

# ALABAMA FOODWAYS GATHERING

CELEBRATING FOOD TRADITIONS FROM  
FOUR REGIONS OF ALABAMA

## TENNESSEE VALLEY GOAT & CHICKEN STEWS



## GULF COAST GUMBO



## LACY CORNBREAD FROM THE WIREGRASS



## SUMTER COUNTY BARBECUE CLUBS



SPONSORED BY  
THE ALABAMA FOLKLIFE ASSOCIATION  
OLD ALABAMA TOWN, MONTGOMERY  
SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 7, 2009

PHOTOS BY SYLVIA STEPHENS (CORNBREAD), DUSTIN PRINE (BARBECUE), GARY COSBY, COURTESY OF THE DECATUR DAILY (STEW), AND ALBY HEADRICK (GUMBO).

# WELCOME TO THE ALABAMA FOODWAYS GATHERING

“Foodways” refers to the study of what people eat and when, why, how, and with whom they eat it. Anthropologists, folklorists, sociologists, historians, and others who study foodways may focus on national cuisines, foods of particular regions or ethnic groups, or on one specific family’s food traditions. The Alabama Foodways Gathering concentrates on foods from four regions of the state.

Over the years, state folklorists traveling across the state to document and present music and craft traditions have happily indulged in wonderful southern foods served at local steam-table restaurants as well as in the homes of the people being interviewed. Besides enjoying the foods that the entire South is famous for, such as fried chicken, barbecue, catfish, sweet potatoes, collard greens, cornbread and iced tea, we have noticed some foods that are important and prevalent in one part of Alabama but are practically unknown in others. This year grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Alabama State Council on the Arts made it possible for us to send fieldworkers to interview people about these regional dishes. Their work gives us the opportunity, today, to learn about four traditional foods, to taste them and to talk to people who participate in making and sharing them.

Three of our fieldworkers learned their interviewing and documentation skills at the Alabama Community Scholars Institute (ACSI). This 10-day program produced by the Alabama Folklife Association trains people from across the state to recognize, document, and present aspects of their local folk culture. Susan Thomas from Mobile (ACSI 2004) interviewed noted gumbo cooks in her city. William Allen of Decatur (ACSI 2006) immersed himself in the topic of goat and chicken stews that prevail in northwestern Alabama. Sylvia Stephens of Waverly (ACSI 2008) traveled to the Wiregrass region to interview cooks who are expert in making the crispy, thin, fried cornbread that is traditional there.

Fieldwork on the barbecue clubs of Sumter County was done under the auspices of the Center for the Study of the Black Belt at the University of West Alabama. Research assistant Pam McAlpine, assisted by Dustin Prine, interviewed members of each of seven clubs who meet regularly to socialize as they prepare and eat barbecue topped with their club’s unique sauce.

It is clear to us that we have just scratched the surface in our first foodways project. We have identified four traditions and described them, but we want to know much more about their origins and to better understand why they appear in one part of the state and not others. Today in each session we will ask you to tell us about foodways in your area that need to be documented. We will also ask for your questions. Any that we can’t answer will be seen as opportunities for future research. Our appetite for Alabama foodways has been whetted.

# THE ALABAMA FOODWAYS GATHERING

was produced by the Alabama Folklife Association and funded in part by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Alabama State Council on the Arts and with funding from the sales of the “Support the Arts” automobile tags.



Executive Director: Joyce Cauthen

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Pam McAlpine's work was done under the supervision of Dr. Tina Naremore Jones, Executive Director, and Valerie Pope Burns, Director, Center for the Study of the Black Belt at the University of West Alabama in Livingston.

We thank Carey Cauthen and Bob Weathers for their help with this booklet and express special appreciation to our hosts, Landmarks Foundation and Old Alabama Town and to the AFA board members and volunteers who helped with set-up and other vital tasks.

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# CHICKEN AND GOAT STEW IN THE TENNESSEE VALLEY

By William Allen

In the part of the Tennessee Valley that includes the Alabama counties of Lauderdale, Lawrence, Limestone, and Morgan, chicken and goat stews are popular traditional dishes. So popular are they that not only are they frequently made for large family gatherings and other social events, but they are also often sold by local organizations as a means of fundraising. Chicken or goat stew is found in other places, but those stews are made with very different recipes and usually in smaller quantities than the ones found in these four counties and a few small adjacent communities.

