

# GRAVY

\$7



ISSUE #54

## POP GOES THE SOUTH

A QUARTERLY FROM THE SOUTHERN FOODWAYS ALLIANCE



# THE SFA SERVES YOU...



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COVER PHOTO by Matt Eich. Kierra Hampton poses outside the Crystal Grill in Greenwood, Mississippi, during a break from waitress training. In the 1960s, the Crystal Grill was one of many Southern restaurants to respond to racial desegregation laws by reinventing itself as a private club. Fifty years later, Hampton claims her home state and her place of employment with pride.

PHOTO ABOVE by Denny Culbert. Parker's Barbecue, Wilson, North Carolina.

# A PROUD BIG SISTER

## GRAVY GAINS A SIBLING

by Sara Camp Arnold

“Pop Goes the South” is the SFA’s tag line for 2015. To prime our readership for a year of examining pop culture, I interviewed University of Mississippi emeritus history professor Charles Reagan Wilson. A pioneer in Southern Studies and the curator of an impressive collection of “Southern tacky” memorabilia, Professor Wilson knows a thing or five about popular culture. We spoke about what popular culture brought to the South beginning in the late nineteenth century. And we discussed how Southern messages have been delivered to the rest of the country via film, radio, and phonographs, beginning in the 1920s; and through television, beginning in the 1950s.

We didn’t talk about magazines, which have been around for centuries. Nor did we discuss a much newer form, the podcast, which is the next big thing for the SFA. We hope you will tune in to our *Gravy* podcast, hosted and produced by Tina Antolini. By the time you read this issue, we will have four episodes in the archives. Binge-listening is highly encouraged.

Both *Gravy* iterations use food to tell thoughtful, engaging, original stories about our region and its people. For this *Gravy* print issue, we’ve focused on images. Train your eyes on this evocative art and photography from across the region. And when you’re finished, close your eyes and feast your ears on the latest episode of our podcast, free and downloadable on iTunes, Stitcher, and SoundCloud. 🍷

# NOW HEAR THIS!



*Bite into a collard sandwich with members of the Lumbee Tribe of North Carolina. Experience Christian coffee house culture in Knoxville. Wade into the water issues facing oyster growth in Apalachicola Bay. Drink and dance with the Saturday morning crowd at Fred's Lounge in Louisiana.*

**Subscribe to the SFA's Gravy podcast on iTunes.  
A new episode airs every other Thursday.**



# SOUTHERN FOOD & POP CULTURE

## CONNECTING TRADITION & MODERNITY

*Charles Reagan Wilson holds forth*

### DEFINITIONS & HOGS

POPULAR CULTURE IS MASS CULTURE. It's mass-produced. It doesn't strive for authenticity, for craftsmanship, so much as to promote consumption. It is made for wide audiences, not for narrow audiences. You can make an easy contrast with folklife and folk culture, which tend to be rooted in communities and built around social groups.

In the South, pop culture is negotiated between tradition and modernity. It often draws from folklore, from folk symbols and rituals. But it is not so much concerned with authenticity as it is with reproducing these symbols for broad audiences.

One of my favorite examples of this negotiation is the pig. Hogs were a major source of Southern foodways going all the way back to settlement. When the South produced what we might call a fast food place, the barbecue joint, the pig was at the center of it. Barbecue restaurants seem traditional. But they also commodify a traditional Southern food. The pig itself becomes the negotiator, the popular culture symbol that draws together tradition and modernity.

That's one point: Popular culture is mass-produced. It connects tradition and modernity, and produces a group of common, well-known symbols and icons that become associated with the South itself.

## AUNT JEMIMA & JEB STUART

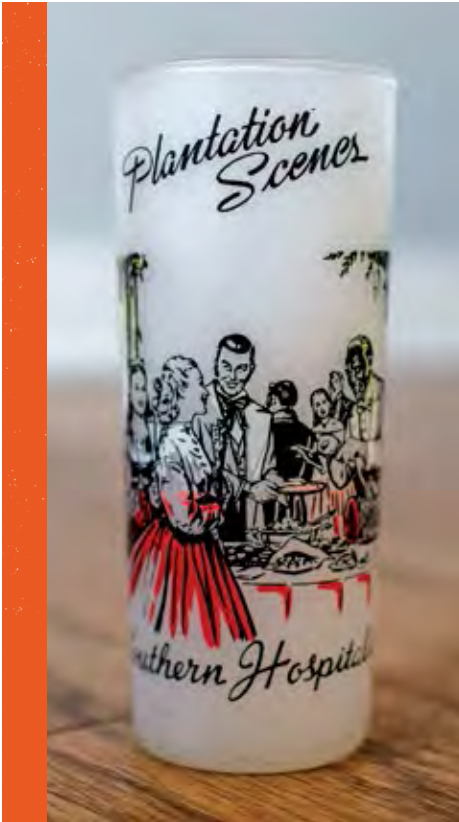
THE NEW SOUTH MOVEMENT IN THE 1880S was about diversifying the economy and making the South wealthier. In that same period, the South produced popular culture representations and artifacts related to the Lost Cause and to the Confederacy. Robert E. Lee on a bag of flour, for example. His image had moral authority in the South. You had Stonewall Jackson and Jefferson Davis. You had Jeb Stuart, the romantic cavalryman. He was very salable. So you had those images on plates, on all sorts of mass-produced goods.

