

THE GREAT CHILI CHAMPIONSHIP FIX

When Author H. Allen Smith claimed he knew more about chili than anyone else, some simmering Texans challenged him to a cookoff that wound up in controversy and settled nothing, including stomachs

By **Gary Cartwright**

Justice was never an issue: Texas chili had been defiled. Yet the world championship chili con carne cookoff ended in no contest October 21 when the Dallas-based CASI (Chili Appreciation Society International) got cold feet.

It started as a routine Saturday afternoon lynching. Author-Humorist H. Allen Smith had waived caution and had submitted himself to CASI's plot to call attention to itself, hence to the chili recipe it is sworn to protect. Smith's attraction was that he fixed his name to an August story in *Holiday* magazine titled: *Nobody Knows More About Chili Than I Do*. From a hook that large, CASI could hang a Brahma bull. When Smith allowed himself to be coerced from his home in Mount Kisco, N.Y. to the ghost town of Terlingua, Texas, in the remote Big Bend country—there to cook burner to burner against CASI's chief chili chef, Wick Fowler—he had played into the hands of his enemy.

Texans for historical reasons believe that any chili that isn't theirs is trickery. A man who orders chili with beans would probably put catsup in his coffee. Beans are another matter entirely. So are fresh tomato, sweet bell pepper and other ingredients of Smith's school of chili. CASI is a self-appointed police force against such practices. In 1962 CASI Founder and Chief Chili Head George Haddaway attacked the chef of the Dobbs House kitchen at Houston International Airport because some infidel included Boston baked beans in his order of chili. The police came and, according to CASI records, berated the cook.

For the chili challenge, CASI selected the perfect battleground: Terlingua (pop. 9), in sprawling, barren Brewster County, which has a land mass equal to the combined areas of Rhode Island and Connecticut, but a population of fewer than 7,000. Only foolish

pride or an incurable dope habit would force a man into this country to take a chance he knew he didn't have. CASI did not care which it was with H. Allen Smith.

Founded in 1951, CASI is an indefinite number of middle-aged, middle-class chili lovers. They are publishers, newspaper editors, prosperous attorneys columnists, local television personalities and ranking public-relations men. They have granted chapters to Los Angeles, Mexico City (Chino Ortiz, former Mexican ambassador to Chile, is a card-carrying CASI member), Tokyo, Saigon, Danang, Kansas City and to the National Press Club in Washington. But the nerve center of the organization is Dallas. Members of CASI prefer their chili thick, and they demand that it be hot. They are proud to burn in the name of chili con carne.

In the week preceding the contest, the chili war attracted front-page notice in papers ranging from The Austin-American Statesman to The Wall Street Journal, which billed the cookoff as the "Chili Bowl." Prodded on by The Dallas Morning News Columnist Frank X. Tolbert, the cookoff took on the aspects of a bitter political campaign.

Wick Fowler is a 255-pound sometime newspaper reporter who packages and sells his own chili mix and travels extensively (he recently returned from Vietnam) in the name of CASI. His recipe is the outgrowth of a bunch of fun-loving pals dumping personal theories in the cook pot aboard his houseboat; but he believes it to be so surefire that he brought along a package of his two-alarm mix to use in the preparation of his entry. His Caliente Chili, Inc. of Austin will package and sell 200,000 batches this year: together with two pounds of lean, coarse-ground meat, one eight-ounce can of tomato sauce and some water, each package makes 1½ quarts of chili (the alarm number is optional) and costs \$1 by mail.

Fowler admitted that he had never tasted Smith's chili, but added, "I saw a punch bowl of it recently. It makes a very clever centerpiece."

Smith heard this and called Fowler "hen-headed." He observed further that a "fowler is a despoiler of little birds. A wick is a hunk of rag stuck in a container of oil. It burns with a flickering, smelly flame. This Wick Fowler. I believe, will burn with the searing flame of ignominy at Terlingua next Saturday at high noon."

Columnist Tolbert—once threatened with expulsion by CASI for championing a greaseless chili favored by LBJ's doctors, but more recently, on publication of his book,

A Bowl of Red, elevated to the position of a poet laureate of the society—jumped on the story.

What incensed Tolbert and his cronies was not the title of Smith's magazine article, which could be dismissed as eastern stupidity, but Smith's references attacking the revered chili pepper on which the Texas recipe hinges ("It killeth dogs") and the Texans' habit of thickening their boil with masa flour ("You might as well throw in some maraschino cherries").

What is more, Smith's recipe called for vegetables and, God help him, canned pinto beans. Tolbert wrote that Smith's recipe put him in mind of "a chili-powder-flavored low-torque beef gruel."