The practitioners of this tradition, who were interviewed for the Alabama Folklife Association's Foodways Project, are in most cases in their late sixties or older, but for each cook there is at least one person



*Friends of Boss Hill start cooking stew at 4:00 a.m. for his annual stew held in Elkmont. (Photo by Joyce Cauthen)*

from a younger generation who is learning the art from them. The cooks grew up on farms or in farming communities settled by their ancestors who emigrated mainly from the Carolinas and Virginia, either directly or via Tennessee. These early farming families were large and, as one interviewee said, “You can feed more people with a stew than you can with a chicken.”

As is to be expected with recipes more often passed on orally from generation to generation than by being put into writing, there is some variation in the way the stews are made. The cooks in succession have subtly modified the basic recipe to their own tastes and that of the people for whom they are making the stew. The core recipe remains the same throughout the area: 2 pounds of meat (chicken or goat), 1 pound of potatoes, and ½ pound of onions per gallon of stew. Whole chickens or large chunks of goat meat are first cooked in water. They are then taken out of the pot, deboned, and chopped into bite sized pieces before adding them back to the stock produced when cooking the meat. The potatoes and onions are diced and added to the pot along with salt—measured by the handful—and black and red pepper to taste.

Beyond the core recipe, each pot of stew bears the signature of its cook. Jimmy D. Faulkner of Waterloo adds a variety of vegetables to his chicken stew while Charles Hagood of Moulton disdains any vegetables other than those listed above. Some cooks add whole kernel corn for flavor or creamed corn as a thickening agent. Others have adopted another, more modern, thickening agent—instant mashed potatoes. Crushed tomatoes, tomato juice, and tomato paste (or some combination of these) are also commonly added.



*Guests of Boss Hill (center) get in lines to be served their choice of goat, chicken or beef stew at his home in Elkmont. (Photo by Gary Cosby, courtesy of the Decatur Daily)*

Most of these stews are cooked in cast iron pots ranging in size from 20 gallons to over 60 gallons. Many of these pots are family heirlooms which in former times were used for doing laundry or making soap. Gas burners have replaced log fires under the stew, however. The stew is simmered for four or more hours once all the ingredients are added and requires constant stirring to keep it from sticking. The implement of choice for stirring is a canoe paddle or similarly sized hand-carved wooden paddle. As the stew thickens, the average stirring time for one person is about forty minutes before they tire and must pass the paddle on to the next cook’s helper.

Although chicken for the stews is now frequently purchased pre-slaughtered and plucked, cooks like Marvin Smith of Coxe who make goat stews often start with live goats. This adds time and work to an already long and labor intensive process. As another goat stew chef, Carlos Shannon of Piney Chapel, says, “from on the hoof to on the table, it takes three days to make a good goat stew.” But neither they nor any of the other goat or chicken stew cooks interviewed complain about this; they love eating the stews and they love cooking them for others.

The social aspect is as important in the enjoyment of the stew gatherings as the stews themselves. Boss Hill’s gathering in Elkmont is a typical gathering. Boss started having an annual chicken and goat stew get-together for a few friends over 30 years ago. Now a thousand people or more show up each year and he welcomes them all. And whether they have previously met each other or not, the attendees all strike up conversations and exchange stories with the people sitting next to them as they eat their meals and listen to musicians playing old time tunes or singing gospel songs.

It’s a rare week that passes without a notice in one of the local newspapers announcing a chicken or goat stew fundraiser. Churches, schools, festival organizers, benevolent associations, and of course politicians know that to draw the people of northwestern Alabama in, stew is the thing to have. Among the organizations with regular stew sales are the Athens American Legion Post #49, which has a monthly chicken stew luncheon to fund the many community projects it supports, and the Tanner Volunteer Fire Department, which has a yearly chicken stew sale to provide things for the department not covered by government funding. As with the social events, the fundraisers depend on cooks who have been preparing these stews for years. At the Tanner VFD, some of the men who cooked for the first fundraiser in the 1960s still help at the annual event.

