

The History of the Annual Lone Star Vegetarian Chili Cook-Off

Shirley Wilkes-Johnson, Director of LSVN (1989-2002)

It was early 1989 when the first meeting of the Lone Star Vegetarian Network (LSVN) took place. There were four major active vegetarian societies back then, Austin, Houston, San Antonio and the now defunct South Texas Vegetarian Society (STVS) in Brazoria County, 60 miles south of Houston. Only four people attended this original meeting, the leaders and founders of those vegetarian societies (respectively). Pat Tierra, Dana Forbes, Kimberly Lewis and me, Shirley Wilkes-Johnson. All of us understood, without a doubt, that a vegetarian world would be a better world, while most of the world could not yet understand. How the four of us met was magical, it seemed the Universe had pulled us together for a grand plan.

I had read that chili cook-offs were one of the biggest fundraisers across the USA and that some of them cleared \$20,000 in profit! I naively dreamed of the grand work that vegetarian societies could accomplish with that kind of money in our treasuries. The four of us agreed to host a yearly vegetarian chili cook-off. We reasoned that chili was Texas food and that it was easy to “veganize” and cook and that it might draw the general public for a tasting so we could show them that vegetarianism wasn’t strange, that it could be something with which they were familiar such as a *Bowl of Red*, as author Frank Talbot had dubbed it in his book by that name. It was time for a change. We would be the *Chili Outlaws*, breaking all the rules, messing with Texas tradition and creating new traditions.

Our groups would take turns hosting the Cook-Off. Austin, being centrally located, was the choice for the First Annual Lone Star Vegetarian Chili Cook-Off. Pat collected information from the International Chili Society and set the ground rules for vegetarian chili cook-offs based on the rules of that organization.

That first chili cook-off on October 1, 1989, at Travis County’s Farmer’s Market in Austin attracted 500 people and was memorable and successful. There was an amazing array of local talent to entertain both the chili tasters and the cooks. The proceeds kept the Austin Vegetarian Society (not to be confused with its replacement group, the Vegetarian Network of Austin), in the financial black for a long time. The First Place winner of that first chili cook-off was the *Best Damned Chili in Texas* created and cooked by Jason Bratcher and Patrick Sullivan representing the Animal Connection of Texas (ACT). Why would anyone want to eat *Dead Animal Chili* when they could eat the *Best Damned Chili in Texas*? It was fantastic chili!

The First Annual Lone Star Vegetarian Chili Cook-Off was held in the Capital of Texas but the Second Annual Lone Star Vegetarian Chili Cook-Off was held in the First Capital of Texas (read your history book) in West Columbia, Texas (population 4,000) at the American Legion Hall and Pavilion. It was hosted by STVS. It was a grand event for such a small town. We had a popular DJ from KLOL Radio in Houston, Jim Pruett, who was a vegetarian, MC the event. He drew a lot of people. We had celebrity judges that came all the way from Hollywood !

Linnea Quigley, known as the scream queen of the grade B movies (such as Return of the Living Dead) and her special effects wizzard husband, Steve Johnson of Ghostbusters fame, gained us extra publicity and added excitement to the Cook-Off. The judges, one an owner of a local Mexican restaurant, were blown away by the unbelievable concept of vegetarian chili that was better than "old-fashioned chili". David Embry and Laura Ruffino, a couple of teenagers from Houston, with their 'Out on a Limb Chili' (ala Shirley MacLaine) garnered both First Place trophy and the People's Choice ward. They said they went 'Out on a Limb' with their chili recipe because they made it up as they cooked it.

As the years went by, vegetarian societies began popping up all over Texas; Dallas, Corpus Christi, El Paso, Fort Worth, and South Padre Island, in addition to the original four. They joined the LSVN. Each society retains their autonomy but agrees to a few things; the major one is to support the Chili Cook-Off by sending at least one chili team from their group to cook. They also agree to host the Chili Cook-Off at some point in time. They furnish a door prize to be given away at the Cook-Off and publicize the Cook-Off to their members and in their locality. One other thing, all events hosted by each vegetarian society must be vegan (totally vegetarian - no dairy or eggs).

The Cook-Off has been held twice in both Austin and Houston. It has been in Dallas , Fort Worth , South Padre Island, El Paso , and in San Antonio in 1993 and again in 1999, co-hosted by the San Antonio Vegetarian Society and the San Antonio Voice for Animals. In 1995 LSVN was awarded the prestigious Vammy ward, from the North American Vegetarian Society in New York for our promotion of vegetarianism through our annual Cook-Off. Others to receive this award are Helen Nearing, vegetarian and author of The Good Life, the University of California at Berkeley for making vegan meals available to students in all university dining halls and the Whole Foods project in New York for furnishing plant based organic meals to people with life challenging illnesses.

It is surprising to many people to learn that Texas is one of the leading vegetarian states. According to an editor at Vegetarian Times magazine, next to California , most of their subscribers are from Texas . LSVN has contributed to that fact and has given cohesiveness to the vegetarian societies of Texas . Our Chili Cook-Off has been publicized nationally and they've even heard of us in Canada . One of the most amazing things about the Lone Star Vegetarian Network is that many of us felt isolated living as vegetarians in a carnivorous world - but now we know vegetarians from all around this great state and some of us have become very good friends. Someday the world will be vegetarian. It will be the most important social change the world has ever seen. We are the pioneers of that world!