

Carolina Kitchen: Duke Mayonnaise Creator 'Could Do Anything'

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By Allison Askins

Last summer, in commemoration of the 90th anniversary of Duke's mayonnaise, I wrote about the beloved condiment's creator, the late Eugenia Duke, who got her start in Greenville, making sandwiches for soldiers at Fort Sevier.

The beginning of Duke's story was easy to pull together, but no one seemed to know what happened to her after she sold her mayonnaise recipe to the C.F. Sauer Co. in 1929. (Around the same time, she also sold her sandwich company to her bookkeeper.)

Mark Sauer, great-grandson of C.F. Sauer Sr., who first purchased the mayonnaise, and Judy Bainbridge, a Greenville historian, knew Eugenia moved to California, but that was the end of the trail...

Until I heard from her great-granddaughter, Janet Kramer Bensley of Vermont. Bensley had discovered my story while doing genealogical research.

Turns out Eugenia's granddaughter (Bensley's mother), Eugenia Thomas Bronson Kramer, 80, moved to Charlotte five years ago and has been surprised to learn about the local passion for Duke's mayonnaise.

"As far as I knew, there was nowhere on the West Coast where you could find it," Kramer told me during one of several recent phone conversations.

She described her grandmother as a spunky woman who her mother told her wasn't too good at saving money, but "sure knew how to make it."

Once in California, where she moved to be closer to her only daughter (Kramer's mother), she started another sandwich company, Duchess Sandwich Co., which later was sold to someone outside the family.

"She far from disappeared from the map," Kramer said. "She came into California and struck out like a house on fire."

The sandwich company sold "truckloads of sandwiches" to shipyards during World War II, Kramer said.

"It was a labor of love. She just loved doing it," she recalled. "She had a lot of spunk and a lot of enthusiasm for just up and doing. She was not a feminist, but she sure knew how to function in a man's world."

Eugenia Duke also relished big gatherings around her own table.

"Sunday dinners were something else again," Kramer said. "My husband remembers when... we would go for Sunday dinners. There would be squab and a prime rib and a ham.... She loved to feed people."

Kramer said her grandfather, Harry Duke, whom we don't hear about very often, was an integral part of the family, too.

“He was a doll. The handsomest man. You always saw him in a three-piece suit,” Kramer recalled. He originally was from North Carolina, but not from the Duke family after which Duke University is named, she said.

Interestingly, Kramer said she only made mayonnaise once in her own life, and that was from a cookbook recipe when she ran out at home.

She regrets that she never got her grandmother to teach her how to make her own. And she regrets that the envelope on which the recipe was scrawled has long since slipped away from her collection of family treasures.

But it has been fun moving to the South and discovering what an icon her grandmother’s mayonnaise is here.

“She was a wonderful person. ... She could do anything,” Kramer said.

Eugenia Thomas Duke, mayonnaise connoisseur and culinary entrepreneur, died Feb. 26, 1968, at the age of 90. Her ashes are interred in the Chapel of the Chimes Mausoleum in Oakland, Calif.