The names in this article are but a small sample of the people and organizations carrying on this very active food tradition in northwestern Alabama. Much work still awaits the Alabama Folklife Association fieldworkers documenting the unique chicken and goat stews and the people who make them in this section of the Tennessee Valley.

# THE BARBECUE CLUBS OF SUMTER COUNTY, ALABAMA

By Pam McAlpine and Valerie Pope Burns  
*Center for the Study of the Black Belt*

Rural communities dot the landscape of Sumter County in West Alabama. In some their citizens are like large families, always looking for an excuse for fellowship and fun. One tradition passed down through generations is for members of the community to gather to cook barbecue and share a meal together. In seven of Sumter County's small communities this practice has been formalized into barbecue clubs, each with its own customs, yet sharing the same reason for being.

The clubs are similar in that they meet in their local community centers, which are often old schoolhouses, or are associated with local churches. In all of them only hog meat cooked over an open pit is served, though now most clubs buy theirs from one local provider. Whether cooked by club members or purchased, the meat is always pulled from the bone, then shredded into pieces small enough to eat. Each club member interviewed stressed that the meat is never cut from the hog.

The clubs also are alike in that each club thinks it has the best barbecue sauce in the county. Each has its own recipe which is a treasured and guarded secret.

The barbecue club in Geiger, formed in 1927, is the oldest of the seven Sumter County clubs. It was named the Timilichee BBQ Club after the Choctaw Indian chief who was vital to the opening of Sumter County. The Timilichee club still cooks whole hogs on its pit during the summer months, and they are one of only two clubs in the county that cook the whole hog themselves. The membership is open to those living in the immediate area, and only members may bring guests to the dinners. According to one long-time member, "it is a lot of work to belong to a barbecue club but it is worth it to see the people in the community come together for fellowship and a good meal."



*Bud Williams makes final preparations on his famous sauce at the Epes Barbecue Club. (Photo by Dustin Prine)*

The next oldest club is the Emelle BBQ Club, whose membership is the most exclusive. To belong to the Emelle club, one must live, work, or own property in Emelle. The group, founded in the early 1950s, meets in the Emelle Community Center, and since 1960 has kept a guest book listing all who have attended their suppers. The families, who each serve at one of the monthly barbecues between May and August, meet early on supper night. While the women get the building ready for the feast, the men pull meat from pork butts and slice ribs. They no longer cook whole hogs. The club calls its sauce the "Bryant Richardson sauce" after the first member to make it. As in other clubs, members bring side dishes, some of which come to be expected. At the Emelle Club, lemon cheese cake has become a tradition over the years.

Though other barbecue clubs occasionally have dinners to benefit local churches, the Panola BBQ Club is unique because all of its members belong to the local Methodist Church and its sole purpose is to raise money for the church. The club began in 1946 with friends getting together at someone's home. When the church needed to build new Sunday school rooms in the early 1950s, the club cooked two hogs for a fundraiser. It has continued to cook barbecue for an annual fundraiser, now cooking six hogs each year on open pits over coals from hickory logs. The pits are located on the grounds of a schoolhouse built in 1940. The club's sauce was developed by a Panola resident from the Carolinas. The Panola club is the only club where one need not be a member or an invited guest to enjoy their food. They warn you to buy your tickets early, however, because they sell fast!

The Boyd BBQ Club held its first supper in March 1951, soon after the completion of the club house located on the dirt road that leads to the Boyd Cemetery. According to a long-time member, “everyone raised hogs at the time, and it was just natural to have barbecues.” Originally the club only allowed residents of Boyd, but they have now opened membership to others. When dinner is served, the men go down the right side of the table, and the women and children go down the left side. Boyd is the only club to do this, though it came about in a similar fashion to customs in other clubs: “that is how we have always done it. It’s just our tradition.” Boyd, like the rest of the Sumter County clubs, began by cooking whole hogs, but now they cook pork butts or shoulders. Membership has declined because, when the club started, “we did not have televisions and telephones, and it was just a good time to get together.” However, they continue to have monthly suppers from April to July.

