A LIFETIME OF BARBECUE IN SELMA

PULLED PORK WITH A SIDE OF CIVIL RIGHTS HISTORY AT LANNIE'S

by Meredith Bethune

Plates heaving with thick strands of smoked pork and topped with a single crackling are synonymous with Lannie's Bar-B-Q Spot in Selma, Alabama. They've been serving it that way for nearly seventy-five years. Locals flow in and out of the low-slung brick building, picking up to-go orders. A photo of founder Lannie Moore Travis, who passed away in 1994, hangs above vinyl-cushioned booths.

Current owner Lula Hatcher is Travis's daughter. Now in her eighties, she used to watch her mother, who was born in 1915, make that sauce on the stove. Lannie's had a dirt floor when it opened in 1942. Before the age of meat inspections, Hatcher's stepfather purchased live hogs and slaughtered and butchered them himself. "We had big old black pots. He would boil the water and get that hog hair off," she remembers. "Then, he'd cut them up on the table." He smoked the hogs on site. "We used to have open pits built out of blocks," she says. "It was kind of dangerous with those pits, with fire going and grease dripping down."

Photos by Jerry Siegel

At twelve, Hatcher's mother assigned her a new and unexpected task—retrieving the hogs from a stockyard on the eastern outskirts of town. The owner calmly tied up the terrified, wiggling animal and placed it in Hatcher's bicycle basket. "It was a live hog! We used to get big old hogs squealing all the way home," she laughs, recalling how she struggled to balance the bike as she peddled back to the restaurant.

Selma lies in the Black Belt, that large swath of rich soil stretching across south-central Alabama. Once considered the "Queen City of the Black Belt," its prime location on the Alabama River made Selma the region's bustling commercial center, with a thriving downtown. The cotton trade initially drove the city's economy. Craig Air Force Base, built in 1940, helped sustain local businesses in the mid-twentieth century. Selma's black residents, though, were typically excluded from prosperity. Most lived under the poverty line, and nearly all were denied the right to vote.

In 1963, African American attorneys, ministers, teachers, and high-school students began working with national civil rights leaders like John Lewis and Bernard Lafayette to demand voting rights in Dallas County. Hatcher remembers carrying barbecue sandwiches to activists staying in the neighborhood.

IN JANUARY 1965, A CROWD OF VOTING-RIGHTS ACTIVISTS GATHERED AT LANNIE'S TO CELEBRATE THE NEWS THAT DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. WOULD BE COMING TO TOWN.

Although Lannie's was located in East Selma, a historically black residential neighborhood, customers of all races were welcome there.

"We were the only place that wasn't segregated," Hatcher says. "White, black, whoever. They

bought what they wanted. I don't know of any other place that did that." Brown Chapel A.M.E. Church, less than a mile away, acted as a headquarters for the local movement.

In January 1965, a crowd of voting-rights activists gathered at Lannie's to celebrate the news that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. would come to town. By March, with the help of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the voting rights campaign reached a fever pitch in Selma, attracting locals like Annie Lee Cooper, a close friend of the Travis family. After standing in line for hours outside the Dallas County Courthouse to register to vote, Cooper famously got into a fight with the billy club–wielding Sheriff Jim Clark.

"It was tough back then in '65. We had some mean people back then," Hatcher says, recalling the violence that many civil rights activists suffered at the hands of police. On March 7, 1965, Alabama state troopers mercilessly beat peaceful protestors marching across the Edmund Pettus Bridge. That televised moment burned its mark on the American consciousness.

The right to vote didn't necessarily produce better economic conditions for all the black residents of Selma or the Black Belt. Whites continued to maintain much of the power in the region. When the Air Force base closed in 1977, many local shops and restaurants shut their doors.

Lannie's managed to stay open. Hatcher took the reins when her mother retired in 1984 and built the current brick structure a few years later. Lannie's continued to support causes the family believed in. In 1990, when Selma High School students protested the firing of Selma's first black school superintendent, Hatcher and her employees brought them barbecue sandwiches.

Over the past fifty-four years, Selma has lost 30 percent of its population. Like many Southern towns that once relied primarily on agriculture, the commercial buildings on Broad Street are now vacant. Stately antebellum mansions line side streets. So do boarded-up businesses and decrepit shacks.

Still, Hatcher acknowledges that Selma has made astounding progress, even if more work is needed to achieve true equality.

Lannie's Bar-B-Q Spot thrives today. On weeknights, it's one of the few non-chain businesses near downtown Selma where locals can grab a quick meal. Joanne Bland, a Selma native who marched on the bridge on Bloody Sunday back in 1965, started eating at Lannie's as a child and still goes there regularly. To her and to many other Selmians, the Lannie's staff is like family. "They're loving and kind," she says. "And I'll tell you what, it's always been a black and white business. It's not a black thing—good food spans the rainbow." And so does Lannie's Bar-B-Q, which bridges Selma past and present.

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SLAW ABIDING CITIZENS

A QUEST FOR THE WEST VIRGINIA HOT DOG

by Emily Hilliard, with illustrations by Emily Wallace

A tray of hot dogs and peanuts from Buddy B's in Sissonville, WV.

