



## **“Ladies and Gentlemen, I’m A Cook:” The Saga of C.B. (Stubb) Stubblefield**

by **Scott Sosebee**

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*Scott Sosebee is Executive Director of the Association and can be contacted at [sosebeem@sfasu.edu](mailto:sosebeem@sfasu.edu).*

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(Feb 26, 2023) While I may not have appreciated it at the time, as a young college student at Texas Tech I was treated to what I still think was either close to, or the absolute, best BBQ brisket I have ever tasted at the original Stubb’s BBQ on East Broadway. The meat was smoky and fork-tender, with just the correct number of spices, and the beer at Stubb’s remains the coldest I have ever had. The story of the man who opened and operated the original Stubb’s in Lubbock, Christopher B. (C.B.) Stubblefield is a fascinating one, and it is of a man who followed a path similar to one trod by many African Americans trying to make it as an entrepreneur in a white-dominated society.

C.B. Stubblefield was a native East Texan, born in Navasota in March 1931, one of thirteen children. C.B.’s father was a laborer and Baptist preacher. Life as a Black family in Jim Crow Texas was not an easy lot and, looking to escape some of the pressures as well as looking for better economic opportunity led Stubblefield’s family to move west to Lubbock in 1936. C.B.’s father took a job picking cotton for a large farm near the city and he also continued to preach on Sundays. C.B. Stubblefield took to the fields with his father when he was a young boy, and in an interview later in his life he said he learned that “he didn’t want to pick cotton for a living.” He married when he was only sixteen and lied about his age so he could join the United States Army. He rose in rank to be a staff sergeant and gunner while fighting in the Korean War. Stubblefield was wounded three times during combat, injuries that would change his life. After his last wound, he was assigned to a back unit job as a mess sergeant. It was there that he learned to love to cook. He served in the U.S. Army in that role until he was honorably discharged in 1967 after twenty years of service.

Stubblefield was just 36 when he mustered out of the service, and he returned to Lubbock looking for something to do with the rest of his life. What he knew how to do better than anything else was to cook, so in 1968 he leased a small building on East Broadway and opened “Stubb’s Bar-B-Q.” The original spot was small with room for no more than fifty people, but Stubblefield—now known to everyone as “Stubb”—gained a reputation for running the “best bar-b-que joint” in West Texas. He served his ten-hour-plus smoked brisket, quarter-chickens, and sausage in generous portions but always accompanied by his famous “secret recipe” sauce. He drew patrons from all over the region for the food, but another part of the appeal was his jukebox, which played nothing but blues standards. He also hung over the jukebox his famous, hand-lettered sign that read “There will be no Bad or Loud Talk in this Place.”

Stubb added a stage at the suggestion of legendary Lubbock guitarist Jesse Taylor in 1973 and expanded his seating. The music then became the focal point of Stubb’s, although the food remained exquisite. Stubb would let anyone who wanted to take the stage and play, but he did not pay an appearance fee: the musician got tips and a plate of BBQ of their choice. Through the 1970s it gained a reputation for a place either budding or accomplished musicians could come and play what they wanted to instead of a concert playlist. It often turned into a “jam session” when other musicians would wander in and join the player on stage. The list of people who played Stubbs—for the same food and tips—is legendary and includes Stevie Ray Vaughn, Johnny Cash, Tom T. Hall, George Thorogood, and Linda Ronstadt. A frequent visitor to Stubb’s stage was Lubbock native Joe Ely, who learned many of his chops on that tiny wooden stand.

C.B. Stubblefield was a unique restauranter in that he did what he did more out of love than for profit. Jimmie Dale Gilmore, Ely’s bandmate in The Flatlanders, put it more bluntly when he once said, “Stubblefield was a great cook and amiable fellow. . .but he wasn’t a great businessman.” Gilmore had a point. Stubblefield fell for almost every hard-luck story he heard, and the craft of his cooking meant more than shaving costs. Despite the almost constant full dining room, the restaurant neared insolvency on multiple occasions. It was Stubb’s musician friends who kept it alive. As Joe Ely began to find fame in the late 1970s he funneled thousands of dollars to Stubb, as did a number of others. Tom T. Hall coined the moniker IRS: “Idiots Rescuing Stubb.”

Stubb’s couldn’t escape its money woes forever and in 1985 Stubblefield had to shutter the restaurant. C.B. left Lubbock and moved to Austin, where he cooked at Austin institution Antone’s for a bit, then in 1986—with investment money from Ely, Gilmore, and Charles Attal—he opened a new Stubb’s in Austin in 1986. But it didn’t last either and closed in 1989.

Faced with bankruptcy another time, Stubblefield began to mix and sell his sauce out of his home. He mostly sold it to friends until, once again, Joe Ely changed his fortunes. Ely appeared on the “David Letterman Show” in 1991 and gave the late-night host a bottle of Stubb’s sauce. Letterman then booked Stubblefield on his show and in a six-minute appearance he enthralled the television audience with his wit and said he made his sauce with “love and happiness.” Sales exploded after the appearance and Stubb had to rent an abandoned warehouse in Dallas to make the sauce. Nationwide sales reached nearly a million dollars by 1994. C.B. Stubblefield had found financial success.

He did not get to enjoy it long. A hard, worrisome life caught up with C.B. Stubblefield in May 1995 and he died of a heart attack at 64. He was buried in Lubbock, attended by what a local paper called “the most diverse crowd ever in Lubbock.” His business partners once again opened a Stubb’s in Austin and continued to produce his sauce. Eventually, in 2015, food giant McCormick Spices bought Stubb’s sauce line and it is now the third largest-selling BBQ sauce in the nation. Each bottle has a sketched depiction of Stubblefield with the words right under his face, “Ladies and gentlemen, I’m a cook.”

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