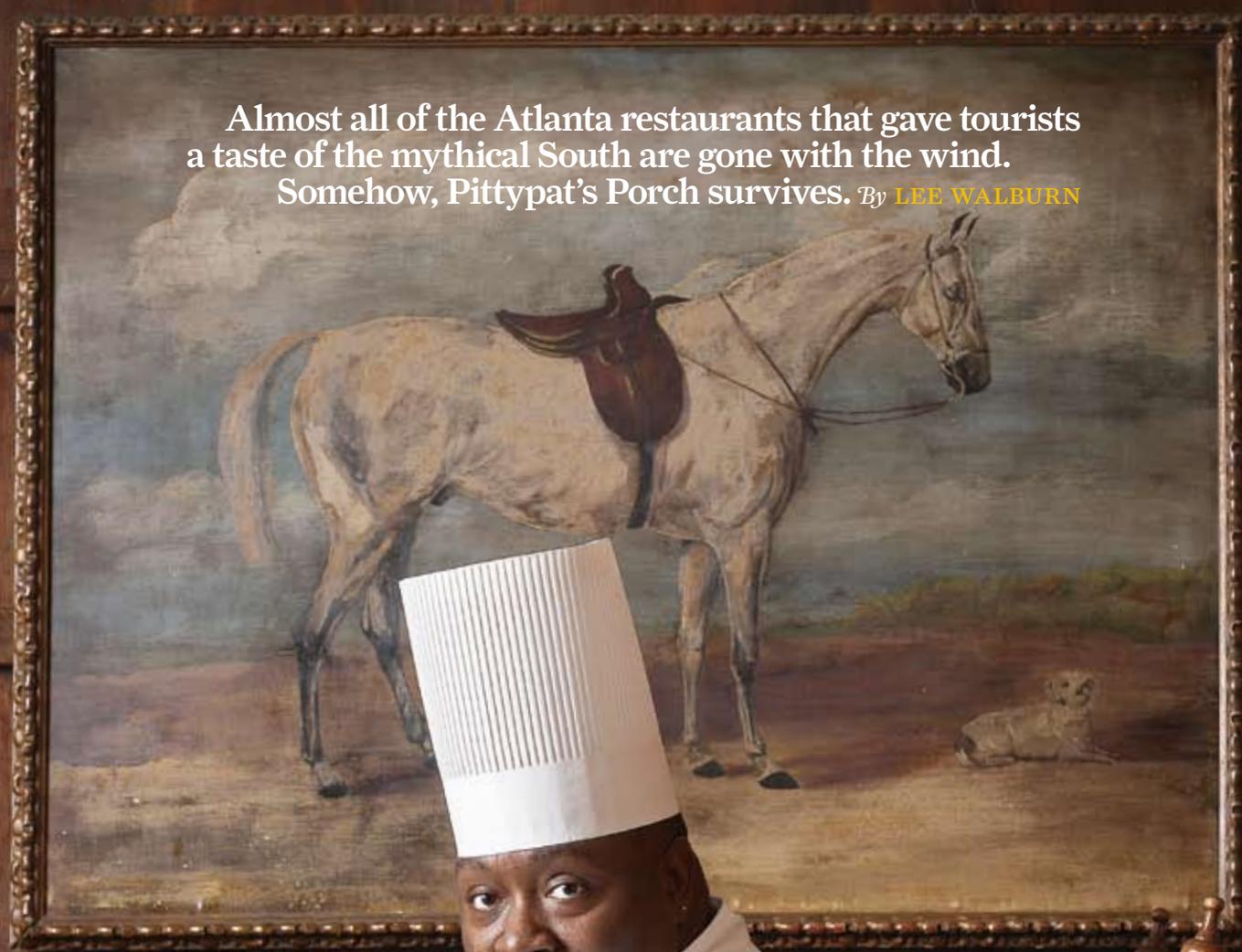


Almost all of the Atlanta restaurants that gave tourists a taste of the mythical South are gone with the wind. Somehow, Pittypat's Porch survives. *By* LEE WALBURN



the restaurant that time forgot



Photographs by GREGORY MILLER



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WHEN I MOVED TO ATLANTA IN the 1960s, the Hollywood version of the Old South, the romanticized *Gone with the Wind* version, the happy black folk Uncle Remus version, was slowly beginning to fade. Nevertheless, a phosphorous glow lingered from symbols that vaunted a regional reluctance to forget the past. Of course, in a city

boasting it was too busy to hate (truth in advertising be damned), burgeoning commercial opportunities meant businesses over time would gradually grow hesitant to reflect reverence for “the old ways.” For example, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* eliminated its long-standing *Dixie Living* section, and only in the newspaper’s archives can be found the braggadocios motto, “Covers Dixie Like the Dew.” In political arenas, flags flaunting the stars and bars that in 1960 might have helped elect a candidate were, by 1990, more likely to defeat one.

