

Mobile & Bayou la Batre Foodways--Amy Beach

Submitted by Amy Beach, Wednesday, 01/07/2009 - 11:44am.

Working on my Folkways project since the Alabama Community Scholars' Institute of 2008 has been an exciting journey. On day one of ACSI I came in planning to work on documenting how living from seafood harvest to seafood harvest influenced daily life in a Bayou la Batre family. As our classes progressed at the Institute, my outlook on my personal project did also. By the time I left ACSI 2008, my project had changed focus, and now had a title: "Bayou Gumbo: Recipes and Family Stories from Bayou la Batre."

Since ACSI I have cooked gumbo with two families, and enjoyed a meal and storytelling session around the kitchen table. Three personal interviews have followed. One of the families I had gumbo with was the Raley/Johns family: Tavia Lowery Raley (gumbo cook), Steve Raley (her son), Lois Johns (her daughter), and J.T. Johns (her son-n-law).

Tavia Lowery Raley moved to Bayou la Batre as a child when she was five years old. Her father, John Thomas Lowery, had hurt his back helping a friend pull a truck out of a ditch in Wallace, Alabama (Escambia County); and came to Mobile County to "Get his back fixed at the hospital." His back could not be fixed, and he lived out the rest of his days working in the fish camps in Bayou la Batre with his family.

At the age of 21 Tavia married her sweetheart, Henry Elroy Raley. He was a WWII vet who made his living in the Bayou by shrimping and oystering. His family had been a "fisher family" since his Great-grandfather, Nathaniel Green Raley, moved into the Bayou la Batre area during the 1860s. After working in fish camps as a young woman, then being married to a shrimper/oysterman for most of her life, Tavia perfected recipes not only for seafood gumbo, but shrimp & spaghetti, fried oysters, and shrimp creole.

One of the lessons I learned about cooking gumbo and life from Tavia Raley is to slow down, take your time, and enjoy the process. "Hurried gumbo is bad gumbo. Slow gumbo has time to blend, and the flavors of the ingredients touch your mouth better after they've had time to marinate."

This philosophy is also reflected in her family. When the family gathered around the table, there was no "hurry" to them. They enjoyed each other just as much as the savory gumbo placed before them, and listened with interest and good humor to the stories shared at the table. Long after the gumbo was gone the family still sat sharing life and remembered stories with each other.

Please check back with me: I will be posting interview excerpts and pictures from Tavia's house and others.

On a side note: I have been cooking historical recipes from the Gulf City Cook Book published in 1878 for a local news station: WKRG 5. It has been a pleasure giving history lessons to the viewers in Mobile County while cooking with the anchor, John Nodar. Below are posted the links you can view the cooking segments at:

<http://www.wkrg.com/story/21606078/sally-lunn-bread>

<http://www.wkrg.com/story/21599645/soft-ginger-cake>

<http://www.wkrg.com/story/21603487/spice-cake>