Along with a staff of three, Terry makes the majority of the school's daily lunch menu offerings from scratch. On monthly pepperoni roll days she arrives at 5:30 in the morning to start the dough. Using USDA

yeast roll recipe "B-16," Terry weighs fifty pounds of flour, mixed with dry milk, sugar, salt and yeast. Working a commercial stand mixer, she adds oil and water, stirring until a smooth, pliable dough comes together.

Once the dough is proofed, Terry and company roll it into 500 balls, top them with slices of pepperoni and a combination of mozzarella and cheddar cheeses, wrap them like mini-burritos, tuck the ends inward, and place them on sheet pans to rise again. Not long before lunch service begins, the pepperoni rolls go into 350-degree convection ovens to bake for fifteen minutes. Terry strokes the warm-from-the-oven rolls with melted butter. "The smell just fills the whole school when you're making them," she says.

In 2012, Mercer County Schools began serving free breakfast and lunch to all students as part of a national program aimed at curbing childhood hunger in high-poverty areas. "Sometimes this is their only meal they have to eat every day," Terry says. On pepperoni roll day, Mercer parents, grandparents, and even Board of Education employees show up for lunch, paying the bargain price of \$3.75 for a warm pepperoni roll and two sides.

Given the amount of care Terry and her staff take, and factoring in the culinary and coal-mining history of West Virginia, it's easy to understand how pepperoni roll day at Mercer Elementary is a favorite. And it's clear why I still remember those logs of meat and cheese fondly, more than twenty years after I left town. At a time when school-based scratch cooking is rare, Terry's pepperoni rolls represent the triumph of tradition over convenience. They show how one woman's love of people and place has transformed a public school cafeteria into destination dining. 🍷

Martha J. Miller lives outside Washington, D.C. Her work has appeared in the Washington Post and the Oxford American.

PHOTOS, PAGES 28-30, by Kellan Sarles.

ORAL HISTORY

ALWAYS ON THE SUNNY SIDE

VOICES FROM THE CARTER FAMILY FOLD

In 2009, SFA oral historian Amy Evans traveled to Hiltons, Virginia, to interview the women who run the Carter Family Fold. At the Fold, live music shares the bill with homemade Appalachian fare like soup beans, cornbread, and chili dogs.

IN 1927, A.P. CARTER, his wife Sara, and Sara's cousin Maybelle (who was married to A.P.'s brother) made the thirty-mile trek from their home in Hiltons, Virginia, to Bristol, Tennessee, to record a few songs. The

resulting Bristol Sessions came to be known as the “Big Bang” of country music.

Almost fifty years after those recordings, Janette Carter, daughter of A.P. and Sara, established the Carter Family Fold. In keeping with her father's dying wish, Janette opened the small concert hall to celebrate her family and its contribution to country music, as well as the rich musical traditions of Appalachia. Janette played host to music fans every Saturday night for more than thirty years, opening shows with her brother Joe and son Dale and singing songs made famous by her parents, such as “Keep on the Sunny Side” and “Wildwood Flower.”

When Janette passed in 2006, her daughter Rita Forrester took over the Fold. Rita sits in with the band each Saturday night to welcome the crowd and pay tribute to her family. Before the music even starts, Rita, her family, and her friends prepare the food to serve that night. In addition to soup beans and cornbread, Fold concessions include egg salad, made from Janette's recipe, and a menagerie of cakes baked by community women. Together, these women work to ensure that the Carter Family circle remains unbroken.



