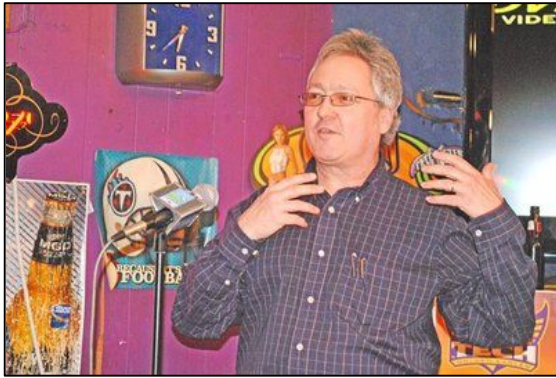


## **JOHN'S PLACE MAKES NATIONAL REGISTER**

by Megan Trotter

**COOKEVILLE** -- The community joined in celebration with WCTE at John's Place in Cookeville to celebrate the restaurant's inclusion on the National Historic Register and the recent WCTE documentary on its historical significance.

"This place really is remarkable," said Michael Birdwell, Tennessee Tech professor and member of the Tennessee State Review Board for the National Register of Historic Places. "Now that it's on the register, people can't wait to tell me stories (about it)."



Built in 1949 on Gibson Avenue, John's Place started out as a grocery store and restaurant owned by the African-American McClellan family. It was first owned by Ed McClellan and was known as Ed's Place until he later transferred ownership to his brother John. A popular hang-out for Tennessee Tech students and blue collar workers, the restaurant became known as a place where people could just get a good bite to eat, regardless of race.

(Pictured: Michael Birdwell, Tennessee Tech professor and member of the Tennessee State Review Board for the National Register of Historic Places, talks about the history of John's Place. Herald-Citizen Photo/Megan Trotter).

"One hundred and ninety seven lynchings happened every year in the south (at this time), but white people and black people could come here and not worry about any kind of bodily injury, not worry about any kind of bad things being said about you -- everything was fine here," Birdwell said.

John also became the first African-American elected to public office in Putnam County as Justice of the Peace, and his family continued make a huge impact on the white and African American relations in the area. It was because of this significance of the McClellans and John's Place to Putnam County that Birdwell suggested its inclusion on the historic register.

However upon its first inspection by the board, they were not terribly impressed with the deceptively humble outward appearance of the building.

"The initial reaction of the folks who drove from Nashville to see this place was, 'It's a cinderblock building.' But it's much, much more than that," Birdwell said. "This is a place that has stories in every booth; there's stories in every square inch of this building. Some of them are heart-warming, some of them are tragic, but what's amazing about this place was that nobody was discriminated against in here."

Fortunately the board was able to see the historical significance of John's Place as well and officially added it to the National Register of Historic Places.

While at the celebration, WCTE also showed a clip from the upcoming documentary, "Freedom Riders" to air at 8 p.m. May 16.

The documentary will tell the story of more than 400 Americans -- both black and white -- who defied the Jim Crow laws of segregation and traveled together on busses and trains through the deep south.

The Freedom Riders themselves tell of the imprisonment and beatings they survived while trying to take a peaceful stand against racism.

The documentary comes on the heels of the 50th anniversary of the ride. This May 6-16, American

Experience will host a reenactment of the ride with the original Freedom Riders and 40 college students.

For more information on the Freedom Riders or the documentary, visit [www.pbs.org/freedomriders](http://www.pbs.org/freedomriders).

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<http://www.ajlambert.com>