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## A REPORTER AT LARGE

**R**ETURNING from a late vacation, I stopped off in Savannah, Georgia, and made a pilgrimage to Mr. Will Barbee's diamondback-terrapin farm on the Isle of Hope, a small, lush island nine miles below Savannah. I was there on the first day of autumn, when he starts shipping live terrapin to Northern hotels, clubs, seafood dealers, and luxury restaurants, and was in time to see his Negro foreman barrel up three dozen nine-year-old cows, or females; this, the first shipment of the season, was dispatched to a dealer in Fulton Fish Market. The diamondback is a handsome reptile, whose meat, when stewed with cream, is tender and gelatinous. Gastronomically, it is by far the finest of the North American turtles, and terrapin stew is our costliest native delicacy. Three styles of stew—Philadelphia, Maryland, and Southern—are made in bulk by a man in Fulton Market and sold to families and clubs; Maryland style, in which dry sherry and thick cream are used, costs \$10 a quart. In Manhattan hotels the usual price is \$3.50 a plate. A live terrapin in New York City brings from \$3.50 to \$7 retail, according to the length of its belly shell. For the last decade, under the protection of conservation laws, the diamondback has been slowly increasing in numbers in brackish sloughs all along the Eastern seaboard, but it still is scarce enough to make the fecundity of Mr. Barbee's farm of the utmost importance to chefs in New York, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Washington, and New Orleans, the cities in which the stew is most respected. Mr. Barbee is the country's largest shipper; last year he supplied three hundred dozen live terrapin at an average price of \$30 a dozen. He also put up four thousand cans of stew meat. In addition, on the porch of a rustic dance pavilion which he operates as a sideline, he sold terrapin dinners to hundreds of Yankee yachtsmen who stopped at the farm on their way to Florida through the Inland Waterway, which skirts the Isle of Hope. His wife, Rose, who looks after the cooking, is revered by yachtsmen, and her terrapin stew, Southern style, is famous from Cape Cod to Key West.

**M**Y train arrived at Union Station in Savannah at 9:30 the morning of the day I visited the farm, and an unselfish cab-driver I consulted advised me to check my bag and take a streetcar to the Isle of Hope. "I could drive you there," he said, "but if you want to see

### MR. BARBEE'S TERRAPIN

some old-fashioned yellow-fever country, you better take the streetcar." I am thankful I followed his advice. The Isle of Hope line is a single-track, Jim Crow, interurban railroad; in its steam-engine days it bore the stirring title Savannah, Thunderbolt & Isle of Hope Railroad. I recommend a trip on it to lovers of Americana. There were only three passengers on the car I boarded. We rattled through Savannah and its suburbs and plunged into a swampy forest of primeval live oaks whose limbs dripped with gloomy Spanish moss. Occasionally we crossed trestles over marshes in which rice was once grown with slave labor, and we passed through a number of small farms whose door-yard bushes were heavy with ripe, crimson pomegranates, the autumn fruit of the South. About five miles out of Savannah, the streetcar rounded a curve and the motorman suddenly put on his brake. A fat milch cow was on the track, grazing on nut grass that grew between the ties. The motorman pulled his whistle cord, but the cow did not budge. Some Gullah Negroes were digging yams in a patch beside the track; one hurried over and kicked the cow and she ambled off. The motorman, who was laughing, stuck his head out and said, "I give you fair warning. Next time she gets on my right of way I'm going to climb out and milk her." The Negro, also laughing, said, "Help yourself, Captain. She's got enough for the both of us."

A short while later we crossed a bridge spanning one of the rice marshes

and reached the Isle of Hope. The streetcar line came to an end directly in front of several weatherbeaten frame buildings, on one of which there was a sign: "Alexander M. Barbee's Son. Dance Pavilion. Operating the Only Diamondback Terrapin Farm in the World. Oysters, Shrimp, Fancy Crabmeat. You Are Welcome." This building extended out over the water on piles, and two battered shrimp sloops were tied to the wharf abutting it; later I learned that this water was the Skidaway, a tidal river. I entered the building and found Mr. Barbee behind a counter, opening bottles of Coca-Cola for some shrimp fishermen. I recognized him from a description given by a Northern yachtsman who told me about the farm just before I went on vacation; he said Mr. Barbee looked "like an easygoing country storekeeper who would rather talk about his merchandise than sell it." I introduced myself and told him I was from New York and wanted to see his terrapin farm.

