



In Search of CLEAVE

Folks made a way
where there was no way,
loving what they had
while knowing full well
what they didn't.

by MARK V. REYNOLDS

My Parents' Hometown



Map: Adobe Stock, Photo: Courtesy of the author

Dad loved his house,

the first he'd ever owned. He built a fence around it. He kept the front and back yards neat and trim. He painted the front shutters Mom's desired shade of pink. He even installed a home plate in the backyard so I could pretend to be a baseball player.

But the centerpiece of the backyard was his barbecue grill. At some point during my grade-school years in the late 1960s, Dad upgraded from an old-school metal grill on wheels to a permanently installed grill, landscaped with rocks around the base, next to the sour apple tree. It was relatively modest compared to the multilevel grillmaster stations often found on decks nowadays. The grill itself wasn't much bigger than the old one, but it was mounted on a pedestal and ensconced in a cast-iron shell that survived every Cleveland winter. It was the first time I'd ever seen a barbecue grill given pride of place as a backyard fixture. It made perfect sense, because Dad loved to barbecue.

Steaks were his specialty. I have no idea what prep work went into getting them grill-ready. All I know is that they came off the grill consistently tender and juicy, somehow looking and tasting fuller than steaks from our kitchen oven. He didn't overdo it with the sauce, always just enough to bring out the flavor of the meat. He had his way with a slab of ribs, too, but he had competition in that regard.

On the next block, just past the Citgo gas station, there was a small, square, white building with a hand-painted sign and room for a few cars to park in front. This was Whitmore's, my introduction to the world of retail barbecue. Whitmore's ribs were meatier and had a heavier taste than Dad's, and the sauce was redder and more plentiful. They were a different

kind of delicious. The fries struck a keen midpoint between shoestrings and steak fries, with just enough substance and seasoning to compliment both the ribs and the sauce. Mom liked Dad's ribs better, but he fired up the grill only on those Sundays he felt inclined, and Whitmore's was open seven days a week.

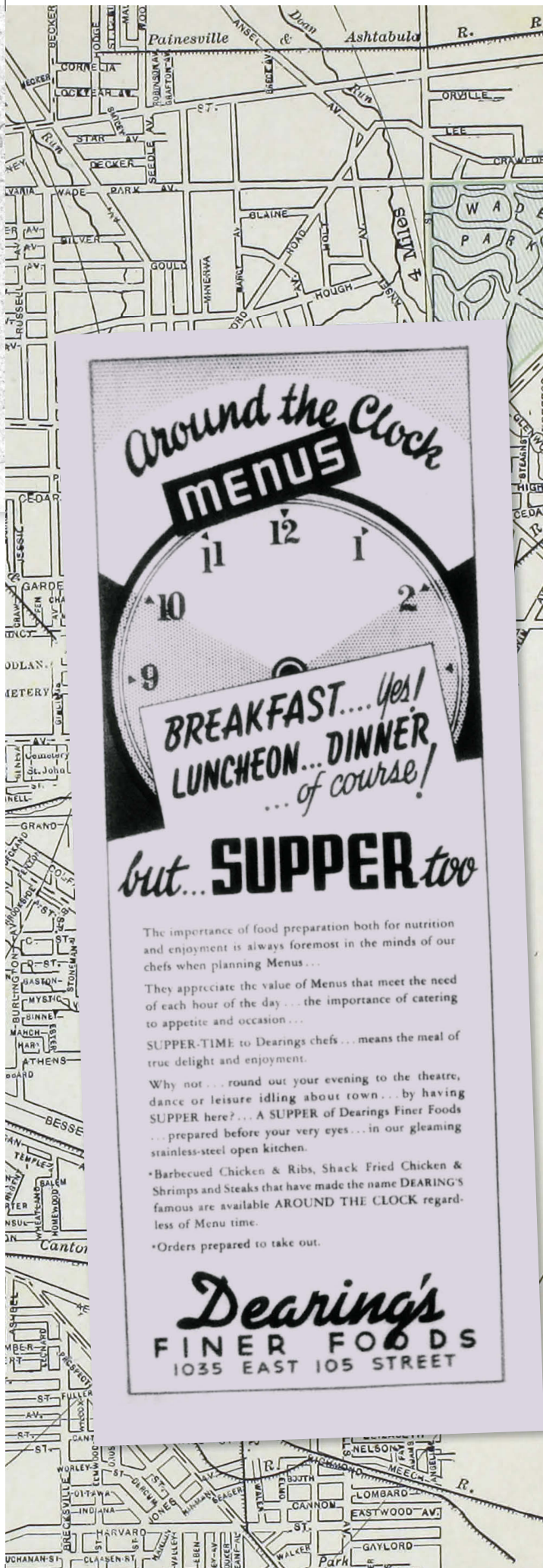
Although my family had moved around a lot prior to my coming along, the Lee-Harvard part of town where they'd landed—as one of the first Black families to move there—was the only neighborhood I knew as a kid. Whitmore's was just part of the landscape to me, the natural order of things, like the A&P and Pick-N-Pay supermarkets in the shopping center down the street. But Whitmore's and Hot Sauce Williams, another barbecue joint in the neighborhood, meant something entirely