At the midpoint of the last century, restaurants became a conspicuous target for headline-grabbing protests and, especially after Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act, for legal action. Yet,

well into the late 1960s, quite a number of Atlanta eateries remained slow to realize that symbols of discrimination could attract social lightning bolts, even if random and more unpredictable than legal storms. Those establishments had freed up their diner stools and booths, if not their consciences, as sit-ins transitioned into sit-downs. The names of some of Atlanta’s most popular restaurants might well have been subtitled, “Forgit, Hell!” There was Johnny Reb’s, Mammy’s Shanty, Lickskillet Farm, Pittypat’s Porch, and of course, Aunt Fanny’s Cabin.

Yes, I ate at every one of them. I first visited Aunt Fanny’s in 1966, the year the Braves moved from Milwaukee to Atlanta and hired me as press and promotions director. A man named Harvey Hester owned the restaurant. He was a garrulous charlatan, Falstaffian in girth, and a longtime friend of Donald Davidson, the Braves’ traveling secretary. Donald was not my boss technically, but I was a newcomer to both major league baseball and expense accounts and easily influenced as to the distribution of the team’s entertainment dollars. Donald measured exactly forty-eight inches tall and taxed his tiny kidneys by seldom drinking from a glass that wasn’t filled with Cutty Sark. His tongue sponsored a range of vulgarities that sometimes led to near physicality in bars and restaurants—one of the reasons he encouraged my company in his entourage. Naturally,

the major league world considered Donald an irascible, lovable, and relatively harmless icon.

I elucidate Donald’s august stature and resulting influence in this showering of the Braves’ expense funds on Aunt Fanny’s Cabin, not as a personal mea culpa—I’ve never favored ignorance and weak backbone as a disclaimer—but as example of my hindsight awareness of mixed messages that pervaded an era diffused with irony. In corporate philosophy and in fact, the Braves, led by GM John McHale and aides Dick Cecil and Bill Lucas, would pioneer an admirable record for affirmative action in the front office and in the community. I recall with pride the Braves’ enlightened view of their institutional responsibility in race relations, although I really can’t remember if I personally felt any pangs of discomfort during the visits to Aunt Fanny’s. Perhaps we . . . I . . . considered the restaurant a caricature, as far-fetched from actual zeitgeist as Amos and Andy on television.

In general, Atlanta . . . I . . . had not fully realized just how deeply symbols can penetrate hearts and minds. And that mind-set was not exclusively Southern. Aunty Fanny’s owner Harvey Hester apparently knew or was known by the majority of America’s celebrities judging by the autographed photos that covered the walls of his restaurant.

In reconsideration, the best that can be said for Aunt Fanny’s is

that it served the best fried chicken I’ve ever tasted, and perhaps that was the main reason even the more liberal of its clientele were able to reconcile digestion with the glorification of the South’s legacy of slavery.

Hester had concocted the totally humbug legend that his establishment was named for a former slave famous for her cooking, who had lived past the age of 100 in the very same cabin that housed the restaurant. Guests were greeted by a small boy who poked his head through a blackboard with the menu chalked on it. In sing-song he would warble, “Wekummmm to Aunt Fanny’s Cab beeen! Wot’ll it be, fokes?” At some point in the evening black waitresses in period gowns gathered around the piano and sang haunting gospels. They shook jars and claimed they were collecting money for their church; white folks were more apt to turn loose change to the church than in tips to African American performers.

Today, almost all of the Atlanta restaurants selling customers a South that Hollywood myths created are gone with the wind. Mammy’s Shanty shocked native Atlantans and conventioners by closing in 1971. No longer would we savor Willie B. Borders’s

**LOYALTY:** Executive chef David Myree (opening page) has worked at Pittypat’s for 27 years; baker Larry Newton (center) has logged 31; and assistant manager Charles Tetterton (right), 25.





Left to right: Sous chef Penny Hurst; Anita Hulata, sales director, and Bobby Hulata, who started 40 years ago as bus boy and is now general manager.