Often those goods were manufactured in other parts of the country. Despite the New South Movement's call for economic diversification, the South remained a largely agricultural area. In the American industrial

economy, the North was often the producer, and the South was the consumer. Mass-produced popular culture items were symbols that the region's people could respond to.

Aunt Jemima is a good example of this. Aunt Jemima was introduced at the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago. Nancy Green, a freed slave, was the original image for the first ready-mix pancake mix. What Aunt Jemima sold was the South as a place of gentility and servants. Popular culture is about mass-producing images as well as mass-producing pancakes.

What Aunt Jemima gave the company was this image, deep in the American psyche, of the South as a land where people served you. Even though the pancake mix is fast and convenient, it's like she is symbolically serving you. She always is portrayed with the



bandana, the apron. When she appears in person, like at the World's Fair, she speaks in dialect. She tells tales about the Old South. This is part of this romanticization of the Old South that occurs in the late nineteenth century. The company that produces Aunt Jemima is not from the South. It is a Northern company exploiting this fascination with the South in the American market.

## GOOD TO THE LAST DROP

IN THE 1920S AND 1930S, popular culture forms that were not distinctive to the South, but made use of Southern materials, emerged: movies, radio, and phonographs. In the 1930s, marketers of food products—Maxwell House coffee is a good example—were sponsoring radio shows. They had a live radio show from Nashville. There was an actual Maxwell House hotel in Nashville, and that's where the brand name comes from. Here's this fancy, upscale hotel. Of course, they have black waiters who are serving the coffee. And so it's the ideal of this gentility, of morning coffee, with a waiter serving you: All of this becomes a popular-culture way of selling coffee.

Part of what popular culture does is take these Southern cultural experiences and project them onto the national scale. They become American as well as Southern.

## COOKING WITH ELVIS: A Q & A

**GRAVY: YOU HAVE THIS SET OF ELVIS RECIPE CARDS. And Elvis is not someone I associate with food, except a peanut butter-and-banana sandwich.**

You can't say Elvis was a gourmet. But Elvis loved food. And he would have liked to be a member of the Southern Foodways Alliance. But these recipes—they're not very imaginative, you know. A hamburger, boneless chicken, meatloaf, home-fried potatoes, and a ham sandwich.



**Gravy: Why would a marketer want to connect Elvis and food?**

Because you connect Elvis to everything. There's a market for Elvis. Because people who are crazy about Elvis are crazy about all things Elvis.

I think Elvis's audience today is Southern whites. It's working-class people, and it's women. All of those people are touched by Elvis. Despite his extraordinary celebrity and success, he remained very much an identifiable white Southerner of a certain time period and place. And his food was part of that. A lot

of working-class white Southerners identify with his food.

We say in the South, "You don't get above your raising." And Elvis never got above his raising. And food was a classic case of how he never got above his raising. He was not aspiring to go to a high-style restaurant or eat fine food. He was eating what he grew up eating, and he still loved it all his life, even though he could go anywhere and he could afford to eat anything. And I think people who would buy these cards appreciate that about Elvis. And they probably are going home and cooking these recipes.

## CHITLIN STRUT

ONE OF THE THINGS WE HAVEN'T TALKED ABOUT in terms of popular culture is festivals. Most of the festivals in the South today are popular culture, but they grew out of folk traditions. The fair, the county fair, is the folk progenitor. At the county fair, in the old days, you would have had a beauty contest. You would have had the queen of the county fair. Out of that came the beauty pageant that is popular culture. They're not the old folk festival that goes back to agricultural fairs. They're modern. They commodify the women.

So many of the festivals today are popular culture in that they aim at a mass audience. And they are often all about consumption. But they still draw from that traditional Southern iconography. In Mississippi, the watermelon festival in Water Valley is an example. So is the catfish festival in Belzoni. There's a chitlin strut in Salley, South Carolina, which I love. I've never been to it; that's one of the places I'd love to go. Even something lowly like chitlins, they have raised it up, and it becomes a tourist attraction.