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different to Mom. When she'd get to telling me about the good old days, she'd mention places like these, and streets like Cedar and Central Avenues, which were nowhere near where we lived.

She'd rhapsodize about those eateries of yore. "That was *good* eatin'," she'd say, stretching out the "good" for an extra vowel or two. She'd talk

Map: Adobe Stock; Dearing's advertisement: The 12 Counts Year Book 1947, courtesy of the author



about the nightclubs of her young adulthood, including the one where she met Dad, and how much fun she had back then. And then she'd lament that I had no way of knowing just how special those times were.

The reminiscing ramped up when a Dearing's restaurant and party center opened in a vacant building across from Whitmore's. Mom went on and on about their chicken wings (which, frankly, I never much cared for), and how big a deal they were back in the day. But the Dearing's she knew—on East 105th Street in the Glenville neighborhood—was from some other dimension, as far as I could tell.

Had not Mom fired up the wayback machine, I might not have known about any of this. We didn't live anywhere near the spots she raved about, and we had no reason to venture toward them. We didn't have family or friends there; we didn't worship there; we didn't shop or dine there. Why would we? Everything we needed was a short drive away, within minutes of my childhood home.

I didn't realize it at the time, but I was beginning to learn a lesson about food and the things it could summon: my city's past, my birthright as a Black Clevelander, and even how my parents lived before I showed up.

As Black Cleveland grew

in the 1920s and '30s, with Great Migration newcomers expanding by multiples the community that already existed, a vibrant economic and social structure took hold. This was in part because Blacks were redlined into subsets of the city's sprawling East Side, mostly between the downtown business district and the University Circle cultural neighborhood. Within those confines, they created a universe. Since Blacks weren't always allowed to patronize businesses in white-dominant areas, they built their own on the East Side. Everything Black folk might need, from radio repair to a realtor, was available in the 'hood, and often from more than one source. In that respect, Black Cleveland was similar to Black Chicago, Black Detroit, and pretty much every urban area where Black people sought opportunity.

There were also Black social clubs: groups of compadres who would rent out a nightclub or banquet hall to throw a party. Some weren't much more than a close-knit friend circle, but one

THE 12 Counts SOCIAL CLUB.

TRUSTEES and STAFF



FREDERICK
D. GRAIR



MERRITT
N. STEPP



JACK L.
OLIVER



TOYCE M.
ANDERSON



CAESAR A.
DAMERON



MORRIS E.
MORGAN



MATTIE BELLE TUBBS



KATHERINE BOYD



MARY MUMPHY

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club, the 12 Counts, went a step further. Known for their debonair style and high-class events, they made their name in the late 1930s and '40s. They made the leap from informal gatherings to established businesses, holding down a series of addresses along Cedar Avenue, the main entertainment strip of the East Side back then. Their parties were so meticulously planned, they even filmed them to show at subsequent events, so folks who missed out could get caught up.

The Counts were more than just party-throwers who could also make a buck. They were community-minded brothas as well, and took pains to champion and support their fellow entrepreneurs. In 1947, at their peak, they published their annual yearbook as a "Better Business Issue" that showcased every Black retailer and service provider who chose to take out an ad.

"It is symbolic of the progress and modern methods of our businesses to note that 94 1/2% are aware of the wisdom of advertising," managing editor J. L. Oliver and executive editor F. D. Grair wrote in the introduction. "Of the 273 businesses contacted, 258 were pleased to accept this opportunity to better acquaint Cleveland citizens with the Negro business and professional world. We hope the other 5 1/2% will soon become equally as enterprising."

