Meat in the Middle: The Racial Contours of Kansas City Barbecue
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Abstract:

Even though forms of segregation existed in Kansas City from 1879 to 1964, there were some things that brought whites and blacks together, and barbecue was one of them. White residents of Kansas City often found themselves traveling to the predominantly African American neighborhoods in the city to sample and savor the smoked meats. Often sitting together, being served by black pit-masters, blacks and whites enjoyed barbecue and a brief period of inter-racial harmony. Barbecue has deep roots in black culture, beginning with its role during slavery. It was not uncommon for white slave owners to hold celebratory barbecues for their family and friends, often assigning the job of pit-master to black men. Slaves carried that barbecue knowledge with them after the Civil War, establishing barbecue stands in various cities across the United States. When stands popped up in Kansas City in the early twentieth century, they not only had a loyal black customer base but also a white one. Many men who worked in the stockyards, of all races, often visited the local barbecue stands. Politicians, acknowledging the popularity of smoked meats, frequently used it to entice black and white voters at political rallies. Tom Pendergast was one such politician. Thanks to Pendergast's policies, Kansas City became a “wide-open” town during prohibition, attracting gamblers, drinkers, and jazz musicians. In these jazz clubs, which were frequented by both blacks and whites, barbecue was usually served. Not only were blacks and whites associating in these clubs, but they were also furthering the attachment they shared for barbecue. Over time, the bond over barbecue flourished, helping to bridge the racial divides within the city. By examining racial interactions in relation to barbecue, it will help identify the complex and challenging problems surrounding racial divisions within Kansas City.

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