



John R. Kenner – The Barbeque Man

[Tyler County Booster](#) (October 17, 2013), 8B.

John R. Kenner, the Barbeque Man, smoked delicacies at his West Magnolia Grocery for 30+ years, except on Sundays, where you would find him at church.

He grew up in Chireno, Texas, and graduated in 1959, salutatorian, in a class of 13. His parents were tenant farmers, and they lived in an old four-room house.

After Massey Business College in downtown Nacogdoches, he ran a test lab and drew blueprints at NIBCO (NIBCO.com), a leader in valve manufacturing.

Drafted into the army in 1964, John smiled, "Out of about 850, only ten of us made a 100% in proficiency training." He started out as a gunner on a 155mm howitzer, then he went to Fort Sill, Okla., creating soldier training schedules.

Out of the Army in 1966, in Nacogdoches, John said, "I was cattin' around SFA."

John met Sherry Tolar and Suzy Lowery in the student center. They talked for a while.

Sherry smiled nonchalantly. "I did not think I would hear from him, but I did. We dated about two years."

They married in 1968 in a garden wedding on the patio at Sherry's parents' home in Woodville, where they have lived for several decades after her parents passed.

John whispered, "She caught my eye because she smiles so pretty." They have two children, Gina and Richard, and six grandchildren.

Sherry's brothers, Bill, Jerry, and Jessie opened and worked the South Magnolia Grocery since 1958. The building still stands next to the Ringer Law Office. Though two 12-foot doors that opened the whole store to the street are gone, it was the first drive-in grocery in Woodville,.

The brothers branched out, Jessie operating the laundry mats and car washes and Bill opening the North Magnolia Grocery, still there beside the Tolar's Feed Store.

In 1972, the Tolars built the West Magnolia Grocery and John soon became manager. He had a barbeque pit built and has been smoking since 1980. In '76, he was elected President of Chamber of Commerce. It was the first automated 24-hour gas station in Woodville.

John still has the first dollar he made, in a frame with the photo of the man who spent it.

When does John arrive?

"Early, no later than 3 a.m." said John. He cooks scrambled eggs, bacon and sausage. His egg sandwiches are famous. One popular sandwich is "The Undertaker," named after Tyler County Judge Jacques Blanchette, former undertaker for Stringer and Griffin.



John's "attending ladies" – Sarah, Judy, Marie, Jeanette, and Sydney – often remember what regular customers want. The family atmosphere fosters many early morning conversations and advice from skilled plumbers, contractors, painters, loggers, doctors, nurses, students, and ole-timers. A fine way to start the morning.

In the past as many as 23 logging companies came by, including Spurlock, Hatton, Minter, Prime Acres, and Read Logging companies.

"Cashed nearly all of their payroll checks," John said. "I tried to get them to smile. They loved my Seaport Coffee. I kept all kinds of saw chains, bars, files, mixing and hydraulic oils."

John loves to serve with his favorite Travis Club Senator cigar hanging from his lips, with baseball cap and in overalls. His instinct guides his five sauces, each tailored for chicken, brisket, pork chops, hamburger or other meats.

"I make all my barbeque sauce. Never bought a bottle," John said, cigar bobbing. Not sharing his recipe, there is an art to good barbeque. "You have to learn your pit. All pits do not cook at the same temperature. Got to cook the meat slowly."

John will engage any and delights in helping a young man or woman along the path of wisdom and righteousness.

After Hurricane Rita hit Tyler County on Sept. 25, 2005, "I was open the next day," John said. "I kept the pit going. Served drinks from coolers. The price of gas stayed the same as it was before Rita hit."

Jennifer Steinhauer reported for the New York Times (10-3-5), "It can be stated as unchallenged fact that those beef sandwiches were the best food item available in two electricity-free counties in Texas."

In early 2006, the Tyler County Chamber of Commerce awarded his store 2005 Business of the Year. Chamber President Richard McCullough noted John's generosity in helping the First Baptist Church youth, the Fire Department and the Little League Baseball.

