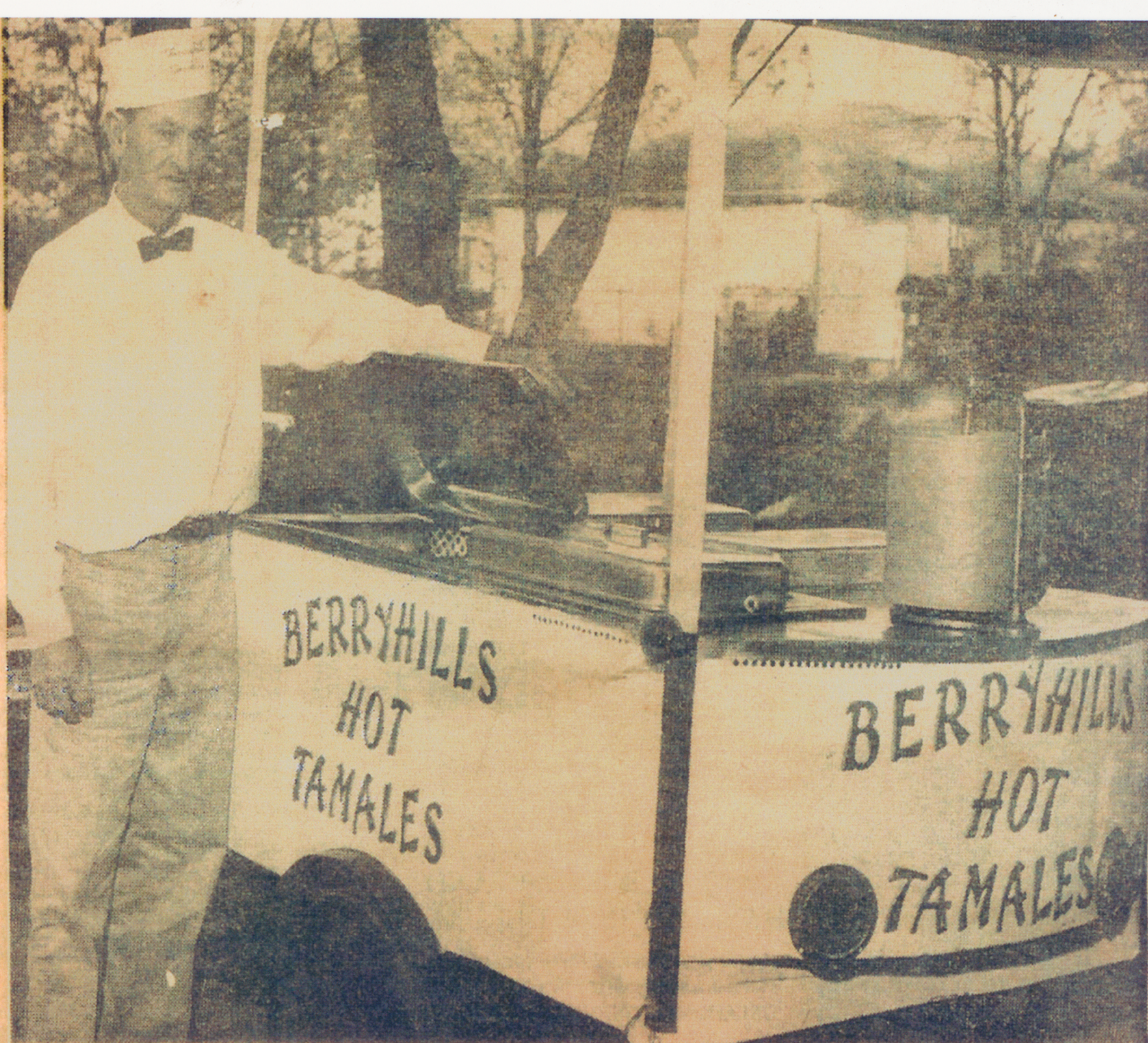


## HEREABOUTS

### TAMALE MAN

By Charlotte Phelan



**CORNER BUSINESS**—Each week end in the winter—except from now until the first of the year—Berryhill takes his portable tamale dispensary from

his home on West 16th Street to a spot at the corner of Westheimer Avenue and Buffalo Speedway. In the summertime he fishes—and cuts his grass.—Post Photo by Robert Willner

**“P**EOPLE have a taste for tamales,” W. R. Berryhill was saying the other day, Berryhill being the proprietor of a tamale dispensary that has become something of a week end landmark at the corner of Buffalo Speedway and Westheimer Avenue.