Smith got into personalities, firing off a letter describing his antagonists as a bunch of "childish, semirumped, Rotarian-type cracker breakers...."

"I have read most of Smith's books...in fact, all the dirty ones," retorted Fowler. "He is a very funny man. The funniest thing he ever wrote was that chili recipe."

To insure that the judgment would be a fair-and-square victory for Fowler and Texas, CASI asked each contestant to select one judge. The society appointed the balancing judge. He was Dallas Attorney David Witts, who is half owner (with Auto Racing Impresario Carroll Shelby) of the 200,000-acre Terlingua Ranch on which the ghost town is situated. Witts also happens to be one of three "kitchen helpers" in CASI's hierarchy. Fowler's advocate was Floyd Schneider, vice-president of a San Antonio brewery; H. Allen Smith puzzled the enemy camp by naming a Texan, Mrs. Hallie Stillwell of Alpine, as his judge. Mrs. Stillwell is Peace Justice of Precinct 1, Brewster County. Her court is in Hell's Half-Acre, Texas, an hour's ride from Stillwell's Crossing. It was much later that CASI learned she is H. Allen Smith's cousin, but that was a paltry concession, under the circumstances.

It was apparent that if Fowler didn't wear down his opponent, the land would. The Big Bend is a lonely, hostile, strangely beautiful land. At times it is like the wildest parts of Arizona; at times the wind wails across the moonscape, and a ghost light winks down from the Chisos (Spanish for ghost) Mountains. It changes personalities constantly. The mountains go from purple gray in the deep shadows of morning to a soft sand in the glare of the day, and they are arranged in a hundred shapes and sizes. In some parts the ranges are long and spiny in the silhouettes of sleeping dinosaurs. Others break off

sharply; one resembles a reclining profile of George Washington. Still others are blobs, swirled at the peaks like fresh soft candy, or pinched at the sides to suggest Smokey Bear hats. Landmarks have such fetching names as Hen Egg Mountain (elevation: 5,002 feet), Squaw's Tit Peak and Dirty Women Creek.

"This land is unlike anything I know," says David Witts. "It's scraggy, violent, colorful, friendly, brutal, a paradox at every turn. You wouldn't think you could raise cattle out here, but we had 4,000 head last spring. There are places in Texas where cattle literally die from overeating. Out here there is not much to chew on, but what there is has a very high mineral content."

When Witts bought the land he didn't know he was getting a ghost town in the bargain. Inspired by Dallas Public-relations Man Tom Tierney, a city government was elected. For the first time in three decades Terlingua had a mayor, David Witts. Tolbert was elected water commissioner. In time most members of CASI found titles for themselves. Shelby is chairman of the Terlingua Racing Authority. His Cobras race all over the world under the banner of the Terlingua Racing Team. Europeans, says Shelby, are instantly impressed with the fact that the Terlingua Racing Team insists it was founded in 1860, some years before the invention of the combustion engine. The team emblem is three feathers and a jackrabbit holding his hand against the sun (allegedly saying, "Hold the peppers"), and among other racing titles currently on display in the Terlingua archives is the 1967 Trans-American Sedan Series championship.

Like the vast country where it hides, Terlingua is a town of contrasts—the most obvious being that it lives a lot for a ghost.

Until the mines watered out, Terlingua was the largest producer of quicksilver in the U.S. There was a time when maybe 5,000 boomtowners lived here. Now the population is given as nine, although Terlingua Post Master Daisy F. Adams (the post office is three miles from town) estimates the figure at closer to 20. "The number don't vary a bunch," cackles Daisy, showing off the single tooth remaining in her mouth, "'cause every time a baby is born around here, a man leaves town."

The Terlingua Inn, the one-room jail, the church and the old Perry Mansion still stand more or less as they were at the turn of the century, when Chicago promoter Howard E. Perry had the spot jumping. The opera house next to the inn is four walls and sky. Several dozen crumbling adobe and bleached mud structures protrude in ruins from the

scrubby hills, and one corner of town spills off into an 850-foot open mine shaft, where the town met its final irony: early miners abandoned Terlingua because of its heat (up to 120°) and its drought; their successors quit because the richest vein of all was submerged in an underground lake 850 feet below the earth's surface.

The town is laced across a jagged mesa sunk between the Chisos (pronounced to rhyme with Jesus) Mountains to the southeast in Big Bend National Park, and the Christmas Mountains to the north, where some prospectors "got lost and didn't get out till Christmas." In early times three Indian tribes—the Apaches, the Comanches and the Kiowa—would gather here, form raiding parties and sweep west across the Rio Grande into Mexico. The Indians called the place Tres Linguas (three tongues) and the cowboys corrupted that into Terlingua.