The Epes BBQ Club meets monthly from April through October, except for July, in the Epes Community Center, a two-room school built in the early 1900s. The club got its start as a hunting club that met behind the school. According to the club president, “it’s a tradition for Mr. Bud to make the sauce for our Epes barbecues. His sauce is so popular that he makes it for people in and around the Epes community.” Epes is the only club to introduce all of its invited guests before dinner begins. Members bring side dishes and pride themselves on hearing someone ask who brought a particular dish. According to one member, “Traditions are important here in Epes, but our traditions will not impede progress in our community. But at the same time, progress can not impede tradition.”



*The Cuba Club was founded in 1986.  
(Photo by Dustin Prine)*

In Cuba, barbecues were held to raise money for the local school until it was closed in 1974. When residents realized they missed the fellowship of those fundraisers, members of the Vaughan family took the lead in founding the Cuba BBQ Club in 1986. The club uses the former school, which is the oldest building in town, and meets four times a year, in April, May, September, and October. It is said of the Cuba sauce, made by a long-time member, that

it is so good you can drink it. While the membership of the club is half of what it used to be as older generations pass away and the younger generation moves away, the suppers are still successful. According to the sauce maker, “it’s a hoot! Just country people having a good time. There is no pretense and nobody goes away from here hungry.”

The newest member of the Sumter County barbecue club circuit is the Sumterville BBQ Club, founded in 2001. Like other clubs, the Sumterville club meets in an old school building that now serves as the community center. The one-room school, located next to the Church of Sumterville, was built in 1838 as an academy for girls. The club is different because it has never cooked its own meat or had a pit. Membership is not exclusive and most members were once members of other clubs. The Sumterville Club was founded so the residents could have a club close to home. According to one of the founders, “we are just a community. You can’t tell who is Baptist or Presbyterian. We just wanted to have a barbecue club because we wanted to have a community-wide family gathering.”

Though the barbecue clubs differ from one another in several ways, they all have fellowship as their main reason for being. All seven continue the tradition of eating together and inviting friends to come sample their special sauces. Food has brought people together for millennia and in Sumter County, eating barbecue is what brings rural communities together.



# FRIED LACY CORNBREAD

By Sylvia G. Stephens

**F**ine ground corn meal. A little salt to taste and water. Mix it 'til it's soupy and spoon it into a very hot skillet. Fry it in sizzling hot vegetable oil or lard until it's a light golden brown on both sides. What do you get? Fried lacy cornbread!

Several of the cooks interviewed for the Alabama Folklife Association's Foodways Project remembered the cornbread as "fried cornbread" but agreed that it is probably called "lacy cornbread" because the edges around the patty resemble the holey, curled up edges of a crocheted doily. While it may be found in other parts of the state and called by other names, people in Alabama's Wiregrass region regard it as a specialty of the area.

The Wiregrass includes portions of Alabama, Florida and Georgia. In Alabama, the Wiregrass winds its way through nine counties in the lower southeastern corner of Alabama: Barbour, Henry, Coffee, Covington, Crenshaw, Dale, Geneva, Houston, and Pike. It includes major cities and county seats like Dothan, Enterprise, Eufaula, Fort Rucker, Ozark, and Troy, as well as small, rural towns like Abbeville and Skipperville.

At a meeting of the Matron's Club of Abbeville, members told Alabama Folklife Association director Joyce Cauthen that outside of the area it is hard to buy the finely ground cornmeal that is required to make fried lacy cornbread. Local mills supply the demand, however.

The Pollard Milling Company in Hartford, located in the Wiregrass, still makes



*Lacy cornbread resembles a lace doily. (Photo by Sylvia Stephens)*

cornmeal the old fashioned way by slowly grinding the corn between two granite stones that can be set to produce medium, fine, and extra-fine ground cornmeal. One of the six mills currently used to grind the cornmeal is over 100 years old. Jimmy Pollard, a third generation owner, and his partner and sister-in-law, Paula Pollard, continue to follow the traditions of his father and grandfather. Pollard, a miller who learned from his father how to set the stones to grind the corn, explained that the corn used to make the meal comes from Kentucky and is a "full season" white corn that matures in the field. In the Wiregrass, cooks tend to prefer Pollard's fine ground cornmeal to make fried lacy cornbread.