"Well, sir," he said, "I'm glad to see you. I'll show you the whole works, and I'll see that you get all the terrapin stew you can hold. We're going to barrel up a few terrapin for the New York trade today. The season opens up North around the second week of October, and we commence shipping on the first day of autumn. I've got forty-five hundred in my fattening pen ready to go and I want you to see them, but first we'll go up to the breeding farm. It's up the road a ways." He took off his apron and called to his wife, who was upstairs. "We keep house on the second



floor of the pavilion," he told me. His wife came downstairs and he introduced us, saying, "Rose, I've invited this gentleman to have dinner with us. Make sure he gets a bait of terrapin." Mrs. Barbee, a pretty, red-checked young woman, smiled and said, "Mighty glad to have you."

I followed Mr. Barbee out on the front porch of the pavilion. "Right off the bat," he said, "I better tell you that the most important thing about terrapin meat is its tonic quality. It fills you full of fight. Why do you think so many rich old men eat terrapin? Well, sir, I'll tell you. A terrapin is full of rich, nourishing jelly, and this jelly makes you feel young and spry. To be frank, it's the same as monkey glands. If you were to take and feed terrapin stew to all the people of this country, the birth rate would jump like a flash of lightning. There was a time when the coastal marshes were so full of terrapin they fed the meat to plantation slaves. It was cheaper than sowbelly. Well, I was up to City Hall in Savannah one day and a man there showed me some old papers he had dug out that said the plantation owners of Chatham County were forced to quit feeding terrapin to slaves because it made them breed too much. They wanted them to breed, of course, but they didn't want them to breed that much. Why, they spent all their time breeding. After all, there's a limit to everything."

WE started up an oyster-shell lane that ran beside the river, and I said, "It must be convenient to have the streetcar line end right in front of your pavilion."

"To tell you the truth," Mr. Barbee said, "that's no accident. In a way, that's how the terrapin farm began. My daddy, Alexander Barbee, was a conductor on that road back in steam-engine days. He was French descent, and he liked to eat. He used to buy terrapin the colored people along the railroad would capture in the marshes. At first he just bought a mess now and then for his own table, but in time he took to trading in them, shipping them up to Maryland by the barrel.

"Well, around 1895, diamondbacks got so scarce the price shot up. They had been fished-out. When an old millionaire up North got ready to throw a banquet, he sometimes had to send men up and down the coast to get a supply. So in 1898 it came to pass that my daddy decided to make a stab at raising terrapin in captivity during his off hours from the railroad. Some Northern sci-

entists he wrote to said it was a tomfool idea, absolutely impossible, but he went out at night with the colored people and bogged around in the salt marshes and got so he understood terrapin better than any man in history. When he got ready to buy land for his terrapin farm, he naturally thought of the end of the railroad line. The land there had always looked good to him. It was the most beautiful scene in the world; when he reached it he could knock off and have a cigar. So he bought a few swampy acres, built a shed, and stocked it with terrapin. Every time he got to the end of the run he would jump out and tend to them. He got them in a breeding mood, and by 1912 they were breeding to such an extent he quit his job on the railroad. From time to time he bought more land down here. He was a unusual man. He played the cornet in a band up in Savannah and he had a high opinion of fun, so he built a dance pavilion down here. The pavilion isn't any gold mine, but we still keep it going. I sort of like it. People come out from Savannah on hot nights in the summer and you know how it is—you like to see them."

WE reached the end of the oyster-shell lane and came upon a long, rather dilapidated shed in an oak grove. Green moss was growing on the shingled roof and the whitewash on the clapboards was peeling. There was a big padlock on the door. "This shed is the breeding farm," Mr. Barbee said. "They're born in here, and they stay here until they're around nine summers old. At the beginning of the ninth summer they're put in the fattening pen and allowed to eat their heads off. In the autumn, after they've been fattened for four or five months, they're sent to market. You can eat a terrapin when it's five years old, but I think they taste better around nine. Also, it's wasteful to eat young terrapin, when you consider it takes two nine-year-olds to produce a good pint of clear meat." He unlocked the door but did not open it. Instead, as if he had suddenly changed his mind, he turned around on the steps of the shed and resumed the story of his father.

"Daddy passed away ten years ago and I took charge," he said. "He was quite a man, if I do say so. That white house we passed up there at the bend in the lane was his home. His room is just

the way he left it. It's called the Barbee Musical Room, because everything in it plays a tune. Touch the bed, and a music box in the mattress plays a tune. Hang your hat on the rack, and the same thing happens. Pick up anything on the table from a dice cup to a hairbrush, and you get a tune. Why, there's one hundred and fifty objects in that room that'll play a tune if you just touch them. There's a rubberneck wagon up in Savannah that brings tourists down here to the island just to see it, and we employ a colored girl to stay in the room and answer questions. I bet half the yachtsmen that go to Florida in the winter have visited it.

