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for Don O'Briant's book, BACKWOODS ~~CAFE~~ <sup>Buffet</sup>

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not stapled

Sept. books will  
be out

Carlene's Cafe - from Backwoods Buffet  
a book by Don O'Briant - County  
Cafe

Carlene's Cafe is located as far east off I-75, as you can go, straight-shot on State Highway 94--Fargo, Georgia. Hang a left on Highway 441 and you're at Carlene's; hang a right and you'll cross the Suwannee River and arrive at the entrance to the Stephen Foster State Park, in the Okefenokee Swamp. Keep going south on 441, or angle eastward onto 94 again, and you'll wind up in Florida with all the seniors and palm trees. Oh, Fargo has a few palms itself, and seniors, though of a different sort: many of them still work, and all of them feel necessary. None has a face-lift. There's even a Gator Motel in Fargo, and a post office and a couple of filling stations with the cheapest gas and the most genuine people, some say, in Georgia or Florida.

According to Doris Long, current owner of Carlene's Cafe, over a span of some sixty-odd years, numerous area people have owned the old street-front cafe, beginning with Arti-~~E~~ Griffis Brooks.

Aside from the all-you-can-eat buffet, featuring fried chicken and hopping-john (you don't have to mix your rice and peas) and the tenderest cornbread in southeast Georgia (Ruthie, cook and waitress, even taught me how to make it), what I like about Carlene's is watching the customers: locals drifting in from the deerwoods, the

logging woods, and the old homeplaces scattered throughout the Clinch and Echols County flatwoods. My home, Echols County, stops just west of the Fargo city limits, at Suwanoochee Creek. I like the contrast of the natives with the foreigners come to scout out the Okefenokee. The natives already know the Okefenokee, heart of their homeland. Like their parents and grandparents, dipping back into the generations, they live and work there. The foreigners...well, they can't quite get over these down-to-earth Fargoians with all the time in the world to sit and eat and swap news in an atmosphere of Indian artifacts and crochet-work by the good ladies of Fargo trying to make an extra dime, or just sharing with the world something pretty they've made.

Table one, on the right side of the single-room, wood-paneled cafe is reserved for the regulars--no sign, the reservation is simply understood--, honest, hard-working men in for the noon meal we call "dinner." Or you can breakfast at five A.M. and stay for supper--you have to leave by 8 P.M., unless you aren't quite through eating. Friday, fishday, marks the end of the work week and the start of the weekend: more young people on Saturdays, and on Sundays, the same crowd but dressed up after church. Any day of the week, while you eat, Ruthie and Carlene wander from table one to table ten with pitchers of sweet, steeped tea. They'll get you unsweet tea--no problem, ma'am--if that's what you want.

One fellow, at table one, who is thin as a sunset shadow of a pine, doesn't eat his chicken fried or his green beans seasoned with smoked pork. So every day, Monday through Sunday, exactly at twelve o'clock noon, as signaled by the next-door Methodist Church chimes pealing off old-timey hymns, his plate of boiled food is waiting.

There are bottles of pepper sauce on the tables for your greens, and you can visit the sparkling chrome-and-white kitchen if you have time. And if you want to pick your teeth, that's okay too. Everybody else is.