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Modern methods lift an old-fashioned business

Steaks, steak, steaks! Stacks of T-bones, ribeyes, strip sirloins and round steaks are displayed with roasts, pork chops, ribs, and other cuts in an old fashioned 30-foot-long showcase – all fresh and cut that day just as they were in the meat shops of my boyhood.

That's what you see when you walk into Wheeler's Meat Market at 1524 SE 44th St., a couple of blocks east of Interstate 35. There are no supermarket-style plastic-wrapped or packaged pre-cooked meats in that showcase. Darrell Wheeler cuts and trims hundreds of steaks and other products twice a day. His son, Darren Wheeler, runs the business.

I haven't seen anything like it since 1957, when I lived next door to Hexter's Meat Market in New York City. The steaks are one-and-a-half to two inches thick. People come from as far away as Norman and Edmond regularly to buy meat the old-fashioned way. The Wheelers ship meat for special customers as far away as Puerto Rico and Turkey, and they take orders only in advance for holiday turkeys and hams.

All this stems from a 1,000-square-foot store with sales expected to reach \$2 million this year, including a few groceries and pre-packaged meats in separate areas. It's a 21st century version of a family tradition that goes back to 1907. That includes store names that include Honest John, which was well known in Oklahoma City for decades.

"We provide the same kind of personal service that my grandfather and father gave," said Darrell Wheeler. "I learned the business under my father, Oceail Wheeler, during the 1940s and 1950s, when we still cut up sides of beef. We get to know our customers by their first names, and we smoke ribs and brisket for them right here in our parking lot.

"Darren has brought modern business methods and marketing to the store, advertising on radio and television. That's the reason our business has grown so rapidly during the last few years."

The Wheelers opened their meat market during 1988, a year after the family had sold the Honest Market and Grocery store at SE 18th Street and Central. Darrell, who had retired, wanted to get back into the business. Darren left his job with the Thomas J. Lipton Co. to join him.

“We started with a small store in this building with a 12-foot meat case and nothing else,” said Darren. “We moved to this larger space in 1990, when we had sales of \$400,000. It has grown every year.”

The family tradition, however, goes back 93 years to 1907, when Oklahoma became a state. Oklahoma City was emerging as a distribution center with five railroads, 15 miles of paved streets and 35 miles of streetcar tracks. The city was in the midst of a rapid growth from 10,000 people in 1900 to 60,000 in 1918, with new office buildings, hotels and theaters sprouting downtown.

J.T. “Pappy” Runyon, great-grandfather of Darren and grandfather of Darrell, opened a grocery store at Grand and Harvey, where the Biltmore hotel was later built. He called it Honest John, and he operated there until 1929, when he moved to a 200-square foot store at 712 Pottawatomie, now Fifth street.

That’s where Runyon started specializing in meat. He made his own lunch meat, wieners and chili in a big walk-in oven with a black kettle. His daughter, Lola Runyon, married Oceail Wheeler, who worked for Pappy Runyon until 1936, when Oceail opened his own store at 208 S. Broadway.

One of Darrell’s brothers, O.T. Wheeler, died at six that year. Oceail used a \$500 insurance policy on O.T. to pay for the funeral, buy clothes for the family and open the new store, which he called Honest John the Poor Man’s Friend.

“The store was small – around 200 square feet,” Darrell recalled, “so we arranged more groceries outside than inside. Each morning we carried outside and displayed ax handles, brooms, sacks of potatoes and flour, and other merchandise too big to leave inside.”

The Great Depression was at its peak that year, but John T. Giffin of Griffin Wholesale Grocery (now Griffin Foods of Muskogee) and Dan Hogan of City National Bank were friends of Oceail. They helped him move to a larger store at 217 S. Broadway, still near downtown.

In 1946, when the Rainbow Bakery was developed on that site, Oceail Wheeler built hi own store across the street at 301 S. Broadway. Darrell, who was born in 1938, grew up working there. In 1951, Oceail Wheeler added a store at NE Sixth Street and Nebraska, and Darrell started running that store.

In 1967, Urban Renewal bought the store at 301 S. Broadway. Oceail also sold the store on Nebraska Avenue and opened a 700 square-foot store at SE 18th Street and Central. Darrell and his father built a 4,000-square-foot store behind the small one.

“We tore down the old small store on Saturday night and made a parking lot out of it,” Darrell Wheeler recalled. “On Monday morning, we opened the new store. A drunk told us he was going to quit drinking, because he woke up and saw the new store where the old one had been.”

Darrell took over the new store, which was a small supermarket, and ran it with his father’s help until 1987, when the family sold it. A year later, Darrell and Darren opened Wheeler’s Meat Market.

“In the old days, we bought sides of beef from local packing companies,” Darrell recalled. “Now we buy meat in boxes, including all Black Angus beef. Sometimes, I cut meat for 12 hours a day, and we make about 350 pounds of ground beef three times a day.”

About 10 years ago, the Helmerich & Payne energy firm of Tulsa started buying large numbers of steaks to reward crews on oil rigs. Darren expanded that idea to other firms and organizations, which continue as customers even when they move. Wheeler’s Meat Market sends steaks to the 552nd Air Control Wing of Tinker Air Force Base every year, regardless of where they are serving, and to the U.S. Embassy in Turkey.

The Wheelers work with the Blazers hockey club in raising money for the terminally ill at Children’s Hospital with an annual cookout. They display autographed hockey sticks from those occasions proudly. The store also includes some Griffin Foods and J.T. Lipton products.

“Working with Children’s Hospital is our way of giving something back to our community,” said Darren Wheeler, “and carrying Griffin and Lipton products is our way of remembering our friends. That’s how it has always been with our family, and it will continue that way at Wheeler’s Meat Market.”