That enterprising majority represented the gamut of products and services available within Cleveland's Black community of the day. On page 20 are small advertisements for, among others, a law firm, an accounting firm, a hardware store, and a coin-operated machine proprietor. The full-page ad on page 71 touts Carver Appliance Company, "complete electric kitchen outfitters." Throughout the rest of the book are ads for auto body shops, hairdressers and barbers, photo studios, bicycle shops, hotels, and florists. There are nightclubs, like Club Ron-Day-Voo ("The House of Swing") on Cedar Avenue and Little Harlem

Tavern ("It Jumps All the Time") on Central. There is even a Black-owned farm and horseback riding academy out in the suburbs. Between the ads are short articles extolling the virtue and achievements of Black Clevelanders, including the 12 Counts themselves.

In 1997, my wife and I worked on a fiftieth-anniversary reprint of this publication. The entrepreneurial range and vitality (as well as the production values) exhibited throughout those pages amazed us then—and they still do. Sadly, virtually all of those business are long gone. So, to the best of our knowledge, are any surviving Counts. By the time of their last gasp in the 1980s, life had irrevocably changed. The patronage of their heyday had thinned beyond rebirth; Black people socialized in different ways and in other parts of town; and corporate interests sought to seize what they suddenly considered valuable real estate on the East Side.

But that doesn't mean there was no connection between the Cleveland of my parents' young adulthood, depicted in its heyday in the 12 Counts yearbook, and the Cleveland of my own childhood. I didn't notice it while working on the reprint, but now I do: Inside that 1947 yearbook are two ads that linked my parents' past to mine.

Page 57 sports a full-page ad featuring a beaming pitmaster and slab upon slab of ribs. It's for Hot Sauce Williams—"Featuring Ribs and Shoulder, Golden Brown, Mellow and Cooked to the Bone"—and the weekly radio show he sponsored. Years later, a Hot Sauce Williams set up shop in my neighborhood, miles from the East 49th Street location in the yearbook.

And on page 103, a half-page notice with post-Art Deco graphics invites readers to not only breakfast, luncheon, and dinner, "but Supper too": "Why not...round out your evening to the theatre, dance or leisure idling about town...by having SUPPER here? ...A SUPPER of Dearing's

LITTLE HARLEM TAVERN
"It Jumps All The Time"
 BEER – WINE – LIQUEURS – FOOD
 7209 Central Avenue EN. 9148
 CLARENCE LOVING CHARLES LOVING BOB LOVING
 — Props. —

Finer Foods...prepared before your very eyes... in our gleaming stainless-steel open kitchen."

I remembered Mom invoking the name Dearing's with reverence when one opened down the street from us in the 1960s. Here was proof that Dearing's wasn't just another chicken shack. It was part of Cleveland history, and so was Hot Sauce Williams. Years after their respective foundings, their names still carried currency. They were places that mattered to the Black lives of their times, and would continue to mean something a generation later. Growing up, I did not appreciate how a take-out joint could become a cultural institution.

The stories of Dearing's, Whitmore's, and Hot Sauce Williams reach farther back than I knew as a kid. Not surprisingly, they each contain strains of time-worn American tales: rags-to-riches sagas, family legacies, and the vicissitudes of the restaurant business.

Let's begin with Ulysses S. Dearing, born in 1903 in Washington, Pennsylvania, in the Allegheny foothills. As a teen he worked in the local steel mills, then made his way to Pittsburgh. There, he scraped together enough money to open a restaurant

and hotel, but it was destroyed by a flood.

He eventually lit out for Cleveland, getting off the bus with about a dollar in change to his name, which he promptly left on the sidewalk. (According to legend, he did so because he figured someone could use that money more than he could.) After gigs as a short order cook, he became manager of the Cedar Gardens nightclub, one of the most popular in town.

There, he perfected his fried chicken recipe, and by 1946, he'd opened his first restaurant in Cleveland, the location featured in the 12 Counts yearbook (in a neighborhood soon to flip from white to Black). That made him the first Black owner of a sit-down restaurant in Cleveland—other Black-owned eateries of the day, apparently, were either take-out-only or had only modest seating space.

