

The Welcome Table

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For Southerners born of my generation and later, the defining moment in our region's history was not the Civil War, but the Civil Rights Movement. When I seek good guys to emulate and bad guys to vilify, I look not to Robert E. Lee and Ulysses S. Grant but to Myrlie Evers Williams and Byron de la Beckwith, Rosa Parks and Bull Connor, Will Campbell and Ross Barnett. They are my pantheon, my pariahs.

Unlike those soldiers of old, many of my heroes and villains are still very much with us. And nowhere else in the South have I felt their presence more than in Montgomery, Alabama. Here, you're likely to take a seat in a café beneath a portrait of Rosa Parks only to spot her crusading attorney, Fred Gray, two tables over, sopping up potlikker with a wedge of cornbread. Here, honorable people who still hold hope for the Beloved Community gather for breakfast meetings to talk about race and bigotry over biscuits and bacon, grits and eggs.

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As would befit a state capitol, Montgomery is rife with historical markers, dull, bronze placards pointing the way to the childhood home of this distinguished lawmaker or that noted orator, and, of course, to the state capitol high atop Goat Hill, a monolith of whitewashed masonry, as commanding a sight today as it must have been back in February of 1861 when Jefferson Davis mounted the steps of the front portico to take the oath of office as President of the Confederate States of America.

On a recent weeklong ramble about Montgomery, I came upon an historical marker like none other I had seen before. Located just south of the capitol on Dericot Street, in a working class neighborhood of tidy brick and frame bungalows, it stands in honor of one of the unsung heroines of the Civil Rights Movement, one of those people Martin Luther King Jr. called a "member of the ground crew." It reads:

Georgia Gilmore

February 5, 1920 – March 3, 1990

Georgia Gilmore, cited as a "solid, energetic boycott participant and supporter," lived in this house during the days of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Once arrested on a bus, Gilmore was ardent in her efforts to raise funds for the Movement and organized the "Club From Nowhere" whose members baked pies and cakes for sale to both black and white customers. Opening her home to all, she tirelessly cooked meals for participants including such leaders as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Dr Ralph David Abernathy. Her culinary skills contributed to the cause of justice as she actively worked to encourage civil rights for the remainder of her life.

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As I would discover during conversations with [Georgia Gilmore's] family, friends and colleagues, though the erection of the marker was an admirable gesture, it is a meager assessment of her life's work.

Georgia Gilmore was more than just a "solid, energetic boycott participant and supporter." As remembered by almost everyone, she was a mountain of a woman, nearly 250 pounds of girth, grit, and sass. "She was a lady of great physical stature," recalls Reverend Thomas E Jordan, pastor of Lilly Baptist Church. "She didn't take any junk from anybody. It didn't matter who you were. Even the white police officers let her be. She wasn't a mean person, but like it was with many black people, there was this perception that she might be dangerous. The word was, 'Don't mess with Georgia Gilmore, she might cut you.' But Lord that woman could cook. I loved to sit down at her table for some good greasing."

Revered Al Dixon, a longtime customer of what would become her home-based catering service, told me that when he came walking in the front door, she would call from the kitchen, “Come here you little whore and get your food! I don’t want to hear any of your mess. I got a big ole bowl of buttermilk and some cornbread for you to crumble into it, just like you want. Now sit down and eat, you old heifer!”

Martin Luther King Jr. got much the same treatment when he came calling, said Gilmore’s son, Mark, now a Montgomery City Councilman: “She was an equal opportunity name caller. Everybody was heifer or whore to her; she loved to pick on folks. And Martin – he called her Tiny – he just loved my mama’s cooking. You know it got to the point where he couldn’t eat out in public, but at her table he felt safe. He loved her stuffed pork chops and stuffed bell peppers, her roni and rice. When she fixed rice, every grain would stand off to itself. He couldn’t get enough of her potato salad. She was a stone cook; anything she made was a blessing.”

Trained as a nurse midwife, Georgia Gilmore raised six children during the bleak years before the Brown decision and the Montgomery Bus Boycott instilled black citizens of Montgomery with hope for an integrated future. By the early 1950s, she was working at the National Lunch Company, a lunch counter on Court Street in downtown Montgomery. She served ably as a cook, winning a citywide reputation for her creamy sweet potato pies and crusty fried chicken. Though a local ordinance required the restaurant to erect a partition at least seven feet tall between the races, there was no segregation of the foods served at National Lunch. Black laborers and white bureaucrats alike sat down to a noonday feast of dusky collard greens doused with pepper vinegar, gooey sweet potatoes napped with orange juice and brown sugar, hefty slabs of meatloaf swaddled in a sauce of stewed tomatoes. And though white women worked the counter, there was always a black hand – Georgia Gilmore’s hand -- on the stewpot or skillet.