Photos by Emily Hilliard

We arrived at the small country store at dusk, giddy for our first hot dog. The hand-painted sign outside Buddy B's in Sissonville, West Virginia, advertised fresh produce, pinto beans and cornbread, and "Best In Town Hot Dogs." Inside, bulk seeds, bags of peanuts, and jars of penny candy lined the red gingham–papered walls, and a cash register and food counter stood on either side of the door. We gawked like tourists at the hot dog clock and hand-painted hot dog sign, outlined by the triple-underlined text, TRY OUR HOT DOGS THEY ARE GO-O-O-O-D. As the cashier-cook prepared our dogs, we surreptitiously took pictures.

We walked into an ongoing conversation. "Watch out, she's the meanest thing here," a man joked as he walked past, lugging a twenty-pound tube of ground beef from the self-serve meat case. Recognizing the words were intended for her, the cook countered, "Get outta here, trouble!"

She slid our dogs through a side pick-up window and we retreated, tray and a bag of peanuts in hand, to the diner booth outside. Lifting our dogs in the air as coleslaw and chili dribbled onto the waxed paper below, we toasted the kickoff of our trip.

Chili, slaw, mustard, and onions: Since moving to West Virginia last fall to work as the state folklorist, I've answered with that refrain when asked how I want my hot dog dressed. My travels to conduct interviews with vernacular artists and document community-based traditions often include stops at hot dog joints. These lunch counters, ice cream stands, and country stores are sometimes the only lunch option in rural areas. The passionate declarations of loyalty I'd overheard between interviews suggested that there was more to hot dogs in West Virginia than just that four-ingredient list. To better understand this cultural phenomenon, I enlisted the help of a fellow folklorist who also happens to share my first and middle names. That's how Emily Wallace and I found ourselves on a 286-mile loop that we affectionately dubbed The Emily Elizabeth West Virginia Hot Dog Road Trip.

Arriving at my Charleston apartment wearing a hot dog T-shirt and a pickle pin, Wallace prepped for our journey by illustrating a Google map with hot dog doodles (they still pop up on my phone whenever I near one of our dog stops). I consulted *The West Virginia Hot Dog Blog*, founded in 2006 by a native who goes by the *nom de sausage* of Stanton. Yes, he has rated hundreds of joints with a 1-5 weenie system. But he has also elucidated a taxonomy of hot dog styles and, most important, developed a Slaw Mapping Project that would make any digital humanities scholar proud.

The perfect West Virginia hot dog is an exercise in balance. Compared to eastern North Carolina's bright-red dog or the Chicago-style Vienna Beef (which Wallace and I grew up on, respectively), a West Virginia hot dog relies less on the sausage and more on the interplay of spicy, hot chili and cool, sweet coleslaw. Over the course of our trip, we learned how to parse variations on that iconic combination, but as folklorists, we also recognized that the stories locals tell about these places were the true dressing on West Virginia dogs.

West Virginia is home to at least 350 hot dog joints (and that's playing it safe). Almost all claim "Best Hot Dogs in Town." In a state of fewer than two million people scattered across 24,000-odd mountainous square miles, that's a surfeit of hot dogs.

Presented with this bounty, I narrowed our quest to a loop that ran through the southern coalfields. We planned stops at drive-ins, convenience stores, and an ice-cream stand. That route put us firmly beneath the Slaw Line, which West Virginians recognize as a kind of Mason-Dixon of

condiments. We'd miss out on some of the regional variants, particularly in the northern part of the state, where Italian heritage is strong and slaw is often unavailable. There, in what is also pepperoni roll country, chili is referred to as "sauce," and doubles as a pepperoni roll topping.

WE WEREN'T THROUGH with Sissonville after a couple of Buddy B's dogs. The next morning, we scouted Skeenies, peering in the windows of the unlit kitchen. In business since 1953, the yellow-and-white roadside stand inspires both local loyalty and expat longing. Mrs. Skeen (as she's reverently known), now in her nineties, runs the place with her son Joshua. As Wallace wondered out loud if they had any signature waxed hot dog bags she could take home as souvenirs, Joshua Skeen, who lives next door with his mother, walked over to greet us. Soon we were deep in a conversation about West Virginia hot dog history.

It's unclear how the hot dog came to West Virginia. Like Michigan Coney dogs, which also feature ground-beef chili, mustard, and onions, Greek immigrants may have introduced them to the state. Perhaps the Germans of West Virginia played a part. Maybe hot dogs traveled south down the Ohio River from Cincinnati, a national meatpacking center in the 1800s. (Kahn's hot dog company, once a West Virginia favorite, was founded there in 1883.)

We know a bit more about the beginnings of slaw dogs. Just a bun's throw from Skeenies is the site of the former Stopette Drive-In, arguably the originator of the slaw dog. Documentation of those early years is scarce. But we do know, thanks to Stanton's research, that the Stopette advertised slaw dogs in the local newspaper by the 1920s. "Everybody's talking about Stopette's hot dog with slaw," read a 1922 ad. Cabbage was a common home garden crop, and slaw made a hot dog more filling. In 1951, a *Charlotte Observer* writer joked that slaw was the only good thing that West Virginia hillbillies brought south to the Carolinas.

A more detailed history of West Virginia dogs has yet to be written. But I'm pretty sure of one thing: The popularity of hot dogs here is linked to the industrial labor that boomed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Coal miners, steel workers, and other factory laborers needed a quick meal they could eat between or during shifts. Hot dogs, like pepperoni rolls, proved an inexpensive and filling option. Entrepreneurs sold them because the ingredients were cheap and demand was high.

After Skeenies, Wallace and I made our way about an hour south to the 1,800-person town