THE LIFE AND TIMES OF
Carson Gulley
BY SCOTT SEYFORTH
During the decade of the 1950s, Carson Gulley crisscrossed Wisconsin presenting hundreds of cooking lectures and demonstrations to school, community, and civic groups. He was often one of the only African American speakers invited into the communities he visited. Here Gulley is speaking to the Rotary Club of Madison in 1954.
In August 1965, at the height of the civil rights movement—the same month President Lyndon Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act into law and the Watts Riots shook Los Angeles—the University of Wisconsin Regents voted to name a building on campus after Carson Gulley, a beloved longtime university chef. Carson Gulley Commons was the first UW–Madison building named after an African American, and the first building on campus named after a civil-service employee. Though now largely forgotten, Carson Gulley was a celebrated figure in the mid-twentieth century, known for his groundbreaking efforts crossing racial barriers in Wisconsin as a teacher, a radio and television personality, and a pioneer in the struggle for equal housing. The story of Gulley’s life sheds light on the persistent practices of racial segregation and exclusion in Wisconsin in the twentieth century and illustrates how one African American used his professional and public stature to challenge those practices.

Carson Gulley was born in 1897 in Nevada Township, Arkansas, the third of ten siblings. His parents, Ely and Elizabeth Gulley, grew cotton, and Gulley began work in the fields at age six. School was held in the local church and the calendar was based around the needs of the cotton fields. As a child, Gulley usually only attended school for two months a year.

When Gulley was sixteen years old, his father hoped to improve his son’s chances at success in life and apprenticed him to a teacher in a nearby community, where Gulley worked in exchange for tutoring. He graduated from high school at eighteen years old, passing in two years. Following his graduation, he took the teaching examinations and returned to teach in his local church schoolhouse while also sharecropping. Gulley taught school there for three years, learning how to teach and acquiring the skills of an educator. He would utilize these skills for the remainder of a lifetime spent teaching and educating others.

In 1917, at the age of twenty, Gulley married Maybelle Lenor, and by 1923 they had four children. Little is known of Gulley’s early family life with his first wife and children. At some point in the 1920s, Gulley and Maybelle separated and the children stayed with their mother in Arkansas.

Gulley attempted sharecropping cotton in 1918 on an eighty-acre farm, with several acres planted with vegetables for home use. Working diligently, he produced a bumper crop of cotton. But the landowner claimed high operating expenses and took all of Gulley’s profits, a common occurrence in sharecropping. The following year brought the same success with the crops, the same claims from the landowner, and Gulley gave up the farm. He decided to leave home to try to find a trade for himself, determined to find some kind of work other than sharecropping.

When Gulley left rural Arkansas, he joined the first Great Migration of over 1.6 million African Americans. They moved from mostly rural areas in the South to northern and midwestern cities, leaving Jim Crow segregation with its widespread violence and terror and lack of economic opportunity for African Americans. At first Gulley tried the construction business, where for a few months he worked as a hod carrier, carrying bricks and other construction materials for plasterers and bricklayers. But that position ended abruptly when his employer went broke.

Then, in 1921, Gulley landed a dishwashing job in a little restaurant in the oil boom town of El Dorado, Arkansas. When the cook quit, Gulley was allowed to cook in his place, and after a four-week trial, he became the head cook. He stayed on for several months, but eventually made the decision to move...
around the Midwest, learning the cooking trade in cafes, restaurants, and railroad cars. “In those days,” Gulley recalled, “there were no schools for chefs, and if there were, I didn’t know of them. One had to serve a long apprenticeship, but it was difficult for me to obtain this training, since my connections were poor and my background deemed an insufficient recommendation. I left El Dorado, and traveled about from place to place, picking up jobs here and there, and trying to learn all I could as I went along. Frequently more kindly chefs would help; more often they would not. And, so it went for years.”

Gulley served as pastry cook at the Baltimore Hotel in Kansas City, Missouri, which led to an assignment as a chef at a large chain restaurant in Saint Louis. It was at this restaurant in 1922 that Gulley—and a piece of his Washington Pie—caught the attention of the president of Principia Institute, a Saint Louis Christian Science educational institute, who hired Gulley as head chef. Gulley would work at Principia for the next four years.

During his time at Principia, when the institute was closed for the summer, Gulley worked at summer resorts in Kansas and Florida, and spent some of the busiest days of his work life at an exclusive resort at Lake Chautauqua, New York, where on Sundays he cooked 1,400 chicken pot pies.