Eventually, the Dearing's chain stretched to six locations, the one in my neighborhood being the last outpost to open in 1969. It even had a banquet room for special events. By then, according to a 1972 blurb in *Ebony* which featured his recipe for chicken stew with cornbread dumplings, Dearing was frying 5,000 chickens a week.

But at the time of Ulysses Dearing's death in 1984, only one Dearing's was still in business. The

Map: Adobe Stock. Advertisements: The 12 Counts Year Book 1947, courtesy of the author

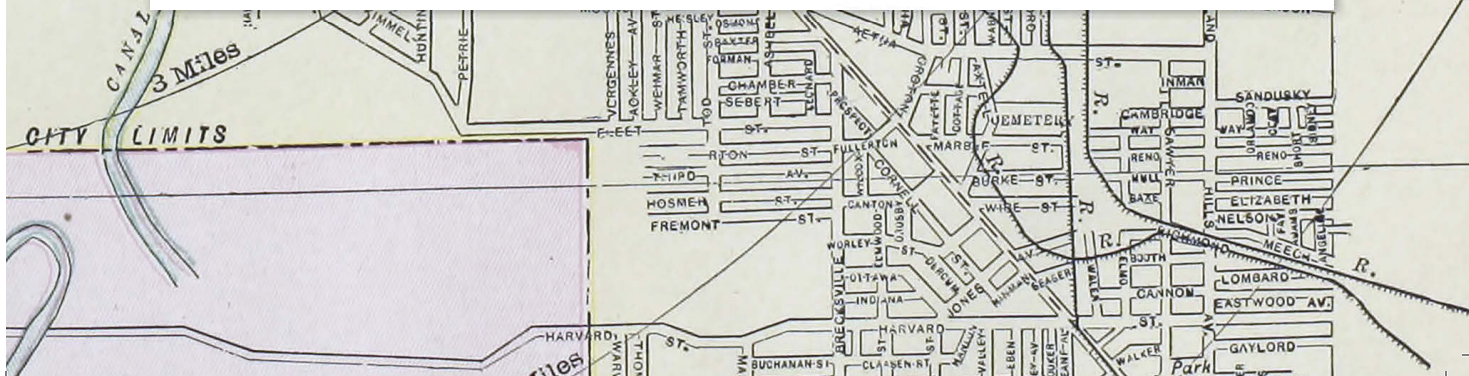
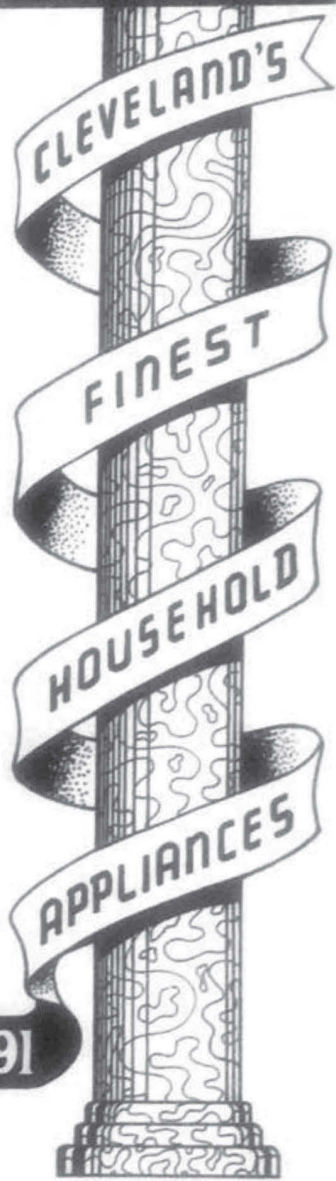


Community BUILDING

Step by step... and stone by stone... we have endeavored to lay the modest foundation for building our future in your community... and ours.

We are proud of our Community today and we look forward enthusiastically to lending our meager efforts towards the Building of a Better Community for tomorrow; a Community for tomorrow that will afford better living and greater opportunity for our coming generations... that they may know... that the profits from our services to you were not expended in selfish or absentee projects...but...that they were re-invested, in Building...Building the Community today...that is tomorrow's hope for yours and ours.

