

NATIONAL REGISTER STATUS SOUGHT FOR JOHN'S PLACE HOME OF THE JOHN DOG

by Megan Trotter
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COOKEVILLE -- It's a small, unassuming building -- one you might drive right past if you weren't looking for it. But John's Place on Gibson Avenue in Cookeville and the family who owns it has an impressive history. John's Place is now under consideration for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places.



Visitors to John's Place enjoy a home-cooked southern meal at the restaurant in this 1950's photo.

"It started just as an off-hand comment," said Michael Birdwell, Tennessee Tech professor and member of the Tennessee State Review Board for the National Register of Historic Places. "I was in there with three or four people, having a John Dog, and talking about what an interesting place this is, what a unique place it is."

He began talking to the current owner, Mary Alice McClellan, which led him to interviews with about 15 people around the community in order to document the building's African-American heritage.

"It ends up being an interesting story," Birdwell said.

Established in 1949 by Ed McClellan, it was originally known as Ed's Place and started out as a grocery store and restaurant divided by a partition. It was the second grocery store for the African-American community on the outskirts of Cookeville's West Side.

The restaurant served traditional southern cooking such as fried chicken and cat fish, corn bread, biscuits, sandwiches and sweet iced tea. Later Ed's brother and Mary Alice's late husband, John, would create the famous John Dog -- a deep red hot dog steamed in beer and dressed with homemade relish that remains a family secret to this day. The John Dog became so popular that John later had a drive-through window installed for those who wanted a hot dog, but were either not old enough or did not want to be seen entering an establishment that sold beer. The restaurant quickly became known as a place where visitors could get an excellent meal, regardless of their race.

"There were never any racial incidents there. Now, there might have been incidents between fraternities, but no racial incidents ever happened there," Birdwell said.

On the nomination for inclusion on the historic register, Ed's son, John "Shakey" McClellan commented that the restaurant "did more for integration and the Civil Rights movement here (in Cookeville and the surrounding region) than the politicians. Lots of people around here, you know, Crossville or Jamestown, never saw a black man or woman 'till they came to John's. This place integrated the Upper Cumberland!"

In 1950, Ed received a beer permit that allowed alcohol to be available for purchase but not consumed on the premises. However, in 1953, the permit was revoked, citing the business' proximity to a Methodist church. When a petition started circulating to return the beer permit to John's Place, one of the signers was the pastor of the nearby Methodist church that had been cited as the original reason the permit was taken away.

When the permit was granted again, Ed shifted ownership of the business to his brother John Lee McClellan and the name of the business was appropriately changed to John's Place. In 1963, it was remodeled.

The partition was taken out, the grocery store was done away with and the restaurant's characteristic horseshoe-shaped bar was installed.

Afterward, the McClellan family continued to make big strides for the African-American community.

In addition to becoming a well-known businessman, John also became the first African-American elected to public office in Putnam County as Justice of the Peace. He helped Cookeville public schools desegregate without any serious racial incidents.

He worked with local law enforcement to deal with anyone in the African-American community causing trouble.

He worked with Cookeville pharmacist Bobby Davis to apply for a grant to improve roads, build sidewalks, provide connection to the sewer system and fluoridated water for the African-American community.

Shakey was the first African-American enrolled at TTU who did not play collegiate sports. It was partly because of his support of and passion for tennis that community tennis courts were set up for the first time in Cookeville. He and his family also gave financial support to TTU students through employment, loans or even monetary gifts.

According to the nomination, "John's Place helped folks see persons for who they were, not the color of their skin. It is an Upper Cumberland landmark that deserves to be acknowledged and preserved."

The status of John's Place with the national register should be revealed soon.

"Once it passed the State Board -- and it passed unanimously -- it went to Washington. Washington has 45 days to tell us if it's on or if we need to make changes. We should know any day now," Birdwell said. "Also, being on the register will allow (Mary Alice) to apply for some grants to fix up the place. It could definitely use a fresh coat of paint, and it would be nice to have the signs restored."

WCTE will air a documentary on John's Place at 7 p.m. April 24, at 10 p.m. April 25, and at 9 p.m. April 28.

For more information about the restaurant, search for "John's Place" on Facebook.

*Read more about Putnam County, TN in the history section at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>