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**A Tie That Binds:
Contemporary Funeral Foodways
in a Rural, Central Kentucky Community**

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Folk Studies 585 / Foodways
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July 24, 1989

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"Blest Be the Tie That Binds"¹

Blest be the tie that binds Our hearts in Christian love;
The fellowship of kindred minds Is like to that above.
Before our Father's throne, We pour our ardent prayers;
Our fears, our hopes, our aims are one, Our comforts and
our cares.
We share our mutual woes, Our mutual burdens bear;
And often for each other flows The sympathizing tear.
When we asunder part, It gives us inward pain;
But we shall still be joined in heart, And hope to meet
again.

-John Fawcett/Hans G. Nageli
Arr. by Lowell Mason

When a death occurs in the small, rural Kentucky community in which I have lived the majority of my life, the bereaved family can expect a barrage of food almost immediately from the moment the death becomes commonly known to the community at large. On the literal and practical level, of course, the community responds with gifts of food because the bereaved family will often be unable to prepare food for themselves and their many guests because of their grief-stricken, emotional upheaval and the time-consuming demands of completing funeral arrangements and funeral home visitation schedules. On a less obvious, psychological-social level, the gifts of food function as emotional defense mechanisms, which allow everyone involved in the chain of the food exchange experience alternate behavioral avenues amid the psychically strained and socially awkward moments of the funeral ordeal; too, the gifts of food function to encourage the resocialization of members of the bereaved family into the family of the community. On a more figurative level, but one commonly understood by the members of the community in general, the gifts of food can be viewed as non-verbal, material extensions of the verbal expressions of sympathy, respect, and love (which, of course, most often accompany the presentation of the food itself). Finally, on the most metaphoric level, the gifts of food can be interpreted as the community's symbolic expressions of the

reaffirmation of life, evoked directly in the face of death. In short, in the community in which I have lived most of my life, gifts of food from the community to the family who has experienced the loss of a life among their members have both denotative and, more importantly, connotative cultural value, illustrating, once again, the highly social and symbolic nature of food and eating.

Almost from the moment a death becomes known to the community in general, food begins to arrive at the home of the family most immediately affected by the death. Because of their obligations outside of the home and their general emotional upset, community members realize that during the days between the death and the funeral service itself the bereaved family members will be unable to prepare sufficient amounts of food to feed themselves and the plethora of sympathetic visitors and extended family members who arrive from outside the community. In most instances, one or more women in the community, usually nearby neighbors or distantly-related family, arrive to oversee the reception of food in the bereaved family's home. As temporary hostesses in the home of the bereaved family, these women, primarily, record the receipt of gifts of food so that an accounting of dishes can be maintained to easier facilitate the return of containers after the funeral experience has ended. In addition to chronicling the gifts of food, these hostesses also assume other responsibilities to assist the bereaved family,

such as answering the telephone and recording telephone messages, the cooking, reheating, and storing of food and the clearing away of soiled dishes and utensils, assisting family members to ready themselves for visits to the funeral home, and, in general, and not unlike the chorus of ancient Greek drama, providing information to both family and visitors about the status of events in the funeral process.

Under normal circumstances, the body of the deceased person will lie in state at the funeral home for a short period of time, usually one or two days, prior to the funeral and interment. During this time, the need of the bereaved family for food to serve visitors and family members will be the greatest, culminating in a final meal following the funeral after which visitors and family members formally disperse, and the community responds steadily with gifts of food throughout the interim. Funeral home visitation schedules vary from one establishment to another, but, most often, family members will be present there to greet friends who arrive to express their condolences from late morning (approximately 11:00 a.m.) until middle evening (approximately 8:00 p.m.), leaving little time for them to prepare food in the substantial quantities which will be needed to serve a large number of mourners at multiple meals. Family members often serve as family representatives at the funeral home in shifts of a few hours each, which allows each person

time to return home to rest, to greet guests who choose to call there, or, most often, to eat. While an attempt is often made to preserve the tripartite structure of daily dining, the suspension of normal daily duties during the funeral experience also discourages consumption of food by groups of people at scheduled mealtimes, except for the aforementioned meal which follows the funeral service itself. For those individuals whose appetites have not been put asunder by emotional upset, kitchens are often a banquet laid, a perpetual buffet, from which a wide variety of foods can be taken any hour of the day or night.

