



# HAM TO HAM COMBAT

THE TALE  
OF TWO  
SMITHFIELDS

BY  
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# THIRTY YEARS AGO, MY HOMETOWN OF SMITHFIELD, NORTH CAROLINA,

launched what the *Washington Post* later called “A War In the Hamlets.” On the line were rights to the title “Ham Capital of the World,” which Smithfield, Virginia, long took as its own and painted on a welcome sign at the entrance to town. They took the Smithfield brand name, too, when in 1926, Virginia’s General Assembly passed a law stating that any ham labeled “Genuine Smithfield” had to be “cut from the carcasses of peanut-fed hogs, raised in the peanut-belt of the State of Virginia or the State of North Carolina,” and “cured, treated, smoked, and processed in the town of Smithfield, in the State of Virginia.”

This all caused endless confusion for my similarly rural Smithfield, located just three hours south in eastern North Carolina, with its own strong curing tradition. In 1940 Carolina Packing Company on Brightleaf Boulevard began slaughtering hogs for their own line of products. Soon after, they began to supply hams to other local companies.

In 1985 Johnston County’s so-called Big Five—Barefoot’s Country Hams, Johnston County Hams, Medlin Hams, Sanders Country Hams, and Stevens Sausage Company—launched the Smithfield (North Carolina) Ham & Yam Festival. There was a hog calling contest, a “What’s That Yam Thing?” competition (in which kids transformed sweet potatoes into animals and celebrities using toothpicks, paint, and glue) and a Pretty Pig Pageant, which reportedly garnered just one contestant, Mike Outlaw. He donned a plush, pink costume borrowed from the local Shriners club. But the main event was a series of head-to-head ham competitions for the best cure. The town bigwigs invited Smithfield, Virginia, down to settle the score.

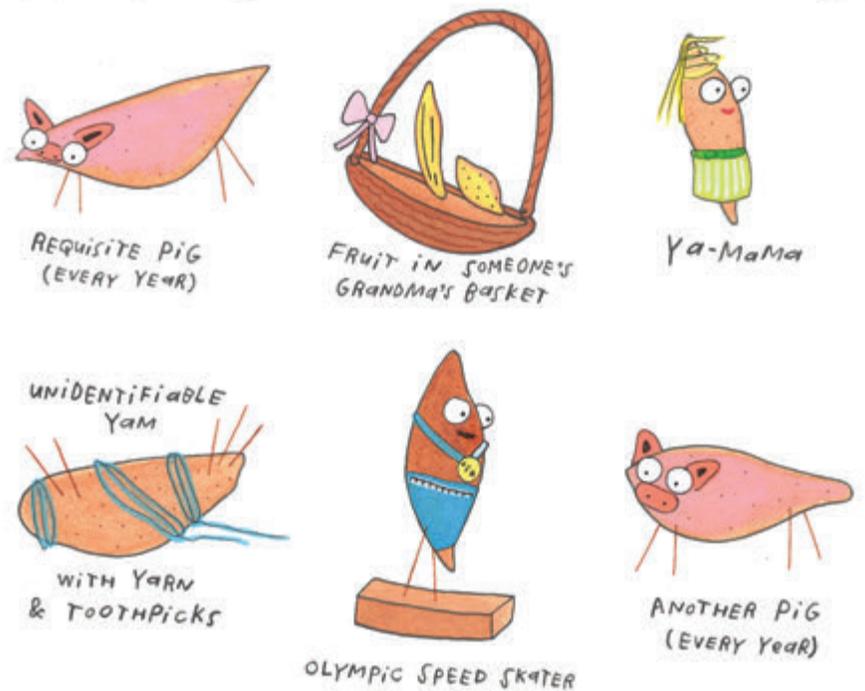
Jim “The Sodfather” Graham, North Carolina’s longtime agriculture commissioner, felt so sure his state would win that he put a set of tickets to the ACC basketball tournament on the line, a prize equivalent to winning the lottery in this part of the country. The night before the contest, a group gathered at Becky’s Log Cabin steakhouse—where Johnston County’s contestants reportedly plied the judges with bourbon—and exchanged verbal blows. John Smith

of *The Smithfield (VA) Times* said, “When I think of North Carolina hams, I think of salt pork that hasn’t been smoked and Tar Heel politicians that may or may not have been cured.”

Leo Daughtry, a local lawyer who attended Wake Forest with one of the Smithfield, Virginia, ham boys and was just getting into politics, “set the record straight,” explaining that North Carolina was the first to cure hams. After all, he proffered, when Englishmen arrived at Roanoke to find the Lost Colony, next to the famed tree inscribed with CRO, they also found a smokehouse hung with hams.

