

Hot Dog!

by Kris Nesbitt
and the Chicago History Museum

Allan was a picky eater. He only liked certain foods, and he only liked them his way. His way usually involved ketchup. No matter what he was eating, he wanted ketchup, lots of it. Whatever his mother cooked, he wanted it with ketchup. Whatever his grandma cooked, he wanted it with ketchup. His little sister Ruth was sure *her* job was to make sure Allan had plenty of ketchup.

Their mother suggested that Allan should change his habits. “Eight-year-old boys need more nutrition than what comes in ketchup. Ketchup is not a vegetable,” she would say as Allan pushed aside his peas and carrots and poured a thick coating of ketchup on his meat loaf.

Grandma suggested that Allan should try some new things. “It’s 1955, and you have choices I never would have dreamed of when I

was your age. Why always eat the same things?” Allan shrugged and poured a pool of ketchup onto his baked potato. He only liked things his way.

Sometimes on Sundays, Allan and Ruth got permission to go to Maxwell Street Market with their Uncle Jimmy. Uncle Jimmy went every week to play guitar. People at Maxwell Street called him Howlin’ Hound and liked the way his band played blues music. One week, Allan and Ruth’s mother gave them money to buy hot dogs at the market.

“We’ve got money for hot dogs!” Ruth exclaimed when her uncle arrived. “Where should we get them?” Allen asked.

“You can’t go wrong at Maxwell Street. Everything’s good,” Uncle Jimmy said. “Everybody selling will tell you his stuff is the best. They’ll talk away at you until you buy, so

just get what you want fast, or it'll drive you crazy." Uncle Jimmy glanced in the mirror, straightened his tie, and adjusted his felt hat with a wide brim. "Let's go, kids," he said, winking. "Howlin' Hound has blues to play. My fans are waiting."

Allan and Ruth climbed into Uncle Jimmy's old red Chevrolet, squeezing in between his guitar and the speakers he would set up at Maxwell Street. They headed north from Bronzeville towards downtown. Allan grasped the money in his hand, already tasting a hot dog in his imagination, covered with ketchup, of course.

Maxwell Street Market was already crowded and noisy by the time they arrived. "You're late!" one of Uncle Jimmy's friends

scolded as they began to set up the equipment on the street corner. "Enough complaining. Let's just play," Uncle Jimmy said, strumming his guitar as if to end the conversation once and for all. "See you later, kids. Howlin' Hound has work to do." Allan and Ruth laughed as the sound of harmonica, guitar, and electric bass took over, nearly drowning out the voices of vendors advertising their goods.

The children stood and watched their uncle play as a small crowd gathered to listen. Some people dropped money into Uncle Jimmy's guitar case. "Time for hot dogs!" Ruth finally said, waving goodbye to Uncle Jimmy.

The children made their way down Maxwell Street, Allan grasping little Ruth's hand so she wouldn't get separated in the crowd. They walked past table after rickety table overflowing with all sorts of things for sale: fruits and

vegetables, clothes, old toys, machines for the kitchen, rusty tools, stacks of shoes. Some vendors had big umbrellas to shade themselves from the sun. Others didn't even have tables and just used fences and the sidewalk instead. "Look, Ruthie," Allan said, pointing out piles of hubcaps, brooms, sledgehammers, and who knows what else for sale along a fence.

"I wonder where he got all that mix of stuff," Ruth answered, laughing. It made her tired just to think about setting out all those things every Sunday.

"Pork chops, Maxwell Street Polishes, get 'em here!" one vendor yelled.

"Tacos, tortas! Fresh and good," yelled another.

"New shoes, old shoes, great prices!"

The street smelled of grilled onions and meat cooking. Ruth and Allan stopped next to a

stack of old tires for sale and cardboard boxes filled with tools and pipes to watch a man in a top hat playing the guitar and harmonica at the same time.

"Let's get our food, Ruthie," Allan said, pointing to a nearby hot dog vendor. His sister agreed.

"One hot dog, please!" said Ruth.

"Everything?" said the vendor to the little girl.

"No peppers. They're too hot."

