

IN MEMORY

Of BBQ and Oysters: Dr. Sammy Ray

An amazing character in the Gulf Coast food world passed away last Monday.

Published Oct 22, 2013, 11:09am
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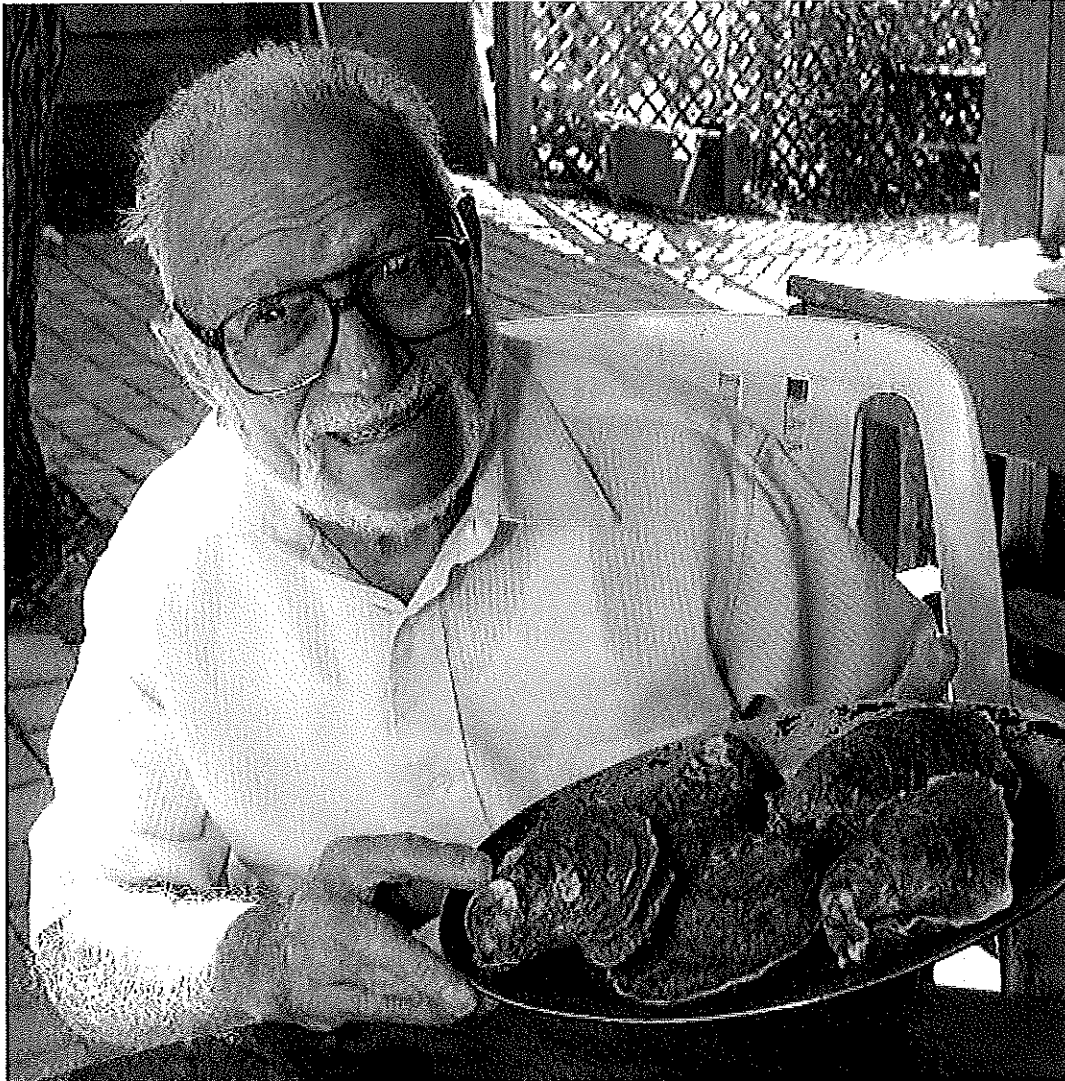


Image: Robb Walsh
Dr. Sammy Ray at Gilhooley's in 2004

At 1 p.m. on Saturday, October 26, a memorial will be held at Texas A&M Galveston for Dr. Sammy Ray, who died last Monday. Professor emeritus and former director of the Marine Laboratory at Texas A&M, Galveston, Dr. Sammy, as his friends called him, was an Arab-Southerner who grew up in the back of a barbecue stand in Rosedale, Mississippi. Recipient of the Texas Academy of Science's Distinguished Texas Scientist Award in 1996, and named to the Texas Science Hall of Fame in 2002, he was the first recipient of the Foodways Texas Lifetime Achievement Award in

2010. Dr. Sammy Ray was considered by many to be the foremost authority on the biology of Gulf oysters.

In 2005, I asked Dr. Ray to share his amazing life story:

It wasn't until 20 years ago, when I wrote off for my birth certificate, that I discovered the name I was given at birth was Hussein Mehedy Raya. My father was born near Beirut and emigrated to the United States at the age of 15 to avoid conscription in the Turkish Army. I was born in Kansas but moved to the Delta at an early age. I started school in Shaw, Mississippi. On the first day, I wore white shoes and a white coat. On my way home, three guys waylaid me, beat me up, called me a dago and a wop and threw me in a ditch. I never went back. I missed that whole year of school.

We moved to Rosedale in 1932. We bought this barbecue stand from a Italian guy, and kept the name, Provenzo's Barbecue. We got his secret barbecue sauce recipe in the deal too. Hummus, tabbouleh, and leftover barbecue was a pretty typical dinner for us.