What’s true is that in 1666, a promotional piece written for British immigrants declared Carolina hogs thriving, practically drunk on an abundance of acorns (this was before Johnston County became known for its moonshining). Sixty years later, William Byrd II of Westover, Virginia, went south to encounter a “porciverous” population whose “only business...[was] raising hogs.” John Shelton Reed tells these stories in *Holy Smoke*, the Good Book of North Carolina barbecue, along with a black-and-white photo—conceivably a century old, at

## WHAT’S THAT YAM THING?



<sup>1</sup>My prized entry to the 1994 competition was Dan Yamsen, a nod to Olympic speed skater Dan Jansen, who took gold at that year’s winter games. Unfortunately, as nobody in temperate eastern North Carolina was as into speed skating as I was at the time, my potato lost to Duke University’s better known Coach K, who stylishly rode in a Barbie Ferrari with the caption “Yam dunk.”

# AS SEEN ON THE HAM CAM



least—that depicts a group posing by thirteen hogs that hang from a lengthy post. The caption: “‘Porciverous people’ in Johnston County”

According to Rufus Brown, the second-generation curemaster at Johnston County Hams, this abundance of local pork allowed commercial country ham businesses to flourish in this pocket of eastern North Carolina in the second half of the twentieth century, when sliced and packaged meats became popular. The Big Five cured hams for an average of five to six months. Contrary to North Carolina’s dominant style, Johnston County Hams, under the direction of Rufus’s father, Jesse Brown, a native of North Tazwell, Virginia, also smoked their pork with hickory fumes for eight hours. That scared a few North Carolina folks off—they expected the heavy-handed cure of Smithfield, Virginia, where hams are smoked for an average of two weeks. But the results are pretty perfect, as far as I’m concerned.

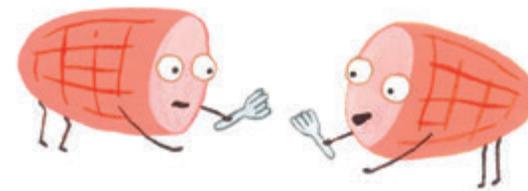
As for the judges, my people didn’t quite crush Virginia at the first Ham & Yam Festival in 1985. Entries from our county’s curers placed first and second in the uncooked ham category, and second in the cooked competition. The *Virginian-Pilot* reported that the judges—two food scientists and one ham-maker—“pondered their decisions prayerfully in the shade behind Smithfield’s Primitive Baptist Church.” Ranks were doled out according to fat-to-lean ratio, trim, taste, and

overall appearance, and Jim Graham was confident of a victory, determined to keep his basketball tickets safely in his clutch. “We took three of four,” he said, “so I consider North Carolina won it.”

Virginia wasn’t so sure, claiming they didn’t send down enough hams for all of the categories and promising more for next 1986 rally. “Last year we brought two hams and were met by about fifty from Johnston County,” said John Edwards of Smithfield, Virginia. But North Carolina won again in 1986, nabbing five awards in four categories: cooked long-shank, cooked short-shank, uncooked long-shank, and uncooked short-shank (with two awards handed out in each category). As the *Smithfield* (NC) *Herald* boasted on its front page above a photo of two of my friends dressed as pats of butter and riding on a sweet potato float, “Johnston Hams Send Virginians Home to Lick Salt From Wounds.”

That was the last time Smithfield, Virginia, officially came to town. They declined an invitation for a rematch in 1987, and the Ham & Yam Festival shifted to a competition among North Carolina curers. By the early 1990s, the festival had dwindled into a sort of craft fair, with less emphasis on pork and potatoes.

Rufus Brown believes that timeline follows the overall decline of cured pork. As he sees it, the industry peaked in the 1990s and fell out of widespread favor during a national shift toward fat-free foods and fad diets. Ham production in Johnston County fizzled out, too, with just two curers now remaining: Johnston County Hams and Stevens Sausage Company, which rounds out its product line with bright red hot dogs and cooked pork chitterlings, among other things. Smithfield, Virginia, on the other hand, has expanded to become the world’s largest producer and processor of pork, well beyond cured hams—including a line of pre-scandal Paula Deen-approved meat products. In 2013 Shuanghui International, a China-based company, purchased Smithfield for \$4.7 billion.



I WAS THREE YEARS OLD WHEN MY HOMETOWN INVITED the folks from Virginia down for the big rumble. Though we beat them whole hog then, some thirty years later the confusion remains, murkier than the waters of eastern North Carolina’s hog lagoons. When I say I’m from Smithfield, more often than not, folks singsong back, “The hams!” They’re right, but not for the right reasons.

At his family’s factory on Stevens Sausage Road, I asked Mike Stevens

what the mix-up means for his company. The stakes are small, he told me. Sometimes they get mail addressed to Smithfield, Virginia (albeit with the right zip).