When the bus boycott began in December of 1955, Gilmore threw herself headlong into the effort. Long a supporter of the NAACP, she became a strong force in the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), the boycott’s organizing body, for which a young Martin Luther King Jr. served as president. It was at one of the early mass meetings that she met King. “I never cared too much for preachers, but I listened to him preach that night,” she told an *Alabama Journal* reporter back in 1978. “And the things he said were things I believed in. He told all about the good things you should do for one another and how with a better education you could be a better person.”

Early in the struggle, she began bringing food to the mass meetings held at Holt Street Baptist Church. “At first she would pack up one of those big metal picnic basket looking things full of chicken sandwiches and pies in little tins and sell them to people at the meetings,” recalled her sister, Betty Gilmore. “Then, along with her friends, she organized a group to start selling cakes and pies all over town, to beauty parlors and laundries and cab stands and doctor’s offices. She called it the Club from Nowhere, so those people who were afraid of losing their job could still work for the movement. It was like, ‘Where did this money come from?’ ‘It came from nowhere.’”

Johnnie Carr, a charter member of the MIA, told me that, “Georgia would stand up at the mass meetings and announce how much money she had raised that week selling her food and she’d just bring the house down. Another group started doing the same thing – selling cakes and pies -- and before long they had a friendly rivalry going between the two. When the time came for the offering, the club president would stand up and say something like, ‘I represent the Club from Nowhere and we raised this much money.’ The whole place would go wild, everybody cheering and shouting. They were doing an important thing; it took a lot of money to run the boycott.”

But Gilmore’s involvement went far beyond mere fundraising. When the city of Montgomery brought suit against the King and 90 other members of the MIA in March of 1956, claiming the boycott to be an unlawful conspiracy, Georgia Gilmore, dressed in a somber black suit, her eyes fixed with a look that bordered upon contempt, testified as a defense witness on the second day of the trial, telling of her October 1955 encounter with a city bus driver:

“That redhead freckled faced bus driver on the South Jackson line is a very nasty bus driver, the nastiest I’ve ever seen,” she told the packed courtroom. “I tried to enter the front door and the driver said, ‘Nigger, give me that money.’ He then told me to get off and enter through the back door. While I walked to the back door, he drove off and left me. I decided then and there not to ever ride a bus again.” Later, King would write of her courtroom appearance: “I will always remember my delight when Mrs. Georgia Gilmore, an unlettered woman of unusual intelligence, . . . turned to Judge Carter and said, ‘When they count the money, they do not know white money from Negro money.’”

The next day, newspapers around the country reported of Gilmore’s appearance on the witness stand. Her picture graced the front page of the *Chicago Defender*, the most widely read black newspaper of the time. The *Montgomery Advertiser* dutifully reported her testimony. *Life* magazine quoted her in detail. Payback was swift; within days, the National Lunch Company dismissed her.

Rather than seek out yet another job where she would work for meager wages and a share of the leftovers from the pots she stirred, Gilmore went into business for herself. “Dr. King helped set her up,” recalled her sister Betty. “He gave her money to buy big industrial pots and pans and such. He told her, ‘All these years you’ve worked for somebody else, now it’s time you worked for yourself.’”

Soon she was running a virtual restaurant out of her modest home. “Everybody came to our house back then,” her son Mark told me. “White or black it didn’t matter. When people in the Movement visited Montgomery, their first stop was my mama’s kitchen. It wasn’t a real restaurant – she didn’t call it one – everybody just said they were going down by Georgia’s to eat. We – my brothers and sisters – delivered food all over town, to the warehouses and doctor’s offices, and laundries and everywhere else. It got to where she had a regular clientele. She would call and tell them what she was fixing that day and then we would make the deliveries.”

Rachel Clark, a Civil Rights Movement veteran herself, remembers a meal at Georgia Gilmore’s table as being “more like a sacrament. To say that it was about hospitality, well, that’s inadequate. It felt like a camp meeting at her house every day with people sharing food and fellowship. They’d walk around from room to room with a plateful of food in their hands. It had nothing to do with being black or white and everything to do with loving one another. She was an asset to the Movement; she set a real example.”

When the boycott came to a close in November of 1956, fifty-thousand black citizens of Montgomery returned to riding city busses. Only now they needed not ride in the back, or give up their seat at the whim of a white passenger, or suffer abuse at the hands of a white driver. Georgia Gilmore was in attendance at the final, celebratory mass meeting. “We sang ‘Swing Low Sweet Chariot’ and ‘This Little Light of Mine, I’m Gonna Let It Shine,’ and a whole lot of others,” she later recalled. “Weary feet and weary souls were lightened. It was such a night. We didn’t have to walk no more. Even before Martin Luther King Jr. got up and told us it was over, we knew it was over and we knew we had won.”

As the struggle for black voting rights and economic parity took fire across the South, Georgia Gilmore’s home became a kind of unofficial executive dining room for the Civil Rights Movement. At her ten-seat oak trestle table, Martin Luther King Jr. and Lyndon B. Johnson broke bread in 1964. Aboard Air Force One, John F. Kennedy ate take out chittlins and sweet potato pie ferried to the plane straight from her kitchen. Robert Kennedy joined King at her house for strategy sessions fueled by platefuls of collard greens and pork chops, cornbread and potato salad.

