

The Cremation of Ethyl A. Pigg and the Making of a Chef- Cook

By Dan Gill, Ethno-Gastronomist

Customers often ask how long I have been cooking and if I have a culinary background. Actually, it all started about ten years ago when I cremated Ethyl. I was raised on a farm and therefore had a basic appreciation for all aspects of food production, preservation and preparation. We always had a garden and a milk cow and killed our own hogs. We made butter and cottage cheese, canned tomatoes, cured hams, made scrapple and salted herring. We had three hot, sit-down meals a day - all made from scratch. Table discussions often centered on what we were eating. Except for the obligatory brownies, cookies and fudge, I never did much cooking when I was coming along. With a mother, grandmother, two older sisters and a housekeeper - all excellent cooks - it was hard to get into the kitchen. What I did cook, however, must have been good because, after I turned out a batch of peanut butter cookies, our housekeeper said: "Mister Dan, when you grow up, you' going to be a chef-cook"

I came along during the 1950s when outdoor cooking with charcoal was just getting popular. Charcoal was expensive so Daddy bought a small, efficient cast iron Sportsman Grill. I learned early on that steaks could be cooked on six pieces of charcoal. If the

fire was not quite hot enough, he wadded up a piece of newspaper to sear the meat. He said that he was cooking with Kilpatrick (James J. Kilpatrick was then writing conservative editorials for the *Richmond News Leader*). In the winter, we just put the grill in the fireplace so we could cook indoors. Grilling is not barbecue - I wanted to make barbecue but didn't know how and didn't have a pit.

When I designed our new house, I included an indoor barbecue pit. I wanted to roast oysters and make real barbecue indoors as well as grill steaks. Our house took a long time (four years) to build, so after the roof was finally on, we figured it was time for a party. Our daughter Shelley was joining the Air Force and we decided that a going-away party was a good excuse to try out our new pit. Shelley had raised a pig named Ethyl. Fattened on corn and kitchen scraps, Ethyl had grown to an impressive five hundred pounds. She was friendly and loved to be scratched. It made quite an impression on guests when Ethyl escaped from her pen and ran straight at them at full tilt, only to stop next to their trembling legs to be petted.

A few days before the party, Shelley and I did in Ethyl and prepared one of her shoulders for the pit. On the morning of the party, I got a nice low fire going, inserted Ethyl's shoulder and went about my business, confident that she was just going to cook slowly for a long time and magically turn into barbecue. Meantime, Ethyl heated up and starting dripping fat on the fire. When I opened the door to check on her, I was met with a wall of flame - Ethyl was fully involved! One of the craftsmen working on the house saw this and exclaimed: "Dan done cremated Ethyl!" The rest of the day was spent tending the fire and periodically extinguishing Ethyl. As it turned out, Ethyl was edible, though a little crispy on the outside and definitely not barbecue: She had to be sliced and some guests had difficulty with the idea that their entrée had a name. Shelley *did* take exception when we raised a glass to Ethyl before toasting her and her new endeavor. We then named the pit the "Ethyl A. Pigg Memorial Cooker", complete with a brass plaque, and I decided that I had better learn how to cook on it. I joined a newly formed barbecue e-mail list and was soon hooked.

In those days, before flame wars and the flooding of e-mail lists with mindless drivel, I learned a lot about the art very quickly from some of the best, down-to-earth practitioners from around the country. Because of my background with curing meat and fish, I soon became known as "the guru of brining" and participated in writing a barbecue FAQ that is still available on the Internet (<http://www.bbq-porch.org/faq>). I bought a Weber Smokey Mountain and built a "butt ugly" pit from a large food warmer and a wood stove: I was well on my way to becoming a bona fide "pit master". We hosted the Greater Remlik Oynkster Festival for several years: Barbecue enthusiasts from around the country descended on our farm and we cooked whole hog (Rufus) on a cinder block pit and cabrito (young goat) on a spit among other delicacies (some of which fell into the category of miscellaneous parts). The last Oynkster Festival was filmed for *Virginia Currents* on PBS. From there I moved into food history and became a full-fledged "foody", haunting restaurants and learning what I could

about the business. When we bought the old Green's Store for our daughter Sarah, it was only natural that I helped out by making barbecue and smoked meats. It was soon obvious that "Pinetree One Stop & Deli" was going nowhere as a convenience store, so Barbara, Sarah and I shut it down and completely remodeled in an attempt to protect our investment. We then re-opened as "Something Different" featuring freshly roasted coffees from around the world, my barbecue and smoked meats, homemade desserts, sides and soups and our sandwiches on homemade bread. I tell customers that I was tired of losing money farming so I figured I would diversify and try the food business. All because I cremated Ethyl!



The Ethyl A. Pigg Memorial Pit

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