

THE POWER TO FEED

A Delta epiphany

BY JOHN T. EDGE



DAVID WHITE WAS TWENTY MONTHS old when the crowd of politicians and reporters came to his Cleveland, Mississippi, home on a spring day in 1967. As the man with the fop of brown hair stooped to the floor, David hungrily scratched for crumbs of cornbread and grains of rice. Annie White raised six children in that house with one faucet, no hot water, and no electricity. The family toilet was a hole in the floor. Come winter, she heated their home with a woodstove.

Dressed in a tattered and soiled t-shirt and diaper, David was small for his age.

Open sores pocked his young body. David's eyes were flat and his belly was distended. Robert F. Kennedy stroked David's cheek and touched his belly, but he could he not capture David's attention.

Kennedy was helpless in the face of the poverty that David endured every day. Dressed in a suit and tie, his shoes glossy with wax, the junior U.S. Senator from New York emerged from David's family home on a dirt alley chastened, embarrassed, and angry.

"We could be doing more for those who are poor," Kennedy said that day.

Photos by Timothy Ivy

On his visit to the Mississippi Delta in 1967, Senator Robert F. Kennedy was helpless and chastened in the face of the poverty that David White endured every day.

"And particularly for our children, who had nothing to do with asking to be born into this world...This is a reflection on our society, on all of us."

I wrote about this moment in my book *The Potlikker Papers*. In my telling, young David White's hunger taught a lesson about America's failure to care for its most vulnerable citizens. But his life, as I depicted it, was without dimension. Then I read *Delta Epiphany*, a new book by my friend and University of Mississippi colleague Ellen Meacham.

From Ellen, I learned that, at the time Kennedy toured the Mississippi Delta on a poverty fact-finding mission, David's mother, Annie White, was fighting heroically to feed her family. She fished. She planted a garden and canned and preserved the harvest. Her brothers shared the blackbirds, raccoons, squirrels, deer, and possums they hunted. When Annie White still came up short, she walked the dirt streets of her neighborhood, trading and borrowing food to feed her children.

I also learned more about David. At age fifteen, Ellen reported, he began



Sunset outside Greenville, MS



Photos by Celestia Morgan

mowing grass for the Western Sizzlin' steakhouse in Cleveland, where he worked his way up from dishwasher to head cook to assistant manager. After following his older brother Lorenzo to Dallas, Texas, David raised his own beautiful family, sometimes working two jobs to feed his five sons. And then, Mississippi called him home. In 2017, David moved back to the Delta, settling in Greenville, where his sister lives.

Fifty-plus years after Kennedy's visit, Mississippi's second congressional district, which includes David's old hometown of Cleveland and his new home of Greenville, now registers the highest rate of food insecurity of any district in the nation. The Mississippi to which he returned is, by some measures, much the same. But David's role in the state has changed. And

so has his relationship to food.

On the suggestion of Ellen, I visited David in Greenville this past October. We met at the Q Mart on Highway 82, where he now works seven days a week, flat-top-frying hamburgers and tossing salads with cheddar and bacon. As we talked, one of his colleagues showered a burger with seasoned salt. And a cloud of grilled onion vapors floated toward the ceiling.

When David spoke of the dishes he likes to cook, here and at home, his face brightened and his eyes shone. I couldn't help but notice how strong and confident he looked, standing in front of the kitchen he now leads. And I couldn't help but think: Such is the power we humans gain when we step into a kitchen to feed our people, like Annie White did back then, and David White does now. 🍷

John T. Edge is the founding director of the SFA and the host of TrueSouth on the SEC Network/ESPN.

WINTER SYMPOSIUM

TOPIC

FOOD IS WORK

LOCATION

**HAVEN
Birmingham, AL**

DATE

**SATURDAY
February 9, 2019**

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(includes food & drink)**

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