



Tom E. Smith

May 2, 1941 - June 2, 2023

Tom E. Smith, whose 82 years were rooted in Rowan County soil and in enduring family lessons, passed away June 2, 2023, peacefully at his home in Salisbury, N.C., following a lengthy illness.

When he retired in 1999 as CEO of Food Lion, the Salisbury-based grocery chain, Smith left a legacy of goal setting and achievement. Born May 2, 1941, in Salisbury, he was the son of the late Cora Belle Ervin Smith and Ralph E. Smith. His drive and determination began at age five, when he and his mother picked cotton for farmers in their home community of China Grove. He listened carefully to her on-the-job lessons about working hard, saving money, and setting goals.

At 16, while a student at China Grove High School, he began a career with Food Town, a new supermarket in Salisbury. His initial duties were bagging groceries and stocking shelves, but he quickly ascended to store manager by the age of 19. As a student at Catawba College, he switched to night classes so he could continue to work at Food Town to pay for college. After graduating with a degree in Business Administration in 1964, he went to work for Del Monte Foods and served four years in the U.S. Army Reserve.

When Smith first returned to Food Town in 1970, there were 12 stores. Food Town would later be renamed Food Lion, and Smith would eventually be named President, CEO and Chairman at ages 39, 44 and 49, respectively. Many fondly remember Smith for his folksy Food Lion commercials during his tenure as CEO. At the time he was named CEO, there were approximately 200 stores. When he retired, there were over 1,200 stores with 90,000 employees. For several years, Smith said the company opened as many as two new stores per week in the Southeast. Hard work and goal setting shaped the company he led so well.

Tom Smith believed in servant leadership. In an April 14, 2023, interview about his life story, Smith said, “I always believed the leader of a company should not make a decision on his or her own. I believed in working with the employees — getting their thoughts, their ideas — before any decision was made. It was amazing how employees were able to help grow the company. I always felt the results were from us rather than from me.”

He also drew inspiration from his Christian faith. “There was something that Jesus did that I liked a lot, and it was doing for others. My faith is more from that standpoint than any

other, the thrill you get when you help somebody and you see them grow and accomplish their goals. I based all of my decisions on the words of Jesus in Matthew 7:12, 'In everything, do unto others as you would have them do unto you.'" Smith was a longtime member of St. John's Lutheran Church, where he served as an usher at the 8:30 a.m. service.

Smith's passions included traveling with his wife, Martha, his daughters and grandchildren; farming and caring for a variety of animals; and sharing his John Deere farm equipment and classic American car collections with fellow enthusiasts. To stay active in the business world after retirement, he purchased a local John Deere dealership and invested in two local hotels.

Generous philanthropy came later in his life. Once Smith saw what generosity could do for others, he said, "I got a great deal of joy out of that, and I got on the bandwagon." Always rooted in his hometown, Smith gave the lead gifts for the restoration of the Meroney Theatre, the Historic Salisbury Depot, the Lee Street Theatre, and the construction of the South Rowan branch of the YMCA, in honor of his parents. A project especially dear to him was the Price of Freedom Museum near where he grew up because he thought it was important for local schoolchildren to learn about World War II history.

Smith tirelessly served his community and beyond in leadership roles during his career and retirement, including the Chairman of the Board of Trustees at Catawba College and President of the North Carolina Food Dealers. Other corporate and non-profit board positions included serving on the Board of Directors of Farmers & Merchants Bank, Speedway Motors, Concord Telephone Company, the Food Marketing Institute, Children's Miracle Network, Foundation for the Carolinas, United Way, Duke Children's Hospital, the N.C. State Veterinary Advisory Board, the University of North Carolina Research Institute, Carolina Youth Commission, and the Rowan County Chamber of Commerce. He was a member of the Rotary Club, the President's Advisory Committee of the American Red Cross, the American Red Cross Hurricane Cabinet, the N.C. Business Council of Management and Development, and the Salisbury Community Foundation.

Among his many honors were the Distinguished Alumnus Award and Honorary Doctor of Laws Degree from Catawba College; the Martin Luther King Humanitarian Award; the Bronze and Silver CEO of the Year for Financial World Magazine; N.C. Food Dealers Association Grocer of the Year; Salisbury Lions Club Man of the Year; and Easter Seals Society's Equality, Dignity & Independence (EDI) Award for Individual Leadership.

