

**Rotary**  
Club of  
Charlotte



# THIS WEEK'S PROGRAM

November 12, 2024

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## *Jack Claiborne, "Charlotte, the Slugger, and Me"*

by **Rick Handford**

**Tony Zeiss** introduced his close friend, Jack Claiborne, a distinguished journalist and historian with longstanding ties to Charlotte. Born in Newell, North Carolina, in 1931, Jack Claiborne's passion for writing was evident from an early age. At just fourteen, he won a writing contest with the Charlotte News, leading to a remarkable ten-day road trip with a professional baseball team. This early success launched a career that would span decades and impact both journalism and education in North Carolina.

Claiborne's career included notable stints at the Charlotte Observer, where he covered a range of topics from sports to politics, business, and education. His work earned him prestigious awards from the North Carolina Press Association. In the 1970s, he became associate editor of the Observer, writing a well-known Saturday editorial series, "This Time and Place," which examined local issues within the broader context of Charlotte's history.

In addition to journalism, Claiborne authored several books, including *The Charlotte Observer: Its Time and Place, 1869-1986* and *Discovering North Carolina: A Tar Heel Reader*. His work in journalism and public service culminated in a leadership role at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, where he served as Associate Vice Chancellor for University Relations until his retirement in 2000.

Tony stated that he would be interviewing both Jack and his wife, Anne Marie, who epitomized the “Magic of Charlotte”, which he described as giving to Charlotte, demonstrating a love of God, family, and the community, and being rewarded by the community embracing you in return. He also would be talking about Jack’s latest book, “Charlotte, the Slugger, and Me”. Jack was one of six children, who lost their father at age four, and their mother when he was sixteen. But he had a special relationship with his younger brother, James “Slug” Claiborne, whose relationship is the basis of the book.

Tony elicited some fascinating stories with his questions to Jack and Anne Marie about their lives and relationships and the history of Charlotte. The first was about growing up on Elizabeth Avenue, where Jack came to know Harry Golden, who published a periodical called the *Carolina Israelite*. Jack and Slug each had paper routes, Jack on Fourth Street and Slug on Elizabeth Avenue. One day when Slug had to be away, Jack agreed to handle collections for him. When he called on Harry Golden, Harry invited him in for bourbon and smoked oysters, both of which Jack politely declined. He was thirteen at the time.

Charlotte’s population was about 85,000 then, and he and Slug were able to watch it grow to 850,000 by 2012, the year that Slug died. When Jack graduated from Central High school, he was awarded a \$250 scholarship, which was enough to cover his first year’s tuition at UNC-Chapel Hill. He got a job working in the University News Bureau for three years and then left UNC to go into the Army for two years during WWII. He returned to Chapel Hill for his final year and graduated with a degree in English and a minor in history. He then went to work for the Charlotte Observer as a sportswriter for a year, at which point he decided to further his education at the University of Chicago where he received a Masters of English while working for the Chicago Daily News—covering nightclubs!

When he was a student at Piedmont Junior High School, he entered an essay contest sponsored by the Charlotte News and wrote a 300-word essay about his favorite Charlotte Hornet baseball player, Carl Miller. He won the contest and learned that the second-place finisher was a 13-year-old named Charles Kuralt. Jim Babb was also at that school, making it three famous journalists in the same place and time.

Jack spoke about his mother, who had an 8<sup>th</sup>-grade education and ran a boarding house to support the family, and his brother Slug, who used what he learned there to help start his career in food service. He started several cafeterias and then opened up a white tablecloth restaurant, *Slug’s Rib*, which only served prime rib with spinach and a baked potato. It did have the first salad bar in Charlotte, however, and was immensely popular. His next project was *Slug’s 30th Edition*, a restaurant on the 30<sup>th</sup> floor of the Jefferson-First Union Tower, the only restaurant in the city with such a glamorous view. This was followed by *Slug’s at the Pines* in Chapel Hill and *Slug’s Choice* in the SouthPark Mall.

Slug was not a chef, and did no cooking at his restaurants, but was an excellent developer, businessman, and host. When he had a small number of establishments in close proximity, he was a welcoming presence and friend to everyone, especially at the higher-end fine-dining restaurants. When his business expanded to thirteen restaurants in two cities, he could no longer do that effectively. His health began to deteriorate, and he sold or gifted his restaurants to his employees and retired from the restaurant business.

Both Jack and Slugger had multiple jobs to help keep the family solvent during the 1930's. In addition to their paper routes, they cleaned ashes out of stoves for 10 cents a day, ran errands for people, collected bottles and returned them to bottlers for 10 cents per 24-bottle case, and parked cars at sporting events. This was during the Depression, and at the time, 50 cents to a dollar per day was pretty good money for a teen.

Tony then shifted his questions to Anne Marie. She was born in Birmingham in 1948, and the family moved to Pensacola, where she spent a lot of time at her grandparents' home in nearby Fort Walton Beach. She attended the University of Florida, and after a time decided to see some more of the world and bought a ticket to Colorado. She loved it there and transferred to the University of Colorado in her junior year, graduating with a degree in English Literature. She then went to graduate school at Denver University and got a degree in Library Science. When she was 25, she came to Charlotte, where her husband had taken a position at UNCC.

Anne Marie was the language and literature librarian at the Charlotte Public Library when she heard of Jack, who was employed at the Observer. He was working on a project to identify literary writers of note who were from Charlotte, going way back—she wasn't sure if it was to 1700 or 1800. He managed to get the library to take on the task of identifying these writers, which fell to her. She enlisted the resources of all of the local colleges and universities to help with the research and came up with enough material for the library to publish a book on the subject.

Dannye Romine Powell was the book editor for the Charlotte Observer starting in 1975, and was also a poet, author journalist, and teacher. She decided that Jack and Anne Marie, both widowed and both lovers of Shakespeare, should get together, and invited them to a dinner party at her Dilworth home. It was love at first sight, and they were subsequently married.

Side note—Anne Marie's father's uncle was Paul Harris, founder of Rotary!

Jack said that the primary message of his book is that "We're all in this together". As six children with a widowed mother, that is the pact that the family made, and that is how Jack perceived that Charlotte worked as well. People helped each other, the churches and community organizations helped the people who were in need, and the community supported

those organizations. Charlotte is a welcoming place, and you don't need a lot of money or connections—if you have good ideas and the moxie to push for them you will do fine here.

**Terri DeBoo** asked what Jack would say is his most memorable story. Jack replied that it would have to be the assassination of John F. Kennedy, perhaps the most cataclysmic story in his time. I knew I was listening to a serious writer when Jack described the arrival of Lyndon Johnson on the South Lawn of the White House. Johnson was coming to the White House for the first time after being sworn in as President. It was at night, and he was coming in on Marine One. Most of the lights at the White House and the surrounding office buildings were off, “and there was this blinking light on the Virginia horizon, rising, coming towards us like a beating heart, bringing new life to the government”. And as the helicopter came in over a fountain on the grounds “. . .those fingers of water curtsied as if obeying the power passing overhead”.

After the helicopter had landed, a tired and disheveled Johnson disembarked and shook each hand and spoke to each of the people who had waited at the landing pad for his arrival. “And he said the same thing to all of us—“Pray for me, Pray for me, Pray for me.””

As always, the above is a partial description of the event. To see the video of the entire talk, see below for the link.

A recording of the meeting can be found here:

With slides: [Jack Claiborne, Historical Author with slides](#)

Without slides: [Jack Claiborne, Historical Author without slides](#)

The presenter's introduction begins at approximately 26 minutes and 40 seconds.