

DIRECTOR'S CUT



PULL UP A STOOL

In memory of Clark Shaw

BY JOHN T. EDGE

Illustration by Disha Sharma

CLARK AND JUANITA SHAW, PROPRIETORS OF THE OLD COUNTRY STORE in Jackson, Tennessee, stood at the top of the stairs here in Barnard Observatory in March of 2019. Many visitors who climb the steep flight arrive out of breath. Clark and Juanita arrived smiling, lugging a chrome-backed stool with a black vinyl seat, mounted on a short white pedestal. Clark had acquired it from a Jackson friend who specialized in demolitions, and who, knowing his interest in restaurant history, sold Clark a few stools.

It was a gift for the Southern Foodways Alliance, in honor of our work and the long friendship that connects their family and our staff. And it was an artifact, worthy of a museum. The presence of that stool in our office made clear that, when SFA talks about restaurants as public spaces, we consider matters of deep importance that resonate across space and time. After Clark and Juanita left, we installed their gift to the right of the main door and mounted a framed panel of text above:

This stool was salvaged from the Woolworth store in Jackson, Tennessee. In October of 1960, inspired by a sit-in movement that began that February in Greensboro, North Carolina, students from Lane College in Jackson staged peaceful protests that demanded integration of the city's restaurants.

On October 27, the students took seats on stools like this one, in the whites only section of the Woolworth lunch counter. They requested service. In response, the white operators closed the counter. And white counter-protesters dragged the young men and women from the counter, sprayed them with insect repellent, and pelted them with rotten eggs.

Efforts made by the Lane College students, coupled with the courage of other Black youth in cities across the South, made clear the burdens and horrors of Jim Crow and the promise of Black activism. That courage drove the passage of the Civil Rights Act of

1964, which outlawed discrimination based on race, color, religion, or national origin in restaurants and other places of public accommodation engaged in interstate commerce.

CLARK CAME INTO OUR LIVES IN 2012. Sam's Bar-B-Q, down the road from his restaurant in the little town of Humboldt, had burned. Clark had kept up with our post-Katrina rebuild of Willie Mae's Scotch House in New Orleans. He asked SFA to help this family business rebuild. In the end, Nick Pihakis led the effort, with SFA volunteers serving as labor. Four months later, Sam's reopened. Our friendship with the Shaw family grew.

Under Clark's leadership, the Old Country Store proved a remarkable place. I remember stopping there with SFA colleagues on the way to Nashville. As we walked from the hoecake station to the hot bar stocked with collards, Mary Beth and I marveled at how this buffet restaurant just off I-40 was the most integrated space we'd seen in years. That space also reflected contemporary tensions. I looked up in the rafters to see a piece of Old South memorabilia mounted in the eaves. On the way to the car, I walked across the parking lot to stare at the Tesla Superchargers.

IN AUGUST OF 2020, CLARK WROTE to me, "It's survival mode here but we are praying for God's great favor, another round of PPP and a vaccine sooner than



Clark and Juanita Shaw at SFA
World Headquarters, March 2019

with his family. Months passed.

In June of this year, SFA hosted a potential donor in Oxford. After lunch on the Square, they wanted to see where we worked. So we climbed those same stairs that Clark and Juanita climbed. When our new friends got to the top they did what most people now do when they walk in our offices. After taking in the soaring ceiling (constructed to house a rotating telescope), after staring at the oversized barbecue photographs mounted on the far wall, they turned to take in the stool and read the script. And then, noting the tribute to him on the framed panel, they told us that Clark Shaw had died. Back in November 2020, when COVID-19 ravaged Tennessee.

All this year, I've written about built environments for *Gravy*. About how the spaces we make with brick and mortar and board and paint reflect who we are

later." His people were vulnerable, he said. He was worried about them: "Fully 25% of our staff here at the Old Country Store came out of drug and alcohol recovery programs, usually faith based. Three of them were sex trafficked."

Clark praised the work of his son,

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Brooks, who had begun to lead the business: "After 53 years Covid took the Buffet and Salad Bar. We are now serving our same Southern Food FAMILY STYLE. You and your amazing team will have to come try it again soon." I told him that we wanted eat with them soon, and that we looked forward to visiting

and who we want to be. I hope when you visit SFA offices here in Barnard, you, too, will climb those creaky wooden stairs to see the stool that the Shaws hauled up those steps. And I hope you will take the time to think about people like Clark, who through their stewardship make our built spaces better. 🍷

John T. Edge is the founding director of the Southern Foodways Alliance and the host of TrueSouth on the SEC Network/ESPN. This is his last column for Gravy.