

CHAPTER 21



BUILDING AN EMPIRE

"Keep your dreams alive. Understand to achieve anything requires faith and belief in yourself, vision, hard work, determination, and dedication. Remember all things are possible for those who believe."

Gail Devers

After the war there were few jobs. John always thought that with naval experience finding a job would be easy. He was a Navy man who served his country and cooked for the officers of the most successful ship in the U.S. Navy. The last thing John expected to do was resort to wandering the streets of Boston in search of a cooking job with no luck at all. Employment opportunities seemed worse after the war than before he went into the service. This time John could not find any restaurant work doing anything. Struggling to find a way to make a buck, he only knew a few things that might work. If it wasn't food, maybe it was hair.

The only reason he conjured up cutting hair was because he enjoyed doing it in the service, but he had no professional training. He cut sailors' hair in the head (bathroom) of the battleship. How difficult could it be? Doing hair on the ship was just a way to make extra money until he messed up Wyatt's hair, his one and only failed attempt at styling. After that mishap, basic haircuts were the only haircuts he did on the ship. Cutting hair still made sense. John found out how to use the GI Bill to attend barber's school.

Right after graduation from barber's school John got a job at Hamp's Barber Shop. On his first day, his first customer was a drunken white fellow. He sat in the chair smelling like a whiskey bottle and said, "Give me a haircut!" John asked him, "What style would you like sir?" He blurted out, "Just give me a damn haircut!" So John draped the apron around his neck and turned to get his scissors, wondering what he should do. When he turned back around, the guy was passed out.

John did not really know what the guy wanted, so he gave him a military barber's cut. When the customer woke up, he complained that John cut off too much and refused to pay him. John blamed the customer for not being specific. Hamp blamed John for poor service, not knowing current styles, not making him money, just about everything he could think of because the customer was unhappy. So after the round-robin with the customer blaming John, John blaming the customer, and Hamp blaming John, John told both of them "to hell with them" and walked out. As ridiculously as the scenario played out, John decided cutting hair was not worth the aggravation.

Ordinarily he would not give up that easily, but he still did not know where his place was in the world. Cutting hair was a temporary solution at best; at worst, it was a waste of time compared to cooking. Satisfied with his conclusion, he still had to find a job, with very few ideas left. A movie projectionist's job was his final option. Hoping for better results he went downtown to the movie district to ask around.

Looking for projectionist positions, John knocked on several movie theater doors. Movie house managers offered him brief interviews and asked him if he had any experience. When John discussed the equipment with which he was familiar, each of them laughed at him. The technology he spoke of qualified as ancient, at least a generation or two old. "Pins falling to the floor and all that nonsense, well that's a thing of the past!" one man said. The new technology of film projection today had replaced all that antiquated junk from a few years ago. Of course, John could learn the new projection equipment if he could join the Projectionists Union of Boston, but membership was by referral only and he did not know anybody who could grant him entry. With one theater left to visit, he began to accept the improbability that he had a future as a projectionist.

His last stop was the Olympia Theater. The manager did not have any projectionist positions, telling him what he already knew about not having a union card, but he did have a night cleaning position available immediately if he wanted it. John considered his situation and the possibility of finding anything that would earn him a paycheck. Completely uninspired, John took the job. In August 1946, John started out working after hours as the night cleaner.

The owner of the Olympia Theater eventually renovated the old theater, changed the name to the Pilgrim Theater, and offered him the supervisor's job with a crew of five people in the janitorial department. John's employment with the Olympia/Pilgrim Theater lasted over three years. It was during that time that John met Mildred and married her.

He kept his eye out for cooking jobs, but prejudice was actually worse in Boston than in Atlanta. Boston neighborhoods were very ethnocentric, territorial, and bigoted with very clear boundaries. Most Boston restaurant owners were Italian or Irish and they did not like black people, leaving John no choice but to stay with the Pilgrim Theater. Unfortunately, he fell ill, developing a case of appendicitis, and required an emergency appendectomy. During his recovery, John lost his job in early September 1949.

After he healed, he was ready to go back to work. John did not see himself cleaning movie theaters anymore. At the same time he never gave up his desire to one day own his own restaurant. He knew the one thing he loved to do more than anything was cook. Every person who appreciated his culinary skills could not be wrong. Mildred was his biggest supporter. She encouraged him to set his sights on the restaurant industry. After two and a half years as a cook in the Navy, John had enough experience if anyone had a job opening.

