



## ***A. Vann York Was One of the Original Chili Icons***

If I had never started cooking chili, there would not be a CASI organization today. If it

had not been for Vann York, I would not have started cooking chili. There may have been some occasional cookoffs still going on today and ICS, but not anything organized and run like the CASI organization. The money CASI gives to charity (ICS gives none, they are a for-profit corporation with a bleak future for growth) in Terlingua to the schools, the fire department, the EMS, and the scholarships would not exist.

ann York was there to encourage and help me; he and Judie pushed me when I wanted to give up. And from time to time I did want to quit. There was a time when Vann and I could not go to any cookoff without about half the cooks there wanting to whip our butts. Thank God we were both good salesmen and sold the CASI program to about 90/95 percent of them. The rest we had to take on, sometimes physically. Vann was always by my side. No, that's not right; Vann was always ahead of me. Actually I may have been able to sell some of those on the CASI program if I could have talked to them before Vann nailed them. I saved a few confrontations, because I could tell when they were going to happen. If I saw Vann pulling the buttons off the front of someone's shirt I had to run and get between them. That usually worked; I was damn lucky I didn't get hit by both.

I don't know if Vann and I were dedicated or stupid to take the abuse and still pay for it out of our own pockets. Vann said we were determined. I

think he was right. That's what he and Judie always used on me when I wanted to quit. They were a tough twosome; I can still hear them. "Are you a quitter? Are you going to let a bunch of big mouth blankety-blanks beat you?" That would always do it. They knew I hated to lose at anything I thought was important.

These are some of the reasons I don't think anyone else would have organized CASI. CASI has a good Board working hard to improve and grow the organization every year. I think they do a good job. I think Vann would agree, although he probably would not admit it.

CASI is fulfilling the vision Vann and I had in the beginning. But I don't see any of them or anyone else in chili dedicated enough to take the phone calls in the middle of the night from people saying they are going to kill you, the people threatening to beat you up at the next cookoff, having some of the creeps turn you in to the IRS (even though you are squeaky clean, an IRS audit costs time and money, plus they will not tell you who made the false charges), and all the nasty letters mailed by the jerks who only have false courage to sign them as anonymous. I will not even go into the lawsuits, personal and otherwise, that we had to contend with. I think most of the people ever involved in the chili world were smarter than us. I don't think they would have put up with the self-inflicted abuse we did.

Vann York and Richard Knight were the first CASI referees. Although they did not have a vote, they were at every CASI meeting voicing their opinions, and their thoughts and suggestions were valued in the continuing structure of CASI. Richard is another person you don't want to piss off. He can be quiet and smooth talking, but don't ever think he will not take you on physically or verbally. Richard was a stabilizing influence who kept Vann and me on a constructive course.

I know this is an article about the memory of Vann York and I am writing a lot about chili history, but Vann York was and is a large part of CASI chili history. Vann never got the respect nor the thanks for all he

contributed to our great hobby. In his heart and mind, he knew how he helped CASI evolve as us old timers do, and we will not let him fade from our memories. I hope out there somewhere there is another Vann York developing, who will get heavily involved in chili. It would be a big boost for the future development of CASI.

Vann York was one of the first CASI referees. Vann was on the first Board of Directors when it was reorganized in 1983. He was a CASI President. Vann was the first Alcalde of the present CASI site. Vann created the CASI trophies and that was one of his achievements that he was the proudest of all. Vann started the SOTOL Pod in Terlingua and was the first Great Pepper of the Pod. Vann was on the CASI Board of Governors. How many of you even knew that there was a CASI Board of Governors? Vann loved chili cooking, chili cooks and life.

Vann was like my brother. There is going to be a big void in my life. Did we always agree? No, only about 25/30 percent of the time. We played black hat and white hat at meetings, because it was the best way to control and accomplish our agenda. If you don't understand that, you need to review some of the videos from the first CASI meetings. You will be reading a lot more about Vann in my writings of CASI chili history. I pray that God will give me energy and enough time to document our history. I am the only one left who knows all the history.

Vann York was born seventy-seven years ago in Alabama. We lost him on Christmas Day 2003 in Terlingua. His ashes will remain there forever. Vann had a massive heart attack. The doctor said his arteries were about ninety percent clogged; surprisingly his liver was good for another 20/30 years.

Over the past thirty years, Vann and I spent many hours discussing chili, chili politics, world politics, big boobs and small minds, football, life, good and evil, sex, Mexico, work in the food industry, people in general, favorite beers, and etc. But Vann would not talk about religion very long. We differed in our beliefs by about a hundred and eighty degrees.

Vann was a good man and an honest and charitable man. He was not a religious person. He believed in good and that good would triumph over evil. He did not believe in a Supreme Being. But I think he will make it to Heaven anyway. By now he should have met God and learned I was right and he was wrong on this subject. God created Vann, and He is probably the only one who understands Vann thoroughly. I think God will even be patient and understanding with Vann when he starts telling Him how He should run things on earth and in Heaven.

