

## Celebrating the Life of Ralph F. Stayer, Founder of Johnsonville Sausage

Today we celebrate the life of a true American. A life based on hard work, hope and the promise of a brighter tomorrow. The life is that of Ralph F. Stayer, the founder of Johnsonville Sausage. His life grew through a solid faith in the American dream and today we remember an accomplished man, father and fellow citizen, who as of June 24, 2007 has passed beyond the confines of the flesh and has moved into our hearts and memories.

Ralph F. (RF) Stayer was born on March 15, 1915 to a poor immigrant family living in Eli, Minn. Growing up in Milwaukee, Wis., RF found himself the sole provider as the oldest in a family of six, without a father, at the height of the great depression. Due to his position in the family, RF never graduated high school. Even though he was at the head of his class and had only one month left before graduation RF, a man of great work ethic, sacrificed his high school diploma to take a position with the Civilian Conservation Corps – a program created by Franklin D. Roosevelt as part of the New Deal, connecting unemployed men with massive conservation projects. The strong work ethic and commitment to family that showed itself at such a young age in RF would drive him to make one of the best business decisions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

After meeting and marrying his life long love and partner, Alice Stayer in 1938, RF moved his family to a small town in Wisconsin. RF and Alice lived a simple life filled with hope and a strong entrepreneurial attitude. Saving every penny RF made while working at Plankington Packing Company, Alice and RF were able to purchase a small meat market in Johnsonville, Wis. in 1945 with \$1,500 left for capital. RF was passionate about the quality of the food he ate and made.

“With one bite, Dad could tell if Mom had prepared the hamburgers with the onions in the pan or if the onions had been added after the meat had been cooked,” recalls RF’s son Ralph C. (RC) Stayer, current CEO and owner of Johnsonville Sausage.

When it came to great tasting meat, RF had a natural born talent. Everything came together one day when a festival changed the course of his life. RF and Alice were attending a local festival when he noticed a considerable number of half eaten brats in the trash. RF realized that if he could develop a great tasting brat, he could set his company apart. Launa Stayer-Maloney, RF’s daughter and owner of Johnsonville Sausage, tells a story of how a loyal customer’s behavior changed after RF created his brat.

“A loyal customer of my parent’s butcher shop at the time would come in and order 40 pounds of hamburgers and 10 pounds of brats,” said Stayer-Maloney. “However, he quickly changed this ratio to 40 pounds of brats and 10 pounds of hamburger.”

Based on the overwhelming response to their brats, Ralph and Alice decided to turn their neighborhood butcher shop into a sausage company. As the years passed, Johnsonville began to move toward the company we know today. But even as RF and Alice’s situation changed, RF remained focused on the quality of taste.

“Even after we moved from Johnsonville to Sheboygan (a distance of more than 10 miles), Dad would still drive back to Johnsonville to get the water for his morning coffee,” said RC Stayer. “Dad just knew what tasted good.”

In fact, RC and Launa were not the only ones to see the emphasis RF placed on taste. He was meticulous about the sausage made at Johnsonville.

“I remember watching him in the spice room, creating new recipes. He would have the counters covered in different spices, adding a pinch of this and a dash of that. RF had a knack for creating the best tasting sausage and he did it by taste and a dedication to the quality of the sausage,” said Steve Laack, Johnsonville member for 29 years.

An active member of Johnsonville until the day he passed, RF is responsible for creating many of the recipes still used by Johnsonville Sausage today, but RF's passions extended beyond sausage. Family was everything to RF. Being a provider from an early age, that instinct carried through in the way he took care of his children, grandchildren and great grandchildren. A father of two, Ralph C and Launa, his family grew to include twenty-seven direct descendents. RF insisted on spending his free time fishing with the grandchildren, hunting with his son, or golfing with his wife and daughter. Everything RF did, he did well. At the age of 70, he became the club golf champion at the Naples Country Club in Naples, Fla.; an accomplished golfer with four holes-in-one to his name. He traveled around the world as an avid outdoorsman in search of beautiful game and like all other fisherman RF had many a great “fish tale” to tell.

To RF, family extended beyond his immediate family to include the less fortunate who lived within his community. Known as an extremely generous philanthropist, RF did anything for kids in need, whatever it took to inspire children of a new generation to have faith in the American dream. Today, there are many physical examples of RF's charity including: The Ralph F. and Alice Stayer Boys & Girls Club in Sheboygan, Wis. and The Stayer Park in Plymouth, Wis. A strong religious man, RF continued his charitable efforts through the Knights of Columbus, holding the ranking of a Fourth Degree Knight, which is the highest ranking a Knight can achieve.

The definition of success, RF Stayer proved that the American dream is real and not just a story told to encourage enterprise. His keen eye for opportunity, paired with a strong work ethic and dedication to his craft, grew RF from a poor boy to an accomplished man. A man not only defined by his accomplishments, but also by those he loved and those he helped. As we say goodbye to our friend, Ralph F. Stayer, we find comfort that we can continue to savor the efforts of his life through the variety of footprints he left on the world or just in one simple, delicious bite of a Johnsonville Brat.

In memorial of Ralph F. Stayer (1915-2007)