In the summer of 1926, while Gulley was cooking at the Essex Lodge in Tomahawk, Wisconsin, Don Halverson, the director of university housing at UW–Madison, happened to stop at the lodge for the evening. The kitchen was closed, but Gulley opened it and served Halverson a memorable meal. Afterward, Halverson asked to meet the chef. When Gulley came out, they visited for a long time and Halverson stayed another day at the lodge getting to know Gulley—inviting him fishing at 5:00 a.m. and enjoying the noon and night meals that day. Before leaving, Halverson offered Gulley a job at the university. Several months later, in December 1926, Gulley began his career at the University of Wisconsin at the age of twenty-nine.

As he established himself in his work at Madison, Gulley also met the woman who would become his second wife: Beatrice Russey, the sister-in-law to one of his brothers. Beatrice lived in Chidester, Arkansas, and Gulley courted her long-distance, eventually asking her mother if Beatrice could move to Madison. In 1930, Beatrice made the move, renting a room with a family in town. On Saturday, July 26, 1930, Gulley asked Beatrice to go for a ride in his car. While out driving, they stopped at the home of Reverend Joseph Washington, the pastor of Mount Zion Baptist Church. Once inside the house, Beatrice took a seat. In response, Reverend Washington said, “Sister, you don’t sit down for this. You stand up for what you’re going to do.” Gulley laughed and remarked to the pastor, “She’s getting married, but she doesn’t know it.” The marriage proposal that day was a surprise to Beatrice, but one she accepted on the spot.

Gulley continued his work at the university until, in 1936, he was invited by the president of Tuskegee Institute to develop and instruct a ten-week summer course as in-service training
for currently employed chefs. Gulley was granted a short-term leave from his position as chef at the University of Wisconsin to spend the summer immersed in life at Tuskegee Institute, one of the most important centers of African American identity, culture, and community in the United States. At Tuskegee, Gulley drew on faculty members, including famed botanist and inventor Dr. George Washington Carver, to supply specialty lectures and demonstrations in his course. Carver helped Gulley understand the importance of food beyond its effects on personal health, putting it in relation to its larger role in commerce.

The course Gulley taught at Tuskegee included site visits to the institute’s slaughter house, creamery, dairy, poultry yard, and the city of Tuskegee fish markets. The class traveled to Montgomery to study wholesale groceries, packing houses, and the kitchens of the city’s finest hotels. The program culminated in a two-day simulation of a hotel restaurant, advertising itself in the community as “Hotel Tuskegee.” For the simulation, the institute’s cafeteria paralleled actual hotel conditions and opened for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, taking reservations from community members. Gulley’s students had to perform not in a classroom setting but in “restaurant conditions.” The ten-week summer course would quickly become a full degree program at Tuskegee.

After Gulley returned from Tuskegee to his chef’s position in the University of Wisconsin dormitories, his teaching skills became more widely recognized. The US Navy chose Gulley to direct a Cooks and Bakers School during World War II that ran from 1942 to 1944 at the University of Wisconsin. Over those two years, Gulley trained more than one hundred navy cooks who would provide meals on ships and other locations around the world. Gulley replicated his Tuskegee Institute course right down to the simulation restaurant as the final exam, even inviting the governor and the officers from Great Lakes Naval Training Station to serve as judges of the final product.

Soon Gulley would become one of the first instructors of color for the University of Wisconsin. After witnessing the quality of Gulley’s teaching with the Navy Cooks and Bakers School, University of Wisconsin dormitories decided to use Gulley’s talents to develop a professional cook’s short course for present and prospective state employees at Madison in 1944. In 1946, the six-month program was expanded to become a two-year training course taught at Madison under the GI Bill. Many of Gulley’s navy students came back to continue their training at Madison. In fact, almost every person who took the course was a veteran. Similar to the Tuskegee course, the program included field trips to tour different restaurant operations, including the Palmer House in Chicago. The course also ended each year with the restaurant simulation.

Gulley’s teaching only further ignited his desire to learn about the food industry. During the 1930s and 1940s, Gulley often spent part of his summer vacation traveling around the country to study food production and processing. He visited Puget Sound fisheries, watched the grading of citrus fruits in California fruit orchards, studied frozen food plants in Oregon, and observed methods of processing vegetables in packing plants in California. He studied food retail by examining cafeteria item pricing in Los Angeles and visiting hotel kitchens wherever he went, from the Waldorf-Astoria in New York City to Chicago’s Palmer House. He attended meetings of
the Wisconsin Restaurant Association and the annual conventions of the American Restaurant Association, continuing to advance his knowledge of food production and his artistry as a chef and educator. In the late 1940s, as word of Gulley’s teaching skills spread, Gulley became one of the few African Americans in the state to be broadcast on the radio. He was offered appearances on radio programs around Wisconsin under the auspices of the WHA radio Homemaker’s Program. The UW College of Agriculture Extension designed the WHA Homemaker’s Program as a way to reach residents in all corners of Wisconsin to share homemaking advice.