## LUCKY DOGS

PLACES HAVE THEIR PARTICULARITIES. In the postmodern twenty-first century, tourism is everywhere. We're trying to get people to come to our places, to spend their money and eat the local food. New Orleans is the classic case: eating oysters at Acme oyster bar, buying the beignets from Café du Monde, and getting the muffuletta at the Central Grocery.

My wife's family made homemade Italian sausage. They lived in Jackson, Mississippi. And when my wife was a little girl, they would drive to New Orleans to go to Central Grocery to buy the fennel seeds that you couldn't buy in Mississippi. They were an "Italian food" ingredient. Central Grocery was owned by an Italian family. Her family would drive down from Jackson to New Orleans, they'd eat a muffuletta, they'd drive back, and make their Italian sausage. They made a special trip—tourism—to get this fennel seed for their Italian sausage. That was a long time ago. But that's an example of a way that food can figure into people coming to a place and spending their money, which is what the tourist industry wants them to do.



It goes back a long way, but Lafcadio Hearn, in the late nineteenth century, wrote some of the earliest articles about food in New Orleans. He talks about the street vendors. And they're still there. Lucky Dogs are a good example. In New Orleans, food is central to your experience. Whether it's eating at a world-renowned restaurant, or a beignet, or a muffuletta. Or, as the bars are winding down, eating a Lucky Dog.

## SOMBREROS & TACOS

THE DEMOGRAPHICS OF THE SOUTH HAVE CHANGED fairly rapidly in historical terms. Most notably you now have Mexican restaurants in huge scale. The imagery of Mexican restaurants is often stereotypical: sombreros and donkeys. That's becoming a part of the Southern iconography.

These restaurants have become a part of the collective popular culture landscape. I'm a big believer in landscapes. The landscape of the South has evolved to incorporate Mexican food. You see it whenever you eat in a Mexican restaurant. It's not just Latinos eating there, it's a wide range of whites and blacks and Asians and whoever else wants Mexican food. For all of these people, Mexican restaurants are part of a specifically Southern landscape, where you have the choice of getting fried chicken or barbecue or hamburgers or tacos.

POPULAR CULTURE PROVIDES easily accessible representations of the South. They're mass produced, and they're easy to dismiss. They often have a sense of humor about themselves, and that's one thing I like about them. They're kitsch. They often offer lively commentary through their imagery or design features. And they can tell us something about the South. 🍷

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*Charles Reagan Wilson taught history and Southern Studies at the University of Mississippi for thirty-three years. He retired in 2014.*

PHOTOS, THIS ARTICLE, by *Danny Klimetz*. Pieces from the "Southern Tacky" collection of Professor Charles Reagan Wilson, on display at the Center for the Study of Southern Culture.



ROAD TRIP

## A DEMOCRATIC WAY OF LOOKING

FOOD, DRINK, AND POP CULTURE IN SOUTHERN PHOTOGRAPHY

"I HAD THIS NOTION of what I called a democratic way of looking around, that nothing was more or less important." That's how Memphis native William Eggleston, the color photography pioneer, describes his approach to capturing his surroundings. Eggleston's primary-hued world of grocery-store parking lots, drive-in restaurants, and gas-station signs inspired this assemblage of photographs from the Pop Culture South.

Popular culture is defined and disseminated through images. When most effective, pop culture images are essentialist, distilling complex webs of people and places and ideas into simple and direct photographs. The food and drink images that follow tell us something about twelve Southern states and one Southern precinct. They broadcast values, realities, and aspirations.

Many of these photos are roadside glimpses, and for good reason. Mass-market goods get delivered on roadways. Along those routes, billboards and storefronts compete for consumer dollars. Join SFA as we travel the highways and byways of the Pop Culture South.

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### ALABAMA

Barbecue has long been a roadside food. Many of today's most storied joints began as shebangs with earthen pits. Today, earthen pits are few. And barbecue trailers, like this one in the Black Belt town of Selma, are many. Culinary tourism is booming in the Black Belt. Hunters travel here to shoot their limit of bucks each year. And barbecue pilgrims bag their rib sandwich limits at Sherry's Cook Out. *Photo by Jerry Siegel.*

## ARKANSAS

The Arkansas Delta town of Helena, on the west side of the Mississippi River, shares geographic, demographic, and cultural features with the better known Mississippi Delta, which hugs the eastern bank of that big and muddy river. This restaurant doubles as a juke joint, placing it firmly in the long tradition of rakish Delta establishments famous for inexpensive food, hard drink, and ragged blues. *Photo by Dave Anderson.*

