

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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in History presented on

Spring 2017

Title: Meat in the Middle: The Racial Contours of Kansas City Barbecue

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Abstract approved: _____
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Even though forms of segregation existed in Kansas City from 1879 to 1964, there were some things that brought whites and blacks together, and barbecue was one of them. White residents of Kansas City often found themselves traveling to the predominantly African American neighborhoods in the city to sample and savor the smoked meats. Often sitting together, being served by black pit-masters, blacks and whites enjoyed barbecue and a brief period of inter-racial harmony. Barbecue has deep roots in black culture, beginning with its role during slavery. It was not uncommon for white slave owners to hold celebratory barbecues for their family and friends, often assigning the job of pit-master to black men. Slaves carried that barbecue knowledge with them after the Civil War, establishing barbecue stands in various cities across the United States. When stands popped up in Kansas City in the early twentieth century, they not only had a loyal black customer base but also a white one. Many men who worked in

the stockyards, of all races, often visited the local barbecue stands. Politicians, acknowledging the popularity of smoked meats, frequently used it to entice black and white voters at political rallies. Tom Pendergast was one such politician. Thanks to Pendergast's policies, Kansas City became a "wide-open" town during prohibition, attracting gamblers, drinkers, and jazz musicians. In these jazz clubs, which were frequented by both blacks and whites, barbecue was usually served. Not only were blacks and whites associating in these clubs, but they were also furthering the attachment they shared for barbecue. Over time, the bond over barbecue flourished, helping to bridge the racial divides within the city. By examining racial interactions in relation to barbecue, it will help identify the complex and challenging problems surrounding racial divisions within Kansas City.

Keywords:

Barbecue, Arthur Bryant, Henry Perry, Ollie Gates, Racism, Integration, Segregation, Tom Pendergast, Stockyards, Jazz, Jazz Clubs, Kansas City Barbecue, Westport, West Bottoms, George Gates, African Americans, Calvin Trillin, Kansas City Call, Pitmasters, Arthur Bryant's BBQ, Gates Bar-B-Q, Exodusters

Meat in the Middle:

The Racial Contours of Kansas City Barbecue

A Thesis

Presented to

The Department of Social Sciences

EMPORIA STATE UNIVERSITY

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

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Spring 2017

Approved by the Department Chair

Approved by the Dean of the Graduate School and Distance Education

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Introduction

Barbecue. That single word invokes images of mouth-watering ribs, smoked ham, beef brisket, burnt ends, and even the sweet or tangy barbecue sauce that accompanies such heavenly meats. More than that, the word also incites memories of birthday parties with family and friends in the backyard, or of community gatherings celebrating Labor Day, Memorial Day, and the Fourth of July. The term barbecue, used both as a noun and a verb, refers to the preparation of smoked and/or grilled meats, the meats themselves, and the place or occasion where the meats are served and consumed. While we may not ruminate much about the impact that barbecue has had upon our lives, it has immersed itself into our culture, becoming an intrinsic part of American society. It has been able to transcend the stagnant status of basic sustenance and emerged as one of the favorite foodstuffs that Americans love to devour. Barbecue has proven to be an effective tool in bringing people together, and this is nowhere more evident than in Kansas City.

Kansas City plays host to more than one hundred barbecue joints.¹ Like other cities across the United States, Kansas City has developed its own unique style of barbecue, centered on the variety of woods used for cooking and the thick, sweet, molasses and tomato-based sauce that is prepared. Carolyn Wells, the Executive Director of the Kansas City Barbeque Society, declared, “Kansas City is the epicenter of the

¹Doug Worgul, *The Grand Barbecue: A Celebration of the History, Places, Personalities and Technique of Kansas City Barbecue* (Kansas City, MO: Kansas City Star, 2001), iv.

barbecue universe.”² Not only are there multitudes of barbecue restaurants to pick from, but Kansas City also hosts one of the country's largest barbecue contests, the American Royal, which attracts hundreds of people to the city every year.³

It took decades for Kansas City to gain notoriety for its barbecue, but the smoked meats represent so much more. The barbecue culture is deeply embedded within the city, reflecting the constructs of society that have evolved over time. “Barbecue's strength as a city symbol comes from its popularity on both sides of the state line and across the big rivers.”⁴ While visitors may flock to the metropolis to watch the Chiefs or the Royals play, or to reminisce about the famous jazz musicians that entertained in the downtown clubs, there is no denying that barbecue has played just as important a role in cultivating the Kansas City environment as the rest. “This cuisine clearly possesses roots in folk culture, not the kitchens of Milan or Paris. It also links the city with the rural South, not the sophisticated Northeast or West Coast. Furthermore, barbecue honors both the meatpacking and the mixed racial heritages of Kansas City.”⁵ KC Masterpiece and restaurants, such as Arthur Bryant's and Gates Bar-B-Q, have also helped to make Kansas City the headquarters for smoked meat lovers, but barbecue has served a much larger purpose for the area. “Kansas City barbecue is a good example of a food that has escaped from an ethnic association to become part of the general culture.”⁶

²Eileen Ogintz, "Best of Kansas City Barbecue," Fox News (October 28, 2015), <http://www.foxnews.com/leisure/2015/10/28/best-kansas-city-bbq/>.

³Worgul, *Grand Barbecue*, 67.

⁴James R. Shortridge, *Kansas City and How It Grew, 1822-2011* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2012), 204.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Barbara Gimla Shortridge and James R. Shortridge, *The Taste of American Place: A Reader on Regional and Ethnic Foods* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), 3.

From 1879 to 1964, racial divisions were just as prevalent in Kansas City as they were in any other metropolitan area in the United States. Segregation existed despite the large population of blacks that occupied the city, which created sections of town that were mostly avoided by white, middle-class Kansas City residents. There were a few things that drew whites to the predominantly black communities in the city, and barbecue was one of them. Barbecue may have had its roots in black culture, but white residents of Kansas City came to appreciate the smoked meats and spicy sauce that blacks had been consuming in their own backyards for decades.

Barbecue brought whites and blacks together in a unique bond, a bond rooted in the basic human need of food. And good food, at that. Segregation may have been alive and well in Kansas City, but both blacks and whites could be found eating at the same counters in barbecue restaurants devouring the delicious cuisine. “Barbecue's power to bring people together and establish community bonds has made it highly enduring,” conveyed historian Robert Moss.⁷ Nowhere is this more revealing than in Kansas City, where social norms were repeatedly abandoned by people who were craving the distinction of smoked meats.

“Several social scientists that stress the importance of food and community believe that food sharing can be used to forge a sense of togetherness.”⁸ So, what was it about barbecue that gave it the ability to bridge the racial divisions, even if for a short period? Several conditions in the country, and in Kansas City, led to the common bond

⁷Robert F. Moss, *Barbecue: The History of an American Institution* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2010), 241.

⁸Anne Donovan and Karen De Bres, "Foods of Freedom: Juneteenth as a Culinary Tourist Attraction," *Tourism Review International* 9, no. 4 (2006): 387.

that whites and blacks seemed to share in regards to barbecue. This paper will discuss how that bond was formed and how it solidified, even during the years of segregation.

In Chapter One, “The Roots of 'Cue,” the origin of barbecue is established. First learning of the practice from Native Americans, the Spanish continued to spread the art of barbecue to European settlers along the East Coast. As settlers discovered the benefits of barbecue, they taught their slaves as well. The chapter details how barbecue became firmly affixed within the slave community, becoming a permanent staple of the black culture. It also entails the benefits and drawbacks of barbecue celebrations on the plantations, for both blacks and whites. It provides a glimpse into how some black men ultimately benefited from learning the art of barbecue, even though it was forced upon them by their masters.

Chapter Two, “Cue on the Move,” focuses on the dissemination of barbecue knowledge across the United States, and specifically in Kansas City. After the Civil War, many southern blacks left the South in search of better opportunities. As they made homes in the north, their barbecue expertise came with them. The chapter delves into barbecue as being a staple of black culture. Passing on barbecue wisdom from one generation to the next, blacks bettered themselves and the next generation. Since the practice of barbecue was mainly performed by blacks, they held a monopoly over barbecue knowledge, ultimately drawing whites to the black communities.

The main approach to Chapter Three, “The ‘Cue Empire,” is the examination of how black men were able to build a barbecue legacy from little stands on the street corners. The chapter dives into the story of Henry Perry, the father of Kansas City

barbecue. Most of what Kansas City offers in terms of barbecue today can be traced back to him. The Kansas City style of barbecue can be linked to Perry's originality, smoking techniques, and his preference of sauce. It includes quotes from Henry Perry, outlining his viewpoints about race and the enjoyment of barbecue.

Chapter Four, "Legacy of the 'Cue," illustrates how Henry Perry was able to rise from obscurity and create an empire of barbecue legends. Thanks to Perry's techniques and mentorship, other barbecue kings emerged in Kansas City in the early 1900s. Men, such as Arthur Bryant and George Gates, are famous to this day for their barbecue restaurants. These followers of Perry helped to create the reputation of Kansas City as being the "barbecue capital of the world." The chapter also discusses the racial viewpoints of these men, detailing how they treated and regarded white customers in their restaurants.

In Chapter Five, "Bonding Over the 'Cue," other areas in which blacks and whites bonded over barbecue are reviewed. Barbecue was used as a tool for unity at community celebrations and gatherings, where both races were in attendance. Barbecue also played a role in political pandering. Catering to their black constituents, white politicians often served barbecue at their rallies in hopes of earning their votes for the next election. Even though most white politicians continued to oppose forms of integration, they recognized the need for the black vote. Blacks and white, European immigrants also bonded, mostly due to the same burdens they shared. They worked alongside of each other in the stockyards and meatpacking facilities, and found common ground in the barbecue stands down the street.

“‘Cue the Machine,’” the sixth chapter, tells the story of the rise of the political Pendergast machine in Kansas City. Under Tom Pendergast's rule, Kansas City earned the reputation of being a “wide-open” town, playing host to many blues and jazz joints, where barbecue was served to both black and white patrons. While listening to music and eating barbecue in these “black and tan” clubs, the races mixed in an atmosphere that was mostly accepting because everyone was indulging in some sort of vice. The rise of this politician is necessary to understand the complex circumstances under which blacks and whites bonded over barbecue. While Pendergast's legacy is controversial, his support of alcohol, drugs, prostitution, and gambling provided an arena in which barbecue played a key role.

Chapter Seven, “Jazzin' Up the 'Cue,” dissects the jazz era in Kansas City. This chapter shares quotes from those who either visited the jazz clubs or played in the establishments. It showcases how intricately linked music and barbecue are and focuses on how both are tools for celebration. Musicians were often paid with barbecue, and patrons usually ate their smoked meats while listening to the new style of jazz. People were coming to Kansas City to indulge in vice, but barbecue always played a supporting role in the background, being consumed by those hoping for a good time.

These conditions fostered an environment where it became somewhat socially acceptable for white Kansas City residents to share in the foodstuff that was enjoyed mostly in black communities. While it may seem ludicrous to credit smoked meat with the ability to bridge racial divisions within Kansas City, barbecue was something that bonded both blacks and whites together, and it was purely through the simple enjoyment

of good food. Moss says, “Barbecue is one of the most American of foods, and it's the one most intimately linked to the contours of the nation's history.”⁹ By looking at racial interactions through the lens of barbecue, one can better understand the racial intricacies that existed in Kansas City during this period.

There are accounts in newspapers and books, where both blacks and whites acknowledged that many barbecue restaurants and jazz clubs which served barbecue were mostly, or partly, integrated. I think food can bring people together. Even though barbecue has deep roots in black culture, it has become a food staple across the country, among people of all races. There are thousands of members who participate in barbecue societies, barbecue restaurants abound in every state, and there is often a debate about who has the best sauce or rub.

The joy in food is something we all share because it is a basic human need. Historian Mark Padoongpatt writes, “Food represents a tangible, familiar, and intimate reference that structures broader narratives.”¹⁰ This is not to downplay the significance and cruelty of segregation, but rather to explore another capacity in which the lines of race crossed paths. Blacks were often barred from eating in white restaurants, but whites had few restrictions, if any, on their movements. Blacks had little choice but to accommodate white people, but I think it is still telling that some whites chose to ignore social norms and eat in predominantly black barbecue establishments. There is no denying that segregation had a devastating impact upon blacks in Kansas City, but I think it is naive to consider that black and white residents never communicated or connected

⁹Moss, *Barbecue*, 241.

¹⁰Mark Padoongpatt, "Sitting at the Table: Food History as American History," *Journal of American History* 103, no. 3 (December 15, 2016): 687.

with each other in any congenial capacity before integration occurred.

Segregation played such an important role in shaping this country, especially in shaping Kansas City. Many books and articles have been written about the subject of racial differences, but there are so many facets that need to be explored in respect to race, such as food. While racial divisions clearly existed within the city, there were times when integration was somewhat acceptable. Whether it was at the restaurant counter, political rallies, or jazz clubs, racial lines were crossed frequently to eat barbecue in Kansas City. Indulging in barbecue was one of the few pleasures that whites and blacks relished in together, and that relationship is worth researching. By looking at racial interaction from the perspective of food consumption, one can better understand the delicate lines that existed between blacks and whites in Kansas City from 1879 to 1964.

Chapter One

The Roots of 'Cue

In *Barbecue: The History of an American Institution*, author Robert Moss contends that, “For three centuries,” barbecue “has been a vital part of American social and political life, particularly in the South and the West.”¹ Long before slaves in the South were learning the art of barbecue, Native Americans were perfecting the craft. In *Food in Missouri: A Cultural Stew*, author Madeline Matson discussed the known origin of barbecue. Matson described how the Spanish saw natives in the Caribbean islands grilling their meat outside instead of inside their dwellings. The Spanish also witnessed Native Americans smoking and grilling their fowl and fish on a wooden frame over a fire, mostly done to preserve their meat by smoking.² The Spanish explorers referred to the wooden rack the natives used as “barbacoa.”³ There is some debate about the origin of the word, with some authors believing that the word “barbecue” instead comes from the French word “barbe a queue.” The French meaning refers to how an animal is roasted, which is from head to tail. Regardless of the debate about the origin of the word, it is known that the Spanish contributed their spicy sauces to the craft of barbecue and helped to spread the method among settlers along the East Coast.⁴

The practice of smoking meat was more a matter of logic than of taste.

¹Robert F. Moss, *Barbecue: The History of an American Institution* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2010), 2.

²Madeline Matson, *Food in Missouri: A Cultural Stew* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1994), 72.

³Shifra Stein and Rich Davis, *All About Bar-B-Q: Kansas City Style* (Kansas City, MO: Barbacoa, 1985), 11.

⁴Matson, *Food in Missouri*, 72.

“Preservation was particularly important to the Caribbean Indians and natives of the southern east coast because the damp, hot climate made the food spoil quickly,” explains Shifra Stein in *All About Bar-B-Q: Kansas City Style*.⁵ As Europeans settled in America, cooking techniques learned from the Native Americans spread throughout the settlements. Settlers were forced to contend with a new environment, complete with new wildlife to eat and limited resources for cooking. Inevitably, the practice of smoking meats became quite popular to preserve fish and game. As time went on, different techniques for barbecue were formulated. Virginians developed smokehouses, open pits were employed in the Carolinas, and closed pits were eventually used in Kansas City and even Texas.⁶

Barbecue took on a much larger role as it went from being a method of preservation to a way in which mass consumption could be achieved. By the mid-18th century, barbecues were starting to become common place in America.⁷ As large gatherings of people necessitated the preparation of large amounts of food, barbecue increased in its popularity.⁸ Indoor kitchens were almost unbearable in the summertime heat and they also did not have the space to cook for hundreds of people, so smoking meat became an easy and popular way to feed large numbers of guests.⁹

Community gatherings, festivals, and celebrations encouraged the establishment of barbecue as an American tradition. “In colonial Virginia, barbecues had been part of

⁵Stein and Davis, *All About Bar-B-Q*, 11.

⁶*Ibid.*, 12.

⁷Doug Worgul, "The Culture of Slow Smoking, Sauce, and Ribs," *Kansas City Star*, May 21, 2000,

6.

⁸Stein and Davis, *All About Bar-B-Q*, 12.

⁹*Ibid.*

an aristocratic social structure, with wealthy planters showing their hospitality and hosting barbecues for those on the lower rungs of the hierarchy.”¹⁰ It was a way in which the wealthy showed their benevolence toward those of lower social classes. As barbecues became more and more frequent, it further entrenched itself in the social aspects of American society, representing the wealthy classes, but also the lower classes. The type of meat used at a barbecue, and the way it was prepared, also came to represent regions in the country, which can be seen in nineteenth century cookbooks. In *Common Sense in the Household: A Manual of Practical Housewifery*, author Marion Harland writes in 1882, “The large gray squirrel is seldom eaten at the North, but is in great request in Virginia and other Southern States. It is generally barbecued, precisely as are rabbits: broiled, fricasseed, or—most popular of all—made into a Brunswick stew. This is named from Brunswick County, Virginia, and is a famous dish—or was—at the political and social picnics known as barbecues.”¹¹

While wealthy planters may have been the hosts of these elaborate gatherings in the South, it was their slaves that performed the arduous labor. Male slaves became the pit-masters and cooks for these large barbecues. The work may have been forced upon them, but black men ended up playing a formative role in the development of recipes and smoking techniques for meat.¹² Due to this involvement, barbecue became an important fixture in the slave community. Although these gatherings were attended by whites, barbecue established deep roots within the black culture.