Gulley’s appearances on WHA led to an invitation to host his own cooking program on WISC radio in Madison. Ralph O’Connor, general manager of WISC, praised Gulley as “an unquestioned expert who has the happy talent of making his teachings understandable to even the most inexperienced.” In the early 1950s, Gulley’s radio program Cooking School of the Air moved to Madison’s WIBA radio where it ran three times a week, offering recipes and cooking advice. Gulley received hundreds of letters and postcards from listeners requesting recipes. WIBA soon published a monthly booklet of Gulley’s recipes as a way of meeting listeners’ demand.

His success on the radio soon led to opportunities in television. In 1953, Gerald Bartell, who was launching WMTV in Madison, offered Gulley one of the anchor programs on the fledgling station. Beatrice joined him as cohost of the program, initially called What’s Cookin’, which ran from 1953 to 1962. They became some of the first African Americans to host their own television program in the United States. Though WMTV received hate mail for having an African American couple star in one of their programs, Bartell unwaveringly supported Carson and Beatrice Gulley.

What’s Cookin’ aired for half an hour, increasing from once a week to five days a week as the show became more popular. Carson and Beatrice would rehearse the show...
together at home before broadcast to make sure the program went smoothly. On camera, Beatrice usually passed items to Carson, who did most of the presenting. Carson, then in his fifties, utilized his decades of experience teaching others to cook. He came across as a natural television host. His warm, inviting personality transferred well to the small screen, and he excelled at explaining the successive steps needed to complete a recipe.28

While local cooking shows were ubiquitous in the 1950s and '60s, existing in almost every television market in the country, it was uncommon for one to be led by an African American couple.29 Ebony magazine counted fewer than twelve locally broadcast shows starring African Americans in the United States at any one time throughout the 1950s.30 The Gulleys’ show was one of the longest running of that era, airing for ten years. It stands out as the only known program to feature an African American husband and wife team in a television show in the United States during the decade of the 1950s.31

Beatrice and Carson Gulley on the set of their long-running cooking show, 1950s

Gulley had a professional interest in spices and discussed them at a time when many home cooks did not often season their food beyond the use of salt and pepper. He used his traveling spice case, shown here, as a practical visual prop for his lectures around the state.
Gulley's radio shows, television program, and cookbook, published in 1949, added to his celebrity and led to invitations for him to address various groups of homemakers, men's civic organizations, and service clubs. Throughout the 1950s, Gulley maintained an active lecture and cooking demonstration schedule, often giving between one and three talks a week in communities around the state and the greater Midwest. As a result of this demanding schedule, Gulley had a special carrying case built to hold seventy-five of the herbs and spices he commonly used as a speaker and demonstrator. He brought with him a complete traveling set of butchering and chef knives. And, perhaps most helpful, he had the trunk of his car converted into a portable refrigerator.\footnote{32}

Despite his professional success and public celebrity, Gulley was subject to segregation and other forms of exclusion at his university job and in the Madison community—discrimination that all African Americans in Madison experienced during the early part of the twentieth century.\footnote{33} Gulley worked at an educational institution where there were no African American professors or administrators; where fraternities, sororities, and student organizations forbade membership to people of color and Jews through restrictions in their bylaws; and where residence hall students were paired with roommates of the same race on the assumption that white students didn’t want to live with African Americans.\footnote{34} In the Madison community, African Americans were not allowed to dine in some restaurants. Downtown department stores had policies that would not allow African Americans to try on clothes under the assumption that white people would not want to buy clothes that had been tried on by a person of color.\footnote{35} African Americans could not rent rooms in hotels in Madison or teach in Madison public schools, and they were systematically excluded from jury duty lists in Dane County.\footnote{36} And, due to restrictive covenants in deeds and landlords’ refusals to integrate boarding houses, African Americans had difficulty finding housing outside of several small, prescribed areas in Madison.\footnote{37}

In his travels around Wisconsin in the 1950s, Gulley was often one of the only African American speakers invited into communities he visited, giving talks in communities that had no African American residents. In fact, some were considered sundown towns, communities that intentionally kept African Americans out by custom or law. Hotels in most of the towns where he spoke would not accept African Americans. Often after speaking by invitation to hundreds of people, Gulley would have to drive back to Madison after the evening’s engagement or find people in the community with whom to stay.\footnote{38}