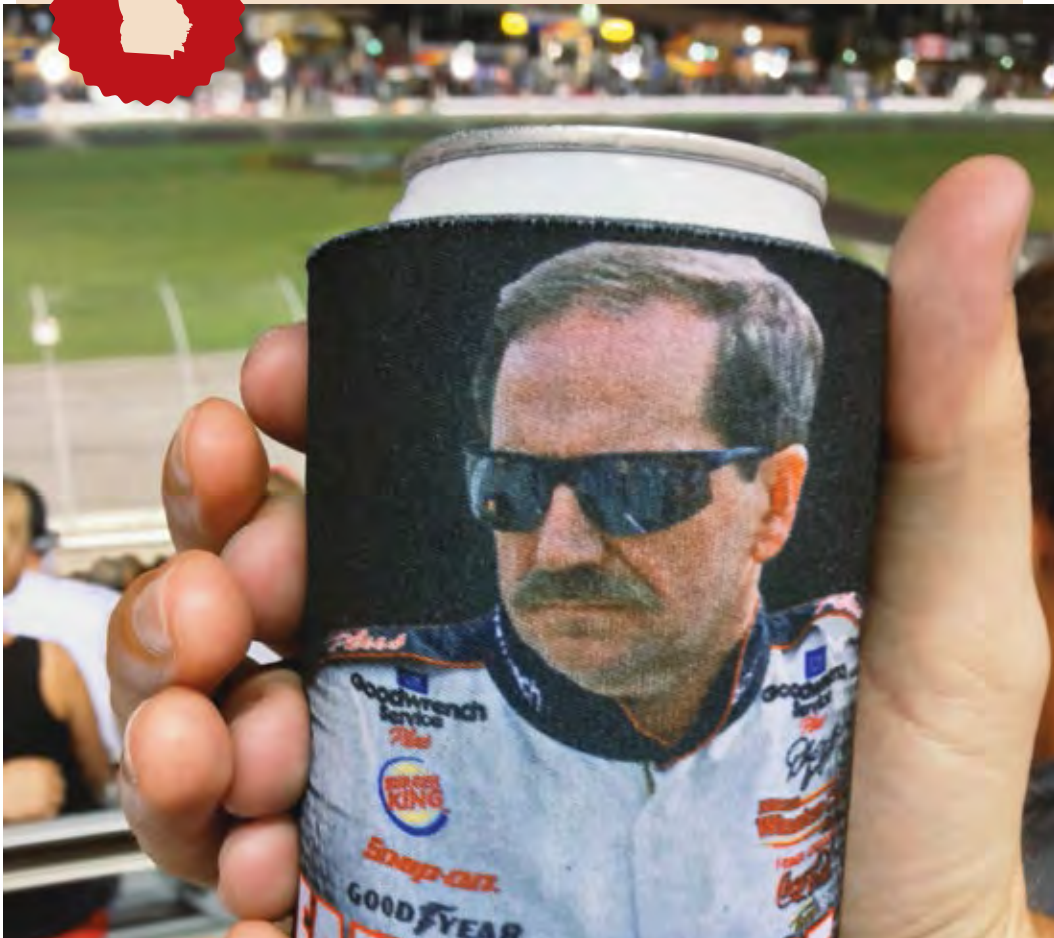


## FLORIDA

Dangling from the rest of the continental United States, framed by the Atlantic and the Gulf, Florida is the South's destination state. A first beach for immigrants and a last beach for snow birds, it's also an occasional last resort for criminals. On January 9, 1991, Aileen Wuornos was arrested outside the Last Resort Bar in Port Orange. Charged with the murders of seven men, Wuornos, who had been working as a prostitute, made a full confession. She was executed by lethal injection in Florida in 2002. *Photo by Joshua Dudley Greer.*

## GEORGIA

Atlanta Motor Speedway in suburban Hampton, where this beer was consumed, is hallowed ground. As a boy, President Jimmy Carter worked as a ticket-taker here. The track was also the backdrop for opening scenes in the film *Smokey and the Bandit II*. Dale Earnhardt, depicted on this foam insulator, is a five-time Atlanta 500 champion who won for the first time in 1980. A crowd favorite, Earnhardt went on to win Atlanta four more times. *Photo by Troy Stains.*



## KENTUCKY

Forego the Colonel in favor of Indi's spicy fried chicken. That's what in-the-know folk do at this mini-chain with locations on both sides of the Ohio River. Indi's is famous for fried keel bones of chicken drenched in homemade vinegary hot sauce, washed down with pink lemonade. Bright lights and big flavors are the touchstones of the Louisville outpost. *Photo by Titus Ruscitti.*

