

A Tie That Binds:  
Contemporary Funeral Foodways  
in Rural Kentucky

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"Blest Be the Tie That Binds"<sup>1</sup>

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

## Contents

- I. Introduction
- II. Food As Food
- III. Food As An Emotional Defense Mechanism
- IV. Food As An Expression Of Sympathy, Respect, And Love
- V. Food As An Expression Of The Reaffirmation Of Life
- VI. Conclusion

When a death occurs in the small, rural Kentucky communities 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 due to 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, both biological and social, evoked directly in the face of death. In short, in the communities 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.

*local home?*

From the moment a death becomes known to the community in general, food begins to arrive at the home of the family most intimately affected by the death. Jewell Hawks offers:

Almost immediately after someone hears that someone has passed away in the neighborhood, some of their friends, then they begin to think, what can I take to help them out with food? And everybody that wants to prepares a dish that they think they would enjoy and takes it to the home.<sup>2</sup>

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 female family members, arrive to oversee the reception of food in the bereaved family's home. Edna Browning relates:

It's just usually a certain few that just come in and take over and help you. Certain ones go to all the homes. They help each other the same as they help their neighbors.<sup>3</sup>

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: answering the telephone and recording telephone messages; cooking, reheating, and storing food; clearing away 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.

"They start sending the first day and, especially, the second day," states Lucinda Matherly.<sup>4</sup> Edna Browning adds:

Some will send the first and some the second. And then the last day, some, you get less on the last day, but usually the day of the funeral is when you have your big meal, put it all out on the table. Usually on the last day you didn't have all that much brought in.<sup>5</sup>

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 appetities 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. 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."<sup>6</sup>

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, what Christopher Crocker labels "special ceremonial foods . . . appropriate to ritual occasions,"<sup>7</sup> such as Southern fried chicken, macaroni and cheese casserole, deviled eggs, potato salad, or any one of many other local favorites. "I have this friend," recalls Corine Holder, "that always takes ham and biscuit."<sup>8</sup> 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 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 tradition. 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. Marie Jones remembers:

Years ago when my Daddy died there was no such thing as paper cups and paper plates. I mean, you just didn't have them. Nobody brought them. You didn't have them. We just washed dishes and washed dishes and washed dishes.<sup>9</sup>

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 return 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. Edna Browning asserts: "If you don't send to other families, you're not apt to get very much."<sup>10</sup>

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.

Joni Stevenson explains:

It was just coming in because they knew that all of us was there, and it would just kind of come in, but especially when they knew that a meal was, like the church especially brought in more at mealtime when they knew that everybody would be there.<sup>11</sup>

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. "I think you have to be well liked," offers Cora Matherly.<sup>12</sup> 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. Jewell Hawks observes:

It used to be that a lot of it would go to waste, but I doubt now if a lot goes to waste because so many people of a family gather in for a big meal after they have put the body in the grave. So I suppose that most of it's done away with by that time. If there is some left, why, I hope they don't throw it away. I wouldn't want what I had taken thrown away.<sup>13</sup>

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 may ensue. Lucinda Matherly

relates:

They do a lot of that now. They just go buy a bucket of chicken. Some of them don't have time, and some of them don't take time. Probably you wouldn't appreciate it as much.<sup>14</sup>

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. Corine Holder recalls:

We had that and I didn't know where to send it, so I sent to both places. I kind of knew how things were going to work. I knew one sister lived in Russellville, and I knew where she was coming. I knew where she'd go. And the other two lived up here at Austin, and so I just took something to both houses because I didn't know. I knew where most of it would go anyway.<sup>15</sup>

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.

"That's right, you're right," recalls Cora Matherly, "Elwood died, she thought she ought to have food."<sup>16</sup> Lucinda Matherly adds: "Pearl fixed stuff and we took it up there

because Louise expected it."<sup>17</sup> In some situations, then, miscommunication, real or imagined, may occur between 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. Jewell Hawks observes:

At a time like that you don't know what to say, and you're always afraid you'll say something you ought not to. But even though you've lost a loved one you still need friends, and if they come with food that means that they care. And if they come their presence means more than anything they could bring. Lets you know that they care.<sup>18</sup>

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. Edna Browning remarks:

Usually you discuss what's good, though. When Mabel was passed away there was a lot of food brought in from Taylor County, and then we had different people there, like from Chicago and different places, and they discussed the different ways that the food was prepared in different parts of the states and different counties, the difference in the taste of the food. This one guy from Chicago couldn't get over green beans and corn being cooked together, and he just kept eating that. He said he had never eaten green beans and corn cooked together like that. Someone from Taylor County brought that up home. But he was from Chicago, and he had never seen food prepared, because they were used to eating a lot of Italian foods. 19

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. Jewell Hawks notes:

The person to whom you have taken food is supposed to see that your dishes get back to you. I always put my name on mine so that they'll be sure to get back to me, but some people forget to do that, and then you have a hard time knowing where you're supposed to take something.<sup>20</sup>

