

Chicago Tribune

LIFESTYLES

The Butcher To The Stars

Ed Drier's Meats Found Fans In Larry Hagman, Bill Blass And Others

June 03, 1994 | By Jon Anderson, Tribune Staff Writer.

THREE OAKS, Mich. — Why, a visitor might ask, walking unawares into Drier's Butcher Shop in this small town in southwestern Michigan, is there a white butcher's apron fitted on a dummy and signed by Bill Blass? And a Stetson hat from Larry Hagman? And a signed photo of Chicago's late Mayor Richard J. Daley? And a picture of Carl Sandburg?

Well, it's a long story. Or, actually, stories, as June Drier related recently as she pulled up an oak chair, while daughter Carolyn tended the counter, to talk about her late husband, Ed, who died in February after running the family business for most of the last 50 years.

"Ed just loved this place," June began. "I used to tell him, 'If you had to choose between this place and me, you'd choose this place.' "

For a butcher, working in Three Oaks, well off any beaten track, Ed drew an amazing list of patrons to the little wooden building with a curved roof that was built as a wagon-repair shop just after the Civil War. "People would come in for a ring of bologna and stay 20 minutes to talk," June said. "You just don't find a lot of people to talk to these days."

It was James Hormel, a meat mogul who vacationed nearby, who first brought in Larry Hagman, at the peak of his fame as J.R. Ewing on TV's "Dallas." The two men, talking meat, became friends. Drier shipped some bologna to Hagman. Hagman sent Drier a white Stetson, a twin to one in the Smithsonian Institution, and a photo signed, "To Ed. Thanks for everything you taught me."

Another customer, Pulitzer Prize-winning cartoonist Bill Mauldin, working on butcher paper, left a rare drawing of Willie, his stubble-bearded GI from World War II, actually smiling. "Ed told people, 'Bill must have really liked my sausage,' " June said.

So did the late Mayor Daley, and his wife, Eleanor, who often dropped by on their way to the family vacation home in nearby Grand Beach. June quoted Ed as saying, "Dick Daley had a knack for seeking out the common man."

And so, in a sense, did Ed. He never lost his ability to schmooze, with anyone who walked in. "What was most interesting to Ed was the people who came in," June said. Nor was it unknown for Drier to follow a customer out the door onto North Elm Street, still talking.

Artist Ivan Albright, who had a country home in the area, did a drawing of a bull, with Ed's name hidden in its head curls. Framed, it hangs on one wall of the incredibly cluttered shop, beside a local painter's oil portrait of Ed as Edward II, with links of sausage looped around his neck. Nearby is a mock-FBI poster with Ed's picture: "WANTED: FOR SPREADING BOLOGNA ACROSS THE U.S." On another wall is nailed a series of vanity license plates that, over a four-year period, put together a slogan in tin: UMUST TRYOUR DRIER HAMS.

A real character

Ed was a collector of everything from signs to old lamps to objects that fit in with the shop, such as a foot-high butcher doll with a tiny pig under one arm and a chicken under the other.

And, noted John McHugh, a computer programmer and author now living in Three Oaks, "He was a font of information.

"He knew all the local lore. He kept in touch with everybody. He loved good gossip and dished it out liberally, along with the ham and the sausage. And the guy knew Carl Sandburg personally."

As McHugh recalled, Sandburg, a customer at the Drier shop in the late 1930s, lived a few miles away in Harbert and liked to walk along the shore of Lake Michigan while composing his monumental study of Abraham Lincoln.

"One morning, after an all-night session, Drier and a couple of his poker-playing buddies decided to shake him up," McHugh said. "One of them dressed up like Lincoln, in a stovepipe hat, beard and heavy coat, and walked towards Sandburg on the beach. As they passed on the sand, Sandburg simply murmured, 'Good morning, Mr. President,' and, without changing expression, trudged on."

