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Equal but Separate

Decades after Jim Crow, black patrons of the 4 Way Lunch counter in Cartersville, Ga., are still sitting in the back -- by choice.

February 24, 2006 | Richard Fausset | Times Staff Writer

CARTERSVILLE, Ga. — Marvin Mitchell and Henry Lee Smith forged a brotherly bond long before the civil rights era came to Georgia's Appalachian foothills. Smith taught Mitchell how to drive a car in the early 1950s. Mitchell's parents gave Smith a job and fed him at the family table.

But six mornings a week, the two old friends enter the 4 Way Lunch counter through different doors at breakfast time. Mitchell, who is white, goes to the main dining room up front. Smith, who is black, goes through a side entrance and sits in a cramped backroom where blacks were once forced to eat during the Jim Crow era.

These days, blacks are welcome to sit wherever they want at 4 Way Lunch. But Smith, like many older African Americans here, still shuns the front section.

So he and Mitchell are left to carry on half a century of ribbing and reminiscing through the narrow kitchen doorway. They shout their daily hellos over the country music. Stories are shuttled back and forth by an obliging wait staff.

"Pete," Mitchell says to co-owner Lillian "Pete" Starnes, "ask Henry what year he went to work for my daddy."

Starnes confers with Smith and yells, "'52."

"Pete," Mitchell says, "Go tell Henry I'm going to tell the story about the time I got him drunk."

Again she goes to Smith, who gives a sheepish look through the door. Starnes returns to report that Smith is so embarrassed that "he'd like to die."

"That was mean, Marvin," she kids.

This peculiar ritual has been going on for decades, and it was in evidence the week of Coretta Scott King's Feb. 7 funeral, which brought four presidents together to praise the civil rights movement.

Most of the legal battles to dismantle segregation were won more than 40 years ago. But in pockets of the Deep South -- in a place like 4 Way Lunch, about 40 miles north of Atlanta -- change came slowly and subtly, unfolding over decades of freshened-up coffees and \$1.25 breakfast specials. Even today, the movement's victories have not broken some of the old habits that keep people apart.

The older blacks at the 4 Way consider themselves admirers of the civil rights movement, but most still prefer eating in the former Jim Crow section.

They don't go up front, they say, because they simply feel more comfortable in the back. They mention that blacks have been sitting on those three stools as long as anyone can remember, trading gossip and cutting up.

"I just like it back here," says Smith, a 77-year-old handyman. "You see what fun we have."

"It didn't ever bother me eating back here," says Mack Sanders, 66. "When [integration] passed I still didn't go up there. I still came back here. It's just something you get used to."

From their spot near the six-burner stove, the old regulars can watch a younger generation of African Americans walk in the front door and get served with no hassles. But these days, treatment is just as good in the back.

On both sides of the restaurant, the 4 Way's chatty waitresses take custom orders for hog jowl, grits and homemade gravy. They ask after mutual acquaintances. They take care of their favorites: On a recent weekday, Smith was eating biscuits and salmon patties that a white employee, Rachel Kendricks, had brought from home.

Starnes is a 38-year veteran of the 4 Way. She and her sister took ownership of the diner about two years ago, when the proprietor died.

Today, she seems sweetly bemused by the black regulars and their stubborn preferences. They will often wait for one of the three stools in back even though seats are available in the main room.

"We'll say, 'You want to come up front?' And they'll say, 'No, I want to wait back here,' " said Starnes, 54. "I just feel that they feel comfortable eating back there.... I know them all, and I don't see no color."

For 75 years, 4 Way Lunch has been serving up simple meals in the heart of downtown Cartersville, a farming and manufacturing hub of about 17,400 people with a rich Southern history. The Union destroyed much of the town during the Civil War, but its

location on a major railroad line ensured a muscular postwar comeback. Today, the city core is dominated by handsome turn-of-the-century brick buildings, including a gold-domed courthouse that prominently displays a memorial to Confederate troops.

Locals are particularly proud of the 4 Way for having survived the urban and suburban influences that have transformed Cartersville as metro Atlanta has sprawled ever closer. On Main Street, an herb store advertises fresh kava root. A boutique called Psycho Sisters trades in hip, punk women's fashions. Chain restaurants like Applebee's have given the outskirts of town a generic look.

The 4 Way, in a squat, fire-engine-red building, announces its name in blocky black letters painted onto signs sponsored by Coca Cola Co. In a front room 40 feet wide, 11 black stools are sidled up to a broad red countertop.

On the wall is a head shot of the 4 Way's most esteemed regular, Joe Frank Harris, a conservative Democrat who served as Georgia governor from 1983 to 1991. Nearby, a hand-lettered menu offers chilburgers, slaw dogs and a breakfast special -- one egg, a biscuit and cream gravy -- cheekily named the "unhappy meal."

Hamburgers for the lunch rush are cooked out front, on a griddle behind the main counter. But other dishes, like fried cube steaks and gravy, are prepared on the rear kitchen's big stove.

The smaller second counter is off to the side of the rear kitchen, making a separate dining room of about 4 feet by 6 feet. But the space is also used to store food and a few appliances. Diners one recent morning jostled for space with a 50-pound bag of onions. From time to time, they obliged politely when a waitress would ask them to fetch something from the big refrigerator at their backs.

