



Wildlife officer now feeds far more than he arrested

By THOMAS LANGFORD | Posted: Sunday, March 21, 2010 12:00 am

Millions of oysters still cluster on the South Carolina coast. Ben Moise (that's another one of those French emigre names – Mo-ees) should know. He spent two years with the S.C. Department of Natural Resources arresting those who harvested too many oysters; now he roasts thousands more than that at 50 to 100 private and public parties a year.

One was in Orangeburg for the Thalian Club last week; last year he held another for the International Congressional Conservation Fund at the historic Sewell House on the Mall in Washington, D.C.

Both Governors Dick Riley and Carroll Campbell called on him to roast for hundreds, and serve Frogmore Stew besides, at the Governor's Mansion. Prestigious preparatory school Woodberry Forest engaged his and his assistants' services in Virginia, and two weeks ago Gov. Sonny Perdue in Atlanta asked 100 or so guests to come to the gardens at the mansion and see how many oysters each of them could gulp down.

Quite a few, according to Ben's observations.

"The older crowd will stand at one of the tables, chew up from a half to a dozen, then find a place to sit down and talk. Many, you might as well call them oyster jocks, will be at the table the moment the first hot, 40-pound box is passed down and still be there two hours later when the last survivors, and oysters, fade away," he said.

"My philosophy about food has always been that if you're standing up and eating with your fingers, you've got to be having a good time," Ben adds.

n 46 counties of lovers

Not that he serves only the prominent. Lions, Kiwanis and just about every club from Florence to Aiken to Greenville, in all 46 counties, call on his talents.

Most business nowadays comes to his home in Charleston. They call and set a date. Then he calls Crosby's Seafood to place the order. He and 30-year partner John Laroche and nephew David Crump pick up the seafood a few hours before the event after packing their special trailer with all the folding tables and other equipment, then driving to the clubhouse, park or home.

There, they set up the big steamers. A model Ben designed, 25 years ago is a heavy aluminum box, 2 feet by 4 feet, with an aluminum basket on the inside that is suspended over gallons of water. Underneath the box are the burners, which bring the water up to a furious steaming boil and cook the shellfish. Three boxes of the oysters, about 120 pounds, can be heated to goodness in four and a half minutes.

The same steamers will cook Frogmore Stew (shrimp, sausage and corn) to satisfaction in 15 minutes. By this time, a number of men in the crowd are already standing around eyeing the cooker intently. The wood-topped tables are set with napkins, seafood cocktail sauce, little pick-like oyster shuckers and dainty yellow gloves to prevent the rough-edged shells from cutting. Ben says that on several occasions, women have called him the next day to ask if he found a valuable ring left in one of the gloves. He always has – one a Citadel graduation ring and several diamond engagement rings.

Looking around for a place that might instill more discipline in his young son, Ben's father enrolled him at Carlisle Military Academy in Bamberg when he was 15.

"All of us remember our commandant Colonel Risher's lecture before our first afternoon of leave in Orangeburg," Ben said. "He denounced 'the sin of our going forth into [the City of Orangeburg](#), visiting young ladies, taking their most priceless possession and trampling it through the mire of our animal-like desires.' Not many of us were old enough to understand

completely what he said.”

n 25 years in a little boat

Out of Carlisle, then the Citadel, Ben was drawn to a career outdoors, joining the South Carolina Wildlife Department in 1978. Soon he was checking hunter’s licenses on land and fishermen’s licenses in rivers and inlets.

“I spent 25 years in a small boat finding the latter, often working with Lt. Laddie Boone from Rowesville. He was enamored with the pleasures of cooking fish or game suppers for legislators and politicians,” he said. “For years I served as the ‘pot walloper’ and wash-up man for these affairs. They lasted until the early 1990s when new laws prohibited such private entertainments.”

“At the same time I had to stay on the job, sometimes up to 12 hours a day, to write tickets for trespassing hunters, many who began catching before legal hours ... also fishermen who used gill nets more than half the width of the creek they were on,” Ben said.

After 25 years of such winter and summer duty, he retired as the sun set on the tree line of the Edisto, the last day of the duck season in 2002.

“A future career had already been set for me. Arranging, cooking and serving Carolina fish and game, no longer an avocation, (was) now my full-time vocation.”

Today Ben has been at this delicious, sometimes sweaty task for 37 years.

Meanwhile, he has developed into a writer of note with frequent articles on wildlife for Charleston’s newspapers and magazines. He is also author of two books, “Ramblings of a Low Country Game Warden” and “A Southern Sportsman, the Hunting Memoirs of Henry Edward Davis,” both published by the University of South Carolina Press.

“But in all, I believe my greatest satisfaction comes from the suppers we serve without charge to raise funds for Charleston conservation organizations. One, the Horticultural Society, plants small trees in the city and county. Also, the Keeper of the Wild, an animal rescue group, the Sewee Environmental Center in Awendaw and a number of others.”

Ask Ben if he still likes to fish and hunt and he shouts back, “Well, I’ll tell you. I’m going to be sitting in the woods on the fringes of the Congaree Swamp tomorrow morning straining for the sounds of an old gobbler.”

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