

**CLEORA  
THOMAS  
BUTLER  
1901-1985**



**COOK  
FOR  
ALL  
OCCASIONS**

Cleora Butler grew up in a family of professional cooks, who cooked everything from scratch and grew their own food. Her book “Cleora’s Kitchens: The Memoir of a Cook & Eight Decades of Great American Food” offers an extensive look into the cuisines of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and details the lifestyles of Black people and the racial dynamics of the times.

Born in August 1901 in Texas, Cleora Thomas came to Indian Territory by covered wagon with her parents, former slaves, for free land and the hope Oklahoma would become a Black and Indian state. Oklahoma did not fulfill that promise, but these pioneers built Black towns and successful businesses.

She grew up in Muskogee, where at age ten she successfully baked her first batch of biscuits using a Calumet Baking cookbook. The family worked for Harriet Weeks, sister of the state’s first governor. When the Weeks left Muskogee, they generously left their house to Cleora’s family. Her mother Martha worked at the Severs Hotel, one of the best hotels.

While at Manual Training High School, Cleora’s class was chosen to prepare a meal for Muskogee Board of Education members. The meal’s success insured the job of her young instructor, Lucy Elliot, the sister of a prominent local clothier. Years later, Cleora recalled her most memorable catering affair was the silver anniversary of this teacher. Upon graduation, Cleora left with an affluent friend for Oberlin Junior College but had to quit after her first year when her family could no longer afford the tuition.

Cleora moved to Tulsa in 1923 to cook for oil millionaire Charles Robertson. Her family followed in 1925. She created incredible meals for oil tycoons who attended lavish parties at the mansion. With the coming financial crash, the family lost their fortune and Cleora was dismissed. After freelancing as a caterer, she found work in 1932 with a busy oil worker, whose rising family fortunes helped them purchase an elegant house. Cleora cooked hundreds of meals and supervised parties, until she quit in 1940 after marrying hotel worker George Butler.

Whenever bands like Cab Calloway, Duke Ellington, and Count Basie came to town, they would stay in Black hotels and homes. Her saxophonist brother Walter brought the Cab Calloway band to his parents’ home, who said Cleora’s chicken and dumplings were the best in the world.

After facing racial discrimination in an exclusive downtown Tulsa department store – they wouldn’t let her try on a hat – Cleora took a millinery correspondence course and started selling hats to her North Tulsa friends. In the mid-1950s, while working as a dress shop stock clerk, she befriended people at every level of Tulsa society. When the store closed in 1961, she opened Cleora’s Pastry Shop and Catering. Her catering business expanded rapidly with calls from the Opera Guild and Philharmonic to serve at special parties and brunches. Due to George’s failing health, she closed the business in 1967.

After his death in 1970, Cleora rebuilt her catering business, serving first to Holland Hall High School and Trinity Episcopal Church, and eventually remodeling her kitchen to accommodate her ever-increasing business. In the 1980s, she began collecting recipes and food memories for a book. The chapters were divided into decades, showing the differing styles of food preparation and kitchen equipment. Cleora Butler died in November 1985 at age 84, shortly after the book was completed. It was published in 1986 with many classic recipes including Baked Fudge and Date Nut Cake.