## “That stuff is so long ago. We come here

chicken shortcake (a marriage of cream, milk, chicken fat, pepper, pimento, mushrooms, and chicken served over hot egg bread slices). One by one, other establishments with Old South themes collapsed. Aunt Fanny’s shuttered in 1994.

Not long ago, while engaging a friend in intellectual sparring over the merits of fried chicken, we began to rank Atlanta’s restaurants in term of the South’s favorite dish. I raised my verbal flag for Watershed in Decatur. A number of other restaurants—Quinones, Sweet Lowdown—have in the last decade championed Southern cooking with a sense of culinary heritage absent a sense of cultural nostalgia. I was admittedly startled when my friend said, “But have you eaten at Pittypat’s Porch lately?”

No punster could pass up such an opening and I replied, “Frankly, my dear, I didn’t know Pittypat’s was still in business, or even more frankly, if anyone gives a damn.”

But it is indeed alive and vigorous. *Atlanta* magazine actually has its signature faintly scratched on the conceptual cornerstone of Pittypat’s Porch. A.J. Anthony had intended to open an Italian restaurant, but he read in these pages that the city lacked the cuisine and historical atmosphere a growing number of visitors expected. Anthony abandoned his plans for pasta and in 1967 introduced

Pittypat’s Porch, blatantly themed on *Gone with the Wind*. The book and movie towered above all others when the world thought about Atlanta (if it thought about Atlanta at all prior to the 1996 Olympics).

The evocation of Pittypat’s Porch stimulated whatever nerve in me always seems to respond to incongruity. Hearing that, after four decades, it was indeed very much in business, I immediately reserved a table for four. And so it was I discovered that the restaurant, virtually unchanged in appearance from its 1967 inauguration, remains at what was once 25 Cain Street but is now 25 Andrew Young International Boulevard. Those who don’t comprehend the irony of the address may also miss the discordance of the theme.

Anthony named the restaurant after Aunt Pittypat Hamilton, portrayed lovingly in Margaret Mitchell’s book and more memorably in the 1939 movie as a gracious hostess and gifted cook, though prone to faint in shock at Scarlett’s socially irresponsible attitude. Then as now, Pittypat’s Porch is inconspicuous at street level, though once inside, a customer steps up to a gigantic front porch supposedly epitomizing those wrapped around plantation mansions. Ambience strives for a similar level of cliché. A greeter, African American, sits beneath a portrait of Aunt Pittypat’s porcelain-white face.

## because the fried chicken is great.”

Artwork reminders of “the way it was” cover the porch’s perimeter walls. A painting of a Cake Walk calls attention to the blithe spirit of colorfully garbed, dancing, high-slappin’ black men. As I walked the circumference of the porch, I saw a portrait of Robert E. Lee and other legends of The War of Northern Aggression, as well as Prissy, who famously didn’t know nothin’ ’bout birthin’ babies, plus a variety of movie-gilded stereotypes.

On the stairs descending to the dining room, we passed a wall crowded with photos of recognizable faces inside plain, dark frames: Governor Lester Maddox, Representative John Lewis, and Mayor Maynard Jackson, to mention a portion of the paradoxical museum.

We were appointed seats next to a table occupied by an African American lady and two young men. A few minutes later, five black women took their seats at another table, and within half an hour, the number of African American diners reached fifteen. I counted white customers. Thirteen. That included the four in my party.

As the family at the nearby table was preparing to leave, I introduced myself and asked, “Did you like your meal?”

“Oh, yes,” the woman replied. “Is this your restaurant?”

“No, just curious,” I said. “I apologize for such a personal question, but does the theme, the decor of this restaurant offend you?”

“I really had not thought about it,” she said. “I thought it would be a good idea to get some real Southern cooking. We don’t have it in Los Angeles.”

“I sorta thought about it,” said the teenager, who was enrolling the next day at Morehouse College, a citadel of African American leadership.

Somewhat surprised by the answers, I moved over to the table of five ladies. Our server had volunteered the information that most of the clientele is from out of town, but these women said they lived in Atlanta. I asked the question I had presented to the visitors from Los Angeles.

“Offended?” one responded with a laugh. “That stuff is so long ago. We come here because the fried chicken is great.”

Their responses inspired several nights of uncertain reflection. Could their relaxed presence at Pittypat’s Porch mean that the sharp-edged promises of inalienable rights have begun to parry the daggers of symbolic insult? Those diners apparently come to Pittypat’s Porch because . . . because they can . . . because they have the choice to express righteous anger at insensitivity—or to just turn a cheek that is munching on some mighty good fried chicken in a restaurant that time forgot. ■