9102 QUINCY AVE · RA. 6391





HOT SAUCE WILLIAMS

WORLD'S BEST B A R - B - Q

FEATURING RIBS AND SHOULDER, GOLDEN BROWN, MELLOW AND
COOKED TO THE BONE



HOT SAUCE WILLIAMS TIME

Each Saturday Afternoon at 5:30 P. M.
Over Radio Station WJW

STARRING

Gay Crosse and His Mercury Recording Orchestra

OPEN 3:00 P. M. to 5:00 A. M.

Central Ave. at East 49th St.

EN. 9828

founder had no desire to impose the hardships of the business upon his heirs. There is now a massive church at the original location's address; it would be nice if somebody erected a historical marker alluding to what once was there. Had not Jaya Saxena referenced that *Ebony* piece in her 2016 book, *The Book of Lost Recipes: The Best Signature Dishes from Historic Restaurants Rediscovered*, present-day and future Clevelanders would have scant awareness of Dearing's pride of place in their Black culinary and entrepreneurial history.

The story of Hot Sauce Williams is equally fascinating. For starters, just as blues music has two separate harmonica legends who went by Sonny Boy Williamson, so, too, does Cleveland barbecue history claim two separate Hot Sauce Williamses. The Hot Sauce Williams featured in the 12 Counts yearbook (Hot Sauce Williams I, for our purposes) was Eugene Williams, born in Louisiana in 1901. During the Great Migration, he made his way from New Orleans to Memphis, then Chicago, and, in 1923, to Cleveland. There, he opened a fish stand and later expanded to barbecue, a craft he had learned from his father. In the midst of the Great Depression, he bought the rights to a space in the heart of the East Side, and all of a sudden he was a businessman.

That business took off, thanks in no small part to Williams' secret sauce, based on herbs and recipes he learned in New Orleans (first, as a youth, and later, on his annual trips back home for Mardi Gras). He was featured in *Ebony* years before Dearing, and Louis Armstrong once bought 300 boxes of ribs at a single order, according to *Texas Monthly*. Business was so good that Williams bought land in the suburbs to raise his own hogs and expanded to Detroit and Pittsburgh. On days off, he parked his Cadillac on the shores of Lake Erie and fished from the front seat.

The good times didn't last, though. Williams suffered his first stroke in 1954, lost the business by 1958, and passed away shortly thereafter.

Hot Sauce Williams II, the one I actually

remember, was founded in Cleveland in 1964 by five Mississippi-born brothers: Lemaud, Alonzo, James, William, and Herbert Williams. Such was the quality of their ribs that their customers started calling the newcomers' establishment Hot Sauce Williams, too. Not wanting to throw away found name recognition, the brothers allowed the name to stick (after reaching some sort of financial arrangement with the survivors of Hot Sauce Williams I).

Hot Sauce Williams II also expanded, opening various other spots across the East Side and, in the early 1970s, moving into the neighborhood where I lived. I was always partial to their shoulder dinners, which I suspect might be a uniquely Cleveland nomenclature since folks elsewhere call it pulled pork. But that location, like the Dearing's of my youth, seems to be closed; the whole operation appeared to be running on fumes by the time the last of the Williams brothers, Herbert, died in 2019. At the time of his death, the existence of the previous Hot Sauce Williams was barely reported.

But Whitmore's, the first barbecue place of my youth, is still around, with two locations not far from where I grew up. Virgil Whitmore Sr. opened his first restaurant in 1942, quickly becoming known for his special sauce. (That sauce is still a Whitmore family secret, but my taste buds remember a rich, tangy concoction with just a hint of sweetness). He soon expanded throughout the city and beyond, to Cincinnati and even Honolulu.

Whitmore died in 1983, but the business remains in the family. His granddaughter Vanessa even harbored notions of selling Whitmore's sauce online at one point. The fact that she and her brothers are still involved makes Whitmore's something of a rarity—a third-generation, Black-owned family business. That such a legacy belongs to a take-out spot, not a newspaper or an insurance company or an auto dealership, speaks as much to that individual family's dedication and resilience as to the vagaries Black businesses of

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every stripe have suffered over the years.

To this day, Whitmore's is still known not only for their ribs, but also their Polish Boys. The official Cleveland sandwich, a Polish Boy is a Polish sausage, topped with French fries, coleslaw, and barbecue sauce, on a bun (a Polish Girl adds shoulder to the mix). You can get the authentic version only in its birthplace. As with Chicago's Italian Beef or the Philly Cheesesteak, other places that put their own spin on the Polish Boy invariably do more harm than good.

