by DAVID HAGEDORN

NOTHING GREEN BUT THE PLATES

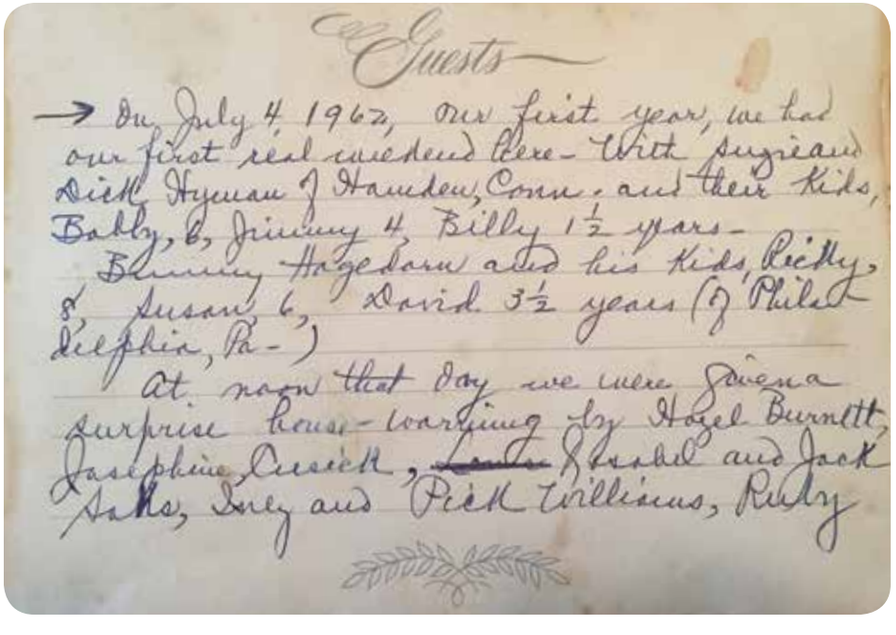
SIREN SONGS OF AN ALABAMA LAKE HOUSE

"DAVID IS A BABY! A BIG BABY!"

declares my sister Susan on August 16, 1964 in the oldest of seven, musty, mismatched guest books lying on the living room coffee table of my family's country house on Lake Guntersville. The lake flows through the pine-dense, red clay Appalachian foothills of Northeast Alabama.

Whenever we Hagedorns gather there over the Fourth of July to spend time with our father and stepmother, to tell stories, relax, drink daiquiris, and eat good food (God, the food!), there comes a time, usually on a rainy afternoon or after dinner when there is a captive audience. Someone pores through the guest books and reads the most entertaining (meanest) remarks out loud. My sister's observation about her five-year-old brother, written in the tentative cursive of an eight-year-old, always makes the cut and gets a laugh. I don't mind now, though surely I did then, because if I'm being honest, she was right.

Most of the sources of pleasure at the lake—swimming, water-skiing, boating, and fishing—amounted to a hotbed of dangers to me. I was convinced I'd drown in the lake's dark green water, where water moccasins lied in wait in gooey milfoil that would swallow me up if a tiny piece of it ever grazed my foot. If the bogeyman existed, he lived in Guntersville, either right outside the window of the room where we kids slept or in the tar black water by the dock.


Guests

→ On July 4, 1962, our first year, we had our first real weekend here - With Suzie and Dick Hyman of Hamden, Conn. and their kids, Bobby, 6, Jimmy 4, Billy 1½ years -

Jimmy Hagedorn and his kids, Ricky, 8, Susan 6, David 3½ years (of Philadelphia, Pa -)

At noon that day we were given a surprise house-warming by Hazel Burnett, Josephine, Dick, Lewis, Isabel and Jack Sikes, Suzy and Dick Williams, Ruby

Courtesy of David Hagedorn

LEFT: The author (far right) with his brother and sister on "The Chickadora"; OPPOSITE PAGE: The inaugural lake house guest book entry

I refused to swim, especially in the middle of the lake, until my father put me in the water while a boat full of people looked on. I'd grab the bottom of the ladder attached to the side of the boat and beg for him to not make me let go, lest I float away in my puffy orange life vest and never be seen or heard from again. We went through this exercise until I finally shed that fear, trading up to a new one: learning how to water-ski. I famously mimed skiing inside the boat until I was nine and Dad insisted I do it for real. He'd get out in the water with me, holding onto a cushion so he could float while I attempted over and over to get up and then stay up without falling.