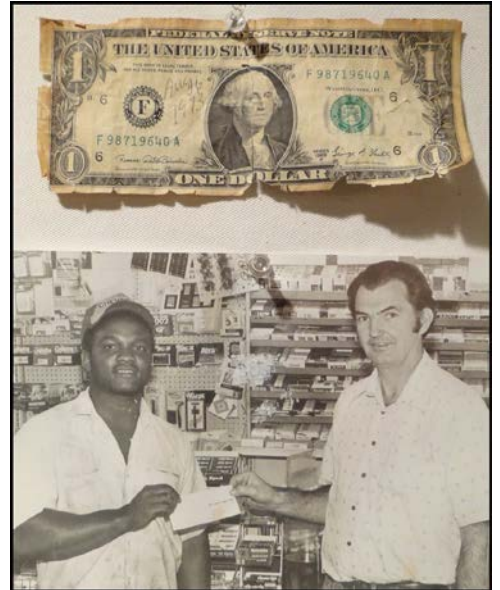
One of John's lifetime goals was "to feel like I was born in Tyler County instead of imported.... I hope God will bless me through the many years to come to help the churches to promote Jesus Christ."

John's store was also a showcase for old toy cars, and one time he had a whole wall of Elvis records. See their Facebook page (tinyurl.com/mjqtacq). John loved guitars, especially his 1963 Bass Eckthophone, and has had about 25 guitars. Chuck Barry is his favorite guitarist.

John's big sentimental heart relished in giving a candy bar and coke to any child who made the ABBIT Honor Roll (A's and B's Because I Try), a program dear to him, as it was started by his wife, the elementary school principal.

He coached Tee Ball, and then minor and major league youth ball, for two years each as their son Ricky grew up.

In a scholarship article, Woodville student Alyson Pate said John helped spread the news of her birth at the Tyler County Hospital. She bragged about seeing John every week of her life, and often five times a week for breakfast, redeeming certificates from school for good grades.



Woodville student Dorian Maloy wrote and read a poem about John at the Woodville ISD Veterans' Program held at the Eagle Summit, a memory John cherishes to this day.

John taught first and second grade Sunday school at First Baptist Church for 25 years and serves as a deacon.

Russ and Nancy Pilgrim's daughter Heather, whom he taught in Sunday school, became a teacher herself. Heather said, "Mr. Kenner is like a grandfather to me. He is the most adorable, selfless man and I love that about him. He always greets me with a hug and a smile and still wants to catch up with me when he sees me. He is such a great example for young children to look up to. He is a godly husband, father, and mentor! What more could you ask for?!"

"When people ask me for advice, I'd say, 'Read your Bible,'" John said in his expecting tone, cigar a-hanging.

Sadly, his store caught fire on June 6, 2013. Facebook buzzed with sympathy. It was also his wife's last day at school – Sherry had retired and was moving stuff home as firemen secured the store.

One Facebook friend said, "Well, Mr. Kenner must have finally lit that cigar."

Immediately, the community and his church responded. Tyler County Sheriff Bryan Weatherford put a police cruiser out front to deter any would-be thieves during the night. FBC deacon Preston Broom mobilized the deacons. Roy Buckner said, "I am going to see you through this to the end." And he did.

What would you say to a young person just starting out?

John rolled his cigar in his mouth, then thoughtfully said, "First of all – believe in God and ask His leadership in your life. You have to set a goal on what you want to be. One has to 'want success.' It is not handed to anyone. Take pride in what you do."

Will John and Sherry rebuild?

"Right now, we are waiting on the Lord to tell us what to do. The gas pump will be no more. The good Lord wants me to cut down my hours. My diabetes and blood pressure seem to be better."

God will guide. Whatever the fate of the store, but be assured, John's resilient spirit will continue to inspire service to God and people. And barbeque, somehow, will play a part. A good example for us all.



John's business neighbor Evonne Mitcham, owner of Bubbles and Bows, determined to get people together for a day to honor John, which will be at the FBC Family Life Center on Sunday night, 6 p.m., October 20. Bring a dish and wear your overalls – everyone is invited!

