

## Kemp's Zest for Life Found in Food, Spices, and the Great Outdoors

by Jennifer Johnson

When Ecru resident Burt Kemp says he can trace his ancestry pretty far back, he's not kidding. In fact, Kemp said, he has seven relatives who came over on the Mayflower, and his father's family eventually helped found the city of New Orleans.

Kemp was born in Gulfport, MS, where his father was a geologist for an oil company. They moved to the West Bank and later to the East Bank of Orleans Parish. Kemp enjoyed his childhood, learning to cook jambalaya as a young boy of about 13.

His first foray into cooking began with taking part in jambalaya-eating contests. "I almost won a couple of times!" he said. He's been perfecting his recipe for 56 years. His first cooking pot was a five-gallon variety that he still has to this day.

He graduated to a larger pot to feed extended family, noting that everyone in New Orleans is considered family – aunt, uncle, or cousin- so those gatherings involved very large groups of people.

He worked some jobs as he reached adulthood, eventually going into outside sales for Zep Chemical. It was during that time that he met wife Beverly, who first spotted Kemp dressed in suit and tie, cleaning out his horse stalls at a public barn in Slidell. Kemp said, "She couldn't get over that."

Eventually the two got together, and they tried to find a place to live that would have ample room for their horses. One day they found a place they loved that wasn't for sale. That didn't stop them from meeting with the homeowner to see if they would consider parting with the place. The owners said yes, and the Kems were on their way to having a place they and their animals could enjoy.

But trouble was on the horizon. "Three weeks later, (Hurricane) Katrina hit. I had to chainsaw my way in. The only damage to the house was that the sunken den was full of water. We had a mile and a half of fence down and lost more than 100 trees."

That wasn't all he lost – Kemp's building he had planned to cater out of was destroyed, and that was not an easy loss for someone who did as many as four crawfish boils a day for customers. They ended up running a generator to prepare food and cater for six months.

Kemp's path to catering came from his outside sales work. "When we would sell chemicals to a company, we would come back and cook food for them as a thank you. Eventually,

folks started asking us to cater for them at other events. It got to the point where, even though I had 20 years with Zep, I decided it was time to try this catering thing full time.”

Kemp has fond memories of his growing business in Louisiana. “We did a big job for Shell Oil in Bangor, ME. We had 10,000 pounds of crawfish in a 90-gallon jambalaya pot.” Another time, Kemp said, they fed a shipyard of 2,700 people in 45 minutes. He said that event included six lines so everyone could get their food, enjoy it, and head back to the job. They were successful, he said.

Right after Katrina, Kemp said he was cleaning up hurricane damage on his property and decided to rest under a tree. He fell asleep there for two hours. He went to see his doctor, who immediately had two nurses walk him across the street to the emergency room. Unbeknownst to him, Kemp had had a heart attack – a widow maker heart attack- and survived it. He had stents placed and was sent home.

He said things went well for about five years, and then he started to have trouble breathing. That led to more stents. At the time, he had a wedding to cater in fewer than two days. “I told my doctor there was no way I was calling that bride to tell her I couldn’t do it. So we compromised, and I sat in a chair and supervised what was going on to make sure everything went off without any problems.”

The next time he went to be checked, the doctor determined Kemp had had a slight stroke. He was put on cholesterol medication and found out he was diabetic.

He’s had Covid-19 five times. Health conditions led him to shut down the catering business. But he still enjoyed cooking for family and friends. After moving to north Mississippi in 2021 (evacuating after Hurricane Ida), Kemp commuted between his ailing mother in Bay St. Louis and wife Beverly in Ecru.

He had started a print shop in Louisiana before he left there, and he was told it would be less stressful than catering.

Then, he decided he would do something that would involve his love of cooking and helping others: He start selling his seasonings.

Kemp had always made his own seasonings for his dishes, and folks seemed to quite enjoy them. He gave them away for those who asked, but then he thought about getting into that line of work on a larger scale.

He works out of a shed in his backyard. He spends his time there creating, mixing, pouring up, and packaging his spices and sauces using his “Guidry the Alligator” mascot for labeling. He’s currently selling them at McCoy’s Grocery in Ecru, and he is working to expand into other stores.

Since coming to North Mississippi, Kemp has found a church home at Ingomar Baptist Church, where he feeds their congregation on Wednesday nights, including their shut ins. In addition, he feeds the Chase House in Pontotoc a couple of times each month and takes meals to the Church Street Personal Care Home in Ecu.

Growing up with an Episcopalian background, Kemp was recently baptized into the Baptist faith. An avid outdoorsman, he told his pastor he wanted to be baptized in the Gulf of Mexico since he had spent most of his life enjoying the water there. Though they weren't able to make that happen, about 50 members of his church family traveled to see his baptism at Pickwick Lake. It was quite the celebration, including a fish fry prepared by none other than Kemp himself.

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