"Three things Daddy truly admired were diamondbacks, music boxes, and William Jennings Bryan. In 1911, just before he quit the railroad, he put a clutch of terrapin eggs in his grip and went up to Washington and called on Mr. Bryan at his hotel. He had one egg that was just before hatching, and he said to Mr. Bryan, 'Sir, I have long been an admirer of yours and I want to ask a favor. I want you to hold this egg in your hand until it hatches out.' I reckon the great statesman was a bit put out, but Daddy argued him into it, and he held the egg until a little bull terrapin hatched out right on his palm. Daddy thanked him and said he was going to name the little fellow William Jennings Bryan, but Mr. Bryan said he thought Toby would be a better name. Daddy kept that terrapin for many years. He would carry it in his coat pocket everywhere he went. He had it trained so it would wink its right eye whenever he said, 'See here, Toby, ain't it about time for a drink?'"

Mr. Barbee laughed. "Yes, sir-ree," he said, "Daddy was a sight." He swung the shed door open. A rickety catwalk extended the length of

the shed, and on each side of it were nine stalls whose floors swarmed with thousands of terrapin of all ages. Some were the size of a thumbnail and some were as big as a man's hand. There was a musky but not unpleasant smell in the shed. The diamondback is a lovely creature. On both sides of its protruding, distinctly snakelike head are pretty, multi-colored lines and splotches. The hard shell in which it is boxed glints like worn leather. On the top shell, or carapace, are thirteen diamond-shaped designs, which may be pale gold, silvery, or al-



most black. Sometimes a terrapin shows up with fourteen diamonds on its shell; Mr. Barbee said that Negroes save these rare shells for good luck. The belly shell, or plastron, is the color of the keys of an old piano. "We measure them by placing a steel ruler on the belly shell," Mr. Barbee said, bending over and lifting a terrapin out of a stall. The creature opened its sinister little jaws, darted its head from left to right, and fought with its claws. "This cow will measure six and a half inches, which means she's around eight years of age. Next year she'll be ready for the stew-pot. The price a terrapin brings at retail is largely based on shell length. In New York you'd pay between three and a half and five dollars for a seven-inch cow. An eight-inch one might bring seven dollars." Mr. Barbee noticed that I was watching the terrapin's jaws. "Oh, they never bite," he said.

"Are bull terrapin used in stews?" I asked.

"A bull's meat is tougher but just as palatable," he said. "A bull doesn't grow as big as a cow. You seldom see one longer than five inches. Also, from eggs hatched in captivity we get eighteen cows to every bull. That's a fact I can't explain. Naturally the bulls are over-worked, so we strengthen the herd by putting wild bulls in the pen at breeding time. We employ hunters to capture them in the winter, when terrapin hibernate. They don't eat anything from frost until around March. They burrow in the marsh mud and sleep through the winter. They always leave an air hole in the mud, and that's what hunters look for. Some hunters use dogs called terrapin hounds, which are trained to recognize these holes. When a hound finds a hole he bays, and the hunter digs the terrapin out. We buy wild terrapin and ship them right along with our home-grown stock. My terrapin are raised so naturally they taste exactly like wild ones just pulled out of the mud. The difference is impossible to detect."

Mr. Barbee returned the terrapin he had been holding to its stall, and she crawled off. He said that, just as in the wild state, captive cows begin laying eggs in the late spring, nesting in shallow holes which they dig with their hind claws in sand on the stall floors. A cow may lay twice in a season, depositing a total of twenty eggs. The eggs are about the size of pecans and are elastic; they do not crack under pressure. In the tidal marshes the eggs hatch in from two to three months; on the farm they are stolen from the nests and incubated.

Just how this is done, Mr. Barbee flatly declined to tell. "That's the Barbee family secret," he said.

An old Negro came into the shed. "Looky, looky, here comes Cooky," he said. He was carrying a bucket. "Jesse Beach, my foreman," Mr. Barbee said. "His bucket is full of crab legs and chopped-up oysters." The old man went down the catwalk, tossing a handful of food into each stall. I had noticed that the moment he entered the shed, the terrapin commenced crawling toward the front of their stalls. "They know Jesse," Mr. Barbee said. The terrapin converged on the food, shouldering each other out of the way, just as puppies do. They ate greedily. "Diamondbacks make wonderful pets," Mr. Barbee said. "I sell a lot of babies for that purpose. They are much more interesting than the dumb little turtles they sell in pet shops."

