

Pass It On®...

The Secret Ingredient to a Good Meal: Family and Friends.

Bernetta McKindra pays tribute to her grandfather, the Barbecue King of Kansas City. A [StoryCorps](#) story.

The early 1900s in America were rough years for much of the population. The economy was strained, the great flu pandemic shortened lifespans, World War I took its toll, and many common diseases were not yet treatable the way they are today. But the working class found ways to thrive. They were resourceful, lived in close-knit communities and looked out for each other.

We often look for ways to be happy in our day. Looking back at how our great-grandparents lived gives us a new perspective. Their values, hard work and optimism for the future cleared the path for each of us. When Bernetta McKindra started looking into her family tree, she found her grandfather, Henry Perry, the Barbecue King of Kansas City.

“He came to Kansas City when he was 15, by steamship. He came alone, and he brought with him this method; you could take these cheaper cuts of meat that was thrown out from the packing plants and make it be tender, make it be delicious, make it be where people stand in line and wait for it [with] that beautiful art of smoking that he perfected,” Bernetta says.

Henry Perry honed his skills in restaurants and on steamships. He perfected the art of slow cooking over coals, a process that encouraged people to take their time eating. And eat they did. When he opened his restaurant, word quickly spread. People traveled from great distances just to eat his food.

But with all the time spent preparing meals and running a restaurant, Henry had little time to write his life down. Bernetta only learned of her famous grandfather when she overheard a conversation. And that set her looking into the smoky, savory past. “It was a glorious time. It was a time of reckoning that not only was this man being recognized, but he also was my blood relative,” Bernetta says.

It was also a time of segregation. But that didn't stop people of all colors eating together. In fact, Henry's Barbecue was one of the few places in America that was integrated. “It was a place where segregation ended when you walked through the door,” historian Sonny Gibson says. “People were just hospitable. They loved to sit there and eat barbecue.”

Bernetta carries on the tradition of having people over for dinner. Her friend Ray Mabion delivers memories with a deep, mellifluous voice, the kind that has been smoked to perfection next to a barbecue pit: “BBQ was always there. How wonderful it is to be invited to your house and those wonderful Sunday meals. You are an excellent cook; it is in your gene pool.”

Bernetta adds: “When you know what you come from, and it's good stock, it makes you stand a little straighter, makes you walk a little more upright.”

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