

## Johnny's Tavern

*Marsha Henry Goff*

In 1978, two young men brought to Lawrence a business that, in tone and spirit, is reminiscent of *Cheers*, the bar featured on the popular television sitcom. Johnny's Tavern in North Lawrence is named after its original owner, John Wilson, who established the business in 1953 as a "working-man's bar." However, Johnny's now caters to an eclectic clientele which runs the gamut from college kids to locals, business professionals to moms.

Rick Renfro and Doug Hassig, two members of the K.U. Rugby team, bought the bar with the help of fatherly loans, and established a business account at Douglas County Bank. Though Renfro jokes that the bar was purchased out of the necessity of finding a place for the rugby team to meet since they had been "thrown out of every bar in town," the two friends quickly transformed the tavern from a "knife and gun club" to a fun spot for celebrating K.U. sports victories (or lamenting defeats) as well as a comfortable place for businessmen and –women to enjoy a tasty lunch.

In 1960, the two partners considered closing the bar when their landlord's rent demands became unreasonable. They made an attempt to buy the building housing Johnny's, but were turned down by the first DCB loan officer they approached. Then a friend contacted R.A. Edwards on their behalf, and Edwards granted them a loan to purchase the building.

Renfro and Hassig welcomed Louie Riederer, a friend and teammate, as a partner in 1982, and again approached DCB about a loan to expand and remodel with Johnny's Up and Under, making the upstairs a private over-21 club and reserving the main floor for those customers aged eighteen to twenty-one. "We didn't know what we were going to do; we thought we had made all these great connections with R.A. Edwards and then he left. We tried to work our way up the loan chain again and on the last day, when we had to make a decision, Joe Kelly called us at home and invited us to come in and talk about it. We got the loan."

Douglas County Bank also aided the partners in 1987 when they branched out with Johnny's Classic Burgers, a drive-in restaurant located at Ninth and Illinois. And in 1988, Johnny's—now serving solely the twenty-one crowd due to a change in liquor laws—again expanded at the North Second Street site with an addition, Betty's, so named because of an ancient tombstone uncovered during construction.

Johnny's and DCB embarked on a bold venture together when Johnny's Tavern branched out into the Kansas City market. The idea made sense because Renfro and Hassig are from the Kansas City area and because many of the 50,000 K.U. students and alumni, who live with a ten-mile radius of their new branch, are patrons or former-patrons of Johnny's Tavern in Lawrence.

K.C.'s Johnny's Tavern opened for business in August, 1991, at 119<sup>th</sup> and Metcalf. The loan Douglas County Bank made in that venture is its first outside the Lawrence market.

Given the three partners' track record, it is highly likely that their newest enterprise will be profitable. But that Johnny's Tavern means more than money to Renfro, Hassig and Riederer is obvious when Renfro, asked to describe what is fun about his work, says, "I just like being with the people. It's a real people kind of business and you get to meet people from all walks of life. We have so many good customers and a staff of forty-two—fifteen or more with work on a busy night—and our regular customers think of Johnny's just like it's their family room" Or, perhaps, *Cheers!*