¹⁰Moss, *Barbecue*, 33.

¹¹Marion Harland, *Common Sense in the Household: A Manual of Practical Housewifery* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1882), 173.

¹²Moss, *Barbecue*, 33.

In the autobiography written by Louis Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave: From Bondage to Freedom*, Hughes recalls the excitement and anticipation that he and his fellow slaves experienced during barbecues on his plantation. His owner, whom he referred to as, “Boss,” held an annual Fourth of July barbecue for the slaves. Hughes remembers, “The anticipation of it acted as a stimulant through the entire year.”¹³ Hughes also touches on something in his autobiography that became widely accepted among blacks and whites. He recollects, “It was said that the slaves could barbecue meats best, and when the whites had barbecue, slaves always did the cooking.”¹⁴

In *Kansas City: A Food Biography*, author Andrea Broomfield asserts that southerners equated hospitality with exceptional food.¹⁵ Placing such emphasis on the quality of their meals, slave owners assigned the job of pit-master to only the most trustworthy slave, who was often referred to as the area's barbecue master. To please their guests and demonstrate their rigorous hospitality standards, slave owners had to ensure that the flavor and quality of their meat was exceptional. The slave whom attained the position of pit-master held a high degree of responsibility because they were responsible for the entire barbecue operation.¹⁶ This position also opened the pit-master up to ridicule and punishment from their master, if the barbecue was not to his liking.

Pit-masters also held the responsibility of passing down their barbecue knowledge and practices to the next generation of slaves, ensuring that the tradition would survive in

¹³Louis Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave: From Bondage to Freedom: The Autobiography of Louis Hughes: The Institution of Slavery as Seen on the Plantation in the Home of the Planter* (Montgomery, AL: NewSouth Books, 2002), 46.

¹⁴Ibid., 50.

¹⁵Andrea Broomfield, *Kansas City: A Food Biography* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016), 85.

¹⁶Moss, *Barbecue*, 49.

the South. Barbecues had become commonplace on southern plantations, so it was essential for slaves to be proficient in the preparation, cooking, and serving of smoked meats. Through years of experimentation and demonstrations, elderly pit-masters passed on their observations and expertise to younger generations of black men, who played a fundamental role in the advancement of black barbecue entrepreneurs after the Civil War.

Even though barbecues were basically just celebrations centered around the consumption of smoked meats, they came to symbolize much more than that for blacks. Slaves were obviously banned from eating alongside the white guests, but owners often allowed slaves to eat whatever was left over from the barbecue. In time, slaves came to view these celebratory barbecues in much different capacities.

Barbecues were often used as a means of control by the masters. Many owners hosted barbecues specifically for their slaves during holidays, such as Christmas and the Fourth of July, as a superficial reward for their hard labor throughout the year. Moss argues in his book, “This occasional display of generosity helped reinforce the image of benevolent masters that was crucial to the South's conception of its peculiar institution.”¹⁷ It was not uncommon for masters to use manipulation as a means of control. Whether slaves bought into this deception is not vital, but what is important is the idea that barbecue was used as a means of fraternization. Barbecue was the binding force between the two races during these times of “reward,” creating a relationship between slave, master, and food.

Historian James Oakes says, “Slaves engaged in a variety of acts designed to ease their burdens and frustrate the masters' wills. They broke tools, feigned illness,

¹⁷Ibid., 63.

deliberately malingered, 'stole' food, and manipulated the tensions between master and overseer. When pressed, the slaves took up more active forms of resistance: they became 'saucy', ran away, struck the overseer or even the master, and on rare occasions committed arson or joined in organized rebellions.”¹⁸ Slaves also used barbecue to subvert the institution as well.¹⁹ Some male slaves went hunting at night to satisfy their own hunger, often trapping raccoons, rabbits, squirrels, and opossums, barbecuing what little meat the animals afforded.²⁰ The most daring and bold slaves stole the much-prized livestock from their owners and held their own barbecues at the masters' expense, creating entertainment for the other slaves while also supplementing their meager food rations.²¹ Author Andrea Broomfield recounts that while “masters ate 'high' on the hog, enjoying cured hams, the best bacon, and fresh pork roasts, slaves ate bacon rinds, spare ribs, chitlins, brains, feet, ears, and snouts.”²²

Barbecues also provided a place in which slaves gathered and interacted with each other, which sometimes even included slaves from other plantations. Any time in which slaves could communicate with one another was treasured, since they were usually bound to the fields or were confined within the masters' households. “In antebellum Virginia, masters often allowed slaves to hold their own barbecues for recreation, but the practice was curtailed after several incidents—most notably Gabriel's Rebellion in Henrico County—where these gatherings were used as cover to plan uprisings.”²³ Gabriel, a

¹⁸James Oakes, “The Political Significance of Slave Resistance,” *History Workshop Journal* 22, no. 1 (1986): 89.

¹⁹Moss, *Barbecue*, 63.

²⁰Broomfield, *Kansas City*, 82.

²¹Moss, *Barbecue*, 63.

²²Broomfield, *Kansas City*, 82.

²³Moss, *Barbecue*, 63.

blacksmith, invited other slaves to attend several barbecues in Virginia. Gabriel and his co-conspirators planned an uprising which consisted of the massacre of all the neighboring whites and the seizure of ammunition from Richmond. The plot was foiled by informants, and Gabriel and his conspirators were executed.²⁴ Similar stories appeared out of the South, where barbecues provided the protection needed for slaves to plan such elaborate uprisings.

Barbecues also served as motivation for collaborative work, acting as a reward for exhaustive chores. For certain endeavors, all the slaves on a plantation, and perhaps even a nearby plantation, were recruited to complete various tasks in the fields.²⁵ Cotton picking and hog killing events involved a concerted effort among everyone since they were so labor intensive. Corn shucking also became a big event for slaves every year. After it was harvested, corn needed to be shucked, dried, and stored, which required many hands to complete the task.²⁶ After their work was complete, slaves were treated to a large feast of barbecue as a reward for their hard labor. They then typically danced and played music late into the night.²⁷ Fiddlers played tunes, while able-bodied slaves danced the night away, serving as a release for the monotonous and tortuous lives they were forced to endure.²⁸ Here is where the connection starts to form between music, dancing, and barbecue, which will eventually take center stage during the jazz era in Kansas City in the 1930s.

There is no denying that slavery was an evil institution. Men, women, and

²⁴Ibid., 64.

²⁵Ibid., 66.

²⁶Ibid., 65.

²⁷Ibid., 66.

²⁸Ibid., 65.

children were held in bondage for hundreds of years, enduring forced labor and deplorable living conditions. But there is also no denying that slavery laid the groundwork for the connection that whites and blacks eventually had in relation to barbecue, whether it was involuntary or not. Plantation owners forced their slaves to learn, prepare, cook, and serve barbecue. That knowledge was passed down from one generation of slaves to the next, ultimately benefiting black society. Due to these factors, barbecue became deeply entrenched in the black culture, which only flourished after the Civil War.

Both whites and blacks enjoyed eating barbecue during this period, but for entirely different reasons. For whites, it was a celebratory food for holidays and gatherings. Good barbecue was the epitome of southern hospitality. Smoked meats also became a way for plantation owners to exert their influence and authority over their slaves, or to show their benevolent nature.

Barbecue served several purposes for slaves, whether it was for planned uprisings, building relationships with one another, supplementation of diets, or for collaborative efforts in the field. Ultimately, barbecue came to represent togetherness for the black community. “Whether explicitly at white-approved events or illicitly as subversive forms of entertainment, the tradition of barbecue ran deep in the life of African-Americans before the Civil War, and it would only deepen and expand after the end of slavery,” Moss writes.²⁹

This chapter was necessary to understand the mindset and background of slaves in the South, in relation to barbecue. Racial divisions were not repaired or overcome during

²⁹Ibid., 68.

this period, but the roots of connection through barbecue were established. The traditions, knowledge, and attitudes that blacks developed about barbecue were not lost after the Civil War. What experiences slaves shared over barbecue during slavery became permanently etched into the black culture, and the next chapter explores how former slaves carried their affinity for barbecue, and their barbecue expertise, to Kansas City.

Chapter Two

'Cue on the Move

“As the Civil War drew to a close, Kansas held a special place in the hearts of black Southerners. Free-state Kansas had been the home of the martyred abolitionist John Brown and of the emigrants who had voted against the ‘peculiar institution.’ To black Americans, Kansas was synonymous with freedom and opportunity, and it was to Kansas that thousands of Southern blacks migrated in the years after the Civil War.”¹ With former slaves fleeing the South, believing false reports that free land awaited them in Kansas, Kansas City experienced a population explosion.² Blacks who left the South for northern cities in search of better opportunities were known as “Exodusters.”³

In *Kansas City and How It Grew, 1822-2011*, Shortridge states, “Starting in the spring of 1879 and continuing for eighteen months, some 20,000 African American refugees fleeing from the abuses of Reconstruction in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas arrived at the wharf and depot. Hearing rumors of free land in Kansas, these so-called Exodusters were nearly penniless.”⁴ Additionally, Broomfield said in her book that many Exodusters ran out of money before they reached their destination and ended up settling in Kansas City. They competed against European immigrants for jobs in the stockyards

¹Rick Montgomery and Shirl Kasper, *Kansas City: An American Story* (Kansas City, MO: Kansas City Star, 1999), 110.

²Ibid.

³Timothy J. Fox, "The Secrets in the Sauce: Kansas City's Barbecue Tradition," *Gateway Heritage* (Fall 2002): 26.

⁴James R. Shortridge, *Kansas City and How It Grew, 1822-2011* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2012), 57.

and packinghouses.⁵ Staying in the South meant working on a farm, for little pay, and little chance of promotion. Moving to the North provided former slaves with an opportunity to advance themselves economically, without being inhibited by many of the Jim Crow laws of the South.

Authors Rick Montgomery and Shirl Kasper declare, Kansas City “owes its love of barbecue to African Americans who rode the rails from the South.”⁶ The black influence in Kansas City grew significantly as the Exodusters made their way into town, bringing with them the roots of barbecue that were established between whites and blacks during slavery. Worgul states that, “it was the migration of African-Americans to the region, between 1879 and 1881, and then again in the early decades of the 20th century, that was the single most important factor in barbecue becoming such a distinct part of Kansas City culture.”⁷

Kansas City was a hopping town in the 1800s, serving as the last stop for thousands of people who were preparing for their long trips on the Santa Fe and Oregon trails.⁸ With plans to move west, travelers often stopped in Kansas City to refill their supply wagons and buy provisions for the arduous journey ahead. With the construction and installation of railroads, though, Kansas City changed from a prominent frontier town to a leading commercial city in the United States.⁹ Also, “the rise of giant slaughterhouses marked Kansas City’s first step in becoming an urban center in its own right, not merely a

⁵Andrea Broomfield, *Kansas City: A Food Biography* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016), 86.

⁶Montgomery and Kasper, *Kansas City*, 110.

⁷Doug Worgul, "The Culture of Slow Smoking, Sauce, and Ribs," *Kansas City Star*, May 21, 2000, 14.

⁸Madeline Matson, *Food in Missouri: A Cultural Stew* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1994), 79.

⁹*Ibid.*, 80.

convenient stop for products moving east.”¹⁰

Kansas City became the second-largest processor of meat and grain between 1870 and 1890, only trailing Chicago.¹¹ By 1890, over five million head of cattle were slaughtered and packaged in Kansas City.¹² The railroads and rivers helped by shipping livestock in and out of the city, affirming the town's rapidly developing meatpacking industry.¹³ Meat packing was the top economic development in Kansas City. Thousands of men were employed by the meat packing facilities. To be close to their place of employment, workers created entire neighborhoods around the West Bottoms, such as Armourdale.¹⁴

Hundreds of black families from the South settled in the West Bottoms, to be close to the packinghouses. Jobs with Kansas City packinghouses were desirable among black men since there were plenty of positions, which paid relatively well.¹⁵ William Raspberry, a black man who worked in a packinghouse in Kansas City during the 1940s, revealed during an interview, “See, for a long time in the packinghouse I was making more money than most professionals.”¹⁶ By the 1890s, approximately ten percent of the population of Kansas City was comprised of blacks, and one-fifth of the black population worked in the packing industry.¹⁷ Not only did the packinghouses provide black males with jobs, but they also sometimes served as a source of food. “Thousands took jobs at

¹⁰Montgomery and Kasper, *Kansas City*, 111.

¹¹Broomfield, *Kansas City*, x.

¹²Ibid., 12.

¹³Doug Worgul, *The Grand Barbecue: A Celebration of the History, Places, Personalities and Technique of Kansas City Barbecue* (Kansas City, MO: Kansas City Star, 2001), 14.

¹⁴Montgomery and Kasper, *Kansas City*, 111.

¹⁵Roger Horowitz and Rick Halpern, "Work, Race, and Identity: Self-Representation in the Narratives of Black Packinghouse Workers," *Oral History Review* 26, no. 1 (1999): 29.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Montgomery and Kasper, *Kansas City*, 113.

the packinghouses and the cheapest cuts of meat often wound up in black households.”¹⁸
Kansas City ultimately became known as the city built on “beef and bread.”¹⁹

Job opportunities for Exodusters after the Civil War were varied, but those who found a job on the rails gained invaluable experience. George Pullman hired black men as porters for his trains, believing that they were the most experienced and well-qualified servants, since many had been former slaves. Even though these men were subject to blatant racism by the Pullman Company, they increased their knowledge of the food industry.²⁰ “After the Civil War, African Americans continued to work in the catering industry and were in demand aboard trains after the invention of the Pullman car allowed passengers to dine en route. As a major rail hub, numerous young African American men responded to Kansas City newspaper ads calling for cooks and waiters with promise of ‘good wages and working conditions.’ Significantly, many gained their start working on steamboats or trains and would later return to Kansas City to start their own restaurants,” says Broomfield.²¹ The experience and training in the food industry learned aboard steamboats and trains helped to prepare many black entrepreneurs for their future barbecue establishments.

Kansas City was greatly impacted by the immigration of these Exodusters, much like other cities across the United States. Education, housing, employment, music, and especially food, changed drastically with their arrival. Kansas City became a complex city, with many different cultures, customs, and races converging in a concentrated area

¹⁸Ibid., 184.

¹⁹Matson, *Food in Missouri*, 81.

²⁰Janice L. Reiff and Susan E. Hirsch, “Pullman and Its Public: Image and Aim in Making and Interpreting History,” *The Public Historian* 11, no. 4 (1989): 102.

²¹Broomfield, *Kansas City*, 85.

that had only began as a small frontier town. It was inevitable that this wide array of cultures influenced one another, especially in regards to food consumption. The Exodusters in Kansas City were intent on establishing new lives, but they did not abandon everything they had learned from their time in slavery. They carried with them the traditions and rituals that had become deeply embedded within black culture, including the art of barbecue.

Historian Robert Moss explains that black southerners carried their barbecue traditions with them as they began migration to northern cities, helping to spread the art of barbecue.²² Developing roots in other regions of the nation, blacks adapted their barbecue knowledge and techniques to fit the area they inhabited, using the local wood to smoke their meat. This is clearly seen in many other cities that are known for barbecue as well, such as Memphis. Barbecue is popular all over the United States, but there are different styles, flavors, sauces, rubs, and wood that is used for barbecue in different regions of the country. The Carolinas are known for using a vinegar-based sauce, Memphis uses a lot of dry rubs, Texans forgo a lot of barbecue sauces, focusing on the flavor of meat, while Kansas City has become known for the variety of meats smoked, along with the tomato and molasses-based sauce used. One variation of sauce, rub, or meat has come to distinguish one region from another. Black communities in different parts of the country placed their stamp on what is considered “good” barbecue. To this day, barbecue enthusiasts argue over what region of the nation has the best barbecue and flavor.

²²Robert F. Moss, *Barbecue: The History of an American Institution* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2010), 102.

By 1910, there were over a quarter of a million people in Kansas City.²³ Not only did Kansas City experience a population explosion, but the resources available benefited all those who immigrated to town, including black barbecue entrepreneurs. Worgul explains that the availability of hardwood trees and cheap meat in Kansas City provided barbecue entrepreneurs with the two fundamental requirements necessary for their barbecue practice.²⁴ The area was ripe for barbecue entrepreneurs; it just needed a select few to see the potential.

