



Road to the White House

By Doug White



When I was a kid, my brother and I thought it was cool to answer our home phone with the greeting, “This is the White House, how may I help you?” Our last name, White, allowed me to claim it as a perfectly reasonable greeting. My ever-proper mother didn’t approve, but my dad always got a kick out of it so the practice continued. In fact, 40 years later, I still answer the phone the same way.

So it was with great excitement that we set out to visit the historic city of Camden and spend an afternoon at the White House Café. Yet another White House – how strangely coincidental.

South Arkansas has a rich history and no city more so than Camden. Founded in 1824 during

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America’s expansion after the Louisiana Purchase, Camden originated as a steamboat landing for the burgeoning cotton trade. Camden is the county seat for Ouachita County and can claim its share of famous visitors. Edgar Allen Poe was a printer at the local newspaper. Martin Scorsese’s first movie, “Box Car Bertha,” was filmed in Camden. Camden is the birthplace of David Pryor, congressman, governor, United States senator and longtime friend of the cooperative program.

The town has done a commendable job keeping its history preserved. As you enter the historic downtown district, you will pass one of the oldest restaurants in the state — the White House Café on Adams Street.

Owners Teresa Lampkin and Tommy Vaughan bought the restaurant in 2000, continu-

ing in the footsteps of prior owners. The café has been here for more than a century in the same building that Hristos Hodjopoulos built in 1907. The White House Café menu boasts several of the same choices as the original, including Kansas City-style grilled steaks and plate lunches. On our recent lunch visit, we ordered the Thursday special, which comprised meat loaf and a choice of six featured vegetables. My experience with meat loaf has been hit or miss, with restaurants falling short of expectation trying to impress me with additional ingredients or fancy presentations. Not here. The White House Café’s homemade meat loaf was superb — meaty and perfectly moist.

The perfect plate lunch must have more than canned vegetables, as is sadly the custom in many diners. Miss Ann and Miss Angela, the two cooks responsible for our meal, know how to prepare Southern-style vegetables for the most discerning of palates. We had speckled butter beans with a hint of ham. The fried potatoes with yellow onions were delightful, as were the purple hull peas. Turnip greens, mashed potatoes, cabbage (with bacon, of course) and corn rounded out the panoply of sides.

With every meal comes your choice of Texas Toast or cornbread. No offense to the former, but you have to order the cornbread. Trust me. It is “hot water cornbread,” and it is indescribably good. Hot water cornbread is a truly Southern dish, and this soul food staple made the meal that much better.

We brought along a couple of longtime White House Café customers to help us with our choices (the menu includes Mexican food, seafood and the aforementioned steaks). They insisted we try the cheeseburger, but only if we replace the standard huge order of hand-cut French fries with the Café’s special sweet potato fries and dipping sauce.

I’m not going to get hyperbolic here and state that this was the best cheeseburger I have ever had (it was). Families have been torn apart and wars have been waged debating the best burger. Suffice it to say that the burger was cooked to perfection. However, the addition of those sweet potato fries was just amazing. The dipping sauce (butter, vanilla, cinnamon, brown sugar) was addictive.

The White House Café has two distinct personalities. One is the restaurant, with wonderful homemade food and warm, attentive service. The original section contains an ‘L-shaped’ counter with barstools filled with regulars on their lunch hours. The walls are covered with a photographic history of both the restaurant and the city itself.

The ying to the restaurant’s yang, is the second personality of the restaurant, the lounge. At night, the White House Café becomes both a restaurant and a full-service bar, replete with flat-screen televisions beaming that evening’s sporting events in a separate lounge.

There is also an upstairs, which includes outdoor seating on the deck and overlooks the railroad. During World War II, soldiers from across America hopped off the rail cars to enjoy a home-cooked meal. Looking from the deck in 2011, one can only imagine what a sight that must have been.

As we concluded our lunch, stuffed to the gills with their awesome and affordable cuisine, owner Teresa led us out while continuing our tour of this historic place. The phone rang and Teresa placed the receiver to her ear, saying “White House.” I smiled. •

The White House Café is open Monday through Saturday, 11 a.m. – 10 p.m. and is located at 323 S. Adams St. in Camden. Phone 870.836.2255

Have a favorite Arkansas eating place for Doug to try? Write him at doug.white@aecc.com