Finding housing in Madison was an ongoing struggle for the Gulleys. In 1932, when they rented and moved into

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**The Gulleys were avid golfers and they are both buried in Madison at Forest Hill Cemetery, within sight of the eighth hole green of Glenway Golf Course, where Gulley once shot a hole-in-one. He asked to be buried within sight of that hole.**

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a house on West Johnson Street, white neighbors circulated a petition stating that they did not want African Americans in the neighborhood. The Gulleys were given notice by their landlord to move, and by 1933, they had relocated to 1418 Northern Court. In 1934, they were able to rent an apartment at 1200 West Johnson. But once again, neighbors circulated a petition asking the landlord to give the Gulleys notice. This time, the landlord refused and the Gulleys lived there for the year, until Beatrice decided to attend Tuskegee Institute to complete a seamstress degree while Carson stayed to work in Madison.

Upon Beatrice’s return in 1935, the couple again had great difficulty finding a place to live. Gulley asked Don Halverson, director of dormitories, for help. However, after finding them an apartment near campus, Halverson received a phone call from the Gulleys’ upstairs neighbor saying they were going to be evicted. “I’m running for alderman,” the man explained, “and I cannot get anywhere when I have a colored person living in my house.” Frustrated, Gulley decided to take a job he had been offered outside of Madison. To temporarily resolve the housing problem and to induce Gulley to stay at the university, Halverson obtained permission for the university to build Gulley an apartment. Located in the basement of Tripp Hall, the apartment had an outside entrance that led directly to the Van Hise Refectory where Gulley worked next door. Gulley accepted the university’s offer, and the Gulleys lived in the basement apartment until Carson retired in 1954.

Since the late 1940s, Gulley had been challenging Madison segregation laws by attempting to buy property on which to build a home. At this time, Gulley was active in the Madison chapter of the NAACP, an interracial organization dedicated to eliminating local race-based discrimination. The Madison chapter included skilled organizers such as labor leader Hilton Hanna, educators Velma and Harry Hamilton, social worker Pauline Coggs, and Reverend Joseph Washington, and it provided a community of support dedicated to challenging practices of racial segregation in Madison. Real estate agents would explain to Gulley that Madison deeds contained restrictive covenants prohibiting property from being purchased by a person of color. Eventually, Gulley found a local realtor who would help him buy property using white “go-betweens” in the negotiations leading up to the purchase. But even in these situations, Gulley was refused property numerous times in Madison and Monona Village. In 1949, he purchased property on Highways 12 and 18, but the deal fell through and his money was returned to him. A similar purchase fell through in 1953 when he bought a lot on Ridge Road at a Dane County tax sale.

Discouraged by his fruitless attempts to obtain housing in Madison, Gulley testified before the Madison City Council’s Committee on Human Rights in 1951. He stated that he had been refused housing in Madison more times than he could remember. His testimony came during a committee session devoted to learning the extent of discrimination against people of color in Madison—a study requested by the city council. Gulley explained, “We have faced so much embarrassment we gave up hope of ever owning a home of our own in the city.” Progressive members of the city council attempted to pass a Madison ordinance making it unlawful to refuse to sell or rent property to another person because of race, color, or religion, but in 1952 the full Madison City Council tabled such proposals for “further study.”

On August 3, 1954, Gulley again bought a piece of undeveloped property in order to build a home, this time in a new
subdivision five miles west of downtown Madison that was run as a cooperative called Crestwood. A group of Crestwood residents circulated a petition asking the Crestwood board of directors to appropriate funds to buy back Gulley’s lot or call a stockholders’ meeting for that purpose. Some residents placed large signs in their yards threatening to leave Crestwood if the Gulleys moved in. On September 16, 1954, a special meeting of the cooperative was held to discuss the issue. The Gulleys chose not to attend, but two hundred Crestwood stockholders and their families packed into the Highlands-Mendota Beach School that evening. A motion to buy the Gulleys’ lot was made with the stipulation that further discussion on the issue not be allowed. “More hard feelings have been generated over this than any issue that has arisen in Crestwood in its fifteen-year history,” declared Charles Achtenberg, who made the motion. The motion also called for a standing vote. Stockholders had to rise and vote “yes” or “no” on the motion as their names were called. In an intense and divisive meeting, the co-op voted sixty-four to thirty against the proposal and invited the Gulleys to join the community.