Author Rose M. Nolen states, “In many ways, the lifestyles of today's African Americans in Missouri continue to reflect the cultural traditions of their forebears. Just as the creation of the Negro spiritual led to gospel, ragtime, jazz, and the blues, other customs from the African American past have evolved to become mainstays of today's everyday life.”²⁵ Barbecue is one of those mainstays, which has expanded beyond the black culture and firmly established itself as an all-American food. Exodusters may have been inhibited by their lack of wealth and education, but they created an institution in the city that became a part of the wider Kansas City culture. “Because barbecue was, at the time, a method of preparing meat that was practiced almost exclusively by slaves when former slaves and descendants of slaves moved to this part of the country, their barbecue skills became the basis of significant economic activity. Barbecue was a product that they alone could provide,” argues Worgul.²⁶ Therefore, barbecue wisdom became an asset, not a burden.

²³Ibid., 154.

²⁴Worgul, *Grand Barbecue*, 14.

²⁵Rose M. Nolen, *Hoecakes, Hambone, and All That Jazz: African American Traditions in Missouri* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), xi.

²⁶Worgul, *Grand Barbecue*, 14.

Since slaves were the ones predominantly doing much of the cooking on plantations, whites had little to no knowledge of the barbecue practices taking place in the South. Blacks passed down their skills and knowledge to the next generation of men, emboldening barbecue as an economic asset that was almost restricted to black culture.²⁷ Even with the racial boundaries that existed in town, black culture and tradition evolved and flourished as blacks made a place for themselves within Kansas City. “After all, having grown up in an agricultural environment, producing and preparing food was one thing in which nearly everyone had firsthand experience.”²⁸

Barbecue served as a means in which blacks asserted themselves economically and socially. In *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom: Excursions into Eating, Culture, and the Past*, author Sidney W. Mintz explores the paradox of blacks and food, in relation to freedom. Mintz states that, “working in the production of food legitimized certain claims that the slaves would level against their masters; working in the distribution of food legitimized freedom of movement, commercial maneuver, association, and accumulation; working in the processing of food legitimized the perfection of skills that would become more important with freedom; and working in the emergence of cuisine legitimized status distinctions within slavery, both because the master class became dependent upon its cooks, and because the cooks actually invented a cuisine that the masters could vaunt, but could not themselves duplicate.”²⁹ In essence, the slaves held a degree of control over the food preferences of their masters.

²⁷Ibid., 61.

²⁸Tracy N. Poe, "The Origins of Soul Food in Black Urban Identity: Chicago, 1915-1947," *American Studies International* 37, no. 1 (February 1999), 11.

²⁹Sidney W. Mintz, *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom: Excursions into Eating, Culture, and the Past* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 47.

Blacks undeniably held the monopoly over barbecue wisdom in Kansas City. During the days of slavery, it was out of necessity and compliance that they were forced to learn the art of barbecue. After slavery, it was out of tradition and enjoyment that they continued to do so. Most middle to upper-class white people did not possess this barbecue knowledge because they had relied on slaves to provide the barbecued meats for them. In *Cornbread Nation 2: The United States of Barbecue*, author Lolis Eric Elie states, “Black barbecue stands on the side of the road became the first barbecue restaurants in the Old South. And because of the fame of black barbecue, ‘whites, in a strange reversal of Jim Crow traditions, made stealthy excursions for take-out orders,’ according to the *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*.”³⁰

Due to this compulsory knowledge during slavery, black men built upon that expertise to establish themselves as the ultimate authority on all things related to barbecue. Their insights no longer bore the signs of servitude, but rather became a symbol of intellect. This relationship of barbecue reliance between blacks and whites since the days of slavery only expanded in Kansas City, as black men embarked on a new chapter in barbecue history: the restaurant.

³⁰Lolis Eric Elie, *Cornbread Nation 2: The United States of Barbecue* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 52.

Chapter Three

The 'Cue Empire

The black population in Kansas City nearly doubled in the early 1900s, increasing from 17, 567 to 30, 710.¹ Along with a steady influx of blacks to the city, there was also a continuous stream of European immigrants searching for employment in Kansas City as well. There were bound to be some growing pains with the arrival of so many people. Upper-class white, residents of Kansas City unsurprisingly sought ways to hold onto the town they had known, much like other cities across the country.

Even though blacks were legally free, the shadow of segregation loomed over the city, leading white residents to hinder any advantages or advancements that blacks were attempting to make. The city was changing, and whites seemed unwilling to change along with it. White homeowners used legal restrictions, deception, and scare tactics to keep blacks out of their neighborhoods, fearing that their property value would depreciate. “From the 1920s through the 1950s, the Kansas City Real Estate Board subscribed to a national code of real estate ethics that endorsed the view that all-black and racially mixed neighborhoods were inferior to all-white homogeneous neighborhoods.”² These regulations created black enclaves within the city. Timothy J. Fox, author of, “The Secret's in the Sauce: Kansas City Barbecue Tradition,” claims that, “these attempts to restrict African American home ownership in the city forced greater

¹Andrea Broomfield, *Kansas City: A Food Biography* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016), 92.

²Kevin Fox Gotham, "Missed Opportunities, Enduring Legacies: School Segregation and Desegregation in Kansas City, Missouri," *American Studies* 43, no. 2 (2002): 13.

numbers of blacks into, and whites out of, the Vine Street corridor and other African American neighborhoods.”³ Thus, the African American population in the Vine Street corridor tripled between 1900 and 1920.⁴

Roger Wilkins, a black man, was Assistant Attorney General under Lyndon B. Johnson’s administration, but he spent his childhood in Kansas City. His father, Roy, was the business manager for *The Call* newspaper, but was stricken with tuberculosis early on in his career. Wilkins recalls in his autobiography, “By the time he got sick, he and my mother had gotten enough money together to make a down payment on a small house in a lovely middle-class neighborhood where some Negroes lived, miles away from 18th Street and Vine, where the largest black population of the city was confined.”⁵

Kansas City had also initiated the City Beautiful Movement in the 1890s, which involved the creation of boulevards, parks, and housing developments to improve the aesthetic appeal of the town. The city made it illegal for blacks to reside in the exclusive neighborhoods being built, unless they were live-in servants working for white home owners.⁶ Such boundaries made it almost impossible for neighborhoods to be mixed, resulting in enclaves of blacks in certain sections of the city, such as Hick’s Hollow, Quality Hill, and Belvidere.⁷

The concentration of blacks in small areas only perpetuated the poverty that most found themselves in after the Civil War. “The largest area of African American housing

³Timothy J. Fox, "The Secrets in the Sauce: Kansas City's Barbecue Tradition," *Gateway Heritage* (Fall 2002): 26.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Roger W. Wilkins, *A Man's Life: An Autobiography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), 17.

⁶Broomfield, *Kansas City*, 92.

⁷Robert F. Moss, *Barbecue: The History of an American Institution* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2010), 154.

and businesses was bounded on the north by Independence Avenue, Troost on the west, Twenty-Seventh on the south, and Benton Boulevard on the east. Starting at [12th] and Troost and continuing south to [18th], one soon arrived at the pulsing heart of 'Paris on the Plains,' the [18th] and Vine District.”⁸ It was in these segregated sections of the city that blacks came to be self-proficient, since they were not allowed in most of the white businesses throughout town. The 18th and Vine District eventually became synonymous with the jazz scene in Kansas City, and it also served as a major business hub for the black community.⁹ Even though blacks were relegated to certain areas of the city, it was here in these black enclaves that the barbecue empire began.

Doug Worgul claims in his book that black men were the only ones who knew anything about barbecue because the practice was considered too lowly for white men and too arduous for females.¹⁰ As covered in the previous chapters, it may have been forced upon them by their owners, but African American men eventually used their knowledge of barbecue to establish their own restaurants and become proprietors themselves. Meeting the demand for a filling, inexpensive meal was one impetus for the rise in barbecue joints, but Robert Moss acknowledged another. He said that black entrepreneurs were motivated to open their own businesses because it was a way to gain independence and self-sufficiency in a city that offered few opportunities for black advancement.¹¹ Moss also cites, “In interview after interview, black barbecue

⁸Broomfield, *Kansas City*, 92.

⁹“African-American Community in Kansas City,” Visit KC, June 07, 2016, <https://www.visitkc.com/visitors/discover/diversity/african-american-community-kansas-city#sm.000lv2zzf144vczvy7g1p30jdyf7t>.

¹⁰Doug Worgul, *The Grand Barbecue: A Celebration of the History, Places, Personalities and Technique of Kansas City Barbecue* (Kansas City, MO: Kansas City Star, 2001), 17.

¹¹Moss, *Barbecue*, 167.

restaurateurs cite the desire to not have to answer to anyone as a key reason why they went into the business—and why stay in it despite long, physically demanding work weeks.”¹² Black men were able to channel that barbecue wisdom into something that not only benefited the black community, but also allowed a way for some black men to be economically viable in a poverty-stricken area. In Kansas City, the first recognized black man to do this was Henry Perry.

Henry Perry is considered by many to be the father of Kansas City barbecue. He “is credited with being the first man in Kansas City to take barbecue, what had traditionally been offered up for free, and make a substantial living selling it.”¹³ Born in Shelby County, Tennessee, Perry started learning the art of barbecue at age seven. When he was fifteen years old, he took a job as a cook on one of the many steamboats that traveled up and down the Mississippi River.¹⁴ Most likely, many of the barbecue techniques he later used in Kansas City were learned during his time on the steamboats.

Perry settled in Kansas City in 1907, finding work at the Quality Hill saloon as a porter.¹⁵ To make extra money on the side, Perry opened a barbecue stand in an alley located in the heart of downtown on Bank Street in the Garment District. Over a wood-filled pit dug in the ground, Perry cooked ribs and sold them for twenty-five cents a slab, wrapping them in newspaper for his customers.¹⁶ “Lack of refrigeration necessitated that Perry sell out, and apparently, he had no difficulty doing so,” claims Broomfield.¹⁷

¹²Ibid.

¹³Broomfield, *Kansas City*, 88.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Worgul, *Grand Barbecue*, 17.

¹⁶Moss, *Barbecue*, 155.

¹⁷Broomfield, *Kansas City*, 89.

Perry's barbecue fame spread fast, even to the white communities.

In her article, “Our Daily Brisket: Arthur Bryant's Keeps on Keeping On,” Sarah Digregorio relates that Henry Perry arrived in Kansas City when the area was ripe for barbecue because it had plenty of hard woods for smoking, meat from the stockyards, and a growing ex-Southern populace to appreciate the smoked meats.¹⁸ For Southerners who had migrated to Kansas City, barbecue was something they had grown accustomed to eating in the South, and many sought out the comfort food they had so deeply cherished at home.

Perry sold ribs, ham, and pork. Advertisements in the *City Directory* in 1916 for Perry's food also included barbecued turkey, pig, goose, duck, ground hog, coon, beef, pork, mutton, and even opossum.¹⁹ His food catered to not only a traditional palate, but also to those who were used to eating from the land. He claimed that he had a special technique for preparing smoked meats. Perry said in an interview, “Cooking only over a fire made from hickory and oak woods, the meat gets that delicious flavor which is the cause of the tremendous popularity of barbecued meats.”²⁰ He used wood from the hickory trees in the area, along with local tomatoes to form the base for his barbecue sauce.²¹ He was also known for creating such a harsh and spicy sauce that it brought tears to the eyes of his customers.²²

Perry's stand in the alley on Banks Street became successful enough that he

¹⁸Sarah Digregorio, "Our Daily Brisket: Arthur Bryant's Keeps on Keeping On," *Chile Pepper* (June 2007): 41.

¹⁹Broomfield, *Kansas City*, 89.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Rick Montgomery and Shirl Kasper, *Kansas City: An American Story* (Kansas City, MO: Kansas City Star, 1999), 184.

²²Kalsey McCall, Nancy Staab, and Allyson Wilson, "KC's Best Barbecue," *435 Magazine*, (October 2015), <http://www.435mag.com/October-2015/Kansas-City-Best-Barbecue/>.

needed to expand his operation to accommodate the growing number of customers. He started off at a location at 1514 East 19th Street, but moved soon after to a trolley barn at 19th and Highland. Both locations were in the black neighborhood called the Bowery.²³ He eventually moved his business into the heart of the 18th and Vine District, selling his meat to aspiring jazz musicians.²⁴ “Perry's reputation soon spread beyond the boundaries of the metropolitan area, and by 1920, his restaurant at [19th] and Vine was one of the destination points within the African American community.”²⁵

Author Doug Worgul reveals that Perry became tremendously important to the black community, mostly due to his generous nature. Every year, Perry hosted a barbecue picnic on the Fourth of July.²⁶ In “*Take Up the Black Man's Burden*”: *Kansas City's African American Communities 1865-1939*, author Charles E. Coulter discusses Perry's generous nature in giving back to his own community. Perry's philanthropy became well known throughout black neighborhoods. Coulter recounted that, “for four hours on one day of each year, with the help of some of his patrons, Perry gave free barbecue sandwiches to the elderly, the young, and those too poor to afford to buy a meal. In 1929, Perry distributed 150 pounds of meat and countless loaves of bread at his annual giveaway.”²⁷

He also developed a no-nonsense reputation within the city. A sign in his restaurant read, “My business is to serve you, not to entertain you.”²⁸ Being a successful

²³Moss, *Barbecue*, 155.

²⁴McCall, Staab, and Wilson.

²⁵Charles E. Coulter, “*Take Up the Black Man's Burden*”: *Kansas City's African American Communities, 1865-1939* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006), 120.

²⁶Worgul, *Grand Barbecue*, 18.

²⁷Coulter, “*Take Up*,” 120.

²⁸Worgul, *Grand Barbecue*, 18.

entrepreneur in a black district, Perry must have felt a great degree of responsibility to give back to his community and to also be a leader in the face of adversity. Perry served as an example of what successful black men could accomplish with hard work and ingenuity in a society that was dominated by white, middle and upper-class men.

Henry Perry started the barbecue empire in Kansas City, but even more important than that, he bridged some of the social divides that existed in the city during this time. Perry reminisced later in his life, saying, "Cooking for the people of Kansas City has taught me a lot. I made lots of money. And I made lots of friends ranging from humble neighbors to members of the monied groups."²⁹ Perry served customers from all social classes, which is astounding considering the racial discrimination in Kansas City during this time frame. It is also astounding to think that middle to upper-class white patrons traveled to a black community to eat his barbecue. According to Perry, it was not uncommon to see both white and black patrons at his stand, partaking in the slabs of ribs wrapped in newspaper. He was particularly proud that he had developed a loyal, white customer base.³⁰

The Call, a black newspaper in Kansas City, which started in 1919, even acknowledged that the popularity of Perry's barbecue crossed the social barriers that prevailed in town. An article in *The Call* in 1932 said, "With a trade about equally divided between white and black, Mr. Perry serves both high and low. Swanky limousines, gleaming with nickel and glossy black, rub shoulders at the curb outside the Perry stand with pre-historic Model-T Fords. Liveried chauffeurs gaze haughtily at

²⁹"Henry Perry, the Barbecue King, Is Dead," *Kansas City Call*, March 22, 1940, 25.

³⁰Worgul, *Grand Barbecue*, 61.

humble self-drivers but all have the common ambition to sink their teeth in a bit of Perry's succulent barbecue.”³¹ It is revealing that a black newspaper acknowledged the mixed patronage at Perry's barbecue restaurant. Whites were not exactly flocking to black communities to eat or shop, so to have white people specifically come to the black enclaves to dine on smoked meats served by a black man was meaningful.

While Perry's barbecue attracted hundreds of customers, it also attracted competitors. They saw the success that Perry experienced and sought to duplicate it. After Perry established himself as a successful entrepreneur, barbecue stands started to pop up all over the city. Barbecue was the perfect food to serve at a roadside stand because it did not require costly equipment, only a hole in the ground and some bread for the meat.³² Early barbecue proprietors often converted old cable cars into barbecue stands until they could establish a permanent structure somewhere else.³³ It was a business that could be started on a shoe-string budget, with most black men using local resources to begin their barbecue enterprises.

Whether it was exaggerated or not, *The Call* said in 1932, “In Kansas City alone today there are more than a thousand barbecue stands, so Henry Perry really started something when he opened his first little stand for the cooking and selling of barbecued meats, one of the succulent viands which have made southern Negro cooks famous.”³⁴ Black men saw the success and accomplishments that Perry experienced with his barbecue stands, and they followed the same formula, hoping to attain a degree of

³¹Ibid., 18.

³²Moss, *Barbecue*, 170.

³³Ibid., 131.