WE followed the old Negro out of the shed and Mr. Barbee locked the door. "We'll take a look at the fattening pen now," he said. We went to one of the shacks alongside the pavilion. It housed a crabmeat cannery, another of the thrifty Mr. Barbee's enterprises. Between the shack and the riverbank, half in the water and half in the shore mud, was a board corral. The shallow, muddy water in it seethed with forty-five hundred full-grown terrapin. "This is a terrapin heaven," Mr. Barbee said. On one side of the corral was a cement walk, and when we stepped on it our shadows fell athwart the water and the terrapin sunning themselves on the surface promptly dived to the bottom. The tips of their inquisitive heads reappeared immediately and I could see hundreds of pairs of beady eyes staring up. "They're fat and sassy," Mr. Barbee said. "There's a pipe leading from the shucking table in the crab cannery right into the pen, and the legs and discarded flesh from the shucked crabs drop right into the water. The terrapin hang around the spout of the pipe and gobble up everything that comes along. Sooner or later those terrapin down there will appear on the finest tables in the country. God knows they're expensive, but that can't be helped. I feed a terrapin nine years before I sell it, and when you think of all the crabmeat and good Georgia oysters those fellows have put away, you can understand why a little-bitty bowl of terrapin stew costs three dollars and a half." While we stood there gazing down into a muddy pool containing more than \$11,000 worth of sleek reptiles, the Negro foreman walked up

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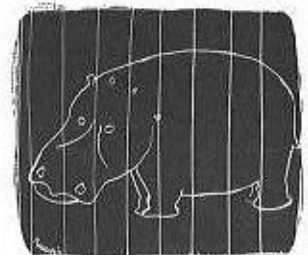
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with an empty barrel and a basket of Spanish moss. He doused the moss in the river and made a bed on the bottom of the barrel. The barrel had air holes cut in it. Then he reached in the pool and grabbed six terrapin. He scrubbed them off with a stiff brush and placed them on the wet moss. Then he covered them with moss and placed six more on this layer, continuing the sandwiching process until the barrel contained three dozen. While he was putting the head on the barrel, Mrs. Barbee came to a window of the pavilion and called, "Come to dinner."

THE table was laid on the back porch of the pavilion, overlooking the Skidaway, and there was a bottle of amontillado on it. Mr. Barbee and I had a glass of it, and then Mrs. Barbee brought out three bowls of terrapin stew, Southern style, so hot it was bubbling. The three of us sat down, and while we ate, Mrs. Barbee gave me a list of the things in the stew. She said it contained the meat, hearts, and livers of two diamondbacks killed early that day, eight yolks of hard-boiled eggs that had been pounded up and passed through a sieve, a half pound of yellow country butter, two pints of thick cream, a little flour, a pinch of salt, a dash of nutmeg, and a glass and a half of amontillado. The meat came off the terrapins' tiny bones with a touch of the spoon, and it tasted like delicate baby mushrooms. I had a second and a third helping. The day was clear and cool, and sitting there, drinking dry sherry and eating terrapin, I looked at the scarlet leaves on the sweet gums and swamp maples on the riverbank, and at the sandpipers running stiff-legged on the sand, and at the people sitting in the sun on the decks of the yachts anchored in the Skidaway, and I decided that I was about as happy as a human can be in the autumn of 1939. After the stew we had croquettes made of crabmeat and a salad of little Georgia shrimp. Then we had some Carolina whiting that had been pulled out of the Atlantic at the mouth of the Skidaway early that morning. With the sweet, tender whiting, we had butter beans and ears of late corn that were jerked off the stalk only a few minutes before they were dropped in the



pot. We began eating at one o'clock; at four we had coffee.

THREE afternoons later, back in Manhattan, I visited the terrapin market of New York, which is located in three ancient buildings near the corner of Beekman and Front Streets, in Fulton Market. The largest of these is occupied by Moore & Co., an old black-bean, turtle-soup, and terrapin-stew firm now owned by a gourmet named Francesco Castelli. Each winter it sells around two thousand quarts of diamondback stew. In Mr. Castelli's establishment I saw the barrel of terrapin I had watched Mr. Barbee's foreman pack on the Isle of Hope. "I order a lot of Barbee's stuff and I ordered it from his father before him," Mr. Castelli said. "I also use terrapin from the Chesapeake Bay area, from the Cape Hatteras area of North Carolina, from New Jersey, and Long Island." Mr. Castelli believes that turtle and terrapin meat is the most healthful in the world and likes to tell about a fox terrier which lived in his factory and ate nothing but turtle meat until he died in 1921, aged twenty-five. He uses all his terrapin in his stewpots and sells no live ones.

