WISCONSIN MEAT INDUSTRY HALL OF FAME

2000

Ralph & Alice Stayer
Ralph F. & Alice Stayer

Until you have eaten a Johnsonville “Brat” while tailgating at a Brewers or Packers game you simply haven’t lived! And if it hadn’t been for Ralph and Alice Stayer purchasing a small meat market in Johnsonville, WI nearly 55 years ago, and transforming it into a world leader in sausage production, Johnsonville “Brats” would have never existed!

Alice Brinkman was one of 14 children born to John and Mary Brinkman of Ahmeek, MI. John was a copper miner and when the mine closed during the depression, he brought his family to Milwaukee.

After graduating from high school, Alice received a scholarship to college but was unable to take advantage of it because she had to help support the family by working as a secretary during this time. She knew of Ralph F. (“R.F.” as he is known) Stayer because he was a friend of the family. It took Alice and R.F. several years before they noticed each other, but when they did, they became inseparable and were married in 1938. After marriage, they both worked and sacrificed to achieve their dream of having their own business. They tried to buy a small, empty shop and convert it into a floral shop in Milwaukee but the offer fell through, and after more waiting the dream was finally fulfilled.

In 1945, the Stayers joined Carl and Anna Hirsch and founded Johnsonville Sausage in the unincorporated village of Johnsonville. The facilities included a store, living quarters for the two families, sausage kitchen, a small smokehouse and a separate shed for slaughtering. The Stayer-Hirsch partnership thrived until it was dissolved because of Carl’s death. At this time the Stayer family partnership was formed.

R.F. and Alice, together with their son Ralph C. and daughter Launa, built one of the largest independent sausage companies in the United States. They have popularized fresh bratwurst across the nation, which has also helped to increase the markets for bratwurst made by other Wisconsin meat processors. Their company’s total yearly sales are now over $200 million, and they employ more than 600 Wisconsin residents.

The Johnsonville Company slaughters over 10% of the sows butchered in the U.S. every year. Much of the slaughtering is done at their Watertown plant, creating a market for many sows raised in Wisconsin. The company also buys millions of pounds of beef, much of it coming from culled Wisconsin dairy cows which have been slaughtered by other companies.

R.F. and Alice made a great team using their complimentary skills to build their business. R.F. focused on making the best sausage he could and Alice handled the office tasks. Together they withstood agonizing disappointments and shared the joy of their successes. Daughter Launa Stayer-Maloney once said, “I can’t remember a time when my Mom was not by my Dad’s side. She was always there.” Now in their semi-retirement, both of them are “always there” for their 10 grandchildren and 4 great grandchildren, as well as for the Johnsonville Company.