## LOUISIANA

Crawfish and Louisiana State University are two of the state's most recognizable icons. Each winter and spring LSU students and alumni alike stage crawfish boils on campus in Baton Rouge and in New Orleans, the city to which its graduates flock. Most crawfish are harvested in Cajun Country, south of I-10 and west of New Orleans. Today, crawfish and crawfish boils serve as proxies for the state. *Photo by Pableaux Johnson.*



## MISSISSIPPI

Most of the nation's farmed catfish is produced in Mississippi. Much of it is now farm-raised in ponds. Wild catfish can also be caught by line, by dynamite, or by hand. That middle technique, sometimes called blast fishing, is generally illegal. The latter technique, known as noodling, involves a blind dig into a catfish hole and a bare-handed grab of a gill. Catfish are rife in Mississippi waterways such as Sardis Lake, north of Oxford, pictured here. *Photo by Houston Cofield.*

## NORTH CAROLINA

North Carolina is the nation's largest producer of sweet potatoes. A 1995 letter-writing campaign mounted by elementary school children secured the place of this root as the state's official vegetable. In towns like Graham, pictured here, locals take pride in Beauregards, Rubies, and Jewels. The best roots are cured immediately after harvest to convert starches to sugars and intensify flavors. Of late, sweet potato greens have become a white-tablecloth specialty across the region and beyond. *Photo by Chris Fowler.*



## SOUTH CAROLINA

Pancake houses dot Kings Highway in Myrtle Beach, serving cheap breakfast fare to hungover spring breakers and beach-bound families with children. This flank of South Carolina was once plantation country. Tourists can now book scenic boat tours that depart from Wacca Wache Marina in nearby Murrells Inlet. The operators promise “rice plantations, trunk gates, slave cabins, moss-laden oak trees, alligators, eagles, and osprey.” *Photo by Chris Fowler.*

## TENNESSEE

McDonald's sells burgers and fries in more than 100 countries. Franchises often attempt to go native. In Oxford, Mississippi, home of *Gravy*, William Faulkner memorabilia blankets the walls of the University Avenue location. Tourists who journey to Gatlinburg for the Smoky Mountain vistas don't even have to leave the McDonald's to take in the mountain panorama, thanks to this wall-plastered photograph. *Photo by Joshua Dudley Greer.*



## TEXAS

Vencil Mares has been smoking beef and pork at Taylor Café since 1949. Here, a satisfied regular exits the café after his meal. Likely, he ate a “bohunk” sausage and washed it down with a Lone Star beer. What you can't see from the street, but what this photo hints at, is that the interior of this barbecue joint is a drinker's reliquary, the sort of smoke-patinaed saloon that beckons locals and culinary tourists alike. *Photo by Jody Horton.*

## VIRGINIA

The Old Fiddler's Convention in Galax has been drawing musicians and dancers since 1935. B.K., pictured here, is a flatfoot dancer whose fashion broadcasts his history. Nearby Franklin County was once a hub of moonshining. Today, the region is a hub of music making. In the Appalachian South, string music and white-dog whiskey have long been commercial products. *Photo by Pat Jarrett.*



## NEW YORK CITY

During the Great Migration of the twentieth century, African American Southerners sought a better life in Northern cities. Many immigrants from the Carolinas landed in Brooklyn. Here in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood, the Southern diaspora still shops for tastes of home at the Carolina Country Store and grubs at Soul Food Kitchen. And each year the Brooklyn Borough Hall stages a Thanksgiving sweet potato and collard green giveaway for hungry or homesick locals. *Photo by Nicole A. Taylor.*

## THE SUBVERSIVE NOSTALGIA OF CEDRIC SMITH

His grandmother ran a country store in Thomaston, Georgia. Though the store burned before Smith can remember, he recalls playing in the woods behind the tumbledown remains, riffling through junked advertising signs. Like art, advertisements carry embedded messages, Smith realized. Through art, he has recognized the complement.

Much of Smith's work is rooted in Thomaston, where his grandmother raised chickens and stitched quilts. His fabric usage pays tribute to her talent with thread. And he honors her service as a church usher by sketching a line drawing of a church on the back of each painting, as part of his signature.

Layering paint, photographs, scraps of paper, and strips of fabric, Smith sells the viewer on ideas both overt and subliminal. Back in the 1970s, when Smith came of age and awareness, few blacks appeared in advertising campaigns. When they did appear, the portrayals were often based on stereotypes of the Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben sort. Smith took those sins of visual omission as a challenge. His first exhibit was a series of paintings inspired by a lyric from the 1989 Public Enemy anthem "Fight the Power": "Most of my heroes don't appear on no stamps."

