

Passion for Pig

Jim Early, who has traveled N.C. back roads researching a book on barbecue, leads expeditions in search of fish as well

His love of cooking came from mother and her family

BY EILEEN KERR
SPECIAL FEATURES REPORTER

WINSTON-SALEM — He calls it the "All American" casual food and swears that aficionados will travel 100 miles to a distant hamlet in search of a "pretty pig."

Served chopped or pulled, Lexington-style or eastern Carolina pig pickin'-style, North Carolina barbecue wins the blue ribbon in Jim Early's newly-released book *The Best Tar Heel Barbecue Manteo to Murphy*.

Born and raised in Henderson, Early is a native North Carolinian and a long-time resident of Winston-Salem. A graduate of law from Wake Forest University, he continues a limited civil law practice in Winston-Salem and is certified as a Superior Court mediator.

Early inherited his love of cooking from his mother Nettie Hicks Early and her family. They all regarded eating as a form of celebration, and good barbecue was often at the heart of the festivities.

In fact, his family ate everything about a pig but the squeal, Early says. Steeped in the atmosphere of great country cooking and family recipes handed down over generations, Early took the basics of cooking and perfected those skills, developing a flair for gourmet cooking, creating new recipes and teaching others his art.

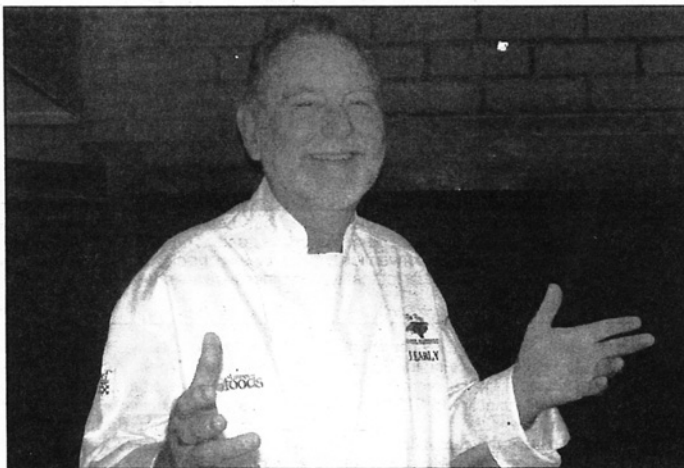
But cooking wasn't all Early learned. His upbringing taught him principles that have shaped his life. He is passionate about fair play, caring and reaching out to those who for whatever reason

need a hand, he says.

This passion inspired Early to research and pen *The Best Tar Heel Barbecue Manteo to Murphy*. Wanting to make the largest contribution possible to Special Olympics North Carolina, Early developed the idea of a book dedicated totally to the topic of North Carolina barbecue, a book that combines history, chef critiques, recipes and the personal stories of those who raise the hogs, cook the barbecue and of those who eat it.

His sponsor for this project, Lowes Food Stores Inc., began distributing his book in their 104 stores statewide last Saturday. The book retails for \$14.95.

When printing, publishing and promotion fees are deducted, Early anticipates that about 45 to 50 percent of the book price will go directly to Special Olympics. This is a generous contribution by Lowes Foods stores, he says.



Jim Early leads hunting and fishing trips to such places as Alaska and Montana.

Early's project was not without much personal sacrifice. For six months, he crammed a 50-hour-a-week law practice into four workdays. Leaving each Thursday evening and returning Sunday night, he traveled through 100 counties, drove more than 18,000 miles, talked with more than 1,500 people, checked out more than 200 barbecue places, critiquing 140 for his book.

With nothing more than a North Carolina map spread on the seat of his car, Early traveled the four regions of the Tar Heel state, each region's boundaries determined by how his map lay folded. He found the barbecue places on main streets, back alleys, hidden in rolling valleys or on long sandy stretches of the flat coastal plains.

He drove back roads, stopped at filling stations, country stores and fire stations to ask those he met the all-important question: "If your best friend was celebrating his birthday today and wanted to eat barbecue, where in this county would you take him as a treat?"

Then from the recommendations of firefighters, farmers, police officers and wrecker drivers he sought out Hog Heaven in Washington and Butts on the Creek in Maggie Valley. In Frisco, he found Bubba's.

At each barbecue place, he approached his critiquing as if it were a wine tasting. To perform a fair critique, Early would forgo meals, remaining hungry throughout the day.

"I generally could critique five to six places per day," he says. "I would order a sample of the barbecue in all the ways that it was served — chopped, coarse chopped and sliced — along with a tablespoon of

slow and one hushpuppy.

"Cleansing my palate with lemon water before sampling the barbecue, I would take a bite, taste it like a wine and write what I had experienced."

Now, fifteen pounds lighter than when he began, Early has wonderful stories to tell. There are the stories told by Gene Hill of Winston-Salem and Bill Ellis of Wilson, whom Early calls the "ultimate survivor."

Bill had built a barbecue empire, and one dark night Hurricane Floyd nearly washed it all away. Spurred by the philosophy that "God will not put more on you than you can tote," quotes Early, Bill hitched up his trousers, put his mind to work and built back his business.

In Shallotte, Early introduces the reader to Joe's Barbecue Kitchen, which lives up to its fame and slogan, "As good as the best, better than the rest and just a little bit habit forming."

Early says he hopes his readers will experience his journey through the mountains, the Piedmont, the flatlands and the coast and come to know the warmth and fellowship of those throughout the state who welcomed him and shared not only the techniques of their kitchens but their family histories and stories as well.

"I hope each reader of this book can vicariously experience my journey ... new friends and old clasped my hand ... but beyond the good food and beauty of rural North Carolina, the thing that made this adventure shine for me was the people. The outpouring of friendship that I experienced, the warmth, the fellowship and the laughter will be with me all my days," he writes.

Early speaks nationally and internationally on the quality of life, stress management and achieving balance. He also teaches gourmet cooking classes at Salem College.

An avid fisherman and experienced hunting guide, he leads hunting and fishing expeditions several times a year to venues such as Alaska, Montana, South Dakota, the Bahamas, Scotland and Africa.

This fall, Early will attend book signings at Lowes Food Stores throughout North Carolina. He has presentations scheduled at Brevard College and Wake Forest University. He will be a judge at barbecue festivals in Washington, N.C., and Mount Airy and complete his training as a judge for the Kansas City Barbeque Society in October.

The Best Tar Heel Barbecue Manteo to Murphy will be available from the publisher and will be sold at bookstore and at most of the barbecue places critiqued in the book.

Name: James Howard Early Jr.

Age: 63

Occupation: Attorney at Law, Law Offices of Jim Early, Winston-Salem

Education: B.A., Wake Forest College; L.L.B., Wake Forest College; J.D., Wake Forest University

Birthplace: Henderson, N.C.

Family: one son; Jim Early III; two daughters: Mary Early Lindsey, Anna Elizabeth Early

Hobbies: hunting, fishing, cooking; racing boats, balloons and cars; restoring British sports cars and classic Chris Craft speed boats

Wheels: restored 1986 Jaguar XJ8

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