

A Meal *at* DELLA'S PLACE

*Local foodways and
entrepreneurship at a
Raleigh boardinghouse*

by

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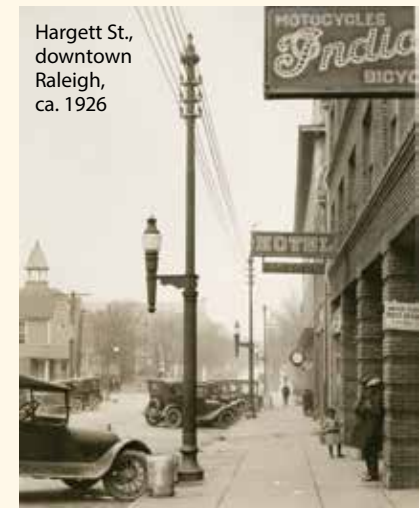


We live in messy, in-between spaces.

Take the Southern boardinghouse from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. The women (and some men) running Southern boardinghouses lived in cities and small towns, near remote vacation spots and railroad-accessible resorts, temporary logging or railroad camps, and more permanent factories. They clustered around schools, courthouses, and business centers. Some keepers called themselves businesspeople; others insisted they were just helping out extended family or friends. Lines blurred between boardinghouses and hotels, and also between restaurants, brothels, cafés, taverns, resorts, and private homes. Owners, proprietors, and customers negotiated the uses of these flexible food spaces.

The food was diverse, too. Ingredients for the boardinghouse table were grown in the backyard or processed in distant factories, prepared simply or in complicated dishes. Cooks chased culinary fashion or remained tried and true. Boardinghouses, and their foods, evaded easy definition. They were spaces of transition and becoming, not quite one thing and not quite another. One academic word for that is “liminal.” Liminal spaces are ones in which definitions are in flux, new ways of being are tried out, and powerful transitions emerge. That is the wonder and usefulness of boardinghouses to the Southern food story.

The Federal Writers’ Project (FWP), one of President Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal arts programs, sought to capture a portrait of everyday life in the United States in the 1930s. With that goal in mind, it is no wonder that boardinghouse



Hargett St.,
downtown
Raleigh,
ca. 1926

keepers, lodgers, and diners emerge frequently in the FWP’s papers and transcripts. In 1939, Della McCullers of Raleigh, North Carolina, told her boardinghouse story to FWP documentarian Robert O. King. McCullers ran a restaurant and gathering space she called a boardinghouse.

23



Raleigh branch of the African American-owned Mechanics and Farmers Bank



McCauley Hospital, a private hospital for African American patients

The few beds she kept were mostly occupied by extended family. McCullers' primary business was food. She served meals for working folks in the heart of Raleigh's African American business district.

Located in the 400 block of S. Blount Street, "Aunt" Della's place, as the establishment was called, was mere blocks away from Shaw University, the first historically black institute of higher education in the South. In the 1930s, residents of the neighborhood could fulfill all of their needs on Blount Street or nearby Hargett Street. There were general stores and gas stations, churches and beauty parlors, doctors' offices and a drug store. McCullers was born in the neighborhood in 1874, married in 1911, and widowed in 1916. When King interviewed her for the FWP, she was sixty-four years old. Before opening Della's, she had taken in

laundry, cooked in private homes, operated a café, and managed a hotel.

Over the course of her adult life, McCullers successfully shifted careers and adapted her business strategies according to new technologies, changing economic conditions, and the needs of her employers and customers, both black and white. Born Della Harris, she learned how to wash and iron as a girl. Later, she learned to cook while working in the home of a white Raleigh family. After her husband, John McCullers, a brickmason, passed away, McCullers returned to the workforce to support her three young children.

The introduction of household appliances and automated commercial laundries drove McCullers' first career change. As a result, she found that fewer white families were sending their laundry out to African American washerwomen. She told

Courtesy of the State Archives of North Carolina



Royal Theater, which served African American moviegoers from 1920 to 1961



Lightner Arcade, a multiuse hub of African American life in Raleigh

King, "As I was a good cook and there was only a few places where [African Americans] could buy meals, I decided to open a small café for them to eat in." She was successful enough in this first venture to see her daughters graduate from high school and to provide for her family's needs.