I had very little self-confidence. It was the Great Depression, we were dark-skinned, we didn't have any money and we lived on the edge of black town, only they didn't call it black town back then.

My parents spoke Arabic to each other, but my father would only speak English to me. We didn't practice the Muslim faith or keep the holidays. The only thing we kept from his culture was the food.

Shish kebab and kibbeh were my father's favorites. We ate the kibbeh cooked and we ate it raw too, "kibbeh naya" is what my father called raw kibbeh. We ate raw meat all the time, When we went on a picnic, my dad would bring a kid goat or a lamb and he'd kill it on the riverbank. We'd eat slices of the kidney and liver raw with salt and pepper while we grilled the rest of it. When we were making shish kebabs out of pieces of lamb, we would eat some of that raw too.

One time, I was hanging around with our neighbors while they were killing a pig. I asked if I could have some of the raw kidney. When I told my dad about it, he beat the hell out of me. 'You must never eat any part of a pig raw,' he told me. He ate pork, but only well-cooked. Strange how an immigrant adapts his culture.

I never ate raw pork again, but I developed a lifelong love of organ meats. I used to eat broiled liver for breakfast a couple of times a week. But my very favorite breakfast is a kidney split in half and braised in a little butter. Then you scramble some eggs in the braising juices.

My dad was peddler. He walked everywhere with a grip bag. He could get to places in the boondocks where the wagons couldn't go, where there weren't even any roads. He sold fancy bedspreads.

My mom ran the barbecue stand. She barbecued a fresh pork shoulder and baked a cured ham once a week, that was about as much business as we did. We sold barbecue sandwiches on white bread with pickles and onions for 25 cents, cokes for a nickle.

Most customers bought sandwiches to go, which they ate in their cars parked out front. The shoulder tasted like a thinly sliced pork chop and the sauce was dark brown. It had a lot of Worcestershire sauce taste to it. I think it had some vinegar in it, but no ketchup.

We always had a garden. We grew our own parsley, tomatoes, peppers, and eggplant. My mother pickled green tomatoes and chow chow every fall. She also pickled turnip bottoms in beet juice. We got black olives in five-pound tins.

From the fifth grade until I was a senior in high school, I peddled popcorn and peanuts on the street and at Thalisman's Theater. I made the popcorn in a screened popcorn popper with a kerosene

heater. I roasted the peanuts in a tumbler that I set up over a wood fire. Black sharecroppers bought a lot on Saturday nights when they came to town. It was humiliating to be out there in the street with the tray yelling, "popcorn, peanuts" all the time, but in retrospect, I realized a lot of people in that little town respected me for working so hard.

My dad taught me to say "sir" and "ma'am" to everybody, but one day, I said, "Yes ma'am," to a black woman and he beat the hell out of me. He told me never to call a black person "sir" or "ma'am." It's sad that as much as he suffered from bigotry, he felt he had to talk down to black people.

I was a meat hunter from the age of 15 on. I would borrow a shotgun and go shoot rabbits. I was going to quit high school and take a job as a postal clerk. Nobody on either side of my family had ever graduated from high school, so it wasn't that big a deal.

But this guy I had met, Gordon Vaidin, told me that I would regret it for the rest of my life. He was an ornithologist working on creating natural history museums for the WPA and his taxidermist had just quit. So handed me a gun, a bird guide, and a book on taxidermy and paid me \$35 a month to mount birds for him. But only if I would stay in high school.

Taxidermy became my passion. And through taxidermy I gained respect. Not only did I graduate high school, I ended up going to Sunflower Junior College. The dean there was sponsoring one of these natural history museums. And he needed a taxidermist. I met my wife there. And I ended up working my way through LSU as a taxidermist too.

I sent over 200 bird skins to the Smithsonian from the South Pacific during World War II. When I got back from the war, I thought about becoming a doctor. But while I was visiting LSU, one of my former professors told me about this field research job that paid \$250 a month plus living expenses.

A bunch of Louisiana oyster fishermen had sued the oil companies for \$35 to \$40 million because their oysters were mysteriously dying off. They claimed that the petroleum from the oil rigs was killing them. Researchers were hired by both sides to find out what was really going on.

The job was supposed to last six months. But I ended up living on Sabin Island in Santa Rosa Sound researching oysters for over three years. That was the first time I ever saw a raw oyster.

I don't remember the first time I ate a raw oyster. But I always loved oyster stew. You don't want to eat raw oysters if they have been sitting out in a lab, but they're fine if you freeze them. Sometimes, I put the oysters I use in research in the freezer when I'm done and take them home and make oyster stew. You just simmer them in milk and butter. I like mine with lots of crumbled crackers in it.

The lawsuit was dropped when researchers from both sides came to the same conclusion. Petroleum wasn't killing the oysters. It was a microscopic parasite called dermo which we identified for the first time. The dermo was there because of an increase in salinity. Turns out it wasn't the oil rigs that were killing the oysters, it was the levee built along the Mississippi river to stop flooding. Oysters need lots of fresh water. It keeps their predators away.

I still eat a lot of oysters, but I don't eat liver and kidneys much anymore. Organ meats have a lot of purines in them, which the body metabolises into uric acid. After a couple trips to the hospital for gout and kidney stones, I had to cut them out of my diet. But the smell of liver cooking is still one of my favorite aromas.

To make a donation to the Dr. Sammy Ray Scholarship in Marine Biology contact: s-milligan@tamu.edu.