Normally amiable, Ed could be gruff. Film critic and longtime customer Roger Ebert, planning to host a party, once went to Drier's to stock up on smoked ham. Ed, who prided himself on consumption estimates, asked Ebert how many people he would be serving. Informed that there would be 100 guests, Drier told Ebert he would need one large ham. "Better have two," Ebert said. Ed came late to the party, made a beeline for the kitchen, looked at the amount of ham left over, snapped at Ebert, "I told you-only one," and promptly left.

Ed could also be single-minded. Ebert told of Ed's inviting WMAQ-Ch. 5 news anchor Ron Magers, new in the area, to dinner. Later, Ebert asked Magers, "What did you talk about?" Replied Magers succinctly: "Hams."

Making an impression on Blass

"He could get his points across without raising his voice," recalled daughter Carolyn. "There was a smart-aleck delivery boy who kept calling him Bud. Dad told him, in a quiet voice, 'If you want to get anywhere in this world, you don't call people Bud.' He never did it again."

One longtime customer has been designer Bill Blass. Finding out that Blass liked to cook, Ed once sent him some butcher knives, asking for a sketch in return. Instead, Blass designed a white butcher jacket with apron lined with rhinestones. Ed wore it on what he called "state occasions," June said, among them a fashion show in Chicago a decade ago where Drier and Blass finally met in person.

"You couldn't beat his stuff," said Tricia Miller who, with her husband, Ron, runs Miller's Country House in nearby Union Pier and often shops at Drier's. A fellow antiquer, she gave Ed a stuffed bull, rescued from the Stockyards Inn in Chicago just before it was demolished in 1977. In 1986, when they opened their restaurant, Ed thoughtfully gave it back, noting that it would look great by the front door.

"I remember his slogans," said author Grace Mark, who, with her husband, broadcaster Norman Mark, once thought of doing a book about Drier. "Bare feet, when accompanied by cash, are most welcome." "It is better to be the dog of a butcher than the dog of a hardware store owner." He liked sawdust on the floor, he often said, because it hid dropped change until he could get at it.

A long history

June said the shop's history began in 1875, when an English immigrant, Alec Watson, converted a wagon-repair shop into the Union Meat Market. Ed Drier's father started working there in his teens, buying out Watson in 1913. Two decades later, Ed started working in the back, gutting chickens. After a stint at Kalamazoo College, where he met June, he entered medical school at the University of Michigan. Drafted into World War II after one semester, he headed for the shop after he got home and never left.

Over the last 30 years, as Drier's patch of southwestern Michigan slowly restyled itself into a resort area known as Harbor Country, Ed changed with the times. His father retired in 1965, the year Ed decided to drop fresh meat.

"Smartest thing we ever did," he once said. "We'd have had to spend \$100,000 to fulfill government regulations." He also knew, Carolyn added, "that you just could not compete anymore with the supermarkets."

Instead, Drier's turned to smoked hams, liver sausage, bologna, bratwurst and polish sausage, along with a line of other people's cheeses-and it's done just fine ever since.

Ed was, many said, part of the fabric of the area, a person to check in with, shoot the breeze with, keep in touch with. For favored customers, he used to have a special treat, a shot of straight Scotch in a paper cup. "He always kept half a gallon out back," June recalled. "We never gave out calendars, but everybody remembered that shot of booze."

A beautiful return

"Ever had this before? Let me give you a taste," said Carolyn, picking up her father's patter and handing a customer a slice of liver sausage. "We're open seven days a week, as Dad used to say, from about 9 to exactly 5:30."

Early last January, when Drier's closed for two months, as it does each year, Ed and June went to Florida, as they always did. On Feb. 16, Drier, 74, suffered a fatal heart attack during a tennis game.

"The gal who was serving said he got a beautiful return back. Then, just like slow motion, he sank to the court," June said. There was never any question about the store's reopening-and so it did, on March 17, right on schedule.

Drier's will remain the same, vowed June, 74, and Carolyn, 49. In addition, Carolyn's nephew, David Wooley, now is learning to make bologna.

"Every day we talk about Dad," Carolyn said. "This is where he would want us to be."