³⁴"Henry Perry Has Cooked Good BBQ for 50 Years," *Kansas City Call*, February 26, 1932, 1-B.

economic prosperity. *The Call* added that Perry “was one of the first members of his race in Kansas City to commercialize on the business of selling well-cooked barbecue meats. His stand at [19th] and Highland streets is literally a mecca for hundreds who come to buy his savory delicacies.”³⁵

Henry Perry served barbecue to the people of Kansas City for thirty-two years. He was only sixty-six years old when he died on March 22, 1940.³⁶ The impact that his barbecue had upon the city is undeniable. He came up with a business venture that countless other black men followed. He started a food craze that eventually earned Kansas City the title of being the “barbecue capital of the world,” with over one hundred restaurants now catering to barbecue lovers from around the country.³⁷ More importantly, though, his barbecue brought whites and blacks together in a unique atmosphere that was solely focused on the enjoyment of good barbecue. Obviously, his barbecue did not reconcile the racial complications within the city, but it did provide an opportunity for blacks and whites to mingle within a setting that was equally aligned within the realm of food consumption. Perry opened employment opportunities within the black community that had not existed previously. He also became a father-figure to future barbecue entrepreneurs, training many of them in the techniques he had learned, which will be discussed in the next chapter. Henry Perry has a unique place in the city's history, as the leading figure in the barbecue empire. His legacy became entrenched in Kansas City folklore as future barbecue owners replicated Perry's business tactics and his eagerness to please all customers, both black and white.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Worgul, *Grand Barbecue*, 18.

³⁷Ibid., 123.

Chapter Four

Legacy of the 'Cue

Henry Perry trained a generation of famous Kansas City barbecue men, and those apprentices shaped the region's unique style of barbecue. Informal apprenticeships were not uncommon among blacks when it came to learning the art of barbecue. Even during slavery, younger men watched and assisted the elderly male pit-master on the plantation, learning and practicing the techniques for succulent smoked meats. After slavery, young men learned the trade from pit-masters, who were all too eager to pass down their knowledge. Author Robert Moss explains, “Young people would go to work for an established local pitmaster, learn the craft, and then go out and open their own places. In city after city, key mentors can be identified who taught an entire generation of restaurateurs, who in turn passed on their knowledge to the next generation.”¹ And Henry Perry was one of those guys.

Henry Perry served as Kansas City's reigning barbecue mentor for decades, and his influence is clear in the style of barbecue that is found in Kansas City today. In his book, Moss expanded on the determinative power that barbecue pit-masters had upon their apprentices. Moss relates, “Beyond simply teaching the skills of tending a pit and managing a business, the mentorship system helped codify the style of barbecue served in a particular region. The identifying characteristics of a region's style include the cuts of meat used, the equipment and technique used to cook it, and how the meat is chopped,

¹Robert F. Moss, *Barbecue: The History of an American Institution* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2010), 132.

sliced, or otherwise prepared for serving. A region's style also includes the type of sauce to be served as well as the side items that accompany the meat.”² Most barbecue restaurants in Kansas City traditionally serve a sweet or tangy sauce made with huge amounts of sugar and tomatoes, which has been imitated in the products produced by both Kraft and Heinz. Burnt ends, which are the small bits of meat cut off the ends of smoked brisket, have also become one of the signature items served in restaurants across the city.³ Perry helped to shape and initiate this entire style, having a profound impact upon what residents of Kansas City eat today. By serving as a mentor to young black men, he influenced an entire generation of black barbecue entrepreneurs. Perry's reign as the “father of Kansas City barbecue” is unquestionable. He established the barbecue empire in Kansas City, and Perry's followers solidified the region's sense of barbecue style, along with the customer base it appealed to.

Barbecuing is not an easy business to undertake. It takes money, hard work, and dedication. As Perry expanded from his small stand to a bigger restaurant, he needed extra hands. The young men Perry recruited to work for him eventually opened their own barbecue businesses, having learned invaluable skills under Perry’s mentorship.⁴ Charlie Bryant was one of these men. He is not well known today, but Charlie played a major role in the Kansas City barbecue culture.

Moving from Texas, Charlie Bryant came to Kansas City as a boy and began working for Henry Perry. In 1927, he started his own barbecue business at 14th and

²Ibid.

³Ibid., 157.

⁴Andrea Broomfield, *Kansas City: A Food Biography* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016), 90.

Woodland after serving as Perry's apprentice for a while. Moss claims, "He borrowed Perry's cooking method, but created his own formula for sauce and soon gained his own reputation as a barbecue man."⁵ In 1929, Charlie moved his business to 18th and Euclid.⁶

Charlie's brother, Arthur, is undoubtedly the most famous barbecue man in Kansas City. Arthur Bryant graduated from Texas Prairie A & M and decided to stop in Kansas City in August of 1931 to visit his brother.⁷ Arthur had absolutely no plans to stick around Kansas City, let alone train to become a pit-master, but he became enamored with the barbecue lifestyle and never looked back. In his article, "Meet the King of Barbecue," author Ron Malcolm claims, "Fascinated with the skills of Perry and his brother, Arthur soon found himself working alongside the two, devoting himself to learning all he could about the business."⁸

Arthur Bryant became a barbecue man. Broomfield stated, "As had Charlie, Arthur credited Henry Perry for his skill, explaining in a 1980 interview that both he and Charlie "learned the game under him."⁹ Charlie and Arthur Bryant were some of Perry's most well-known and respected barbecue apprentices. Like slaves had done years before, Perry passed down his barbecue knowledge to the next generation and continued the traditions of his ancestors. By teaching these men everything he knew about barbecue, Perry was also furthering the advancement of young, black men. They achieved economic independence and prosperity. In turn, it also created more barbecue establishments where whites and blacks came together to enjoy smoked meats cooked by

⁵Moss, *Barbecue*, 156.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Broomfield, *Kansas City*, 90.

⁸Ron Malcolm, "Meet the King of Barbecue," *Missouri Life* (Jan.-Feb. 1979): 7.

⁹Broomfield, *Kansas City*, 90.

black men.

Charlie and Arthur Bryant worked together in Charlie's restaurant, hoping to set themselves apart from other barbecue restaurants in Kansas City with their fiery sauce and notable meat flavor.¹⁰ If *The Call* was right in its estimations, then they were competing against hundreds of other barbecue establishments in Kansas City. It would have been difficult to stand out in such a crowd, with so much competition in the city, but they did. It also did not hurt that they had learned their skills from the father of Kansas City barbecue himself.

In 1946, Charlie retired due to his failing health and sold his restaurant to his brother.¹¹ Arthur changed the barbecue scene drastically, but Charlie's influence upon Kansas City is undeniable, especially in terms of bridging racial divides. Charlie's obituary in the *Kansas City Call* in 1952 read, "In 1929, Bryant moved his business to its present location at 18th and Euclid, and although he had not been actively connected with the business for several years, he lived to see it thrive and prosper into one of the most popular barbecue spots of the Midwest, to which all races and classes of people came to enjoy his barbecue."¹² This obituary revealed that Bryant's restaurant was not just exclusive to blacks, but was frequented by everyone, of every social status and color. Charlie's obituary was remarkable considering the racially charged environment in the 1950s. Perry had not only passed along his barbecue wisdom to Charlie, but also his acceptance for patrons of all races and social classes. For black pit-masters, like Henry Perry and Charlie Bryant, race and social class were of little concern. They enjoyed what

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²"Death to KC Barbecue Man, 60," *Kansas City Call*, November 10, 1952, 1.

they did, and they enjoyed providing good food to whomever appreciated it.

When his brother died, Arthur made some changes to the restaurant he had taken over from his brother, starting by changing its name to Arthur Bryant's. "Not wanting to destroy a good thing and adamant that Charlie and Henry Perry were 'the greatest barbecue men he ever knew,' Arthur nonetheless altered the establishment to reflect his own style, starting with the sauce. His was less fiery than his brother's, although it retained its distinctive vinegar-paprika base and noticeable absence of sugar."¹³ He thought the old sauce was way too hot for customers, since most of them gasped the first time they took a bite. Arthur cleaned up the place a bit as well by replacing the sawdust planks with linoleum and adding Formica tabletops. He also put in refrigeration and electricity.¹⁴

Eventually, Arthur moved the establishment to 1727 Brooklyn in 1958. "After the business moved around the corner, the space was even smaller—no need for waiters and waitresses. Customers lined a counter for beef, ham and sausages served in a sauce more orange than red, sandwiched between plain white bread and wrapped in reddish-brown butcher's paper. The floor was perennially slippery from the presence of all that grease."¹⁵ Arthur was tremendously dedicated to the restaurant, often sleeping in his back office overnight. Even if he went home, he was the first one there in the morning. He made his own pickles, cut his own potatoes, and made his own barbecue sauce (often trusting no one else with the delicate task).

¹³Broomfield, *Kansas City*, 90.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Rick Montgomery and Shirl Kasper, *Kansas City: An American Story* (Kansas City, MO: Kansas City Star, 1999), 346.

Over time, the reputation of Arthur Bryant's spread throughout the city. The famous jazz musician, Count Basie, used to stop in for a bite. Harry Truman was also a regular customer.¹⁶ Arthur Bryant's may have had a great reputation within the city, but it became famous worldwide in 1974 because of one article. *Playboy* magazine asked the famous culinary writer, Calvin Trillin, to name the top three restaurants in America. Trillin said, "Arthur Bryant's, Arthur Bryant's, Arthur Bryant's."¹⁷ Trillin even went so far as to name Arthur Bryant's the "single best restaurant in the world."¹⁸ What Bryant himself had called a "grease house" became an instant sensation overnight.¹⁹

Having a restaurant applauded in the national spotlight contributed to Kansas City's reputation for barbecue. "Hollywood heavyweights Robert Redford and Jack Nicholson made a point of stopping at Bryant's when they were in town, just to show that they were in the know. World-famous chef Craig Claiborne arranged to have 300 pounds of Bryant's ribs flown to New York to serve to visiting French chefs. And in October 1979, President Jimmy Carter arrived unannounced for lunch during a Kansas City visit, apparently leaving town with an extra sandwich handed to him by Arthur Bryant himself."²⁰ Over the years, countless celebrities have visited Arthur Bryant's to try the smoked meats, and it has become one of the top restaurants in Kansas City, if not the entire country.

In his book, *American Fried: Adventures of a Happy Eater*, Calvin Trillin

¹⁶Moss, *Barbecue*, 156.

¹⁷Montgomery and Kasper, *Kansas City*, 346.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Madeline Matson, *Food in Missouri: A Cultural Stew* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1994), 72.

²⁰Doug Worgul, *The Grand Barbecue: A Celebration of the History, Places, Personalities and Technique of Kansas City Barbecue* (Kansas City, MO: Kansas City Star, 2001), 26.

discussed his article in *Playboy* and defended his opinion about Arthur Bryant's. Trillin may have been slightly biased since he grew up in Kansas City, but his book offered wonderful insight into the world of barbecue. Trillin interviewed Arthur Bryant before his death in 1982. In the interview, Bryant talked about Henry Perry's influence upon him and his business. Bryant said, "He was the greatest barbecue man in the world, but he was a mean outfit."²¹ Bryant also said, "It's all Perry. Everything I'm doing is his."²² Trillin also noted in his book that Bryant paid homage to Perry by keeping jugs of barbecue sauce in the window like Henry Perry did in his own restaurant.

The most revealing part from Trillin's interview with Arthur Bryant dealt with the issue of segregation in Kansas City. Trillin says, "When we mentioned that we had been customers since the early fifties, it occurred to me that when we first started going to Bryant's it must have been the only integrated restaurant in town. It has always been run by black people, and white people have never been able to stay away. Bryant said this was true. In fact, he said, when mixed groups of soldiers came through Kansas City in those days, they were sent to Bryant's to eat."²³ Author Madeline Matson echoes this same sentiment about segregation in her book. She says the restaurant "was integrated in the 1950s when few other places in the city were."²⁴ The Kansas City newspaper, *The Star*, even confirms that Arthur Bryant's, "was integrated when the rest of the city was not."²⁵

Arthur Bryant's may have become famous for its savory barbecued meats, but

²¹Calvin Trillin, *American Fried: Adventures of a Happy Eater* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 30.

²²Ibid., 32.

²³Ibid., 29.

²⁴Matson, *Food in Missouri*, 72.

²⁵Montgomery and Kasper, *Kansas City*, 346.

Trillin's interview and these other sources reveal that the restaurant was also a place where both blacks and whites came together for barbecue. While we know from other Kansas City newspaper articles that whites frequented multiple barbecue restaurants throughout town, this serves as another example to show that whites enjoyed barbecue at black establishments just as much as everyone else did. Arthur Bryant's was one of the best, therefore, he served up smoked meats to a racially-mixed batch of people daily. It must have been a vivid memory for Trillin witnessing blacks and whites eating harmoniously together at Arthur Bryant's in the 1950s, otherwise he would not have remembered it so well and discussed it in the interview. Partly because of Trillin's article, and mostly because of the amazing barbecue it produces, Arthur Bryant's is still one of the top barbecue restaurants in Kansas City. Broomfield recounts in her book that Arthur Bryant's "continues to attract dignitaries, out-of-towners, and even though the Municipal Stadium around the corner at Twenty-Second and Brooklyn was closed in 1972, Chiefs and Royals fans still descend on Bryant's on game day, patiently waiting in a cafeteria-style line for their barbecue fix."²⁶

Henry Perry had a tremendous impact upon the Bryant brothers, but his sphere of influence did not end with them. Arthur Pinkard was another apprentice who served under Perry, alongside Charlie and Arthur Bryant. Pinkard began working for him in the 1930s, but he had no aspirations to be a business owner himself.²⁷ When George and Arzelia Gates bought the O' Johnny's Ol' Kentucky Barb-B-Q at 19th and Vine in 1946, Pinkard went to work for them as their pit-master. George Gates had not been properly

²⁶Broomfield, *Kansas City*, 91.

²⁷Moss, *Barbecue*, 156.

trained in the art of barbecue, being a former railroad worker, so Pinkard proceeded to educate him. “Pinkard taught George Gates the Perry method of barbecuing, which involved slow-cooking the meats directly over a wood fire so that the juice dropped down onto the coals.”²⁸ Pinkard did not seek the glory of being a restaurant owner himself, but the knowledge he had acquired from Henry Perry helped the Gates family launch their own restaurant.

The Ol' Kentuck was a favorite hot-spot for musicians during the jazz era, serving up barbecue alongside the music, but it declined significantly in the 1940s.²⁹ With Pinkard's barbecue skills and George's expertise in promotion, it soon became a favorite hot-spot again for residents of Kansas City. George eventually renamed his restaurant Gates Bar-B-Q. If it was not for Arthur Pinkard's tutelage under Henry Perry, Gates Bar-B-Q would not be one of the leading barbecue restaurants in Kansas City today.

The restaurant's location helped to attract customers as well. “During the 1950s and '60s, the old Municipal Stadium, at 22nd and Brooklyn was close enough to some of the area's many barbecue stands that announcers broadcasting ballgames over the radio could smell the sweet smoke. They'd mention this to their listeners and people throughout the Midwest began to get the idea that if you were hungry for barbecue, Kansas City was a good place to be.”³⁰ Sportswriters visiting from other parts of the country also wrote about the sweet barbecue that was to be found in Kansas City, helping to spread its reputation far and wide.³¹ Arthur Bryant's even benefited from the sports

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Broomfield, *Kansas City*, 92.

³⁰Worgul, *Grand Barbecue*, 15.

³¹Ibid.

enthusiasts at the stadium, hungry for barbecue before the Kansas City A's baseball game.³² Harris Bar-B-Q also saw some business from the baseball crowds on game days. They bought ribs to enjoy for the long games. “After the game, players dropped by to drink some beer and enjoy 'barbecue at its best,' as the sign outside boasts.”³³ Even though the stadium is no longer there, patrons still stop by to grab sandwiches and smoked sausage.³⁴

Ollie Gates, the son of George Gates, recalled, “‘Around 18th and Vine there sprouted the kinds of businesses that go with a segregated environment. There were the soul-food places, and as time went on there was a barbecue at 19th and Vine, 24th and Brooklyn, all around. Each one had a tall smokestack that went up. We surrounded the stadium. And the announcers, Harry Carry and those guys, would get on the radio and they would say, 'Man, do you smell that odor?' And we would give some barbecue to those announcers, and they would talk about it. You see that stadium was right in the black section.”³⁵ Due to their location, and mostly because of the sweet aroma of smoked meats, barbecue restaurants attracted black and white clientele from the stadium. Baseball helped to spread the reputation of black-owned barbecue joints. So, blacks and whites were not only sharing in their passion for baseball but also for barbecue..

Gates Bar-B-Q is wildly successful now, boasting six locations across the city. Much like Henry Perry's restaurants and Arthur Bryant's, Gates also developed a black

³²Rick E. Abel, "Bar-B-Q King Arthur Bryant Dies," *Kansas City Call*, December 31, 1983, 1.