With commercial advertising and photography as inspiration, Smith attempts a sort of projected inclusion. When Smith and *Gravy* editor Sara Camp Arnold were working to select the images that follow, he told her that he works to portray black life as "just as American" and "just as salable."

Smith practices a subversive nostalgia, sampling and elaborating the romantic advertising imagery used to sell Southern products both inside and outside the region.

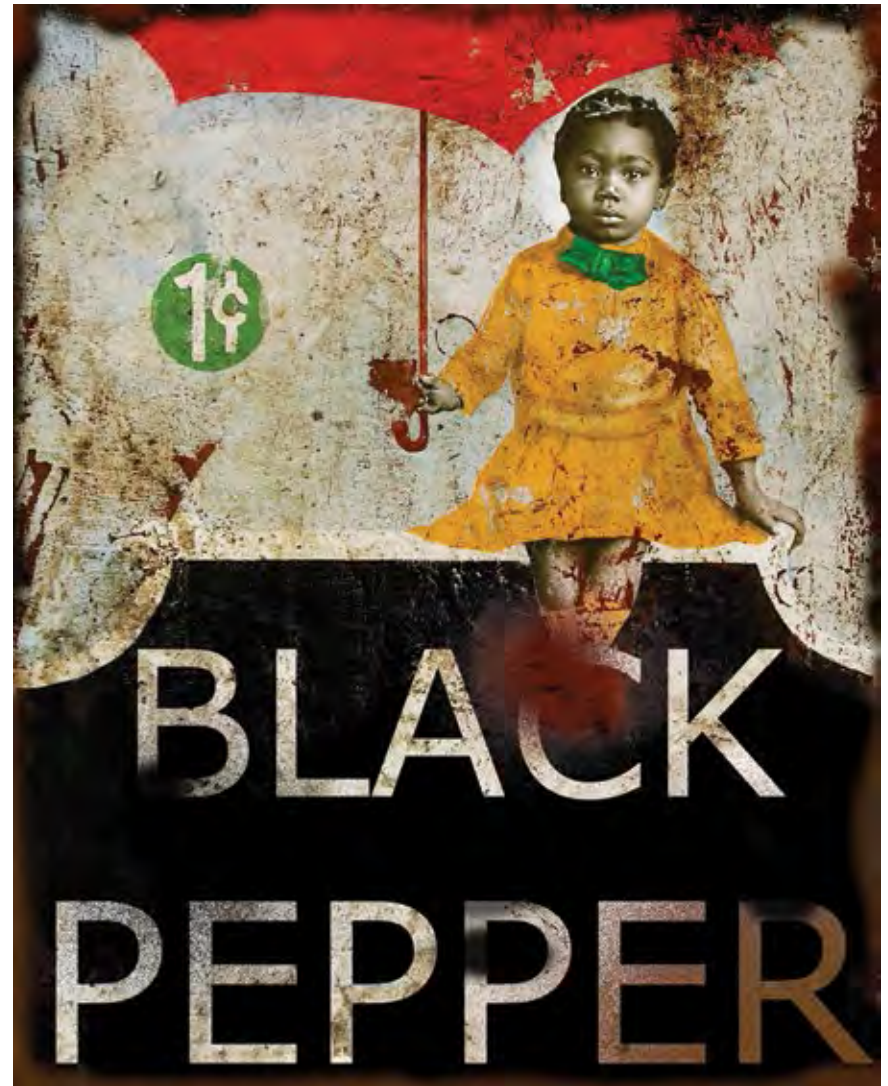
—John T. Edge



▲ *Carrot Cake*, pigment print on paper



- ▲ *Daddy's Girl*, mixed media on canvas
- ◀ *Sugarland*, pigment print on paper

