

## Chet's Cigar Store closes, but sweet memories linger

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### Document Text

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(ran East, South, West editions)

Another bit of St. Petersburg tucked itself into the history books last week when Chet's Cigar Store, one of the last boom-era shops in the heart of the city's downtown, closed its doors after more than 60 years.

Mourning the passing of a cigar shop may seem strange in these days of anti-tobacco furor, but to many, Chet's Cigar was a cultural landmark.

Despite decades of changes, Chet's Cigar remained a simple place, anchoring the northeast corner of the Mediterranean-style Snell Arcade, built in 1928. Facing both Fourth Street N and the once open-air post office, Chet's was a gathering place for the people who worked and walked in St. Petersburg's downtown.

At Chet's, passers-by could count on a friendly smile, postcards and, of course, cigars. A little political discourse was always welcome.

Dr. Edward L. Cole Jr. worked for his father, Les Cole, at Chet's Cigar in the mid-1930s while in high school. He remembers a circular metal staircase (it's still there) leading to an open loft above the store.

"That's where I learned about the birds and bees," Cole said. At one point, his father reluctantly installed slot machines when a nearby competitor's slots pulled cigar business away.

Chet's also provided a political springboard for Cole's father, who served on the St. Petersburg City Council, was the city's vice mayor, and headed the Florida League of Municipalities as well as the Port Authority, responsible for drawing up the first plans for the Sunshine Skyway bridge.

In 1953, Earl Kindt took over Chet's Cigar. He was a wholesale candy salesman whose regular route included Chet's. One day, he decided to stay. By 1978, Earl still had 25-year-old postcards - prized by collectors, popular with tourists, and even used as marketing tools by a real estate broker intent on enticing Northerners to move to St. Petersburg's sunnier, palm-shaded clime.

"Old Earl," as many remember him, was an honest, hard-working man who always had something good to say and a kind, patient ear for his customers' tales of joy and woe.

When Earl died last year, his daughter, Karen, kept the store going until last week, when she moved the remaining merchandise to her card shop across the street. A hand-printed paper sign on her door reads "Chet's Cigar."

Frank Foskett is now leasing Chet's Arcade space. The retired railroad clerk is new to both business and St. Petersburg. Less than a week after the lease became available, he has \$200 in business licenses, and renovations are under way. He plans to offer many of the same cigars, the familiar post cards and an expanded newsstand. "I hope to be open in two to three weeks," he says.

A representative of Hav-A-Tampa Cigars recently sought to acquire the neon sign above the store's entrance, for the company's museum.

"They really want it, but I'm keeping it. It's a real antique," Frank says. There are actually two neon signs - one on the front and one on the side. One works. The other doesn't.

He hopes to repair the Hav-A-Tampa signs, but says he will remove the portion that reads "Chet's" and replace it with "Frank's." "Cigar" will become "Smoke Shop." When that happens, Chet's Cigar truly will be gone - as is any memory of the original "Chet."

### Illustration

BLACK AND WHITE PHOTO, KEN HELLE; Caption: (1979) Hav-A-Tampa Cigar wants a neon sign from what used to be Chet's, but the Snell Arcade site's new leaseholder plans to keep it for his smoke shop and expanded newsstand.

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### Abstract (Document Summary)

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