³³Shifra Stein and Rich Davis, *All About Bar-B-Q: Kansas City Style* (Kansas City, MO: Barbacoa, 1985), 162.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Lolis Eric Elie and Frank Stewart, *Smokestack Lightning: Adventures in the Heart of Barbecue Country* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1996), 143.

and white customer base. In an article for Fox News, “Best of Kansas City Barbecue,” Arzelia Gates, the granddaughter of George Gates, was interviewed. Her grandparents started the restaurant in 1946 and Arzelia recalled that the original store was in a segregated section of the city. She also remembered that whites flocked to the black enclaves within Kansas City to listen to jazz and eat barbecue.³⁶ Gates served blacks and whites indiscriminately, just as Perry had in his establishments, and the Bryant brothers in theirs. “As was the case throughout the United States, stopping segregation legally could not stop de facto segregation, and yet eating together could be, as it had been briefly shown to be, a way to unite people. Again, barbecue restaurants were held up as an example of what peaceful coexistence could look like in other public venues,” claimed Broomfield.³⁷

In interviews with Ollie Gates, he also acknowledged the racial intricacies and boundaries that were crossed in his restaurant during the 1940s, ‘50s, and ‘60s. Gates alleged that the beginning of integration in the 1960s was “when you knew whether you had a good product or not. It was one thing to sell to African-Americans when they had no choice as to where they shopped or ate. But if you could keep your customers even after they could go across town to the white business, well, then you knew for sure that you had something. You had a good product.”³⁸

In another interview, Ollie Gates identified how deeply rooted barbecue was in the black culture, how those roots were threatened with desegregation, and how black

³⁶Eileen Ogintz, "Best of Kansas City Barbecue," Fox News (October 28, 2015), <http://www.foxnews.com/leisure/2015/10/28/best-kansas-city-bbq/>,

³⁷Broomfield, *Kansas City*, 99.

³⁸Worgul, *Grand Barbecue*, 61.

proprietors felt threatened when integration occurred. He said, “The advent of integration—it hit black business worse than it did anything. You see, black business had to compete for black dollars. Well, this is one business where the white businesses had to compete with me. They took the fried chicken from us, but I refused to let them take the barbecue.”³⁹

Ollie Gates obviously held the belief that barbecue was inextricably tied to the black culture in Kansas City, even if fried chicken was not. Today, the Gates's restaurants are trying to hold onto barbecue's roots in the black experience by emphasizing the finer and sophisticated points of its past. Instead of maintaining the perception of a barbecue joint being a greasy, smoke house, Gates Bar-B-Q is trying to clean up its image while simultaneously holding onto barbecue's heritage in black society. “The old logo for Gates's restaurant was the typical barbecue logo: an old, beat-up covered wagon. There is some old signage around that still contains that emblem, but it has been replaced now by a picture of a man in spats and cane accompanied by the old Louis Armstrong composition that serves as the new Gates theme, 'Struttin' with Some Barbecue.' The point, he tells us, is to polish up the image of barbecue and the places that serve it.”⁴⁰

White entrepreneurs made just as big of a difference in bridging racial divisions as black proprietors did. Anthony Rieke was one of them. Rieke had survived the Great Depression by selling vegetables out of the back of his truck at the city market.⁴¹ When 1932 arrived, he rented a small stand and started selling beer and hot dogs to make a living. He moved his stand to a new location in 1936 and named it The Bucket Shop

³⁹Elie and Stewart, *Smokestack*, 152.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Moss, *Barbecue*, 157.

because he sold his patrons twenty-five cent buckets of beer.⁴² Rieke eventually renamed The Bucket Shop because he started selling smoked ribs along with the beer, and it became Rosedale Bar-B-Q.

Even though Rieke was white, he catered to black patrons as well as whites. Barbecue was dominated by black men, but Rieke followed the same blueprint as Henry Perry, the Bryant brothers, and George Gates by allowing people of all races and social statuses to dine in his establishment. According to F. Neal Willis, a psychology professor at the University of Missouri, who wrote an unpublished history of Kansas City barbecue, “Rosedale had as many black customers as whites. That's kind of the test. If black people will eat white barbecue it must be pretty good, 'cause they don't have to eat it.”⁴³ This is the same kind of “test” that Ollie Gates had discussed in his interview. Ultimately, good barbecue drew in customers from all backgrounds. It did not matter what color the cook was if the food was satisfying.

Rieke seemed to be just as accepting of blacks as Henry Perry, Charlie and Arthur Bryant, and George Gates had been of white clientele. In an interview that Rieke gave, he told a story revealing his antipathy to discriminatory behavior. Rieke said, “For years we'd serve the black people, but they'd have to take it with them. But we didn't have room inside. We just had about nine or ten seats inside. People would just set out in their cars and eat. Well, one time, a man that was coming in there, oh, every day or two and eating all the time and a black man come and sit down beside him and we started to serve the black man. And this man that was coming in every day, he said, 'You serve him, just

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Elie and Stewart, *Smokestack*, 143.

as well forget mine,' and he walked out. We never seen him since. That was when things was changing like that. But you know, the black people were just as good customers as the white people.”⁴⁴ Rieke could have kicked out the black man to appease the white customer, but he did not. He continued to serve him, despite losing a white consumer. He showed great restraint considering the racial tensions that existed in the city. Much like the black business owners discussed earlier in this chapter, Anthony Rieke seemed more concerned about providing the best barbecue, instead of focusing on who was eating his smoked meats.

Henry Perry served as a mentor to Charlie Bryant, Arthur Bryant, Arthur Pinkard, and countless others, but Rieke was an influential mentor in his own right. Anthony Rieke taught the art of barbecue to several white people, who later established their own restaurants.⁴⁵ Many well-known places such as, Wyandot Barbeque, Porky's Pit Bar-B-Q, Johnny's Bar-B-Q, and Quick's 7th Street Bar-B-Q, were all founded by those who had been trained by Anthony Rieke.⁴⁶ Rieke ran Rosedale Bar-B-Q until he died in 1997, at the age of ninety-two. The restaurant is still open to this day, in the same location, a few blocks from Rosedale Park on Southwest Boulevard.⁴⁷

Barbecue became a serious commercial business that was initiated, pursued, and conquered mostly by black men. “The city had so many barbecue restaurants that even a couple of New York City restaurants started serving 'Kansas City Barbecue.’”⁴⁸ It was a style. A style started by Henry Perry and pursued by his followers. No longer was

⁴⁴Ibid., 150.

⁴⁵Ibid., 143.

⁴⁶Moss, *Barbecue*, 157.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Broomfield, *Kansas City*, 90.

smoked meat being wrapped in a newspaper and sold for twenty-five cents in a trolley barn. Barbecue became a business venture that proved to profit well. “Be it a takeaway, a restaurant, a tavern, or a cafeteria in Kansas City's African American commercial districts, barbecue reigned supreme for its flavor and its price.”⁴⁹

Henry Perry and his followers shaped what is known today as Kansas City barbecue. They developed and maintained the same techniques, meats, and sauces that are still used in the city now. These men had a profound impact upon the city in terms of barbecue, but also in terms of racial tolerance as well, by accepting patrons from all backgrounds. In “A Sociology of Rib Joints,” authors P. D. Holley and D. E. Wright, Jr. argue that ribs can be considered food for the “common man.” They write, “It is difficult if not impossible to pretend to be better than others with food in one's hand, with grease and sauce on one's mouth and hands, and wearing a bib and/or a napkin stuck in the neck of one's shirt.”⁵⁰ Eating barbecue brought blacks and whites from all social classes down to a similar level. It is nearly impossible to be pretentious when eating barbecue.

The men who built this barbecue empire did much more than establish a barbecue style. They did more than uplift their fellow blacks or establish themselves as respectable proprietors in a world dominated by whites. They broke through the racial barriers that existed within the city by forming a relationship with whites that was forged through the bond of barbecue. Henry Perry, the Bryant brothers, and George Gates did not cook smoked meats to only cater to their own race. They smoked meats to please the palates of everyone. They held great satisfaction in knowing that their barbecue was supreme to

⁴⁹Ibid., 98.

⁵⁰P. D. Holley and D. E. Wright, Jr., “A Sociology of Rib Joints,” *McDonaldization: The Reader* 2002, edited by George Ritzer (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 2002), 48.

others.

By serving both whites and blacks, Perry had taught his apprentices much more than barbecue. He taught them to accept customers of every creed and color, and they followed his lead in their own restaurants. Their barbecue establishments, and even Anthony Rieke's, provided an environment where blacks and whites could share in the simple indulgence of smoked meats, with little fear of repercussion. The legacy that Perry and his followers left behind is one of racial tolerance, mixed with a sweet sauce of acceptance.

Chapter Five

Bonding Over the 'Cue

The impact of Henry Perry and his followers upon Kansas City was profound. Not only did they help to put Kansas City on the map as a barbecue kingdom, but they also fostered an environment where racial tolerance was encouraged. Black entrepreneurs excelled in the barbecue business, furthering their economic prosperity and creating a path toward upward mobility. Whites traveled to black enclaves in Kansas City to partake in the delicious smoked meats, despite the self-imposed racial lines they were crossing. But barbecue establishments were hardly the only places where both blacks and whites enjoyed the simple pleasure of barbecue. Since the early days of the republic, barbecue was a versatile substance, catering to the needs of whomever was serving it. It became present at assorted events in Kansas City, testing the boundaries of ethnic divisions. Community gatherings, political rallies, and the stockyards in Kansas City all served as places where the lines of race were often crossed.

Barbecue was frequently used as a tool for cooperation and unity at community gatherings. Author Doug Worgul expresses that, “Barbecue is inherently communal because it is such hard work, so inefficient, and so very slow that it makes no sense to go to all that trouble unless you intend to feed lots of people.”¹ As early as 1858, Kansas City held its first Fourth of July barbecue.² Colonel McGee hosted the event, offering the

¹Doug Worgul, "The Culture of Slow Smoking, Sauce, and Ribs," *Kansas City Star*, May 21, 2000, 105.

²Robert F. Moss, *Barbecue: The History of an American Institution* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2010), 79.

community a bison for the barbecue.³ Three thousand people attended, with the barbecue event ending in a ball that night.⁴ The *Kansas City Times*, in October 11, 1876, describes a barbecue that the public had been invited to attend. The story claims that “15 beeves, 120 sheep, 25 hogs and five car loads of turkey” were used to feed everyone.⁵ That was an extraordinary amount of meat that probably took several people many hours to prepare and serve.

Kansas City residents apparently knew how to celebrate in a big way, and they did so again in September 18, 1880. To commemorate a railroad connection that had taken eight years to complete, Kansas City held a giant feast. *The Kansas City Evening Star* titled their piece about the celebration, “The Grand Barbecue.” According to the article, “-a grand old fashioned barbecue was determined upon...the event celebrated in a manner and style peculiarly characteristic of Kansas City pluck and enterprise.”⁶ The article describing the event ended with a communal sense of prose stating that “The Grand Barbecue” was “where a sumptuous feast of fat things is prepared for all that may come.”⁷

Barbecue continued to play a pivotal role in the black community itself after the Civil War, with smoked meats being front and center at Emancipation Day celebrations. Blacks used barbecue to celebrate their freedom after slavery. Since barbecue was so deeply embedded in the black culture and because it had always been a symbol of

³Andrea Broomfield, *Kansas City: A Food Biography* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016), 88.

⁴Moss, *Barbecue*, 79.

⁵Rick Montgomery, "Kansas City: 1926-1950," *Kansas City Star*, May 21, 2000, 104.

⁶Worgul, “The Culture,” 105.

⁷Doug Worgul, *The Grand Barbecue: A Celebration of the History, Places, Personalities and Technique of Kansas City Barbecue* (Kansas City, MO: Kansas City Star, 2001), 3.

celebration throughout slavery, it only made sense to use smoked meats as a symbol of their new-found freedom. Moss claimed that Emancipation celebrations played a vital role in the civic life of blacks during Reconstruction, with barbecue acting as a focal point of the celebrations.⁸ White citizens often attended these Emancipation Day celebrations as well, even though they were organized and coordinated by the black community.

Emancipation Days and Fourth of July celebrations during the Reconstruction era influenced the eventual barbecue cultures that developed in Kansas City, but also in Memphis, St. Louis, Chicago, and Houston.⁹ These barbecue cultures developed mostly because black men set up barbecue stands at festivals, fairs, and expositions.¹⁰ Before the 1890s, barbecue was usually given away free to the public. It was hardly ever sold. “School celebrations, social club gatherings, estate sales, town-boosting land sales, and community betterment efforts were just a few of the events where it was common to find barbecue being served.”¹¹ These events served as an opportunity for black entrepreneurs, who were intent on capitalizing from the large crowds. As black men sought out ways to support themselves and their families during Reconstruction, they began to seek profit for their barbecue. “These cooks would set up tents on special occasions such as the Fourth of July, Labor Day, and court days in county seats and on street corners in cities. The tents evolved into more permanent structures, and the modern barbecue restaurant was

⁸Moss, *Barbecue*, 98.

⁹*Ibid.*, 102.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 107.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 102.

born.”¹²

Blacks may have been the cooks behind the scenes at these grand barbecues and commemorations, but after the Civil War they were part of an integrated celebration in the communities. They joined in communal gatherings that were fastened together by the bonding power of barbecue that went beyond the parameters of black and white. Author Robert Moss makes a noteworthy assessment in his book, *Barbecue: The History of an American Institution*. Moss concludes, “In some ways, barbecue was an institution that brought blacks and whites together. The tradition was shared by everyone in the South, and many public events were attended by all of a community's residents regardless of skin color.”¹³

Barbecue also played an enormous role in the realm of politics. Author Timothy J. Fox claims in his article that politicians tried to gain voter trust by appealing to their appetites, so barbecue became a necessity at political speeches and rallies.¹⁴ Barbecue was used frequently due to its mass appeal. It was a great equalizer among men. Barbecue appealed not only to the wealthy classes, but to the common man as well. It was a food that all social and economic classes appreciated, without any pretentious notions. By using barbecue, politicians implied that they were common men with the ability to appeal to the masses. “In the South, as elsewhere, outdoor political rallies and speeches produced huge crowds. To keep the masses happy, food and beverages were served. Various documents from the Colonies during the 1700s indicate that barbecues

¹²Ibid., 3.

¹³Ibid., 212.

¹⁴Timothy J. Fox, "The Secrets in the Sauce: Kansas City's Barbecue Tradition," *Gateway Heritage* (Fall 2002): 26.

had become great social and political events.”¹⁵ George Washington, himself, attended many barbecues in his day. This tradition of serving barbecue at political rallies continued for hundreds of years, especially since it was an easy way to feed large crowds. Even at emotionally charged political rallies in the South before the Civil War, blacks cooked and served the smoked meats. “It is not without some irony that enslaved people, the earliest barbecue pitmasters, were called upon to avail slaveholders and politicians with Fourth of July barbecues meant to win over neighbors and constituents.”¹⁶

Politics in the South became somewhat tumultuous after the Civil War, as the Democratic Party became desperate in their measures to regain control in the South. The Republican Party had complete power in Congress since the North had won the brutal and exhausting conflict, much to the chagrin of war-tattered Democrats. To sway black voters away from the Republican Party, Democrats began hosting barbecues in 1868.¹⁷ A barbecue was held in Yalobusha County, in Mississippi, where Democrats attempted to sway black voters. “The orations sought to convince the newly empowered voters that the Radical Republicans cared only about exploiting southern blacks for profit and that Democrats were actually the party most concerned with the welfare of black Mississippians—a theme that was omnipresent at Democratic barbecues aimed at African Americans voters that year.”¹⁸ The northern press and Republican politicians were amused and bewildered at these attempts to attract black voters with barbecues and

¹⁵Shifra Stein and Rich Davis, *All About Bar-B-Q: Kansas City Style* (Kansas City, MO: Barbacoa, 1985), 12.

¹⁶Michael W. Twitty, “Barbecue Is an American Tradition— of Enslaved Africans and Native Americans,” *The Guardian*, July 04, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jul/04/barbecue-american-tradition-enslaved-africans-native-americans>.

¹⁷Moss, *Barbecue*, 101.

¹⁸*Ibid.*

political rallies.¹⁹ These political endeavors were to no avail. Republicans were re-elected across the South in sweeping numbers. Barbecue did little to win the black vote in the South.²⁰ Since blacks were not swayed with barbecue and insincere discourse, southern whites turned to intimidation and disfranchisement of black voters, leading to many of the Jim Crow laws by the turn of the century.

Jim and Tom Pendergast created a unique political environment in Kansas City in the early 1900s, which will be discussed in detail in the next chapter. These politicians recognized the great needs among the black population in Kansas City. They saw the poverty and the hardships that many within the black enclaves were experiencing. They also saw an opportunity to gain votes in a sector of the population that had been largely ignored by past politicians in Kansas City. Much of the West Bottoms was referred to as “Hell’s Half-Acre,” where most of the population was comprised of European immigrants and African Americans.²¹ Jim and Tom Pendergast focused a lot of attention on this area, recognizing the potential constituents that existed there. It was not unusual for Jim to put up bail bond for African Americans in jail.²² In later years, “A local and usually Republican negro newspaper strongly backed Tom Pendergast in 1908 because during his term as county marshal he had seen that Negroes in the county jail got decent treatment.”²³ Tom Pendergast, especially, showed considerable support towards groups that had been previously overlooked by other politicians. “The base of his support

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid., 102.