The obvious conclusion of the times stared him in the face. The only way John was going to work in a restaurant was by opening his own. In 1950 he finally gathered sufficient resources to do just that. Back in Atlanta, his old buddy Sam Walker had gone into the Army before John

went into the Navy. After the war, they met up back in Atlanta and talked about one day owning a business together. Suddenly that time had come. John tracked Sam down, told him about his idea, and asked Sam if he wanted to partner with him. Sam agreed, and they opened a small restaurant on Shawmut Avenue in Boston.

One could argue that John belonged in the restaurant business, joining a family legacy of restaurant owners. His father had his own café in Griffin. One of his stepbrothers named Buddy owned a barbeque shack located on Butler Street off Auburn Avenue, the black business center area before integration in downtown Atlanta. From his childhood in Atlanta all the way through the Navy, John was around the food business, particularly on the *NORTH CAROLINA*. Now John wanted to take his turn in the growing line of family restaurateurs.

The most definitive factor pointed to few alternatives; however, timing did not appear to be in his favor either. With a child on the way, John concluded a restaurant had a better chance to succeed than landing employment that paid him enough for him and his family to survive. Recalling his father-in-law's advice about following his heart and having faith inspired his decision.

Scraping every available dollar together to open for business, their small restaurant struggled to find customers. In need of cash flow, John received a job offer up in Maine to work at the Hillcroft Inn Seafood Restaurant in York Harbor. He accepted the position and traveled to Maine, leaving Mildred with her full-time job at Folsom's Market and Sam to handle the restaurant. John paid the landlord a month's rent in advance and told her he would send the remaining rent through Sam.

Three months later John returned from Maine and stopped by the restaurant. Approaching the front door, he saw his equipment gone and the business closed.

Stricken with grief, he was beside himself. John chased down the landlady and asked her why she shut down his business. The landlady revealed to him that she didn't get two months' rent so she confiscated all the restaurant equipment and sold it to cover the delinquent balance. If he sent money to his friend Sam, he must have run off with the rent. Moreover, she had not seen him for some time. He asked in shock, "Sam has disappeared?" She said Sam had confided in her that he was going to sell vacuum cleaners. John never heard from him again.

This could not have come at a worse possible time. Mildred and John's first daughter Patricia was born shortly thereafter, on November 3, 1950. Suddenly John was a dad with even more financial pressure. The money left over from Maine and Mildred's full-time position left them a little money set aside, so they were making it all right, but John wanted to go back to cooking in the face of a cooking job shortage all over again. He ended up right back where he started. Understandably, his faith was tested as frustration and anger got the best of him.

Lacking inspiration or hope, and unable to risk another investment in a new restaurant, pushed John to the end of his rope. He needed employment with good pay and flexible hours, and he needed it immediately. Mildred being pregnant with their second child forced John to eliminate most regular job options. Walking across the street, he nearly got clipped by a taxi cab. Desperately in need of a miracle, the taxi cab idea almost ran him over as

well. In September 1951 John started driving a Checker Cab. It wasn't fancy, but it solved his problem.

John and Mildred's second daughter Linda was born on December 27, 1951. Every day while driving, he thought about what he could have done differently to save his restaurant. Every day he asked the question until he finally concluded - accepted - that Sam ripped him off. John drove a cab for almost five years.

Despite his obligations, John just wanted to cook. With two young mouths to feed, he kept driving with one eye on the road and the other on *The Boston Globe* newspaper. During the late summer of 1956 he was looking through the *Globe* when he found an Italian restaurant in Dedham named the Coronet Restaurant looking for a cook. Dedham was an upscale area way across town and as prejudiced against black people as anywhere. John did not care. He was going to the interview no matter how far away it was. Dad decided to ride to the appointment with him.

When they arrived, Dad told John he was going to get hired that day and he started praying as John went inside. John met with a Sicilian man named Don. Don had been in the service himself and he talked to John about the war. He mentioned a black buddy in the service whom he never forgot and how after the war he wondered about his buddy every day for months. Of course, Don never heard from his friend again, but he sympathized with his war pal, John too. He respected John for coming so far to meet with him.

Don's father was a first-generation Sicilian immigrant from the old school who did not want his son to hire John, but John's war history meant something to Don. He knew black men had a hard way to go, like his father's

generation did. That appeared to be why the old-world Italians stuck to their own and why his father wanted his son to keep it that way. Don said he wasn't like his father and he had his own mind. Don apologized for his father's behavior, gave John the job, and provided him an opportunity to learn how to cook authentic Italian cuisine.

