

Johnson Jr., Henry Vanderbilt: The Engelhard Cafe ^[1]

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Dr. Henry Vanderbilt Johnson Jr.: The Engelhard Cafe

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 5/11/2008. Copyrighted. Reprinted with permission.

Recently, Dr. Henry Vanderbilt Johnson Jr. shared a story with me about an unsung little moment in our state's civil rights history: a cafe brawl in Engelhard, a fishing village in Hyde County. The story, which I have edited for length, comes from a memoir that he is writing about growing up in Engelhard and his career as a high school teacher, university professor and now dean of education at [Livingstone College](#) ^[3] in Salisbury. You know the story has to be good: It involves a fight, a guy named Meatball and Dr. Johnson's trademark, sly humor.

In Dr. Henry Vanderbilt Johnson Jr.'s words:

When I was growing up, there was only one restaurant in Engelhard, and the owner, Mr. Ben, had an extremely low tolerance for blacks. Mr. Coleman, a black laborer, decided to open the Town Tavern right across the street from Mr. Ben's cafe. Mr. Coleman's two sons, George Thomas and Meatball, always had his back. They were tall and slender with voices that would intimidate Floyd Patterson.

George Thomas, the older son, was a prankster and serious intimidator. He typically walked around with his shirt unbuttoned, his hair was always bushy and unkempt, and his vocabulary was essentially a string of cuss words. Meatball, George's younger brother, was a prankster and serious intimidator. He typically walked around with his shirt unbuttoned, his hair was always bushy and unkempt, and his vocabulary was essentially a string of cuss words. Blacks were not allowed to enter the front door of the Engelhard Cafe to order food. But one Saturday afternoon, my friend Erskine, George Thomas and my cousin Ervin decided that they weren't going to go to the back door anymore. They went to the back door. Three white hunters from Wanchese looked at the guys. Then the biggest white dude that I had ever seen stood up and slowly said, "Ain't you boys a little lost? The back door is that away."

Another white guy, who was big also, responded with, "You boys better get ... out of here before somebody gets hurt."

At that moment, the front door opened and Meatball entered. He said, "I'm hungry, I'm thirsty, I'm tired, and don't think that I won't bust a cap in somebody today, because I will." The waitress hid behind the counter.

The three white guys stood and placed their hands on the handles of their hunting knives. Erskine was slightly intoxicated, but he boldly said, "You don't go to the back, so I'll be ----- if I'm going to the back door."

The largest of the three white guys threw his lime soda in Erskine's face. Meatball didn't hesitate for a second before he pulled out his pistol. He quickly pulled the trigger, but his pistol jammed.

At that point, the two other white guys rose and started swinging. One of the white guys connected Meatball with a hard left to the jaw and Meatball fell against the jukebox. Sam Cooke's "A Change Is Gonna Come" began to bellow out of the jukebox. Ervin grabbed Mr. Ben, and Mr. Ben pleaded, "Please don't hurt me! I've always been good to you people."

Ervin looked at Mr. Ben and said, "You people?! What do you mean by you people?"

Ervin gave Mr. Ben an uppercut to the chin that would have floored Joe Frazier. Meatball had one of the white guys in a chokehold. George Thomas and the guy that he was fighting were exchanging blow for blow.

Erskine was having a difficult time with the white guy that he was fighting. Then the white guy called Erskine a black -----. Everyone on Ridge Road knew that Erskine didn't play with the N-word and name-calling. He grabbed the white guy by the neck of the shirt. The white guy dusted the glass off his pants and came right back after Erskine. Erskine hit the white guy with the padded seat of one of the bar stools. Otis Redding's "Mr. Pitiful" began to bellow out of the jukebox's speakers.

The front door opened and Little Harry yelled to the guys, "Look, you better get out of here! Sheriff Cahoon and the Highway Patrol are on the way!"

Little Harry looked around the restaurant. Then he slowly looked at Erskine, George Thomas, Meatball and finally, Ervin. Then he looked at the white guys. "You boys from Wanchese are some tough white boys!"

The black guys all went on the Hill Top to avoid Sheriff Cahoon and his posse. When Sheriff Cahoon arrived, he asked, "What in the world happened in here?!"

Mr. Ben responded by saying, "I have always been good to the colored people. Now they are too good to come to the back door to order their food!"

Sheriff Cahoon asked, "What really happened? I need to know the facts. Can you tell me who did what?"

Mr. Ben got angry. "That's the problem right there!" he said. "You treat the coloreds like they're one of us! Why don't you find one of those boys and make an example out of him?"

I guess that triggered something in the white guys, because, after Mr. Ben finished, the biggest of the three rose to his feet. He said, "I have no hard feelings. Those colored boys didn't start the fight anyway. And why should they have to go to the back door?"

"In fact, when we leave here," he said, "we're going on the Hill Top to apologize to those boys. And we had so much fun, we'll pay for the damages! I've just had one of the best times of my life!"

All Mr. Ben could say was, "I just don't understand what this world is coming to."

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