²¹A. Theodore Brown and Lyle W. Dorsett, *K.C.: A History of Kansas City, Missouri* (Boulder, CO: Pruett Publication, 1978), 42.

²²Lyle W. Dorsett, *The Pendergast Machine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 19.

²³Brown and Dorsett, *K.C.*, 112.

always rested in the poor, the black, the Italian, the immigrant. These groups disenfranchised by other major political groups, found a benefactor in Tom Pendergast and his war lieutenants.”²⁴ He was able to draw both whites and blacks toward his party by executing acts of kindness within their impoverished communities, including the distribution of food, such as barbecue. As was the case in the South, barbecue continued to be a tool used by politicians over the years to garner votes.

The stockyards and packinghouses of Kansas City also served as places where barbecue and race blended together. In an article for the *Kansas City Star*, “Learning the 'Rules,' Singin' the Blues,” Melvin B. Thompson says, “The summer before I enlisted, I worked in a packinghouse in the Missouri Bottoms. I lived in one state and worked in another. Every morning I crossed the river into Kansas, with men of all nationalities and races.”²⁵ With such a diverse population living and working in Kansas City, there was bound to be some conflict among the different races and cultures co-existing in the area. Barbecue helped to serve as a unification tool among blacks and white, European immigrants.

In *We Were Hanging by a Thread: Kansas City Garment District Pieces the Past Together*, authors Ann Brownfield and David W. Jackson discuss the route taken by garment employees on their way to work. “The streetcars once transported people between Kansas City, Kansas, through the stockyards in the West Bottoms, and up through a long, dark tunnel to the first stop at 8th Street and Broadway in Kansas City, Missouri. This stop let off some of the 40,000 sewers, cutters, and office staff that

²⁴Nathan W. Pearson, *Goin' to Kansas City* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 84.

²⁵Brian Burnes, "Learning the 'Rules,' Singing the Blues," *Kansas City Star*, February 20, 1984, B1.

worked in the 75 factories in this area from 1920 through 1988.”²⁶ The garment factories were actually the second largest employer in Kansas City, providing an ample number of customers for barbecue entrepreneurs.²⁷ Due to the large influx of people traveling through these areas daily, barbecue owners were able to survive and thrive. They were prime locations for black entrepreneurs to set up their stands. Enticing them with the aroma of smoked meats, barbecue owners capitalized off the different nationalities traveling to work every day.

Author Madeline Matson states that Kansas City had 27, 320 foreign-born immigrants in 1920. Not only had the city seen a huge influx of blacks after the Civil War, but it also went through a period of population explosion with the arrival of European immigrants. Matson added that Kansas City’s significance as a railroad hub, and its cattle and grain businesses attracted thousands of European immigrants.²⁸ To live near their places of employment, though, it was not uncommon to see blacks and European immigrants living in the same areas. Not only were there distinct differences among European immigrants themselves, but they were also contending with the cultural differences they found among blacks. Author Charles E. Coulter discusses the complexities of black and immigrant communities in his book. Coulter states, “In the West Bottoms, African American and Irish workers competed for living space and employment, but unlike in other communities, the competition appeared to be friendly. Black and Irish intermingled freely, and in some cases intermarried. In the 1894 strike

²⁶Ann Brownfield and David W. Jackson, *We Were Hanging by a Thread: Kansas City Garment District Pieces the Past Together* (Kansas City, MO: Orderly Pack Rat, 2013), 266.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Madeline Matson, *Food in Missouri: A Cultural Stew* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1994), 103.

against packinghouse operators, African American, Irish, and native-born white workers bonded to protest low wages and poor working conditions.”²⁹ Coulter admits later in his book that on some occasions, “blacks and whites theoretically sat as equals.”³⁰ The major unions, organized by both black and white labor leaders, contributed to the growing collaboration among African Americans and European immigrants. Coulter infers that, “For most African Americans, then, Kansas City represented two worlds, in which opportunities for advancement coexisted with sometimes strict limitations.”³¹

The slaughterhouses served as a site where blacks and white, European immigrants bonded over their similar plight. The meatpacking industry was one of Kansas City's largest employers, and it was not uncommon to see blacks working right alongside whites. They formed unions to fight for better wages and working conditions, intent on coming together to overcome their struggles. “Once the workday was over, individuals from each ethnic group would go home to their own communities, but during work hours they worked for a common goal that bonded them.”³² It is impractical to think that blacks and black culture did not have an impact on the European immigrants they worked so closely with daily. Hundreds of barbecue stands existed in this well-traveled area, and it would have been difficult for black entrepreneurs to sustain their businesses based off the patronage of blacks alone. In *No Foreign Food: The American Diet in Time and Place*, author Richard Pillsbury writes that as time went on, larger numbers of

²⁹Charles E. Coulter, “*Take Up the Black Man's Burden*”: *Kansas City's African American Communities, 1865-1939* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006), 29.

³⁰Ibid., 53.

³¹Ibid.

³²Kara Evans, "Unionization Comes to the Slaughterhouse," The Kansas City Public Library (November 14, 2014), <http://www.kclibrary.org/blog/kc-unbound/unionization-comes-slaughterhouse>.

workers were not within walking distance of their homes anymore. This meant that the midday meal had to either be carried or purchased near their workplace.³³ Barbecue stands arose to meet that growing need. “As America's towns and cities grew, they attracted enough people to serve as a stable clientele for daily operations, and it was in downtown areas that the first barbecue restaurants appeared.”³⁴ White immigrants were consuming barbecue prepared by blacks, leading to the maturation of barbecue stands and restaurants.

The point of this chapter was to showcase the various circumstances in which barbecue was consumed by blacks, but also whites. Barbecue restaurants were not the only places in which both races were seen eating smoked meats together. Community gatherings and celebrations in Kansas City used barbecue as a tool for unity. Politicians used barbecue as a means of not only feeding large groups of people, but also to earn votes from the black community. Blacks and white, European immigrants found a connection through barbecue as well, partaking in the smoked meats that were found in their employment districts. These things contributed to the bond that whites and blacks shared over barbecue in Kansas City.

Author James R. Shortridge writes, “Barbecue, in turn, through its expansion from a limited position within the black community to an enthusiastic embracement by the city as a whole, has played a powerful role in bridging racial divides.”³⁵ Barbecue was not limited to the restaurants that popped up all over town. Smoked meat was employed in

³³Richard Pillsbury, *No Foreign Food: The American Diet in Time and Place* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 170.

³⁴Moss, *Barbecue*, 127.

³⁵James R. Shortridge, *Kansas City and How It Grew, 1822-2011* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2012), 177.

so many different capacities throughout Kansas City, but its purpose always remained the same. It brought people together. It served as a means of unification because the enjoyment of food is something everyone can understand on an emotional and psychological level.

The consumption of barbecue encouraged intimate engagements between blacks and whites that was unparalleled in the city. The bond over barbecue was established during slavery and strengthened by the circumstances discussed in this chapter. All of this is important in understanding the mindset of Kansas City residents in the early twentieth century and how they viewed and thought about barbecue. These elements set the stage for what was to come in Kansas City. The bond over barbecue had started, but it solidified with the ushering in of a new wave of music: jazz.

Chapter Six

Cue the Machine

Before delving into the connection between jazz, race, and barbecue, it is important to look at the political and social environments in Kansas City in the 1920s and 1930s. Several elements came together during this time, creating a unique atmosphere in Kansas City, starting with the Eighteenth Amendment. The Eighteenth Amendment, better known as Prohibition, was enacted in 1920. It was encouraged by the temperance movement and thousands of Americans tired of dealing with the disastrous nature of alcohol. From 1920 to 1933, it was no longer legal to produce, transport, import, or sell alcoholic beverages in the United States.¹ Prohibition gave rise to bootlegging and speakeasies, instigated by the actions of organized crime. The Prohibition era is just as easily equated with the gangster era. Acts of violence by gang members became regular occurrences in the country. Underground economies were built around illegal drinking, with bootleggers, smugglers, and gangsters providing the outlawed booze to people across the country. With so many Americans ignoring the Eighteenth Amendment, it became extremely hard to enforce, regulate, and prosecute offenders. It was a vice that Americans found hard to give up, and Kansas City capitalized off this illicit trade.

Jim Pendergast arrived in Kansas City in 1876, finding work in the West Bottoms. Jim opened the Climax Saloon in 1881, which became his political base and the impetus for the Pendergast machine. The Climax Saloon offered gambling, drinking, and many

¹Jeffrey Miron and Jeffrey Zwiebel, "Alcohol Consumption During Prohibition," *The American Economic Review* 81, no. 2 (May 1991), 242.

other illegal activities to its patrons.² Jim was eventually elected alderman in 1892 and held that position until 1910. He became an increasingly powerful politician. When his health began to fail, Jim gave up his seat as alderman, and endorsed his brother, Tom.

In 1911, after Jim's death, Tom won his seat and took over the Pendergast machine. Tom Pendergast became incredibly influential in Kansas City, becoming a key political figure behind the scenes from 1925 until 1939.³ He became Chairman of the Jackson County Democratic Party, helping to elect Democratic politicians. Authors Rick Montgomery and Shirl Kasper also believe that Pendergast's relationship with the gangster, Johnny Lazia, enhanced his power within the city. By employing gangsters to do his bidding, Pendergast used violent threats to achieve his objectives.

“In the 18 years between Jim Pendergast's death and the stock market crash, Tom crafted a regime that drew the backing of unions and entrepreneurs, radio and newspapers, bootleggers, racketeers, even the Chamber of Commerce.”⁴ He knew that power and wealth came only from the profit of business. Pendergast was not only a hotel operator and racetrack owner, but he was also the vice president of the Ready-Mixed Concrete Company. As he endorsed and spearheaded construction projects in Kansas City, his personal concrete business profited as well.⁵

Tom Pendergast controlled Kansas City's politics during this era, ushering in the city's reputation as being a “wide-open” town.⁶ When the state Supreme Court decided

²Nathan W. Pearson, *Goin' to Kansas City* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 83.

³Ibid., 84.

⁴Rick Montgomery and Shirl Kasper, *Kansas City: An American Story* (Kansas City, MO: Kansas City Star, 1999), 223.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Jane Mobley and Shifra Stein, *Kansas City: Heart of America* (Montgomery, Ala.: Produced in Cooperation with Greater Kansas City Chamber of Commerce Community Communications, 1994), 30.

that Kansas City should govern its own police force instead of relying on the governor to appoint commissioners, it gave Pendergast the opportunity to hire his own replacements. Police officers who were members of the Republican Party were replaced with Pendergast's Democratic supporters.⁷ Shortridge claims that when Pendergast gained control of the city council and police force in 1925, he "saw how lucrative a carefully encouraged and regulated vice industry could be."⁸

"Pendergast's seizure of the police department ensured that gamblers, club owners, brothel keepers, and vendors of liquor and narcotics, who once secured protection from individual police officers or machine judges, now enjoyed the tacit approval of an entire police organization," explains author Sherry Lamb Schirmer in her book, *A City Divided: The Racial Landscape of Kansas City, 1900-1960*.⁹ The people propagating vice and debauchery in the city were now free to operate without any restrictions or inhibitions, as long as they paid their fees and dues to the Pendergast machine. Jazz historian Ross Russell also comments on the profound influence Tom Pendergast exercised over the people of Kansas City during this era. Russell mentioned, "Every club operator, rum runner, pit boss, madame, prostitute, pimp, narcotics peddler, hoodlum, and bartender in Kansas City operated at Pendergast's pleasure and privilege."¹⁰ It all contributed to an environment where the police were encouraged to turn their heads against any unlawful or illegitimate actions.¹¹ From January of 1920 to

⁷Montgomery and Kasper, *Kansas City*, 227.

⁸James R. Shortridge, *Kansas City and How It Grew, 1822-2011* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2012), 87.

⁹Sherry Lamb Schirmer, *A City Divided: The Racial Landscape of Kansas City, 1900-1960* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 167.

¹⁰Ibid., 125.

¹¹Montgomery and Kasper, *Kansas City*, 197.

December of 1933, there was not one felony conviction for violation of Prohibition, despite the existence of more than three hundred bars in Kansas City.¹²

According to a magazine article from *Future* in 1935, Kansas City had more night clubs per capita than any other city in the United States. The article stated that more than three hundred clubs, hotels, joints, and dives contributed to Kansas City's reputation as being a "hot, wide open town."¹³ With Tom Pendergast allowing gambling, drinking, drug use, and prostitution to go unchecked, it allowed these businesses to flourish, and fostered an environment where vice and debauchery reigned supreme.¹⁴

Many Americans resorted to visiting speakeasies and hideaways to indulge in their favorite alcoholic beverages in private. Kansas City became famous for the symbiotic relationship that existed between organized crime and the police department, with Pendergast spearheading the system. With the kickbacks being received from the clubs and dives, Pendergast and his men continued their operations uninhibited and unopposed. In, *The Pendergast Machine*, author Lyle W. Dorsett argues that most residents of Kansas City knew that these places were protected by the Pendergast machine, and most assumed that the machine took a percentage of the profits every year.¹⁵ The money kept the machine running, which in turn, kept the businesses operating and people employed. It was essentially a cycle of depravity that continued for years.

Even though Tom Pendergast was white, he developed a special relationship with

¹²Nathan W. Pearson, "Political and Musical Forces That Influenced the Development of Kansas City Jazz," *Black Music Research Journal* 9, no. 2 (1989): 181.

¹³"Night Life of the Mortals," *Future* (March 29, 1935), 1.

¹⁴Timothy J. Fox, "The Secrets in the Sauce: Kansas City's Barbecue Tradition," *Gateway Heritage* (Fall 2002): 27.

¹⁵Lyle W. Dorsett, *The Pendergast Machine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 88.

blacks, which was discussed in small detail in the last chapter. Tom's older brother, Jim, had already established an amiable connection with the black community. When Tom took over the Pendergast machine from Jim, he continued that intimate relationship. In the *Missouri Historical Review*, author Larry Grothaus discusses the unique connection that existed between the Pendergast machine and blacks. Grothaus said, "Jim Pendergast and his organization also gained supporters by protecting the civil rights of Missouri and Kansas City blacks, when rural and out-of-state Democrats attempted to pass discriminatory legislation, state legislators from Kansas City refused to support the measure."¹⁶ In some ways, the Pendergasts were champions of racial tolerance because they knew that votes, whether it came from blacks or whites, kept them in power.

Despite the illegal activities, the Pendergast machine appealed to black communities for several reasons. Blacks were offered employment in the jazz clubs that popped up around the city, giving them a way to support themselves and their families.¹⁷ Many blacks worked as custodians and musicians, as well as pimps and dealers.¹⁸ Blacks knew that the Pendergast machine was in control of everything, but a job was a job. That fact was not lost on Tom Pendergast either. Pendergast realized that if blacks had employment and a small degree of economic success, they would continue to vote for him. Roy Wilkins, who worked for *The Call* newspaper in Kansas City until 1931, recalled that one advantage of having a "boss" was that blacks could take their problems

¹⁶Larry Grothaus, "Kansas City Blacks, Harry Truman and the Pendergast Machine," *Missouri Historical Review* (1 Oct. 1974), 67.

¹⁷Ibid., 69.

¹⁸Shortridge, *Kansas City*, 87.

directly to him and Pendergast would take care of it.¹⁹ They did not have to go through the regular governmental system to get things done within their communities.

While the location of these jazz clubs and joints made it easier for blacks to acquire work, the location also had a negative effect on blacks. “The town was wide open, but by far the greatest number of its seamy niteries were located in the black ghetto, where it was both cheap and easy to open a jazz joint.”²⁰ Most of these night clubs were lined along 12th Street, or 18th and Vine, in the heart of black communities.²¹ The concentration of clubs in the black enclaves did not deter people from coming to the city to engage in carousing behavior, but it did not help the reputation of blacks either. With the concentration of vice and debauchery in the black enclaves, it created an association between blacks and objectionable behavior.²² Even though both races engaged in illegal activities, blacks bore the brunt of the shame since the clubs and joints were in their section of the city. The *Kansas City Times* even accused black men of voting for Pendergast and his machine to protect the degenerate behavior being displayed in their communities, despite the large numbers of whites who also frequented the clubs.²³ Kansas City's black newspaper, *The Call*, responded to this accusation by stating that most of the blacks who voted Democratic were housewives and churchgoers, not the ones participating in such debauchery. A white singer and dancer, Edna Mintirn, recalls going to the black enclaves within the city to visit these clubs. Mintirn says, “We went down to Nigger Town when we get off work. We'd go down and watch 'em. [12th] and Vine, that's

¹⁹Grothaus, “Kansas City Blacks,” 81.