After John had been working at the Coronet Restaurant for a while, Don's father began to appreciate John's ability to cook like an Italian. The older man's attitude toward him changed and they grew to respect each other. On Valentine's Day 1959, John's third child and first son David was born. After a few years, John decided to broaden his cooking skills and moved on. In retrospect, John swore on his life that Dad's prayers had something to do with him getting the Coronet Restaurant job. Maybe Dad had called in a favor.

For the next several years John upgraded the quality of his life. He worked in a number of restaurants, including a Greek restaurant and Newbury Steakhouse. The goal became to increase his value by diversifying his culinary knowledge across a wide spectrum of international menus. As the economy improved and jobs became more readily available to him, John first decided to move his family out of the city. He bought a home in the South Shore suburbs 20 miles outside of Boston. Then, he came to realize that while he could be flexible and varied with his cooking skills, he preferred a more stable working environment.

Growing weary of high-pressure restaurant kitchens, though he wanted to keep cooking, John filled out an application for United Servomation in Boston. In 1965 he got a call to come in for an interview, and he accepted the position when it was offered to him. "By 1965,

Servomation was a \$100,000,000 public company with over 70,000 vending units in 29 states coast-to-coast.”⁴⁵ With a booming vending, dining, and recreation services business, Servomation constantly grew by way of acquisitions.

John mentioned in his interview that he wanted to expand his range of cooking experiences. It turned out that the company needed someone to fill a temporary position. He welcomed the challenge and accepted a unique offer to get out of the city over the summer to work at a campground. During the summer of 1966, Servomation sent him to Camp Robinson Crusoe where John cooked for kids attending the camp. While the surroundings were new to him, the world was a better place so long as he worked in a kitchen. In this particular instance, he unexpectedly enjoyed showing children from wealthy families how to cook. When he returned, he went to work for a division of Servomation called Recording and Statistical. John worked in their kitchen from 1966-1970.

The summer of 1970 marked a new era of technology utilization to replace human resources. The vending business deemed human labor obsolete, determining machines were cheaper than people. Corporate restructuring led to a major R&S downsizing from 450 employees to 100. Massive layoffs affected every department, including his. The time had come once again for John to consider going out on his own.

Mildred and John agreed that it was time to open another restaurant. They found a burned out furniture store on Blue Hill Avenue in Dorchester and renovated the location. In the process, they created J & S Caterers Restaurant and Function Room. John and his half-brother

Bob worked day and night to remodel the upstairs area, which included the dining area, kitchen, function room, and bar. They had to pump water out of the flooded basement, which eventually became completely redecorated office and storage space. When it came to plumbing, electrical, and all kinds of necessary repairs, they remodeled everything themselves.

The day J & S Caterers opened validated a lifelong dream for John. A grand opening marked proof that persistence and passion would eventually pay off. The restaurant specialized in southern and American cuisine, while the catering service offered an international menu. The function room was equipped to host all types of social and political events.

John handled the food, customers, and promotion. Mildred handled all the bookkeeping and banking responsibilities. Their enterprise built a nice reputation, though no one foresaw John's gift for cooking to seed building an empire. Among those who visited their restaurant and function room were Mayor Kevin White, State Representative Royal Bolling, U.S. Senator Edward Brooks, and presidential candidates U.S. Senator Ted Kennedy and Governor Michael Dukakis, to name some of the most accomplished public officials.

The business expanded to include three U.S. Navy contracts through the SBA's 8(a) program - the Winter Harbor Naval Air Station in Maine, the Brunswick Naval Air Station in Maine, and the South Weymouth Naval Air Station in South Weymouth, Massachusetts. They also ran a cafeteria food station and catering service at the University of Massachusetts at Columbia Point and Park Square in Boston.

Things were going so well that John was asked to demonstrate how to cook a Chinese dish on television. He was doing a demonstration with one of his employees at a local school on how to cook a Chinese food dish when someone from WBZ-TV 4 saw him. John found it humorous that a black man would be asked to give a Chinese food cooking demonstration on local TV, but good fortune had many faces.

Business was very good, and people loved the food. In addition, they managed food and beverage services at the Fulton Mental Health Center on Harrison Avenue in Boston. Then they opened an additional restaurant on Warren Street in Roxbury. Their catering business expanded to include Harvard University, Emerson College on Beacon Street in Boston, and an NAACP Anniversary Banquet in Boston which hosted 2,500 guests.