A shift in Raleigh's demographics and restaurant landscape pushed McCullers' second career change. Greek immigrants arrived in Raleigh and began opening hot dog stands. Soon, according to McCullers, they expanded their menus to cater to an African American clientele. Her own café could not compete. When a neighbor built a hotel on nearby Cabarrus Street, McCullers leased it from him, installed a café, and ran both the eighteen-room hotel and the café successfully until the stock market crash of 1929.

As the country descended into the

Great Depression, diners had less cash to eat out, and roomers sought cheaper accommodations. Women like McCullers struggled, too, as the costs of groceries and utilities went up. Dispassionately, McCullers said, "Well, I had to make a living somehow, so I gave up the hotel and came over here in this little place and started my boarding house." Her decision to classify the restaurant as a boardinghouse was a strategic one: The fee for acquiring a restaurant license from the city of Raleigh was greater than that for a boardinghouse, so McCullers made sure her establishment had beds in the back rooms. Instead of offering short orders, she served three fixed meals a day, charging twenty-five cents a plate (or three dollars for a week's worth of meals) and focusing on what she called "plain substantial grub."

She described a typical menu to King:

Courtesy of the State Archives of North Carolina

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406 Gill The Tailor (c)
407 Vacant
407½ Blacknall Jos H (c) restr
408 O'Neal Anderson (c)
409 Harris Bettie M (c)
410 Busy Bee Cafe (c)
410½ Spanish Am War Veterans Post No 24 (c)
414 Crump Jas (c)
415 Auto Salvage Co auto wreck-ers
416 Crump Susie (c)
416½ Harrison John (c)
417 Fuller's Barber Shop (c)
418 McCullers Della (c) restr
420 Vacant
421 Gill Lillian (c)
422 Koonce Lafayette F vet surg
423 Williams Geo (c)
425 Cumb's Tailor Shop (c)
426 Dozier Sol (c)
427 Masonic Temple Bldg (c)
Fleming Harper L (c) dentist
Perry Nelson L (c) phys
2d fl Masonic Dance Hall (c)
3d fl Lodge Hall
429 Roberts Drug Store (c)
Cabarrus intersects
500 Third Ward Service Sta (c)
501 Tupper Memorial Baptist Church (c)
503 Gray Alex (c)
505 Williams Lottie (c)
507 Jackson Luvenia (c)
508 Freeman Benj (c)
510 Jones Chas C Rev (c)
Stronach's al ends
511 Bailey Eliz S (c) nurse
512 Harris Saml (c)
513 Cannon Grocery Co
Cannon Howard
514 Vacant
515 Hill Jerman E (c)
516 Jenkins Rosa (c)
517 Davis Thos (c)
518 Thomas Pearl (c)
519 Lytle Effie C (c)
525 Yarbough Agnes (c)
529 North State Auto Wreckers
Lenior intersects
603 Jones Oscar W (c) gro
607 Leach Coster (c)
609 Brown Mollie (c)
611 Harris Walter (c)
615 King Eva (c)
619 Rand Troy (c)
Rand Tiney (c) hairdrsr
South intersects

