

Ralph F. Stayer, 92; put bratwurst on menu in U.S.

From the Associated Press

Ralph F. Stayer, the founder of a Wisconsin sausage company that helped popularize bratwurst in the United States, died Sunday in his sleep at a Florida nursing home, his family said Monday.

He was 92.

Stayer bought a butcher shop in 1945 and turned it into the million-dollar Johnsonville Sausage Co., said his son, Ralph C. Stayer.

"He started with nothing, and he had the joy of seeing his business blossom, of doing business in 40 countries," said Stayer, current chief executive of the company, based in Kohler, Wis.

The elder Stayer was born in Ely, Minn., in 1915 and moved to Milwaukee as a teenager.

He dropped out of high school a month before graduation to support his parents and five younger siblings during the Depression.

"He always had a great sense of responsibility," his son said. "He just did what he had to do."

Stayer's butcher shop was struggling in 1945, when he went to a picnic and saw garbage cans filled with partially eaten brats.

He and his wife, Alice, drew upon their Austrian and Slovenian heritage to make better-tasting bratwurst based on an old family recipe, his son said.

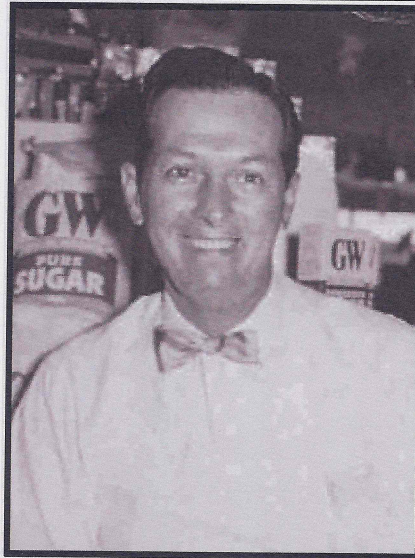
Stayer once said he knew the company was doing something right when a customer who had previously ordered 5 pounds of bratwurst and 30 pounds of hamburger returned six months later and ordered 30 pounds of bratwurst and 5 pounds of hamburger.

Johnsonville Sausage became a multimillion-dollar business under Stayer's son's leadership.

Its bratwursts are sold seasonally at about 4,000 McDonald's restaurants nationwide and in 16 National Football League stadiums.

The sausage company is the main sponsor of Brat Fest, an annual event in Madison, Wis., in which participants eat almost 190,000 of the spiced pork sausages in four days over the Memorial Day weekend.

Besides his wife and son, Stayer is survived by a daughter, 10 grandchildren, 11 great-grandchildren and three brothers.



Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

RALPH F. STAYER

He used an old family recipe to make his bratwursts. Johnsonville Sausage sponsors the annual Brat Fest.