Connie Floyd, a caterer in Troy, learned to cook fried cornbread from her grandmother and never used a written recipe. Floyd said she made the cornbread from memory and instinctively knew from watching her grandmother about how much water to mix into the fine ground meal to get the right consistency. She would let the batter drip off the side of a spoon to see if it was thin enough and ready to spoon into the skillet with a shallow layer of hot oil that barely covers the bottom. Floyd and co-worker Erma Hamm created the recipe on page 12 from memory.

Erma Hamm, a former school cook who has lived most of her life in the Wiregrass, said her father was the cook at her house and she learned to make fried cornbread from watching him. She said the cornbread has to have the right consistency in order to cook up right and end up with that lacy appearance. Hamm remembers it being called "fried" cornbread and recalls that her father added other ingredients into the batter, such as okra, before he fried the cornbread in a sizzling hot skillet. She said fried cornbread tastes better when it's hot, right out of the skillet.

Manonia Snell recalls having lacy cornbread at church functions as a child and still fries lacy cornbread for her family. Snell, a retired school teacher in Skipperville, adds a little self-rising flour to her fine cornbread mix and makes sure it is soupy enough before she fries it in hot vegetable oil in a black cast iron skillet. Some evenings after supper, her husband Jimmie



*Lacy cornbread requires a fine cornmeal, such as that ground in Hartford at Pollard Milling Company. (Photo by Sylvia Stephens)*

crumbles crispy pieces of the cornbread into a thick, tall glass, fills it with sweet milk, sprinkles in a little salt, and stirs it with a tablespoon to drink and enjoy. Snell searched for a recipe for lacy cornbread but could not find one, and thus created her own.

Here is Miss Connie and Miss Erma's recipe for you to make for yourself. You might want to add your own special ingredients like Erma's daddy or add a tablespoon or two of flour like Miss Manonia does.

*Connie Floyd & Erma Hamm's*

## **FRIED LACY CORNBREAD**

*Troy, Alabama*

*Ingredients:*

2 cups fine ground cornmeal  
1 tsp. salt  
2 ¼ cups water (tap water or water at room temperature)  
Vegetable oil (or lard)

*Directions:*

- Mix dry ingredients, adding water until batter is thin and pourable.
- Pour a tablespoon of batter into skillet with a thin layer of hot oil.
- Fry on both sides until golden brown.

Enjoy!



# **GULF COAST GUMBO TRADITIONS**

By Susan Thomas

The Alabama Gulf Coast is known for its historic diversity, having been settled by colonists from France, England, and Spain; slaves from Africa; and displaced Creoles from Saint-Domingue in the Caribbean. These groups intermingled with the local Native American tribes and subsequently produced a culinary style that is very distinctive and set apart from the rest of the state.

Perhaps no other dish symbolizes this rich and varied cuisine better than seafood gumbo. Combining okra originally brought to the South by African slaves, tomatoes introduced by the Spaniards, filé powder derived from sassafras leaves produced by Choctaw Indians, hot peppers obtained from the Caribbean, and a rich gravy-like roux contributed by the French, early Gulf Coast cooks created a thick, savory broth into which they added Gulf seafood—shrimp, crabs, oysters, and occasionally crawfish. Called gumbo—a word derived from the African name for okra—the dish has been a popular staple in Gulf Coast kitchens for generations.

Preparing a true gumbo requires a heavy investment of time and money. Most gumbo cooks insist on using the freshest ingredients and stress the necessity of slow-cooking the broth for several hours. Preparing the stock, vegetables, and seafood is a time-consuming process that takes advanced planning. Although some cooks still use shrimp and crabs they catch in Gulf waters, most rely on local shops for their supply of seafood. Few cooks rely on written recipes for preparing gumbo; instead they base their preparation skills on knowledge handed down verbally from earlier generations. The demanding steps of preparation, the high cost of seafood, and the dependence on oral history to pass on gumbo knowledge has resulted in fewer people mastering the craft. Most Mobilians today are content with ordering their gumbo from a restaurant.