No one can say who actually invented it, though. It has been a Cleveland barbecue staple since the 1970s, but neither Whitmore's grandchildren nor Lemaud Williams' widow could say for certain, when *Cleveland Magazine* asked in 2019, that they had birthed it. Most likely, they concurred, some anonymous food vendor on some anonymous street had the idea, and it took off from there. No matter; your next visit to Cleveland is incomplete without a venture to Whitmore's or another local spot (the less fancy, the better) to sample this gorgeous, sloppy meal-on-a-bun. And when you take that first delicious bite, you'll be biting into an extension of Black Cleveland's cultural heritage.

My parents were both born

and raised in Cleveland—Mom often ridiculed the Migration newcomers, calling them “Bamas.” They married not long after World War II and lived in various places across the East Side before they bought into Lee-Harvard in 1963. Prior to then, their social life—the nightclubs they frequented, the places they dined—was proscribed by Cleveland's segregation. Black businesses established themselves in proximity to where Black people were allowed to live. It's the classic story of segregation: Folks made a way where there was no way, loving what they had while knowing full well what they didn't.

But the vast majority of those establishments didn't keep those Black consumers who could afford to move into other parts of town, where they could have their own piece of the pie. In the fullness of time, new entrepreneurs—new record stores, new attorneys, and so on—emerged to meet their needs without their having to revisit their old stomping grounds, which were rapidly declining, due partly to a lack of business from former customers like my parents. (Government

disinterest and corporate disinvestment also played a role, but that's a longer story.)

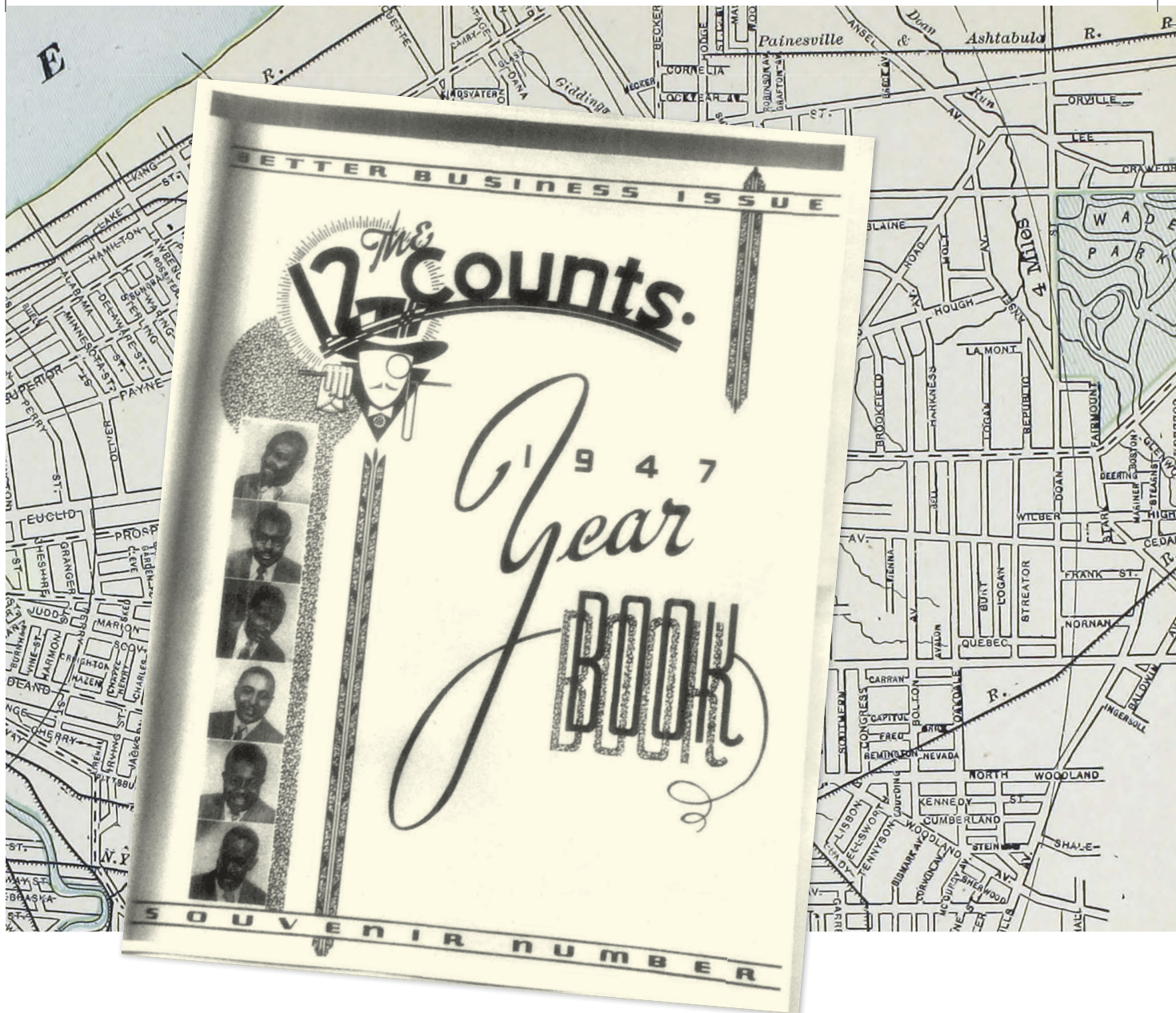
Yet old-school barbecue and take-out restaurants often followed their longtime customers, establishing satellite locations in the expanding Black territory. And of all the businesses my parents could have hearkened back to—indeed, every last one of them in that 12 Counts yearbook—it was the restaurants and take-out joints they remembered and regaled.