I miss you, my brother.

***H. Ray King***

## Along the Chili Trail

It was only 9:00 a.m. and I could already feel the warmth of the hot Texas sun as I worked at a hurried pace to get all my ingredients together for what I hoped would be an award winning pot of red chili. I smiled to myself thinking that I was happy to be back in this special corner of West Texas for the granddaddy of all chili cookoffs - the Terlingua International Chili Championship.

It had been several years since I had made the long journey from Virginia to be a participant in this event. I was one of 350 qualified cooks competing for the honor of having the best chili, and I wanted more than anything else to be on the stage as a chili winner at the end of the day. As I continued adding a few “secret” ingredients, I looked up through the steam rising from my chili pot to see a familiar person approaching my table. He walked slowly like an old man. His hair was gray and his face was weathered from the hot West Texas sun.

I gave him a big “bear” hug and said, “How are you Mr. A. Vann



York? It seems like years since I’ve seen you!” He had lost all of his teeth since I last saw him, but he was still a charming man who enjoyed talking to folks who were willing to take a minute or several minutes to listen and talk. I offered him what was probably his favorite breakfast beverage – a cold beer - and a seat on my ice chest. I continued to work on my chili as we talked about a number of mutually interesting subjects. He was an oldtimer in the chili world, and he could remember how it all started 36 years ago when a few guys thought it would be fun to have a chili contest in a ghost town called Terlingua.

Things have changed a lot since 1967. For one thing, there were only two contestants at the first cookoff and there were no rules. It was primarily a media event to bring attention to a remote area of West Texas – a place that was and still is a paradise for cowboys, “wantabee” cowboys and city folks in search of a little solitude.

Now many chili cooks, including myself, take the competitions more seriously! In fact, I was beginning to get a little concerned that I might forget to add something very important to my chili if the conversation with Vann continued.

However, he was on a roll and for reasons I don't fully understand I encouraged him to talk. We talked about some of the “characters” that were involved with the early cookoffs including Frank X. Tolbert, a journalist from Dallas, and Carroll Shelby, who is perhaps better known for creating some “hot” sports cars.

We talked about the disagreements among the “chili fathers” and the resulting “chili wars” that led to the creation of two and then three chili groups.

“Remember when we became pen-pals?” I said to him. That was a number of years ago when I had embarked on a personal crusade to learn more about the disagreements in the chili world and to do my small part to see if there couldn't be a unified world of chili cooks. Little did I know what a controversial issue it was, and the aging guy sitting on my ice chest became one of the first people I contacted for information. We exchanged a number of letters over a couple of years and some of the letters were quite heated and emotional!

Now we laughed as we recalled the letters we sent to each other.

“Your typing wasn't too good or else you couldn't spell”, I said. I'll bet you never got an “A” in typing. “The problem was I never took typing in high school” he replied.

I realized the more we talked that I was getting another important chili history lesson from this entertaining guy whom some still considered a “living legend” in the chili world. I wanted to write down what he was saying, but it was impossible to write and cook chili at the same time!

Finally I said, “Vann you need to write down your version of our rich chili history for all of us to read.” He just shook his head and I knew that it

would never happen.

It suddenly dawned on me that I had found the perfect reason to open the \$60 bottle of tequila that I had purchased a few days earlier. “How about a shot of tequila, Vann, to celebrate our friendship and anything else we want to celebrate.” He flashed a charming smile at me and said, “Sure, you know I’m always ready for a shot of good tequila and I’d say this is one of the best.” My friend cooking next to me just looked at me and shook his head. “You’ll never get that chili cooked if you continue swapping stories with Vann.” I knew he was right and that I needed to focus on the pot of chili that I had traveled 2000 miles to cook. Vann understood and I suggested he come back later in the day, after I had turned in my chili for judging, and we could continue talking over a few more shots of tequila.

I gave him another big hug and I asked him one last question. “Are you happy living here in Terlingua? It is so remote and the nearest big city is 350 miles away.” He looked at me and I could see a tear in the corner of his eye. “I know my family and some friends worry about me living out here



by myself but I love it and I am happy. I can’t think of any other place in the world I’d want to live.”

He slowly walked away, probably in search of someone else who was willing to share a beer with him and a few tales from the chili trail. He didn't return to talk to me later in the day, and unfortunately, my number wasn't called as a chili winner. I realize, however, that I was indeed a winner on November 1, 2003, at the Terlingua International Chili Championship. Vann died a month and a half after the chili cookoff in the place he loved so much – Terlingua, Texas. I'm glad I gave him the opportunity to distract me from my pot of chili. I only wish that I had turned off my Coleman stove and spent the entire day talking to him.

I'm already planning my next journey to the Terlingua International Chili Championship. My first stop will be the cemetery in the ghost town. I'll take a bunch of yellow roses and talk to Vann for a while. I'll tell him how happy it made me to spend some time with him last year laughing, talking about chili history, and sharing a few shots of my good tequila.

***Beverly King***