While the funeral service can occur any day of the week, most are scheduled some time between late morning and middle afternoon, usually between 11:00 a.m. and 2:00 p.m. Following the funeral service and interment, which ordinarily lasts no longer than two hours all together, mourners will gather at the home of the bereaved family to dine together before formally dispersing, marking the end of the funeral experience proper. The community knows that the need of the bereaved family for a larger number of food items will be the greatest for the meal following the funeral. Many community members will wait until the morning of the day the funeral occurs to send gifts of food, and many community members will send additional gifts of food that morning. Throughout

the span of the entire funeral experience, the meal which follows the funeral is usually the only consciously organized and strictly structured food event in which large numbers of family and friends participate. A gargantuan feast occurring outside regular routine, the meal following the funeral encompasses characteristics of what Brunvand labels the American folk meal: "large quantities, great variety, and the use of regional specialties."²

The gifts of food received by the bereaved family will include many types of offerings. Due to the busy nature of contemporary lifestyles, or, perhaps, the often unexpected occurrence of a death in the community, some persons prefer, or are obligated, to bring pre-prepared food items purchased from commercial vendors, such as bakeries (breads or pastries), delicatessens (trays of cold cuts for sandwiches), or supermarkets (cans of ground coffee and canned or bottled carbonated drinks). Other persons, especially well-known, individual community cooks, prefer to send specific "scratch" specialty dishes, such as Southern fried chicken, macaroni and cheese casserole, deviled eggs, potato salad, or any one of many other local favorites; through years of responding with gifts of food in such crisis situations, these cooks, for various reasons, have chosen, or traditionalized, a certain food item to send consistently to the homes of their friends and neighbors, and, in many cases, the

receipt of that special food item under these certain circumstances becomes a part of community expectations and local funeral foodways tradition.

In addition to the gifts of food sent to the home of the bereaved family, other non-food, food-related items are also an important part of the funeral food exchange experience. Since only a small number of temporary hostesses--perhaps one, two, or, at most, three women at any one given time--work to accomplish the running of the household during this crisis period, time is of the essence, and any time-saving innovation is heartily welcomed. Many community members respond with gifts of non-food, food-related items, such as paper napkins and towels, paper or styrofoam cups and plates, and plastic cutlery, all of which, of course, can be disposed of immediately after use. Also, gifts of food purchased from commercial vendors are most often packaged in disposable containers, such as cardboard boxes, aluminum foil trays, and plastic or aluminum bottles and cans, and they do not require returning to the giver after the funeral ordeal. In addition to the gifts of food, the gifts of non-food, food-related items also serve to facilitate the funeral food experience, to simplify the family foodways of the bereaved individuals, and their assistants and guests, during an upended time of sorrow and sympathy.

The quantity of food with which the community responds to the bereaved family will depend on a variety of factors, some obvious and some unspoken. First, if members of the bereaved family have been responsive in the past with gifts of food to other community members in similar crisis situations, they can usually expect to receive like offerings; individuals and families who have not actively participated in the funeral foodways exchange in the past are not usually as inundated with gifts of food as those who have traditionally taken part in the process. Secondly, community members, knowing the normal size of the bereaved family and estimating the size to which it may swell during the funeral ordeal, will attempt to gauge the gifts of food to approximate actual needs. Finally, if gifts of food can be interpreted as symbols of community sympathy, respect, and love, individuals and families for whom the community in general holds the highest esteem usually receive the most bountiful amount of food. Many judgments, practical and emotional, affect the quantity of food with which the community responds to the bereaved family, including the past participation of the family in the life of the community, the actual need of the family for food, and the esteem in which the community holds the deceased person and the bereaved family.

Many times, the quantity of food received by the bereaved family during the funeral experience will far

outweigh their actual need, and acceptable methods of managing the excess food must be agreed upon. Gifts of food, of course, must be accorded the respect received by any gift: not to be disposed of haphazardly, without appreciation or use. Food, as a perishable item, is short-lived and requires quick consumption or prompt preservation. Some gifts of food which remain after the meal following the funeral service are disposed of because of spoilage or ruinage; other remaining gifts of food are divided among the mourners before the group formally disperses; still other gifts of food, particularly ones that have been untouched, are preserved, by freezing for example, whenever possible, for consumption at some later date. In effect, every effort is made by members of the bereaved family to fully appreciate the gifts of food, even when they far outweigh immediate need, that the family has been so graciously accorded by community members.