Tom Smith is survived by his loving wife of 35 years, Martha Hatley Smith; daughters Leigh Van Pelt and husband Greg, and Nancy Moller and husband Hans; grandchildren Josh Friday, Alexis F. McGann and husband Jacob, Olivia Van Pelt and Catherine Moller. He is also survived by his sister Brenda Seamon; his nephew and niece, Todd Seamon and Rhonda Jones and their families; and his brother-in-law, Mike Hatley and his family. Based on his wishes, a private family memorial service was held in Salisbury.

In lieu of flowers, the family suggests that donations be made in memory of Tom E. Smith to Duke Cancer Institute for Prostate and Urologic Cancers, 300 W. Morgan St., Suite 1200, Durham, NC 27701, www.gifts.duke.edu/dci; Catawba College, 2300 W. Innes St., Salisbury, NC 28144; or St. John's Lutheran Church, 200 W. Innes St., Salisbury, NC 28144.

Summersett Funeral Home served the Smith family. Online condolences may be made at www.summersettfuneralhome.com.

Tribute Wall

Doreen
Black

“ *It was a honor to have served as your mail lady Mr Smith, I loved you dearly , when I had to leave the post office saying goodbye to you and a chosen few was just too hard. My Mother pass with that I had some depression, everyday I'd see you, you'd say how's your Momma? After she passed I never went back to work. I didn't say goodbye to you my dear friend. Mrs.Smith it was fun sneaking his special gifts to you ❤️ God Bless you. Sending all my love Doreen Black*



Doreen Black - July 15, 2023 at 05:02 PM

JW

Sorry to hear of Tom's passing. While working an icestorm in North Carolina Tom invited our powerline crews to see his trophy room.I was astonished.I told this story many times over the years. It was the most satisfying experience I ever had while doing line work. This was around 2004. Jeff63waters@gmail.com

Jeff Waters - June 04, 2025 at 04:40 PM

SH

“ *I have worked for Food Lion since the day our store opened in 1990. I never met Mr. Smith but always enjoyed seeing his commercials on the local TV stations. I was sorry to hear about his passing, My condolences to his family. I think anyone working for Food Lion today, owes a debt of gratitude to Tom Smith, for his part in making this company what it is today.*

*Steve Hooper
Clarksville, Tn.*



Steve Hooper - July 12, 2023 at 11:25 AM

DB

“ My thoughts and prayers go to the family, and while I only met Tom and Martha once while travelling from LaGuardia to Charlotte it was very clear to me the high character of both. I was fortunate to be sitting next to them on the flight and we immediately connected over classic cars, being from NC, general humble beginnings, and the value of hard work. They invited me up to see them, but regrettably I never made the trip to visit.

From my experience, I would describe both as very humble, honest, and good people. I often make that flight and have never bumped into anyone with whom I enjoyed talking with more.

Again, prayers to the family - and especially Martha.

*Dwayne Blanton
Waxhaw, NC*

Dwayne Blanton - June 15, 2023 at 03:14 PM

LR

“ Sending my deepest condolences to Brenda and the Smith family in the loss of Tom. May his precious memories live on in your lives forever. Tom Smith leaves a beautiful legacy to his family and the Salisbury community.

*Love and prayers,
Landrea Rhyne*

Landrea Rhyne - June 14, 2023 at 10:07 PM

LR

“ Landrea Rhyne sent a virtual gift in memory of Tom Smith



Landrea Rhyne - June 14, 2023 at 09:59 PM

LS

“ Brenda I am very sorry to hear of this. I always thought you and your brother were two of the most down to earth people ever. Although I did not know him personally, his get up and go was also reflected in you at work in the VA Library where I got some much-needed experience on how a Special Library functions. Take it one day at a time and you and yours are in my prayers. LJ Steele,Mocksville,NC Retired K12 Teacher.



Lillian Jane Steele - June 12, 2023 at 06:25 PM

DE

“ I did not know Tom personally, but I know he was a good man. He used his influence to get my daddy admitted to the Salisbury VA Medical Center when no one else could. I will always be grateful for that kindness. I am very sorry for your loss. Darrell Elium

Darrell Elium - June 12, 2023 at 02:29 PM

KA

“ Over many years my husband Marc and I had the honor of knowing and working with Tom Smith on several projects. He was a generous philanthropist, but more than that, a man who shared his spiritual and philosophical support to friends and projects he believed were beneficial to the people of his community and North Carolina.

Tom was a rare and precious individual.

His passing leaves a large void - and shoes like his are hard to fill.

It was a gift to us to have him as a friend and supporter.

Rest well.

Truest and heartfelt condolences to his family and friends.

