“Till the day I die, I’ll say that is what Kirksville needs — another Smokeshop.” Those are the words of Mr. Lee Poston and most likely everyone else who was ever associated with the little building known as the Smokeshop. Its share of area history began in the early 1930’s. It was then that the Smokeshop opened for business, providing a local center of activity that would last well into the seventies. The success it experienced was due to many men, some of whose memories are in these pages.

The Smokeshop is a name still recognized by many area residents even though it has been gone for nearly seven years. Those who remember the Smokeshop recall it as it was during their time. For many the Smokeshop means the 1930’s or 60’s. To a few, the 1940’s put vivid memories in their minds. Those who remember the thirties and opening day, however, are a rare few. Lee Poston and Melvin “Mugs” McClanahan are two such men who recall the Smokeshop well. These and other now aging fellows gave that building in downtown Kirksville its character. Most everyone, it seems, has “shot a game” or “sipped a malt” there at one time or another. Through the smoke and the “old war” stories, these guys “sank” many an eight ball back in the poolroom. Often the seven pool tables and a long row of seats weren’t enough for the evening crowds. It was a good, clean place for friends to get together and have fun, according to Mr. Poston and Mr. McClanahan, and very few will argue that point.

Jerry James, who ran the Smokeshop for many years before buying out his father Clifford, agrees with them. With a gleam in his eyes he will gladly reminisce his days connected with the place. Yet Jerry was hardly old enough to remember the Smokeshop’s beginning, a time in the 1930’s very
unfamiliar to most people today. Dates and names do fade to those who knew the time as do the people and the places. This is the case with the Smokeshop. Men like Lee and "Mugs" aren't sure exactly when it opened or who owned it at the time. As close as anyone knows, two Illinois men saw a business opportunity and ventured to Kirksville to open a pool hall. It was located on the west side of Elson Street, a half block south of the square, where it stayed until the day its doors closed. Although the beginnings of the Smokeshop are almost forgotten, the times when "Mugs" and Greene Simpson shot the "big Saturday afternoon" games, are usually quite clear. Those kind of times are what made the Smokeshop.

Commonly known as "the Smokeshop" for its sale of tobacco, the place was first a "membership only" type of club. The city of Kirksville wouldn't issue a merchant's license, according to "Mugs," unless it was controlled under a clean and orderly type of business. The membership cost was a dollar per month and by paying the dollar a person was considered a member. With all of this, the Smokeshop became a popular place, and by the forties was firmly established as a local place of activity. By this time Clifford James, the manager, had purchased a small share of the business, along with Dr. Ralph Stickler and Mr. Paul McClain.

When World War II began heating up, business became tough for everyone, but the Smokeshop was damaged in a different sort of way. Rather than losing customers, it lost its manager. According to "Mugs," Mr. James was rushed off to a defense plant in 1944, and he, Melvin McClanahan was hired to fill the job. Melvin McClanahan is a name rarely recognized by anyone; "Mugs" is what he is known by both now and during his days with the Smokeshop. With "Mugs" in charge and a war rumbling far away, the Smokeshop became a place to relax and forget about everything. "Mugs" still recalls those few war years as if they had been forever. They are undoubtedly some of his best memories. The war did come to an end, and with Clifford's return the place continued much the same as it had been. After four years of steady progression, Mr. James bought a bigger share, making him half-owner with "Doc" Stickler. The malts seemed to be getting even tastier, and the pool balls were dropping easier. Things were going in one direction—forward.

Along with the usual business of townspeople and farmers, the youngsters always had their place in the Smokeshop. In the 1950's, drugstores with malt shops became very popular, and for many boys and girls the Smokeshop was the answer to that new craze. It had a fountain that served the best malts around. No one took the time to ask the secret behind them, instead most spent their time devouring them. The older men were also as popular as ever. They were admired by the younger kids, who often had dreams of shooting pool as well as they did. With the boys watching contently or collecting money racking balls, a certain group of men became "sharks" at the game. Lee Poston and "Mugs" McClanahan, along with such big names as Dillard Mulford, Kenny Howe, Winford Pearson and Les Poston were a few of the "gang" who came to "stand out" through the years. Even though each thought he was the best, they seemed to be about even, trading wins as the days went by. As traveling salesmen would pass, they would remember those names and always call to set up a game before coming through these parts again. The men of the Smokeshop played every chance they had, keeping tabs on the ball games at the same time. Many a St. Louis Cardinal game was won, thanks to these guys. (At least they'll tell you)

The photo at left shows the front view of the Smokeshop as it appeared in September of 1963. Photo at right: This display shows the wide range of athletic equipment found in the sporting shop area of the Smokeshop.
that.) Whatever the case, these men passed days and eventually years of their lives in the Smokeshop having good, clean fun. "Nothing bad ever came out of that place," declares Lee. "It was just a place where friends could get together and have a good time. I know, I practically lived there."

The Smokeshop stayed basically the same; only the names changed with time. As one generation went out, another was there to take its place. Jerry James worked for his father as a boy and racked his share of balls on the side. In 1956 he bought out "Doc" Stickler and became half-owner with his dad. Within the next two years the sporting shop was started in the front around the fountain. The shop did well, selling name brand products for anything in the athletic field, especially fishing equipment. Business continued to grow through the sixties and by 1971 Jerry had bought his father out, making him the sole owner and decision maker. With such changes, the Smokeshop stayed as popular as ever. Pool playing was still popular with everyone. The farmers still came, especially on Saturdays when their wives were shopping. Construction workers came on rainy days to pass the time. The "pool sharks" were as good as ever, if not better with age. Kids were no different, coming alone as well as in groups. They drank malts and swung the new bats for size. Everything seemed unchanged, except one thing, the economy. Time caught up with Jerry, including the time spent at work. Higher prices caused a backup supply in the sporting goods shop, and the old guys will tell you that too many hours didn't help Jerry any. Working 10 to 15 hours a day added up to a lot of hours over a number of years. Whatever the case, things caught up with the Smokeshop in August of 1976. "It came as a blow to a lot of people," says Lee Poston, "especially the ones who were always there." Those people had grown to love the place, and when it suddenly closed, they seemed bewildered. A few gathered on the steps for a while, probably hoping that somehow it would be the same again. Yet, even that loyalty faded and after awhile the Smokeshop gradually began to take its place in the past.

Even though the Smokeshop went out on a sad note, it had been a happy and good place in its time. It had gone against everything that a pool hall was supposed to be. Now its "people" like to remember it as a place of goodness. Other establishments, such as game-rooms and bowling alleys, have tried to take its place, but as anybody who knew the Smokeshop will tell you, "They just aren't the same." Although Lee, "Mugs" and Jerry may still argue who's the best shot on the pool table, they'll all agree that the Smokeshop is irreplaceable.

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