As with any act of human communication, either literal or figurative, a margin for miscommunication exists, particularly in emotionally intense situations such as the death of a family member. For example, if a community member who, according to community standards, has sufficient time to prepare a home-cooked gift of food responds with a gift of food purchased from a commercial vendor, conflict concerning the appropriateness

of that expression of sympathy will ensue. Also, consider the confusion experienced by the community when a death occurs, such as that of a widowed, elderly parent or grandparent, who is survived by more than one household of immediate family members in the community; community members will be unsure about which household to direct gifts of food, and, fearful of offending one family member or another, they may hesitate to send gifts of food at all, or, as a precaution, will send gifts of food to more than one household. Finally, sometimes individuals who once had intimate, kinship connections to the deceased person, such as an ex-wife or an ex-husband, will expect, unrealistically, in the event of their past partner's death, that the community will respond to them with gifts of food, when often the deceased person has established an entirely new family household since separating from a prior spouse. In some situations, then, miscommunication, real or imagined, may occur between the members of the bereaved family and community members who respond with gifts of food, all of whom have their own personal conceptions of the obligations and expectations of individuals involved in the funeral foodways experience.

In addition to the practical value of the exchange of food during the funeral experience, that of basic human nourishment, food assumes various levels of symbolic significance under such special circumstances.

On a psychological-social level, the gifts of food function as emotional defense mechanisms, which allow everyone involved in the chain of the food exchange experience alternate behavioral avenues amid the psychically strained and socially awkward moments of the funeral ordeal. Outside of offering their condolences and their gifts of food, community members know there is little they can do to lessen the pain and sorrow experienced by the bereaved family. When community members present gifts of food to members of the bereaved family, the food functions to lessen the all-around anxiety occasioned by the situation by providing an alternate, albeit temporary, topic of interest. In fact, throughout the entire span of the funeral experience, discussion about various aspects of the food which has been brought to the home of the bereaved family--such as the quantity of food, the quality of individual dishes, the identification of individual cooks with certain dishes, comparison of present food offerings with past food offerings, and many other concerns--will constitute a significant part of the conversation between individuals in attendance there. On one special symbolic level, then, food functions to temporarily alleviate anxiety for all those individuals involved in the funeral food exchange experience by providing an alternate area of interest outside the most immediate concern, the loss of life in one family and in the family of the community.

Another important aspect of the psychological-social significance of the gifts of food is the important role food, particularly the containers in which the food has been presented, plays after the funeral experience proper has ended. Many gifts of food arrive at the home of the bereaved family in non-disposable containers, which, of course, must be returned to their owners. In some cases, the women who have served as temporary hostesses in the bereaved family's home during the funeral experience will return after the funeral ordeal to aid in the return of the dishes. In most instances, however, the responsibility for the return of the dishes rests upon members of the bereaved family. To return the food containers, in effect, members of the bereaved family will be required to physically remove themselves from their own home and, once again, through visiting the homes of friends and neighbors in the community, become an active participant in the life of the community. The gifts of food, then, symbolize not only the beginning of a period of mourning, but they also encourage resocialization, which often symbolically represents the beginning of the end of a period of mourning.

On a second, significant symbolic level, but one commonly understood by members of the community in general, the gifts of food can be viewed as non-verbal, material extensions of the verbal expressions of sympathy, respect, and love (which, of course, most often accompany

the presentation of the food itself). Gifts of food, of course, are not the sole material expression of sympathy with which the community responds to the bereaved family. Many community members purchase and mail commercially marketed sympathy greeting cards to the bereaved family. Also, many community members purchase and send floral bouquets via commercial florists which will be exhibited at the funeral home while the deceased person lies in state. Gifts of food, however, remain the most immediate and the most intimate material expressions of sympathy through which community members respond to the bereaved family, arriving, as they do, during the interim of the funeral experience itself and as gifts communicated directly from the home of one community member to another. As material expressions of sympathy, respect, and love, then, food functions to symbolically verbalize to the bereaved family the sentiments intellectualized and emotionalized by members of the community in response to the death of one of their members.

