



SUN STAFF : 2001

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Seymour Attman, 76, owner of Attman's Deli on city's Corned Beef Row

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By HOWARD LIBBY
STAFF

Seymour Attman, owner of Attman's Deli on Baltimore's famous Corned Beef Row, died yesterday morning at Mercy Medical Center of complications from a heart attack he suffered three weeks ago. He was 76.

Working in the 87-year-old deli founded by his father, Mr. Attman helped make the name Attman synonymous with Baltimore corned beef.

"All over the world, whenever I mentioned my last name, people would ask me if I was related to the deli in Baltimore," said Mr. Attman's son, Marc Attman. "I would say, 'That's my dad.' He's a world-famous guy."

Born and raised near Butchers Hill, Mr. Attman began working in the deli at age 16 and never stopped. Friends and family members said he had no hobbies other than working in the deli, which has been at its 1019 E. Lombard St. location since 1933.

On the street, Mr. Attman was known to everyone as "Seymour." In the deli, his employees called him "Mr. Attman" or "Pop."

"For everyone in the store, it's like family," said Earl Opper, Attman's manager. "People have worked here 25 years, 18 years, 15 years. Everyone was close, and Seymour Attman was like a father to everybody. He was so generous to everyone."

Through his decades of serving sandwiches, Mr. Attman met a variety of city, state and national politicians who visited the deli. President Jimmy Carter brought his national campaign through Mr. Attman's corner of Corned Beef Row, and Sen. Edward M. Kennedy is known to have enjoyed the Attman's sandwiches.

"He got to know a lot of famous people, but he treated everyone the same, whether you spent \$1 here or \$1,000," said Mr. Opper, who has known Mr. Attman for 38 years and worked in the store for almost three decades.

The deli is still buzzing over last month's first visit from Cal Ripken Jr. to pick up an order. Though the retired Orioles star had eaten Attman's catered food at many events, including several post-game meals in the team clubhouse, he had never been inside.

Attman's regularly appears on lists of the top places to eat and visit in Baltimore, representing one of the three surviving eateries on the city's famous Corned Beef Row.

After the Baltimore riots in 1968, Mr. Attman expanded the deli, purchasing an adjacent building to create Attman's Kib-

itz Room. Mr. Attman dedicated the room to his son, Stuart A. Attman, who died in 1994. Stuart Attman had overseen the deli's successful catering department.

Mr. Attman was married to the former Ruth Vafapsky for 27 years. Their marriage ended in divorce. He was married for almost 20 years to the former Elinor Dopkin, who died about 1½ years ago.

The deli will be closed today and is set to reopen tomorrow.

The traditions of Attman's are expected to continue. "I've been working with my father for the last year and a half, learning everything about the store," Marc Attman said. "Nothing's going to change. I know all the secrets."

"There's a legacy there. It's part of Baltimore," he said.

Services are set for 1 p.m. today at Sol Levinson and Bros., 8900 Reisterstown Road.

In addition to his son, survivors include two daughters, Eileen Levine and Deborah Snyder; two brothers, Edward Attman and Leonard Attman; three grandchildren; and one great-grandson. All live in Pikesville.



Seymour Attman looks out onto Lombard Street from the delicatessen his father started in the 1930s.

'Seymour stories' at the deli

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of delivering overstuffed sandwiches and service with an edge.

"You walk in here and you know you are in a deli," said Opiel, referring to both the surroundings and the staff. The guys and gals dishing out the sandwiches may have a few more tattoos than folks you see working at yogurt shops, but they are disarmingly competent. They remember complicated orders without writing them down or making eye contact with the customers.

The deli staff, Opiel said, "is a collage of true Baltimore. They didn't come in here with a resume, they came in here looking for a job."

A small business often mirrors the personality of its owner, and Attman's personnel and its menu are a direct reflection of Seymour. Take the hot dogs, for instance. Seymour insisted that the hot dogs, six to the pound, have texture or "bite" in them and that they be served "Baltimore style" — wrapped with a slice of bologna.

Seymour also knew his pickles. As a boy, he used to help his father make them. They bought Eastern Shore cucumbers at the Marsh produce market in downtown Baltimore, smashed the garlic that would be tossed into barrels of spicy saltwater brine that would transform cucumbers into pickles. Seymour grew up hearing that the cure for "the arthritis" was drinking pickle brine.

Years later, when the deli was buying pickles rather than making them, Seymour checked out each new shipment. "He would tell us to measure the pickles," said Bush, to make sure they were the correct length.

While in some parts of America eating red meat is regarded as primitive behavior, at Attman's in East Baltimore it reigned supreme. "The demise of meat?" Opiel asked. "We never got that memo." Instead, he said, Seymour made sure that employees learned the cor-

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rect way to slice the corned beef against the grain, with your fingers clear of the sharp blade.

"He used to tell us: 'Stay away from the blade. If you cut yourself, the blade won't feel a thing,'" Opiel said.

Seymour also insisted that all sandwiches be sliced on a 45-degree angle, not 90. "If you cut it the wrong way, Seymour would say, 'This is a deli, not a farm,'" Bush said.

As a boss, Seymour was demanding, but forgiving, his employees said. "He mellowed out," said Opiel, who worked with him for 38 years. "Seymour had a heart of gold," said Mehlinger, who has worked at the deli 15 years. It was Seymour's policy that if a customer was short of cash, you gave him the sandwich anyway, Mehlinger said.

Seymour also believed in talking to the customers. "He would hold court," his son Marc told me yesterday in a telephone conversation. "You couldn't keep him away from the store, especially on Saturday, the busiest day. If you came to the store for lunch, and my father came over to your table, it was not a half-hour lunch."

I last saw Seymour about six weeks ago. I was at the back of the deli line, when Opiel tapped me on the shoulder and took me deep into the warren of kitchens and offices, where Seymour sat watching a monitor that showed him how fast the deli line was moving.

We talked about current events. It was about noon, but he already had read *The Sun* and *The New York Times* and was full of informed opinions. And we talked about family. Eventually I got a pastrami on rye and headed back to work.

After visiting Seymour, you felt satisfied, rooted and glad to be a part of the life of this town. I am going to miss him, and I am sure I am not the only one.