

TRADITION CARRIES ON AT RALPH'S

by Laura Gwinn

COOKEVILLE — Cookeville's popular donut shop on Cedar Street has seen a number of changes throughout the years, but perhaps the biggest one occurred in the last week with the passing of owner Ralph Smith.



However, Ralph's Donuts will stay the same little place it is - same atmosphere, same hours, same recipes.

"It's like the Cheers bar, but without the alcohol," Jimmy Smith, Ralph's son, said. "We're just one big family."

Jimmy is taking over the business in the wake of his father's passing and is keeping with his dad's tradition of making it a friendly place to gather.

However, with the help of his sister, Cynthia, they are bringing the restaurant slowly forward into the 21st century.

(This photo was taken in the mid 1970s. From left are Ralph Smith, owner; Jimmy, son; Evelyn Smith, co-owner and Ralph's wife; and Cynthia, daughter).

HISTORY:

Ralph opened the shop in September of 1962 with his **wife, Evelyn**. The building was an old bus stop for Cookeville and it's been rumored to have been an old grocery store before that.

It began with only six stools until 1974 when Ralph and Evelyn remodeled the building and doubled the size of the business. Now, there are 26 stools and a small table with three chairs.

Ralph and Evelyn were heavily involved in the community. In the '60s, they sponsored men's softball teams and girls ponytail softball teams. One of the men's teams went on to win the state championship in 1966.

A World War II veteran, Ralph was raised in Buffalo Valley. Evelyn was born in Overton County and worked in a shirt factory prior to her working with her husband's business.

The store was open 24 hours a day, seven days a week until 1992. The current hours are from 5 a.m. to 11:30 p.m. Monday through Saturday, with no business conducted on Sundays.

Nearly 150 dozen donuts are made during the early part of the week and 250 dozen a day are made on the weekends.

Jimmy has been working in his dad's store off and on since he was 16. He is one of the bakers who enjoys meeting the people of the community, along with many out-of-towners.

It has been a popular college hangout, with many Tennessee Tech alumni coming back to visit Ralph's.

"Over the years, we lost the college group with the opening of other restaurants in town, but now they're

starting to come back," Cynthia said.

Jimmy recalls some of the fun and crazy things that have happened over the years.

"Some of the coffee drinkers would request candles on their donuts when it's their birthday, or someone would request a cake or a very large donut to celebrate their dog's birthday and many other things happening during Tech's rush week."

Speaking of coffee, Jimmy Mackie with IWC has stuck with them over the years.

Cynthia believes that the building is haunted by one of their former third shift employees.

"We have heard weird things," she said. "The doors would slam shut on the showcase and people have reported seeing things."

RALPH'S CONNECTIONS:

Thanks to the merchandise available at Ralph's, the name is synonymous with Cookeville.

One story involves Jerry Dale Abston. He was in Portland, Ore., sitting on a bench on the sidewalk, wearing a Ralph's Donut Shop cap and a John's T-shirt. Somebody walked by and said "You are from Cookeville, Tenn., and I have been to both places," and just kept walking.

T-shirts, hats and coffee mugs are just some of the popular memorabilia offered at Ralph's Donut Shop.

"People from all over the country buy these items," Jimmy said. "We sell out of them pretty quick."

Jerry Bumbalough, author of the Purple Pup children's books, gets inspiration from the counters at Ralph's Donuts.



Rick Flatt creates some very artistic Styrofoam cups on the stools at Ralph's. He hasn't given permission to sell them yet.

Jimmy recalls an event where a group of people who were passing through from Knoxville came in to buy a dozen of the sour cream donuts, took them out to the car where other people ate them, and then returned to buy another dozen.

(Pictured: Jimmy Smith and Cynthia Smith Pullum are helping Ralph's Donuts move into the 21st Century).

"They said that the donuts were just that good," Jimmy said.

They left after purchasing the second dozen. A few days later, Jimmy received a three page letter, detailing just how great Ralph's donuts are.

The store also sees a number of people come in from Knoxville and other areas to spend Saturday mornings there.

Any loyal customer of Ralph's have stories to tell -- all you have to do is visit the restaurant and just listen to what some of the people have to say.

FUTURE:

"It's amazing the amount of people who showed their support when dad died," Jimmy said. "He touched a

lot of people."

Ralph's Donuts will remain the place where people can come in and listen to the other customers' opinions or their take on whatever the conversation happens to be that day.

Some changes will be taking place to move the business into the 21st century.

Wireless Internet access is also available.

Jimmy is looking to make the business a member of the West Side Business Association. There's even talk of bringing the third shift back and the move to ship donuts domestically.

Gift cards are also available and can be reloaded at any time. The drive through is also a popular addition that has come along in recent years, despite Ralph's hesitancy.

Anyone who wishes to share memories of Ralph can do so by visiting Crestlawn Funeral Home's website at .Ralph's Donuts is at 59 S. Cedar Ave. in Cookeville. Call 526-4231 for more

James Ralph Smith Obt.

COOKEVILLE -- Funeral services for **James Ralph Smith**, 84, of Cookeville, will be held at 2 p.m. on Monday, Oct. 18, at Crest Lawn Funeral Home. Burial will follow in Crest Lawn Memorial Cemetery, with full military honors provided by the Veterans Honor Guard.

The family will receive friends from noon until 6 p.m. today, Sunday, Oct. 17, and from 1 p.m. until time of services on Monday at the funeral home.

Mr. Smith died Friday, Oct. 15, 2010, at his residence.

He was born April 23, 1926, in Carthage to the late Columbus Benton and Allie T. Nabors Smith.

Mr. Smith served in the Army during World War II, receiving the Good Conduct Medal. He was a member of Faith's Chapel Church.

He was best known and admired as the owner/operator of Ralph's Donut Shop in Cookeville for 48 years.

He was a devoted husband and a loving father, grandfather, brother and friend.

His family includes his wife, Shelby Jean Smith of Cookeville; a daughter, Cynthia S. Pullum and husband of Cookeville; a son, Jimmy Dale Smith of Cookeville; a stepdaughter, Tammy Jo Atkins and husband Rodney of Brentwood; a stepson, Roger Dale McDonald and wife Susan of Cookeville; six granddaughters, Ginger Stout and husband Darrin, Lindsey Herren, Morgan Herren, Hillary Jones, Jessica Jones and Jamye Smith, all of Cookeville; two grandsons, Michael McDonald of Cookeville and Elijah Atkins of Brentwood; two great-grandsons, Caleb and Ian Stout, both of Cookeville; three sisters, Virginia Glover of Buffalo Valley, Robbie Upchurch of Indianapolis, Ind., and Mildred Anderson of Lebanon; a brother and sister-in-law, Fred and Evelyn Smith of Buffalo Valley; two dear friends, Misty and Bud Daniels; and a host of nieces, nephews, cousins and friends.

In addition to his parents, he was preceded in death by a sister, Nita Wood, and a brother, Junior Smith.

Pastor Steve Warren will officiate at the services.

Please go to [to sign the online guest book and send a message to the family.](#)

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*Read more about Putnam Co., TN at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>