Live ones are sold by a rather sharp-spoken old Irishman on Front Street named D. R. Quinn, who has been in the business most of his life and has not developed a taste for the meat, and by Walter T. Smith, Inc., also on Front Street. Smith's is sixty-two years old and is one of the largest turtle firms in the world; its cable address, Turtling, is known to many European chefs. It sells all kinds of edible turtles, including treacherous snappers and great 150-pound green turtles out of the Caribbean, from which most turtle soup is made. Snappers, prized for soup in Philadelphia, are not popular here. They can knock a man off his feet with their alligatorlike tails and have been known to snap off the fingers of fishermen; few New York chefs are hardy enough to handle them. I had a talk with Mr. Kurt W. Freund, manager of the firm, and he took me up the sagging stairs to the room in which his tanks are kept and showed me diamondbacks from every state on the Eastern seaboard except Maine. A few were from sloughs on Long Island. He said that in the local trade all terrapin caught from Maryland north are called Long Islands. He said that in the North, terrapin hunting is a fisherman's sideline and that few hunters north of Maryland catch more than a couple of dozen a year.

"I imagine you're under the impres-

sion that millionaires buy most of our terrapin," Mr. Freund said. "If so, you're dead wrong. During prohibition the terrapin business was hard hit, and it's just beginning to come back, and for years the poor Chinese laundryman has been the backbone of our trade. I'd say that seventy per cent of the sixteen thousand live diamondbacks sold on this street last year were bought by old Chinese. Come look out this window and see my sign." Hanging from the second-floor window was a red-and-white wooden signboard smeared with Chinese characters. Mr. Freund said the characters were pronounced "gim ten guoy" and meant "diamondback terrapin." He said that each autumn he hires a Chinese to write form letters quoting terrapin prices, which are distributed by the hundred in Chinatown.

"An old Chinese does not run to the drugstore or the doctor when he gets creaky in the joints," Mr. Freund said. "He saves his pennies and buys himself a terrapin. He cooks it with herbs and rice whiskey. Usually he puts so much

whiskey in it he gets a spree as well as a tonic. In the autumn and in the spring the old Chinese come in and bargain. They balance terrapin on their palms and deliberate half an hour before making a selection. The turtle has been worshipped in China for centuries. It's supposed to have tonic and aphrodisiac qualities. The local Chinese certainly believe it has. Most of my steady Chinese customers are old laundrymen, and I know that some of them are practically penniless, but they think terrapin meat will do them more good than the finest doctor."

I told Mr. Freund that Mr. Barbee professed to believe that the consumption of terrapin meat is better than monkey glands for regaining youthfulness.

"Seriously," I said, "do you think there's anything to it?"

"I've been around terrapin a good while, and I've eaten the meat myself for years, and I've discussed the matter with scores of old Chinese," Mr. Freund said, "and I wouldn't be surprised."

—JOSEPH MITCHELL

## INCIDENT ON MADISON AVENUE

On Saturday, amid the crowd  
That in the sunshine drifted by,  
I wandered happy as a cloud  
Afloat with fellow-cumuli,  
Till suddenly, and face to face,  
I came on Mr. Morgan's place.

On Mr. Morgan's house I came,  
Where wonder brought me to a standstill.  
The iron gates were yet the same,  
The gardens stretched on either hand still.  
But, oh, I noticed, nearly fainting,  
How window sills cried out for painting.

As shabby and as weather-beat  
As those of mortgage-bearing biped,  
The sashes shamed that shining street;  
They were not even washed and wiped.  
And, staring on that sight appalling,  
I felt the world around me falling.

Upon my ears the tumbrels sounded,  
While wealth decayed and Fortune groaned.  
I looked on Privilege, surrounded,  
The Mighty from their seats dethroned.  
And quick, in terror and abasement,  
I fled each drear, unpainted casement.

Now, hidden from the curious gapers,  
I weep and know the end is near.  
I have not dared to read the papers,  
Lest they should tell me what I fear:  
That mine and Wall Street's Patron Saint  
Cannot afford a can of paint.

—PHYLLIS MCGINLEY