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FEBRUARYIS BLACK HISTORY MONTH

Ham maker and more

By Diana McFarland News editor

hoppers at the Smithfield Ham Shoppe may be unaware that its premier ham was developed by one of Smithfield's earliest black leaders.

Charles Henry Gray — former Smithfield Foods executive and the town's second black councilman — came up with the recipe while experimenting in his kitchen in Jersey Park.

And to this day, the recipe remains a secret.

"He was always trying out something for the plant," said his widow, Mary E. Gray.

Today, a Charles Henry Gray ham fetches \$149.99 for a whole ham, or \$9.99 for eight ounces of sliced ham at the shop in Smithfield. But in the beginning, Charles Henry and Mary spent many nights before Christmas processing and cooking the hams for friends and family.

M ary said Charles Henry had a special procedure for making the ham — starting with slicing the ham and removing it from the bone.

Then he would baste the slices in the secret recipe and put them back on the bone. The ham was wrapped in layers of aluminum foil and put in a 250-degree oven for about three hours.

Often they would be up at 3 a.m. pulling one batch of hams out of the oven and putting in another.

"Sometimes we'd be up half of the night fixing those hams for his friends," Mary said.

"He loved to do it. He would sit back and smile after people said they liked it."

Charles Henry was born in Smithfield in 1919 and started working at what was once Luter's in the 1930s. He stayed with the company for 47 years.

Charles Henry learned every part of the business and was promoted several times — to personnel and later to working with the hams.

Eventually Joseph Luter III, who became the company's CEO and chairman of the board, made Charles Henry his executive as-

Luter often consulted with him on personnel and union matters, said Lawrence Pitt, who is a close associate of Luter.

Mary said Charles Henry was particularly effective at negotiating the sale of truckloads of hams.

"Some people wouldn't buy the hams unless they bought it from Charles Henry," she said.

At one point, Luter asked Charles Henry to run the restaurant at his resort in Bayse — Bryce's Mountain Resort. In addition to his hams, Charles Henry was well known in Smithfield for his barbecued pork and once ran his own catering business. Charles Henry, and later Mary, stayed at Bryce Mountain Resort for three years until Luter sold the business and Charles Henry returned to Smithfield.

He is remembered by Smithfield Foods as a "company man" committed to "doing it right."

In 1984, Charles Henry decided to run for the Smithfield town council. At the time, there was only one other black person on the council — James Chapman.

"He didn't know if he would win, but he did," Mary said.

While on the council, Charles Henry was named to Who's Who Among Black Americans in 1985.

Unfortunately, Charles Henry was only able to serve two years of his four-year term. He died of a heart ailment May 21, 1986.

But his legacy continued. Luter donated \$25,000 to Main Street Baptist Church in Charles Henry's honor.

Charles Henry Gray Jr., who now lives in Richmond, said his father didn't talk about racial issues. Instead, "he wanted everyone to be accepted as a person, not by color."

In describing his father, Gray Jr. said, "He gave me a lot of substance in my life, such as carrying myself in a respectful manner"

"He was actually my role model." Not surprisingly, Gray Jr. grew up to attend college, joined the Army and eventually went to the culinary arts institute and pursued a career as a chef.

He remembered helping his father with his catering business, and recalled doing the election reception in the home of A. E. S. Stephens, who served as Lieutenant Governor of Virginia from



Photo courtesy of the Isle of Wight County Museum

Smithfield ham executive Charles Henry Gray poses with one of the many hams produced by Smithfield Foods and Smithfield Packing.

"He was the one that got me into cooking," Gray Jr. said.

And it was after he died that Smithfield Foods decided to name a ham in Charles Henry's honor. Mary said someone from the company called and asked her permission to create the special ham. She agreed. Today, the ham's recipe remains a deeply guarded secret by another Foods associate, according to the company's website.

Gray Jr. knows the secret recipe and makes his own version at home.

"It's cheaper for me to make it than to buy it," he joked.

The ham is advertised as a party ham that provides the "ultimate ham experience" and continues to receive rave reviews.

If Charles Henry had been alive to know of the signature ham that bears his name, "He would love it. Oh, he would love that," Mary said.