*Karen and Marc Rotterman
Raleigh, NC*

Karen - June 12, 2023 at 09:24 AM

DM

“ One of my most treasured possessions is a picture of Mr. Smith and me at a Clinton, Tenn., distribution center picnic. Mr. Smith set an example for all of us to follow. At Harrison rd., I went to work early. His car was always there ahead of mine. We left work late. His car was still there. Everything I have today I owe to Mr. Smith and Mr. Ketner. He and Martha attended one of our Food Lion retirees luncheon. As soon as they walked into the room, everyone immediately stood up. The amazing thing to me was that more than half of the people were not even at Food Lion when he was there. Just one small example of the respect those in the food industry had for him. I will forever appreciate the professional impact he had on me.

David Miller
Seneca, SC

David Miller - June 11, 2023 at 03:33 PM

PS

“ Prayers of Comfort for all the Family

Mr. Smith was always a Blessing when he would come into the Store when I was a Store Manager.

John 14:1-3

Pastor Joey Spry - June 11, 2023 at 07:03 AM

AJ

“ My husband, Jeff, and I were both honored to work for Tom for many years and were touched by his integrity, kindness, and exceptional leadership. He was a rare man that will be greatly missed. Sending our prayers to Martha and the family. Jeff and Anna (Hedgepeth) Jones

Anna Jones - June 10, 2023 at 07:49 PM

TC

“ 1990 Mr. Smith and Foodlion gave my son Justin (7/26/1989-2/14/1993) cases of diapers

It was a blessing for us.

Was a blessing in Salisbury

Teresa Ann Collinsworth - June 10, 2023 at 03:22 PM

CP

“ Martha, I'm so sorry to hear about your loss. Tom was always so good to me at Food Lion. He'd always come into the print shop for coffee in the mornings because he knew I'd have a pot ready. I'm keeping you in my thoughts and prayers.
Cooki Pozyck Perkins

Cooki Perkins - June 10, 2023 at 01:13 PM

AS

“ Martha and family,
I am so sorry to hear about Tom's passing. I have such fond memories of working in the office at Food Lion. I started in 1978 and remember so well seeing Mr. Smith around the office and always with a smile on his face. He had a genuine affection for all the employees and really enjoyed the down to earth camaraderie with all of us in the office. Mr. Smith was always so nice to me. Years later, after I had married, retired and moved to Charlotte and had my first baby, I came back in the office to show him off. I remember seeing Mr. Smith in the hall and he stopped to say hello and had the biggest grin on his face when he saw my firstborn.
Please know you and your family are in my thoughts and prayers.
With deepest sympathy,
Anne Reed Stevenson

Anne Reed Stevenson - June 10, 2023 at 09:30 AM

MD

“ I am honored and humbled to have worked with Tom for many years. He was truly a servant leader at Food Lion and his community. He touched so many, most of whom he didn't realize he touched. He will be missed by so many!

Melinda Dabbs - June 10, 2023 at 09:03 AM

BB

“ Sending Condolences and Prayers to the Family of Tom Smith, In His Later Years He Blessed Many, 🙏🙏🙏



Brenda Bryant - June 10, 2023 at 12:04 AM

TG

“ A life well lived. Blessed to have had Tom as a friend. My condolences, love and prayers to Martha, Leigh, Nancy and their families.

Trudy Gale - June 09, 2023 at 08:35 PM

BS

“ Tom was a very down to earth, genuine person. It was always a pleasure to work with him. My thoughts and prayers are with Martha and the family.

Benita Sheets - June 09, 2023 at 08:16 PM

PS

“ Another mighty oak has fallen in our community. He was a force for positive influence in all he did. We, here in Spencer, consider him to be one of our own since he married our own lovely Martha Hatley from 4th St and NRHS. I am sure he is reconnecting in heaven with all those he loved, admired, and worked with as a public servant and professional businessman.

Patti Secest - June 09, 2023 at 07:30 PM

AP

“ In August of 1992 Mr. Smith and his wife came to Roxboro, NC. At the time my husband and I were employed by Food Lion in Durham. Mr. and Mrs. Smith attended our wedding and stayed for reception afterwards. Such a very nice man. He enjoyed talking to our guests and was very pleasant. I had the honor of telling about that day numerous times. Now, Roxboro is a small town and a celebrity like that made the front page of the local newspaper. I am so sorry to hear of his passing. He is with my husband now. I did retire from Food Lion after 20 years due to health issues. One thing for sure, Mr. Smith cared about the employees. God Bless you all ❤️🙏



Audrey Parker - June 09, 2023 at 07:28 PM

SU

“ I am so sorry for your loss and know he is with our Jesus Christ now and god bless you and all of your family..... Susan Hinson

Susan - June 09, 2023 at 06:49 PM