701 Wade Thos P (c)
705 Dubose Benj (c)
707 Shaw University Dining Room
709 Lee Jas S (c)
713 Somerville Wendell C Rev (c)
715 Jones Glenwood E (c)
717 Harris Nelson H (c)
719 Holland John (c)
725 Perrin H Cardrew (c)
729 Burns Jas M (c)
731 Vacant
Worth intersects
737 Morgan Camoline (c)
739 Freeman Alex (c)
741 Jeffers Chas (c)
745 Covington Carrie (c)
749 Morrisey Alex A Rev (c)
751 Sapp Mary E (c)
753 Horton Josephine (c)
757 Streeter Ross (c)
759 Vacant
Smithfield intersects
802 Ashley Effieta (c)
806 Bryant Wm B (c)
808 Marks John E (c)
812 Fennell Steph (c)
813 Holden Chas H (c)
816 Williams Thos R (c)
Williams Thos R & Son (c) awning mfrs
819 Chavis Mary (c)
821 Smith Robt W (c)
822 Sanders N Wiley (c)
825 White Lonnie (c)
Bledsoe av intersects
900 Community Store The gros
901 Morgan Neal (c)
902 Logan Eug (c)
904 Burroughs Jas W (c)
905 Brown LeRoy (c)
906 Farrar Melvina (c)
908 Baker W Atlas
915-17 Stahl K E Mfg Co Inc elec coolers
921-25 County E R A (Sewing rm)
921 Stalling W Edgar auto repr
924 Smith Wm D gro
930 Solomon John T
Lee intersects
1100 (1002) Blake Alf G
1101 Lee Wm S (c)
1103 Grant Joe S (c)
1104 (1006) Robinson Philip D (c)
1105 Brown Hubert B (c)
1106 Evans John H (c)
1107 Davis Langston L Rev (c)
1109 Galloway Farfield (c)
1109½ Barber Paul (c)
1110 Bryant Bessie (c)
1111 Vacant
1112 Mitchell Lucy (c)
1113 Carter David (c)
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1116 Mt Zion Baptist Church (c)

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McCrary Eunice E Mrs member Bd of Trustees of the City Administrative Sch Unit h1029 W South
McCrary Marcellus E (Eliz) mach Catholic Orphanage of Nazareth NO h Avent's Ferry rd nr Western blvd
McCrary Marion D (Louise R) asst dist mgr Durham Life Ins Co of Raleigh NC h2221 The Circle
McCrary Nancy V student r2221 The Circle
McCrary Otis F (Eunice E) dist agt State College of Agriculture and Engineering h1029 W South
McCray see also MacRae and McRae
McCray Annette (c) cook F W Woolworth Co h17 Lake
McCray Bertha (c) emp Hattie Morgan r17 Lake
McCray Carter (c; Bertha) plstr h1216 Hill
McCray Jas (c) lab r17 Lake
McCray Katie (c) prsr Raleigh Linen Supply Co r511 E Lenoir
McCray Major (c; Katie L) porter California Restr r511 E Lenoir
McCray Refrigerator Co L Brown Crosby sls and service rep 2309 Beech Ridge rd
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McCrimmon Ernest C (c; Bertha) clk NC Inspection & Rating Bureau h 911 E Martin apt 2
McCrimmon Frances S (c) h321 S Tarboro
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McCrimmon Tressie (c) clk Maye's Pharmacy r321 S Tarboro
McCrucheon Silas (c) lab r717 S Dawson
McCuller Oliver (c; Nettie) lab r205 W North
McCullers Aaron (c; Mattie) lab r1702 B
McCullers Aiden (c) dom r110 College
McCullers David (c; Olivia) h1310 Pender
McCullers Della (c) r316 Cannon
McCullers Della (c) restr 418 S Blount h do
McCullers Duane H slsmn Atlantic Tobacco Co Inc r Clayton NC
McCullers Eliza (c) r10 Ross
McCullers Florine (c) r16 McKee
McCullers Geo W (c) r16 McKee
McCullers Gladys (c) dom h10 Ross
McCullers Goldie M (c) r316 Cannon
McCullers Hal A (Mildred) h547 E Jones
McCullers Henrietta (c) h531 (2) E Davie
McCullers John A (c) emp Dillon Supply Co 216 S West
McCullers John M (c; Maggie) hlpr h110 College
McCullers John M jr (c) janfor r110 College
McCullers Jos clk State Unemployment Compensation Comn r Garner NC
McCullers Mattie (c) Indrs r10 Ross
McCullers Queen E (c) dom r139 Lincoln dr
McCullers Rufus (c; Mary) lab State College of Agriculture and Engineering h139 Lincoln dr
McCullers Thos L slsmn S W Brewer & Son r Garner NC
McCullers Vandell (c) r316 Cannon
McCullers Wilbur L (Effie G) clk Betts Coal & Oil Co Inc r312 Perry
McCullers Wm (c) lab r1304 Hill
McCullers Willie M (c) r110 College
McCullers Winston D (c) emp Dillon Supply Co h16 McKee
McCullin Shaw Mrs (Ritz Beauty Salon) r Hotel Raleigh
McCulloch Wm F (Nora Y) tfr clk Ry Exp Agency Inc h403 Kinsey
McCullough Addie (c) dom r616 Wynne
McCullough Chas (c) porter r603 (619) W Lenoir
McCullough Danl Rev (c; Judy) h603 (619) W Lenoir
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“For breakfast I’ll have fried salt herrings, mullets, sausage, pork chops, **biscuits, cornbread and baker’s bread and coffee. I let them select whatever they want, but I do not serve them but one kind of fish or one kind of meat. For dinner I have cabbage, collards, blackeyed peas, stew beef, haslet stew, pigtail stew, pig ears stew, and water. I always have some kind of fresh fish for supper, pork chops, hog liver, coffee, and things like that. I fill their plates with as much food as I can get on them...I give them plenty of [cornbread] with their meals.”**