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. Edna Browning observes:

Once the funeral is over with then the crowd is gone. And it is a let down. It really is a let down at that time. They're gone and everybody's gone, and right then, after the funeral is over, is really when you need people the most. Just somebody to talk to you and to listen to you. But, as I say, within a few days they're gone, because they've got their life to go on with, and you're left alone. That's it. While your grieving is just started, they're forgetting.<sup>21</sup>



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). Debby Browning offers:

When you're grieving over somebody in the family or a friend or something, you sure as heck don't feel like cooking. And then, too, when a lot of people drop in you need extra food, and I sure never have enough food for ten or fifteen extra people to drop in. I think that's why. It's a sign of friendship, friends, neighbors, being neighborly and friendly. I think that's a lot what it means, too.<sup>22</sup>

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. "It's respect for the deceased," adds Marie Jones. "It's sort of a habit that people do, too, but still it's showing respect for the dead."<sup>23</sup> 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 number.

Finally, on the most metaphoric level, the gifts of food can be interpreted as the community's symbolic expression of the reaffirmation of biological life, evoked directly in the face of death. As Kalčik has observed: "The group plays a part in making sure the living go on supporting life."<sup>24</sup> The most obvious irony of the funeral foodways experience, and the strongest indicator of the important symbolic value of the gifts of food, remains 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 must as Edna Browning relates:

Have this. Eat this. You have to keep your strength up. That's usually what it is. They'll try to get you to eat, all right. Some people think that eating's the cure for everything.<sup>25</sup>

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, which, according to Yoder, unites "them all in the continued pursuit and celebration of life."<sup>26</sup> 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 exemplifies the very concrete network of actual community that supports 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 communities 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, 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 many small, rural Kentucky communities, 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.<sup>27</sup>

Endnotes

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

<sup>2</sup>Interview with Jewell Hawks, Glasgow, Kentucky, 12 November 1989.

<sup>3</sup>Interview with Edna Browning, Glasgow, Kentucky, 15 October 1989.

<sup>4</sup>Interview with Lucinda Matherly, Mitchellsburg, Kentucky, 15 October 1989.

<sup>5</sup>Interview with Edna Browning, Glasgow, Kentucky, 15 October 1989.

<sup>6</sup>Jan Harold Brunvand, The Study of American Folklore: An Introduction (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1968), p. 297.

<sup>7</sup>Christopher Crocker, "The Southern Way of Death," in The Not So Solid South: Anthropological Studies in a Regional Subculture, ed. J. Kenneth Morland (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1971), p. 121.

<sup>8</sup>Interview with Corine Holder, Austin, Kentucky, 5 November 1989.

<sup>9</sup>Interview with Marie Jones, Glasgow, Kentucky, 22 October 1989.

<sup>10</sup>Interview with Edna Browning, Glasgow, Kentucky, 15 October 1989.

<sup>11</sup>Interview with Joni Stevenson, Auburn, Kentucky, 14 November 1989.

<sup>12</sup>Interview with Cora Matherly, Mitchellsburg, Kentucky, 15 October 1989.

<sup>13</sup>Interview with Jewell Hawks, Glasgow, Kentucky, 12 November 1989.

<sup>14</sup>Interview with Lucinda Matherly, Mitchellsburg, Kentucky, 15 October 1989.

<sup>15</sup>Interview with Corine Holder, Austin, Kentucky, 5 November 1989.

<sup>16</sup>Interview with Cora Matherly, Mitchellsburg, Kentucky, 15 October 1989.

<sup>17</sup>Interview with Lucinda Matherly, Mitchellsburg, Kentucky, 15 October 1989.

<sup>18</sup>Interview with Jewell Hawks, Glasgow, Kentucky, 12 November 1989.

<sup>19</sup>Interview with Edna Browning, Glasgow, Kentucky, 15 October 1989.

<sup>20</sup>Interview with Jewell Hawks, Glasgow, Kentucky, 12 November 1989.

<sup>21</sup>Interview with Edna Browning, Glasgow, Kentucky, 15 October 1989.

<sup>22</sup>Interview with Debby Browning, Glasgow, Kentucky, 22 October 1989.

<sup>23</sup>Interview with Marie Jones, Glasgow, Kentucky, 22 October 1989.

<sup>24</sup>Susan Kalčik, "Ethnic Foodways in America: Symbol and the Performance of Identity," in Ethnic and Regional Foodways in the United States: The Performance of Group Identity, eds. Linda Keller Brown and Kay Mussell (Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 1984), p. 49.

<sup>25</sup>Interview with Edna Browning, Glasgow, Kentucky, 15 October 1989.

<sup>26</sup>Don Yoder, "Folk Cookery," in Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction, ed. Richard Dorson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), p. 345.

<sup>27</sup>Mary Douglas, "Deciphering a Meal," in Myth, Symbol, and Culture, ed. Clifford Geertz (New York: Norton, 1971), p. 61.

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Dedication

For my sister, Barbara, who loved to eat.

J.D.B.