"I finally went skiing today, and made it!" I wrote on July 6, 1968.

By college, I rarely spent time at the lake. My vacation tastes tended, at an early age, toward nice hotels in Europe. I came out as gay during my junior year in Paris in the late seventies and never looked back once I returned to Washington and finished my degree in foreign service at Georgetown University. I stayed in Washington, embarking on a career as a chef and restaurateur and then a writer.

Every now and then throughout my adult life, I'd take Northern friends to the lake, once I could convince them that they wouldn't be met at the plane by Klansmen. They discovered the lake's beauty and quickly came to appreciate that there wasn't anything else to do there but to relax, read, laugh, drink, and eat. They'd sign the guest book after their stay, as hundreds had before them, thank the Hagedorns for the marvelous time, remark on the quality and abundance of the food, and plan another visit there.

In recent years, the health of my father and stepmother has declined. It breaks my heart to watch my father robbed one by one of the activities he enjoyed most in life. Getting him into the boat or into and out of the water for a swim turned into time-consuming productions, then into impossibilities. Now he can't even make it down to the dock, barely mustering the energy to maneuver his walker from the back bedroom to the porch. The porch is where we savor morning coffee and stare at the placid water. It's where we gather at happy hour to drink frozen lime daiquiris, eat Chex party mix (Hagedorn crack cocaine), Brie (his favorite cheese), and guacamole and Tostitos while we fire up the Weber for dinner, watch another gloriously gilded magenta sunset, and insult each other mercilessly and lovingly.

My siblings and I will soon have to decide what to do when the house, which needs to be rebuilt, passes to us. The decision is clear to me from the cold distance of Washington; it makes no sense to invest in a house that my husband and I would go to only a couple

of weeks a year, and to maintain it from afar by committee. But once I get to the cabin and smell the okra frying or hear the whirring of the White Mountain echoing through the pines with its promise of peach ice cream, my steely resolve turns into fluid sentimentality.

I came to terms long ago with fears and recriminations in Guntersville that seemed great and turned out small. Like the time when I was eighteen and a family member watched a news report about a gay rights march in San Francisco and hissed at the screen, "Those people should be shot!"

Time, education, and love turned that person around, but now in Alabama, public officials and religious zealots deny the validity of my marriage (performed by Ruth Bader Ginsburg, no less) and threaten my safety. In our new reality, once polite people have been given permission and incentive to voice their hatred and ignorance and call people strangers in their own land. Now I'm faced with a new bogeyman, more real than any I imagined lurking in the lake.

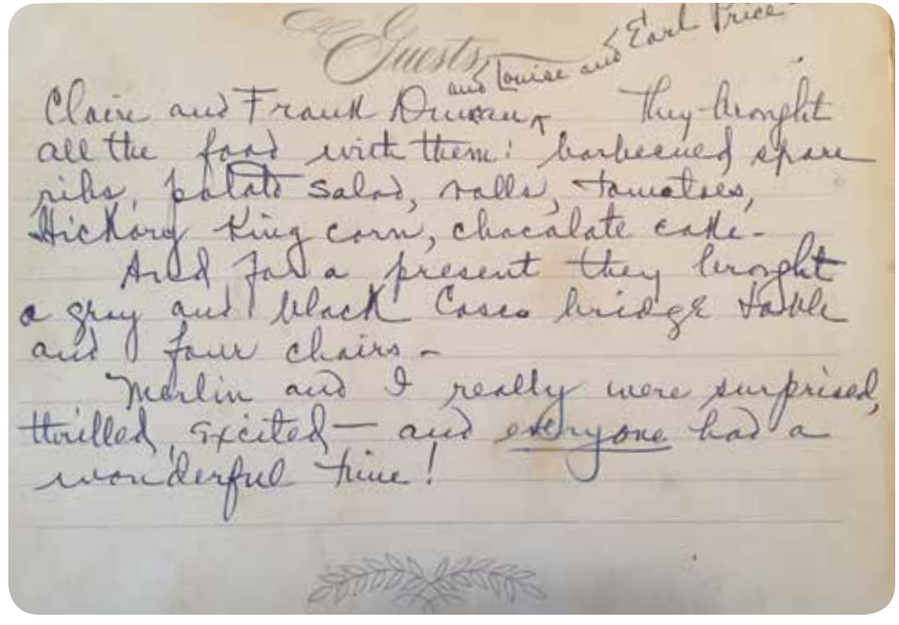
Part of the Tennessee River, Lake Guntersville is a 69,000-acre, manmade reservoir created by the Tennessee Valley Authority in 1939. Many families from Gadsden, forty miles southeast of the town of Guntersville, and Huntsville, forty miles northwest, bought waterfront country houses there. As family lore goes, in 1962, friends of my grandparents, Ruth and Merlin Hagedorn, or, as we kids called them, Gogney and Pop Pop, told them of a three-bedroom pine cabin a few inlets away. It was for sale, completely furnished down to a set of hunter green Homer Laughlin dinnerware in the kitchen and an eighteen-foot mahogany Chris Craft motorboat.

