

KFFA and Helena are even “must see” stops for Japanese and European tourists who want to learn about the cultural roots of the blues.

“First things first,” recalls Sonny “Sunshine” Payne, the program’s host for over eleven thousand broadcasts; King Biscuit Time started when guitarist Robert Junior Lockwood and harmonica player Sonny Boy Williamson were told they would have to get a sponsor to get on the air.” That was 1941, when Payne was a teenager cleaning 78 rpm’s and running errands at KFFA. “They came to the station one day and I showed them in to station manager Sam Anderson . . . he sent them over to the Interstate Grocery Company and its owner Max Moore who had a flour called “King Biscuit Flour . . .”

Lockwood and Williamson became the show’s original King Biscuit Entertainers who advertised flour and corn meal in Helena and the surrounding Delta region; and after a lucky break, Sonny Payne took over as program host when the announcer lost his script while on the air. The program was a smash hit, thanks mostly to the playing and on-air presence of harp player Williamson. He became so popular that the sponsor named its product “Sonny Boy Corn Meal” and he was, and still is, pictured, smiling and with his harmonica, on a burlap sack of his own brand of meal.

Williamson was a musical pioneer in his own right. He was one of the first to make the harmonica the centerpiece in a blues band. His unique phrasings, compared by many to the human voice, influenced countless harp players.

His partner, Robert Junior Lockwood, stepson of the legendary Robert Johnson, also influenced the blues style. A fan of big band jazz, he incorporated jazzier elements into the blues, often playing the guitar with his fingers.

As years passed, the duo expanded into a full band, including piano player “Pine Top” Perkins, Houston Stackhouse and “Peck” Curtis, and musicians who played on the show also advertised local appearances that gave them more work.

With the success of “King Biscuit Time,” Helena soon became a center for the blues. It was a key stopping off point for black musicians on the trip north to the barrooms and clubs of Chicago’s South and West sides. Already, in the thirties, the town had seen the likes of pianist Memphis Slim and Helena native Roosevelt Sykes, as well as guitarists Howlin’ Wolf, Honeyboy Edwards, and Elmore James. And when the program went on the air, it helped shape the early careers of many an aspiring musician. “Little Walter” Jacobs and Jimmy Rogers, who later played with Muddy Waters, came to live and learn in Helena in the mid-1940’s. Muddy Waters also brought his band to Helena to play on KFFA and in bars in the area. Teenager Ike Turner first heard the blues on KFFA around

that time, and King Biscuit pianist “Pine Top” Perkins gave him lessons in his trademark boogie woogie style.

The program also influenced other stations to put the blues on the radio. Its initial popularity convinced advertisers that the blues had commercial potential. “It was a major breakthrough,” explains folklorist Bill Ferris, director of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at Ole Miss; “King Biscuit Time was a discovery of an audience and a market . . . that hitherto radio had not really understood.” Across the Mississippi River from Helena, radio station WROX put the South’s first black deejay, Early Wright, on the air spinning blues and gospel records in 1947. Upriver in Memphis, station WDIA the next year became the first southern station with an all-black staff, including a young musician named Riley “B. B.” King, who got an early break as a deejay. And, in Nashville in the late forties, station WLAC reached nearly half the country with its late-night blues and R&B shows. All of these programs and stations owe an enormous debt to “King Biscuit Time.”

And today, the legacy of the show continues, with blues programs heard on radio stations across the U.S., the recordings of the many “King Biscuit Entertainers,” and the yearly King Biscuit festival in Helena celebrating the city’s cultural heritage and significant role in developing and promoting the blues.●

IN RECOGNITION OF CALIFORNIA STATE SENATOR JIM COSTA FOR TWENTY-FOUR YEARS OF PUBLIC SERVICE.

● Mrs. BOXER. Mr. President, I rise today to bring to the Senate’s attention the exemplary achievements and outstanding service of State Senator Jim Costa of Fresno, California.

Senator Jim Costa will retire this year after twenty-four years of service in the California State Legislature. I am pleased to honor Senator Costa for his outstanding leadership and service and add my voice to the special recognition and the outpouring of admiration from throughout California.

In his many years of public service, Senator Costa has been dedicated to serving the Central Valley. Senator Costa is also well known for his sense of honor, purpose and teamwork that made him so effective in the California State Legislature.

I am honored to congratulate him on his many accomplishments over more than two decades of service. I wish Senator Costa the best in his future endeavors. I know he will continue to make outstanding contributions to the people of California. I ask that excerpts from the Fresno Bee Editorial from July 24, 2002 be printed in the RECORD:

There being no objection, the material was ordered to be printed in the RECORD, as follows:

[From the Fresno Bee, July 24, 2002]

CALLING IT A CAREER

JIM COSTA’S VALUABLE SERVICE IN THE STATE LEGISLATURE COMING TO AN END.

Democrat Jim Costa will make his political curtain call next month at a testimonial dinner that is expected to draw some of California’s most powerful politicians. It will be a fitting send-off recognizing a 24-year legislative career that began with youthful exuberance and is ending with a record of accomplishments that you’d expect from a seasoned veteran.

The dinner on Aug. 25 at the Fresno Convention Center will bring together four of the state’s five living governors, along with San Francisco Mayor Willie Brown, the former speaker of the Assembly. Costa has worked with all of them, gaining their respect even when they were at political odds. Dinner proceeds will benefit the Kenneth L. Maddy Institute at California State University, Fresno.

Costa understands better than most politicians the independent nature of Valley’s voters. First in the Assembly and then in the state Senate, he balanced the political interests of the region as well as any legislator. He has championed the needs of agriculture and has fought to improve the Valley’s business climate. He also battled to improve the plight of the region’s many impoverished communities.●

THE RETIREMENT OF RIVERSIDE COUNTY SHERIFF LARRY SMITH

● Mrs. BOXER. Mr. President, I rise to reflect on the distinguished career of Riverside County Sheriff Larry Smith, who will retire later this year. Sheriff Smith is also the immediate past president of the California State Sheriff’s Association. The people of Riverside County, his colleagues and admirers will celebrate his career on August 9.

During Sheriff Smith’s extraordinary 36-year record of service to law enforcement, he has held numerous positions and has achieved many important accomplishments. He served as Riverside County’s Search and Rescue Coordinator and commanded the Department’s SWAT team before working as chief deputy sheriff. Thanks to Sheriff Smith’s leadership and vision during his tenure as chief deputy sheriff, the Riverside County Corrections system is one of the largest in the United States.

Sheriff Smith was elected to serve as Riverside County Sheriff in 1994 and was reelected to serve a second term in 1998. During Sheriff Smith’s tenure, Riverside County saw a dramatic decrease in crime. Sheriff Smith was instrumental in the creation of the Ben Clark Public Safety Training Center. He collaborated with federal, state and local legislators to establish the facility, which provides valuable training for law enforcement officers, firefighters and paramedics. As I have seen for myself, it is truly a model for public safety training centers throughout the nation.

In addition to his tremendous commitment to his career, Sheriff Smith is an exemplary community leader. He has been active in the American Heart Association, the United Way of the Inland Empire and the Debbie Chisholm