A coal stove, “patched in several places with tin, and held together by wire,” King observed, was the only kitchen equipment McCullers had to produce such a range of foods. While our first impression might be of quantity, a deeper look reveals that what McCullers called “plain” hid a world of complex flavors, skill, and transformation.

McCullers had clearly developed an arsenal of economical recipes. Stew beef then, as now, was often a mix of leftover cuts bundled together and sold cheaply. Pigtales, pig ears, and pig liver were all less desirable and less expensive parts of the hog. Haslet stew was made from liver, lungs, and sometimes heart. She relied on hardy vegetables with long growing seasons. McCullers shopped and cooked wisely while pleasing her customers and giving them reason to return.

McCullers’ list was deeply responsive to the foodways of the Piedmont in which she lived. Hogs are still plentiful today in eastern and central

North Carolina, and they were crucial to twentieth century foodways there, even if some of the pork McCullers bought at the store was most likely of Midwestern origin. Adding regular fish dishes speaks to the connections between Raleigh and the rivers and coastal waters of eastern North Carolina. Collards are consumed all over North Carolina, but more so in the central and eastern counties. When McCullers said she gave her customers what they wanted, she knew what that meant.

Later in the interview, McCullers drew distinctions between what her customers wanted to eat when employed versus when they were out of work. She said she faced more competition from Greek restaurants when unemployment was high, because people could eat “a hamburger and a cup of coffee” and be “all right for several hours.”

When her customers had jobs “swing[ing] a pick or shovel all day,” then “that’s where I can beat the



Hamlin Drug Co. on E. Hargett St., believed to be the oldest African American–owned pharmacy in the United States

Greeks, because they don’t know how to fix vittles like collards, turnips, haslet stew and the other things,” she said, referring to the dishes her African American clientele favored.

King observed that she had a “piccolo”—a nickel-fed juke box—with “the very latest blues recordings” on it, a picture of Joe Lewis hanging on the wall, and outdoor benches for people to gather. As a result, Della’s was “the gathering place for Negroes during the evenings and on Sundays.” We can only imagine the laughter,

music, and community fellowship that took place there.

McCullers was a skilled, modern businesswoman. And Della’s was a success. During the years she ran the establishment, she supported herself and a disabled brother and paid school tuition for a grandson whom she hoped would become a doctor. Her liminal boardinghouse holds sophisticated stories of business acumen, community patronage, and everyday foodways that brim with a sense of place and purpose. ☛

Elizabeth Engelhardt is the John Shelton Reed Distinguished Professor of Southern Studies at UNC-Chapel Hill and the chair of the SFA’s academic committee. She delivered a version of this article as a talk at the 2016 Southern Foodways Symposium.

The King-McCullers interview is archived in the Federal Writers’ Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.