This decisive vote effectively ended the enforcement of the restrictive covenants in the Crestwood deed. Immediately after the vote, Crestwood developer and resident Marshall Erdmann rose and stated that he was in favor of Mr. Gulley living in the community. Furthermore, he offered to buy back the home of any current resident who didn’t want to live in Crestwood. Gulley said afterward that the vote meant his over-twenty-year search for a home “in a decent location” had
ended. “I’m just so thrilled I don’t know what to do,” Gulley said. “It gives me assurance that people have come a long way in learning about people.”

When the Gulleys moved into their Crestwood home in late December 1954, they were concerned about how they would be treated. Once, a cross was burned in their yard. They received hate mail and phone calls. They did receive positive overtures from some neighbors: one man originally opposed to Gulley building in Crestwood later told him, “With the vote showing that the majority wants you here you’ll find it won’t be like you were afraid it would be.” However, tensions remained high in the Crestwood neighborhood following the vote, even as the integration attempt was being put forth by the Governor’s Commission on Human Rights as a model of how integration could be achieved. There was no mass exodus of white residents from Crestwood, but a few residents did sell their homes and leave the neighborhood. No other African Americans followed the Gulleys into Crestwood.

The story of the Crestwood vote went out over the AP and was reported in papers across Wisconsin. The Gulleys’ move into Crestwood was newsworthy because it differed sharply from similar integration attempts occurring in Wisconsin and Illinois at the time. Many of those attempts required outside negotiators, and sometimes they became full-scale race riots involving hundreds, or even thousands, of angry whites. In some cases, support from the National Guard was necessary to quell white rioters and restore order.

The Gulleys’ move was an individual victory for open housing in Madison, and a very public one at that—the *Capital Times* called it an “action unique in Madison history.” Yet, this stand for integration did not produce immediate change to Madison housing laws. The local mass movement for fair housing did not come until 1963, a year after Gulley’s death.

Years of continually being passed over for the director of dormitory food services and other positions for younger, less qualified white candidates wore deeply on Gulley. In 1954, after over sixteen million meals served to students and twenty-seven years of service, Gulley retired from the University of Wisconsin. With newfound speaking, catering, television, and radio ventures to support him, Gulley chose to move on. In a 1958 letter to Don Halverson, Gulley described his work environment and reasons for leaving the university. He wrote:
I am sure you know that my job with the different people I had to work with was not a bed of roses. . . . The only way that I could do that job was to swallow the bitter pill of prejudice, opposition and hatred. I feel that I have made some gains. I would like to have spent the rest of my life at the University. However, as you know, when one is young and the body is strong, one can stand a lot, but when one grows old and the resistance becomes low, one cannot stand up to the things one endured or did while young. Therefore, I gave it up.

In the early 1960s, the Gulleys decided to expand their catering service into a full-fledged restaurant. Carson and Beatrice had been running their own catering business since 1953, working side by side to outfit everything from small private dinner parties to convention banquets of 3,500 people. In 1961, they bought property on University Avenue and built a structure with living quarters on the second floor, a restaurant on the first floor, and catering preparation in the lower level. Carson Gulley’s Catering and Dining Service opened on September 15, 1962. Just two weeks later, Gulley became ill due to complications from diabetes and entered the hospital. He never recovered and died there on November 2, 1962. News of his death appeared in the conservative paper of record in Madison, the Wisconsin State Journal, on the front page above the fold. At the time of his death, there was, arguably, no better known African American in Wisconsin.

With a stable of loyal staff, Beatrice Gulley continued operating the restaurant until 1965. The public reason for the closing was that Beatrice was no longer “able to handle the many responsibilities of the business.” Privately, two factors contributed. First, the city would never give the Gulleys a liquor license, making it almost impossible to compete with other supper club businesses. Secondly, the amount of hate-filled phone calls and racial harassment toward Beatrice increased after Carson’s death. With intensified threats, Beatrice found it difficult to live alone in the large commercial building and desired to move to a more residential environment. In 1965, Gerald Bartell bought the building from her. In the late 1980s, Beatrice began to experience dementia and moved into a care facility. She died in Madison in 2001.

Carson Gulley’s life was filled with many triumphs and challenges. His professional career included many pioneering efforts and public acclaim. Gulley used his celebrity to fight a series of struggles, some but not all of them successful, to achieve equal standing in Madison and the state. The story of his life offers not just the case of one extraordinary individual, but provides examples of the persistent practices of segregation and exclusion that African Americans actively challenged in mid-twentieth-century Wisconsin.
Beatrice Gulley at Carson Gulley Commons, the first building on UW–Madison’s campus to be named after an African American, ca. 1966.

Notes

5. “UW Staff News.”
7. “UW Staff News.”
13. “An Adventure in Good Cooking.”