Despite these hurdles, many cooks along the Gulf Coast still prepare gumbo. Six such individuals were interviewed recently for the Alabama Folklife Association's Foodways Project. All were recommended by friends in the community who could vouch for the quality of these cooks' gumbo recipes. Most of them not only make gumbo for their families





*Gumbo is a key component at the annual Blessing of the Fleet at St. Margaret Catholic Church in Bayou La Batre. (Photo courtesy of the Mobile Press-Register)*

but also prepare it for community events, often donating their time and ingredients to cook gumbo for church or charity fundraisers. All have definite ideas on what constitutes a good gumbo and there are similarities as well as striking differences among their recipes.

All interviewees agree that using the freshest ingredients available and slow cooking both the roux and the broth are the secrets to a good gumbo. All emphasize that the roux (a mixture of equal parts oil and flour) should be stirred continually until the desired color is reached—a golden brown for some cooks and a darker, almost black color for others. Although the cooks use different ingredients in their stocks—chicken, seafood shells, and even a whole, chopped up roast—all agree that the stock should be made ahead of time and cooked slowly. All cooks use

the “holy trinity” of Creole cooking—celery, onions, and bell peppers—but they disagree on what additional seasonings should be incorporated. Several add thyme, prepared seasoning mixes such as Old Bay or Tony Chachere’s, and Worcestershire sauce; while others only use garlic or cayenne pepper. One cook’s secret ingredient is turmeric.

Shrimp and crabmeat are used by all of the interviewees; four of the six usually add oysters while two do not. All use fresh seafood obtained locally. Two of the cooks often catch their own shrimp or crabs at Dauphin Island, off the coast of Mobile. The interviewees are divided on the addition of sausage to seafood gumbo—three use Conecuh County sausage regularly and three never add sausage. Likewise, there is disagreement concerning tomatoes. One cook never uses them; two use only an imported Italian boxed brand; one always uses fresh tomatoes; and two use whatever type they have on hand, fresh or canned.

Five of the interviewees serve their gumbo over rice. Some serve it as a main dish while others use it as an appetizer. All prepare gumbo for such special family occasions as reunions, Thanksgiving dinner, and Christmas. One interviewee serves gumbo throughout the Mardi Gras season as her signature dish for guests coming to her downtown home to watch the parades.

All the cooks take pride in their gumbo traditions and hope to pass on their knowledge to their children. All agree that making gumbo is probably a dying art, since most people in today’s quick paced society do not want to devote the time needed to make a good gumbo. These cooks all feel that gumbo is an important part of their Gulf Coast heritage and it serves a prominent role in their family’s culinary traditions.





# SCHEDULE OF PRESENTATIONS

Church Building, Old Alabama Town

## 10:00 a.m.: Chicken and Goat Stews in the Tennessee Valley

William Allen with Carlos Shannon of Piney Chapel, a farmer known for his expertise in making large quantities of stew and telling his friends some of the best stories they ever heard.



Carlos Shannon and Jim Holland

Photo by Joyce Cauthen

## 11:00 a.m.: The Barbecue Clubs of Sumter County

Valerie Pope Burns of the Center for the Study of the Black Belt, Livingston, with Becky Robertson, president of the Epes Barbecue Club.



Epes Barbecue Club

Photo by Dustin Prine

## Noon to 1:00: Tastings (Courtyard)

- Three Sumter County Barbecue Sauces— from Epes, Timilichee, and Emelle— over shredded pork from the Farmers Market Cafe
- Goat and Chicken Stews
- Gulf Coast Seafood Gumbo
- Fried Lacy Cornbread
- Slaw

## 1:00 p.m.: Lacy Cornbread from the Wiregrass

Sylvia Stephens with Connie Floyd, owner of the Olde Enzor Lane Restaurant in Troy, and Erma Hamm.



Connie Floyd

Photo by Sylvia Stephens

## 2:00 p.m.: Gulf Coast Gumbo Traditions

Susan Thomas with Judith Adams of Mobile, who learned to make gumbo from older relatives in Louisiana and in Bay Minette, as well as from African American cooks employed by the family.



Judith Adams with her mother, Ronni Clark

Photo by Susan Thomas



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