"You'll buy that house over my dead body!" Pop Pop told my grandmother. She bought it the next day for $19,000, naming the boat "The Chickadora," for Pop Pop, whose card-playing buddies at the Gadsden country club called him Chick. She named the house "Ruth Haven."

Gogney made that decision largely because her son, my father, had gotten divorced the year before and she thought the lake would be a nice place for him to take Susan, our older brother Ricky, and me. We had moved to Philadelphia with our mother. Per the custody agreement, we were to live with her and attend school and spend Christmas, Easter, and summer vacations with Dad.

My grandmother, in her bold, dramatic script, set the scene at Ruth Haven with a prologue in the opening pages of the first guest book, where she described the inaugural summer there with my father, nicknamed Bunny since he was a little boy, my siblings, aunt, uncle, and three cousins:

On July 4, 1962, our first year, we had our first real weekend here. With Suzie and Dick Hyman of Hamden, Conn. And their kids, Bobby, 6, Jimmy, 4, Billy, 1 ½ years. Bunny Hagedorn and his kids, Ricky, 8, Susan, 6, David 3 ½ years (of Philadelphia, Pa.)


Guests, Louise and Earl Price
Claire and Frank Duncan. They brought all the food with them: barbecued spare ribs, potato salad, rolls, tomatoes, Hickory King corn, chocolate cake.
And for a present they brought a gray and black Cosco bridge table and four chairs.
Merlin and I really were surprised, thrilled, excited — and everyone had a wonderful time!

At noon that day, we were given a surprise house-warming by Hazel Burnett, Josephine Cusack, Rosabel and Jack Saks, Inez and Pick Williams, Ruby Claire and Frank Duncan, Louise and Earl Price. They brought all the food with them: barbequed spare ribs, potato salad, rolls, tomatoes, Hickory King corn, chocolate cake.

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The enduring and constant allure that unites everyone at the lake, and keeps me coming back, is the love we shared at the dining room picnic table, where glass stains indicate age like the rings on the trees it was made from. The meals endure, too. Fourth of July dinner isn't much different now than it was in 1962, when there was nothing green on the table but those Homer Laughlin plates.

On that day in 1962, I began my long and complicated relationship with the lake, sometimes a haven and sometimes a jail, where conflicting feelings of joy and anguish, tranquility and anxiety, insouciance and terror came together and separated like a finicky vinaigrette.

I was a misfit in Alabama from the start, a Jewish kid born in Gadsden's Holy Name of Jesus Hospital. Unlike my brother and sister who had developed roots and friends in Alabama before my parents divorced, I was a tabula rasa. My mother blamed my father and grandmother for the demise of her marriage and pleaded her case against them regularly. The anger and resentment took to me like thin gravy to a plain biscuit. I sopped it all up. Whenever it came time to go to Alabama, drama broke out. I'd always show up there a bundle of fear and apprehension.

I was effeminate, gay from the get-go. Attempts to dress me in army uniforms or Native American headdresses made me miserable, as early Christmastime photographs bear out. I was more interested in playing beauty shop and making

RIGHT: Ruth Haven, circa 1976; OPPOSITE PAGE: Ruth Haven feasts memorialized by Gogney

LEFT TO RIGHT: Barbara, the author's stepmother, trims okra; Lake Guntersville

cakes in the Easy Bake oven with my sister and her friends than catching a ball with my brother. When Dad came home from work and switched the TV to sports, that was my exit cue.