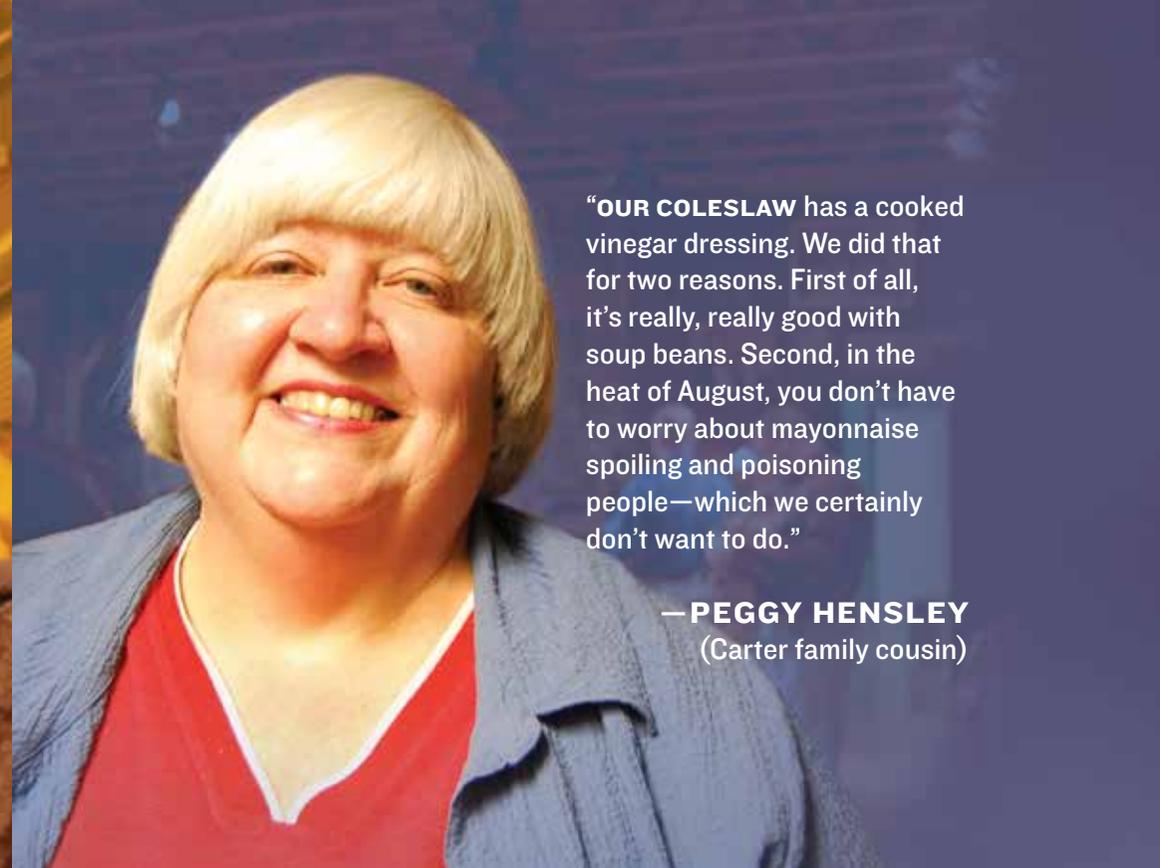
“GRANDMA CARTER WAS KNOWN for her molasses stack cakes. She would make them as high as thirteen, fourteen layers. You roll the layers out real thin, and molasses is what you use to sweeten them. And then in the middle, you fill it with homemade apple butter. You talk about good with a glass of milk. It doesn’t get better than that.”

— RITA FORRESTER
(granddaughter of A.P. and Sara Carter)



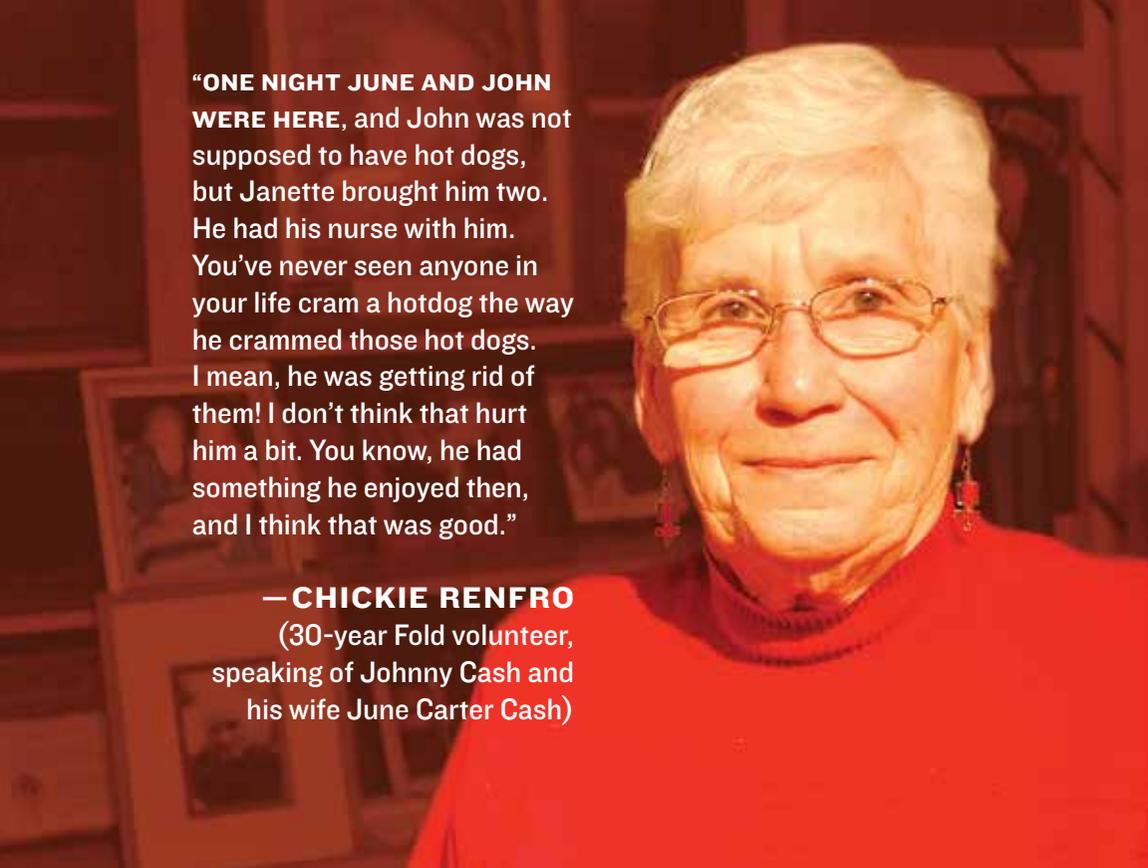
“OUR COLESLAW has a cooked vinegar dressing. We did that for two reasons. First of all, it’s really, really good with soup beans. Second, in the heat of August, you don’t have to worry about mayonnaise spoiling and poisoning people—which we certainly don’t want to do.”

