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RESTAURATEUR REVELED IN LAUGHTER, LIFE ON KENTUCKY RIVER

Don Edwards Herald-Leader columnist

In those old, soft, dark summer nights along the river, your car window would be down and you could smell the steaks and catfish cooking as you pulled into the parking lot.

Through an open kitchen door you'd see a cook slicing an onion the size of a softball into rings to be dipped in batter and fried. And when you sat down, the beer cheese, celery and crackers arrived automatically.

It was a place of short orders and tall tales, pungent with the odors of beer and banana peppers; crowded, noisy and full of life.

Everybody invents something in a lifetime, and John E. Allman, 83, who died Sunday, invented a Kentucky River restaurant a few miles downstream from Boonesboro.

"I love this river," he'd say. "I absolutely love this river."

He had been a boxer, a Richmond police officer, a state police officer and an aide to governors. But he found something closer to his heart when he got a job managing the old Boonesboro Hotel on the Madison County side of the river in the 1930s.

Part of the job was running the hotel restaurant.

Allman liked that part of it so much that he started his own **Allman's** Restaurant on the Clark County side of the river, and it lasted more than four decades.

He began frying fish in the days when the fish actually came from the river instead of from a food wholesaler.

It was **Allman's** that originated those river restaurant trademarks of beer cheese and fried banana peppers in the early 1940s.

"I can't take all the credit for that," Allman said in a 1983 interview.

"I had a cousin, Joe Allman, who'd been a chef in Phoenix. He came up with the beer cheese and the peppers.

"We should have kept that cheese recipe a secret, but everybody on the river worked for us at one time or another and learned the recipe."

Allman was a natural restaurateur, a big man with a booming laugh who knew many of his customers by name.

He liked a good story and a good laugh, even if the joke was on him.

Once when the restaurant was flooded, Allman had his photo taken standing waist deep in water in front of the building, wearing a captain's hat and holding a beer.

Thirty years ago, college students at Boonesboro Beach used to have an annual summer river contest -- floating on your back from the beach to **Allman's** while reading a newspaper.

Whoever arrived with the driest paper got free food and drink the rest of the night.

Like a lot of other nights at **Allman's**, it was a night to remember.

Bon voyage, Captain John.

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