“When Smithfield, the big company, gets some bad publicity, then we do also because of our website—and our store, Smithfield Ham Shop,” said Rufus Brown of Johnston County Hams. Even so, “It’s been more advantageous to us as far as sales and stuff. We’ve sold probably thousands over the years because of it.”

Sitting in Brown’s metal warehouse, I felt a twinge of satisfaction that our rival Smithfield’s name somehow helped local sales. But I also felt slightly betrayed that he let the mix-up roll over. “We explain it and move on,” he told me in his slow, measured drawl.

I wasn’t convinced. So, sporting a T-shirt emblazoned with the word HAM and Facebook’s thumbs-up icon (a gift from my mother), I ventured across state lines on a fact-finding mission of my own. Highways meandered around peanut fields toward Main Street in Smithfield, Virginia, where Captain Mallory Todd made the town’s first recorded ham transaction in 1779, and today, the Taste of Smithfield restaurant and gift shop welcomes lines of tourists. I stopped for thick-sliced ham and opted for a yam biscuit (holding onto state allegiances) then drove further down the road to the Isle of Wight County Museum, where the lord of aged hams resides in a glass case.

While most “Genuine Smithfield” hams cure for a year, this prized Virginia ham is 113, having begun its drying process in 1902. For almost twenty years it was forgotten among the rafters at P.D. Gwaltney Jr. and Company—which eventually became a subsidiary of Smithfield Foods. Beginning in 1924, the shriveled ham, reduced to 35 percent of its original weight, was insured for \$1,000 and

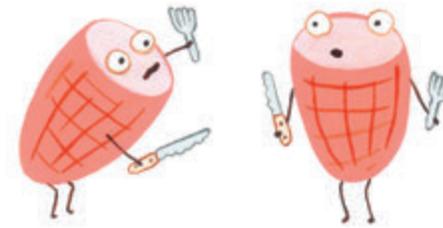
## I KEPT RETURNING TO THE 113-YEAR-OLD HAM, CONVINCED THAT IT MIGHT BREATHE OR MOVE.

stored in a safe that was opened each day to give the ham fresh air. Gwaltney took his beloved “pet,” adorned with an engraved brass collar, to different fairs, where it was fastened by the collar for safety and displayed as a marvel of the curing process. By 1932 the ham had featured twice in Robert Ripley’s *Believe It or Not* exhibition, and its value reportedly increased to \$5,000.

I paid just \$2 to enter the museum, where I glimpsed the World’s Largest Cured Ham, the World’s Largest Ham Biscuit (or, at least, the shovel used to assemble it), and the Oldest Peanut in the World, with

1890 scribbled in black ink across its dusty shell. As if all of that isn’t enough, in a corner next to a cardboard cutout of Gwaltney sits his ham, the World’s Oldest. If you happened upon the museum’s website that fine day, you may have glimpsed me through the Ham Cam—a twenty-four-hour live feed that captures visitors’ reactions to what looks like a black, petrified lung. I left the display several times: to flatten and emboss a penny with the outline of a ham; to watch grainy footage of Gwaltney showing off his pet and adjusting its collar; and to purchase an “I’ve Been to Smithfield, Virginia” magnet.

But I kept returning to the old ham, convinced that it might breathe or move. Back in Chapel Hill, my colleague took a screenshot that reveals me, mouth agape, hair crazed, timidly waving at the Ham Cam as I connected my Smithfield and this one.



TODAY, BROWN SAYS, THE MAJORITY OF LOCAL CUSTOMERS buy hams just once a year for their holiday tables. Folks call relentlessly. “I tell some of the people who work here, I say, ‘Listen. Their whole house could burn down, they could lose all their presents, their Christmas tree, but if their refrigerator made it through the fire with that ham in it, that Christmas would be fine,’” says Brown. “They say, ‘Nah, you’re crazy!’ But I say, ‘Once you get through one Christmas, you’ll see.’”

Johnston County Hams also appeals to a niche market. Under the Curemaster’s Reserve label, they cure specialty hogs including the Mangalitsa—a curly-headed beast whose mop Brown likens to a poodle. (Those hams go for about \$275.) He has also begun working with Sam Suchoff of The Pig, a Chapel Hill restaurant that butchers and barbecues whole, all-natural hogs. The result is Lady Edison, an “extra fancy country ham” that’s named for a Raleigh-born inventor who worked around the turn of the twentieth century on patents including a hair curler and something called a Poodle Dog Doll. Sliced thin, prosciutto-style, it is some of the best ham I’ve ever tasted. For solidarity, not just flavor, I keep Lady’s business card tucked in my wallet. She’s another Johnston Countian who moved west to the city and is fighting the good fight in the name of Smithfield ham. ♡

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