“At one time I had 11 carts around town here, but this is all we have now,” he said, pointing to a canopied contraption on wheels that rested in the driveway behind a vintage Chevrolet at the Berryhill home at 1112 W. 16th St.

“Having all that help was just too much trouble. My wife and I have it by ourselves now, and, I can tell you, she’s the workingest woman in Houston. Anyway, I took all those other carts out to a steel company and had them all crushed up. I didn’t want anybody else using them and then have people say, ‘What’s happened to Berryhill’s tamales?’”

Berryhill sat in a glider on the back porch of his home and surveyed the obviously freshly-raked yard in silence for a moment. Then he answered a question.

**“I**T’S been so long ago that I started making tamales I don’t hardly remember. Forty-five years ago, something like that. I started out in Tulsa. I got out of a job is how come me to start this. I tried several things, and did all right at them too, but I finally said, ‘I’m going to start making tamales.’ It was rough when we first started, really rough, but we kept at it. I made up the recipe. It’s about the same now that I started with, but I’ve improved it greatly. I don’t use pork—just beef.

“We went from Tulsa to Oklahoma City, then from Oklahoma City to Seminole, then from Seminole back to Oklahoma City, then from Oklahoma City to Dallas, then from Dallas we came here. I sold good everywhere I went.

“I remember there in Dallas I picked a corner. It wasn’t the best corner for the traffic and there was three other tamale carts on the other corners, but I stomped down the weeds

and settled on my corner. I had a real live cart, steam pouring out, looking like a battery of boilers. It wasn’t long till I had that whole corner by myself.

**“I**’VE been here now 35, 36 years, something like that. You look around here,” Berryhill went on. “I’ve got half an acre here, and a half acre back there with three rent houses on it. Everything you see (a large shed, what Berryhill called the tamale house, a double garage, all painted the same bright green as the home), everything was bought with tamales.

“And it’s all paid for. I’ve got the deed and abstract I can show you . . .”

Berryhill got up to stroll over to the tamale cart in the driveway. He lifted a shiny steel lid. “See?” he said. “It’s just like a steam table on wheels, nothing else, and stainless steel from bottom to top. I had this made special. It cost plenty of money, around \$1,500 all told, I’d say. I had built so many pushcarts, I knew just what I wanted with this one.

“I move it over to the tamale house and fill it up and put it on natural gas to start heating the tamales. Then, when we move, it’s hooked up to that butane tank there. There’s four compartments here that will hold about 300 dozen tamales.

“And it has tail lights and a light there in the top that are hitched to that battery there . . .

**“N**OW, let’s go look at the tamale house,” Berryhill said, leading the way across the yard. “Here’s where I make them. I’ll probably cook off a hundred pounds of meat in those big pots there tonight and put it in the deep freeze there. There’s the meat grinder over there.

“And here’s the tamale machine. You put the meal in one side and the meat in the other and it comes out a tamale. Then we wrap them in the shucks, just like you would roll a cigarette. This isn’t playing, I can tell you that.

Why, it takes all day just to get the shucks ready.”

Berryhill walked over to an elderly washing machine with a wringer attached. “We rinse the shucks here and wring them out. It leaves them damp and easier to handle, because they come silks and all. We sterilize them then wash them till they come clean. We get them from Weimar, Texas.

“I go over to Buffalo and Westheimer about 3 o’clock, just on Saturdays and Sundays, and just in the winter. I start about October, when it gets cool, and go till about March or April, until it gets warm. But I won’t go back now until after the holidays.

“You ought to happen over there some Sunday late in the afternoon. I’ve had them so thick I wouldn’t know who was next. But it’s tiresome, just standing there on that concrete, the same old routine. And I sell more on a rainy day. They buy more tamales on a rainy day than any other day. I don’t know why. They just want to see me get wet, I guess.

**“I** WAS on the corner of Waugh Drive and Gray for years, then the freeway ruined that. I’ve been out there at Buffalo and Westheimer a long time now. I was there even before they had that antique barn there. They hadn’t even thought about building that Gulf station that’s there now.

“Like I told you, I don’t sell tamales in the summer time. I don’t care whether I work but a little now. After all, I’ll be 66 in July. I go fishing in the summer—or cut grass. I’ve got an acre to take care of here. If it rains a lot, I mow a lot. There’s plenty to do around here. There’s something there for you to do whether you do it or not.

“I tell you the way I do. I buy the stuff I need for the tamales with the money I’ve made selling them. If I’ve got anything left after that, I put it in the bank, or my sock, or somewhere. Somebody asks me how much it costs to manufacture a dozen tamales. I tell them I don’t know, and I don’t.

“I’m not trying to break no world’s record. I’m just trying to make a living.”