— PEGGY HENSLEY
(Carter family cousin)



“ONE NIGHT JUNE AND JOHN WERE HERE, and John was not supposed to have hot dogs, but Janette brought him two. He had his nurse with him. You’ve never seen anyone in your life cram a hotdog the way he crammed those hot dogs. I mean, he was getting rid of them! I don’t think that hurt him a bit. You know, he had something he enjoyed then, and I think that was good.”

— CHICKIE RENFRO
(30-year Fold volunteer, speaking of Johnny Cash and his wife June Carter Cash)



“THERE ARE PEOPLE who want to keep the old recipes alive, so I don’t think they’ll ever completely die out. Hopefully there will be a revival and more people will cook the old-fashioned way and play the old-fashioned music and keep our roots and our history alive.”

— MARIANNA ROBERTS
(Carter family cousin)



APPALACHIAN AWAKENINGS

THE RADICAL INCLUSIVENESS OF RONNI LUNDY

by John T. Edge

I CAME TO THE UNIVERSITY OF MISSISSIPPI to study race relations, for the burden of race was always on me. Born in the Georgia home of a Confederate brigadier general, I began college in the same month that Ronald Reagan took the podium at the Neshoba County Fair in Philadelphia, Mississippi, to woo white conservative voters with these words: “I believe in states’ rights...”

Early in my tenure at the University of Mississippi, I recognized that class and race were intertwined. And so were a range of other issues. When Will Campbell, the Yale-educated Baptist preacher from Amite County, Mississippi, delivered a talk about redneck stereotypes at a Center for the Study of Southern Culture conference on Elvis Presley, I listened as he defined rednecks as working class women and men. Campbell rejected the assumption that bigotry was their defining trait, claimed the mantle of redneck for himself, and closed by declaring the same status for his “beautiful, brilliant, lesbian daughter.”

Those words rocked me back on my heels. And they prepared me for the radical inclusiveness of Kentucky native Ronni Lundy, the SFA founding member and lifetime achievement award winner who has long championed the people of Appalachia. Ronni argues that class has riven as deeply as race, especially among Southerners living in the upper reaches of the region.

At the sixth Southern Foodways Symposium back in 2003, Ronni picked up the good reverend’s message when, in a talk entitled “How to



Make it Real Compared to Possum,” she asked attendees, “Before you let the words ‘white trash’ slip from your lips again, which we do constantly in this culture, before you say those words ever again, answer this question for me: At what precise income level, at what level of taste, how many trailers do you need to own before a human being becomes trash?”

Through the years, Ronni has not slowed. “We artists/storytellers/journalists/historians have to wake up every morning and do an inventory of our souls, if we want to do real work,” she wrote me recently, sounding a message that was typically challenging and encouraging. In a year when the SFA marks the fiftieth anniversary of restaurant desegregation and uses that moment to ask wide-ranging questions about contemporary inclusion and exclusion—about who is made welcome at today’s welcome table, and who is made unwelcome because of differences that include class, sexuality, and obesity—Ronni’s Appalachian timbre rings clarion. 🍷

John T. Edge directs the Southern Foodways Alliance.

PHOTO, THIS PAGE by Pableaux Johnson.

ABOUT GRAVY

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DOCUMENT

STUDY

CELEBRATE



THE MISSION of the Southern Foodways Alliance is to document, study, and celebrate the diverse food cultures of the changing American South.

We set a common table where black and white, rich and poor—all who gather—may consider our history and our future in a spirit of reconciliation.

Not a member? Join us at southernfoodways.org.

southernfoodways.org
info@southernfoodways.org
662-915-3368

UPCOMING

APRIL 6:

New South Family Supper, Atlanta, GA

MAY 15:

Cornbread Nation 7 published

MAY 19:

Cured Meat oral history project debuts at southernfoodways.org

JUNE 20-21:

Summer Foodways Symposium, Jackson, MS



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