Other children in Alabama considered me an oddity and a Yankee to boot. I had no friends. So food became my friend. Before I worked through my phobias and learned to enjoy swimming and skiing, eating food and helping to prepare it was an activity I could participate in fully. At the lake, there was plenty of food, all of it wonderful. Any rules against eating too many sweets or drinking too many Cokes seemed to vanish there. The adults were too busy socializing and partying to pay much attention to us kids, and we took full advantage of it. By the time I hit middle school, I had what Dad called Dunlop's disease. ("Your belly done lopped over your belt!")

Dad married my stepmother Barbara in 1967. My half-sister Aimee was born in 1969. Barbara worked full time as a nurse anesthetist, but took on many of the preparations for the lake, beginning early in the week. She'd go grocery shopping and run errands after work, make dinner, do the dishes, then boil eggs or shuck corn, whip up a broccoli-rice, asparagus-pea, or hash brown potato casserole and make a gallon of custard base to churn into ice cream if Chilton County peaches were in season.

Certain foods were *de rigueur*. German potato salad, made by layering sliced, boiled, and peeled potatoes, sliced red onions, white vinegar, vegetable oil, sugar, salt, and pepper in a huge green Tupperware bowl and topping the affair with paprika and chopped parsley, was non-negotiable and still is. When I later became a chef and performed the cardinal sin of substituting olive oil for vegetable oil in the potato salad to jazz it up, I was mercilessly denounced and ridiculed. Now when Barbara's Tupperware lands on the table and I'm there, everybody delights in calling it "Barbara's Better Than David's Potato Salad."

Other staples, in addition to canned biscuits, various breads, and a few pounds of bacon and pork sausage, would have included tomato and red onion salad, a Cure 81 ham for lunch, fixings for bloody Marys, and spare ribs or a Boston butt for barbecue. To go with it, we relied on Ruth Hick's thirty-two-ingredient barbecue sauce, the specialty of a respected home cook who used to be a neighbor of ours in Gadsden. (The secret ingredient was spiced peaches.)

The preparation we went through for a thirty-six-hour trip now seem ridiculous. On Saturday morning we would eat breakfast and then Dad would load up the car, exercising considerable legerdemain to fit all the food, suitcases, beer, and liquor. The alcoholic beverages had to be concealed for the trip from one dry county to another lest we got pulled over for speeding and the Highway Patrol decided to have a look in the trunk. The coolers containing the perishables had to be easily accessible so Dad could fill them with ice when we made our first stop at the Little Giant food store, a mere five minutes from the house. The meat at their butcher counter was top quality, so Dad would often pick up a couple of two-inch-thick sirloin steaks and some ground beef for hamburgers.

CONFLICTING FEELINGS OF JOY AND ANGUISH, INSOUCIANCE AND TERROR CAME TOGETHER AND SEPARATED LIKE A FINICKY VINAIGRETTE.

We were rarely on the road much before noon. Our route took us from Etowah County into Marshall County, past Boaz and then through Albertville and past the billboard that indicated we were passing through "the Heart of Sand Mountain." Susan and I spent most of our time trying to avoid being tortured by Ricky. When we passed Jack's Hamburgers, we'd launch into their jingle, changing the words from "Jack's ham-BUR-gers for FIF-teen cents are so GOOD, GOOD, GOOD, you'll go BACK, BACK, BACK to JACK, JACK, JACK for MORE MORE MORE!" to "Jack's hamburgers for FIF-teen cents are so BAD, BAD, BAD, you'll go BACK, BACK, BACK to JACK, JACK, JACK for your MUH-NEE back!"

Any fuss in the back seat ended when one of us kids caught sight of the lake.

"First to see the lake! First to see the lake!" someone would scream as we drove down the mountain and through Guntersville, a town of some sixty-five hundred souls in the late 1960s. (And fifty-two churches.) Turning onto Highway 227 and driving past a feed mill, we'd stop at a little market for worms or minnows for fishing and drive over Polecat Creek, turning left onto a dead end dirt road lined on both sides by thick trees. The road became paved once you got to the Agricola's property, because Old Man Agricola, Pop Pop said, had the political clout to get that done.