The 4 Way is the kind of informal diner that was popular around the South before the spread of fast-food chains -- and the kind that was often targeted by black activists who staged sit-ins to force integration.

Inspired by the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Montgomery, Ala., bus boycott, black students in the early '60s ended segregation in restaurants in dozens of communities across the South. Images of well-dressed protesters calmly awaiting service became enduring symbols of nonviolent social protest.

Cartersville, like many Southern communities after Reconstruction, was strictly segregated by race. Until the 1960s, blacks and whites were separated at schools, restaurants and jobs.

The Ku Klux Klan was active, and the city was home to two of the region's most ardent proponents of lynching -- Rebecca Felton, the first woman to serve in the U.S. Senate, and Charles Henry Smith, a popular newspaper columnist.

"Lynch 'em! Hang 'em! Shoot 'em! Burn 'em!" Smith wrote in a 1902 essay, according to an article by David Parker, a history professor at Kennesaw State University in northwest Georgia.

Racial violence was already transforming Cartersville's business climate when a white man named Fred Garrison opened the 4 Way in 1931, on the site of a former saloon. The year before, a black man accused of killing the police chief had been lynched by an angry white mob while awaiting trial.

Robert Benham, a Cartersville native and justice on the Georgia Supreme Court, has written that in the ensuing years, the threatening climate drove most of the black-owned businesses out of downtown.

In some instances, however, there was also deep fellowship between the two races -- a fact that blacks and whites now note with pride. Mitchell said his parents owned a meat market that served blacks and whites alike. His father hired Henry Lee Smith as a jack-of-all-trades in 1952, and later trained him as a butcher. Smith was welcome in the home, and in many ways treated like a son.

"My daddy and mamma loved him," said Mitchell, 68, a part-time sheriff's deputy and former city councilman. "My daddy would have killed a man over him if he had to."

Blacks who remember visiting the 4 Way in the 1950s and early '60s said the employees would treat them fine. But black people knew their place -- and that place was in the backroom.

Tow truck driver Sanford Lawrence, 52, grew up picking cotton on a farm a few miles from here. When the family came to town for a rare restaurant meal, they often went to the 4 Way.

"Back here was for the blacks to eat," he said from the backroom stools he still preferred. "We just knew our place -- that you didn't go to the front of the restaurant. You waited for someone to speak to you. You didn't speak [first]."

In 1964, a small group of local black men decided to bring the integration fight to their hometown. They focused their efforts on Ernie's Restaurant, which was owned by Ernest Garrison, the son of the 4 Way's owner. They chose Ernie's because it was a little classier, with tables in addition to a lunch counter.

Winston Strickland, 64, remembers working up the courage to march into Ernie's and demand service. It was a tense situation. At first, Garrison told them he didn't like the idea. But the men held their ground and told him that change was coming to Cartersville. The owner relented and served them supper.

The tide of history eventually burst through the doors of the 4 Way too. But to hear Starnes tell it, it was met with a collective shrug. She said that a group of civil rights activists from Atlanta walked into the restaurant sometime in the mid-'60s and

demanded that Fred Garrison start serving blacks up front. If not, they would find a way to shut him down.

"He said OK," Starnes said. "But [the black customers] continued to go to the back."

Ernest Garrison eventually closed his restaurant and took over the 4 Way when his father retired. Over the years, a few black patrons would test his commitment to serving blacks in the front room. Lawrence, the truck driver, remembers going up front a few times in the early '70s with some of his friends, just to make a point.

"We would come in and make it our business to be out there," he said. "I was young and I was thinking someone would say something to us and stir something up. But to the person who owned this place, it didn't make no difference as long as you had the money to pay."

Lawrence eventually drifted back to the backroom. He was there on a recent Wednesday afternoon, eating a plate of gravy-smothered hamburgers. Waitresses apologized as they leaned over him to pull items from a toaster oven on the counter.

"It's really a mind thing, to be honest with you," he said. "You ever hear that older people are just set in their ways?"

Along with the force of habit are reminders of the past. Lawrence called a visitor's attention to a white man, Daryl Ray, a retired beer company manager who was sitting at the front counter. Lawrence remembered Ray as one of the troublemakers when the public schools were integrating between 1965 and 1969.

"I went to school with him," Lawrence said. "He was one of my classmates. He was one of the ones when we first integrated the schools who gave me and the blacks so many problems."

Lawrence said he wasn't worried about people like Ray anymore. Social mores have changed, he said, and those kinds of people have to watch their mouths.

Ray denied that he had caused trouble for blacks in school. He agreed that times had changed. He said he had been trying to be more politically correct in public. But over the course of two days at the 4 Way, he worked racial epithets into numerous conversations.

These days, Strickland, who had protested at Ernie's, won't go into the 4 Way Lunch, but not because he is afraid of racist whites. He knows about the backroom, and it makes him ashamed for his fellow blacks.

"I just resent blacks still using that area," Strickland said. "They're still holding onto some kind of farm mentality of life. They say that's what they're comfortable with. Well, there's a lot of people that like to eat with their hands still too."

But for Henry Lee Smith, life at the 4 Way has almost changed too much. It seems the stigma of the little backroom is fading.

"I can't even get in here half the time," Smith said. "Because there's white folks back here."

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