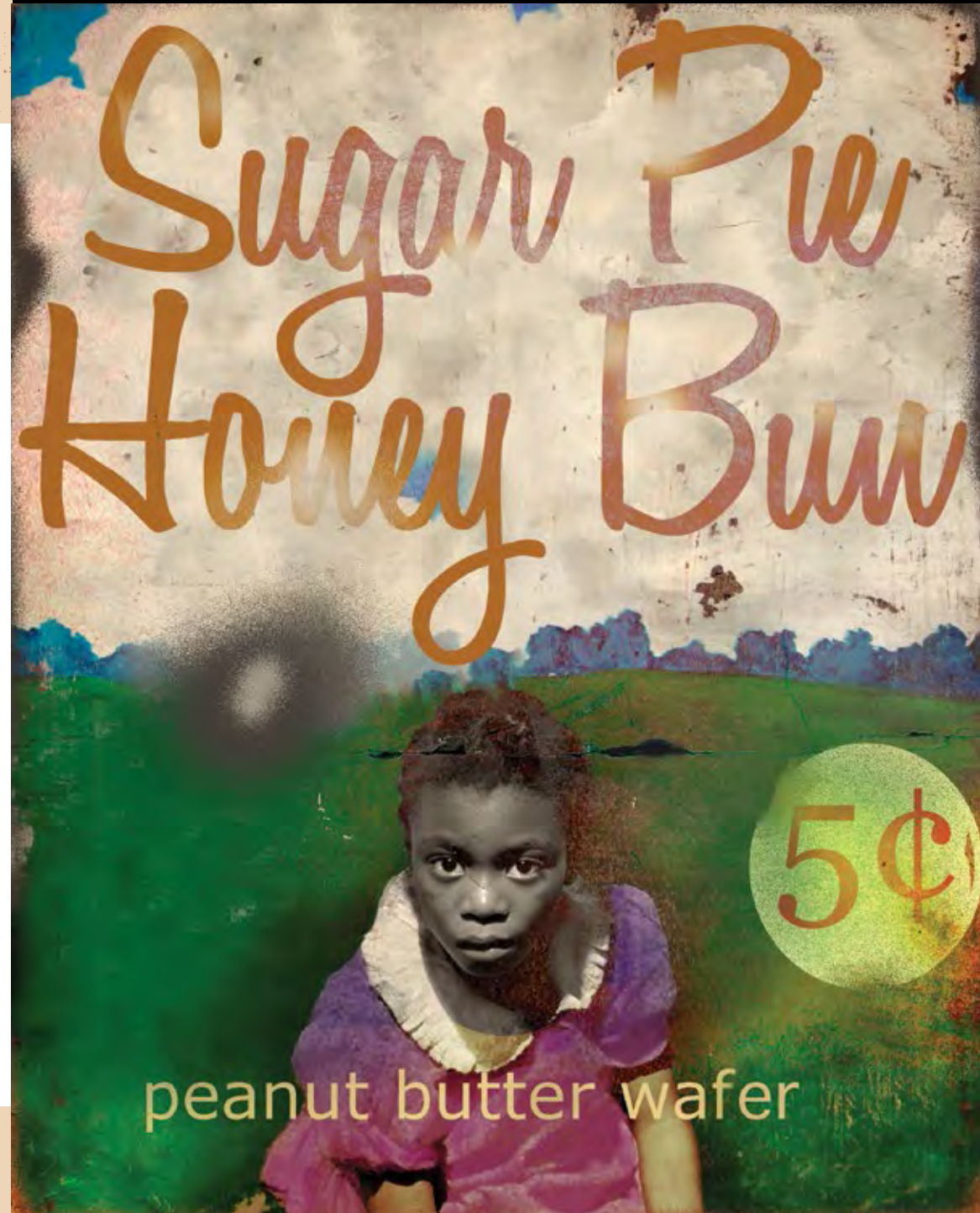


▲ *Black Pepper*, pigment print on paper

◀ *Cornbread Muffins*, mixed media on canvas



- ▲ *Cabbage*, mixed media on canvas
- ▶ *Peanut Butter Wafer*, pigment print on paper



# THE ALL-AMERICAN

# SMITHFIELD\* HOT DOG

(\*NC, NOT SMITHFIELD FOODS!)

ONE HALLOWEEN,  
A FRIEND SUGGESTED WE  
DRESS UP AS ICONIC FOODS  
FROM OUR HOMETOWNS.

SO...  
ME  
AS A  
HOT  
DOG

WHERE I LIVE NOW, MOST FOLKS ROOT FOR THE  
HOME TEAM, BUT I ROOT FOR SMITHFIELD!

HIT GRASS-WIN SALAD!

CAROLINA PACKERS

(A DIFFERENT YEAR,\* MY  
DOG DRESSED UP IN A  
SIMILAR SUIT.)

\*SURELY  
THIS  
MAKES IT  
TOTALLY  
OK!

MY NATIVE SMITHFIELD,  
NC HAS BEEN CALLED  
"GROUND ZERO" FOR BRIGHT  
RED HOT DOGS.

THEY'RE  
BEAUTIFUL!

↑ A PRESENT AS RED AS  
SANTA'S SUIT

AND DELICIOUS!