An old Indian named Marcos Hinojosa sometimes appears and sells warm beer to tourists who find their way to Terlingua. Hinojosa says that everything in the Big Bend "sticks, stings or stinks," but nothing really stinks now that the mines are closed. Dry lava beds curl through the dusty green sagebrush, through the century plants and Spanish daggers. There are no trees. The tallest living thing is the ocotillo, a desert shrub whose thorny ash-white arms reach higher than the head of a man or a bear. Mountain lions, bobcats, jackrabbits, rattlesnakes and enormous centipedes and scorpions have the land to themselves. The nearest center of commerce is Study Butte (pronounced Stewty Butte locally), five miles to the east. There a single resident named Maggie-Maggie operates a gas station-general store-beer hall. She wears ankle-length Indian dresses and carries a loaded pistol in her long bloomers for when the boys come to town. Tooter and four other cowpunchers who work the Terlingua spread do their regular drinking at Maggie's because the next closest center of civilization is Alpine, 79 miles north and across the Del Norte Mountain Range.

Nearly a full week before burn of if time, H. Allen Smith mysteriously appeared in Alpine and checked into the Ponderosa Inn. There on Thursday night he met Fowler for the first time.

"Mr. Smith let Mr. Fowler do all the drinking and most of the talking," reported Cocktail Waitress Jean Page. "Then Mr. Smith picked up the check."

Friday at noon Fowler's backers threw a cocktail party at the Holiday Inn near Dallas' Love Field, then herded their chili heads and a band of newsmen and cameramen into

three chartered planes for the flight to Terlingua. Two hours and 30 minutes later, while a four-piece country and western band brought in from Fort Stockton played in the swirling dust, the planes touched down on the graded runway they call Terlingua International Airport. By Saturday there were 20 private planes parked in the brush. Shelby had flown in with his own contingent from Los Angeles. It included a bogus monk introduced as Father Duffy, and a young man wearing the cap of a Los Angeles policeman.

Father Duffy arrived fortified with two women friends. This appalled the Dallas delegation, which had piously insisted the junket be stag. CASI delegates feared their wives would find out. They did, anyhow. A group identified as the Terlingua Women's Auxiliary chartered a small plane, which buzzed the Terlingua Inn at the close of festivities, spraying the ghost town with 16,000 yellow cards. Engraved on the cards were such messages as: "Congratulations, you get the children" and "We'll arrange the alimony to fit your budget." One wife also told The Dallas Morning News she put crumbled crackers in her husband's sleeping bag.

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CASI members pride themselves on enduring traditional frontier hardships: hot chili isn't the only pain they bear. Sleeping bags and toothbrushes were the only luggage permitted aboard. Several members carried pocket knives, and one Dallas attorney wore his duck-hunting suit. An enormous supply of beer was flown ahead. Witts and Shelby furnished other liquid refreshment at ranch headquarters, and Walter Jetton, Lyndon Johnson's personal barbecuer, was hauled along to do the cooking.

The delegates clambered into two bar-equipped red school buses which would ferry them first to the ghost town, then to the ranch where they would make camp. The trip from Terlingua to the ranch is 35 miles and takes about an hour. One bus barely missed a mountain lion. The other bus encountered no lions, but CASI members counted one horse, two cows, a Pearl beer can and any number of rabbits, hawks and eagles. A Dallas photographer smuggled along a length of rope because he knew that rattlesnakes will not attack a sleeping man who is surrounded by rope, then abandoned the idea when it was called to his attention that scorpions love rope.

Nights in the Big Bend are cold and damp, and the ground is hard. Animals move in the night. By Saturday morning it was assumed at CASI Camp that H. Allen Smith was dead, but the room clerk at the Ponderosa Inn assured the sore, red-eyed chili heads that that wasn't the case.

Tooter the Cowboy was there, representing the rank and file of Terlingua society. Tooter is a wiry, hell-raising drifter who looks something like an insensitive Montgomery Clift. When he is sober he trains horses for Ranch Manager Harold Wynne. Tooter wasn't sober this particular weekend. He was what Wynne called "mean drunk." Tooter drank and played poker until the last chili head fell out, and he was waiting on horseback, a beer bottle in one hand, when CASI delegates staggered to the outdoor breakfast tables of Walter Jetton. While chili heads spooned their eggs and asked each other what could be worse than a hangover, Tooter showed them what, galloping his cutting horse between the crowded tables and over the sleeping bags where some of the frontiersmen were still crumpled.