²⁰Schirmer, *A City Divided*, 125.

²¹Montgomery and Kasper, *Kansas City*, 218.

²²Shortridge, *Kansas City*, 87.

²³Schirmer, *A City Divided*, 166.

where the big shots were, and you could sit in there and get three or four drinks and there was so much marijuana in the air you'd get a buzz. Everybody had smoke comin' up off the ashtrays.”²⁴ Mintirn’s story showcases the fact that whites shared in the illegal activities as well. It was only because property was so cheap in the black enclaves that club owners decided to open their establishments there, not out of a desire to be near their client base.

With people coming to Kansas City to frequent the jazz clubs and dives, it provided the town with the economic stimulation that many other cities in the United States were sorely lacking. Pendergast also contributed projects to the city, which benefited both whites and blacks. The Jackson County Courthouse, Municipal Auditorium, and City Hall were built because of the policies instituted by Pendergast.²⁵ These buildings put men to work at a time when unemployment in the country was at its highest because of the Depression. “Moreover, the machine's lavish expenditures on public works meant that working-class and middle-class whites had money to spend on leisure.”²⁶ It was a cycle that benefited everyone. These buildings were constructed by locals, whom, in turn, spent their extra money at the clubs.

Some historians have criticized Pendergast for buying senators their seats and using manipulation and threats to control local politicians. Harry Truman was even accused at one point of being a pawn in the Pendergast machine. Voter fraud and intimidation was not uncommon in Kansas City, but it also was no secret to Kansas City citizens. Most accepted the corruption. “*The Christian Science Monitor* in 1938 called

²⁴Ibid., 125.

²⁵Mobley and Stein, *Kansas City: Heart of America*, 30.

²⁶Schirmer, *A City Divided*, 167.

Kansas City 'wider open than any place outside Reno' and attacked its residents for being 'astonishingly complacent about it all.'²⁷

“May 29, 1939, marked the end of an era in Kansas City, as Thomas J. Pendergast, one of America's most powerful political bosses, entered federal prison for income tax evasion, his entire governmental machine collapsed.”²⁸ Authors Rick Montgomery and Shirl Kasper claim that some residents of Kansas City missed the way things were under the reign of the Pendergast machine. Gambling, prostitution, booze, and drugs were no longer running rampant in downtown. “The jazz clubs lost their crowds.”²⁹ People were no longer drawn to Kansas City to partake in illegal activities, causing many club owners to lose not only their clientele, but their businesses as well.

The public's reaction to Pendergast's imprisonment was somewhat mixed, especially among blacks, whom many had regarded Pendergast as a friend to the black community. His reign had allowed Kansas City to become the epicenter of jazz and degeneracy, but it had also kept the city alive during the Depression. “Nobody lamented the passing of extortion payments routinely needed to acquire city contracts, but feelings were mixed about the selective police action that had allowed gambling businesses to proliferate and, with them, jazz clubs and other hallmarks of a 'wide-open' town.”³⁰

The legacy of Tom Pendergast is controversial, but the environment he created in Kansas City initiated a time when blacks and whites came together in jazz clubs, intent on eating, drinking, and listening to music. This chapter was necessary because the social

²⁷Montgomery and Kasper, *Kansas City*, 228.

²⁸Shortridge, *Kansas City*, 97.

²⁹Montgomery and Kasper, *Kansas City*, 231.

³⁰Shortridge, *Kansas City*, 97.

and political atmosphere under the Pendergast political machine played a fundamental role in sealing the connection between blacks, whites, and barbecue. As the next chapter will demonstrate, the time that blacks and whites shared in these clubs and dives further cemented the bond that blacks and whites shared over barbecue.

Chapter Seven

Jazzin' Up the 'Cue

The Pendergast political machine left its mark on the city during the 1920s and 1930s, but nothing came to epitomize Kansas City more in this era than jazz. The Jazz Age defined the city in a large way, making it a destination for musicians and anyone seeking a mixture of music and vice. Author Sherry Schirmer writes, “While theaters and clubs shut their doors all over the depression-plagued southwestern states, jazz musicians migrated to Kansas City, where the gigs were plentiful.”¹ Musicians found an incredible combination of debauchery mixed with the sweet sounds of jazz, which kept Kansas City hopping while much of the United States was struggling to survive the Depression.

Thanks to Pendergast's lenient policies, jazz developed and cultivated in the same clubs that were providing patrons with alcohol, drugs, women, and barbecue. “Journalists were intrigued by a new brand of jazz—Kansas City jazz—which was being nurtured in the bars, night clubs, and speakeasies. Several of the illegal establishments were notorious, but they operated around the clock under the protection of the Pendergast—controlled police—for a cut, of course.”² Some of the most important voices in music came out of the Kansas City scene during this time. The jazz scene blossomed and thrived because of “the corrupt but economically stimulating, Pendergast machine.”³

¹Sherry Lamb Schirmer, *A City Divided: The Racial Landscape of Kansas City, 1900-1960* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 167.

²A. Theodore Brown and Lyle W. Dorsett, *K.C.: A History of Kansas City, Missouri* (Boulder, CO: Pruett Publication, 1978), 194.

³Charles E. Coulter, *“Take Up the Black Man's Burden”: Kansas City's African American Communities, 1865-1939* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006), 218.

During the Great Depression, Kansas City offered jobs to musicians when few other employment opportunities in the entertainment industry existed in the country. Blacks had a much more difficult time finding employment opportunities than whites, and that became magnified greatly during the Depression. Not only did racial prejudice hinder their job search, but also a lack of resources. Kansas City offered a unique environment where musicians survived economically by merely playing their music. Not many cities offered opportunities such as this during the Depression. “In the thirties, when the rest of America was devastated by the Depression and musical jobs evaporated, Kansas City rocked, and a generation of Territory musicians came to mingle with the already lively native musical scene.”⁴ Many musicians also satisfied their hunger during the Great Depression by playing music for a few hours in exchange for food. Broomfield concludes, “Hunger powered musical innovation while a wide-open culture of booze lubricated it, and period Mob violence punctuated it.”⁵ Musicians knew the clubs were ultimately under the control of the Pendergast machine, but they were satisfied with playing music, and receiving food and money in return.

Jazz clubs provided opportunities for musicians to gain a significant foothold in the music industry, while also being able to sharpen their skills with the competition. Author Charles Coulter says, “The jobs were low paying, but they paid enough to attract musicians the caliber of Count Basie, Lester Young, Ben Webster, Jimmy Rushing, and Jay McShann.”⁶ With so many musicians in a concentrated area, they developed a

⁴Nathan W. Pearson, *Goin' to Kansas City* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 79.

⁵Andrea Broomfield, *Kansas City: A Food Biography* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016), 93.

⁶Coulter, “*Take Up*,” 218.

distinctive Kansas City sound, which eventually influenced jazz players across the country.

Mary Lou Williams was a pianist who recalls that the clubs were run by politicians and hoodlums, but she also remembers that these clubs served as employment opportunities for musicians, even if the Pendergast machine received a cut of the profits. Williams says, “Work was plentiful for musicians, though some of the employers were tough people...I found Kansas City to be a heavenly city—music everywhere in the Negro section of town, and fifty or more cabarets rocking on [12th] and [18th] Streets.”⁷ Even though Kansas City was one of the few places where musicians found work and free food during the Depression, they were still expected to abide by the rules of the Pendergast machine.⁸ A musician from this era, Buster Smith, has observed, “In Kansas City, all them big clubs were run by them big gangsters, and they were the musicians' best friend. They give you a job, and something to eat, and work regular. We didn't know nothing about their business, they didn't know nothing about ours.”⁹

Charlie “Bird” Parker became one of the most famous musicians to come out of Kansas City during this time. “Vine Street itself rose to the status of jazz mecca in the 1930s, with hometown legend Charlie Parker regularly gracing its clubs and speakeasies until he headed for New York in the 1940s.”¹⁰ The Kansas City environment nurtured jazz musicians, allowing them to play all night, in front of large crowds appreciative of their music and sound. Musicians from Kansas City often refer to this period as “one

⁷Schirmer, *A City Divided*, 167.

⁸*Ibid.*, 168.

⁹Broomfield, *Kansas City*, 93.

¹⁰Timothy J. Fox, “The Secrets in the Sauce: Kansas City's Barbecue Tradition,” *Gateway Heritage* (Fall 2002): 27.

long twenty-year jam session,” since the music never seemed to stop flowing.¹¹

Some musicians from the jazz era discuss in interviews the racial barriers that existed, or were broken down, in Kansas City during the Depression. Clarence Love, a black musician, was proud to say that his band played for both blacks and whites.¹² Many musicians were black and it was not uncommon for them to play in mixed clubs, or in front of black and white audiences. Chuck Haddix, director of the Marris Sound Archives at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, explains, “Jazz musicians didn't see the color lines as we did in the society.”¹³ Haddix goes on to convey, “A lot of white musicians like Benny Goodman and others, would go to 18th and Vine to listen to each other. The racial barriers began breaking down first through these late-night jam sessions.”¹⁴

Even though jazz was seen largely in the United States as a black phenomenon, whites turned out in large numbers to watch black musicians play, which meant whites were traveling to black enclaves within the city to do so. In an interview, Louis Armstrong discussed the huge crowds that used to gather to hear him play jazz. Armstrong remembered that he often played in a hotel downtown and then hopped on a streetcar to head to the Ol' Kentucky Barbecue, where jam sessions lasted all night long. Armstrong recalls, “In Kansas City when they jammed, they jammed, and everybody for miles around came to hear it. First the barbecue place would fill up, and then the sidewalk outside. Then the crowd would overflow into the street and then right across

¹¹Rose M. Nolen, *Hoecakes, Hambone, and All That Jazz: African American Traditions in Missouri* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 89.

¹²Lee Hill Kavanaugh, “For the Love of Jazz: Clarence Love Never Got His Due Perhaps,” *Kansas City Star*, February 20, 1988, J1.

¹³Lee Hill Kavanaugh, “Jazz Broke the Color Barrier, Musicians Say,” *Kansas City Star*, February 20, 2002, 7.

¹⁴*Ibid.*

the street, and pretty soon the street cars couldn't get by at all.”¹⁵ Interestingly, Louis Armstrong and other musicians referenced barbecue in their songs, with the word serving as a double entendre for sex, or a sexy person.¹⁶ Ultimately, racial differences mattered little when it came to music. Arch Martin, a trombone player, echoes these same conclusions about color barriers in his interview. Martin contends that, “Musicians broke down segregation years before it was hip to do that.”¹⁷

The influence that barbecue held over Kansas City did not diminish at all during the jazz era. By the 1930s, barbecue was already established as a substantial part of the black community, and its significance became further absolute as jazz became a permanent fixture in town. According to author Doug Worgul, Kansas City is the place where barbecue and music come together in perfect harmony.¹⁸ Chuck Haddix also admits that they were both an essential part of black society in Kansas City.¹⁹ Barbecue joints often served as convenient covers for speakeasies and clubs, giving people of all races another reason to partake in the delicious smoked meats. Authors Shifra Stein and Rich Davis declare, “This was a time when blues and jazz were nearly synonymous with the beef and ribs served up in the backrooms of prohibition-created speakeasies.”²⁰

Jazz clubs and barbecue joints were both located within the black enclaves of the city because property was cheaper in these areas. Since they were both located in the

¹⁵Tracy Thomas and Walt Bodine, *Right Here in River City: A Portrait of Kansas City* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976), 94.

¹⁶Doug Worgul, *The Grand Barbecue: A Celebration of the History, Places, Personalities and Technique of Kansas City Barbecue* (Kansas City, MO: Kansas City Star, 2001), 35.

¹⁷Kavanaugh, “Jazz Broke the Color Barrier,” 7.

¹⁸Worgul, *Grand Barbecue*, 35.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Shifra Stein and Rich Davis, *All About Bar-B-Q: Kansas City Style* (Kansas City, MO: Barbacoa, 1985), 8.

same vicinity, music and barbecue fused together effortlessly. People ate barbecue while they listened to jazz music, or gambled away their money. Author Lolis Eric Elie affirms, “Not only were these places dispensing barbecue and illegal liquor, they were also important centers for jazz.”²¹ Barbecue and jazz went hand in hand for blacks and whites.²² They were both viewed as tools for celebration, and people who came to Kansas City were expecting to experience just that.

F. Neal Willis, a professor at the University of Missouri and aficionado of Kansas City barbecue, offers up a different reason as to why Kansas City has become known for its smoked meats. Willis explained, “The musicians had more to do with (the reputation of Kansas City barbecue) than anybody else. They would eat here in Kansas City and then they would go to Chicago or New York and want barbecue and there wasn't any. So, people would eventually open restaurants. In fact, in New York in the 20s there were two establishments calling themselves Kansas City-style barbecue.”²³ For Willis, the musicians in town did much more than develop a new sound. They helped to define Kansas City as a barbecue destination.

There were many barbecue restaurants in Kansas City that doubled as a place of iniquity, such as the Ol' Kentucky Barb-B-Q, which later became Gates Bar-B-Q under George Gates. An advertisement for Ol' Kentucky Bar-B-Q at 19th and Vine read, “We supply you with the best in Whiskies—Gins—Wines—Cold Beer—and Barbecue: Good

²¹Lolis Eric Elie and Frank Stewart, *Smokestack Lightning: Adventures in the Heart of Barbecue Country* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1996), 142.

²²Broomfield, *Kansas City*, 93.

²³Elie and Stewart, *Smokestack*, 142.

Music at all Times—Kansas City's Best Barbecue.”²⁴ Author Andrea Broomfield argues, “Ol' Kentuck epitomized what a blend of machine politics, Mob violence, and a 'wide-open' culture could do to make Kansas City a magnet to out-of-work jazz musicians, bohemians, curious travelers, and crooks.”²⁵ Saxophonist Henry Buster labels it a “pig iron” house, recalling that the restaurant was a place where alcohol was drunk, pork was served, and the bands played all night long.²⁶ Ol' Kentucky Bar-B-Q was a favorite among the poor musicians in Kansas City because the barbecue was amazingly cheap compared to other joints. “Barbecue soup” was high in demand at the restaurant, mostly because it only cost a dime.²⁷ The owner of Ol' Kentucky Bar-B-Q, Johnny Thomas, drew in customers with both the aroma of smoked meats and the sound of jazz. He tried to create a “second home” for the musicians at the restaurant. Broomfield states, “If he could fill them up with barbecue and offer a stage with a piano and drum set, Thomas could count on them to perform and bring in more patrons.”²⁸ Playing music in exchange for barbecue was not uncommon for musicians in Kansas City.

Like barbecue, jazz can also be traced back to the days of slavery. Slaves used to sing spiritual songs while working in the fields, helping to relieve some of the pressures of their oppressive lives. After Emancipation, “gospel, ragtime, jazz, and the blues,” become offshoots of the “Negro spiritual.”²⁹ Therefore, both barbecue and jazz were offspring of the South. Barbecue proprietors perpetuated this link between barbecue and

²⁴Sonny Gibson, *Mecca of the New Negro* (Kansas City, MO: Midwest Afro-American Genealogical Interest Coalition, 1997), 144.

²⁵Broomfield, *Kansas City*, 92.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Ibid., 93.

²⁹Nolen, *Hoecakes*, xi.

jazz. “Numerous club owners kept the music going by tying it directly to food. They put kitties to collect musicians' tips, and they offered them cheap chili, coffee cans brimming with hot and spicy crawdads, and newspapers holding mounds of barbecue.”³⁰

A connection formed between barbecue and music during the days of slavery, and it only continued after the Civil War. During Reconstruction, poor blacks in the South dined on chicken, chitlins, fish, and barbecue, while guitars, saxophones, and banjos played long into the night. Dancing often followed these dinners.³¹ They continued these traditional Saturday night suppers after migrating to Kansas City in the late 1800s. It was not uncommon to see black neighbors hosting dinners, referred to as “rent suppers.” If someone needed money for rent or another expense, they hosted a rent supper. It was a way for the black community to come together and support one another, while also feeding a large group of people. Grace Harris, who served barbecue at the Grand Emporium, remembers that, “neighbors would have a little hole in the ground, put a rod in it and barbecue. They would go from house to house, play the blues and dance until day.”³² Many jazz musicians got their start by playing for free at these rent suppers. The suppers serve as another example of how barbecue and music became intimately linked.³³

Establishments where both whites and blacks listened to music, ate barbecue, and drank alcohol were known as black and tan clubs. Many of them had signs that read “whites only” or “Negroes only,” but these rules were often ignored. Surprisingly, the gangsters who worked for the Pendergast machine helped to bend the racial lines in the

³⁰Broomfield, *Kansas City*, 93.

³¹*Ibid.*, 94.

³²Worgul, *Grand Barbecue*, 47.