"Fine," said the vendor, gruffly. "But most people want everything. That's a real Chicago hot dog," he said, loading Ruth's steaming hot dog into a poppy seed bun. He started with the toppings: first the mustard, then bright green relish and chopped onions. Next came two tomato wedges and a pickle spear. He picked up two sport peppers and almost put them on, but

remembered himself, sighed, and finished up with celery salt. He handed Ruth the loaded hot dog. Next came Allan.

“One hot dog, please!” he said.

“Everything?” said the vendor.

“Only ketchup,” Allan answered.

“Ketchup? Ketchup? You can’t have ketchup on a hot dog,” the vendor growled.

“I eat ketchup on everything,” said Allan.

“And I would like it on my hot dog.”

The vendor scowled. “Most people want a real Chicago hot dog. No peppers is one thing. But ketchup? Can’t do it,” the vendor snapped. “You must not be from Chicago.”

“I was born here!” Allan exclaimed. “And I like ketchup on my hot dogs.”

The vendor shook his head. “I don’t even *have* ketchup. If you’re from Chicago, you ought to know hot dogs are important and know better

than to ask for ketchup.”

Allan thought about that for a second. “You can get hot dogs anywhere in America. Chicago doesn’t *own* hot dogs,” he said. He was frustrated. Ruth was munching away on her hot dog, and it smelled good. But he wanted his with ketchup.

The vendor squinted at Allan. “Listen. I’ll give you a hot dog, plain. You can get ketchup somewhere else. Go to someplace with fries,” he said, gesturing towards other stands. “But let’s make a deal. If you come back next Sunday and can tell me why hot dogs are important in Chicago,” the vendor leaned closer, “I’ll give you and your sister free hot dogs. I’ll even break the rules and have ketchup, just for you.”

Allan thought some more, and then said, “Deal.” They shook on it. Allan took his plain hot dog and went searching for ketchup.

Ruth, now with a spot of bright green relish on her shirt, trailed behind him. “How are you going to find out why hot dogs are important?” she wondered. Allan shrugged. For a free hot dog with ketchup, he’d think of something.

Allan and Ruth sat on a curb, trying to figure out how to learn about hot dogs. “Hey, Allan!” somebody called. It was Allan’s friend Carlos from school. “What’s up?” he asked.

“Hey. We’ve got a chance to get free hot dogs, but we’ve got to figure out why hot dogs are such a big deal here. And I have no idea,” Allan said with a sigh.

“Hot dogs? Man, my family knows all about that. Come on, let’s ask my dad,” Carlos said.

Carlos led Allan and Ruth down the street

to his parents’ food stand. “My whole family’s worked with hot dogs since they came from Mexico,” Carlos explained.

“Do you sell them?” Ruth asked.

“Nope, we sell food from Mexico,” Carlos explained. “Papa, why are hot dogs important?” Carlos asked his father, who was cooking meat for tacos on a hot grill.

“It’s how we make a living. A lot of people came from Mexico to work for meat companies. Hard work, but it’s my job,” Carlos’s dad explained.

“What do you do exactly?” Allan asked.

“I use my cleaver every day until my wrists hurt,” Carlos’s dad said.

“What’s a cleaver?” Ruth asked.

“This,” Carlos’s dad showed them a heavy steel and wood tool with a large, rectangular blade. “I cut up meat with it,” he explained. “But

Carlos's mom works making hot dogs."

"Really?" exclaimed Allan and Ruth at the same time.

"Sure, at Oscar Mayer. The meat comes to her in a long tube, and she twists the tube into hot dogs. So for us hot dogs are important because they're our living, along with this stand." Carlos's dad pulled an ear of corn from a steaming bin of hot water and covered it butter, mayonnaise, lime, and chile. "Enough about hot dogs. Try an *elote*."

"Ummm, do you have ketchup?" Allan asked.

Later that evening, after Uncle Jimmy brought them home to Bronzeville, Allan decided to make a list in his notebook about why hot dogs

are important. "Number one," he wrote. "Jobs for people in Chicago, like Carlos's parents."

"What's that?" his Grandma asked. Allan told her what the list was for. "You should talk to your Great-uncle John," Grandma said. "He's been around a long time and he knows a lot about Chicago. I'll call him up."

