

tar heel people

# Recipe for Change

*During the tumultuous 1960s, an unassuming restaurateur served civil rights in Durham.*

BY MELISSA SLAVEN WARREN

Carried by a fresh breeze, the hearty aroma of a Southern staple wafts through a Sunset Beach neighborhood. A makeshift kitchen enclosed in a screened patio has been arranged for the ritual of preparing a favorite local dish: Brunswick stew. Attending to a worn single-burner propane cooker, 83-year-old Jim Warren stirs the stew with a dogwood stick. Warren's thin, creased hands hold firmly to the stick as he checks the stew for the proper consistency.

The soft-spoken gentleman claims no particular successes or fortune in his life, but in 1963 he was the first restaurant owner in Durham to ingrate, helping to soothe the sting of civil unrest in that city. For 30 years, his barbecue restaurant served the diverse citizens of Durham. Now retired, Warren lives in Brunswick County where he still prepares his traditional stew recipe for friends and family.

Warren is a small-framed man with a boyish grin and a ruddy complexion. His aged eyes are heavy but focused, magnified by the large reading glasses slipping down his nose. His fragile hands give shelter to tiny lines and folds, noticeable now as he shreds a boiled hen, piece by piece, for his stew.

"This is the hardest part," says Warren. "You want to make sure all the fat and any pieces of bone are pulled out."



Warren honors every aspect of his aunt's Brunswick stew recipe — right down to the dogwood stick.

## Stewardship

After the devastating divorce of his parents when he was just 10 years old, Warren went to live with his aunt, Jenny Redmond, in Durham until he graduated from high school. Mrs. Redmond, as Warren refers to her, had no children of her own, so she treated Warren as a son. Although he missed his own mother, he found his aunt to be a committed guardian. "She provided me with a lot," Warren says. "She was so good to me."

It was Redmond who taught Warren how to make Brunswick stew. He still follows her recipe exactly, even down to the soft, weatheread dogwood stick. "I don't recall why she used a dogwood stick to air the stew," Warren says. "Maybe she thought it gave it flavor. But that's all she ever stirred it with, and that's all I ever use."

Mrs. Redmond's recipe for Brunswick stew calls for lean pork and chicken. The stew consists of a tomato-based broth loaded with meat and





PHOTOS COURTESY OF MELISSA WARREN

Left to right: Three generations of the Bagley family staffed Turnage's; Warren played an active role in his business, even running the cash register; Warren and Pete Bagley tended to Turnage's renowned barbecue.

vegetables, including onions, lima beans, and corn. Crushed red pepper and Worcestershire sauce are key seasonings. Potatoes, boiled in their skins and strained through a ricer, serve as a thickening agent. As an adult, Warren brought the tradition of Mrs. Redmond's stew to Turnage's Barbeque Place, a restaurant he worked in and later owned.

### Times of trouble

Josh Turnage, the original proprietor of the barbecue restaurant, was a friend and business associate of Warren's father. "[Turnage] was such a nice man," says Warren. "He meant the world to me."

When Warren's father withdrew from his son's life, Turnage filled that void. He gave the young Warren a job waiting tables at the restaurant and even paid Warren's tuition to the Fishburne Military School in Waynesboro, Virginia. Warren worked in the restaurant for years, both before and after his schooling, and eventually became the manager.

In 1941, Warren went off to fight in World War II with dreams of becoming a pilot. Unfortunately, he suffered from severe airsickness. His dreams dashed, he settled on communications and went to work in a radio control tower. In 1945, Warren returned to Durham and, with the blessing of Turnage, bought the

restaurant where he'd worked as a young man.

For nearly 20 years, Warren labored as the sole proprietor of Turnage's. It is impossible to know how many customers he served over the years — and even more impossible to know how many didn't get served because of Durham's segregation laws. But Warren, using his influence as a white business owner, joined the fight to change those rules.