Once we arrived at the cabin, we kids made a beeline for the candy dishes on the coffee table, which Gogney filled with Hershey's Kisses, M&M's we gorged on, and peppermint wheels we ignored. Dad would have us close all the windows so he could turn on the air-conditioning, against the wishes of our grandparents, who preferred the pine air.

After an hour or two of boating, we'd return to the house, where Gogney had

I CAME TO TERMS LONG AGO WITH FEARS AND RECRIMINATIONS THAT SEEMED GREAT AND TURNED OUT SMALL.

laid out lunch. The vat of potato salad remained on the table unrefrigerated all weekend until the last dregs were gone. With Coke or Hawaiian Punch, we washed down ham and cold cut and cheese sandwiches and piles of potato chips.

After another boat outing, it was cocktail time. Lime daiquiris, frozen Limeade blended with crushed ice and a surfeit of white rum, are a Ruth Haven specialty that Dad introduced in the early years. Making them is a rite of passage once a child hits drinking age and only those who know to double the amount of booze called for in the recipe (to make them "Bunny strength") are entrusted with the task more than once.

When I was seven or eight, I started helping the women put together the happy hour hors d'oeuvres, then took the job over completely when I realized how much attention and praise it earned me. I used a large, round faux-wood platter and fashioned a pie-chart on it with whatever delectables were on hand: pimento cheese-stuffed celery sticks, deviled eggs, a block of cream cheese topped with canned smoked oysters or neon green or red peppery jelly, skinless boneless sardines with slivers of red onion, Braunschweiger, jarred olives, and pickled okra. On another platter, I'd make a kaleidoscopic display of Ritz Crackers, Sociables, and Triscuits.

Dinner grilling duties fell to Dad, who was often impaired by the daiquiris and poor outdoor lighting by the time the fire was ready. We'd all be gathered at the table, already piling on the side dishes when he'd come in from the porch with a cookie sheet of hamburgers and steaks, charcoal black on the outside and blood rare on the inside. God help anyone who attempted to put ketchup on a steak in front of him. Dessert would be ice cream, if some had been churned earlier in the day, watermelon, and perhaps a towering Milky Way, caramel, or chocolate cake sent over by one of my grandmother's friends.

The rituals at the lake played out in this way, more or less, through the decades, with successive generations assuming their roles. Pop Pop died in 1984, Gogney in 1989. Today, Dad starts stocking the freezer with steaks, ribs, pork butt, bacon, and sausage months in advance of the Fourth of July holiday, when all his children descend with their families. We perform the cooking duties so Dad and Barbara can relax as much as possible.

It's the Fourth of July. I'm eating dinner at the crowded dining room table, looking across the living room at Aimee's children, my six-year-old nephew Sam, and his eight-year-old sister Liz. They're sitting at the gray and white Cosco bridge table like my siblings and I did when the cabin was full of people, happily gnawing on sweet corn and barbecued ribs. The oil from the German potato salad is bleeding through the paper plates onto their wicker underliners and it's clear to me in this moment what the future of Ruth Haven must be. I am, once and forever, a baby. A big baby.

David Hagedorn is a former chef and restaurateur who now writes in Washington, DC. His latest book, Rasika: Flavors of India*, will be published by HarperCollins in September.*

Andrew Thomas Lee

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Tim Hontzas of Johnny's; Ted's restaurant; Tasos Touloupis of Ted's Restaurant; barbecue from Demetri's

THE BIRMINGHAM GREEKS

FROM SOUVLAKI TO HOT DOGS, BAKLAVA TO SNAPPER THROATS, AND BARBECUE TO MEAT-AND-THREES, THE SOUTH AND GREECE INTERTWINE IN ALABAMA.

In 2004, SFA collected oral histories of Greek restaurant owners who had been feeding Birmingham since the nineteenth century. Their establishments have served as employment centers and immigration draws. From their progeny, a sprawling Greek family tree has grown. With the help of Eric Velasco, SFA has updated that oral history project, revisiting previous interviews and chronicling the lives of a new generation of Greek restaurateurs now shaping the food culture of the Magic City. Here's a small taste of the restaurateurs who have defined the city. Look for the fully revised and updated Greeks in Birmingham oral history collection to debut on our website in May.