The following night Tooter took more money from the Dallas folks and terrorized Father Duffy and his friends. Ranch Manager Wynne explained that Tooter sometimes has trouble sleeping. This time the trouble was two Mexicans, brothers of a boy he had pistol-whipped in Study Butte, who were hoping to shoot him.

By high noon Saturday an estimated 500 chili fanciers had materialized out of the desert and pushed up to the front porch of the Terlingua Inn. They were overwhelmingly pro Fowler. They had come to drink free beer, sample chili and inspect firsthand "the elderly challenger H. Allen 'Soupy' Smith of New York," as Tolbert called him—though, in fact, it was CASI that had issued the challenge.

Smith appeared fit and rested. He wore a fresh open-neck sports shirt and had a sidearm strapped low on his hip. Fowler had slept in a garage under the ranch house and had been sick all night with a virus. While he made jokes about Smith's ancestry, particularly about the fact that Smith learned about chili in Decatur, Ill., his heart wasn't in it. Fowler, who at 58 is a year younger than his opponent, started appreciating chili during the Depression, when a bowl of red cost 5¢ in south Texas.

"It was cheap and greasy, and it saved my life," he says doggedly.

Precook ceremonies opened at 11:35 a.m. with a blessing originated years ago by a Negro cowpuncher and chuck-wagon cook named Bones Hooks.

It begins like this:

"Lord, God, You know us old cowhands is forgetful. Sometimes I can't even recollect what happened yestiddy. We is forgetful. We just know daylight and dark, summer, fall, winter and spring. But I sure hope we don't never forget to thank You before we is about to eat a mess of good chili. We don't know why, in Your wisdom, You been so doggone good to us. The Chinees don't have no chili, ever. The Frenchmens is left out. The Rooshians don't know no more about chili than a hog does about a sidesaddle. Even the Meskins don't get a good whiff of it unless they stay around here. Chili eaters is some of Your chosen people...."

When their praying was done and Master of Ceremonies Bill Rives had led the 500 in the singing of Hello, Terlingua, a song of his own composition, Rives tossed off a couple of one-liners accusing Smith of violating several city ordinances and read a letter from the governor making Smith an honorary citizen of Texas—an honor that Smith declined.

At noon they got with it. For two hours two pots boiled, two reputations simmered. The contestants watched their pots and posed for pictures, offering ladles of chili to Father Duffy or holding their noses at the misfortune of being so close to their opponent's entry. The hot Texas air was thick with spice. At one point Smith seemed dispirited. "What

chance do I have?" he asked. "Last week Tolbert claimed in his column that a Texas Baptist preacher invented the airplane. Before this is over he'll be saying that Wick Fowler invented caviar in Swampnose Park on the Pecos River. There is no end to what these people will do."

He was wrong, happily, for judgment was swiftly approaching. The Fort Stockton plowboys laid down their instruments. Two amateur chili makers from Abilene who had been distributing free bowls of red under a tent in the shade of an adobe ruin stood at attention. Daisy F. Adams said this was the most dramatic thing she had witnessed since they no-billed Whet Thompson for gunning down a wetback at his front gate. In grand silence the three judges stood blindfolded on the porch. And while Matchmaker Tom Tierney did a vote-by-vote over the public address, they tasted.

Mrs. Stillwell voted for No. 2, giving Smith the lead. Floyd Schneider made it one-all, lining himself with Fowler.

Then an extraordinary thing happened. Tie-breaker Witts allowed someone to guide a spoon of chili to his mouth, and promptly spit it all over the referee's foot. Then he went into convulsions. He rammed a white handkerchief down his throat as though he were cleaning a rifle barrel, and in an agonizing whisper Witts pronounced himself unable to go on.

"I have to see a doctor," Witts explained. "I declare a one-year moratorium in the world championship chili con carne cook off."

The world will never know which bowl of chili maimed Witts. Texans take the chauvinistic view, assuming it was Smith's batch with the Kimbell-brand pinto beans and a tart sweetness like Walter Jetton's barbecue sauce with a sprinkle of chili powder added. Smith says flatly that Witts was stricken "by that vile scalding mud Texans call chili."

The world may not even care.

What CASI has in mind is a rematch one year to the day in Mount Kisco, N.Y., but then Smith won't be in Mount Kisco, N.Y. one year from now. He will be in Alpine. He was enchanted by the country where his lynching was to take place, so he bought a piece of land not far from Sul Ross State College. Soupy Smith is building a home in the Big Bend.