³³Broomfield, *Kansas City*, 95.

city.³⁴ In *Kansas City Lightning: The Rise and Times of Charlie Parker*, author Stanley Crouch discusses the racial barriers that were often traversed by the mob. Gangsters of Italian descent “were so powerful that they did whatever they wanted and allowed whatever they felt like allowing,’ and interracial mixing was just one of those things.”³⁵ European immigrants were often discriminated against by upper-class, white Kansas City residents, so these Italian gangsters may have felt somewhat sympathetic toward the black plight.

“As the '30s closed, the collapse of machine rule in Kansas City ended much of the benevolent official attitude toward the gambling, prostitution and liquor violations represented by much of the night-club scene.”³⁶ Once Tom Pendergast was put behind bars in 1939, the machine fell apart, but the city was forever changed. Author Nathan Pearson argues, “Although Pendergast had no personal interest in either music or black Kansas City, the economic vitality that his reign helped to stimulate and the flourishing vice that he permitted are critical elements that led to Kansas City's becoming an extraordinary musical center in the 1930s, instead of just another Depression-ridden Midwestern city.”³⁷

Politicians who came to power after 1939 sought to regulate the town with law and order and wipe out any vestiges of the Pendergast machine. While Kansas City may have been economically stimulated with the policies initiated by the Pendergast machine, it was also a disorderly and unruly place. Once Prohibition was repealed, there was little

³⁴Ibid., 96.

³⁵Ibid., 95.

³⁶Rick Montgomery and Shirl Kasper, *Kansas City: An American Story* (Kansas City, MO: Kansas City Star, 1999), 219.

³⁷Pearson, *Goin' to Kansas City*, 83.

need for bootleggers, smugglers, or organized crime within the city. “Vice was a major part of this system and gave a strong, steady cash flow to the city.”³⁸ Musicians were impacted greatly by the end of the Pendergast era as well, with many moving to other cities to find work. In a letter to *Downbeat* magazine, a member of Musicians Local 627 writes, “Our cleanly operated city is now a cemetery for musicians...Law and order is a fine thing—guess we ought to have it—but it has laid our Local 627 mighty low.”³⁹

The jazz scene in Kansas City dissipated when Pendergast was put in jail, with many of the jazz clubs shutting down business. The jazz era represented so much more than debauchery and vice. Author Andrea Broomfield acknowledges, “Where jazz, food, and alcohol went together, the race lines could sometimes be crossed. The Pendergast era offered brief windows of opportunity for people inclined to mingle without having to judge fellow human beings exclusively through a color lens.”⁴⁰

When the 1950s rolled around, blues became another outlet in which people enjoyed good music and good barbecue. Author Doug Worgul says, “Barbecue is the food of celebration, and the blues are the soundtrack of celebration.”⁴¹ Blues and barbecue became just as inextricably tied together as jazz and barbecue. They were both used as tools for celebration. “The spirit of barbecue is to make do with what you've got and celebrate that you've got it. The spirit of the blues is that, no matter what life throws your way, you survive and you sing about it,” claims Worgul.⁴²

Author Doug Worgul insists, “Barbecue and music belong together because they

³⁸Ibid., xvii.

³⁹Montgomery and Kasper, *Kansas City*, 231.

⁴⁰Broomfield, *Kansas City*, 95.

⁴¹Worgul, *Grand Barbecue*, 35.

⁴²Ibid., 53.

both bring people together.”⁴³ They are both inherently communal. In his book, Worgul provides a list of over twenty blues songs that were written about barbecue, showcasing the influence that smoked meats had upon musicians and their music. Benny Goodman had a song called the “Smoke House,” Louis Armstrong sang “Struttin' With Some Bar-B-Q,” and Big Twist and the Mellow Fellows wrote, “Who Stole the Hot Sauce,” just to name a few.⁴⁴

Music and barbecue brought whites and blacks together in a unique environment, where most people were more concerned about having a good time and indulging in iniquity than preserving the discriminatory measures and racial lines that had manifested in Kansas City. “The Orchid Room at 1519 East [12th] Street billed itself as 'the place where friends meet,' and when white teenage boys craved its music, the kindly doorman at this club would put them up near stage and look the other way when the waiter served them beer. Ears—and eyes—were on the musicians.”⁴⁵ Sure, there were many clubs that were strictly for whites only. There were still many instances where blacks were discriminated against for the smallest infractions, but mostly, the jazz era in Kansas City was about having a good time. It was about letting loose and indulging in music, vice, or even barbecue.

The connection that whites and blacks shared over barbecue became absolute during this era. On the visitor website for Kansas City, it reads, “If jazz is the music of the soul, then barbecue is its sustenance.”⁴⁶ Both races participated in indecent behavior,

⁴³Ibid., 35.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Broomfield, *Kansas City*, 96.

listened to music, and ate barbecue at jazz clubs and juke joints in Kansas City. The political environment during the jazz era provided a realm in which it became somewhat socially acceptable for whites to travel to black enclaves within the city and indulge in the favorite foodstuff of black Americans. Barbecue's role during the jazz era may seem small, but it helped to solidify the attachment that blacks and whites shared for smoked meats. The lines of race became blurred during this period, allowing for blacks and whites to cross racial boundaries, with barbecue often serving as the impetus for such boldness.

⁴⁶"African-American Community in Kansas City," Visit KC, June 07, 2016, <https://www.visitkc.com/visitors/discover/diversity/african-american-community-kansas-city#sm.000lv2zzf144vczvy7g1p30jdyf7t>.

Conclusion

The Impact of Barbecue

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed discrimination based on race, sex, or religion, ultimately altering the relationship between blacks and whites. Integration after 1964 changed the social, political, and economic landscape of the city, but the legacy of barbecue continued and became further rooted in Kansas City culture. After 1964, other elements came together seamlessly to strengthen Kansas City's reputation for barbecue.

Rich Davis developed the recipe for KC Masterpiece in the late 1970s.¹ Davis sold his sauce to the Kingsford Division of the Clorox Company in the 1980s. Today, it is the top-selling barbecue sauce in the store.² Author Doug Worgul argues, "The association of barbecue with Kansas City was further solidified."³ Kansas City's reputation for barbecue can also be attributed to the building of Arrowhead Stadium in the 1970s. The people of Kansas City quickly developed a tradition of tailgating before all the games. "Not surprisingly, barbecue—honest-to-goodness barbecue, smokers and all—has become as much a part of Kansas City-style tailgating as hamburgers and hot dogs are elsewhere."⁴ The founding of the Kansas City Barbeque Society in the 1980's also paid homage to Kansas City's reputation for barbecue. They promoted the American Royal Barbecue and the Great Lenexa Barbeque Battle, which are some of the top

¹Doug Worgul, *The Grand Barbecue: A Celebration of the History, Places, Personalities and Technique of Kansas City Barbecue* (Kansas City, MO: Kansas City Star, 2001), 15.

²Robert F. Moss, *Barbecue: The History of an American Institution* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2010), 235.

³Worgul, *Grand Barbecue*, 15.

⁴*Ibid.*

barbecue contests in the country.⁵ Hundreds of teams participate in the competitions every year, helping to boost the region's tourism rate.

Of course, Calvin Trillin's article praising Arthur Bryant's as the best restaurant in the world also helped to usher Kansas City into the spotlight as a barbecue haven in the 1970s. Author Andrea Broomfield makes a striking remark in her book, *Kansas City: A Food Biography*. She says, "Some Kansas Citians at the time of Trillin's pronouncement were already looking for new inspiration and direction and were acting on their own impulses, irrespective of national culinary trends. Deeply troubled by the city's racist past and the challenges that desegregation brought with it, they remembered that the Pendergast era had resulted not only in corruption and criminal activity, but also in moments of racial cooperation, inevitably when music and food were involved. Black-and-tan supper clubs, barbecue establishments like Ol'Kentuck, and people congregating around a John Agnos lunch wagon all suggested that if good cooking and music could bring the races together at that point, was it not possible that it could bring them together in the here and now?"⁶ Broomfield suggests in her comments that Kansas City residents looked to the past, to music and food, to figure out how to negotiate the social realities of integration after 1964.

The barbecue culture in Kansas City today can be attributed to the various factors discussed throughout this paper. If it was not for the Exodusters arriving from the South in 1879, white residents of Kansas City might not have experienced this part of black culture for quite some time. The barbecue knowledge these former slaves had forcibly

⁵Ibid.

⁶Andrea Broomfield, *Kansas City: A Food Biography* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016), 102.

attained during slavery led to the creation of barbecue havens around the nation. They spread their wisdom, barbecue techniques, recipes, and practices across the country, establishing themselves as the ultimate authority on all things related to barbecue. Kansas City provided ample opportunity for black men to grow as barbecue entrepreneurs and professionals, complete with a bountiful meat source and plenty of hardwood.⁷ With an abundance of resources, black men developed a barbecue empire in the heart of Kansas City. The barbecue empire was prompted by the acumen and ingenuity of Henry Perry, the father of Kansas City barbecue. He passed down his barbecue knowledge to the next generation through informal apprenticeships. Due to Perry's mentorship, multiple black men, such as Charlie and Arthur Bryant, learned the barbecue trade and established barbecue restaurants of their own.

Perry and his followers created a unique style of barbecue, differentiating it from the rest of the country. The most important lesson that Perry passed down, though, was the serving of patrons from all social classes and races. Perry had a loyal base of white customers, who frequented his stands and restaurants on multiple occasions. Perry's followers also catered to a mixed clientele. Of course, black business owners had little choice but to serve white customers. But when reading newspaper articles and interviews featuring Henry Perry, Charlie Bryant, Arthur Bryant, and George Gates, it seems that they were pleased to serve their barbecue to a mixed clientele. They were much more concerned about having the best barbecue in the city.

By 1913, more than forty thousand businesses in the United States were owned by

⁷Timothy J. Fox, "The Secrets in the Sauce: Kansas City's Barbecue Tradition," *Gateway Heritage* (Fall 2002): 27.

African Americans.⁸ There were hundreds of barbecue joints in Kansas City alone that contributed to this number. Many black men survived financially serving smoked meats to the public. “Until the 1930s, here and elsewhere, almost all barbecue joints were owned and operated by blacks.”⁹ These barbecue stands and restaurants allowed black men the ability to gain a degree of autonomy and economic independence that they might not have experienced otherwise. Even though blacks were barred from eating at certain establishments, whites often traveled to black enclaves within the city to partake in barbecue being prepared by black men. “The clientele at these restaurants, however, was frequently both black and white, even if not exactly integrated,” concedes Doug Worgul.¹⁰ Many black entrepreneurs developed loyal customers, both black and white, and established full-fledged restaurants. “Barbecue thus evolved into a method of meat preparation that crossed racial boundaries, especially as it made its way into commercial restaurants.”¹¹

Barbecue restaurant owners, such as Henry Perry, and Charlie and Arthur Bryant, were passionate about the quality and taste of their barbecue, regardless of who was eating it. The kind of environment these men created within their restaurants allowed for blacks and whites to come together in rare displays of tolerance and passivity. “Barbecue restaurants were some of the first black-owned enterprises to establish significant white customer bases, and today it is common to see both white and black patrons eating side

⁸Charles E. Coulter, *“Take Up the Black Man's Burden”*: Kansas City's African American Communities, 1865-1939 (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006), 117.

⁹Worgul, *Grand Barbecue*, 61.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Fox, “The Secrets,” 26.

by side at the tables of barbecue joints across the country,” claims author Robert Moss.¹²

This paper is not denying the existence of discrimination in Kansas City during this time. “In fact, understanding barbecue's life in Kansas City requires some knowledge of the city's troubled racial history.”¹³ Middle and upper-class, whites were not pleased when the city experienced a population surge consisting of southern blacks and white, European immigrants. White residents quickly set limitations on where blacks lived, excluding them from white neighborhoods. Black communities developed next to the stockyards and meatpacking facilities due to these discriminatory measures, but it was in these black communities that barbecue flourished and expanded. Using the techniques and practices they had learned during slavery, black men developed barbecue businesses that not only appealed to blacks, but to prejudicial whites as well.

Barbecue has often been used as a tool for unity. Barbecue became synonymous with celebration, as it was used to feed large crowds during holidays and community gatherings, where both races were usually in attendance. Barbecue was also used at political rallies. Politicians employed barbecue as a means of attaining votes, specifically from black voters. Conveying the idea of being a “common man,” politicians utilized barbecue to appeal to the masses. Blacks and white, European immigrants also came together in the enjoyment of barbecue. They shared the same burdens at work and in their communities, but they also shared in the barbecue being prepared down the street. Conveniently located barbecue stands provided lunch and dinner for those who worked in the stockyards and meatpacking facilities.

¹²Moss, *Barbecue*, 216.

¹³Fox, “The Secrets,” 26.

The rise of the Pendergast machine solidified the importance of barbecue and its ability to bridge racial divisions. The policies of Tom Pendergast incited the idea of Kansas City being a “wide-open” town. Those interested in gambling, prostitution, drugs, and alcohol came to Kansas City. Jazz clubs sprang up around the city, accommodating those who were intent on participating in vice and debauchery. Many of these clubs were partly or fully racially-mixed. The clubs provided more than just a way to indulge in criminal and immoral behavior. Jazz music and barbecue formed the backdrop for these clubs, becoming inextricably linked in the process. Customers often listened to jazz musicians play while they ate barbecue and played cards. Musicians even played for clubs in return for a barbecue sandwich. Music and barbecue were used as devices for celebration, which appealed to both races. “Barbecue, like jazz, is a uniquely American cultural expression that was first primarily perpetuated and perfected by black Americans. And like jazz, barbecue has been largely absorbed and assimilated by white Americans.”¹⁴

The barbecue culture in Kansas City has only grown since 1964, sealing its status as the barbecue capital of the world. Any trace of racial discrimination is obscured, with residents merely arguing over which restaurant serves the best barbecue. “Even as the original restaurants of Arthur Bryant and Ollie Gates on the black East Side attract pilgrims from across the metropolitan area and far beyond, Wyandotte County people are equally passionate about their Rosedale Barbecue on Southwest Boulevard and Oklahoma Joe’s on [47th] Avenue. Northlanders head to Smokehouses at Zona Rosa and on North Oak Trafficway, and Johnson County people praise KC Masterpiece and

¹⁴Worgul, *Grand Barbecue*, 61.

Fiorella's Jack Stack."¹⁵

This paper has attempted to show how barbecue evolved and developed through the years, deepening and extending a bond that both races seemed to share in regards to this unique foodstuff. Ardie Davis, who created the American Royal International Barbecue Sauce, Rub, and Baste Contest, had interesting insight about the racial aspects of barbecue. Davis states, "I love it because it appeals to the things that matter most to me. Barbecue is a 'bridge food' spanning the gap between different races and classes. If you can enjoy food together, barriers drop. Barbecue helps me relate to my working-class roots. It hits you in primal places."¹⁶

Segregation and discrimination were clearly a part of the social, political, and economic arenas in Kansas City from 1879 to 1964. Blacks were consistently degraded, disgraced, and humiliated by white people in Kansas City, and across America. They were prevented from attaining equal status with whites, in all respects. Their neighborhoods, schools, housing, and jobs were inferior in just about every way. Blacks suffered under these conditions, but I think it would be naïve to think that blacks and whites never communicated or interacted with each other in a cordial and affable capacity before integration was won in the courts. Barbecue presented a somewhat socially acceptable avenue for physical association between the races. By visiting black barbecue establishments, whites were not only bringing money into the black communities of Kansas City, but they were also unknowingly spreading an important feature of black culture.

¹⁵James R. Shortridge, *Kansas City and How It Grew, 1822-2011* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2012), 204.

¹⁶Worgul, *Grand Barbecue*, 64.

Integration had a tremendous impact upon the city, changing the social relationships that existed between blacks and whites. Before 1964, barbecue made a difference in small, but important, ways. It may seem daft to give credit to barbecue for bridging racial divisions in Kansas City, but I believe that blacks and whites experienced brief periods of inter-racial harmony at lunch counters, barbecue stands, celebrations, political rallies, and even jazz clubs during this time. Of course, tensions might have run high, and blacks had little choice as to who ate their food, but I think barbecue brought satisfaction and pleasure to anyone who was partaking in it. Joy can be found in good food, especially if its barbecue.

Barbecue provided an outlet in which racial tolerance was achieved in limited moments of bliss. This paper has attempted to look at racial interactions through the lens of barbecue, discovering another facet in which food consumption can alter the social relationships of man. By examining the role of barbecue, this paper has tried to reveal the racial intricacies and complex relationships that existed in Kansas City from 1879 to 1964. It has also tried to showcase how racial lines were often blurred or ignored for the sake of eating barbecue. Author Sarah Digregorio says it best when she declares, “Barbecued meat—it's the great equalizer.”¹⁷

¹⁷Sarah Digregorio, "Our Daily Brisket: Arthur Bryant's Keeps on Keeping On," *Chile Pepper* (June 2007): 43.

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