Finally, on the most metaphorical level, the gifts of food can be interpreted as the community's symbolic expression of the reaffirmation of life, evoked directly in the face of death. The most obvious irony of the funeral foodways experience, and the strongest indicator of the important symbolic value of the gifts of food, remains to be that the very persons to whom the gifts of

food are directed, the members of the bereaved family, are the persons for whom the food, under the particular circumstances, will have the least gastronomical appeal. Also, as noted earlier, food begins to arrive at the home of the bereaved family almost immediately from the time the death becomes known to the community at large, as if community members were compelled to allow as little time as possible pass before reaffirming the continuity of human life. Too, one refrain is directed at the members of the bereaved family from other community members throughout the entire funeral ordeal, and, with some variations, it occurs much as follows: "You need to eat to keep up your strength, because you (or life) must go on." In effect, the community embraces both extremes of human experience, life and death, with their gifts of food. What more symbolically potent gift than the gift of life-sustaining food, then, could one concerned, caring person bestow upon a friend or neighbor who has encountered the awful anguish of the death of a beloved family member?

In addition to this symbolic reaffirmation of the biological life process in general, the gifts of food symbolize the community's expression of the reaffirmation of the social life process, the life of the group itself. While not every community member participates in the funeral food exchange experience, those who do take part maintain a traditional community folkway, an aspect of community life and group identity, that has multi-layered

cultural significance. By participating, and preserving, this funeral foodways tradition, individual community members include themselves as part of the larger group and define the group, too. The exchange of food during the funeral experience reveals the very real network of community that exists to support the abstract idea of community. In one moment, an individual may be the member of the bereaved family receiving gifts of food from other community members, but, in another moment, he or she may be required to respond with gifts of food to a friend or neighbor who has experienced the loss of a family member. In either situation, the individual will be acting as part of a discrete, defined group, which foodways tradition has helped shape and maintain.

In the small, rural Kentucky community in which I have lived most of my life, community members respond swiftly and unselfishly with gifts of food to families who experience the loss of life of one of their number. Community members know, from personal experience, that the bereaved family, due to their emotional upset and the time-consuming demands of completing funeral arrangements and funeral home visitation schedules, will not be able to prepare food in sufficient amounts to serve themselves and their many guests. On a psychological-social level, the gifts of food serve as emotional defense mechanisms, allowing everyone involved in the funeral food exchange experience alternate behavioral avenues during the

psychically strained and socially awkward hours of the funeral ordeal; also, the gifts of food serve to promote the resocialization of members of the bereaved family into the larger community family. Too, the gifts of food can be interpreted as material expressions of the community's sympathy, respect, and love for the deceased person and members of the bereaved family. Finally, the gifts of food can be viewed as the community's symbolic expressions of the reaffirmation of life, evoked directly in the face of death. In conclusion, in the community in which I have lived the majority of my life, gifts of food from community members to the family who has suffered the loss of a life among their members have both concrete and, more importantly, abstract cultural value, which serves to illuminate, once more, the highly social and symbolic nature of food and eating and to recall what Douglas has already written:

If food is treated as a code, the messages it encodes will be found in the pattern of social relations being expressed. The message is about different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across the boundaries. Like sex, the taking of food has a social component, as well as a biological one. Food categories therefore encode social events.³

Endnotes

¹Favorite Hymns of Praise, 10th ed. (Cincinnati, Ohio: Tabernacle Publishing Co., 1974), p. 430.

²Jan Harold Brunvand, The Study of American Folklore: An Introduction (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1968), p. 297.

³Mary Douglas, "Deciphering a Meal," in Myth, Symbol, and Culture, ed. Clifford Geertz (New York: Norton, 1971), p. 61.

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Acknowledgements

I am indebted to my mother, Mrs. Edna M. Browning, and my maternal grandmother, Mrs. Lucinda Matherly, both excellent memorists and cooks, for their recollections and advice pertaining to this paper and all the wonderful food prepared by their hands and hearts for myself and others throughout the years.

Dedication

For my sister, Barbara, who loved to eat.

-J.D.B.

Tim,

A

Very good paper.

You do a wonderful job of analyzing funeral foodways. If there is any weakness, it is that the paper is a bit too abstract. It could be enriched by some specific examples, quotes from family or community members, concrete descriptions. I understand you need to distance yourself, but perhaps there are ways of doing these things and still keeping your distance. On an academic level, at least in folklore, this "objectivity" is not necessary.

I do think you have the basis of a publishable paper, if you are willing to work with it some more. In its present state (or modified in any form you are comfortable) the paper should be placed in the FolkLife Archive. I hope you will also permit me to use your paper in future Foodways classes. Let's talk about these things.

Bail Godwin, I believe in a Southern family, has a character facing the dilemma of rushing immediately to a close friend's side or cooking something first when she hears of an unexpected death in the friend's family. Your comment on p. 13 reminded me of this scene.