



## Smithsonian Institution

*National Museum of African American History and Culture*

### Delegate Magazine 1977

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Recently he visited the beautiful and historic Hampton campus. Now a diverse and modern liberal arts college, Hampton offers courses in all the traditional academic departments as well as in such specialized disciplines as early childhood education, human ecology (which includes the former home of economics department), nursing education, architecture, and communications.

During our Virginia stay we also visited the small town of Smithfield, home of the famous hams. Our hosts, Mrs. Leola Dyson and Jack Holmes, both of WRAP Radio in Norfolk, took us to the headquarters of the Smithfield Packing Company. After we donned the required smocks and helmets to conform with the sanitary code, Charles H. Gray, the firm's assistant to the president guided us on a tour of the company's operations.

Mr. Gray, a Black man whose knowledge of the industry is encyclopedic, has been with the firm for 38 years. He shared his knowledge without stinting and he was equally generous with sample of the incomparable ham. Among the surprises on our tour was the discovery that over 90 percent of the employees-skilled and unskilled- are Black, and that in Smithfield, Virginia there is no unemployment.

Smithfield ham is legendary and deservedly so. Its distinctive taste and texture make it unique and a treat prized by gourmets in many lands. A ham can legally be labeled "Smithfield" only if processed within the corporate limits of the town, but more than geography makes these hams different. A special breed of hogs, razorbacks; a special diet, peanuts; plus a dry-salt curing method and a generous coat of ground black pepper are among the essential characteristics of Smithfield hams. The cured hams are "smoked" over smoldering hickory wood for several weeks and then aged for periods ranging from nine months to almost two years.

But just as one man's caviar is another's fish eggs, there are those- and their numbers perhaps are greater- who prefer the flavor and texture of the so-called "country hams" which are found widely in other parts of Virginia and the South. Usually country hams are wet-cured, that is, they are coated in salt (sometimes sugar and nitrates are blended with the salt) and then stored in vats where the natural fluids from the hams combine with the salt, forming a saline bath that provides the "cure." These hams are also smoked over hickory fires for variable periods.

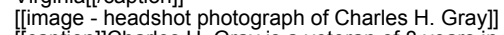
Though aging is not mandatory for country hams, it should be noted that spoilage before cooking is rare in either a Smithfield of a country ham. In country kitchens and small butcher shops one sees them hanging, unrefrigerated, for months.

In the South-and in many Northern kitchens-Smithfield and country hams are fried, simmered or baked, depending on the menu as well as the cook's time and preferences. To minimize saltiness, these hams are soaked for several hours before being simmered, baked or boiled before frying. One delicious by-product of fried ham is the well-known "red-eye" gravy made by adding water to the drippings in the skillet in which the ham was fired. The liquid is simmered down until it turns a reddish brown and "eyes" of grease have formed.

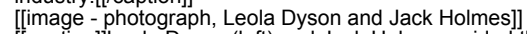
[[image - headshot photograph of James A. Bland]]  
 [[caption]]James A. Bland, composer of the state song of



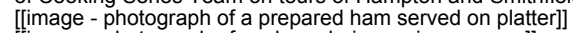
Virginia

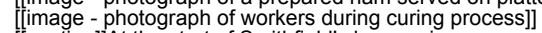


Charles H. Gray is a veteran of 8 years in the meat-packing industry.



Leola Dyson (left) and Jack Holmes guided the Kraft Heritage of Cooking Series Team on tours of Hampton and Smithfield.





At the start of Smithfield's long curing process, hams are bedded down under blankets of salt.

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