CAROLINA-STYLE WITH  
CHILI, SLAW, & ONIONS

FOR US, THEY ARE EVERYWHERE & EVERYTHING.  
WE HAVE...

↑ STEVEN'S SAUSAGES  
(SINCE 1948) & CAROLINA PACKERS' ↑  
(SINCE 1941)

MILLIE'S HOT DOGS  
TAKE OUT - 989-7863

← AT →

ESPECIALLY

LESS  
THAN  
ONE  
MILE  
APART!

BOTH OF WHICH YOU  
CAN BUY IN BAGS\*  
REALLY!

\*GREAT  
PARTY  
BANTER

IS THAT A  
BAG OF  
HOT  
DOGS?

TWO!!

THEY'RE EVERY DOG'S DREAM.

SMITHFIELD  
GIRLS!  
TOO!

WHATEVER.

# EARL'S ART SHOP AND CAFÉ

by Sara Camp Arnold



AT THE INTERSECTION OF POP CULTURE and vernacular art, Mississippi artist Earl Wayne Simmons works. Born in 1956, Simmons has lived and labored for most of his life in Bovina, a few miles east of Vicksburg. As a child he fashioned toys from found objects and developed a grade-school passion for drawing and painting. By the time Simmons dropped out of twelfth grade, he was selling his creations to teachers.

Simmons left Mississippi for Job Corps training in Louisville, Kentucky, where he continued to build the sculptures of cars, motorcycles, airplanes, jukeboxes, and animals that he collectively refers to as his toys. By the late 1970s, he was back in Bovina, constructing a multi-use building he called Earl's Art Shop. Between construction, landscaping, and sawmill jobs, Simmons designed, built, and expanded the rambling structure, using reclaimed or repurposed materials. Eventually, Earl's Art Shop encompassed a studio, gallery, café, and souvenir shop. Visitors could tour the property, sip a drink at the café, peruse the gallery, and make a purchase at the souvenir shop, literally taking a piece of Earl's Art Shop home with them.

In 1994, the Mississippi Arts Commission awarded Simmons a fellowship. The recognition brought a new wave of visitors to Earl's Art Shop, and he used the fellowship funding to add multiple wings to the building. Over the 1990s, Simmons turned his focus from sculpture to painting. His paintings focus on Mississippi pop culture icons like hot tamales, juke joints, and Highway 61. Often they riff on images from mass-market advertisements, calling out brand names Budweiser, Coca-Cola, or Kool cigarettes.

Earl's Art Shop was gutted by fire in 2002 and again in 2012. Today Simmons lives in a FEMA trailer and works outdoors; Earl's Art Shop is under construction yet again. Lesley Silver, owner of The Attic gallery in Vicksburg, serves as Simmons's primary retail outlet. Over the past thirty-five years, Simmons has achieved something rare for a vernacular artist. Through his idiosyncratic rendering of popular culture, he has become a pop culture icon. 🍷



*Art courtesy of Earl Simmons and the Attic Gallery, Vicksburg, MS, photographed by Kaitlyn Silver Boerner.*



**BREAKFAST**

# **BISCUIT TIME**

*Photographs by Kate Medley*

IF THE SOUTH IS THE REPUBLIC of the fast food biscuit, North Carolina might be its capital. Drive the state and you discover the off-ramp pleasures of Greensboro-based Biscuitville. Sunrise Biscuit Kitchen in Chapel Hill stalls traffic at the town entrance on Saturday mornings as dozens of cars queue to drive-thru. Bojangles and Hardees are seemingly everywhere. Chains and mini-chains like these vend biscuits across North Carolina and, increasingly, the wider region. While the hallmark of most fast food is industrial production systems, these purveyors stir, knead, and bake from scratch each morning, relying on four basic ingredients: flour, buttermilk, fat, and expert labor. 🍴

Biscuitville



Hardee's

Sunrise Biscuit Kitchen



THIS PAGE,  
*Sunrise Biscuit  
Kitchen*



# 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](http://southernfoodways.org).  
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## FILL UP ON GRAVY

- All SFA members receive a subscription to the print edition of *Gravy*. It's a new year, which means it's time to renew your membership at [southernfoodways.org](http://southernfoodways.org).
- Subscribe to our *Gravy* podcast as well. It's easy, free, and available to anyone. Search for "gravy" in the iTunes store. If you use the Stitcher app, you can also find us there. Again, just search for "gravy."
- Archives, news, and other tidbits for both versions of *Gravy* are available on our website, at [southernfoodways.org/gravy](http://southernfoodways.org/gravy).



*If our water was  
any closer to nature*

**IT WOULD STILL  
BE IN THE GROUND.**

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