In the spring of 1963, racial tensions peaked in Durham, as they did in towns across the United States. Sit-ins, riots, and violent protests took place on the city's streets and in businesses. Following the lead of student demonstrations at a Woolworth's in Greensboro, black students in Durham protested against "standing service only" policies at lunch counters. Warren recalls the hostile response: a nightly barrage of Molotov cocktails thrown at houses and cars and schools and people.

"The police would hose the demonstrators on the streets," he says. "They would huddle together in a group and hold on to each other."

In an attempt to halt the unrest, Warren volunteered to make Turnage's the first restaurant in Durham to integrate. As much as he wanted to help his city, he also had personal reasons for volunteering to integrate: Among Warren's trusted staff were

three generations of the Bagley family, loyal black employees who had worked in his restaurant for years.

"How could I not integrate?" Warren says.

### Making a difference

Warren wrote out a list of all the restaurant managers in Durham at the time and called each one of them personally, hoping to get commitments from each of them.

"I said, 'Look, I'm going to integrate. I'll open my doors, and I want to know if you'll stand behind me and do the same,'" Warren remembers. "Integrating wasn't an easy thing to do. There was so much resistance. I didn't get much cooperation."

What he did get, though, were two other restaurants that also volunteered to open their doors to the black community. In May 1963, Turnage's Barbeque Place, The Blue Light, and the Rebel Drive Inn broke those barriers, and for the first time in Durham, black people took seats in public restaurants. Months later, Warren became an active member of the Durham Committee on Community Relations, which eventually integrated public schools and the YMCA of Durham.

As progressive and innovative as Warren wanted to believe his city now was, he faced personal repercussions for his involvement. He received threatening phone calls and letters, the most troubling of which was a threat on his children. Warren says he can still hear the nightmarish voice on the other end of that phone: "Jimmy



Warren, we know where your children go to school. Don't be surprised if they come home in a pine box."

Fortunately, not all the responses were negative. Warren received support and loyalty from friends, family, and diners. In a letter dated May 25, 1963, a customer wrote:

*As customers who deeply love your barbeque, we're writing to express our further appreciation and whole-hearted support for your decision this week to integrate your business.*

We realize your *stand* wasn't the easiest one, but it *was* unquestionably a fine one ... *Turnage's* comes close to being the best we've ever found, and we think it *would be* a shame to deny anyone, for any reason, the opportunity to sit down *in* this wonderful atmosphere and experience *that incomparable* joy of eating genuine pit-cooked barbeque, *hot-buttered*

*hushpuppies, and Brunswick stew!*

### Personal success

In 1970, Warren sold Turnage's Barbeque Place, and he and his wife pursued full-time real estate careers until they retired to Sunset Beach in 1993. Although he hasn't cooked barbecue since selling the restaurant, he still makes his famed Brunswick stew for family and friends.

When he does, the screened patio bustles with folks drawn by the stew's mouth-watering aroma.

The gentle bubbling of the broth fills the cooker as the propane hisses, and the improvised outdoor kitchen cradles the familiar smell of stew.


From a recent stack of mail, Warren lifts an alumni reunion announcement from Fishburne Military School, where he attended classes as a boy.

"I had a fantastic time there, even if it was short," he recalls. Warren decides he *won't* attend the reunion, however; "I wouldn't remember

anybody now," he says. "Everybody but me was successful. I might feel a little intimidated."

Dropping the newsletter on his patio table, Warren picks up the dogwood stick to give the stew another stir. He pulls the stick from the pot and examines the thick liquid dripping off the end.

"Well, I'm gonna call it done," he says, then lowers the stick back into the stew. "In a minute or two."

He has perfected the recipe over the last 50 years. Nine hours after he first boiled the hens, Warren turns the propane off and covers the pot, placing the dogwood stick on top of the lid. The warmth clinging to the stick mixes with the chill of the afternoon breeze, and steam rises. This batch of Brunswick stew, like all the rest before, is a success. 

*Melissa Slaven Warren lives in Wilmington; Jim Warren is her father-in-law.*