"John, Allan's got some questions for you. Here he is," Grandma put Allan on the phone.

"Uncle John? It's Allan," he shouted into the phone. Uncle John was a bit hard of hearing from his years working on noisy trains. "Can I come tomorrow and ask you about hot dogs?"

"Dot bogs? I'm not sure what they are, but come on over and visit."

The next afternoon, Allan walked over to Great-uncle John's house. As usual, Ruth followed him. "What if he doesn't know anything, Allan?" she asked. Allan shrugged. For a free hot

dog with ketchup, it was worth a try.

Allan liked visiting Uncle John. He had lots of stories about his years as a Pullman porter on the railroad, but that wasn't what Allan was looking for on this particular day. "Can you tell me why hot dogs are important in Chicago?" he asked.

Uncle John laughed loudly. "Hot dogs! I thought you said dot bogs, and I didn't know what on earth you wanted. Sure I can tell you. Hot dogs are important in Chicago because trains are important in Chicago," Uncle John said. Allan and Ruth looked at each other. Another train story from Uncle John wasn't exactly what they were looking for.

"Hot dogs are part of the meatpacking industry," he continued. "That's the factories that take animals and make them into meat for people to eat. Meatpacking has been important

in Chicago for more than a hundred years. We were famous all over the country for meats, and the railroad made this possible. You've heard of the stockyards, right?"

Allan and Ruth nodded. "You've seen the gates of the Union Stock Yard. There's the head of a bull there. What was I saying? Oh yes, the railroad. Railroad lines stretching all over the country connected near the stockyards. The trains brought millions and millions and millions of animals to Chicago's stockyards, and the meatpacking plants around the stockyards turned the animals into meat. Trains delivered the meat all over the country. Hold on."

Uncle John went into his desk drawer and shuffled through papers until he found what he was looking for. "This is a map of the stockyards from when I was a boy. It shows how all the railroads connected. Look at how big the Union

Stock Yard was.”

Allan and Ruth agreed. It was huge. “Did you work on those stockyard trains?” Ruth asked.

“Oh, no, I was a Pullman porter. I worked on trains that carried people. But I always thought those stockyard railroads were something else so I learned what I could.”

“But how did the meats go on the trains far away without going bad?” Allan asked.

“That’s the other amazing thing,” Uncle John answered, his eyes twinkling. “Let me find something else.” He searched some more in the desk and returned with a small card. “Look at this,” he said.

Allan read the writing: “‘Swift and Company Packers, Union Stock Yards, Chicago, USA.’ It’s a train car with meat in it!” Allan exclaimed. “It says Swift Refrigerator Line, Fresh Meat

Express. So the train car was like a big refrigerator?”

“Yes,” Uncle John explained. “Gustavus Swift was a pioneer in the meat industry. He invented train cars with boxes of ice that chilled the air, letting Chicago’s meats, like hot dogs, to go all over the country without going bad.”

“Is the stockyard still there?” Ruth asked.

Allan nodded. “We’ve smelled the stockyard, Ruthie. You know that bad smell on hot days? That’s the stockyard.”

“Allan’s right. It’s not as big as before, but it’s still there. Now that people usually use trucks for shipping instead of trains, it’s not the same,” Uncle John grumbled. “But meatpacking is still important here. In fact, there’s someone you should meet. Come on.”

While Uncle John got himself ready, Allan took out his notebook and wrote, “Reason

number two: Chicago's railroads and stockyards."

Uncle John took Ruth and Allan to the grocery store on the corner. A bell on the door chimed when they walked in, and a gray-haired older woman came from the back room.

"This is Mrs. Pernesley. Miss Jean, the children want to know why hot dogs are important in Chicago. What can you tell them?"

Mrs. Pernesley smiled, "I've loved eating hot dogs since I was a little girl, but I don't know the history. Let's get my husband. He used to work for the Armour meatpacking factory for years before we opened this store." Mrs. Pernesley called to her husband, and soon a tall older man joined them. "The children are curious about why

hot dogs are important in Chicago," Mrs. Pernesley explained.

