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S M A L L ' S S M O K E H O U S E A N D O Y S T E R B A R

New restaurant is steeped in city and family history

By Gary Ruegsegger

Correspondent

While the menu at Small's Smokehouse and Oyster Bar lists a tasty assortment of seafood, steaks and ribs, the atmosphere is flavored with generous portions of local history.

The walls of the eatery, which opened in February, are lined with vintage photographs, newspaper clippings and city proclamations collected by the Small family, which has been in business locally for nearly a century.

"We're all about great food and great service," said owner John Small III. "Customer service is something I learned at my father's knee – something his father instilled in him."

In 1919, John French Small Sr. opened Small's Hardware Company at 4301 Hampton Blvd., just across the street from where Old Dominion University's Ted Constant Convocation Center stands today.

According to a memorial announcement on the 25th anniversary of his passing in 1977, "John French Small was an intelligent businessman who made things happen."

In addition to running a top notch hardware store, Small was active in community service.

If a project helped people, his fingerprints would be all over it.

As president of the Hampton Boulevard Businessmen's Association, he stood on the podium with Mayor John A. Gurkin when the Hampton Boulevard underpass was dedicated on Nov. 18, 1939.

Norfolk Naval District commandant Adm. Joseph K. Taussig and director of public works Walter H. Taylor III also provided dedicatory remarks. You can read the whole story on a wall in the restaurant near a clock that used to hang in the old hardware store.

John Sr. served as president of many organizations, including the Norfolk Kiwanis Club, Salvation Army board, YMCA Men's Club, Hardware Association of Virginia, Colonial Place Homeowners' Association and the Retail Merchants' Association.

"People in business have a responsibility to the community," explained his son, the late John Small Jr., in a 1979 Virginian-Pilot column by Lawrence Maddry.

"My father followed in his father's footsteps and I followed in his," said John Small III, 66, who served as president of the Norfolk Kiwanis Club like his father and grandfather. "Community service is a family tradition."

Today, a fourth generation follows the path. Logan Small, 24, John III's son and restaurant co-owner, discovered his love of cooking and serving when he was a Boy Scout. The Edgewater resident later ran the summer food concession at the Mallory Country Club.

Johnny Brown, 93, a former Granby High School principal who grew up in Colonial Place before the streets were paved, remembers Logan's grandfather well. "In 1928," Brown recalled, Small "bought out my lemonade stand."

"John was a big guy and thirsty. Once he started drinking our lemonade, he couldn't stop," Brown said, laughing. "He just put down a quarter and closed us up."

John Jr. and Maury Riganto, a legendary Norfolk auctioneer, were matching tackles on the 1932 Maury High School football team. After John Jr.'s stint at Virginia Military Institute, they reunited at the Norfolk Division of the College of William and Mary (now Old Dominion University).

Fans and classmates dubbed the 6-2 lineman "Big Small." Other teammates included Division legends Dick Dozier, Bumpy Valentine and Rhea Lee Walker.

"John had a heart of gold. We miss him, and we miss his hardware store," said Grover Outland, 85, retired attorney and an Edgewater resident.

"John loved people and he was a friend to the community," recalled Vincent J. Thomas, 90, a former Norfolk mayor and VMI graduate. "He helped people in every way imaginable. And did he ever love VMI!"

John Small III grew up in the hardware business, working at his father's side. After ODU purchased the store's property, John III established a successful real estate business. Now, he's a restaurateur.

Manager Terry Fraley and chef Kenny Anthony complete Small's Smokehouse leadership team. Fraley previously managed restaurants in Ghent and Portsmouth. Anthony grew up barbecuing in Norfolk and later fed sailors aboard the Eisenhower. He also seasoned and sautéed at restaurants throughout Hampton Roads.

"We serve up a bunch of love at Small's Smokehouse," said Anthony, smiling under the old hardware store clock.

"And a lot of Norfolk history," John III said.

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COURTESY PHOTO

Small's Hardware Store stood at 4301 Hampton Boulevard for 67 years. Now the store's former site is part of Old Dominion University.

want to go?

Small's Smokehouse and Oyster Bar where 2700 Hampton Blvd. hours 10:30 a.m.-10:30 p.m. Mon - Thurs, 10:30 a.m.-midnight Fri and Sat details 757- 626-3440, www.SmallsODU.com.