That's got to do with the centrality of good food to enjoying life, it seems to me. When we think of Black folk and food, we tend to think of home-cooked holiday feasts, at least as the popular imagination would have us: plates upon plates of deep-red roasts, chickens both fried and baked, collard greens, mac and cheese, biscuits, pies, and all the fixings. But, according to the stories my parents told, food from a popular take-out joint or the fanciest restaurant in the Black part of town could be just as soulful—and memorable—as an endless Sunday banquet. Those Black-owned restaurants, take-out joints, and nightclubs represented happy moments, flush paydays, hot nights on the town. But it doesn't end there.

That Dearing's, Hot Sauce Williams, and Whitmore's weren't just places to get a quick meal, but establishments spoken of like community pillars—especially when other well-known Black businesses weren't—speaks to the value they added to Black life in a difficult time. Of course the food was good, but it wasn't just that. They helped engender comfort and community for people otherwise occupied with making a way out of no way. It speaks to the power of food to evoke not just immediate satisfaction, but lasting cultural memory.

Although such lofty ideals weren't likely top-of-mind for the founders, they're part of why we remember them still. Their legacy relates to their wherewithal to expand, and extend those feelings of comfort and community across disparate parts of town (and the nation), and succeeding generations, even as the Black community took on tenors and locations that weren't even a pipe dream when they started.

So while Dearing's wings, Hot Sauce's shoulder, and Whitmore's ribs were just food to me, they were connective tissue to my parents, keeping them at least a little in touch with a time and place already receding into haze. They would tell their back-when stories, with something



between wistfulness and boastfulness that I would never experience such good times for myself, that I'd never know how unified and vibrant being Black in Cleveland once felt. I suspect that tissue helped make the eating so good for Mom and her memories.

And true, I couldn't experience the Cleveland they knew. As a child of integration, there's no way I could know about having a whole world—its services, its sounds, its savory tastes—inside one defined space, no matter why it was so defined. Mom's storytelling always made me feel like I'd missed out on something special, intangible, irretrievable.

But I have my own tales of young adult life in

Cleveland to tell, adventures at nightclubs and venues in parts of town my parents could never have dared to explore. And because those barbecue joints set up shop where the Black community had expanded, where my parents settled down and where I grew up, they're part of my stories, too.

I live just outside Chicago now, and I've found several barbecue and wing joints to my liking here. But, through no fault of their own, they're not the same as the ones back home. So the next time I'm back in Cleveland, I'll make it my business to swing by Whitmore's for a heaping box of memories, dripping with tangy sauce. 🍷

Mark V. Reynolds is a Chicago-based writer who explores the intersection of history, race, and culture. He wrote extensively about Black art and life for Popmatters and received an Ohio Society of Professional Journalists award in 2005.

MAP: Adobe Stock; The 12 Counts Year Book 1947, courtesy of the author