"Chicago was the capital of the meat world for a hundred years!" Mr. Pernesley exclaimed. "We were known all over as the butcher to the world. Inventions in the industry started here. Campaigns for better workers rights in meatpacking started here. Even many laws about keeping food safe started because of problems in Chicago's packing houses. Chicago was the center of the meatpacking world, and hot dogs were part of that."

"What was it like to work at Armour?" Allan asked. Mr. Pernesley pulled an old bound book off the shelf. Inside he showed them an old picture of a meatpacking plant. The picture showed all the floors and what was happening to the animals in the different areas of the building. Ruth didn't like the looks of it. Neither did Allan

for that matter. “It looks like hard work,” Allan said.

“Running a grocery is easier,” Mr. Pernesley explained. “But I do miss the smell of our sausages. I still have one of the advertisements.” Mr. Pernesley shuffled to the back room and returned with a small card.

“Breakfast sausages, with natural herbs!” Allan read. “I’m a picky eater, but those actually sound good.”

“You’d eat them with ketchup probably,” Ruth said.

“Armour used good quality meats like corn-fed pigs. We were the best in the business,” Mr. Pernesley continued. “Nowadays Oscar Mayer is one of the most famous companies. The Oscar Mayer Wienermobile drives all around the country; a big version of this toy.” Mr. Pernesley pulled a miniature version of the hot dog shaped

car from a shelf. “Their hot dogs are one of our best-sellers.” Mr. Pernesley showed them a tin can of Oscar Mayer Wieners. “Oscar Mayer is famous. I can’t imagine Chicago without hot dogs.”

“Chicago is a place of innovation,” Mrs. Pernesley added. “Doublemint gum, Morton salt, Schwinn bicycles, the skyscraper. I’ve seen many things come along and take the country by storm. The hot dog is one of Chicago’s most famous innovations.”

“Wait a second, I’d better write this all down,” Allan said, pulling out his notebook. “Reason number three: innovations. These are important inventions: workers rights, famous companies, and the Wienermobile.”

“There’s something else to remember too,” Uncle John added. “The meatpacking industry ends up with lots of leftover leather. Besides the

stockyards and packing, many more people in Chicago have made their living and lots of important things from all the leather from the stockyards. Shoes, gloves, all kinds of products.”

“And footballs!” Mrs. Pernsley added. “Wilson’s footballs for the NFL are made with stockyard leather. They use cattle hide, but originally they used pig hides, so that’s why football is sometimes called pigskin.”

Allan scribbled another reason onto his list: “Reason number four: jobs for people at the stockyards and at leather factories.”

Mr. Pernsley continued: “Even though business is a bit slower at the stockyards lately, Chicago is still the meatpacking capital of the whole USA. Chicago’s hot dogs are the best in the country. Some of the best beef goes to Vienna Beef. They make 100 percent, all beef hot dogs. Delicious!”

Allan wrote some more in his notebook. “I think I have too many reasons to count for why hot dogs are important to Chicago,” Allan said very seriously, “but I think this is the big one.” He read from his book out loud. “Number five, most important. The best meat in the country means the world’s best hot dogs.”

Uncle John and the Pernsleys nodded in approval. It was time to get going. The family thanked Mr. and Mrs. Pernsley and headed home. Later that night, Allan took out his notebook and read over his list. Satisfied, he closed the book.

He was ready to get his free hot dog.

The next Sunday, Uncle Jimmy took Allan and Ruth back to Maxwell Street. With the crowds of shoppers, all the noise, and the many people selling, it took the children a while to find the hot dog vendor.

He recognized them right away. “Here to collect on our deal?” the vendor asked. Allan nodded. He took out his notebook and read the list out loud. As the vendor listened and nodded, Allan told him everything he had learned about the hot dog in Chicago: the importance of the stockyards, how Chicago’s meats were shipped by train to the whole country, how innovations in Chicago made it famous all over the world, and how so many people made their living through meat-related jobs. “The hot dog is in the middle of all those stories, and besides, Chicago’s hot dogs are the best in the world” Allan finished, out of breath from talking so fast.

“Good enough,” said the vendor. “Now you can have your free hot dogs any way you want, even with ketchup.”

“Actually, I think I’ll take mine Chicago-style this time,” Allan said with a grin. “It’s about time I

tried some new things.” Ruth couldn’t believe it.