Later, she would recall that King and Kennedy came calling because “they wanted to have a meeting and didn’t want anybody to know they were meeting.” Throughout the Movement, her house remained a safe haven, the appeal as much the promise of solace as soulful cooking. She liked to tell people, “I just served ‘em and let ‘em talk,” but the collective memory of those who were lucky enough to sup at her table belies her modesty.

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On my last day in Montgomery, I stopped off to visit with Georgia Gilmore's younger sister, Betty, a world-weary woman with wavy black hair and doleful brown eyes. Though we had talked on the phone, this was our first face to face meeting. She greeted me at the door and escorted me into the living room of the brick ranch-style house once owned by her sister and now maintained by the family as a sort of shrine.

Over the course of an hour-long visit, we talked of her sister's cooking and her talent for mischief making. Standing in the dining room, staring at the scarred oak tabletop, we shared a laugh when Betty told me that people like to call Georgia "the grub lady because she fixed the best grub in Alabama." But when we moved to the narrow galley kitchen where Georgia Gilmore had manned the stove through the years, Betty's face seemed to darken, and no matter what question I asked she somehow wanted to talk of Georgia's last hours, before peritonitis claimed her life at age 70.

"She had been having epileptic seizures for a time and the doctor had made her stop cooking," Betty told me. "He was scared she might have a seizure and burn her self bad before she realized it. It was on a Wednesday that she got real bad. When the paramedics came to get her she had been working in the kitchen, fixing food for the 25th anniversary of the Selma to Montgomery march. I remember talking to her about the potato salad she was making and next thing I knew she was in the hospital."

As Betty's bottom lip quivered ever so slightly, she said to me, "Georgia died on a Friday, on the anniversary of the march. At the visitation after her funeral, we served the fried chicken and potato salad she had already fixed for the marchers. Lots of people brought food to the house, too, but everybody ate Georgia's chicken and potato salad first. Nobody could fix it better."

Sidebar:

Friendly Supper Club

What's So Funny About Grits, Greens and Understanding?

After spending a week wandering the city of Montgomery, Alabama in search of the ghost of Georgia Gilmore, I couldn't help but come to the conclusion that food – good ole grits and greens, fried chicken and fruitcake – has played a transformational role in this city, the so-called cradle of the Confederacy.

On my first day in town, I met with Morris Dees, director of the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC). After clearing a series of guarded checkpoints worthy of a Cold War missile silo, I sat down with Dees, the force behind the 1984 "bankrupting" of the Klan, and perennial target of hate groups like the Aryan Nation. Turns out that, before he became a crusading lawyer, Dees – along with partner Millard Fuller, who would go on to found the Christian service organization, Habitat for Humanity -- amassed a mail-order fortune, first selling layer cakes to fellow University of Alabama students. He called his company the Bama Birthday Cake Service, and profits from that effort, combined with a later enterprise, the Cookbook Collectors Library, would provide seed money for the SPLC. Dees was dismissive, however, of my "food as facilitator of racial healing" angle. "That's a stretch, a big stretch," he said.

Dinner that night was at the Piccadilly Cafeteria out on the Bypass. I was there as the guest of Johnnie Carr, childhood friend of Rosa Parks, longtime president of the Montgomery Improvement Association, and a founding member of the Friendly Supper Club, a loose-knit biracial band who gather once a month to share nothing more than food and fellowship.

Organized in the wake of a violent March 1983 confrontation between a family of black mourners and a pair of what has been described as "overzealous white police officers who mistook their post funeral visitation as a gathering of drug dealers," the first monthly gathering was called in April 1983 by a man identified only as Jack Smith. 35 people came to the first meeting, 75 or so to the second, nearly 150 to the third, where despite a bomb threat, black and white Montgomerians supped on corn sticks and collard greens, macaroni and cheese and meatloaf. "Think of it as a pyramid scheme for brotherhood," advised Smith in an open letter to members.

On the night I visited, there were but twelve club members in attendance. I was the only one talking about racial issues. The rest of the diners – black and white, young and old – mused about the upcoming Alabama lottery referendum and the startling sweetness of Piccadilly’s carrot soufflé. So what’s the big deal? Club member Randall Williams let me in on a little secret: “My oldest son, Horace, came with me to the first Friendly Supper Club at a week and a half old. And the network news was there to film him being passed around like a loaf of bread from person to person. Years later they came back to film us again. Of course they played up the idea that blacks and whites were sitting down at the same table but by then, for Horace, that was all he knew. So when they asked to interview him about it, he got all put out with me. He kept asking me, ‘Why didn’t you tell me that’s why it was organized. Why didn’t you tell me?’”

With all due respect, Mr. Dees, I think I’m on to something here.

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