



FORK IN THE ROAD

A Soul Food Beacon

FIFTY YEARS AFTER THE PIVOTAL “I AM A MAN” STRIKE IN MEMPHIS, MS. GIRLEE’S CARRIES ON A NOURISHING LEGACY

By John T. Edge



“We’re church people,” Aaron Leach says when I ask how his family came to run a soul café on the edge of the North Memphis neighborhood known as Smokey City, once thick with factories and working-class families. “When I got called to the church, my mother started cooking.” One of six children born to Jimmie and Baxter Leach, who moved from Schlater, Mississippi, to Memphis in the late 1950s, Aaron smiles wide as he calculates the fare for my plate of braised oxtails, brothy pinto beans, stumpy okra pods, and crunchy-rimmed cornbread muffins.

The matter is settled, says that enveloping grin. But the story of Ms. Girlee’s, a celadon-walled café with a mint-and-white checkerboard floor, set on a pilgrimage-worthy superblock of three soul food standouts and a hot-tamale truck, isn’t that simple. To understand how a storefront restaurant in a strip dominated by a barber college and two beauty salons became a Memphis institution requires fluency in labor history and knowledge of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s late-career push for economic justice.

Drawn to Memphis by the February 1968 deaths of sanitation workers Echol Cole and Robert Walker, crushed in the malfunctioning bin of a garbage truck to which they

had retreated for shelter during a rainstorm, King visited the city three times in March and April of that year to support a strike called by their colleagues. And then, on April 4, as King stood on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel, James Earl Ray fired a single deadly rifle shot that shook the movement and challenged the promise of nonviolent social change.

Sanitation workers’ wages at the time were stifflingly low. Hefting tin garbage pails that trickled with muck and swarmed with maggots, black men in Memphis worked with little to no chance of promotion and scant medical and bereavement benefits. Many earned such a low wage that, even after working sixty-hour-plus weeks, they still qualified for welfare.

The deaths of Cole and Walker, and the realization that the city would not financially support their families, exposed a frayed nerve in black Memphis. “[They] would give you handouts,” said sanitation worker Clinton Burrows. “We had just got tired of those handouts. You almost could tell a worker when you saw him in the streets. He either had a hat on too large or his shoes were too big or his coat was too long...”

Baxter Leach was one of the workers who walked off his job to march in the streets of Memphis, holding high a sign printed with a simple and profound declaration: I AM A MAN. “I got Maced,” he recalled recently. “I got tear-gassed. I got run like a rabbit, police behind me.” He was in the audience when King spoke on March 18, declaring, “If America does not use her vast resources of wealth to end poverty and make it possible for all of God’s children to have the basic necessities of life, she too will go to hell.”

This was not the mild, reconciling King often celebrated today. “Never forget that freedom is not something that is voluntarily given by the oppressor,” he said that March night, his voice spiraling upward to meet the shouts of

From left: Three generations of the Leach family; oxtails with greens, yams, and cornbread muffins; Ms. Girlee’s regular Carrie Yancy.



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FORK IN THE ROAD, CONTINUED

the sanitation workers. "Freedom is not some lavish dish that the power structure and the white forces in policy-making positions will voluntarily hand out on a silver platter while the Negro merely furnishes the appetite."

Jimmie Leach, Baxter's wife, often arrives first at Ms. Girlee's. On Thursday and Friday mornings, when she leads the crew, Jimmie ties on her apron before five. Early in her career, to help their son Aaron build a brick church, she baked and sold pound cakes and caramel cakes. She opened a neighborhood restaurant in 1983. And she soon began to fry chicken and smother greens like her grandmother had cooked back home in Schlater, where the family had sharecropped.

On Tuesdays, diners queue for fried chicken, nutmeg sweet potatoes, and hashed turnip greens. On Thursdays, gooey pigs' feet and crusty macaroni and cheese and peach cobbler draw pilgrims. Each Friday, Ms. Girlee's fries buffalo fish and catfish and cooks spaghetti and meatballs. That combination of fish and spaghetti is a soul-café hallmark in Arkansas, Mississippi, and western Tennessee. So are butter rolls, a sort of countrified bread-pudding dessert, baked here only on Wednesdays.

Eight Leach family members work here daily. Enkia Anita Leach Hilliard, who calls customers niece and nephew, animates the café. She's the compassionate businesswoman who stays late to dish discounted five-dollar plates of fried chicken and two vegetables, the devoted neighbor who freezes the leftovers and delivers bereavement platters to mourning community members.

Enkia is a daughter of Jimmie and Baxter Leach. That makes her a sister of Aaron, who works the register here and who has served the True Gospel Church of Deliverance since 1980. Seated before a platter of pork neck bones and saucers of fried corn and sweet lima beans, I watch as twenty-odd men from the Memphis Baptist Ministerial Association amble in. Dressed in deep-brown suits, accessorized with purple ties, shod in two-tone spectators that flash beneath overhead fluorescents, they convene here once a week to sop potlikker and fork slabs of meat loaf and spend

their money with fellow church people.

Thirty-plus years after Jimmie Leach opened her first café, church ties still bind Ms. Girlee's to its customers. Five days a week, locals like Carl Greer, who once drove a city bus and ministers at a nearby church, file to the steam table, alongside reprints of the placards Baxter Leach carried and contemporary signs for baby shea-cocoa butter and rice bran cooking oil, refined in Arkansas. (The Leaches fry exclusively in rice bran oil; Enkia says it cuts indigestion.)

During the civil rights movement, cafés like this one were clubhouses where preachers and activists plotted liberation strategies. The issues—including gentrification, job training and access, and predatory policing—are different today. But the Leach family still sets a welcome table here in Smokey City.

The 1968 strike, the assassination of King, and the riots that followed changed the path of our nation. More specifically, those events changed the path of Memphis. For the first time, a coalition of labor and civil rights activists worked in lockstep. Sixty-five days after protests began, the Memphis City Council accepted many of the sanitation workers' demands, including the right to fund a union and access to promotions.

Ahead of the strike's fiftieth anniversary this year, the National Civil Rights Museum, set in the repurposed Lorraine Motel, updated its exhibits to project footage of protesters on the side of a vintage garbage truck. More recently, current and retired sanitation workers turned the dirt at a groundbreaking for I Am A Man Plaza, set next to the historic Clayborn Temple, the organizing point for many sanitation worker strike initiatives.

Despite those developments, the best place in Memphis to

commune with those workers and connect with King's drive for economic justice may be Ms. Girlee's Soul Food, where neck bones hang heavy with tender threads of pork, and fat pintos bob with pulled turkey meat, where dignity is forever on the menu and school-teachers and preachers and working-class folk gather daily beneath signs that read, I AM A MAN. **Q**

Good Neighbors

Pork chops, tamales, and more at a soul-food nexus

The intersection of Chelsea Avenue and Thomas Street in Memphis is heavy with soul food. Opposite Ms. Girlee's, a white truck advertises Jock Pittman's parchment-wrapped hot tamales. Inside a convenience store on the same apron of pavement, Tucci Touch dishes takeout fried pork chops and lustrous cabbage ribbons. Just down from Ms. Girlee's at the rear of the Independent Beauty & Barber Salon, Patricia Franklin of Patricia's Independent Soul Food serves pigs' feet on Tuesdays and smothered pork steaks on Thursdays. If there's a greater density of good soul food on another street corner in another Southern city, I'll douse a rusted muffler in hot sauce and gnaw it like a neck bone.—**J.T.E.**

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